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Educational Development Websites: What Do They Tell Us About How Canadian Centres Support the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning?

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Educational Development Websites: What Do They Tell Us About How Canadian Centres Support the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning?

Abstract

The study investigates how university educational development centres in Canada currently support faculty in developing the skills and knowledge to engage in the scholarship of teaching and learning. Content analysis of centre websites was used to identify strategies used to support SoTL. The main strategies identified were providing information and grants. Recommendations include increasing the visibility of SoTL on centre websites and integrating it with other centre activities. The data question the viability of a national strategy to improve teaching through SoTL.

L'étude porte sur la façon dont les centres universitaires d'appui à la formation au Canada soutiennent actuellement les membres du corps enseignant dans le perfectionnement de leurs compétences et de leurs connaissances pour participer à l'avancement des connaissances en enseignement et en apprentissage. L'analyse du contenu des sites Web des centres a été utilisée pour déterminer les stratégies employées pour soutenir cet avancement. Les principales stratégies consistent à fournir de l'information et des bourses. Les recommandations portent sur l'augmentation de la visibilité de l'avancement de ces connaissances et sur son intégration aux activités du centre. Les données remettent en cause la viabilité d'une stratégie nationale visant à améliorer l'enseignement grâce à l'avancement des connaissances en enseignement et en apprentissage.

Keywords

scholarship of teaching and learning, educational development

Cover Page Footnote

We are grateful for the helpful comments of the anonymous reviewers. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Ros Woodhouse, Centre for the Support of Teaching, York University, 4700 Keele St., Toronto, Ontario, M3J 1P3. Email: rosw@yorku.ca

The Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (STLHE), Canada's national organization for faculty who are interested in enhancing teaching and learning, has promoted the scholarship of teaching and learning as a "critical component" of a national strategy to protect and enhance the quality of teaching and learning in higher education (Christensen Hughes, 2005). The STLHE website defines the scholarship of teaching as "a systematic approach to critical reflection and/or inquiry on an aspect of teaching and learning, the outcomes of which are shared with our academic communities to enhance our collective knowledge of teaching and learning" (STLHE, 2010). This definition provides a common reference point for Canadian faculty and institutions, which is particularly useful given the many definitions proposed in the literature. (The range of definitions is illustrated in an introductory review by Evers and Hall, 2009.) STLHE has also proposed a framework of four types of action to advance the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL): these actions include "increasing awareness, building a national coalition, improving local infrastructure, and enhancing opportunities for dissemination and uptake" (Christensen Hughes, 2005, p. 3). The framework identifies local infrastructure as educational development centres and educational (faculty) developers and suggests that they are key sources of support for the development of SoTL.

Centres could give local support to SoTL in a variety of ways, including advocacy for institutional recognition of SoTL and facilitating dissemination of, and faculty participation in, SoTL. However, the literature has paid little attention to the role of educational development centres in supporting SoTL. Badley (2003) foreshadowed the support that centres could give faculty with his argument that the scholarship of teaching and learning could be both evaluated and *improved* by the criteria for scholarship described by Glassick, Huber, and Maeroff (1997). Among these criteria are "adequate preparation" to understand and make significant contributions to ongoing scholarly discourse (i.e., in the field of teaching and learning in higher education) and the use of "appropriate methods" (i.e., for educational research) to achieve the scholar's goals. Although Badley did not refer to centres, they would be a natural source of support for faculty who were interested in going beyond their disciplinary research to gain the requisite knowledge base and research skills to engage in the scholarship of teaching and learning.

Kreber (2006) gave explicit attention to the role of educational development centres in her expansion of Andresen's (2000) suggestion that the scope of knowledge and critical reflectivity entailed in the scholarship of teaching requires "assured frameworks for giving guidance and direction, and structures for supplying support for scholar-teachers" (p. 143). Kreber highlighted the importance of drawing on formal knowledge of teaching, assessment, and learning and of philosophical questions about the role and purpose of higher education, in order to engage in critical reflection on the process and premises of educational practice. Kreber suggested that teaching centres could provide professional programs to help faculty gain the knowledge base, methodological skills, and attitudes for inquiry and critical reflection required for SoTL. The design of these courses must ensure faculty opportunities to learn through inquiry and in the context of their own discipline. Courses could be complemented by reading circles, demonstrations, and discussions of SoTL conducted by others. Kreber also suggested that centres could be instrumental in building institutional support and activities to promote and disseminate SoTL.

Notwithstanding the recognition of the need for centre support in the STLHE framework and the suggestions offered by Kreber (2006), there is little evidence available to inform centres' decisions about how best to provide support for SoTL. The need to make informed decisions

becomes more urgent as our institutions are pressured to increase enrollments and to improve the quality of teaching without accompanying increases in resources. In this situation, it is unlikely that many Canadian postsecondary education institutions will be able to follow the lead of the University of British Columbia and establish dedicated Institutes for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning as recommended by Poole, Taylor, and Thompson (2007). Instead, centres interested in supporting SoTL will need to reflect carefully on the depth and scope of their programming and on how to balance investments in SoTL with other needs.

The main goal of this Research Note is to report on the strategies that Canadian educational development centres use to support faculty participation in SoTL. A description of these strategies can be used to inform critical reflection on current and future strategies to advance SoTL. It may also stimulate the exchange of ideas and future inquiry into the design and effectiveness of educational development strategies to support SoTL and so help to fill this gap in the literature.

Centre websites are used to provide public information about important educational development goals and activities. Accordingly, centre websites were searched to identify information on the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning. Content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004) was used to identify the strategies educational development centres use to support SoTL. The results were tabulated to examine the extent to which centres are providing support for SoTL, and to investigate the types and patterns of support strategies in use.

Method

Materials

Information was collected from the websites of 35 teaching centres identified using the list of centres on the website of the Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (STLHE, 2010). (Please note that the STLHE list of centres identifies only one Francophone teaching centre, at the Université de Montréal; this was excluded from our initial analysis.) The data were collected between January and October 2009. To ensure a fully representative sample of Canadian sites, a similar analysis of four Francophone university centre websites was conducted subsequently.

Procedure

The websites were analyzed using a qualitative methodology known as content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004). The first stage of the analysis was to determine whether or not a site included information about SoTL. SoTL material was identified by following a systematic search strategy:

- Each centre Home page was examined for explicit references to SoTL.
- Home page links to descriptions of centre missions, mandates, and goals were examined and references to SoTL in this area of a site were categorized as “Integral to Centre goals.”
- Home page links to “SoTL” were noted and classified as “link from home page” and then followed.

- Information which defined and/or described SoTL activities, tutorials, websites, bibliographies, organizations was classified as “SoTL information.”
- Information that a centre was participating in SoTL projects was classified as “Centre participation in SoTL.”
- Information about centre activities was examined, and any examples related to SoTL development strategies (workshops, consultations) were noted and categorized as “Centre support.”
- Centre participation in SoTL projects was also noted.
- Descriptions of Certificate programs were identified and examined to determine whether SoTL was integrated within their structure.
- The terms of grants and awards linked to or managed by centres were examined to determine whether the support was for SoTL projects.
- A site search for “scholarship of teaching and learning” was used to identify any other relevant resources and activities.

SoTL-related information was identified and classified as described above. The authors conducted the classification separately, and 94% agreement was obtained. Inconsistencies were resolved in consultation.

Results

There is considerable variation in the degree to which SoTL is represented on centre websites. Of the 35 sites analyzed initially, 25 (approximately 72%) presented SoTL-related materials, while 10 websites made no explicit reference to SoTL. None of the four Francophone websites referred to SoTL. The combined data show that 25/39 (64%) of Canadian centre websites represent SoTL explicitly as a component of educational development.

The analysis of SoTL-related material yielded the following seven categories:

- integral to centre goals
- link from home page
- information about SoTL
- grants
- support (activities/consultation)
- SoTL integrated with another activity
- Centre participation in SoTL

Of the sites containing SoTL-related materials, the majority contained a single type of representation. As the number of representations of SoTL per website increased, the number of websites containing multiple representations decreased. Only 2 of the 39 centres contained six representations of SoTL.

Table 1 shows the classifications of different types of SoTL support observed on centre websites and the number and percentage of centres providing that support. Percentages were calculated using the 25 websites which made explicit reference to SoTL (i.e., using a denominator of 25).

Table 1

Levels of SoTL Information and Support Represented in Centre Websites: Category of SoTL-Related Information

Integral to centre goals	Link from home page	Information about SoTL	Grants	Support (activities/consultation)	SoTL integrated with another centre activity	Centre participation in SoTL
15 (60%)	9 (36%)	14 (56%)	15 (60%)	9 (36%)	2 (8%)	7 (28%)

As Table 1 shows, SoTL was represented most frequently as a centre goal (approximately 60% of the centre websites which reference SoTL) and in grants administered through the centre (approximately 60% of sites which referenced SoTL). The majority of grants were for \$5,000 or less.

The next most frequent representations of SoTL on centre websites were direct links to SoTL information from the centre's home page and the provision of consultation and/or support activities (approximately 36% each). Information about SoTL was typically provided through links to other websites; a minority of centres provided an explanation of SoTL directly on their website. Activities to support faculty with SoTL included an introductory workshop (one institution only), consultations, collaborative projects between the centre and faculty members, learning communities, and an inquiry network. Consultations were the most prevalent strategy.

The least frequent representations of SoTL found on centre websites are perhaps the most challenging to implement. As shown in Table 1, seven centres (approximately 28% of the centres which included SoTL on their websites) included information indicating that the centre itself was engaged in work related to SoTL (through affiliation with the Carnegie Academy for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning program) or that centre staff contributed to this field of scholarship through publications or presentations. Only two websites indicated that SoTL was integrated into regular centre programming. In both cases it was incorporated into the design of a teaching certificate program for faculty.

Last, the data showed that there are discrepancies between espoused goals and the presence of SoTL-related material on centre websites. Four websites indicated that SoTL was a centre goal but had no apparent SoTL-related material, while 11 websites made no reference to SoTL as a centre goal, yet presented SoTL-related material.

Discussion

The scholarship of teaching and learning has been vigorously promoted as a powerful mechanism for enhancing teaching and learning in Canada. Given that many centres face financial cutbacks as a result of the current economic situation and so must prioritize their activities, it is important to reflect critically on current strategies and to identify opportunities to improve them.

Our analysis indicated that a small majority of educational development centre websites in Canadian universities contain some SoTL-related material. The most widely used strategies to inform and engage the wider university community are provision of information and support for

grants. The emphasis on making information accessible through websites and providing incentives for participation is important given that SoTL is still new to many faculty. Centres can increase the visibility of SoTL on their websites by identifying it through a link on the home page and ensuring that grant titles and specifications refer to SoTL. However, King's (2004) survey of participation in teaching development activities indicated that only one third of faculty read web-based information about teaching and learning. The limited audience for web-based resources suggests that websites should not be relied on as a primary strategy for promoting SoTL.

The data obtained in our study show that the least used strategy is to integrate SoTL within other development activities. Centres should consider using integrative strategies more often because faculty are unlikely to attend SoTL-specific events or activities if they do not know what it means or see immediate practical value in it. Further, a growing body of research indicates that interactive, face-to-face activities are the most effective way of influencing ideas and behaviours (e.g., Beaudet, Grant, & Starke-Meyerring, 2008; Mazmanian & Davis, 2002). Finally, to convince faculty of the value of SoTL, more centres must model the scholarship of teaching and learning in their practice and communications.

So far the discussion has focused on how educational development centres promote SoTL on their campuses. Our study also shows that overall, fewer than half (approximately 38%) of the 39 websites we reviewed indicated that promotion of SoTL was central to the centre as part of a vision or mission statement or among stated goals and principles. Taken together with the finding that approximately one in three of the centre websites we reviewed made no explicit reference to SoTL, these results suggest that Canadian centres lack consensus on whether SoTL is an important component of educational development. This is of interest given the emphasis which has been placed on SoTL by leaders among the Canadian educational development community and by prominent international initiatives such as the Carnegie Academy for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning. Our findings also appear to support Poole's argument (as cited in Charbonneau, 2009) that SoTL is not firmly established in Canada. If local centre support is essential for faculty engagement and institutional recognition of SoTL, we must question whether SoTL is a viable component of a national strategy to improve the quality of teaching in higher education. We will examine this question more deeply in our continuing research.

We recognize that our method, a content analysis of websites, cannot detect informal or in-person strategies or determine which strategies are the most effective. Despite these limitations, websites are the most visible and accessible source of information about educational development centres and their activities. Because they are also public documents, these texts are likely to reflect significant centre priorities and activities. We believe that the description and reflection on current practice provided in this Research Note provides a useful starting point for dialogue and inquiry into strategies that centres can use to support SoTL. This may be especially useful for those centres which have not (yet) institutionalized engagement in, or support for, SoTL. It may also be of value to centres which are engaged in other important initiatives. The most important contribution of this study may be to stimulate critical reflection on the premise that SoTL should be a critical component of a national strategy to improve the quality of teaching in Canadian higher education.

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