

June 2017

## Bridging the Divide: Leveraging the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning for Quality Enhancement

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<https://doi.org/10.5206/cjsotl-rcacea.2017.2.6>

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### Recommended Citation

Openo, J., Laverty, C., Kolomitro, K., Borin, P., Goff, L., Stranach, M., & Gomaa, N. (2017). Bridging the divide: Leveraging the scholarship of teaching and learning for quality enhancement.

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# Bridging the Divide: Leveraging the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning for Quality Enhancement

## Abstract

This paper argues a divide exists between quality assurance (QA) processes and quality enhancement, and that the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) can bridge this divide through an evidence-based approach to improving teaching practice. QA processes can trigger the examination of teaching and learning issues, providing faculty with an opportunity to systematically study their impact on student learning. This form of scholarship positions them to take a critical and empowered role in the continuous improvement of student learning experiences and to become full participants in the goal of QA structures. A document analysis of current provincial QA policies in Canada reveals a gap between how teaching and learning challenges are identified and how those challenges are studied and acted upon. A QA report is not the end result of an assurance process. It is the beginning of a change process that is intended to lead to improvements in the student learning experience. The authors consider how SoTL provides a research-minded approach to initiate continuous improvements within a QA framework, and provides considerations for how it might be integrated into evolving provincial frameworks.

Dans cet article, les auteurs soutiennent qu'il existe un fossé entre les processus d'assurance de la qualité (AQ) et l'amélioration de la qualité et que l'avancement des connaissances en enseignement et en apprentissage (ACEA) peut combler ce fossé par le biais d'une approche basée sur l'évidence pour améliorer les pratiques d'enseignement. Les processus d'AQ peuvent déclencher l'examen des problèmes relatifs à l'enseignement et à l'apprentissage et ce faisant, donner aux professeurs l'occasion d'étudier systématiquement leur impact sur l'apprentissage des étudiants. Cette forme de recherche savante leur permet de jouer un rôle important dans l'amélioration continue des expériences d'apprentissage des étudiants et de devenir des participants à part entière pour atteindre l'objectif des structures de l'AQ. Une analyse des documents relatifs aux politiques actuelles d'AQ au Canada révèle qu'il existe un écart entre la manière dont les défis relatifs à l'enseignement et à l'apprentissage sont identifiés et la manière dont ces défis sont étudiés et dont on y a remédié. Le rapport d'AQ n'est pas la conclusion du processus d'assurance de la qualité. C'est le début d'un processus de changement qui doit aboutir à des améliorations de l'expérience d'apprentissage des étudiants. Les auteurs examinent la manière dont l'ACEA fournit une approche de recherche pour entreprendre les améliorations continues dans le cadre de l'AQ et apporte des réflexions pour déterminer comment l'ACEA peut être intégré dans des cadres provinciaux évolutifs.

## Keywords

quality assurance processes, quality enhancement, provinces, SoTL

## Cover Page Footnote

We wish to thank Lori Goff for her strong leadership and expert facilitation. She got us to a place where we could collaborate successfully on a topic of great and growing importance.”

Quality assurance (QA) processes in post-secondary education are frequently disconnected from improvements in teaching quality. This disconnection partially explains why academics see QA processes as externally imposed monitoring measures that are “instrumental, minimalist, and mediocre” (Anderson, 2008, p. 257) rather than as earnest attempts at quality enhancement (QE). As pointed out in Hutchings et al. (2013) “many campuses are remarkably successful in going through the motions required by accountability mandates without engaging in real change” (p. 43). Despite these criticisms, QA has become a dominant force in post-secondary education.

In 1973, Trow described how the massification of post-secondary education greatly increased participation rates resulting in pressures on education systems in the western world to grow (Trow, 1973). Skyrocketing educational costs and reports of substandard programs and diploma mills resulted in demands for accountability (Stensaker & Harvey, 2011). This call for increased accountability occurred with an overall shift in post-secondary education towards a globalized market model that commodifies learning and learners. Critics suggest that consumer-oriented ends and the “discourse of crisis” have led to the replacement of the traditional purposes of post-secondary education, such as providing a liberal education and serving the public good (Wall, Hursh, & Rodgers, 2014, pp. 6-7).

If government demands for accountability represent a top-down process, learners are also expecting that their education produce economic value, rather than pursuing education for education’s sake. Accountability and the growing focus on employability have increased attention on evidencing the achievement of students’ learning outcomes. A 2015 study from Colleges Ontario shows that 44 percent of current Canadian college students already possess post-secondary experience and return to college for the purposes of finding “that extra piece that makes them employable” or to “upgrade skills in a particular area” (Ginsberg, 2015, para. 4).

This shift towards a market model has brought with it the ascendancy of managerialism and well-documented academic resistance. A common criticism of QA is that “it pays little attention to educational processes, educational theory and/or student learning and as a result improvement or enhancement is only incidental” (Nicholson, 2011, p. 8). Faculty perceptions that QA mechanisms do not credit the complex dynamics of teaching and learning also takes place in a highly politicized climate where “winning over faculty members – or at least avoiding a revolt – is key to the long-term success of evaluation efforts, and administrators must strike a balance between their needs and faculty concerns” (Patel, 2016). Striking this balance can be difficult when faculty perceive quality monitoring as “another task that pulls them away from the research for which they were trained, and are more highly rewarded” (Wall et al., 2014, p. 9).

From another angle, the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) represents the efforts of those faculty members already involved in innovation and quality initiatives. “The overall intention of SoTL is to improve student learning and enhance educational quality” (Poole & Simmons, 2013, p. 118) through transformation, and, as Goff and Nicholson state, “with its focus on student metacognition, ‘student engagement and growth’” (as cited in Poole & Simmons, 2013, p. 120). While “quality is directly affected by teaching and learning practice, policy, and a generic set of input factors” (Poole & Simmons, 2013, p. 121), QA processes and SoTL approach quality from different places, with different purposes, and for different ends. QA processes are externally imposed with the goal of accountability, whereas SoTL begins with “informal, self-directed improvement efforts” from “faculty members with a strong sense of self-efficacy who perceive little risk in trying out new teaching styles” (Flaherty, 2016, “Different Landscapes, Similar Outcomes,” para. 2).

## **The Quality Assurance-Quality Enhancement Dynamic**

The QA-QE dynamic has been characterized in many ways. Elassy (2015) depicts QA and QE as endpoints on a continuum where QA is used as a diagnostic tool to determine the limitations and strengths of learning, and QE is the process used to address these limitations and further develop strengths. An assurance process outlines the measures and conditions by which academic programs can track student achievement of defined standards. At its best, QA and QE have been described as having a positive symbiotic relationship where both processes are aimed at institutional improvements to teaching and learning (Filippakou & Tapper, 2008). Or, as Woodhouse (1999) puts it, “accountability can always be re-phrased to focus on improvement” (p. 37). At its worst, QA and QE seem foreign and hostile to one another.

Swinglehurst, Russell, and Greenhalgh (2008) suggest QA focuses on teaching, whereas QE focuses on learning. Biggs (2001) differentiates between QA and QE using a measure of what has already been accomplished as opposed to what can be achieved in the future. This focus on improving the future is where SoTL, and its focus on researching whether students’ learning improves as a result of changes instructors make to their teaching, can play a powerful role in the QA and QE cycle.

SoTL may enable a shift from thinking of quality as something imposed from outside towards something that emerges from within. This shift could be a positive connector between QA processes and QE intentions, which can appear to be at odds. For example, the language of QA differs markedly from the way most faculty members would describe their teaching practice. Teaching evaluation processes may be interpreted as punitive through their close association with regulation, accountability, and measurement, whereas educators would be more apt to describe teaching in terms of reflection, growth, and development. This stark contrast in terminology is divisive and may contribute to a sense that QA is a top-down approach rather than an opportunity for inclusive, faculty-driven efforts to enhance learning.

QA is more often associated with three of the four purposes identified by Harvey and Newton (2007): accountability, control, and compliance. Such words incite resistance from faculty members as they can be at odds with their perceived roles in the academy and their philosophies of teaching and learning. We thus focus on the fourth purpose of QA – improvement – as improving both instructional methods and student learning through the practice of SoTL. In this capacity, SoTL can serve as a critical mechanism through which to enable improvement.

Another way of linking QA to everyday practice is described by Wall et al. (2014) who advocate for repositioning assessment in post-secondary education as an ethical and values-focused social practice in order to establish how the goals of QA “interplay” with one’s own preferred method of data collection and social position. QA as an ethical and values-based social practice would make the purpose of an assessment process transparent (continuous improvement of student learning), would pay particular attention to unintentionally excluded stakeholders (faculty and students), should select congruent methods for investigation and data collection, and place a special responsibility upon those involved to interpret findings. SoTL becomes an ethical and values-based practice to assess the quality of student learning experiences.

### **SoTL is the Bridge**

We suggest that SoTL should be intentionally encouraged as a component of QA systems. Hutchings et al. (2013) describe several approaches to grow SoTL initiatives within an institution:

open communication on campus, encouraging collaboration, reaching out to SoTL-related groups, involving students, and educating ourselves about QA. Our focus is on bringing SoTL into QA frameworks and policies at the provincial level, not as a requirement, but as an avenue of engagement by which educators can adopt a scholarly lens to explore new approaches to support student learning in a quality-enhanced environment. While Hutchings et al. (2013) suggest that internal initiatives can help connect high level accountability processes, they can only do so if SoTL is also enshrined at the provincial level, which recommends models and endorses possible directions for institutions. Naming SoTL as a vehicle by which we can better understand and address teaching and learning issues also gives faculty members and students ownership in addressing such issues. One interpretation is proactive while the other is reactive.

In practice, departments often *react to* rather than *engage with* the QA process in a way that is meaningful and useful for continuous improvement of their academic programs. Mårtensson, Roxå, and Stensaker (2014) describe QA policies as de-coupled from the everyday practices of academics and from the traditions and *saga* found within universities. SoTL can play a role in linking the study of daily instructional practices by individual educators to formal institutional reporting mechanisms for teaching and learning, thereby connecting and reinforcing the synergy between individual efforts to improve teaching and learning with institutional goals for continuous improvement. In this way, SoTL can contribute to both assurance reviews and teaching development.

Until recently, SoTL has largely been “primarily driven by intrinsic motivation, the desire of practitioners, often individually, to understand and resolve issues and problems” (Gordon, 2010, p. 1). More recently, SoTL has become embedded in existing institutional values, norms, promotion and tenure practices, and as a part of the institutional *saga*. A brief look at a handful of current college and university academic plans, such as Carleton University (2014), Mount Royal University (2012), Queen’s University (2014), and Red Deer College (2012) highlights how SoTL has firmly moved into mainstream institutional consciousness.

Given the growing appearance of SoTL in institutional strategic documents, our goal was to investigate whether SoTL was also becoming integrated into provincial policy documents and frameworks. Our hypothesis was that little to no reference to processes and language associated with improvement, including SoTL, would appear within provincial QA policies and frameworks, showing a gap between faculty practice, institutional strategy, and provincial conceptions of QA. In demonstrating this gap, we hope to strengthen the promise that linking SoTL to QA

can satisfy the need for public accountability while affirming trust in academics by allowing them to do what they do best: develop, ensure, enhance and deliver educational programmes of study, while giving students the opportunity to achieve their educational goals in a supportive learning community. (D’Andrea & Gosling, 2005, p. 187)

Shifting the language of assurance policies and processes to focus more on the language of SoTL and educational improvement (e.g., growth and development as opposed to accountability and regulation) may also better reflect the grassroots interest in reflective teaching practice.

### **SoTL and Its Promise**

Even though others before Boyer (1990) (e.g., Lewin, 1946; Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Cross, 1986) discussed similar concepts, the term “scholarship of teaching” is credited to Boyer whose

*Scholarship Reconsidered* put forth the vision that “those who teach must, above all, be well informed, and steeped in the knowledge of their fields” and must “build bridges between their understanding and the student’s learning” (p. 23). Since then, there has been growing recognition that the heart of the SoTL is the critical inquiry and examination of how teaching can best support learning. This recognition of, attention to, and visibility of SoTL has been supported by SoTL-related conferences, professional educational journals in almost every discipline, and programs for both faculty members and graduate students (Auten & Twigg, 2015).

As the understanding and integration of SoTL has grown both nationally and internationally, evidence of its impact on teaching and learning has substantiated its benefits among faculty. Increasingly, SoTL is now being seen as important to assessing learning and faculty development (Hutchings, Huber, & Ciccone, 2011). Nevertheless, resistance to SoTL remains and questions about its value and legitimacy persist among non-SoTL practitioners across disciplines (Walker, Baepler, & Cohen, 2008). In defense of the value of SoTL, Riddell (2016) recently wrote in *University Affairs*:

The consensus, however, was that disciplinary experts have the right, perhaps even the responsibility, to engage in careful and nuanced thinking about teaching and learning – why we do things, what works and how we can create positive change. . . SoTL provides us with the opportunity to hold a lens up to all spheres of our professional lives – teaching, service, educational leadership, administration, research, community outreach, etc. – for exploration and analysis. While not all of us wish to pursue SoTL, these scholarly endeavors should be recognized as legitimate avenues of inquiry, available to all, and valued accordingly. (para. 10-11)

While SoTL has remained stubbornly defiant to definition, the authors of this paper accept Felten’s (2013) five principles of good practice in SoTL: it (1) inquires into student learning, (2) is grounded in context, (3) is methodologically sound, (4) is conducted in partnership with students, and (5) is appropriately public, meaning that results are publicly disseminated and ethics procedures have been followed.

Examining teaching and learning through a scholarly lens coincides with the academic integrity central to any university mission. Educators need evidence to better understand what and how students learn, and then to use that information to evolve their own teaching and inform the practices of others for the goal of improving student learning. Several authors correlate the connection between SoTL and improvement of student learning (Dickson & Treml, 2013; Fanghanel et al., 2015; McKinney, 2007, 2012; Poole, 2007; Trigwell, 2013). McKinney (2007) notes that many disciplines have studied teaching and learning from a disciplinary perspective for many years, as evidenced by journals such as *Teaching Sociology* (1973-present), *Journal of Chemical Education* (1924-present), and *Teaching History* (1969-present). A recent survey of 140 post-secondary educators in Canada (Wuetherick & Yu, 2016) describes how engagement in SoTL impacted respondents’ course and assessment design and contributed to enhancement of the student learning experience.

While the impact on student learning occurs primarily at the course level (Dickson & Treml, 2013), McKinney and Jarvis (2009) recommend SoTL research should be applied at the program and institutional levels to leverage SoTL’s impact on the broader student learning experience. SoTL studies might be initiated at the departmental level and involve outside support from educational developers in a team-based collaboration. Research questions will stem from the

department's needs, but learning innovations may benefit a range of programs across the campus. Assurance processes may only capture intended learning outcomes without uncovering how they are interconnected across courses within a program. A SoTL lens would help to examine how outcomes are assessed and how well students achieve them.

The authors of this paper are aware of the criticisms of SoTL (Boshier, 2009); that it will not lead to a paradigmatic change in post-secondary education because no one knows what it means, there are no incentives to learn about it, and that it is not “true” scholarship. Even though SoTL has traditionally been marginalized, is difficult to conceptualize, and early attempts to operationalize it proved difficult, SoTL has continued to evolve, reducing its ambiguities, and gaining a greater degree of respect.

### Document Review and Limitations

Document analysis is useful when striving to understand the processes of change and continuity over time, as well as the origins of the present that explain current structures and relationships in the context of recent and longer term trends (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011). To better understand how QA processes are associated with the enhancement of student learning in Canada, a review of provincial QA policy documents relating to academic program review was completed, with particular attention paid to the presence/absence of SoTL-related language. The goals behind this review were to identify how QA is defined in terms of its relationship to teaching and learning improvement; the teaching and learning indicators used as measures of quality; and the mechanisms for improving and/or operationalizing aspects of teaching and learning that have been identified as critical for enhancing student learning.

We adopted purposive sampling, in which “researchers hand-pick the cases to be included in the sample on the basis of their judgment of their typicality or possession of the particular characteristics being sought” to enable comparisons (Cohen, et al., 2011, p. 156). Our document search was restricted to provincial documents referenced through the Universities Canada website, which explains how QA works in Canada, outlines provincial QA systems, and provides links to provincial bodies governing program review (Universities Canada, n.d.). Since nomenclature varies across provinces, further investigation was required to identify the primary provincial documents governing academic review processes. This proved a greater challenge than expected. After systematically searching for documents within each province, we discovered that many provinces do not possess provincial QA frameworks or policies, and some provincial documents focused on the creation of new programs. These documents were excluded because they do not focus on ongoing program improvements, though it would be a worthy project to examine how teaching and learning is represented within the processes for new program development.

The review was restricted to the university setting, though some provincial documents also include colleges in cases where universities and colleges grant collaborative degrees or where colleges offer degrees. The following provincial documents were selected for review:

- British Columbia Ministry of Advanced Education (2016). [\*Education quality assurance: Policy and procedures manual\*](#).
- Campus Alberta (2009). [\*CAQC handbook: Quality assurance and quality assessment\*](#).
- Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission (2016). [\*Guidelines for Maritime universities' quality assurance frameworks\*](#).

- Ontario Universities Council of Quality Assurance (2016). [Quality assurance framework](#). Toronto, ON: Ontario Universities Council on Quality Assurance.
- Saskatchewan Higher Education Quality Assurance Board (2014). [Quality assurance review process: Program review standards and criteria](#). (This is primarily for new programs but does include one page [p. 9] on Program Review and Assessment.)

The provinces of Manitoba and Newfoundland and Labrador do not have a dedicated provincial-level agency; however, together with the other provinces, they adopted the Canadian Degree Qualifications Framework in 2007, which states that "... the primary responsibility for academic and institutional QA rests with postsecondary institutions themselves" (Council of Ministers of Education Canada, 2007, p. 2). Quebec has published a QA document that is limited to new program review (Conference of Rectors and Principals of Québec Universities, 2011), and consequently, it was not included.

An early finding was that provincial documents that do exist vary wildly in length (from three pages to 212 pages), detail, and comprehensiveness. To account for the differences in style and structure, a rubric was developed with four guiding questions and a consistent vocabulary of keywords and phrases to search for within the documents. The guiding questions were:

- Does the document indicate that one of the purposes of QA is QE, quality teaching, or continuous improvement?
- Does the document require the inclusion of (any) quality indicators? And if so, do these indicators connect with quality teaching and learning?
- Does the document require the inclusion of research, scholarship, scholarly record, or SoTL and does the definition of scholarship leave room for SoTL if it is not explicitly named?
- Does the document require any report or follow up on any progress made as a result of QA program review?

The rubric proved useful in adhering to the guiding questions and ensuring consistency in the analysis process, which was completed independently by members of the team who each analyzed two of the provincial documents. This process was iterative and the team modified the list of key phrases once the initial document analysis commenced. For example, in addition to searching for "indicators," some documents used terms such as "benchmarks (for success)" or "program evaluation criteria," and "program assessment," which were added to the coding list.

We draw our conclusions with caution. We conducted a review based on publicly available documents, attempting to find the most recent and most relevant. Many were difficult to find, and sometimes more than one version could be found. Where two or more existed, the most recent was selected unless that document was a draft and not formally approved. It is possible more recent documents exist and are in use. These are limitations of our methods and findings.

## **Discussion**

QA policies and processes are evolving across Canada. We focused on provincial QA policies and procedures because it was our assumption that these documents would illuminate the current conception of the purpose of QA and explain its relationship to the teaching and learning process. Provincial documents represent the primary rationale describing how QA processes serve the goal of QE by identifying the information and data elements leading to recommendations for



action. An analysis of provincial QA documents offers a snapshot of the infrastructure, focal areas, and priorities on which universities in these jurisdictions are building their own internal assurance processes.

A review of provincial QA documents from across Canada reveals a tenuous connection, at best, between QA and improvements in teaching and learning, and they do not outline how QA processes should or could lead to QE or the improvement of teaching and learning. There is some nebulous connection between quality and enhancing teaching and learning in the section on faculty scholarship and/or teaching innovation. Because scholarship, research, and creative activity occur as indicators of quality in most of the provincial documents, this becomes the greatest prospect for explicit inclusion of the SoTL. While quality indicators do not make direct connections between quality and teaching and learning, this aspect has the potential to do so.

**Question 1: Does the document indicate that one of the purposes of QA is QE, quality teaching, or continuous improvement?**

Of the five provincial documents reviewed, several indicate the intended purpose of QA is continuous improvement, but the pathway to how this is manifested in student learning experiences is not described. The Campus Alberta Quality Council (2009) mandates that institutions regularly assess programs “to continually improve the degree program” (p. 6). Similarly, the Maritimes indicate “a successful university QA framework is guided by the pursuit of continuous improvement” (Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission, 2016, p. 1). Ontario’s framework also addresses the QA-QE link explicitly and states that QA processes provide ongoing and continuous evaluation for the purpose of quality improvement and to support “innovation and improvement while cultivating a culture of transparency and accountability – i.e., quality *assurance* that produces quality *enhancement*” (Ontario Universities Council of Quality Assurance, 2014, p. 1). BC’s document, however, includes no reference to teaching, improvement, or QE.

**Question 2: Does the document require the inclusion of (any) quality indicators? And if so, do these indicators connect with quality teaching and learning?**

All provinces provide examples of quality indicators, but these indicators are generally not connected to teaching or the continuous improvement of student learning. Most of the indicators deal with issues regarding the effective management of the program, including class sizes, percentage of classes taught by permanent or non-permanent (contractual) faculty, graduation rates, academic awards, employment six month and two years after graduation, forecasts on expenditure of teaching staff, support staff, library and learning resources, ratio of teaching costs, governance, policies, processes of periodic review, and alignment with institutional mission. It is our experience working in post-secondary institutions in different provinces that when such QA frameworks are adopted at the institutional level, they include similar quality indicators, as well as some additional quality indicators which may or may not more directly connect to teaching and learning. However, our focus here is QA documents at the provincial level.

**Question 3: Does the document require the inclusion of research, scholarship, scholarly record, or SoTL and does the definition of scholarship leave room for SoTL if it is not explicitly named?**

Scholarship is almost always included as a quality indicator. The Campus Alberta Quality Council's Handbook (2015) includes a section devoted to academic freedom and scholarship, in which the relationship between scholarship and QA is firmly established. Scholarship, which involves the "creation, integration and dissemination of knowledge" (p. 42) can take many forms, including "innovation in pedagogy," "inquiry and reflective practice," and "applied scholarship through problem solving practices" (p. 42). While SoTL is not mentioned, it would not be out of place with innovations in pedagogy and problem-based approaches to SoTL.

This holds true for other Canadian provincial quality frameworks. The sections from the Ontario QA document (Ontario Universities Council of Quality Assurance, 2014) also offer opportunities for including SoTL as a mechanism for enhancing the learning environment. Important statements include: "Quality enhancement initiatives taken to enhance the quality of the program and the associated learning and teaching environment" (p. 24), a self-appraisal that asks how improvements can be made (p. 26), and the evidence of quality of the faculty, including their innovation and scholarly record. Ontario also requires "*evidence of a program structure and faculty research that will ensure the intellectual quality of the student experience*" (emphasis ours) (Ontario Universities Council of Quality Assurance, p. 11). Depending on the underlying intent of this sentence, faculty research and intellectual quality of the student experience may or may not include SoTL and research-based approaches to improving teaching and learning. This language certainly could include opportunities for SoTL, even though it is not explicitly stated.

The Maritime provinces' guidelines (Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission, 2016) are unique in that they require a student-centered document that addresses the "quality of teaching and learning" (p. 2). The continuing performance of faculty includes their "quality of teaching and supervision, and their continuing progress and achievement in research, scholarship or creative activity, and professional activity in light of the program under review" (p. 2). Even here, however, quality of teaching and supervision seems separate and distinct from research, scholarship, and creative activity.

Because the documents include broad, inclusive statements, and because many of the documents suggest that ultimately QA is up to the institutions themselves, there is certainly room for the explicit inclusion of the scholarship of teaching and learning as one of the various research and scholarly activities that could be included as an indicator of quality. All the documents imply or state teaching quality is important and that it is a contributor to learning improvement. However, there are no explicit statements that identify how the scholarship of teaching and learning (or variant phrasing such as innovation in pedagogy) serves as a means to improve teaching and enhance the quality of teaching, the program, or the institution.

**Question 4: Does the document require reports on any progress made as a result of QA program review?**

In gauging how QA processes lead to the enhancement of learning environments, we looked for evidence of how QA processes translated into action and were operationalized within an academic unit. What form do communication plans take and how are faculty within units apprised of results and tasked with further investigation or change initiatives? The provincial

documents under study provide differing approaches to how assurance suggestions are considered, investigated, and/or adopted going forward but none provide any guidance regarding what improvement might look like.

When sharing the progress made as a result of the QA review, the Maritime provinces' document (2016) advocates use of a formal communications plan "to inform the university community (students, faculty, staff, etc.) and the general public about a university's QA framework as well as significant changes brought about by QA activities. The communication strategy should include activities to inform faculty, staff and heads of units about the framework, its objectives, assessment criteria, and follow-up processes" (p. 2). This strategy is commendable in that its goal is to reach all the varied stakeholders in the QA process, including those which represent supporting campus services such as the library, the writing centre, and centres for teaching and learning. Clarification of reporting structures and responsibilities within a formal implementation plan is also helpful. For example, Ontario's QA framework (Ontario Universities Council of Quality Assurance, 2016) recommends that individuals responsible for approving recommendations, providing resources, and acting on recommendations be included in tandem with "timelines for acting on and monitoring the implementation of those recommendations" (p. 22).

### **Some Considerations**

We argue that SoTL work, with its focus on improving teaching and learning, should be explicitly encouraged as a strategy to support the provincial goals of QA. We investigated whether current provincial QA documents identify enhancement of student learning as a key goal for assurance processes and whether SoTL is, or could be, one of the indicators of programmatic quality. We advocate that SoTL could serve as a bridge between QA and QE because it provides a scholarly approach to informing improvements in teaching and learning practice. Faculty research on teaching and learning situates educators at the centre of QA reflection and investigation, thereby giving them a critical and empowering role in the continuous improvement of student learning experiences. SoTL research questions typically come from faculty and departmental needs. Faculty ownership of research into their own practice may be more powerful as a mechanism for changing a learning paradigm than an external approach. Seen from this perspective, SoTL work relates directly to QA processes, which intend to assess the program frameworks that support and enhance student learning. Although SoTL is not named in any of the provincial QA documents under review, we argue that it should be explicitly nurtured and encouraged. What form would this encouragement take? We offer the following considerations to better embed SoTL into provincial QA processes as they evolve and are revised in order to suggest that SoTL offers a logical approach to improving teaching and learning issues that may be raised through QA processes.

#### **Consideration 1: Include SoTL as a quality indicator for teaching and learning.**

Provincial QA documents serve as guidelines and exemplars for institutional QA processes. They have the opportunity to set high expectations for how assurance data and discussion related to teaching and learning are translated in action. Advocating for SoTL as a scholarly approach to understanding teaching and learning issues and making improvements to student learning environments is in keeping with the research-minded and evidence-based

approach that underpins the university mission. SoTL should be described as a quality indicator to set a model for institutional practice. Rather than thinking of this as a top-down appropriation, this could be seen as a way to empower faculty voices and expertise in viewing their work as educators through a scholarly lens.

SoTL is an avenue of engagement and a means to take ownership of QA processes from the bottom-up. In recognizing this work and describing it in the language of educators, it may help to legitimize the process for teachers and give them the recognition they deserve for contributing to the scholarship of the institution. It is evident that many post-secondary institutions see value in SoTL and are making it a strategic priority. There may be some risk to appropriating SoTL into provincial QA processes, but SoTL has long wished to counter its marginalization (Boshier, 2009), and this may be one method to achieve that.

### **Consideration 2: Explicitly recognize SoTL as a valid form of scholarship.**

Faculty research, creativity, and scholarship are named as quality indicators in all provincial documents. While there is elaboration on the nature of scholarship and creative work in some cases, SoTL could be explicitly named as a valued and rigorous approach to better understanding how to improve both teaching and learning. Although SoTL initiatives are often identified in a faculty member's *curriculum vitae*, they should also be highlighted in areas that address teaching and learning innovation. Explicit mention of SoTL as a valued form of scholarship in provincial QA processes would herald the validity and worth of this work, and recognize the efforts faculty continually put forth to improve teaching practice.

### **Consideration 3: Support faculty development initiatives on SoTL.**

SoTL can serve as a vehicle to explore teaching and learning issues uncovered during the QA review process. In this case, academic units need to ask thoughtful questions which inspire further inquiry, critical analysis, reflection, and conversation. Leveraging SoTL to ask such questions could help faculty members see some personal benefit in going through the motions required by accountability mandates while at the same time truly engaging and trusting the change process. Approaching QA with the SoTL lens requires efforts in faculty development to build knowledge and experience in framing questions related to student learning and systematically investigating them. It also requires that faculty members use rigorous methods appropriate to disciplinary epistemologies, self-reflection, analysis, and the application of the results to their own practice, and finally, disseminating those findings to colleagues. As such, QA review processes need to be aligned with faculty development opportunities, in particular those that target faculty engagement in SoTL to develop that expertise. Despite Kreber's (2015) observation that initiatives intended to support and advance the scholarship of teaching have become common in Canada, SoTL still suffers a double burden in faculty awareness. Depending on context, SoTL may still need to achieve legitimacy as "serious scholarship" for faculty. For other first timers, SoTL may need to be de-mystified in order to reduce intimidation and to introduce faculty to research methods outside their disciplines. In either case, building broad-based knowledge of SoTL amongst a group of faculty will take time, effort, and concerted faculty development programs.

#### **Consideration 4: Advocate for a team-based approach to SoTL.**

Who can help departments make improvements to teaching and learning practices? In the age of communities of practice and integrated networks, QA processes might also advocate for the creation of institutional support teams where disciplinary experts conduct research together. Members could include educational developers, student writing experts, teaching librarians, and information technologists specialized in the pedagogy of teaching with technology. Many educational development units in Canada support, advise, and consult on projects exploring emerging teaching trends where research would be strategically useful for informing institutional practice. These units could also expand on existing SoTL professional development opportunities by offering scaffolded sessions over several months within a community of practice that supports SoTL projects from beginning to end. Much of this work is already going on, but internal and external SoTL grants, and significant team-based projects into teaching and learning become additional indicators and benchmarks of quality.

#### **Consideration 5: Construct a communications strategy for sharing and progressing QA outcomes.**

It is our experience that QA processes are often associated with superficial reporting as opposed to meaningful communication with all the relevant stakeholders including academic services external to the department. Having open communication about the QA process helps faculty members better understand the teaching and learning environment in their own department and how that can be enhanced. A communication plan could provide guidance on how assurance suggestions are not only adopted, but might be investigated through SoTL. Components of a communication strategy could include an action plan, timelines, assignment of responsibilities, and venues for sharing the information and receiving feedback. In terms of gathering faculty feedback, a targeted approach might be more useful than a general call or discussion at an open meeting. For example, comments could be invited from faculty engaged in specific types or levels of courses such as first-year introductory courses, or those with large enrolments or research-intensive project work. In each case, faculty groups could document the unique teaching and learning challenges in these scenarios and frame how SoTL could help them address these challenges.

### **Bridging the Divide**

During our exploration to find evidence of the intersection between QA, QE and the scholarship of teaching and learning, we asked ourselves what might an ideal situation look like? What would we like to see within the provincial documents? One strong example that integrates SoTL within QA is the University of Calgary. The University of Calgary's 2011 *Eyes High Vision and Strategy* states, "we will cultivate teaching excellence by integrating research into how we teach and how students learn" (p. 26). University of Calgary's *Integrated Framework for Teaching and Learning* (Sumara, 2011) and their *Strategic Framework for Learning Technologies* (2014) take this statement and provide a comprehensive strategic and operational approach for how research into how students learn will improve educational quality. These documents, taken together, connect SoTL and quality in statements such as, "collecting and using data on teaching and learning to inform teaching and supervision practice, program development, and program

quality” (Sumara, 2011, p. 9). They call for the creation of an Institute for Research in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, as well as a Centre for Leadership in Teaching and Learning (CLTL), and they suggest that “by integrating a networked unit comprised of disciplinary experts conducting research in the scholarship of teaching and learning in higher education with a unit providing expertise development, the CLTL will enable the University of Calgary to directly link its research and educational mandates” (Sumara, 2011, p. 29).

This integration of the research and educational mandates is important, especially now when the increased emphasis on instructional technology creates new and exciting opportunities for SoTL. An example is the University of Calgary’s (2014) strategic framework for learning technologies that includes the “encouragement of research-based teaching innovations; engagement in the scholarship of teaching and learning with respect to learning technologies” (p. 13). The document also calls for institutional procedures to “ensure faculty efforts to research and publish on the subject of technology-enhanced teaching and learning are recognized as part of a member’s ongoing scholarship, *particularly if this activity is not part of the faculty member’s usual output [emphasis ours]*” (p. 15). Instructional technology introduces new possibilities for SoTL to demonstrate the effectiveness (or ineffectiveness) of instructional innovations. An interesting research project would be a case study of U of C to explore how SoTL became so prominent, the role of leadership, and what other institutions could learn from what resulted at the U of C from SoTL’s elevation and recognition.

Imagine what it might look like if a team of faculty, students, educational developers, and other relevant stakeholders launched a number of SoTL related projects when contemplating what to do about the results of their academic review. Through guiding questions, the program team identifies areas where they would like to improve student learning, including strengthening writing skills, measuring the achievement of particular outcomes, and increasing the number of students and faculty participating in high-impact educational practices. The faculty also wish to explore whether or not the integration of digital media can better demonstrate student mastery of core curriculum components. As part of the program improvement plan, faculty design disciplinary-appropriate teaching and learning research projects to explore these issues. During the period before the next program review, the research methodology is identified and ethics proposals are prepared. Research results are shared within and across departments, as well as at peer-reviewed conferences in teaching and learning and in the discipline. Faculty are fully recognized for their efforts, which have led to a deeper personal and institutional understanding of the complex dynamics of teaching and learning, and students benefit from the efforts to enhance their learning experience. Much of this work is already happening, but the dramatic difference in this possible future is that SoTL activity explicitly resides at the heart of the QA process.

The purpose of generating SoTL projects in these areas, and valuing them appropriately, is to legitimize them as an evidence-based practice for enabling continuous improvement. Most QA reviews include recommendations as part of the final report, and increasingly, institutions follow up to determine action taken. Who better to pursue this than the academics directly involved in the core business of the university – research and teaching? Whether or not any of this comes to pass is undetermined, but as provincial QA approaches continue to evolve, strengthening the connection between program review processes and SoTL, in terms of its intention and language of improvement, has the potential to transform both.

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