

ARTICLE

Globalising the local: The scholarship of teaching and learning in a larger context

Peter LOOKER¹

¹ Centre for Excellence in Learning and Teaching
Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

Address for Correspondence: Assoc Prof Peter Looker, Centre for Excellence in Learning and Teaching
Nanyang Technological University, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798. Email: pdlooker@ntu.edu.sg

Recommended citation:

Looker, P. (2011). Globalising the local: The scholarship of teaching and learning in a larger context.

Journal of the NUS Teaching Academy, 1 (1), 21-31.

<https://doi.org/10.24112/ajsotl.13255>

Globalising the local: The scholarship of teaching and learning in a larger context

Abstract

The scholarship of teaching and learning movement has developed over the last 20 years in large part in response to changing circumstances in higher education. Its focus is generally practical and localised, aimed at improving student learning. This is both a strength and a limitation. On the whole, the scholarship of teaching and learning movement has not taken root in non-Western countries, and this is worth considering in a world where disciplinary research is global. This paper concludes that the scholarship of teaching and learning needs to enlarge the contexts within which it conducts its analysis of teaching and learning by taking greater account of who the students taught in higher education are.

Two years ago, at an Australian university, a professor of chemistry contacted me in my role as faculty developer for advice about his teaching. He had begun teaching in the mid-1980s, but had recently returned to academia after a seven-year break working in industry. In the past, he had achieved strong approval from students in his end-of-semester teacher evaluations, but since returning to teaching, his scores had dropped dramatically. He was teaching the same as in the past, but he now realised that times had changed. He needed to come to some understanding of his relationship as a teacher to a new generation of students and to the subject matter he taught.

I begin with this anecdote because it describes a situation that forms one of the fundamental points of departure for conducting scholarship in teaching and learning – the need both to understand and improve the circumstances of student learning. This faculty member was willing to explore his teaching, and in the following months we had a number of discussions, reviewing the syllabus, introducing different activities and revising some of his assessment. Asking those initial questions about his teaching opened a door into the space occupied by the scholarship of learning and teaching.

Significantly, in terms of the argument of this paper, the evaluation of his teaching concentrated very much on the teacher, the course content and the students. In a sense, it was treated as a self-enclosed problem, without reference to larger issues that may bear on teaching and learning. This example of a teaching crisis illustrates the felt need for many faculty to become more aware of teaching and its relationship to student learning, a relationship that in the past seemed relatively

unproblematic in higher education. This professor found analysing his teaching a novel activity, though in his case, it did not lead to further investigation, or publication of a paper. He was moving in the direction of scholarly teaching, but not towards the scholarship of teaching and learning.

One of the problems I wish to raise in this paper comes from addressing this professor's teaching as a self-enclosed system. Although his experience was an individual one of disjunction – his long-held assumptions about teaching no longer matched student expectations – there are larger issues at play. In a sense, we were treating the symptoms, ignoring larger agendas and pressures. The scholarship of teaching and learning can also be a means of understanding, and adapting to, what Kreber (2007) identifies as “multiple challenges with regards to pedagogy” brought about by “the change from elite to mass higher education”. Dealing with this shift involves “changing traditional approaches to teaching and assessment practices” (p.1). Kreber, like D'Andrea and Gosling (2005), appreciates the importance of the scholarship of teaching and learning finding a location in the bigger agendas that shape higher education.

In the last 20 years the scholarship of teaching and learning has developed its own history, locating its genesis in Ernest Boyer's 1990 work *Scholarship Reconsidered*. [For a recent recapitulation of this history see Hutchings, Huber, and Ciccone (2011)]. Boyer's proposal that we take a more holistic view of the work of the professoriate by enlarging the scope of scholarship to include the scholarship of discovery, integration, application, *and* teaching, is seen as a founding moment for an emergent movement. According to Boyer, the scholarship of discovery involves questions about what is as yet unknown, the scholarship of integration seeks to give meaning to research findings, the scholarship of application looks for ways of applying knowledge to new problems, making knowledge useful, and the scholarship of teaching treats teaching as worthy of analysis, investigation and dissemination. A key theme in the development of the scholarship of teaching and learning has been the idea of making teaching more public through evidence-based research.

Boyer wished in part to reconfigure the relationship between the historically separated areas of teaching and research, not only to rebalance priorities, but to highlight common ground (Hutchings et al., 2011). Teaching and research can be linked and mutually informing, and teaching can benefit from basing itself on evidence, rather than custom.

Since Boyer, there have been many attempts to give the scholarship of teaching and learning definition, often by saying what it is not. So, it is distinguished from scholarly teaching, excellent teaching, (Healey, 2003) educational (pedagogical) research and disciplinary research. Another area of debate influencing definitions of the scholarship of teaching and learning is the degree to which it engages

with theory (Brew, 2011). Wankat et al. (2002) suggest that most engineering research can be classified as scholarship of discovery and this is one of the reasons engineering faculty can be suspicious of the scholarship of teaching and learning. There is a need to demonstrate to faculty that the scholarship of teaching and learning requires the same rigour as the scholarship of discovery. The type of phenomenographic and qualitative research the scholarship of teaching and learning generally involves is different from the kind of research to which scientists and engineers in particular are accustomed. Also, it is research focusing on teaching, and as D'Andrea and Gosling (2005, p.153) note, even when faculty are rewarded and recognised for their teaching (through teaching awards, or teaching grants) they can still see disciplinary research, rather than teaching, as central to their identity.

Hutchings (2004) remarks that Boyer's idea that teaching be considered a form of scholarship was, at the time, "provocative" and that the language used to include teaching as a form of scholarship is to many faculty "off-putting" and "more an impediment than a source of energy, seen as a plot to reward work that isn't 'real research'". To faculty already overworked, it looks like yet another demand. It inserts something new (and often elusive) into a professional role already defined by disciplinary research, teaching and service.

There are therefore a number of persistent resistances to the scholarship of teaching and learning. It appears to add new demands, it is not real research, it is not rewarded in the same way disciplinary research is rewarded, and it does not have clear definition, especially in terms of the way research might be conducted. These resistances contribute to the need to reiteratively define what the scholarship of teaching and learning is. The titles of three journal articles used in the paper illustrate the point:

- "What is the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) in Higher Education?" (McKinney, nd);
- "The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning: What Is It? A Personal view" (Prosser, 2008)
- "What Is It Really All about? The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning as an Authentic Practice" (Kreber, 2007)

During the time of its coming into being, the scholarship of teaching and learning movement has been acutely self-conscious. I would argue that traditionally it has been assumed that an ability to teach automatically follows from subject expertise. Until recently, university teachers were not "trained" as teachers, and the scholarship of learning and teaching, or even scholarly teaching, undermines the assumption that good teaching is the natural consequence of subject expertise. This can also go to the question of teachers' identity as university faculty (rather than school teachers) and as subject experts. The scholarship of teaching and learning differs from other areas of research in that it cannot be called a discipline

in the sense of say, physics, or psychology, though some, like Brew would argue that it should come closer to having disciplinary status if it is sufficiently rigorous. Nor is it the kind of research conducted by faculty in departments of education:

education researchers...are involved in scholarship of discovery, integration, application and teaching, they have a strong understanding of educational theory and research, and they identify primarily with other researchers undertaking educational research, broadly defined. ...The audience for scholarship of teaching and learning consists of other practitioners primarily, rather than theorists. (University of Queensland, 2007)

The scholarship of teaching and learning is generally conducted by faculty who also undertake disciplinary research as their primary research, and teach. Educational research, for those in schools of education, is their primary disciplinary research. Prosser (2008) makes a distinction between the research undertaken in faculties of education, which can be generic pedagogical research, and the scholarship of teaching and learning, which arises directly from and within disciplinary practice, but nevertheless draws on the generic research. The scholarship of teaching and learning is situated in the “interplay between the generic and contextual” (p.3). Prosser’s no-nonsense delineation of the scholarship of teaching and learning emphasises the direct line it makes between investigation and the improvement of practice. This is not to say that educational research is not also aimed at improving practice, but that it might do so indirectly through the creation of general theories of education. Prosser’s point seems to be that the scholarship of teaching and learning is in part defined by the immediacy of its practical intent and application. It is “evidence based critical reflection on practice aimed at improving practice” (p.2).

Following Kreber, there are, however, important questions about Prosser’s formulation. What are the boundaries of the contextual? Does the scholarship of teaching and learning start and finish in the “classroom” in the way described above in relation to the chemistry professor? Does it include institutional contexts, or political and cultural contexts? And if it does take account of these larger contexts, how can we determine their influence in order to improve student learning without engaging in large-scale institutional, or even cultural change?

It is useful to see the scholarship of teaching and learning movement over the last 20 years as a phenomenon produced within a particular historical moment, where rapid change has occurred not only in the broader culture, but within the knowledge base of the disciplines themselves. Many disciplines are not the same as they were 20 years ago. Furthermore, universities have changed institutional structures in relation to disciplines. In the 1970s, there was generally a direct correspondence between a discipline and its administrative unit: chemistry was located in a school of chemistry, English in a school of English. This is now rarely the case.

Other factors influencing teaching and learning include uncertainty about the purpose of higher education (Marginson, 2011) and the way students perceive the value of education; the meaning of teaching in relation to what we now know about learning from a number of fields of research; the technological revolution shaping the way we communicate and access knowledge; and the way universities are funded (with all the implications for students and faculty that entails). Taking a global perspective, and recognising a difference between the purpose of learning at Confucian heritage universities and Western universities, Marginson goes as far as to say that universities in general “are in need of a larger purpose that underpins their existence.” Investigating one’s own teaching can be a way of negotiating these changes and coming to some understanding of what they mean.

When Healey (2003) gave 12 definitions of the scholarship of learning and teaching to 77 participants in workshops, the most favoured definition was that based on Martin et al.

The scholarship of teaching involves three essential and integrated elements: engagement with the scholarly contributions of others on teaching and learning, reflection on one’s own teaching practice and the learning of students within the context of a particular discipline; and communication and dissemination of aspects of practice and theoretical ideas about teaching and learning in general and teaching and learning within the discipline. [Quoted in Healey (2003, p.10). The original article cited in the reference list is no longer accessible.]

What is missing from all 12 definitions presented by Healey is any sense that understanding what happens in the classroom may involve deeply embedded cultural practices shared by teachers and students (and possibly invisible to them). What constitutes good teaching (or what is valued as good teaching) and what constitutes quality learning (or what is valued as good learning), are not the same from one context (one part of the world) to another. Since students come to higher education with around 12 years of formal education behind them, they come already shaped as learners.

The scholarship of teaching and learning movement, which has spawned large-scale annual conferences, and a number of journals, has been concentrated in a handful of countries, mostly English-speaking, and mostly Western: the USA, the UK, Ireland, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and Hong Kong (Hutchings et al., 2011, p.18). Conferences such as the annual conference for the International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (ISSOTL) attract participants from a wide range of countries, but the bias towards the countries mentioned is unmistakable, as a glance at any of the conference programmes indicates. While this is billed as an international conference, it has so far only been held in the United States, Canada, Australia and the UK. It includes some participants from

South American countries, some from African countries, and relatively few from South-East Asia.

Is the scholarship of teaching and learning as it has been constituted and practised over the last 20 years itself the product of particular cultural practices? One of the aims of the scholarship of teaching and learning is to enable higher education practitioners to disseminate aspects of teaching and learning to a wider audience, in much the same way disciplinary research is disseminated. In an era of internationalisation, when universities are compared across the globe through various forms of ranking, and when more students cross national borders to attend university, what does it mean that as yet, the scholarship of teaching and learning has not taken hold in South-East Asia, or other parts of the world?

Faculty members here in Singapore, for example, may come from all over the world, just as in other countries, and the disciplinary research they conduct is in the same global arena as that of others. In terms of disciplinary research, academics form a global community. Yet the field of the scholarship of teaching and learning is relatively unknown in Singapore, let alone practised. Why is the scholarship of teaching and learning currently concentrated in the countries mentioned, while disciplinary research is not? If, furthermore, as D'Andrea and Gosling suggest, the scholarship of teaching and learning forms a bridge between teaching and research, why has it only taken root in any substantial way in the countries mentioned?

One possible answer to this question is that the scholarship of teaching and learning as it is understood differs from disciplinary research in that the object of inquiry, and what it seeks to improve (student learning) are entirely dependent on a local context already shaped by local cultural practices. On several occasions when I have presented evidence from scholarship of teaching and learning research to faculty in Singapore during faculty development workshops, participants have dismissed it as work that does not apply to Singapore. “The students here are different”, they say or, “the system here is so different you can’t apply American, or British, research.” This has led to discussion about the school system and the educational conditioning students bring to university. Most recently this occurred when I asked faculty members in a workshop in the biological sciences to read the Deslauriers et al. (2011) article from *Science* on active learning in a large physics class. These comments have come not only from Singaporean nationals, but from faculty from other countries, including the US and the UK, who encounter a different student culture when they come here.

If one of the aims of the scholarship of teaching and learning is to bring teaching and learning more into the public arena, to treat it more like other research, and to communicate with other practitioners, what level of contextualising (to return to Prosser) is required for practitioners across different educational cultures to

communicate meaningfully? Perhaps the value placed in Western education on facilitated active learning simply does not apply here. I am deliberately pushing this to an extreme in order to highlight what I see as questions not yet adequately explored within the scholarship of teaching and learning movement because of its localised focus.

The idea of the teaching commons proposed by Huber and Hutchings (2005) – a conceptual space where educators share research for the advancement of teaching and learning – is welcomed by Kwo (2007) as a space for “international exchanges”. Such exchanges offer the opportunity for enlarging our “mindset for a professional journey to a global existence”. Hutchings and Huber have said that the scholarship of teaching and learning is housed in a “big tent” emphasising that it is diverse, capacious and inclusive. Tellingly, however, after discussing UNESCO figures for the number of children out of school around the world, Kwo asks how “poverty affect[s] the way we see ‘learners’ and SoTL” (p.3). This is a potent question casting the scholarship of teaching and learning into new territory. It immediately expands the boundaries of the contextual part of Prosser’s formulation of a dynamic “interplay between the generic and contextual”. With one stroke, Kwo alerts us to the reality that understanding teaching and learning is not limited to an analysis of what happens in the interactions of teacher, syllabus, and students. Teaching and learning, are not “culture-fair” to borrow a term often applied to non-verbal forms of IQ testing.

When faculty at NTU in Singapore dismiss scholarship of teaching and learning coming from other parts of the world, they say “give us some evidence from Singapore”. So far, I have to admit to them, there is not very much, and nothing on the scale of the research conducted in the countries mentioned above. The ground-breaking work of Biggs and Watkins (2001) in *Teaching the Chinese Learner* and Chan and Rao (2009) in *Revisiting the Chinese Learner* in Hong Kong does open up new avenues of exploration for the scholarship of teaching and learning, but they have not found a place in the mainstream. In his Preface to *Revisiting the Chinese Learner*, Biggs states that his original formulation of “the paradox of the Chinese learner” was that:

Westerners [see] Chinese students as rote learning massive amounts of information in fierce exam-dominated classrooms – yet in international comparisons, students in the Confucian heritage [outperform] western students learning in ‘progressive’ western classrooms. (Chan and Rao, p.xiii)

What has emerged from these studies is a far more complicated picture, one that has changed its colours over the years from the first to the second study. But it is significant that in the first place, the study is formulated in terms of a Western perspective to be explored. What this means is that coming to an understanding

of the Chinese learner vis-a-vis the Western learner does involve understanding the place of learning and teaching in a larger context. Chan and Rao (2009) suggest that

Confucian values are evident in Chinese families residing in societies with very different political structures, such as mainland China, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Taiwan, and are also manifest in overseas Chinese families....This suggests that Chinese cultural values are transmitted through the expectations and behaviour of parents, which means that Confucian notions about learning and education will continue to influence contemporary learning and instruction in Chinese societies.

It would be interesting to see the perspective reversed, with a study of the Western learner from a Chinese perspective.

When colleagues complain about the inappropriateness of Western scholarship of teaching and learning, they raise a range of issues bearing on Singaporean students as learners, including the particularities of the Singapore school system, who gains admission to university, what institutions the students come from (Junior Colleges, or Polytechnics, for example) and assumptions about what higher education is for.

The challenge for the scholarship of teaching and learning is to become truly capable of informing global practice equal to the global dissemination of disciplinary research. The great strength of the notion of the scholarship of teaching and learning, as it is outlined above, is that it opens a space for, and gives support to, teachers who wish (like the chemistry professor) to ask questions about teaching and learning, and improve practice. In order to achieve this it must focus on localised practice and remain grounded in practice. And it engages those whose main occupation is not research in education in the general sense.

If, however, we are to share practice on a global scale we cannot talk as if teaching and learning are culture-fair in the way one might regard research in physics. That means not only taking account of context in non-Western countries, such as the context of the “Chinese learner”, it also means problematising, or even defamiliarising, Western contexts of teaching and learning, a willingness to open up to all the forces, political, cultural, institutional, that shape what happens in the “classroom”. This is different from encouraging a more active scholarship of teaching and learning in, say Singapore, or Vietnam. It is to produce the kind of work where a reader in Vietnam can say of a paper written about online assessment in Canada “I can see that these students come to this learning situation with a particular set of assumptions and under a particular set of conditions”.

As a first step, what this requires in practice is adducing evidence that signals to readers of scholarship in teaching and learning an awareness of the contexts

shaping interactions in the learning environment, such as who the students are. Kwo's question about poverty and learners raises the important question about who the learners are, what they bring to the learning environment both existentially (as in Kwo's example) and in terms of assumptions about the purpose of education. This is not just about the knowledge students bring with them. It is literally about who undertakes higher education.

In Australia, for example, universities not only make it possible, but encourage, mature-age students to enrol. [See for example the website of the University of Western Australia: <http://www.studyat.uwa.edu.au/undergraduate/admission/mature>]. Documents from the University of Newcastle Management Information System (2011) indicate that for the five years from 2006-2010, the total percentage of enrolled students coming through the "Enabling Program" – that is mature-age, and non-school leavers, was 15.2% (n = 13,220) of total 86,921 students. There is an underlying assumption that people can transform their lives at any age through education. And there is a structure put in place by Australian universities to facilitate mature-age entry especially through running programmes that assist prospective students qualify for university entry. This is not the case in Singapore.

Taking into account who can (or cannot) come to university can make visible to readers of the scholarship of teaching and learning different cultural or national assumptions about the purpose of higher education, and the relationship of the learner (in terms of motivation, say) to the learning environment.

Students in Singapore likewise need to be differentiated as coming from Junior Colleges or Polytechnics. Those coming from Republic Polytechnic for example have experienced three years of a curriculum firmly based in problem-based learning. A topic of conversation among faculty at universities in Singapore is the difference between Polytechnic students and Junior College students. Understanding the bigger context of education in Singapore requires taking demographic distinctions like this into account.

One of the advantages to faculty of seeing the scholarship of teaching and learning in Prosser's terms as "evidence based critical reflection on practice aimed at improving practice" is that it seems manageable without venturing into wholly new disciplinary, or theoretical territory. The proposal here may therefore seem to be going in the wrong direction, opening it up to something like the sociology of education. It is, however, a more modest proposal for routinely asking: "Who are our students; who does the system we work in allow, or disallow us, to teach; and how does who they are influence what happens in the learning environment?" Doing this will at the very least adumbrate the institutional and even political structures that influence who undertakes higher education, highlight differences across the globe, and produce a scholarship of teaching and learning that is more frank about the fact that teaching and learning operate within larger contexts, not in a closed system.

REFERENCES

- Biggs, J. B., & Watkins, D. A. (Eds.). (2001). *Teaching the Chinese learner: Psychological and pedagogical perspectives*. Hong Kong/Melbourne: The University of Hong Kong/ Australian Council for Educational Research.
- Boyer, E. L. (1990). *Scholarship reconsidered: Priorities of the professoriate*. San Francisco: Josey-Bass.
- Brew, A. (2011). Higher education research and the scholarship of teaching and learning: The pursuit of excellence. *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 5 (2), 1-4.
- Chan, C. K. K., & Rao, N. (Eds.). (2009). *Revisiting the Chinese learner: Changing contexts, changing education*. Hong Kong: Springer/Comparative Education Research Centre, The University of Hong Kong.
- D'Andrea, V., & Gosling, D. (2005). *Improving teaching and learning in higher education: A whole institution approach*. Maidenhead: Society for Research into Higher Education & Open University Press.
- Deslauriers, L., Schelew, E., Wieman, C. (2011). Improved learning in a large-enrollment physics class. *Science*, 332 (6031), 862-864.
- Healey, M. (2003). The scholarship of teaching: Issues around an evolving concept. *Journal on Excellence in College Teaching*, 14 (1/2), 5-26.
- Huber, M., & Hutchings, P. (2005). *The Advancement of learning: Building the teaching commons*. The Carnegie Foundation Report on the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning. San Francisco: The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, Jossey-Bass.
- Hutchings, P. (2004). The scholarship of teaching and learning in the United States. International Conference for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, Bloomington. Retrieved October 18, 2011, from <http://www.issotl.indiana.edu/issotl/04/hutchings.pdf>
- Hutchings, P., Huber, M. T., & Ciccone, A. (2011). *The Scholarship of teaching and learning reconsidered: Institutional integration and impact*. Stanford, California: The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, Josey-Bass.
- Kreber, C. (2007). What's it really all about? The scholarship of teaching and learning as an authentic practice. *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 1 (1), 1-4.
- Kwo, O. (2007). SoTL in the commons: Elephant, authenticity and journey. *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 1 (2), 1-4.
- Marginson, S. (2011). The modern university must reinvent itself to survive. The Conversation. 31 March. University of Melbourne. Retrieved October 18, 2011, from <http://theconversation.edu.au/the-modern-university-must-reinvent-itself-to-survive-37>
- Martin, E., Prosser, M., Conrad, L., Trigwell, K., & Benjamin, J. (1998). Developing scholarship in teaching. Communicating the scholarship of teaching. Developing scholarship in teaching [On-line]. <http://www.creativecontingencies.com/joanb/> [no longer accessible, quoted in Healey (2003)].
- McKinney, K. (nd). What is the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) in higher education?" Illinois State University. Retrieved October 18, 2011, from <http://sotl.illinoisstate.edu/downloads/pdf/definesotl.pdf>
- Prosser, M. (2008). The scholarship of teaching and learning: what is it? A personal view. *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 2 (2), 1-4.
- University of Newcastle. (2011). Planning, quality and reporting. *Management Information System* 29 March, 1. Unpublished manuscript.
- University of Queensland. (2007). Scholarship of teaching and learning. *Working Party on the Diversity of Academic Roles*. Retrieved October 18, 2011, from <http://www.uq.edu.au/teaching-learning/docs/Scholarship-of-teaching-learning.doc>
- Wankat, P. C., Felder, R. M., Smith, K. A. Oreovicz, F. S. (2002). The scholarship of teaching and learning in engineering. In M. T. Huber & S. Morreale (Eds), *Disciplinary styles in the scholarship of teaching and learning: Exploring common ground*. Washington: AAHE/Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.