

EDITORIAL

Developing SoTL practice and mentorship in Singapore and Asia

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Developing SoTL practice and mentorship in Singapore and Asia

We invited the newly appointed Director of the Centre for the Development of Teaching and Learning (CDTL) at the National University of Singapore (NUS), Johan Geertsema, to share his thoughts about academic development and SoTL [scholarship of teaching and learning] in this issue of *AJSoTL*. Since Geertsema assumed Directorship in January 2015, he has begun moving the Centre even more rigorously towards a scholarly approach to teaching and learning in NUS. In the piece he has provided for *AJSoTL*'s "From the Desk of", he provides an excellent new beginning for *AJSoTL* – a journal located in Asia, aspiring to active engagement with SoTL. In his paper, Geertsema asked, "If SoTL is worth engaging in, then how might one do it? And how could institutions foster such engagement in SoTL?" I invite readers to read and actively engage with Geertsema's piece, and reflect on the many important issues he has raised for colleagues and the institution; and for SoTL in Asia. In our view, a good starting point is for institutions to provide suitable avenues for SoTL engagement. This journal, the *Asian Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (AJSoTL)* is one such form of institutional engagement in SoTL at NUS, created to support the work of colleagues who wish to develop their teaching practice using a SoTL frame, within and beyond NUS.

AJSoTL was formerly known as *JNUSTA* – the *Journal of the NUS Teaching Academy* – a special project that was first proposed by Erle Lim, a Fellow of the Academy. Fielded as an Academy project, this work was subsequently developed and supported by colleagues from NUS and Nanyang Technological University (NTU; see *AJSoTL*'s Editorial Board). The first issue of *JNUSTA* appeared in November 2011 as a platform to engage all colleagues in education, both locally and globally. As stated in the debut editorial, the aim of *JNUSTA* was to nurture "a global network of academics and educators who will discuss ongoing changes and future trends in tertiary education" and "to serve as a resource for educators to share their experiences and knowledge for the benefit of others" (Lim and Geertsema, 2011, p.2). From that first issue to June 2015, 15 issues were produced at regular, quarterly intervals, covering topics as wide ranging as teaching challenges in various disciplines, to technological interventions in facilitating student learning outcomes, to the cultivation of critical thinking and communication skills in tertiary classrooms. Though there was at least one key article about the scholarship of teaching and learning (Looker 2011, pp.21-31), *JNUSTA* did not explicitly encourage SoTL approaches till more recently in its history, starting with an editorial to inform readers of our plans to overtly signal the move towards a SoTL emphasis. In "What's in a name?" Lim and Geertsema (2014) stated that while the journal's focus has not changed (i.e. we remain committed to connecting with the global and local networks of academics and educators interested in education), renaming *JNUSTA* as *AJSoTL* has the following in mind:

Our new name reflects our decision to focus on issues in the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL), and this means an emphasis on research-informed teaching and on explicit pedagogical reflection, as well as documentation of the pedagogical processes that drive classroom activities and student learning outcomes. In short, we hope to improve the quality of teaching and learning, by encouraging fellow teachers to think about, and discuss, issues in a scholarly, i.e. SoTL, way. *AJSoTL* will facilitate the process by engaging SoTL practitioners to write articles that will both stimulate, and inspire, our teaching endeavours. (2014, p.62).

We reaffirm the above repositioning of *AJSoTL*, and going forward, as we develop this journal (twice a year, two issues planned for May and November each year) as a vehicle through which scholarly, peer reviewed reflection on aspects of learning and teaching can be made public, *AJSoTL* will continue not just to support work that aim at improving practice for self and for others, but will also pay special attention to works that emanate from the Asian/ASEAN region, from relatively new SoTL scholars, though not to the exclusion of other scholars from other regions. The important points to note here are the two key considerations of (i) learning from one another through the work that we make public, wherever we may be located, physically or ideologically, to develop both oneself, one's peers, and one's institution, and (ii) a strong mentorship element, this being an explicit focus that many journals do not undertake, which we think is important because it is through mentorship that we can enable and encourage the development of newcomers to the field. *AJSoTL* thus wants to encourage contributions that meet the following criteria:

- Work that makes public what the individual may have done, that enabled his/her own growth in teaching practice, and that of his/her students' learning.
- Work that can help develop teaching and learning at the institutional level, i.e., developing not only the self but also others/institutions in Singapore, in the region and beyond.

Adopting these attitudes towards development and mentorship, this issue features 3 pieces, each an experiment in technology-enabled, blended teaching and learning. The first is, "Catering to engineering students: A flipped classroom case study", a first flipped classroom attempt in teaching Mathematics to Engineering students by Alberto Corrias. Corrias designed and implemented a blended teaching and learning module to engage a relatively large engineering class, his objective being to improve the learning experience of his students. This paper is balanced in its admission of its own shortcomings and future directions (e.g. the need to address in particular the fact that students did not attempt the self-assessment questions, or that they attempted

them only prior to the exam). There are of course various other ways for redesigning this flipped classroom and this study could also be further pursued with a randomized/control group. This article however exemplifies the kind of work we are looking for in *AJSOTL* – it serves as a way to start, for one individual to investigate his own teaching methods and importantly, it can serve to encourage (other) colleagues to pursue scholarly approaches to their teaching and, in the process foster deep learning for all in the institution.

The second piece featured here comes from Psychiatry education – the use of a blended teaching approach using smartphone applications by Melvyn Zhang, Tracey Wing and Roger Ho. Like Corrias, the authors are also experimenting for the first time, and they shared the process of developing a blended learning model for their students that optimised advances in Web-based and smartphone technologies and of gathering information relating to students’ receptivity of such a technology-enabled mode of learning in a field that is defined by traditional teaching and learning approaches. The initial finding is that there was high utilization of the materials placed online and 57.1% of students gave support for such an augmentation to their access to learning resources. The authors hope, as we do, that other clinicians will also consider experimenting with such online affordances in their course delivery, so as to enable students’ learning of clinical skills.

The third contribution to this issue relates to undergraduate life science education – seeking to improve learning outcomes in undergraduate research. We applaud Ng and Hagen’s focus on self-directed, active, higher-order learning in this work and their attention to important skills like decision-making and problem solving, even as their main aim is to teach research skills. At this point, this work has only considered student feedback and informal observations – future work could focus on evidence of skills acquisition as may be visible through a consideration of students’ work, in this case, the way they conduct research.

The reward from encouraging this kind of scholarly investigation and the mentorship process is immense and has already been attested by authors we have actively engaged with in the past year. Corrias for example said he has “learnt quite a bit through the review process” (p.c.) and felt encouraged to continue to engage in more scholarly reflection on his own practice in the future. Hagen echoed this sentiment, and said that the feedback through “the review process was immensely helpful for us, both in terms of the writing and thinking about the project itself. It made a huge difference” (p.c.). Hagen, admitting that there remains a lot to be learnt, has in fact taken steps to pursue this work further, “to look at learning outcomes in a more objective manner” (p.c.).

As Hutchings said in her “Introduction” to *Opening Lines*, each colleague undertaking SoTL work for the first time has to start from somewhere, and they often ask questions relating to “what works” as a starting point – what intervention can help student learning? Each colleague, as with the ones featured in this issue, is in their own way “opening lines of inquiry into significant issues in the teaching and learning” (2000, p.1) in their own fields. *AJSOTL*’s commitment to mentorship prompts us to work with all colleagues who are eager to develop and reflect on their own classroom practice, no matter how new they are to SoTL. Readers can look forward to more such effort in subsequent issues of *AJSOTL*, as we share colleagues’ work addressing different areas of classroom engagement. In the May 2016 issue for example, we will be featuring a piece of work relating to a Chemistry lab module that employs a “GoPro approach” by Fung Fun Man; and a piece that discusses assessment, grading and the important role that instructors play in assessment by Ho Han Kiat. The purpose of *AJSOTL* is thus to feature work addressing a range of teaching and learning issues, in different stages of SoTL development that is emerging from within specific institutions (especially those in Asia) as we strive to create a SoTL culture. We take development seriously, and for this reason, we accept mentorship as a key mission. We would like to encourage all new scholars to contribute to *AJSOTL*, to learn along with us, and for more established scholars to lend their support through acting as reviewers and as contributors, to provide guidance, feedback and set a good example for scholarly reflection. As Geertsema so eloquently put it in his sharing in “From the Desk of”,

Through scholarly engagement with what the literature tells us about [our practice], and at the same time reflecting on how principles derived from the literature can apply to their own teaching context, it becomes possible for faculty to learn how best to create a learning environment that will encourage students to pursue deep approaches to learning (p. 139, this issue).

It is with partnership in mind that we wish to walk this journey with all colleagues, so that we all “learn how best to create a learning environment that will encourage students to pursue deep approaches to learning” as we as teachers pursue deep approaches to teaching.

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