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# Achieving and maintaining a symbiosis between institutional priorities, personal professional development and improving student learning

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# Achieving and maintaining a symbiosis between institutional priorities, personal professional development and improving student learning

## *Abstract*

Research into teaching and learning has changed markedly in the last decade with increased emphasis on the student experience and an increasing role for HE practitioners as researchers of their own practice. This has resulted in a change in perceptions of the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) from an activity of the dedicated few to a higher profile and higher status activity.

There has, however, been little research into whether the drivers which motivate engagement in SoTL have also changed. This paper uses evidence from the past decade of SoTL at the Open University to explore the inter-relationship between these drivers and the implications for the individual SoTL practitioner. It proposes a model of symbiosis between these different drivers and suggests how institutional and faculty structures can support the development of SoTL that is student-focussed, offers suitable reward and recognition for the individual and also contributes to institutional priorities.

## *Introduction*

It has long been recognised that the two key drivers for Higher Education (HE) academics to engage in the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) has been the professional development of the teacher on the one hand and the consequent improvement to student learning on the other. However, what was a decade ago perceived as an activity of the dedicated few, who might pursue an interest in teaching and learning for primarily intrinsic reasons, has become an activity which is increasingly accepted and even expected within HE. In the United Kingdom, policy shifts, such as the introduction of the professional development framework for HE teachers (HEA, 2006; HEA, 2011) ,and national initiatives such as the Fund for the Development of Teaching and Learning (FDTL), and the Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETLs), have placed increased emphasis on the value of HE teachers investigating and improving their own practice, whether as part of initial teacher education or as continuing professional development. This shift in the external environment has been reflected within many institutions where there has been increasing support provided for SoTL and greater recognition of it in formal reward structures. As SoTL has become embedded within the career trajectory of increasing numbers of academics, so the expectations surrounding it have increased. It is no longer possible simply to view the outcomes of SoTL as relating solely to the development of individual practitioners and their students but as contributing more broadly to teaching and learning in institutions. Similarly, the expected outputs of SoTL have changed from being simple descriptions of classroom practice (Bartlett and Burton, 2006) to accounts which contribute to theoretical knowledge (Norton, 2009).

Despite these changes in how SoTL is perceived there has been little research into whether the drivers which motivate individual HE teachers to engage in SoTL have changed and how the inter-

relationship between these drivers affects the outcomes of SoTL at the level of the individual, their students and the institution. This paper explores the changing nature of SoTL and examines its implications within the context of the Open University UK. In particular it seeks to address the following questions:

- What are the drivers which influence SoTL at an individual and institutional level?
- What is the relationship between these drivers?
- What effect do these drivers have on the expectations and outcomes of SoTL?
- What are the implications for SoTL practitioners and the structures in place to support them?

## *The changing nature of SoTL in Higher Education*

The precise meaning and nature of the scholarship of teaching and learning has always been the subject of debate in higher education, but there is general agreement that it contains several key characteristics (Norton, 2009; Mårtensson et al, 2010):  firstly, it should involve the systematic investigation of one's own teaching/learning facilitation practice, secondly, it should aim to improve that practice and benefit student learning and, thirdly, that it should contribute to theoretical knowledge, often through public dissemination of the findings and openness to peer review. SoTL is also an over-arching term for a number of other approaches to investigate teaching and learning which have gained prominence in the last few decades, including practitioner research (Campbell et al, 2004), action research (Kember, 2002), action learning (Warhurst, 2006) and pedagogic action research (Norton, 2009), all which share, to a greater or lesser degree, the characteristics described above.

Early accounts of SoTL within U.K. H.E. focused primarily on the improvement of individual practice and the consequent improvement to student learning. It is fair to say that the outputs of such research could be viewed quite negatively by established educational researchers. Brooker and Macpherson (1999) referred to the 'self-indulgence' of some of the practitioner research disseminated at that time and, several years later, an eminent educational researcher lambasted SoTL practitioners for "some combination of bad faith and shoddy practice for presuming to conduct pedagogical inquiry without sufficient knowledge of or reference to the theoretical armature of education and other learning science fields" (Huber and Hutchings, 2008, p. 227). Given these criticisms, and set against the background of the continuing divide between teaching and research within the higher education sector, it is perhaps unsurprising that SoTL practitioners ploughed a furrow of 'results without rewards' (Walker et al, 2008).

In the last decade, however, there has been a marked shift in how SoTL is perceived in the U.K. In 2004, the Higher Education Academy (HEA) was established as a national independent body for enhancing learning and teaching in higher education (HEA, 2012). In 2006, the HEA published a set of professional development standards, revised in 2011, which highlighted the need for HE teachers to incorporate research and scholarship into their teaching (HEA, 2006; HEA, 2011). The

consequence has been the development of compulsory accredited teacher training programmes for new staff with most HE institutions in the U.K., the majority of which carry an expectation on participants to conduct a piece of research into their own practice. Perhaps the biggest driver in the development of SOTL in the United Kingdom, however, was the establishment of the Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning CETLs), part of a government funded initiative to promote teaching and learning in HE institutions in England and Northern Ireland. The funding of 74 Centres for Excellence from 2005 to 2010 saw a huge rise in scholarship activity and an increase in the number and visibility of SoTL related conferences and journals.

The implications of this shift are that the drivers which motivate engagement with SoTL are not necessarily the same as they once were. Practitioners may be increasingly expected to engage in SoTL, either as part of their initial teacher education or as on-going professional development as institutions focus their attentions on increasing student satisfaction and making continuous improvements to teaching and learning. As SoTL becomes increasingly recognised within cases for promotion (Palmer and Collins, 2006), there may also be new opportunities for practitioners to gain recognition for what was previously an activity with primarily intrinsic benefits and rewards. The changing nature of SoTL, and its implications for the individual practitioner and the institution, will now be examined with the context of the Open University U.K.

## *OU context*

The Open University UK is a large distance education provider with 200,000 students. It operates a blended learning approach with print and online materials produced centrally by teams of subject academics. Individual support and feedback to students is provided face to face and increasingly online by part-time distance education tutors, termed Associate Lecturers. Although the Open University context for teaching and learning is necessarily different to more conventional universities, there are nonetheless similarities in how SoTL has developed within the institution. In particular, much of the impetus for the development of SoTL has come from external initiatives such as the CETLs, four of which were based at the Open University and which have led, as will be discussed below, to a number of faculty-based initiatives to support teaching and learning. Compulsory induction and training materials, although aimed at Associate Lecturers rather than centrally based academic staff, also promote action research as a means of continuing professional development. More recently, in 2010, the university published a strategy document outlining the nature and expected outputs of scholarship and there is now a clear identification of promotion criteria based on SoTL. There has also been increased prominence given to the notion that scholarship should provide the evidence for strategic change.

The focus for this paper is the development of SoTL within the Open University's Science faculty. The Science faculty has been chosen because it has been at the forefront of efforts to develop SoTL expertise amongst teaching staff for the last decade. It has also been a key player in a number of externally-funded initiatives which have promoted the use of SoTL, in particular an

FDTL-funded project on formative assessment in conjunction with Sheffield Hallam University (FAST), and two CETL projects on Physics Innovation (Pi CETL) and Open Learning in Mathematics in Science, Computing and Technology (COLMSCT), from 2005-2010. In these initiatives projects were primarily conducted by subject academics with responsibility for an aspect of teaching and learning in particular modules and were focussed on innovative ways of supporting student learning. The exception to this was COLMSCT which also supported projects undertaken by the part-time Associate Lecturers. In 2011, the Science and Technology faculties came together to create the internally funded eSTEeM initiative to promote innovation, scholarship and enterprise in open and distance learning within the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) subject areas.

## *Methods*

In order to understand the drivers influencing engagement with SoTL at the Open University, four key methods of data collection were used. Firstly, policy and strategy documents were analysed to identify the institutional and faculty perspectives on the development of SoTL over the past decade. Secondly, management documentation and formal reports from each of the SoTL initiatives in the Science faculty were also analysed to identify the structures provided to support engagement with SoTL at a faculty, departmental and individual level. Thirdly, the interim and final reports of individual SoTL practitioners were examined to understand something of the rationale and outcomes of the projects. Finally, in relation to COLMSCT and eSTEeM, interviews were undertaken with practitioners to identify the motivations for engagement with SoTL, and the experience and effects of that engagement on the individual, their students, their colleagues and the wider institution.

## *Findings*

### The drivers for engagement in SoTL

The findings reveal that three key drivers influence an individual's engagement with SoTL at the Open University. These are the individual practitioner's own personal and professional development objectives, student learning and the priorities of the institution. They will not come as a surprise to anyone with an interest in SoTL and reflect the reality of the changes which have occurred in the field of SoTL over the past decade or so. However, as the external and internal context for SoTL at the Open University has changed, so too has the inter-relationship between these drivers and their influence on the individual. These are now explored in more detail through a number of different scenarios of SoTL development.

The scenarios are not based on the experience of one particular individual but are intended to exemplify the implications of the drivers on Open University practitioners' perceptions of SoTL, the nature of the SoTL activity they have undertaken and the likely outcomes of that activity. The inter-

relationship between the different drivers is represented diagrammatically to demonstrate the extent to which one driver may dominate, potentially to the detriment of the others.

## Scenario one: student learning-driven SoTL

Within the context of the Open University, the desire to improve student learning has always has always been a key factors amongst practitioners wishing to engage in SoTL. However, in this scenario, there is a considerable distancing between the individual's desire to improve their own practice and the learning of their students and the priorities of the institution. Norton identifies one of the drawbacks of standard models of action research, that those engaged in it "only have powers of intervention and control of the system they are studying" (Norton, 2009, p. 58). This was a particular issue for those practitioners who were Associate Lecturers, and for whom opportunities to understand yet alone influence the way the institution worked were quite limited.

> So I think I learned a great deal about the difficulties of getting things done in large organisations. And all the different people that are stakeholders that you've got to contact and try and get on board as it were. (COLMSCT Associate Fellow)

As a result, engagement with SoTL for this group of practitioners was often focused on the domain of personal practice, with the effect of such engagement being primarily felt at the level of the individual and their students. It is also fair to say that the institutional drivers of recognition and promotion were felt less by this group than other groups of practitioners for two reasons: Firstly, that the role of the Associate Lecturer falls outside the normal criteria for promotion, and secondly, that the scope and scale of the projects was often smaller and so the influence on wider practice was also limited.

Another way in which lack of alignment between institutional drivers and the drivers of personal and professional development and student learning is evident is when elements of the infrastructure to support SoTL are missing. Beard (cited in Kumar, 2010) identifies the importance of, but relative lack of research into, the management frameworks which initiate and support those practitioners engaged in action research. For those involved in the internally-funded eSTEeM initiative, termed Project Leaders, the extent to which SoTL was prioritised at departmental level had an impact on the individual's ability to engage with SoTL.

> So I think eSTEeM's got to keep banging away at the deaneries in trying to make sure that scholarship time is prioritised somehow. But I can't see heads of department thinking that it's got to be, that it's got to take priority over curriculum (eSTEeM Project Leader)

INSERT
Figure 1: Diagrammatic representation of student learning-driven SoTL

## Scenario two: personal professional development-driven SoTL

In this scenario, the personal and professional development of the individual is the key driver for engagement in SoTL. However, unlike scenario one, where there is very close alignment between personal professional development and student learning, here the individual practitioner is much more closely aligned with institutional priorities. An example of such alignment was in the eSTEeM

initiative, where Project Leaders appeared to demonstrate a more instrumental approach to involvement in SoTL by using the opportunities afforded by eSTEeM to make contact with relevant technical staff or initiate collaboration with other academics to further their own research.

> So, when the eSTEeM call came I thought "Well, I might as well look into it and take the opportunity to do this within the eSTEeM project and through the eSTEeM framework get into contact with other people in the university" (eSTEeM Project Leader).

This is not to say that the individual practitioner in this scenario was not interested in improving student learning. Certainly, all the eSTEeM projects were selected on the basis of their potential to improve student learning and project leaders all spoke of the benefits of their projects to students. However, the initial driver appeared not to an aspiration to improve their individual teaching practice, as in scenario one, but rather how they could develop as researchers and academics.

The publication of the Open University strategy document on SoTL in 2010 could well be perceived to have influenced eSTEeM project leaders' views of the relationship between institutional priorities and personal professional development. However, it was also clear that the growing acceptance and expectations of SoTL, both within the institution and externally, influenced earlier practitioners. During the five years of COLMSCT, Fellows demonstrated a growing awareness of the benefits of involvement in SoTL to their own professional standing. For some this was manifested at the level of broader recognition of new found expertise and for others it was manifested in the desire to engage in "proper research".

> I never imagined at the beginning that I would be doing sort of like proper research, if you know what I mean? And the idea – even when we went along at the beginning at the beginning and people were talking about conferences and journal papers and I thought "Oh, that's just not appropriate to what I'm doing at all". (COLMSCT Associate Fellow)

As a result, the inter-relationship between the different drivers and their influence on engagement in SoTL could be seen to change over time.

INSERT
Figure 2: Diagrammatic representation of personal professional development-driven SoTL

## Scenario three: institutional priorities-driven SoTL

As indicated above, the key influences on the development of SoTL with many HEIs have been the publication of the Professional Standards Framework and national initiatives such as FDTL and the CETLs. As a result, institutional priorities often reflect broader national priorities and may therefore imply a degree of compulsion on the part of the individual. The increasing obligation on HE teachers to gain a teaching qualification is a case in point, with many courses requiring individual practitioners to conduct a piece of action research. As a result, engagement in SoTL may not initially arise from a personal motivation to improve student learning, although one would hope that it would, but rather from a requirement of the institution. As institutions develop recognition and reward structures for SoTL, so the expectations on the practitioner also become greater. Those developing HE teacher education programmes focus not just on the outcomes of SoTL but also the outputs, and there is an increasing emphasis on the theoretical underpinnings of SoTL. At the OU,

and particularly in COLMSCT, there was evidence that some practitioners had not expected the emphasis on research and publication. Others, however, found it a way of moving beyond 'descriptions of classroom practice.

> [I]f the results of my project work were to reach a wider audience than merely within the Open University then I would need to disseminate them through the traditional research channels – conference and journal papers – and so would need to frame the project more clearly as research (COLMSCT Fellow).

The implication is that close alignment between personal professional development and institutional priorities can empower the practitioner, but there can also be the disempowerment when they perceive that institutional imperative takes priority over personal motivation.

SoTL which is driven by institutional priorities is often closely aligned with student learning. This can be seen in the stated outcomes of teacher education programmes and in the aims of initiatives such as FAST, COLMSCT and eSTEeM. The effect of this alignment is that the findings of SoTL activity undertaken by practitioners are more likely to be acted on because it relates directly to what the institution perceives is important. The key difference between this kind of SoTL and that which is student learning-driven is that the priorities of the institution may not be the same as those held by the individual practitioner. As a result, there is the possibility for tension between these different drivers.

INSERT
Figure 3: Diagrammatic representation of institutional priorities-driven SoTL

## *Proposing a model of symbiosis between drivers*

The stance taken in this study is that the ideal scenario for the development of SoTL is one that is student-focussed, offers suitable reward and recognition for the individual and also contributes to institutional priorities.

INSERT
Figure 4: Diagrammatic representation of symbiotic relationship between drivers

In this scenario, there is a stable relationship of symbiosis between each of the drivers and also between the intrinsic and extrinsic reasons for engagement in SoTL. On an intrinsic level the motivation for SoTL could still be to directly support student learning and to improve individual teaching practice. However, there should also be an acknowledgement that such engagement may also, and arguably should, result in greater recognition or reward for the individual and permit powers of intervention over more than the individual system studied (Norton, 2009). .

As has been seen, however, the role of the individual, changes to institutional priorities and differing views on what can benefit student learning are all likely to have an effect on how practitioners perceive SoTL and engage with it. As a result, the development of a symbiotic relationship between each of the drivers influencing SoTL is not something which occurs

organically or automatically. Neither is it something which is static.  As a result, suitable structures to support the achievement and maintenance of symbiosis need to be in place.

## *Achieving and maintaining symbiosis through active management*

The point made throughout this study is that SoTL is the result of, and changes in response to, particular drivers and contexts. Therefore, active management is required is order to achieve and maintain a stable symbiotic relationship between institutional priorities, personal professional development and student learning and their influence on the SoTL practitioner. These are:

- Identification of institutional priorities that will be responsive to scholarship evidence
- Identification of individual scholarship activities whose outputs will have traction at institutional level.
- Empowerment of academics to acquire a new and rewarded academic identity

In order to overcome the limitations of SoTL to have 'power of intervention' (Norton, 2009) over a broader context than that experienced by the individual, procedures need to be developed in order to maximise the potential of SoTL projects to meet institutional priorities.  There are two ways to approach this. The first is to identify institutional priorities which are responsive to scholarship evidence. There is little point in the SoTL practitioner chipping away at an institutional priority or policy which is set in stone. Instead, new or very focussed priority areas are less likely to be the focus of conflicting interests and therefore more conducive to change.  An example at the Open University is the introduction of Interactive Computer Marked Assessment (iCMAs), where scholarship activity led to a realignment of institutional perceptions and student learning priorities.

The second way to achieve and maintain symbiosis is to identify individual scholarship activities whose outputs are more likely to have traction at institutional level.  Alignment with institutional priorities is one way of achieving this, as indicated above. Generating SoTL which is of sufficient quality and influence is another.  To do this, the expectations of SoTL need to be established at the start and support structures put in place to ensure that individual SoTL activity meets these expectations.  Not every SoTL practitioner may wish their project to have traction at institutional level.  However, there is little chance of achieving this if the activity undertaken does not conform to certain standards. As a result, the development of a careful conceptual account of the problem to be researched, as well as and the systematic investigation of that problem, should not be "an optional extra, but a prerequisite" (Foreman-Peck and Winch, 2010, p. 58).

As indicated above, one of the key outcomes of the increasing recognition of SoTL has been its transformation from an activity of results without rewards to one where "at long last … interesting teaching and learning [is] actually going to be valued" (COLMSCT Fellow). The creation of opportunities for engagement with SoTL, particularly those that are managed and supported, provides a space for practitioners to develop an identity as scholars of teaching and learning. Membership of this space alone can confer recognition on SoTL activity and on the SoTL practitioner.

> I used the establishment of eSTEeM to bring it under the egis of eSTEeM but my feeling for doing that was … this legitimacy thing, that by getting an eSTEeM label on it what I wanted to do gained more legitimacy (eSTEeM Project Leader).

This identity becomes further consolidated and valued when there is also institutional recognition for the outputs of SoTL activity through the development of explicit SoTL related promotions criteria.

## *Conclusions*

The achievement and maintenance of a stable symbiosis between the different drivers for SoTL activity is vital if it is to continue to be student-focussed, offer suitable reward and recognition for the individual and contribute to institutional priorities. The creation of a community to engender, support and promote is key to the achievement and maintenance of this symbiosis.  On a structural level, communities such as COLMSCT and eSTEeM provide a framework of practical support for the practitioner and, as indicated above, a space for a new academic identity. They are also able to act as mediator and broker between the individual and the institution. However, for the symbiosis to be maintained, such communities also need to be self-supporting.  Practitioners have to continue to see the value of involvement in the community if that community is to continue to provide legitimacy and brokerage.

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