

Cara Bradley

# The scholarship of teaching and learning

## Opportunities for librarians

University teaching development centers the world over are embracing a new movement called the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL). International and regional conferences, dedicated journals, and funding opportunities attest to the way that this newly framed attention to pedagogy in higher education has captured the imagination of our teaching colleagues. It is time for academic librarians to learn more about the SoTL movement and to consider the many opportunities that it presents to their profession.

Discussions of the SoTL often trace the roots of the movement to Ernest Boyer's 1990 book *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate*. Boyer questioned the professoriate's increasingly exclusive focus on research and publication at the expense of teaching, and instead called for a more holistic view of academic work that includes: "the scholarship of *discovery*; the scholarship of *integration*; the scholarship of *application*; and the scholarship of *teaching*."<sup>1</sup> While it seems obvious that this call for attention to teaching would resonate with students who expect quality teaching in exchange for escalating tuition fees, it also struck a chord with professors who had grown disconnected from teaching and learning, the love of which had drawn them to their profession in the first place.

The emphasis on teaching as scholarly work that was started by Boyer gained much-needed momentum when Lee S. Shulman, a key thinker in the fledgling SoTL movement, became president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.

He provided much needed validation and funding to the movement by establishing the Carnegie Academy for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning. His own writing also helped to further define SoTL:

The scholarship of teaching and learning invites faculty at all these levels to view teaching as serious, intellectual work, ask good questions about their students' learning, seek evidence in their classrooms that can be used to improve practice, and make this work public so that others can critique it, build on it, and contribute to the wider teaching commons.<sup>2</sup>

SoTL is not to be confused with "educational research"; the former is disciplinary-focused, involves professors investigating their own teaching rather than participating in third-party studies, and, most importantly, aims to improve teaching and assign greater value to it.

### SoTL today

A quick search of university Web sites indicates that SoTL activities are typically coordinated by the campus teaching development center (or equivalent). Many of these teaching centers offer small grants to faculty who want to pursue a specific question related to their

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teaching; grants are variously used for materials, dissemination of results, hiring teaching assistants, or teaching load relief that allows the professor to focus more closely on the SoTL project. Some teaching centers also offer workshops on SoTL in general, guidance on methodological and ethical issues, or simply forums for SoTL researchers to share their interests and work.

### **SoTL and librarians**

The SoTL movement provides excellent opportunities for librarians, both in respect to developing their own projects and for supporting, and developing relationships with, faculty working on SoTL projects. Despite this potential, there has been very little written about SoTL in the professional library literature. A thorough search uncovered just two articles: a “Webliography” of SoTL resources,<sup>3</sup> and an article in a regional journal that discusses a SoTL project undertaken by librarians.<sup>4</sup> Each of these articles provides but a glimpse of the possibilities of SoTL for librarians.

Librarian involvement in SoTL can fall into one of two broad categories: librarian support of faculty SoTL initiatives and librarian development of their own SoTL projects. One of the most obvious ways that librarians can support faculty interested in SoTL is to direct them to relevant information and resources. Teaching development centers will likely welcome library support in identifying key resources as they try to engage faculty in campus SoTL initiatives. Once interested faculty members emerge, librarians can provide more discipline-specific support, helping to identify other relevant studies, methodology reports, and potential venues for dissemination of project results. Faculty who are comfortable searching for information in their research areas may be uncertain about how to find relevant information about classroom topics that may have been published both within and outside of the journals in their subject areas. In addition to broader SoTL and post-secondary pedagogical journals, most disciplines have

journals that focus on discipline-specific teaching issues.<sup>5</sup>

Participation in campus SoTL initiatives also demonstrates librarians’ commitment to, and interest in, teaching and learning to campus colleagues who share (and are therefore perhaps more likely to be responsive to) these interests. Opportunities for the librarian abound when surrounded by a community of colleagues who are open to innovations in teaching; my own experience has revealed a previously hidden group of faculty who are willing to involve me in their classrooms in new and creative ways. Some of these opportunities have emerged as a result of formal faculty SoTL projects involving information literacy, while others are simply the product of informal discussions about the need for information literacy instruction in the curriculum. Regardless of which avenue led there, the result is more time with the students (both in the classroom and virtually), better integration of library resources in the curriculum, and a greater sense of participation in the larger academic endeavor.

As previously mentioned, the SoTL movement also provides librarians with new opportunities to ask questions about their own teaching practices and develop SoTL projects around them. Investigations of instructional practices and their effectiveness are of course nothing new to librarians, but framing them in SoTL terms does present new opportunities. Many teaching centers include funding opportunities as part of their SoTL programs, and these provide a previously unavailable avenue of support for librarians asking questions about their teaching. Campus SoTL programs also give librarians an opportunity to discuss and get buy-in on their projects from professors with an interest in improving the classroom experience for students. This buy-in is essential (it is, after all, usually their courses whose time we need to both instruct and study students), and it can be difficult to get without this type of “in.” It also opens the door to faculty involvement and feedback,

something that McNeill and Haines, authors of the only published report of a librarian SoTL project, found invaluable.<sup>6</sup>

## Conclusion

The SoTL movement slightly reframes, but in large part reaffirms and validates, the type of research that many librarians already do. We teach, we change and modify our teaching techniques, we assess effect on student learning, and we share our findings with colleagues through a variety of mechanisms. We are sure to benefit from this renewed emphasis on teaching and learning, which have always been cornerstones of academic librarianship. There will likely be tangible benefits as SoTL challenges traditional reward systems that all too often base promotion and tenure decisions on research output at the expense of teaching. But there will also be the more intangible benefits of more meaningful discussions and partnerships with faculty, better integration of library resources and services into the curriculum, higher profile on campus, and ultimately—what is most

important to all SoTL scholars—a benefit to student learning.

## Notes

1. Ernest J. Boyer, *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate* (Princeton, NJ: Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1990), 16.

2. Lee. S. Shulman, forward to *Into the Classroom: Developing the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, by Thomas Hatch (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006), ix.

3. Musa Abdul Hakim, “Navigating the Web of Discourse on the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning,” *College & Research Libraries News* (July/August 2002): 502–5.

4. My institution’s list at [www.uregina.ca/ctl/resources/sotl/publishing-sotl-work.html](http://www.uregina.ca/ctl/resources/sotl/publishing-sotl-work.html) may serve as starting point for librarians and faculty new to SoTL.

5. Kitty McNeill and Beth Haines, “Scholarship of Teaching and Librarians: Building Successful Partnerships with Faculty,” *Georgia Library Quarterly* (Winter 2003): 4–8.

6. Ibid. *zz*

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