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SoTL in the LIS Classroom: Helping Future Academic Librarians Become More Engaged Teachers

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SoTL in the LIS Classroom: Helping Future Academic Librarians Become More Engaged Teachers

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Abstract

In this paper, we share background and key considerations of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), and propose introducing library and information science (LIS) students to SoTL as a way to acquaint them with the higher education teaching profession. Throughout the article, we employ reflection as the primary consideration and support structure that frames the benefits of SoTL for instructional growth. Four critical stages of SoTL training, first suggested by Gale and Golde (2004), are recommended for LIS students: *Exposure, Encounter, Engagement, and Extension*. As instruction responsibilities and opportunities continue to expand in academic librarianship, teaching about SoTL using the four stages may prepare LIS students to quickly adjust to their new roles and engage with other teaching faculty. This article fills a gap in the literature on SoTL in LIS instruction curricula.

Keywords: Scholarship of Teaching and Learning; teaching; academic librarians; teaching methods; instruction

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SoTL in the LIS Classroom: Helping Future Academic Librarians Become More Engaged Teachers

What is SoTL?

As institutions of higher education seek to retain students and demonstrate their value to society, an emphasis on student learning has emerged (Barefoot, 2007; Kezar, Chambers, & Burkhardt, 2015; Lin, 2016). At the same time, as higher education institutions strive to show evidence of their value, the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) has grown in influence within higher education (Bernstein & Bass, 2005). Shulman (2006) wrote

“The scholarship of teaching and learning invites faculty...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” (p. ix).

The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) is defined by many as the practice of inquiry into student learning and the teaching processes that facilitate learning, with the goal of improving both (Boyer, 1990; Felten, 2013; McKinney, 2006). In SoTL research, the classroom becomes a site of inquiry where teaching and assessment practices and approaches are often both the method and the object of study in terms of how well they facilitate student learning. While teaching “problems” are commonly viewed as negative, Randy Bass (1999) posits SoTL as a redefining of teaching “problems” as research problems that, like other research problems, generate excitement and interest. SoTL invites instructors to view teaching “problems” (such as conceptual bottlenecks, lack of student engagement, the challenges of teaching online, and countless others) as opportunities for study. Hutchings (2000) defines the four key questions that guide SoTL research:

- “What works?” in which researchers investigate a new or existing technique to see if it achieves its ends.
- “What is?” in which researchers examine more closely and describe what is happening in their classroom, often with respect to a specific learning process or the features of an effective intervention.
- “Visions of the possible” in which researchers consider new goals.

- Theory-building questions that seek to develop new conceptual frameworks through which teaching and learning can be considered.

Effective teaching is by nature concerned with understanding and improving student learning; SoTL differs from standard teaching and learning endeavours in its deliberate attention to design, the presence of evidence-seeking research methods, and the intention to disseminate findings through conferences and journals (O'Brien, 2008).

Key considerations of SoTL

Before we discuss why SoTL should be incorporated into LIS instruction and made transparent to master's students in the discipline, we should outline some key aspects to keep in mind. SoTL is by nature interdisciplinary, and promotes interdisciplinary collaboration and discussions. For successful teaching, it is important to blend discipline knowledge and pedagogy. This blending of knowledge and skills is known as pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman, 1987). O'Brien (2008) describes pedagogical content knowledge as the intersection between knowledge of subject matter, student learning in that discipline, and potential teaching strategies; pedagogical content knowledge, and by extension SoTL, will take a different form in each discipline. SoTL methods are influenced by disciplinary methods (Hutchings, 2000); however, cross-disciplinary conversations about methods through conferences and other means are productive in generating new ideas and opportunities for cross-pollination. In his exploration of how students become political actors through their experiences in the classroom, Bernstein (2013) borrows a think-aloud method from history and mathematics, using what he calls "the methodological trading zone" (p. 76). Bernstein identifies a core problem across all fields of study: the inability to teach *all content* in any discipline. The goal of teaching in the disciplines, then, is to equip the students with "the means by which *they* can explore content in the field" (Bernstein, 2013, p. 76). Given this key commonality, disciplines stand to benefit from exposure to or even thoughtful importation of others' approaches.

Reflection is key to SoTL. Before a SoTL researcher can determine a question worth investigating in their classroom, they must first reflect on their teaching and on the student learning that they see and want to see. Many SoTL projects will include the researcher's teaching methods as an object of study, which is one of the factors that distinguishes SoTL. SoTL and assessment have in common the idea that both are intended to produce an improvement, and part of that improvement involves reflection on the data before making changes to practice. Furthermore, reflection is often a component of the methodology in SoTL—a researcher may ask students to reflect on their experience in the classroom, or on

one of the processes in which they have been engaged over the semester. Of course, student perceptions or opinions are not evidence of student learning. Still, much can be uncovered about the learning process from metacognitive activities.

Sharing findings from teaching and learning research is fundamental to SoTL. Hutchings and Huber (2005) describe the teaching commons where higher education faculty can share pedagogy, experiences, and create a high-quality teaching culture. Public dissemination of research findings distinguishes SoTL from other pedagogical discussions and moves from being a solitary activity to “community property” (Shulman, 1993, p. 24). SoTL should be seen as a professional development tool and a research agenda, as well as a means to improve learning.

Why include SoTL in your LIS classroom?

The practice of SoTL correlates with more engaged teaching. Surveys have shown that faculty members involved in SoTL “experience greater excitement in their teaching and become more interested in broader teaching and learning issues” (Hannon & Taraban-Gordon, 2010, p. 177); more engaged and dedicated teaching practices could only benefit students. SoTL research and practice promotes reflecting on effective teaching, testing new approaches, and focusing on student learning, all of which have the potential to improve students’ classroom experiences and encounters with educators. As educators who teach both inside and outside classrooms, librarians are also more effective teachers when we are more engaged.

Connections have already been made between SoTL and librarianship. Otto (2014) has pointed to the volume of teaching in which librarians are involved, even extending beyond the classroom to reference interactions: “Librarians are continually teaching students and faculty how to identify and access learning resources. They teach during individual reference consultations, through presentations to classes, and through library website content they create. Are librarians well prepared to design and deliver well-crafted instruction?”

Signature pedagogies, as defined by O’Brien (2008), are pedagogical approaches that are distinct to and pervasive within the discipline; Otto (2014) muses that the reference interaction and the library instruction session are signature pedagogies within librarianship. MacMillan (2015) draws connections between evidence-based library and information practice (EBLIP) in terms of cross-applicability of research methods and focus on community building, and argues that librarians are well positioned to assist with SoTL

literature searching and dissemination, as well as conducting their own SoTL studies. As libraries become increasingly focused on articulating their value, assessment practices have become important; assessment of information literacy instruction is removed from SoTL only in its intended audience (largely internal, while SoTL research is intended for distribution to the broader teaching and learning community) and deliberate research design, and could provide a starting point for SoTL projects. Information literacy instruction assessment as an ongoing cycle of outcome generating, evidence gathering, and reflection has a lot in common with SoTL.

Writers have published articles that promote SoTL in librarianship (Bradley, 2009; McNeill & Haines, 2003; Mitchell & Mitchell, 2015; Otto, 2014). However, we could not locate any articles addressing the instruction of SoTL in LIS curriculum. Including SoTL in a graduate-level course on library instruction would help familiarize students with a branch of study of which they may have been unaware, and which could have direct implications for their career paths. Many academic librarians are encouraged or even expected to participate in research and scholarship, and students pursuing academic librarianship are not always aware of the type of research in which they might become involved. Information literacy instruction courses present excellent opportunities for students to connect instruction to scholarship, to learn about how others have approached teaching as a scholarly activity through the SoTL literature, and to become more reflective and intentional teachers as they embark on their careers. Part of the SoTL process involves making teaching more transparent; the instruction course gives students the opportunity to unravel the complexities of teaching while (usually) designing and delivering their own instruction session. Although courses in information literacy instruction are rarely required in LIS degrees, most programs at least offer them (Saunders, 2015); given this opportunity to take a course on instruction, academic librarians could feasibly arrive at the university with more exposure to pedagogy and research than their new disciplinary faculty colleagues. Incorporating SoTL at the MLIS level will give students a way to think about teaching as a scholarly act and become advocates for scholarly teaching (Richlin, 2001). Knowledge of pedagogical issues allows librarians to be more knowledgeable teaching partners with faculty (Otto, 2014), and creates a better understanding of issues both teaching faculty and the institution at large face with respect to curriculum design and pedagogy (McNeill & Haines, 2003).

Auten and Twigg (2013) wrote that SoTL can benefit graduate courses by helping prepare students for the teaching in higher education. Academic librarian employers deem teaching skills an important skillset when they are looking to make a hire (Hall, 2013), and studies

have shown that many of the necessary skills for librarians to be successful as instruction librarians are often learned on the job (Davies-Hoffman, Alvarez, Costello, & Emerson, 2013; Westbrook & Fabian, 2010). Teaching SoTL during the MLIS may ease the transition from library school to full-time instruction librarian roles.

The Roles and Strengths of Teaching Librarians, published by the Association of College and Research Libraries in 2017, discusses the need to build a teaching and learning culture within the description of a Coordinator (Standards for Proficiencies for Instruction Librarians and Coordinators Revision Task Force, 2017). SoTL is useful for building a culture that encourages continual improvement of teaching (Mårtensson, 2017). Even if librarians do not feel confident enough, or possess the desire, to conduct research on teaching and learning, they can build a culture of continual improvement by reviewing teaching and learning literature. SoTL “can be a way to acculturate individuals entering an institution; it can also be a way to change the culture of an institution” (Miller-Young, Yeo, Manarin, Carey, & Zimmer, 2016, p. 61).

What to think about when including SoTL

In their discussion of how to introduce graduate students to SoTL, Hannon and Tarabon-Gordon (2010) offer the Gale and Golde (2004) model for discussion. Gale and Golde (2004) posit four critical stages of SoTL training: *Exposure*, in which students are introduced to the SoTL literature; *Encounter*, in which students become familiar with the methods involved in SoTL research; *Engagement*, in which students begin research of their own; and *Extension*, in which students have the opportunity to mentor others in SoTL. Although *Engagement* and *Extension* may be less realistic for a one-semester introductory IL instruction course, *Exposure* and *Encounter* are certainly within reach, and students can be positioned to achieve *Engagement* and *Extension*. While new MLIS graduates may not have the experience to mentor others in SoTL, they can still act as ambassadors and advocates in their institutions, and their knowledge and enthusiasm in this area can facilitate collaborations with disciplinary faculty.

Exposure

Most IL instruction courses introduce students to theories of teaching and learning including constructivism, behaviorism, and learning styles (Saunders, 2015); however, Saunders’ report on her analysis of 58 syllabi related to instruction and information literacy in ALA-accredited programs makes no direct mention of the scholarship of teaching and learning as such. As her data collection finished in 2013, this absence of SoTL from

IL/instruction syllabi may have changed, but we are not aware of any studies in this area. While an introduction to learning theories and educational concepts is certainly necessary for understanding SoTL, exposure to SoTL goes farther. SoTL includes journals, conferences, and scholarly practices that are separate from the field of education. We recommend introducing MLIS students to SoTL as an area of research, as well as incorporating readings from the SoTL literature in the syllabus. Saunders (2015) found a wide diversity of assignments on the syllabi analyzed; a fair number of the assignments involved encounters with secondary literature (such as self-directed reading or a lit review/research paper). Take the opportunity to introduce students to the broad teaching commons by having students examine SoTL literature and educational research and help build in students the habit of reading beyond the library literature. Why not require students to support their ideas in a research paper using educational literature, or ask students to complete a literature review on an educational topic rather than a library instruction topic? Brecher and Klipfel (2014) make the case that “[to] truly become ‘student-centred’ educators, librarians need adequate training that is up-to-date on current best practices in educational theory and its application to the classroom context” (p. 44). The application piece is perhaps the key point here: while many courses already introduce students to basic educational theories, how many allow students to make explicit practical connections?

Encounter

Saunders (2015) found that “Assessment” was one of the most frequently addressed content areas on instruction syllabi. Information literacy assessment shares many principles with SoTL. Both SoTL and assessment are concerned with improving student learning and determining the effectiveness of particular interventions (Chick, MacMillan, & Bradley, 2017). MLIS instructors could easily extend the conversation of assessment to research in teaching and learning. Once students understand the methods involved in SoTL, they are well-positioned to understand how future assessment endeavours could become SoTL projects, or even how their work in the course might look in a SoTL context. Most IL instruction courses require students to create and deliver instructional content (Saunders, 2015)—why not ask students to consider how their instructional design might evolve into a SoTL project?

Engagement

Most MLIS programs include courses on research methods in which students are often tasked with designing (and in some cases carrying out) research projects. Depending on the

level of flexibility afforded to students in these courses, exposure to and encounters with existing SoTL research could prompt a student to want to design a SoTL project of their own in a research methods course. Directed reading courses and theses could also provide opportunities for students to carry out their own SoTL research if the interest is there. However, as Gale and Golde (2004) note, mentorship must be available to the students as they begin their own SoTL research. If this expertise is not available within the department or the library, LIS faculty could help students find and connect with a community of practice within or outside their institution, or arrange for students to partner with their institution's teaching and learning centre. Gale and Golde suggest that the mentoring step of the research design process is best accomplished in a group setting so that students are provided support and critique as they progress from "collective to individual inquiry" (p. 10).

Extension

Graduate students who have participated in SoTL can become mentors in two ways: to other students in the next cohort, and within the faculties that eventually employ them (Gale & Golde, 2004). They become not experts, exactly, but "informed assistants" (Gale & Golde, 2004, p. 11). For LIS students who go on to become academic librarians, knowledge of and experience with SoTL research stands to both fill a gap within the library and provide opportunities for the new librarian to connect with faculty who are interested in teaching. The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning is still only beginning to be discussed by academic librarians, but excitement around its applicability to their work is gaining momentum. New librarians who have experience with SoTL can provide great value by helping demystify the concept for their colleagues, suggest how assessment projects might become SoTL projects, and provide research-based input into existing teaching practices. Familiarity with SoTL can also position new academic librarians to engage with their institution's teaching and learning centre and any communities of SoTL practice and research that might exist at their university, and to assist graduate students and faculty members with finding SoTL information.

Conclusion

"Teaching, like any truly human activity, emerges from one's own inwardness, for better or worse." – Parker Palmer, 1999

Reflection is one of the most salient threads that connects SoTL activity within and across disciplines. Designing a SoTL project involves reflecting on what is happening in the classroom, what could or *should* be happening in the classroom, what effective teaching and

learning looks like, and so on. Reflecting on design then leads to reflecting on the data, and considering how a change could be implemented to enhance student learning based on these findings. Even if MLIS students who become acquainted with SoTL during their degrees do not go on to become active SoTL researchers, they may still become more critically reflective and intentional teachers.

Exposure to SoTL need not be restricted to information literacy instruction courses. Librarians teach in many capacities; as James Elmborg (2002) has noted, “the reference desk is perhaps the most natural constructivist teaching environment in our schools” (p. 463), and understanding the depth to which teaching and learning can be studied will allow students to think more broadly about how and in what circumstances they may teach. Critical reflection on teaching is a beneficial process that need not have any intention toward research—critical reflection allows teachers to identify and test their teaching assumptions (Brookfield, 2017), which has merit for any teaching scenario. Still, reflection can lead to SoTL research that has the potential to improve LIS students’ instruction abilities as well as contribute to the field of librarianship.

At the center of SoTL is the focus on improving student learning. Using SoTL to develop LIS students who are reflective practitioners may create more proficient instruction librarians. As teaching responsibilities continue to expand in academic librarianship, introducing LIS students to SoTL using Gale and Golde’s four critical stages (2004) has the potential to benefit LIS students and, by extension, the students with whom they will work throughout their careers.

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