

Six Steps for Turning Your Teaching into Scholarship

By Donna M. Qualters, PhD

In 1997 Ernest Boyer identified the concept of the Scholarship of Teaching. This was the first time that TEACHING had been identified as legitimate scholarship. Over time this idea has evolved into the movement called "SoTL" or the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning. Many of us are scholarly teachers; we read the literature, plan, assess, reflect, and revise. But what makes our teaching scholarship is very different. Lee Shulman (1999) clearly delineated the difference. To be scholarship, teaching must become public, be an object of critical review and evaluation by members of one's community, and it must be built upon and developed.

This can seem time consuming and overwhelming. Below are some ideas to help you get started on the process.

Step 1: Identify a possible project through reflection. We ALL do something particularly well in our teaching. Take a minute and write down what YOU do well. Don't be shy; this is a time to begin to own your success. Next reflect on your students from the past year, did you notice anything different about their approaches to the classroom, their learning, or the subject that made you pause or create a new challenge you did not have before? This exercise is often most successful if you debrief with colleagues you feel comfortable with.

Step 2: Choose a topic and generate your research questions. Look back on your previous writing, think about conversations you've had with colleagues, and begin to conceptualize what you want to study that addresses either the goal approach (something you do well) or the issue approach (a specific challenge). I like Pat Hutchings' approach, she asks, "What works? What is! Vision of the possible. Vision of the future!" As you begin your research, ask yourself, what is the vision of the possible and what is the vision of the future? Keep in mind the topic should be doable within the realm of your current teaching assignments, have the necessary resources, and be something you can complete in a timely manner. After you have generated your questions, ask a colleague to review them to clarify the meaning.

Step 3: Look at the literature. You can, of course, look at the education literature on teaching and learning, BUT you can also look at your discipline's journals. Many disciplines have wonderful SoTL articles in the field. For example, the business literature is filled with information on teamwork and managing discussions. Ask for assistance, teaching center personnel and librarians would be delighted to point you in the right direction.

Step 4: Find the right context. Before you begin to design the study, seek out a few journals that might be interested in your questions and look at their author guidelines. Kennesaw State has put together a list of the major journals in annotated form. (<http://cetl.kennesaw.edu/teaching-journals-directory>)

Step 5: Design the study. A primary rule of SoTL is to use your discipline-based methods first. Most SoTL articles use a combination of quantitative and qualitative methodologies, so whatever mode you feel most comfortable in should be your starting point. Meaningful SoTL involves many approaches from action research, to case studies, to quasi-experimental design to phenomenological studies to the occasional controlled study. For quantitative data consider using scales, tests, Likert scale surveys, or student grades. For more qualitative data consider interviews, observations, open-ended questions, and focus groups.

Step 6: Write the article. This is where SoTL often differentiates from traditional scholarship. Here again, reflection is the key. Not only do you report results but you write about what you learned and the insights you gleaned from your specific study that can be applied to the general approach to teaching. For example, an article of mine on studying students who went from a passive lecture model to a more active learning pedagogy presented lessons learned and provided guidelines and suggestions for any teacher who was considering a major shift in style.

One final point, like any research there are ethical concerns to consider when undertaking this type of research. It is wise to check with your institution's review board to find out its process for initiating SoTL studies.

With a bit of reflection, you can contribute to the scholarship of teaching and learning to help us all be better teachers.

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