

# **LEADERSHIP, SOTL, AND MENTORSHIP IN A TEACHING SCHOLARS COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE**

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*The Teaching Scholars Program and Community of Practice (TSCoP) develops educational leadership and research through enabling reflective conversations, purposeful listening, inclusive standards, and bold thinking about Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL). Teaching Scholars lead innovative practice in their own faculty given their shared commitment to improving teaching and learning in diverse post-secondary contexts through practice focused research. In this paper, we describe how the TSCoP is both formal in structure and design, and informal and emergent in facilitated interpersonal discussions. Ongoing conversations among diverse colleagues contribute to Teaching Scholars' reflective and reflexive practice, help each educational leader gain new insights into their own studies and expand their vision for educational leadership in higher education. We use a SoTL framework to examine and position each of our research projects, and explore and make connections with educational leadership, mentorship and SoTL research.*

The Teaching Scholars Program (TSP) at the University of Calgary supports the development of participants' educational leadership capacity and Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL). Scholars are funded for up to four years to develop and deliver projects that enrich teaching and learning cultures and educational leadership capacity. This paper represents the experiences of members of the third cohort of Teaching Scholars, while 21 Scholars have been funded since the inception of the program in 2015.

Five pillars of effective educational leadership in postsecondary teaching and learning (Fields et al., 2019) include: affective qualities, mentoring and empowering, action-orientation, teaching excellence, and research and scholarship. In this article, we focus on the importance of mentoring and reflexivity in the development of educational leadership capacity and describe our Teaching Scholars Community of Practice (TSCoP) where regular meetings and project focused conversations provide opportunities for peer mentoring, problem solving, and support. We share the theoretical underpinnings of our three different TSP projects and situate our SoTL research within Miller-Young and Yeo's (2015) framework. Finally, we reflect on the development of our educational leadership during the TSP.

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## Mentorship and Reflexivity

The TSP is enriched by the diverse backgrounds and experiences of each Scholar. We examine personal beliefs, practices and perspectives while conducting and sharing our research (Dean, 2017) in our community of practice. This process, known as reflexivity, highlights how our beliefs influence our research and its implications (Dean, 2017). The TSCoP encourages reflective dialog and contemplation which supports reflexivity across our SoTL, educational leadership, and mentoring.

The main mentorship practice employed in our TSCoP is peer mentorship, a collaborative form of mentoring that leverages the key skills, knowledge, and strengths of each member to guide peers (Barrette-Ng et al., 2019). Peer mentorship builds on the reflexivity of each TSCoP member, and invites our unique beliefs, practices, and perspectives into the community. We also practice group mentorship, where one mentor is supporting a group of mentees (Barrette-Ng et al., 2019), and constellation mentoring, where individuals may take on the role of the mentor or mentee (Barrette-Ng et al., 2019). The different types of mentorship happening within our TSCoP highlight our diversity and reliance on reflexivity and critical reflection as forms of engagement, knowledge sharing and relationship building.

## SoTL and Communities of Practice

Boyer's (1990) ground-breaking work on the scholarship of discovery, application, integration, and teaching challenged the publish-or-perish and basic science ethos that dominated the academic landscape for generations. His persuasive and enduring argument for new approaches to faculty roles and rewards resonates today, having become a part of global conversations on expanding scholarship in the academy (Kern, et al., 2015). Boyer (1990) advocated for a broadened view of scholarship and refocusing the collective gaze from the tenure file to a wider community of practice focused on scholarship of teaching and learning.

Our TSCoP intentionally supports the development of educational leadership in one's own teaching practice, in collaboration with colleagues, and through a shared commitment to SoTL. Our TSCoP engages educational leaders who share a common purpose and interest in the SoTL, and who have come together to fulfill both individual and group goals. We share effective practices and create new knowledge that advances educational leadership in higher education in our TSCoP. Scholars' ongoing interaction and engagement with each other is important to the situated learning in the TSCoP (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Our TSCoP relies on face-to-face meetings (our preferred method) as well as web-based collaborative environments to communicate, connect and conduct community activities, particularly during the global pandemic.

Our TSCoP invites different kinds of scholarly engagement and mentoring which enables the development and dissemination of effective practices and strategies. The importance of our TSCoP can be summarized by drawing upon Wenger's (1998) five critical functions of a community of practice: education by collecting and sharing information on practice, supportive collaboration among members, cultivating and sustaining members' learning, encouragement, and peer mentoring, and the integration of new knowledge into one's own work.

Mentoring is key to engaging in our TSCoP. Our current members bring diverse disciplinary perspectives from Science, Kinesiology, Social Work, and Education to the CoP, along with unique teaching and learning research projects focused on studying learning in a

single course, across several courses, and in online faculty development. During our meetings we share the status of our projects, identify issues or tasks we need help with, ask questions, and share external models and theories that can inform our work. The explicit and intentional valuing and recognition of teaching quality and the impact of our work on student engagement and success has amplified investment in the scholarship of teaching and learning on campus.

### **Situating Our Projects in a SoTL Framework**

Miller-Young and Yeo (2015) suggested that SoTL extends beyond quantitative studies often conducted in educational research (Grauerholz & Main, 2013) to include qualitative subjective works that draw upon a broader array of research methodology. They contended that the challenges presented about SoTL suggest that what works in the teaching and learning environment may not be answered empirically, and that certain methodologies will be privileged over others (Miller-Young & Yeo, 2015).

In their framework, Miller-Young and Yeo (2015) argued the key to SoTL studies is an alignment in methodology, method, and perspective. Aligning learning theory with assumptions about the nature of learning, within a spectrum of methodologies, can clarify the ways in which the study was done. The study methodology also reflects the assumptions and epistemology of the researcher.

The value of Miller-Young and Yeo's (2015) framework, in which theory, method and research question are explicitly stated and linked, can be seen in the following example. A researcher who chooses behaviourism as their theory to explain how learning works holds the assumption that environmental changes (by the instructor) lead to behavioural change (in the learner) such that grades reflect the level of student work; in contrast, researchers using constructivism to explain learning hold that learning is an active constructive process whereby new knowledge builds on prior knowledge to create subjective realities. Miller-Young and Yeo (2015) propose that understanding learning and how to create conditions for learning is influenced by the researchers' focus, such as measuring change (quantitative), assessing power and privilege (critical), or generating thick description of experience (interpretive). As seen below, each of the TSSs research projects is guided by diverse theories and methodologies given the various purposes and intentions of the SoTL project. This diversity of theoretical and methodological perspectives expands and enriches the quality of mentoring we can derive from participating in the TSCoP.

### **Project 1 – Shifting Educational Practices with Inquiry-based Learning: Aspiring to Meet the Educational Needs of Today's Learner**

This project has two components. One is about implementing multiple forms of inquiry-based learning (IBL) with students in social work undergraduate education, and the other is about supporting faculty to implement IBL in higher education settings. This project employs constructivism as the learning theory while the methodology is interpretive and is highlighted on the website (see <https://live-ucalgary.ucalgary.ca/node/339134>). The assumptions behind IBL fit with constructivism because students link new information that they find to their prior knowledge and create new understandings. The assumptions also align with an interpretive methodology as knowledge claims come from interpretations of student experience and their social reality is locally and specifically constructed. In this project, the researcher is not looking to generalize the findings but rather is interested in knowing the multiple subjective realities of

student learning.

With IBL, learning happens through a student-led learning process. Students are seeking answers to their own uniquely generated inquiry question, and their thinking shifts as they discover new information that challenges their old ways of thinking. Student life experiences and cultural factors all contribute to the interpretations and multiple subjective realities that they bring to the learning environment. Utilizing IBL, students learn to engage more deeply in their learning, and take greater responsibility for their learning. Students learn important lifelong skills such as critical thinking and problem-solving, giving and receiving constructive feedback, and teamwork skills.

The second component of the project connects explicitly to mentorship. Some of the activities in the project include instructor lunch and learns within the Faculty of Social Work and cross-disciplinary workshops to provide support to faculty about getting started with IBL in their classrooms. Both of these activities include the option for faculty of additional support through consultation and access to resources including a *Guide to Getting Started*.

## **Project 2 – Enriching Experiential Learning in Labs Through a Community of Practice and Systematic Reflection**

This TSP project focuses on improving teaching and learning in exercise physiology laboratories. We discovered a disconnect between laboratory learning activities, assessments, and developing the skills and habits of a scientist in exercise physiology courses. We are working to enrich student learning and increase the time students spend practicing the skills of a scientist in exercise physiology labs through mentoring graduate teaching assistants in a teaching-focused CoP, modifying learning activities and adding systematic reflection to both teaching and learning. A more detailed description of our reforms is included in our blog article (see <https://blog.lifescitrc.org/pecop/2021/07/06/reworking-the-recipe-adding-experimentation-and-reflection-to-exercise-physiology-laboratories/>).

The research component of our project aims to assess stakeholder experiences participating in the labs and professional learning opportunities we have created. For example, we are collecting student impressions of the reformed labs, graduate teaching assistant experiences from their time in our teaching-focused CoP and their experiences teaching reformed labs.

We are studying our teaching and learning reforms using qualitative methods. The learning theory which informs our research is social constructivism (Kalina & Powell, 2009). Our approach holds that multiple realities or truths exist, and that people construct their realities based on their own experiences and perspectives (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). We believe knowledge is co-constructed through interactions between researchers and participants in our lab reform work.

We are collecting qualitative survey, focus group, and individual interview data to explore student, graduate teaching assistant, lab technician, and instructor experiences with teaching and learning reforms in exercise physiology laboratories. We use reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019) to analyze the qualitative data we are collecting. We are developing two scholarly personal narratives (Ng & Carney, 2017), one instrumental case study (Compton-Lilly, 2012) and practical workshops to share our learning and support educational leaders interested in reforming laboratories in different disciplines.

### **Project 3 – Enhancing Faculty Development for Graduate Supervision in an Interdisciplinary Online Learning Community**

This study of online faculty development is oriented by a pragmatic worldview and a social constructivist theory of learning. This research is an examination of the design and implementation of a massive open online course (MOOC) to support faculty members in a CoP focused on effective graduate supervision practices. This study combines Lave and Wenger's (1991) theory of legitimate peripheral participation with Garrison's (2000) Community of Inquiry framework for fostering cognitive, teaching, and social presence in online learning environments. Using a design-based research (DBR) approach to the iterative development, implementation and evaluation of the Quality Graduate Supervision MOOC, highlighted on our website (see <https://ucalgary.ca/graduate-supervision-mooc>), we employ multiple methods of data collection and analysis through ongoing cycles of innovation and changes to the course. Findings from surveys, interviews and system data are integrated and serve to inform ongoing design improvements in each iteration of the course, the cultivation of an online learning community within the course, and the impacts of learning within the course on faculty members' supervision practice. Thus, this SoTL project is located at several intersections of Miller-Young and Yeo's (2015) framework with our combination of theories of cognitivism, constructivism, and social constructivism, and with design-based research that draws upon quantitative and qualitative methodologies.

In this study, we collaborate with expert supervisors from across disciplines and programs at two universities to deliver synchronous and asynchronous online learning experiences for University of Calgary and Athabasca University academic colleagues with the end goal of improving graduate student learning experiences. Through ongoing design and evaluation of accessible, responsive, and inclusive online faculty development, a series of webinars and online activities and discussions, our research directly impacts graduate mentorship and supervision practices and generates original knowledge about faculty development in interdisciplinary MOOC learning communities. Importantly, this research and practice with the MOOC contributes to improved supervision knowledge and practices through online faculty development, and contributes diverse theory, methodology and perspectives to the peer mentorship and learning conversations in the TSCoP. As Teaching Scholars, we bring a focus on online faculty learning and design-based research in education to the TSCoP. We share what we are learning and the challenges we encounter in our study of an online learning community of practice for graduate supervisors and draw upon the many insights, perspectives and ideas of our Teaching Scholar colleagues.

### **Developing our Educational Leadership Capacities**

In addition to the mentoring, empowering, and research we are doing as participants in the TSP, each member of our TSCoP is practicing and developing the pillars of educational leadership behaviours Fields et al. (2019) found in their analysis of the perspectives of 11 participants in a previous cohort of the TSP. The affective qualities which Fields et al. (2019) described include empathy, respect, humility, and a commitment to building healthy professional relationships. Trust building and relational leadership are at the centre of our three different projects, and our TSCoP contributions. The small yet significant conversations we know create the networks that influence educational change (Roxå & Mårtensson, 2009) afford each one of us important opportunities to mobilize these affective qualities.

We also see ourselves activating what Fields et al. (2019) called an action orientation. This dimension of educational leadership encompasses painting a compelling vision of the future, negotiating change, actively listening, and responding to the needs of stakeholders. Action orientation shows up as creativity, innovation, and risk-taking in our work. It means we not only make things happen, but we are also inspiring strategic progress (Fields et al., 2019). The final dimension of educational leadership and perhaps the birthplace of our work as Teaching Scholars is a commitment to what Fields et al. (2019) labelled ‘teaching excellence’. We connect with, contribute to, and make decisions to support excellent teaching through our leadership. We use evidence-based teaching practices and take a learner-centred, process-focused approach to teaching. We partner with students across our multiple roles, contexts, and work (Cook-Sather et al., 2014) to enable excellent teaching and learning. Our educational leadership intentionally impacts the teaching and learning cultures we participate in and co-create with our students and colleagues.

The five components of Fields et al.’s (2019) educational leadership model are ignited by our commitment to actively steward change that enriches student experiences and learning. We have found time reflecting on the pillars of educational leadership to be practical and energizing. We invite you to pause and consider what your strengths are in relation to empowering, mentoring, affective qualities, action orientation, and teaching excellence (Fields et al., 2019). Reflecting on the educational leadership practices included in this framework helps us reconnect to our purpose, set goals, and strengthen our impact.

## Conclusion

The TSCoP is a valuable component of the TSP at UCalgary. It provides an inclusive space and opportunity for diverse voices and experts within the SoTL community to mentor and learn from each other. Mentoring, problem-solving, reflection, story-sharing and shared experience contribute to a positive educational leadership development space. New scholars entering the TSCoP each cycle offer changes in perspective and community dynamics that refresh and enrich the TSCoP and enliven personal and professional development for emerging and established leaders on our campus.

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