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Keywords

Lecturers, Part-time faculty, Regional universities, Research institutions, Unique history of SoTL

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Abstract

This reflective essay describes the distinct ways that the scholarship of teaching and university has been integrated into the academic culture at two very different universities with the suggestion that universities who actively study their own relationship and history with SoTL can make some empowering discoveries.

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The paradigmatic changes foreseen for higher education by scholars like John Tagg and Ernest Boyer emphasize new forms of scholarship for a new generation of university faculty. A turn to the scholarship of teaching and learning and the increasing connection to integrated learning and the engaged student are ideas integral to the agenda, but now they are no longer novel ideas in themselves, as one 37-page list of pedagogical journals I recently found on a faculty development site attests. Yet I have frequently wondered whether there is a blanket, uniform adoption of these new ideas, or whether in fact different kinds of institutions apply them differently and in disparate contexts. After some reflection, I want to describe the ways in which the scholarship of teaching and learning has proved invaluable in at least two distinctly different settings in the United States in which I have served, a regional university in Louisiana and a premier research university in Georgia. These two institutions provide iconic representations for the very different histories of SoTL that are being written, and an understanding of the implications of these differences may foster a more deliberate analysis of the history and presence of SoTL on other individual campuses.

In the late nineties at the University of Louisiana at Monroe, when I was asked to serve first as Interim Head of English and later as Head, one of the challenges I faced was that 22 of a faculty of nearly 50 were serving as lecturers or part-timers, and I am aware now that this was no anomaly. Working within the constraints of this pattern for nine years (and with particularly assiduous efforts the two years after Katrina), I found that even in such challenging (even impossible for some academic enterprises) economic times that travel money for lecturers could be scrounged up from various sources—custom-published projects, for example—and that lecturers who began to write reflective and research essays on their teaching and their students' learning almost immediately began to develop greater excitement and skill in the classroom. Nearly all of the instruction in the introductory composition courses was delivered by MA faculty whose contracts ran on an annual basis with a good number who were hired semester-by-semester. Thus, a high percentage

of these crucial introductory courses were taught by the people with the least connection to the university life, the lowest rank and reputation amongst the faculty. Yet, the study, effort, and intelligence of these faculty brought about remarkable changes in the time I was there. The year before I left the university, ten of thirteen possible instructors had papers accepted at the Louisiana Association for College Composition. They were studying, evaluating, and writing about their own service learning projects, online and distant education projects, blended learning projects, to mention a few. Some of the newer ones were studying earlier forms of SoTL, reading Boyer and Chickering perhaps, or undertaking projects in peer review and editing. The lecturers took the high ground at that year's conference which is often led by the assistant professor, tenure track faculty who earn lines in the *curriculum vita* for such conferences. These lecturers led departmental workshops and created a stronger presence at the university as well, and I think a good portion of this confident activity traced to their connection to and success with the academic work of the scholarship of teaching and learning.

All too often, these professionals are often not considered to be faculty at all, but lecturers, adjuncts, and other part-timers teach the bulk of general education courses at an increasing number of public institutions, and in the current financial quagmire, I think this trend will continue. The recent work of Dr. Valerie Conley, Director of the Center for Higher Education at Ohio University, illustrates steady increases in university employment of part-time faculty. Charting change across thirty years (1975-2005) in four kinds of academic employment—tenured, tenure track, FT non-track, and part-time—Dr. Conley's statistics demonstrate a decline in the first two kinds of employment and increases in the second two, particularly in that of part-time faculty.

Without many of the benefits of regular faculty, such professionals have adopted SoTL to provide themselves a vital link to the academic life of the institution. Thus, they may not be considered a part of the new faculty by administrators whose central focus is on the bottom line, or by other academic leaders whose interest is in advancing the quality of a particular department or discipline, yet these lecturers, with the support of chairs, heads, and some deans, have found a way to enter the discourse of the academy through the scholarship of teaching and learning. While it is true that broader definitions of scholarship are being adopted by ever increasing numbers of tenure and promotion committees, and the scholarship of teaching and learning and its many pedagogical innovations are now studied by serious scholars, the lecturers in many institutions are the torchbearers whose work lifts the quality of general education.

At another pole, an institution like Oxford College of Emory where the Ph.D. faculty have a strong, even mandatory, research agenda already possesses a long history with SoTL, and a new challenge presents itself. An explanation of my journey to Oxford College will hopefully become the text of another reflective piece elsewhere, but suffice to say that after nineteen years at ULM, my wife (who is also an academic) and I decided to begin the application process again. I landed in the very enviable place of a special college that provided for incoming Emory students an alternative program of study. Oxford College, nestled within the confines of one of the nation's premier research institutions, possesses a faculty who have a close connection to their university that possesses some of the greatest resources of any higher education institution in the nation. Faculty at Oxford College serve as faculty

of a research institution, yet the college has placed its primary focus upon teaching, a focus that a mainstream liberal arts college would have.

As one might expect, the SoTL tradition at Oxford College of Emory traces back more than a decade and began to arc sharply upward when the college earned Carnegie status. At the time and shortly thereafter, a 'Go Public' movement began, and I would guess that a majority of the college faculty became part of the initiative in one way or another, by writing and publishing or by attending and leading workshops on SoTL. Professors of biology and English, religious studies scholars and mathematics professors are working across the curriculum on SoTL projects. The college also has the resources to bring to campus some of the premier scholars of teaching and learning, has created a conference on pedagogy in the liberal arts, and a great deal of the tenure and promotion discussion focuses upon ways that faculty research reflects efforts in and success with learning outcomes and the success of students. The faculty also have fair-sized stipends for conference travel, each one has an individual research agenda, and as a group they are conversant with the terms in the SoTL lexicon and have been for some time.

In this setting, the impediment for most of the faculty is not a tenuous relationship to the academy like the bulk of lecturers who teach general education courses at many regional institutions. It is not lack of support or resources. Rather, as with all movements of some duration, the challenge is to find ways to spark a renewal of interest and a revival of that original devotion to the subject. The spark that seems to be renewing SoTL interest campus-wide at Oxford College involves campus-wide learning outcomes discussions, grant writing and grant participation initiatives such as those with Teagle Foundation and the Wabash Study, and college-wide workshops that focus on such new considerations as debate across the curriculum. The SoTL projects being undertaken at institutions like the liberal arts intensive environment of Oxford College may provide the articles and ideas for another generation of SoTL scholarship. Their resources and history take them to a different place in the study and application of SoTL.

It is simplistic to think that the powerful ideas of SoTL apply to all faculty and institutions in a monolithic way. Similarly, it is also simplistic to think that SoTL should be important only to the freshly-minted and eager tenure track faculty or to those whose responsibilities involve faculty development. The different, evolving histories of these two institutions with SoTL should be enough evidence to encourage all of us to realize the unique opportunity that presents itself. I would urge each institution to have an understanding of this opportunity and to undertake some systematic study or consideration of the presence of SoTL on the campus so as to arrive at strategies to strengthen, modify, extend, and support SoTL to correspond to the unique qualities and needs of that institution. Like the popular ice cream parlors, SoTL offers a variety of containers and a wide choice of flavors, and I encourage institutions to explore the possible combinations of this useful scholarship for their particular institutional tastes.