Portfolio Development, Reflection, Personal Instructional Theory and the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning  
by Mark A. Minott  
Abstract  
The aim of this anecdotal essay is to encourage college lecturers and classroom teachers to examine and articulate their personal instructional theory. This is important for two reasons. One, doing so brings an awareness of personal instructional practices, and two, it is an important facet of the scholarship of teaching and learning. To achieve this aim the author provides evidence of how the process of constructing and reflecting on a professional portfolio brought an awareness of his personal theory about teaching, and displays practical examples of the extent to which the theory drove his instructional practices.

Introduction  
After examining a number of definitions of the term “Scholarship of Teaching and Learning” (SoTL), McKinney (2002) concludes that it is a systematic study of teaching and/or learning and the public sharing and review of such work through presentations or publications. It involves faculty posing and systematically studying questions related to teaching improvement and student learning (Hutchings & Shulman, 1999). The main tenet of the SoTL is inquiry into instructional practices.

Poole (2010) points out that while the SoTL or inquiring into one’s instructional practice is an established part of Canada’s higher education sector, there is much work to be done to encourage its continued growth. This is so because there are obstacles faced by those promoting the SoTL. For example, there is a lack of understanding at the institutional level regarding its potential benefits, and also at the disciplinary level, where many academicians view inquiry into their teaching and students’ learning as actions that are irrelevant to the teaching of their subject area. Despite these and other obstacles, Poole (2010) outlines some benefits when he states:

…research on teaching and learning that is conducted across an institution promises to stimulate evidence-based change. Faculty members interested in teaching and learning can pursue curiosities and pressing questions the ways they know best--through research. Moreover, all this activity can be acknowledged within reward systems that understand the currency of research (Not Paginated).

Personal theories about teaching and learning is one area that should be the focus of the SoTL for these shape instructional practice. Tylee (1992) agrees with this thought for she points out that teachers need to understand their personal theories, as these influenced the way they carry out their teaching. In other words, personal theories about teaching cause one to lean to a particular way of thinking and acting in the classroom (Richards, 1996). Borg (2001) elaborates by stating that a personal instructional theory or a belief about teaching and learning is an idea consciously or unconsciously held. The individual accepts it as true and it serves as a guide to thoughts and behaviours.

Chism (1998) made the point that articulating a personal instructional theory about teaching and learning is increasingly a requirement for promotion and tenure for faculty at many colleges and universities. More importantly, developing and articulating a personal instructional theory is a facet of the scholarship of one’s
teaching and learning. This is so because it stimulates reflection on teaching and learning, and may renew
dedication to the goals and values that an individual holds.

I recently produced a professional portfolio for an internationally recognised fellowship and professional
development program. This resulted in two things. Firstly, the process made me more aware of the accuracy
of the ideas expressed by Borg (2001), Richards (1996), and Tylee (1992) in the foregoing discussion. It
confirmed that I did lean towards a particular way of thinking and acting which was based on this
personally held instructional theory. Secondly, by reflecting on each element of the portfolio, choosing
appropriate artefacts and being mentored, I became aware of, and renewed my dedication to a long standing
theory which drove my instructional practice. The theory is that students’ cognitive and affective needs must
be addressed and they must be actively engaged in their own learning.

What was also of importance was that through the completion of the portfolio I was able to clearly articulate
and share this personal theory with others. This occurrence is inline with Priest (2010) who points out that a
professional portfolio is a vehicle for tracking professional development, assessing changes in personal
belief, and sharing these with others. This is also in tandem with the benefits of a professional portfolio as
outlined on the Villanova University website (2010). The website highlights the fact that a professional
portfolio is used to communicate and provide evidence of the attainment of the knowledge, dispositions, and
performances associated with effective teaching and learning. It is also a venue for demonstrating one’s
reflective thinking strategies, professional development and one’s personal attitudes, assumptions, beliefs,
and values concerning teaching and learning. It details one’s accomplishments and provides insight into how
and why a teacher/lecturer carries out his or her roles in a particular manner.

Having said all of this, how does my personal instructional theory influence my instructional practices? As
indicated in the foregoing discussion, my personal instructional theory involves the idea that students’
cognitive and affective needs must be met and they should be actively engaged in their learning. I use the
sections of the theory as a template to guide the remaining discussion that will answer the question.

Addressing students’ cognitive needs and actively engaging them in their learning

Educational psychologists have been leaders in the area of defining students’ learning needs. Morgan and
King (1975) state that needs or motives—terms used synonymously—drive us to do the things we do. For
example, when asked why they went to college, persons may answer in terms of the need to learn or to gain
a good job. Shultz (1990) states that apart from the basic need for food, water, and sex, there are
psychological needs, created socially and which vary greatly from one individual to another. Some are
universal and others are not.

The work most frequently cited in relation to needs is that of Maslow and his hierarchy of needs. Some have
argued that Maslow never achieved a final coherent theory of self-actualisation (Daniels, 2001). Others seek
to modify the work; see for example (Norwood, 2003). Despite these, references to his hierarchy exist, for
example (Shultz 1990 and Morgan and King 1975).

Tying Maslow’s theory of needs to students’ learning needs means that for the student to self actualise,
physiological, safety, social, or love and esteem needs need to be fulfilled. Relating this to instructional
practice means that lesson content should have built into it aspects that support and encourage the
development of safety, social, or love and esteem needs. Therefore, while lecturers or teachers should not
write these needs into their lesson plans, how they implement a lesson or address the concerns of students
should reflect care and concern for students’ cognitive and affective development.

I did not realise how personal and deeply rooted I had made these ideas, until I began the process of
developing the professional portfolio. For example, the idea of addressing students’ cognitive needs and
actively engaging them in the learning process first emerged when I was asked to articulate in writing, my
philosophy of teaching. In the documentation I state:

My philosophy of teaching has developed over 24 years in the primary, secondary and tertiary
sectors. As I reflect on my beliefs about teaching and learning, I find that my primary role as an
educator is to enable students to build knowledge and to be involved in their welfare. To
accomplish these, I employ a reflective pastoral model of teaching undergirded by the work of Schon (1983, 1987). This is essentially an analytical approach to teaching. This analytical approach has caused me to realize that to build students’ knowledge and support their welfare, there is the need to address their cognitive needs, actively engage them in their own learning, and encourage their emotional and mental health through pastoral care.

Addressing students’ cognitive needs is essential in order to design and implement learning strategies that will enable them to build knowledge. What I came to realise from the portfolio development process was that, in my teaching, I routinely plan activities, such as group discussions, for I believed that students develop their knowledge by building on ideas presented by others in these discussions. At times, they discuss wider conditions that affect their learning, particularly conditions at the community level. The outcomes of these discussions are demonstrated in the following quotations taken from two students’ reflective journals:

The discussions were very informative especially in the area that relates solely to the Cayman Island’s school system and the way to handle possible challenges that one may face only in this community (Tammy, final reflective journal).

They [classroom discussions] have enlightened me on the history of teaching in the islands; they have broadened my view on the relationship that exists between teachers and the students, the relationship between the teachers and parents, the attitude and culture of the students, parents and the community (Rammy, final reflective journal).

In addition to discussions which actively involve students in their own learning, I have engaged in a number of instructional practices based on this deeply engrained personal instructional theory. These practices also focus on students’ cognitive development.

- I developed and implemented a “Reflective Approach to Teaching Practicum debriefing”. The aim of the approach was to have students build a questioning disposition which will enable them to gain knowledge about teaching, self as teacher, and teaching context.
- I constructed rubrics for each course I taught. These are extremely useful as guides to students, because they make the criteria clear for awarding marks. I have found that by constructing rubrics for course assignments/papers, students are able to independently assess the quality of the paper they submit for marking.
- I encourage students to engage in research by making it a required element of courses I develop and teach. By engaging in small research projects, they begin to develop an understanding of the research process. I also provide a list of required and recommended readings for all courses I teach. These are discussed during lessons and used to guide and broaden students’ thinking about the subject being studied and to actively engage them in critical examination of literary sources.
- At the beginning of selected courses I ask students verbally what they are expecting to learn from the specific course on which they were about to embark. Most times, however, I give the students “K.W.L” charts to fill in. (“K” what you know about the subject, “W” what you would like to know about the subject, and “L” what have you learnt). During the first lesson they are asked to fill in only the “K” and “W” sections and give the papers to me. I then take the papers and incorporate the questions and concerns identified into the lessons I teach.

I do this in two ways. One, during a given lesson I would specifically point out a question or concern identified by a student, then provide an answer or solution. Two, in most cases, after I scrutinize the questions or concerns raised, I realise that the course content addresses them. When this occurs, I point this out to the students.

During the final lesson, the “K.W.L” charts are returned to individuals students to fill in the “L” section. Students are encouraged to share whether or not their questions or concerns were addressed. Sometimes seeming unaddressed questions and concerns are addressed during these culminating sessions either by me or the students themselves. Issues that remain unresolved or questions unanswered, I research and incorporate into lessons the next time the course is offered.
Without considering students’ cognitive needs and developing appropriate teaching activities to fulfill these needs, I risk the possibility of my students missing opportunities to analyse a variety of points raised during discussions, scrutinize alternate ideas, and engage in creative problem solving and decision making.

The personal instructional theory also includes addressing students’ affective needs.

Addressing students’ affective needs

Van Manen (1995), states that the concept of teachers as pedagogue assumes that a caring interest in the growth and welfare of students motivates their practice. I seem to have personalised this idea. For, I speak of myself as a ‘care-giver’, whose role is to help students maintain a stable mental and emotional state, which enables them to address factors affecting their learning (Minott, 2007). I would listen and respond to their queries, give a word of comfort or praise and try to be prompt in replying to their emails and telephone calls. When students’ concerns are attended to, I believe they have greater respect for their teachers and the lessons presented.

This personal theory has led me to initiate a ‘person tutor and tutees’ system of support for students in my Department at the local university college where I work. This involved assigning students to various faculty members as their personal tutor. I developed a policy, which outlines the nature and extent of the support to be given. The policy clearly states the role of the faculty member, clarifies what students should expect from faculty, and the benefits to students of this system of support. For example, faculty acting as personal tutors was to confine their activities to that of addressing the affective needs of students and to give academic advice.

Faculty members’ emails and mobile phone numbers were made available for students as a means of facilitating access. This proved very helpful in enabling the system to work. Some students (after graduating) still maintain contact with their personal tutors. While I cannot conclusively say that the personal tutor and tutee system was the main reason why there was almost a one hundred percent graduation rate (during its first implementation), its usefulness in enabling this number of graduates should not be minimized.

I have also been involved in personal counselling of students, especially in how to balance personal life with academic demands. I adopt a pastoral approach to this process, which involves positively impacting the affective needs of students by facilitating healthy emotional and mental states. This enables them to address mitigating factors such as personal financial circumstances, social problems, medical conditions and changing circumstances. This approach places students at the centre and recognizes them as their own problem-solvers. The primary reason for lecturers to be engaged in the pastoral care of students is that doing so encourages student retention, and in economic hard times, there is the need to encourage students to complete their studies.

This personal theory of addressing student affective needs has also led me to become proactive in supporting students’ learning. I recall teaching a number of classes in a Bachelor in Education course at my local university college. During the first few teaching sessions, I noticed that one student seemed reserved and quiet. She would respond only when asked a question and would not elaborate on the answer she gave. I also note that she spoke with a Hispanic accent. I reflected on how I could get her more involved in the discussions that were obviously enjoyable and loud (on a number of occasions, I was asked by colleagues in neighbouring rooms to ‘try to keep the noise down’, or they would meet me in the hallway after a lecture and say in a humorous tone, ‘I would like to come and join your lectures for it seems the students are enjoying them’).

As I reflected on how I could get the student more involved in these loud but demonstrative class discussions, I read a number of research articles on diversity in the classroom. The articles suggest the need to be deliberate in inviting those who are ‘different’ to participate and to give them time to think and respond to questions asked. I employed this suggestion for the remaining classes. As a means of getting the student ready to contribute to discussions, I would start with the phrase ‘I am sure Maria (pseudonym) has another perspective on the issue, let us hear from her’. This strategy would always get her talking.

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Conclusion

By reflecting on the portfolio development process I also reflected on my instructional practices and by so doing I have expanded my awareness of the theory that drives these practices. In other words, reflecting on the process has crystallized the personal instructional theory that has operated somewhat undetected in my practice for more than a decade and which has dictated how I engaged with students, colleagues and ultimately, the practice of teaching. Carrying out this process is at the core of the SoTL. Having said this, I must also state that being led by this personal instructional theory has helped me grow in my love for teaching and learning.

References


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