Cascading Self-reflection and Boundary Crossing: My personal understanding of the scholarship of teaching and learning

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Abstract:

This personal reflection examines the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL). For the author, the key to SoTL lies in circling across boundaries from cascading self-reflection through writing, reading, teaching and learning and back to self-reflection. Examples of self-reflection and an overview of personally important themes in the SoTL literature are offered.

Key words

scholarship of teaching and learning; self-reflection; diversity; interdisciplinarity; learning theories

1. Cascading Self-reflection and Boundary Crossing

The scholarship of teaching and learning is "systematic reflection on teaching and learning made public" Carnegie Academy for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (CASTL)

I was first exposed to the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) over thirty years ago, during studies for my Bachelor of Education degree at the University of Saskatchewan, Canada. More recently I have been involved in the formal application of this scholarship to the post secondary environment. With the development of SoTL at the university level, especially since the publication of Scholarship Reconsidered (Boyer, 1990), university professors have taken a scholarly approach toward their teaching process. I have enjoyed being part of these developments, which continue within and outside faculties of education. In this brief essay, I will discuss the interconnections between the practice and the scholarship of teaching and learning. I will conclude with an overview of SoTL themes which have been helpful to me.

I believe that the key element in the connection between teaching and learning practice and SoTL is cascading self-reflection. This happens when a trickle of thought (often regarding a significant occurrence in a classroom, or in response to a SoTL article) leads to another idea and then to a series of trickling thoughts and self-examinations. Especially if recorded in writing and re-examined at frequent intervals, disciplined self-reflection on teaching and learning can lead to generative insights.

For instance, after noting Susan Sharpe's (2005) comment "I love classrooms. I love the physical presence of students in all their variety", I wrote a question to myself: "what does it mean that my teaching body limps and has grey hair?" Some time later, musing again and re-reading my thoughts, I wrote a potential title to an article: - "w(h)ither the body"!: aging teachers in the classroom and online" and scratched out a

page or so of questions and ideas about online teaching. These included: I am a cyborg teacher and do I like it? Am I an avatar an icon or representation of a user in a shared virtual reality? A light body? A Bray-bot How do I create my avatar cyborg? As I wrote, I read further SoTL material about teacher's expressed identities. A year or so later, I wrote an article about the importance of self-identity online (Bray, 2006) and eventually developed a course on cyberfeminisms for delivery in a face to face women's studies classroom.

In this brief personal example, the cascading, cyclical relationship among moments of scholarly reading, reflection, writing and teaching is clear: teaching, learning and reading SoTL leads me to written reflection, which leads to changed teaching and to further scholarship. Throughout the entire process, I learn and engage in self-reflection. Because of the loop, I believe that I create richer, more complex learning environments which are supportive of a wider variety of students.

As a scholar of teaching and learning, I have benefited from reading SoTL in three main areas:

1. Learning Theories, especially regarding differences in learning styles. It has been important for me to recognize my own learning style, and try to be more cognizant of other learning styles. (For a widely circulated overview see Mergel 1998)

2. Interdisciplinary approaches to teaching and learning. The day of disciplinary bastions is ending. (See Nicholls, 2005.)

3. Diversity literature. A wide variety of publications about teaching in a diverse classroom inform my teaching. Awareness of human differences in ethnicity, gender, ability, social class, and sexual orientation and other characteristics assists me in my curriculum planning and teaching approaches. The more aware I am of diversity amongst my students, the better and more scholarly my teaching becomes. (University of Toronto, 2002)

All three of my areas of interest stress that scholarly teaching and learning crosses boundaries - between disciplines, among theories, and amid varieties of people. SoTL in these areas sparks my thinking about how to recognize and cross barriers among students and teachers. Circling across boundaries from cascading self-reflection through writing, reading, teaching and learning and back to self-reflection is, for me, the key to the scholarship of teaching and learning.

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