

The Relevance of the Philosophy of Social Science for the Scholarship of Teaching & Learning

Vinay Kuma

Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, Singapore

Research Domains

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

Abstract

In recent decades, the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) has consolidated into a movement and become increasingly institutionalized as a form of faculty professional development in universities around the world. However, accompanying this growth, there has been several criticisms directed at SoTL, highlighting its apparent lack of rigour, Eurocentrism, unclear nature, aims, and standards, and an ambiguous relationship with educational and pedagogic research. This paper, then, proposes further engagement with philosophical reflection upon the nature, aims, and scope of SoTL, and whether the distinction between SoTL and higher education research is warranted. In the process, this paper aims to demonstrate the relevance of the philosophy of social science (PoSS)--which examines the nature, aims, and ethics of social science knowledge and inquiry --for SoTL. Ultimately, the intention of introducing PoSS to SoTL is to examine, make explicit, and reconfigure the epistemic foundations upon which the field of SoTL rests.

Full paper

1. Introduction

One key domain of activity that has gained traction in universities around the world in recent years is the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL)--a growth that has been characterized as a SoTL movement ([Tight, 2018](#)). SoTL is generally construed as a form of systematic inquiry into teaching and learning with the aim of improving pedagogic practice and, ultimately, student learning. Since its origins, however, the concept, language, scope, limits, and practices of SoTL have been contested ([Canning & Masika, 2022](#); [Kreber, 2005](#)). Against this backdrop, this paper contends that higher education in general and SoTL in particular can profit from further philosophical reflection upon the nature, aims, and scope of SoTL, as well as further consideration of whether the distinction between SoTL and higher education research is warranted. In the process, this paper aims to demonstrate the

relevance of the philosophy of social science (PoSS)--which raises questions about the nature, aims, and ethics of social science inquiry and knowledge ([Risjord, 2022](#))--for SoTL.

1. Two philosophical problems with SoTL

The history of SoTL is often traced back to Ernest Boyer's classic formulation in *Scholarship Reconsidered* ([Boyer, 1990](#)), which transcended the prevalent conception of scholarship (disciplinary research) to include the 'scholarship of teaching'. The scholarship of teaching was later expanded to become the 'scholarship of teaching and learning', particularly through the work of Pat Hutchings and Lee Shulman ([Hutchings & Shulman, 1999](#)) and others.

However, SoTL has been criticized on multiple grounds, not least due to SoTL's apparent lack of rigour, Eurocentrism, unclear nature, aims, and standards, and an awkward and uncertain relationship with educational and pedagogic research--even leading to the recent charge that SoTL is a "thorn in the flesh of educational research" ([Canning & Masika, 2022](#); [Elon University et al., 2023](#); [Hoon & Looker, 2013](#); [Manarin et al., 2021](#)). Furthermore, SoTL discussions, debates, and practices tend to come from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds and so, may carry diverse philosophical assumptions and commitments about the nature of systematic social inquiry. In so doing, they may implicitly or explicitly take sides on philosophical issues. Here, PoSS offers a form of critical reflexivity--the possibility of bringing these issues to the fore and to make them explicit, to foster collective awareness, reflection, and deliberation of what positions to take on these issues, and acknowledgment of the implications and limitations of doing so. Drawing on insights from education ([G. Biesta, 2020](#); [G. J. Biesta, 2010, 2016](#)) and the philosophy of social science ([Abend, 2023](#); [Alexandrova, 2017](#)), I proceed by discussing (a non-exhaustive but hopefully illustrative list of) two philosophical problems in SoTL:

1. WHAT: the assumption of the centrality of learning (with or without teaching) and the need for a more critical consideration of the ontology of learning as an object of inquiry and focus and to what extent education should be described or represented in terms of learning.
2. FOR WHAT: The idea that SoTL provides an evidence base for evidence-based teaching practice that will translate into student learning. Here, epistemic discussion is needed as to what evidence means (and ought to mean) in SoTL. It is commonly held that the aims of SoTL are not to contribute to educational theory--which distinguishes it from education research. Here, too, further discussion is needed here

of what it means to contribute (and not contribute) to educational theory. This comes back to the question of what SoTL is for.

1. Conclusion

Partially to address the aforementioned problems as well as recent critiques of SoTL, this paper concludes with a proposal that the scope of SoTL be expanded beyond 'teaching and learning' to fully capture the educational efforts and activities that faculty partake in—including, say, curriculum and assessment (re)design, educational leadership, and policy review and change. This would involve refocusing SoTL on Higher Education in general as opposed to teaching and learning in particular—thus calling for SoTL to be reconceptualized as the Scholarship of Higher Education (SHE), diminishing the distinction between SoTL and Higher Education Research.

Finally, this paper calls for further integration of PoSS and higher education. Beyond consideration of the conceptual foundations of the field, PoSS can help higher education practitioners hone a sharpened capacity to engage with and evaluate research projects. PoSS also encourages an awareness of epistemological commitments, and the implications of disciplinary and methodological pluralism. These qualities may allow SoTL/SHE to depart from mechanical approaches to 'improving student learning' to a more critical, reflexive, inquiry-based practice.