

Demystifying and framing SoTL: Exploring the meaning and purpose of scholarship in a School of Education

Angela Jaap, School of Education, University of Glasgow

Julie E. McAdam, School of Education, University of Glasgow

ABSTRACT

The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) is central to professional development in higher education, encouraging colleagues to reflect critically on practice and disseminate their insights through publications, conferences, and institutional initiatives. The focus of this paper, the first of two that we propose to JPAAP, serves as an 'on-the-horizon' exploration of the concept of scholarship, specifically within a School of Education (SoE). The second paper, which will follow one academic year later, will present an empirical case study examining the culture of SoTL in our SoE. In this initial paper, we draw on scholarship to frame our discussion around three themes: recognised concepts of SoTL; its positioning within a SoE; and the role of institutional culture in supporting it. Additionally, we will locate the questions above within the context of a SoE and, in doing so, highlight the challenges of establishing a clear and shared understanding of scholarship within the discipline of education. By situating SoTL within the unique disciplinary context of education, we contribute to broader debates about how scholarship is understood and enacted across different parts of the academy. This paper, therefore, lays the conceptual groundwork for a forthcoming case study of how our SoE seeks to demystify SoTL and build a sustainable culture of scholarly support.

Keywords: professional development, disciplinary boundaries, SoTL, academic identity, institutional culture

Introduction

The premise of our paper arises from a new role within our SoE as Scholarship Champions. The authors, one on a Learning, Teaching, and Scholarship (LTS) contract and one on a Research and Teaching (R&T) contract, have experience in SoTL, specifically in engaging with scholarship for their professional growth and supporting others in their scholarly activities. Early in our role, it became apparent that the concept and construct of SoTL in a SoE held a different understanding than that experienced in other disciplines across the university. In a SoE where SoTL can be closely associated with our practice and research activities, we found it difficult to distinguish between the two. As such, our 'mission' as Scholarship Champions became one of demystification, gaining insight into what this means within our SoE and how we can establish a culture of support and nurture for all academic colleagues. Our first year in the role led us to consider the 'what, why, and how' of SoTL specifically for our SoE and to facilitate a space and environment to forge their identities in scholarship.

Recognised concepts and constructs of SoTL

To launch our in-house discussions on SoTL we began by examining some of the recognised scholarship in the field of SoTL. We revisited the work of Boyer (1990) through his publication *Scholarship Reconsidered* to trace how his reconceptualisation of activity within a university would re-balance the status of research and teaching (Trigwell & Shale, 2004). His work paved the way for teaching to be valued and for SoTL to be linked to knowledge creation that enhances the quality of student learning. This enhancement involves activity and outputs.

SoTL activity is frequently defined as needing to be:

- **public and open to critique** (Felten, 2013; Shulman, 1998; Trigwell & Shale, 2004). This requires the activity to be formalised in some way so that it becomes accessible via multiple formats (podcasts, conferences, blogs, journals) for others to build upon. When SoTL is linked to output, a clear tension arises when some formats are favoured in the academy over others, leading to a perception that SoTL is somehow inferior (Smith & Walker, 2024).
- **connected to inquiry that is focused on student learning** (Felten, 2013; Trigwell & Shale, 2004). This could encompass some form of critical inquiry that touches on disciplinary knowledge, skills development, or professional attributes. Definitions of SoTL have evolved to distinguish between discipline-based epistemology and teaching and learning epistemology (Galloway & Jones, 2012). For those engaged in initial teacher education, this separation causes identity confusion (Galloway & Jones, 2012), especially when pre-figurative or modelling pedagogies are used to teach concepts that our students will then apply within their classrooms.
- **methodologically rigorous and grounded in an established need** (Felten, 2013). Education resides within the social sciences, meaning that many involved in SoTL inquiry are teaching concepts linked to reflective practice, assessment, and evaluation, which bear a close resemblance to the types of methodological questions and approaches used to research the discipline of education.
- **conducted in partnership with students** (Felten, 2013). There has been a growing tendency to partner with students in the inquiry process

For many involved in SoTL, the ambiguity in defining the term and engaging in activity can lead to tensions in academic identity. They find themselves seeking to enhance the quality of their teaching, connected to concepts they are in turn communicating to their student teachers. SoTL relates to both exploration and investigation into academic practices. It can also be utilised as a component of teaching excellence, particularly when aligned with requirements for teaching frameworks and evidence of practice for recognition and promotion. For many academic colleagues, their first engagement with scholarship often occurs through the terms and conditions of their contract, with an expectation to complete a formal programme of study, such as a PGCAP or other HE focused teaching qualification. This programme introduces them to learning and teaching in the HE context, to consider the student experience in their practice and the value of scholarship post-study. Institutions nevertheless expect academics to engage with SoTL, not only to enhance the student experience within their discipline but also to demonstrate alignment with promotion criteria (Fanghanel et al., 2016).

Understanding the positioning of SoTL within a SoE: what counts as scholarship?

As Scholarship Champions within a SoE, we have engaged in conversations with academic colleagues across our school and the wider university to better understand the place and purpose of scholarship. The institution's definition of SoTL is broad - "work that relates to the study and practice of learning and teaching within an HE setting" (University of Glasgow, 2025) - particularly when considered alongside academic promotion guidance, rightly emphasises the value of enquiry into improving classroom practices, high-quality teaching, and engagement with higher education pedagogy, all of which are central within a university context. Yet, while this definition typically coexists with disciplinary work in many academic contexts, in a SoE, the distinction between SoTL, educational research, and disciplinary research becomes far less clear-cut, often overlapping or even merging, and this blurred boundary proved challenging in our first year in the role. In other schools and colleges across the institution, there is often a more precise boundary between disciplinary research and SoTL activity. In contrast, within a SoE, these areas are frequently intertwined, and, arguably, confused, making it more difficult to delineate what 'counts' as SoTL. Insights from our workshops, particularly the 'what' and 'why' sessions, revealed that understandings of scholarship within our SoE are often shaped by institutional drivers such as promotion criteria or university-supported teaching initiatives. This does not suggest a lack of commitment to enhancing student learning nor does it demonstrate a lack of engagement with broader definitions of scholarship; rather, it indicates how institutional framing can influence what academic staff perceive as valuable scholarly activity. The result can be a more strategic and sometimes narrow approach to scholarship, potentially limiting engagement with the broader SoTL literature and practice. In our role as Scholarship Champions, we see it as necessary to both acknowledge and, where appropriate, challenge these perceptions, with the dual goal of deepening understanding of the distinctiveness of scholarship in education, while helping academic colleagues navigate the nuances of SoTL and fostering a stronger, more collaborative culture of scholarly enquiry within our school.

The importance of institutional culture in supporting SoTL

Despite Boyer's (1990) enduring call to broaden our understanding of scholarship, institutional cultures still shape, and at times constrain, how SoTL is enacted and valued. In a SoE, where teaching and research are often deeply entwined, institutional signals can profoundly influence what is prioritised and pursued. Within this context, our role as Scholarship Champions carries a dual expectation: to advocate for the value of SoTL and to create meaningful opportunities for academic colleagues to participate in and contribute to a scholarly culture. We also recognise that any change, whether through new roles, frameworks, or institutional priorities, often brings uncertainty. Leading through such transitions requires the ability to adopt a "getting on the balcony" view (Heifetz et al., 2009, p. 7), stepping back to consider the cultural dynamics at play and gaining a deeper understanding of the experiences and concerns of those within the institution. For us, this means recognising and valuing the expertise, passion, and disciplinary identities that colleagues bring to their scholarly work. Establishing a culture of SoTL in a SoE must be grounded in care, authenticity, and a deep sensitivity to context (Fullan, 2020).

From an academic development perspective, Thompson (2016) characterises such roles as a form of internal consultancy, drawing on scholarly expertise and institutional positioning to support change initiatives and foster collaboration across the institution. This function is especially significant when navigating and shaping shifts in institutional culture.

Future directions

Through this 'on-the-horizon' piece, we have aimed to raise awareness of the specific challenges and opportunities for SoTL within a SoE. Our first year as Scholarship Champions has focused on small but deliberate efforts to demystify scholarship, fostering dialogue, and building a shared understanding of what SoTL can mean in our context. We are mindful, however, that embedding a culture of scholarship is a long-term endeavour, one that requires time, trust, and collective ownership.

Looking ahead, we will continue to support colleagues through writing groups, workshops, and opportunities for peer dialogue, while also seeking cross-institutional perspectives to inform our practice. These activities will provide the foundation for ongoing reflection and evaluation, both for ourselves and for our SoE more broadly. We hope this discussion will resonate not only within our own school but also with colleagues in other disciplines who may be grappling with similar questions of identity, culture, and the value of SoTL. Ultimately, we are left with a horizon question: how can a SoE create a shared and sustainable culture of scholarship when disciplinary boundaries are inherently porous? This question will guide the empirical work reported in our forthcoming case study, which will capture the insights, experiences, and contributions of our colleagues as we continue to foster a scholarly culture together.

Biographies

Angela Jaap is a Senior Lecturer in Teacher Education at the University of Glasgow. She has enjoyed an extensive career in creative arts education and teacher education. Angela is joint Scholarship Champion in the School of Education, University of Glasgow and is the Deputy Director of the Centre for Teaching Excellence. Email: angela.jaap@glasgow.ac.uk.

Julie E. McAdam is a Senior Lecturer in Language and Literacies. She has developed teacher education programmes in Scotland and the Middle East that emphasise inclusive and culturally relevant pedagogy to promote learning in diverse contexts. Julie is joint Scholarship Champion in the School of Education, University of Glasgow. Email: Julie.e.mcadam@glasgow.ac.uk.

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