Chapter 3

Research Paradigms Underpinning SoTL Papers: A Comparative Analysis of Two Journals

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ABSTRACT

The authors investigated key paradigms driving contemporary Scholarship of Learning and Teaching (SoTL) research by analyzing a sample of 84 SoTL articles published in two, highly ranked education journals that publish SoTL papers. The authors identified the paradigm underpinning each article by looking at the stated or implied intent of the article’s authors, the drivers of their research (axiology), the nature of the knowledge/understanding developed from their research (epistemology), the literature and methods used, and the outcomes of their work. As a result of this exercise, using the classification of research paradigms employed in this book, the neo-positivist, inductive mode emerged as the dominant paradigm in both journals, accounting for 60 percent of the papers in the combined sample. These findings are discussed in terms of their application to future SoTL research.

INTRODUCTION

Teachers who are more likely to be engaging in scholarship of teaching . . . seek to understand teaching by consulting and using the literature on teaching and learning, by investigating their own teaching from the perspective of their intention in teaching while seeing it from the students’ position, and by formally communicating their ideas and practice to their peers. (Trigwell, Martin, Benjamin, & Prosser, 2000, p. 164)

Ernest Boyer first used the term “scholarship of teaching” in his book Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate (1990). He argued that there were four equally important scholarships in

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academic work including the Scholarship of Teaching. The word “learning” was later added and the phrase became—Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL).

The definition of SoTL is contested in the literature with clear differences emanating from the United Kingdom and the United States of America. Healey (2003) reports the following Australian definition as garnering wide spread support:

The scholarship of teaching involves three essential and integrated elements: engagement with the scholarly contributions of others on teaching and learning; reflection on one’s own teaching practice and the learning of students within the context of a particular discipline; and communication and dissemination of aspects of practice and theoretical ideas about teaching and learning in general and teaching and learning within the discipline. (Martin, Benjamin, Prosser, & Trigwell, 1999)

Based on this definition, for the purposes of our chapter we defined SoTL as comprising three elements:

1. Being informed about teaching and learning (by other people or the literature which includes grey literature i.e. not refereed articles, but blogs, wikis, newspapers, etc.);
2. Inquiring, seeking answers about teaching and learning (based on the literature) and collecting evidence; and
3. Making that inquiry public.

SoTL therefore is tertiary learning and teaching inquiry that is made public, is grounded in the literature and is undertaken for a variety of reasons, such as: to improve one’s teaching practice, to contribute to the literature on ongoing SoTL issues and questions, and to build on or interpret theoretical foundations of SoTL (Hutchings & Schulman, 1999; Trigwell et al., 2000).

Institutions internationally have worked to develop policies, processes and systems that incentivize academics to engage in SoTL (Grossman, Haigh, & Jiao, 2009; Hamilton, 2014). This has been achieved, for example, through promotion requirements, professional development opportunities, the funding of teaching grants and the provision of teaching excellence awards both at institutional and faculty levels. The authors of this chapter work within a centrally based SoTL team at Swinburne University of Technology. Because of our current roles we focused our work for this book on determining what paradigms, if any, underpin SoTL research publications.

We agree with the Ling and Ling proposition (Chapter 1) that focusing on the paradigm underpinning a research endeavor is more important in the first instance than focusing on the methods that might be used—partly not to perpetuate the dichotomy between qualitative and quantitative methods which persists to this day, and perhaps more significantly, to indicate that a paradigm governs the research, including the methods. As Table 1 (Chapter 2) demonstrates, each paradigm can include a variety of methods, both qualitative and quantitative and those in-between, and methods are not always indicative of the paradigm.

If an article reported on research that was designed to solve a particular problem and provide a practical solution, we classified the article as “pragmatic” in addition to the primary paradigm we had identified as guiding the research. The latter was determined by looking at the literature framing the research, the methods and data analysis techniques used, and the conclusions reached.
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