

The scholarship of teaching and learning: a university teacher learning community's work in progress

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Abstract

The understanding of Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) has raised debate amongst many academics employed in Higher Education (HE). One way of exploring the issues surrounding SoTL in academic institutions has been through the establishment of learning communities (LCs). Very popular in HE establishments within the United States of America, LCs allow a comfortable environment in which academic staff may explore ways to develop professional scholarship in relation to individual disciplines. This can be achieved through sharing of ideas and fostering a multidisciplinary approach to SoTL by establishing contact with other academics who may not otherwise have the chance to meet.

This paper examines the experience of exploring SoTL at the start of a newly formed LC that is composed of a relatively new breed of academic staff, entitled 'University Teachers' (UTs), at the University of Glasgow, Scotland. This LC, believed to be one of the first in existence in HE in the UK, will allow a diverse group of academics to explore

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SoTL in a community environment. This article explores the issues arising in the establishment of the newly formed LC, as well as raising the question of the potential impact of the LC on university policy for SoTL and UTs.

Keywords: Learning Community (LC), Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL)

Introduction

Recent statistics (Sanders, 2005) show there are increasing numbers of academics on teaching-only contracts. This trend is also evident at the University of Glasgow where, in November 2002, a new category of academic staff was introduced – the University Teacher (UT). UTs have the same pay and conditions as lecturers but they are expected, in addition to their teaching and administrative responsibilities, to engage in *scholarship* rather than research. Scholarship, for the purposes of the UT contract at the University of Glasgow, is defined as:

“maintaining and developing knowledge within an individual's specialism, and academic professional discipline, as necessary to fulfil an effective research-informed teaching role” (Human Resources, University of Glasgow, 2003)

In addition, those applying for promotion to senior UT also: *“will be assessed on the basis of merit in Teaching and Service ... together with evidence of Scholarship in support of teaching”* (Human Resources, University of Glasgow, 2006). Thus, the UT at the University of Glasgow must show evidence of scholarship in their own discipline *and* scholarship in support of teaching. For many UTs, the latter, the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) is relatively unfamiliar and the need to engage in, and provide evidence of, SoTL has caused some anxiety. Such views were expressed in discussions at the University's first SoTL Symposium in 2005. In an attempt to support UTs in developing and evidencing their SoTL, funding was obtained from the University's Learning and Teaching Development Fund to form a year-long Learning Community (LC) of UTs engaged in SoTL.

This paper will explore the aims and purposes of the Glasgow LC, its formation, the outcomes of its early meetings and consider its impact on its members, their students and on University of Glasgow policy on SoTL and the role of UTs.

The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

It is generally accepted that the concept of the scholarship of teaching was first introduced in a report from the Carnegie Foundation (Boyer, 1990). Boyer's aim was to improve the status of teaching to that given to research in universities. The apparently lower priority afforded to teaching is a common concern sensed by many (Coate, Barnett and Williams, 2001; Harley, 2002; Seabrook, 2003). Since Boyer's deliberations in 1990, there has been much debate around the issue of SoTL and its implications (Healey, 2000; Nicholls, 2000; Kreber, 2002b)

Learning Communities

The University of Glasgow LC is based on the 'Miami' model proposed by Cox (2004a). Cox proposed that a LC consisting of a group of no more than fifteen members should come together for a period of twelve months to collaborate on a particular subject area.

It is believed that the University of Glasgow LC is the first of its kind in the UK, however, LCs have existed for some time within Higher Education, particularly in North America (Cox, 2004b). Two types of LC exist – cohort-based and topic-based. Cohort-based LCs (for example LCs for new staff, mid-career staff, or graduate teaching assistants) are intended to support teaching and the community's members. Topic-based LCs are more concerned with specific teaching-related activities which require further investigation and discussion, for instance:

- Problem Based Learning
- Online Teaching and Learning
- Enhancing Diversity
- The First Year Experience
- Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

In the US, gaining membership of a LC is competitive and seen as an honour. Members are enabled or rewarded by being provided with release from their other

duties or by gaining financial support (Cox, 2004b). Membership of a LC is used to establish evidence of teaching excellence and supports applications for tenure.

LCs are intended to:

“establish networks for those pursuing pedagogical issues, meet early-career faculty expectations for community, foster multidisciplinary curricula and begin to bring community to higher education.” (Cox, 2004a)

There is a website dedicated to the development of LCs (<http://www.units.muohio.edu/flc/>), which proposes ten qualities that are essential to the LC.

Table 1 Necessary Qualities for Building Community (from Cox, 2004c)

Safety and trust	Relevance
Openness	Challenge
Respect	Enjoyment
Responsiveness	Esprit de Corps
Collaboration	Empowerment

Aims of the Glasgow Learning Community

The LC, formed in January 2006 at the University of Glasgow, was initiated through a proposal by Jane MacKenzie (MacKenzie, 2005) that resulted in funding by the University of Glasgow's Learning and Teaching Development Fund. The proposal was to initiate a one year project that would set up and evaluate a LC of UTs engaged in SoTL. The result is that the Glasgow LC is both a cohort-based LC (i.e. specifically for UTs) and a topic-based LC (i.e. to explore issues surrounding SoTL). The purposes of the LC are threefold: to foster an environment which is supportive to the development of SoTL for each member of the community; to discuss and develop definitions of SoTL broad enough to encompass the wide range of activities undertaken by UTs at Glasgow; and, it is hoped, to influence University policy regarding the role and support of the UT. It is envisaged that members of the LC will use the diverse expertise of the group to help in the development, innovation and evaluation of their own teaching practice and that this will enhance student learning.

Setting up the Glasgow Learning Community

Once funding had been obtained, all UTs employed at the University were contacted by email and invited to make application to join the new UT-LC. For the selection process, applicants were asked to submit a brief statement about their motivation to take part in the LC and give their availability to attend an initial retreat and monthly meetings. The resulting LC group consists of 13 UTs, representing six of the nine faculties and also the central administrative unit of the University (Table 2).

Table 2 Distribution by Faculty of University Teachers at the University of Glasgow and composition of the LC

Faculty	Number of UTs in each faculty	Number of UT-LC applications	Number of UTs selected for the LC
Arts	15	0	0
Biomedical and Life Sciences	12	5	4
Central Administration	1	1	1
Education	51	6	1
Engineering	3	0	0
Information and Mathematical Sciences	7	3	2
Law, Business and Social Sciences	15	1	1
Medicine	26	5	3
Physical Sciences	4	1	1
Veterinary Medicine	3	0	0
TOTALS	137	22	13

Within the newly formed LC there is a wide range of experience of HE: several members of the group have many years' experience in engaging with SoTL, while others are at the start of their careers.

The Retreat

According to the Miami model, central to the success of the LC is "the retreat" which promotes the formation of group identity (Cox, 2004a). The Glasgow LC began with a two-day retreat in a large self-catering house in rural Scotland. The retreat was an invaluable start to the LC for reasons other than to begin the work of the project. Firstly, it allowed the group to form and, secondly, to develop a cohesive identity: providing an ideal opportunity to develop the necessary group qualities for building community, detailed in table 1 (Cox, 2004c). Formal and informal discussions enabled interesting questions to be raised that will continue to be pursued at later meetings. It was considered that the main goals of the retreat were to begin to discuss definitions of SoTL and to start the process of sharing the group's educational practice. The diverse nature of the group meant that each member brought their own unique perspective to the retreat and by the end of the weekend it was generally agreed that the LC represented a supportive atmosphere for all the members of the group.

The Development of Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

During the retreat three groups were formed to consider what is meant by the key terms: 'Excellent Teacher', 'Expert Teacher', and 'the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning' (Kreber, 2002a). The aim was to try and understand the relationships between each category and to consider possibilities for the progression from one to another.

According to Kreber (2002a, p9) an excellent teacher "*is identified on the basis of a judgement made about performance*" and so an excellent teacher is a reflective practitioner but not one who engages with the pedagogic literature. In order to progress to being an expert teacher it is necessary, not only to reflect on one's teaching and seek to improve upon it but also, to engage systematically with relevant literature and with colleagues. Bereiter and Scardamalia (1993) suggest that the continuous engagement in learning about teaching leads to the development of expertise in teaching. Participation in SoTL requires that the results of this scholarship are made public.

The community also discussed the development of SoTL and the role the LC might play in this. It was proposed that, professionally, the appropriate status of the UT is to be an

expert teacher who also engages in SoTL. However, it was agreed that one who is solely occupied with SoTL has become an educational researcher, rather than a practitioner, and that this is not an appropriate goal for the UT.

Evidencing Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

One of the issues tackled by the group was that of how to demonstrate achievement in SoTL. The literature is quite clear that SoTL must be made public (Kreber, 2002a). The group considered ways in which participation in SoTL could be demonstrated. Evidence could be through case studies, participative workshops, discussions with colleagues and seminars (within the LC, home institution or external to the institution). However, when asked to rank this evidence in order of impact, peer reviewed articles were rated highest. A second attempt at this process resulted in the development of an alternative ranking scheme, which deliberately separated evidence of traditional educational research from evidence of SoTL. This time peer reviewed teaching portfolios and peer observations of teaching were ranked at the top.

In addition to tackling the challenging topic of defining SoTL, members of the LC also discussed their own teaching practice. Several of them presented analyses of their current teaching projects, aligning their practice with Trigwell and Shale's (2004) model of SoTL which, unlike many other frameworks, identifies the evaluation of student learning as both an essential element and a key outcome of SoTL. The group members fitted their descriptions to the model and this was found to be appropriate for determining and relating practice to SoTL. From these discussions, the group identified topics that could be addressed at later LC project meetings. Examples of these are: methods of evaluating student learning, critical reflection and enquiry-based learning. A decision was made that the next LC meeting would extend this to involve all members in sharing an element of their teaching and learning practice with the community, providing an opportunity to receive feedback and support.

Sustaining the Learning Community

One of the challenges of the LC (and, indeed for SoLT) is that of sustainability. It is clearly less difficult to be enthusiastic in the early stages of a project, but to sustain the required momentum for a full year will be challenging in the face of other ongoing work

commitments. All the UTs involved in the project have full-time work loads and, unlike the USA LCs, there are, as yet, no established rewards or payback, either in enhanced status or salary or through release from duties for taking part in the LC activities. The LC will continue to meet on a monthly basis for the duration of the project, until December 2006. The LC activities are supported and supplemented by the group's establishment of a virtual learning environment (VLE) hosted on MOODLE (Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment), the system supported by the University of Glasgow. The use of the VLE is particularly appropriate as it facilitates communication amongst the participants of the LC who are dispersed by faculty across the campus. The initiator of the LC stated from the outset that it was her intention to become a member of the community rather than its leader (MacKenzie, 2005). To this end it is anticipated that roles and tasks will be led by different members of the LC, as has been the case with the establishment and management of the VLE.

Evaluating the Impact of the Learning Community

It is an essential objective that the LC will disseminate its outputs and evaluate the impact of its activities and outcomes on its members. The group anticipates that this would play a part in informing the future policy of the University of Glasgow concerning the role of and required support for UTs. One strand of this evaluation will be the members' reflections on their own teaching practice and on SoTL. Prior to the retreat that took place at the start of the project, each member of the LC was asked to write their own definition of SoTL; following the retreat, the members were again asked to write their definition. These pieces of reflective writing will be used as the starting point to chart the progress of individuals within the group, and act as a benchmark for the intellectual starting point of the LC. It is also intended that these reflective journals will continue to be updated during the lifetime of the LC.

Further elements of evaluation will be negotiated, designed and implemented in the remainder of the existence of the LC.

Outputs and Future Activities

In the longer term, it is envisaged that this LC, as well as providing support for the LC members, could provide support for other UTs through dissemination of its findings.

This might arise initially for UTs at departmental and faculty levels and then be extended more widely to all academics across the University. For example, it is likely that this would occur through the University's Newsletter and the Learning and Teaching Centre's Seminar Series. This will readily extend outside the institution, perhaps through engagement with the Higher Education Academy's subject centres and at national and international conferences.

In addition to the issues discussed at the retreat, the LC has already identified several longer-term concerns for exploration. These may have an impact on the requirements for probation and promotion of UTs at the University of Glasgow. The following questions, also likely to be of wider interest to others involved in HE teaching and learning, will be addressed by the project:

- What is SoTL in the context of UTs at the University of Glasgow?
- What are appropriate SoTL requirements during probation and for promotion?
- Is there a clear distinction between SoTL and educational research and if so, what is it?

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