'In-house' journals and the scholarship of teaching and learning – thoughts from a discipline that is not a discipline

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Abstract

This paper offers a reflection on the practical and theoretical issues involved in the development of an in-house journal that publishes work in the area of the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL). While proceeding from the experience of running one such journal in the context of a research-intensive institution, the paper aims to offer a broader view on the impacts, both positive and otherwise, which such institutionally focused publications might make on the field of SoTL as a whole.

Keywords

publishing, scholarship of teaching and learning; SoTL; pedagogy; disciplinarity

Introduction

I am very grateful to have the opportunity to write this extended viewpoint piece for *Innovations in Practice*. In this case, the view I offer is a little on the 'meta' side prompted, as it is, by the business of running a publication relating to the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL). By way of a brief introduction: I am part of the editorial team of an in-house journal at the University of York called (perhaps somewhat unimaginatively) the *York Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Journal*. This annual journal has been running for a couple of years now; having only just published 'Issue Two', I was rather flattered to see it mentioned amongst more well-known institutional publications in Virendra Mistry's (2017) article in *Innovations in Practice*, 'Publishing or perishing? The scale and state of open access institutional higher education journals in the UK'. The following thoughts, then, are in part a response to that eye-opening piece, and partly also an attempt to open up a further conversation about the position of these sorts of publications in the sector, and the potential effects they may have on the future of SoTL as an intellectual discipline.

'Publishing or perishing?' ably provides evidence of the sector environment for institutionally focused teaching and learning journals, about which I previously only had anecdotal evidence along with suspicions formed from previous experience. As the piece demonstrates, there are a number of common attributes that characterise in-house journals related to teaching and learning, at least in the UK. Many of those things are entirely to the good: a genuine desire to support academic colleagues, to champion good practice and interesting

ideas, and to provide a scholarly forum for the discussion of those ideas. It is, however, fair to say that there are also a few troubling questions which emerge from the data produced in Mistry's piece. Firstly, and quite surprisingly, there is a relative paucity of established institutional journals in the sector. This is not, I suspect, for want of trying: every university at which I have been employed has maintained some kind of publication pertaining to teaching and learning, although the format, focus, direction and, if we're honest, the quality does naturally vary. Secondly, there is a lack of stability in even those journals which have had success. Publications appear and disappear with alarming frequency and without much fanfare. Taking those two points together, there is perhaps a suggestion that we might be better prepared for the intellectual and practical work involved in the business of setting up and running a journal, and, most challengingly, maintaining a publication over the longer term. I do not pretend here to offer many insightful answers – as someone starting out in running a journal I tend to have more questions. But Mistry's piece made me thoughtful about the journey we have been on at York, and what sort of impacts, both good and, potentially, less so, we might be having. I hope colleagues might find it useful to set out some of this journey and, frankly, reflecting on it in this way helps me too in thinking about where we might go next.

Publishing SoTL within the University

At York, I am involved in the production of two learning and teaching related publications, pitched at different levels. One, a termly learning and teaching magazine, is one of those publications

which, as Mistry puts it, "have a conversational air" (2017: 111): it offers short case studies of around fourteen hundred words, news, interviews, opinion pieces, and the odd cartoon. The magazine is open access but with a predominantly internal audience. In theory, it performs a vital linking function in incorporating reports of, and reflections on, the results of projects supported by small grants to staff. But in practice it is often very difficult to get staff to contribute materials, and issues can sometimes end up being filled by the same familiar, if well-liked, faces. Still, having that publication already in existence made an easier case for the strong research focus of the *York SoTL Journal*, with annual editions of nine or ten research articles, each of around five to six thousand words. The design for the journal is attractive (all credit to my University's design team rather than to myself), but the aim is to be avowedly academic in what is, after all, a research-intensive environment. The journal was designed to provide a mechanism for the dissemination of learning and teaching research undertaken by University of York staff to the York teaching community; initially, we proposed to encourage participants from our Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice, other CPD schemes and parallel networks to write up their work for publication. This, we felt, would both 'close the loop' on the projects undertaken by staff within those programmes and support our colleagues' continued development, while providing further evidence of our impact (a notoriously difficult but increasingly necessary game these days). As it turned out, we have had a significant and growing amount of interest from academic staff not involved in those programmes, some of whom have since contributed pieces to the journal; we also offer coaching towards external publication in cases where colleagues prefer. Other institutions no doubt follow a similar method, and there is certainly some neatness to it.

There were also a number of challenges to be overcome. It is not my intention to dwell on the practical challenges here, but we might pause over, firstly, the place of any teaching related activity in a research-intensive environment; secondly, getting the pitch right for that environment; and, thirdly and connectedly, finding and keeping one's audience. These things are not insurmountable, but they require some thought. At York, we follow a "communities of practice" model, organising a number of different complementary activities under an umbrella we call 'the SoTL Network'. This includes an online community, a seminar series, and occasional external speakers. Ideally, these activities should all complement each other while providing a springboard for further work, and there is some evidence of the virtues of this approach: Hubball et al. (2010), for example, note mentoring and facilitated communities of practice as being particularly conducive to the development of and support for SoTL in institutional settings. The journal offers one output route for this work, but there is also a powerful feedback loop involved: whether they are quite aware of it or not, the authors themselves become "SoTL champions" (Marcketti et al., 2015) within the University, with some influence over other staff members. In a sense, we are leveraging each other: an institutional level publication is for authors quite a useful thing in which to be featured (or at least presumably more useful than their work sitting on a desk somewhere), and the seniority of the various

staff involved lifts the whole. All in all, there are plenty of reasons to be happy with what we have achieved in a relatively short space of time, and it is worth beating the drum for this kind of activity; indeed, this is a common theme in editorials, including my own, for these sorts of publications. Still, I have some qualms.

In the main, those qualms relate to the discipline of SoTL itself, if one can call it a discipline. As a field, SoTL is normally traced back to Ernest Boyer's 1990 *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate*. Boyer's work was composed in the context of shifts in the US higher education system, which had produced an increasing focus on research as the primary mover in recognition and reward systems for academic staff – at just the same time as the sector increased in student numbers and concertedly widened participation. Little wonder, perhaps, that Boyer's work became of interest in the UK towards the end of the nineties, when we began to experience a similar, though not identical, paradigm. Boyer recommended reconceptualising academic work (and, consequently, academic workloads) in terms of four "scholarships", those of discovery, integration, application, and teaching. The domains of scholarship overlap and interrelate, and unpicking one particular aspect risks taking away from the whole. But the lasting point, as far as the scholarship of teaching goes, is to re-establish the act of teaching as both an integral practice of academia and its character as hard, intellectual work: effective pedagogy takes planning; and planning always needs reconsideration in the light of practice, research and inspiration. Good teaching, Boyer argued, "means that faculty, as scholars, are also learners" (Boyer, 1990: 25). Boyer's model bears directly on the

development and evolution of the scholarship of teaching and learning as an area of enquiry, particularly in North America. But while publication in the arena of SoTL might have initially gathered steam in the context of academic recognition and promotion, it has also evolved to become rather more than that.

Developing over the last three decades, SoTL has proven to be relatively resilient as a field of enquiry, increasingly popular, and ever more difficult to pin down in terms of what it actually is. The term SoTL, as Joëlle Fanghanel points out, "appears endowed with multiple meanings" (Fanghanel, 2013: 59). Fanghanel stresses its use as a developmental methodology, "a democratic and dialogic form of professional development" (2013: 60). Others have emphasised alternative, equally important aspects. Some have remained attached to Boyer's thrust of viewing scholarship in terms of recognition and reward (Diamond, 1993; Huber, 2004; O'Meara, 2006; Chalmers, 2011). Some stress its political aspects; Cranton (2010), for example, characterises SoTL as transformative, emancipatory, and inherently critical of established norms. Some stress its inherent challenge: Manarin and Abrahamson (2016) argue for SoTL as a form of troublesome knowledge. Some have taken the angle of its use in establishing the quality of teaching (Gordon 2010; Mårtensson, Roxå and Olsson, 2011), others its capacity to aid in the business of teaching leadership (Mighty, 2013). Some argue that the primary and potentially exclusive focus of SoTL should be its impact on student learning (Haigh, Gossman and Jiao, 2011). Some stress its interdisciplinary character (Shearer, 2007; Friedow et al., 2012), others its rootedness in disciplinary work (Healey, 2000; Kreber,

2009; McKinney, 2013; Cleaver et al., 2014). No wonder then, as Malcolm Tight has recently put it, that "it would be possible to multiply quotations on the meaning of the scholarship of teaching and learning almost indefinitely" (Tight, 2017: 4). Different threads of SoTL will appeal at different times to different people, and that is part of its attraction. At its best and most enlivening, SoTL brings an arsenal of methodologies, theoretical positions and ideological frameworks to the complex business of being (and teaching, and learning) in higher education.

That sense of diversity is encouraged by current editorial policy and practice in regards to publications, and, for better or worse, it is a position to which our journal contributes, even if in a small way. In a recent survey of research approaches utilised in the pursuit of SoTL, Divan et al. (2017) point to an evident "methodological pluralism" in published work (Divan et al., 2017: 27). This is a trend that is both evidenced in and, in part, created by the publications themselves: "SoTL journals are explicitly inviting SoTL scholars to submit work that draws on diverse and under-utilised methodological approaches" (Divan et al., 2017: 25). That is, I would suggest, particularly the case with institutionally-focused journals, which tend to invite papers from across the many different subject areas of a given university. The *York SoTL Journal* attempts to include two or three inputs from each of our academic faculties in every issue, with as much of a disciplinary spread as possible. There are good, and not simply strategic, reasons to do this: thoughts on teaching and learning ought to attempt to traverse disciplinary boundaries. Haigh warns, for example, that "individual disciplinary contexts should not

become silos for SoTL and that trading of disciplinary, professional and cultural perspectives and wares should occur" (Haigh, 2012: 22). The argument is repeated by Miller-Young and Yeo, who argue that SoTL research has its real worth and lasting impact when it "reaches across disciplines, methods, and perspectives rather than being siloed in one particular discipline or methodology" (Miller-Young and Yeo, 2015: 40). In some ways, this leaves any conclusions to be drawn from the trading of perspectives up to the individual reader, but I also see my editorials as a place to tease some potential connections; in that sense, the editorial is a little more like one that might introduce an edited volume or a special issue of a journal. How successful it is in this respect is an open question.

There are a number of other compelling reasons to publish work in SoTL, all of which tend to lead to diversity in output. Much of this will be well known, but nonetheless worth mentioning given that these were explicit considerations in the creation of our journal and, I suspect, hold true for other institutional environments. Firstly, and perhaps most obviously, publication concretises the ephemeral. Partly as a result of their very specificity, "the life and impact of SoTL projects are often analogous to those of a wild flower, which suddenly bursts into full and striking bloom, delights those in the immediate neighbourhood for a brief period of time, then fades rapidly and disappears" (Haigh, 2012: 20). Writing up and disseminating such projects increases the likelihood of their longevity and impact. Secondly, there is the argument, again long rehearsed in relation to SoTL, of publishing with an eye on recognition and promotion. Here, publication in relation to teaching and

learning plays a similar role to that of subject-based research: "As universities increasingly recognize the value of diversity in the roles of academic staff, so the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) has become one of the ways in which teaching staff can be rewarded through promotion" (Vardi and Quin, 2011: 39). There is a false equivalence in comparing the two. At a research-intensive institution (and, I think, anywhere in the UK sector) a good subject-based publication will generally be more valued than a publication in the area of SoTL, and certainly those within the pages of an in-house publication (departments of education with an explicit and sustained research interest in higher education are an exception). But it is also true to say that publication can play a part in substantiating a profile as a departmental expert in teaching and learning, and hence assist in career progression. Thirdly, there are the developmental arguments. Those of us having daily dealings with the UK Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF), for example, will be familiar with its references to scholarship and publication. Practitioners aligning themselves to the UKPSF, via institutional or national schemes, are expected to engage "in continuing professional development in subjects/disciplines and their pedagogy, incorporating research, scholarship and the evaluation of professional practices." Further, as a professional value, to use "evidence-informed approaches and the outcomes from research, scholarship and continuing professional development" (Higher Education Academy, Guild HE and Universities UK, 2011). In offering a home for work that will develop, disseminate and substantiate ideas from multiple disciplines, we naturally publish a range of material.

SoTL and disciplinary diversity

Ideally, a spread of perspectives offers readers a heady blend of the immediately recognizable and the intellectually difficult. Engaging with disciplines beyond our own broadens our horizons and, simply put, gets one thinking. That moment when we realise, reading a work, that the problems and questions of another subject area are also our own – or perhaps a mirror image of our own – is an invigorating experience. We might even realise that another subject's solutions may well be put usefully to work, perhaps with some tinkering, in our own teaching practice. All this depends, though, on people actually reading one another's work, on their being able to understand it, and on their being able to engage with it in some depth. That is by no means a given. Faced with a statistical or heavily scientific paper, my own internal impulse is to run. I am trained to understand, engage with and appreciate such work as part of my role as an educational developer, but I do wonder what the impetus would be for an academic colleague in English or History to read a SoTL paper from Biology, for example, or vice versa. There is a real tension here, because one obvious way around the problem is to encourage writing which appeals to the general but non-specialist reader and yet, arguably, the less specialist a piece of writing, the less useful and more replaceable it becomes. This is a particular problem for work on teaching and learning. Generally speaking, the purpose of such work "is to generate knowledge which, on the one hand, is useful to teaching and learning in the disciplinary context, and, on the other, arises and is relevant because of the nature of the discipline" (Booth and Woollacott, 2018: 545). Even superficially small things can work against the revelation of that nature to an outsider, even as they

might paradoxically strive to do precisely that. For example, in requiring authors to align themselves to certain common referencing standards, am I aiding the presumed reader of the journal, or am I removing, or otherwise papering over, something that distinctively makes a discipline a discipline?

There are also, I think, longer term intellectual risks in the current SoTL approach. In our journal at York, we might have one article from a humanities subject reflecting meaningfully, but perhaps not scientifically, on a political or social issue. And in the same volume we might have a barnstorming piece from Educational Psychology, which has a real history of its own in relation to SoTL, with huge amounts of data and five pages of references. The problem here is not so much in the papers themselves or the differences between those papers (issues which are both entirely defensible in terms of disciplinary approach), but in what such diversity means for SoTL as a field. An undefined discipline offers intellectual excitement and room for growth, but it also looks institutionally fragile and methodologically problematic – whether that comes in terms of being perceived as weak or, concomitantly, overburdened. For Booth and Woollacott, echoing previous summations of SoTL, the discipline "is a melange that brings together the various talents of its practitioners into a wide frame of knowledge and scholarship". "Attempts to define SoTL," they add, "flounder when faced with its diversity" (Booth and Woollacott, 2018: 538). There are attractions to being part of a melange, and real challenges. Indeed, synonyms for the word 'melange' suggested by my word processor include mixture (good), potpourri (lovely), but also 'jumble' and 'hodgepodge'

(substantially less lovely). While, in 2000, Trigwell, Martin, Benjamin and Prosser argued persuasively for a more inclusive approach to definitions of SoTL, by the next decade the inclusivity had clearly become more of a problem. Trigwell himself went on to note that, "the corollary of the acceptance of such diversity is a need for clarity in communicating about SoTL, because what is meant by SoTL is related to its intended purpose, and how the value of that purpose is perceived" (Trigwell, 2013: 95). In the same year, Felten wrote of an "amateur culture" producing a "methodological and theoretical mutt" (Felten, 2013: 121). Diversity "has produced a kind of inconsistency, even incoherence that makes it difficult to evaluate the quality of SoTL inquiries" (Felten, 2013: 121). Although I do not (self-evidently) consider our journal incoherent, it would be rather harder to argue for consistency of approach in such journals more generally. Indeed, it has recently been argued that the real legacy of SoTL is to have confused, and negatively impacted upon, the perception of pedagogical research as a whole: "when pedagogic research and SoTL are conflated, it implicitly devalues the former […] high quality pedagogic research should be viewed as something quite distinct from SoTL" (Cotton et al., 2017: 10). While conceptualising or redefining SoTL as 'pure' educational research might be one potentially rewarding route to substantiating its place within an institution, it seems likely that established educational researchers may not feel quite so comfortable with such an approach.

There is, then, much at stake in being clear about what we mean by SoTL and, connectedly, much at stake in being able to

define its quality. There have been concerns voiced in terms of the dangers of privileging certain methodologies over others in the pursuit of teaching and learning research (Grauerholz and Main, 2013) and yet, conversely, McKinney speculates that endlessly enlarging the umbrella of what composes SoTL might risk disintegration: "at what point – if any – does such work become something other than SoTL?" (McKinney, 2013: 3). It is an irony distinctive to SoTL that the two more-or-less contradictory positions above appear in the same volume. So, where does SoTL begin and end? There are many guides and introductions to SoTL that offer wise advice on thinking, working, researching and publishing in the area, but there are fewer standards for success and for measuring that success. While some have attempted to establish principles or taxonomies of good practice (Glassick et al., 1997; Trigwell et al., 2000; Felten, 2013), or even "gold standards" by which to measure research quality in SoTL (Dewar and Bennett, 2015), these efforts are relatively few and far between, and in practice a coherent set of standards applicable to all SoTL research – regardless of discipline – is difficult to find (Wilson-Doenges et al., 2015). Probably, that is because it is difficult to imagine. In fact, SoTL may expose a problem in the way disciplines are conceived and interrelate. In Wilson-Doenges and Gurung (2013), for example, we have the claim that the "highest form" of SoTL research "should be theory based, have established power, use reliable and valid measures, use robust methodologies, and utilise advanced and multivariate techniques to analyse properly screened data" (2013: 68). Much of this is inarguable as it stands, even as it also returns us to questions of disciplinary difference. Which particular measures are valid? Which

particular methodologies are robust for which sort of enquiry? Meanwhile, the question of power, which here means the ability to detect (statistical) significance, invalidates most institutionally-based projects simply on the basis of sample size and composition.

On the one hand, we have an ethical and moral duty to maintain standards, even as we also have on the other hand an ethical and moral duty to our colleagues to be as encompassing as possible in the methodologies and approaches underpinning those standards. For some, that circle can be squared by clear editorial processes including stringent peer review. By that measure, this is where institutionally-based publications can run into problems, particularly when compared with the more robust procedures and high production standards of leading research journals in the field of higher education. A lack of transparency in editorial policies and processes amongst in-house publications does not help matters: as Mistry comments, it is often "difficult to determine how the editorial teams have been created and what experience, or otherwise, individuals bring to the mix" (Mistry, 2017: 113-14). At York, we draw on a range of experience across an editorial and advisory board that encompasses senior academics from each of the University's faculties and covering most of its departments. All research involving data collection will have been through a process of ethical approval, although it is important to note that this is the regular business of the University rather than anything that I oversee. Our articles presently go through a rigorous process of review which makes good use of the experience within the institution, but it is some way from being the standard double

blind peer review one would expect from subject-based journals. That is to say, we do not presently engage peers external to the University in this work. That suits us as we become more established, and I imagine most in-house and institutionally focused journals will, as they start out, follow similar processes (I am willing to be corrected on this). Nor, it has to be said, does sending out articles for review necessarily guarantee anything. When passed to one reviewer, an article might be lauded; when passed to another, the methodological apparatus may be criticised. That two reviewers should disagree with one another is not exactly news in the practice of publication, but the ways in which they can disagree with one another in SoTL are striking. There is the answer to this problem given by Boshier (2007), which is that peer review is simply not effective as a mechanism for measuring such scholarship, but that argument only goes so far in a sector in which peer review is the lifeblood, or at least the best available form, of quality assurance.

(Tentative) Conclusions

As I said, then, I have some qualms – but perhaps for the moment they remain just qualms. There are, clearly, excellent reasons both to publish and to support publication within in-house journals. Other than the things I touched on earlier in this paper, there is, in addition, a benefit to creating a framework for what we want SoTL to be and to achieve within the institution. Higher education is a diverse sector, and institutional "priorities, aims, and strategic intentions in developing SoTL capacity" will consequently differ (Myatt et al., 2017: 5). That adds another layer of complexity and potential jumble to the mix, but it also presents an opportunity to work towards greater clarity and strength. Despite the

extent and intensity of work in the area, SoTL can remain something of a tough sell. As Boshier pointed out, "most university faculty members or academic staff do not know what SoTL means" (2009: 1). If they do know it, they may not have liked what they saw: "Often marginalized from 'true' scholarship in the eyes of their institutional or disciplinary peers, SoTL work may not evoke the same respect or carry the same weight as traditional scholarship" (Schroeder, 2007: 1). A journal offers one small way to strengthen the perception of SoTL within a university, to provide something of a community for those interested in such work, and to operate against the tendency noted by Schroeder for such activity to "lurk about at the fringes" (Schroeder, 2007: 1). Hopefully, with some careful thought about what work we promote, institutional journals can also contribute to the continued development and establishment of the field more broadly. The challenge remains in balancing the paradox of developing a discipline that is not, and perhaps cannot, be a discipline. As previously noted, one of the key strengths of SoTL is a capacity, if nurtured, to reach across subject areas. For all the talk of interdisciplinarity over the past decades, genuine engagement between subject disciplines at anything more than a surface level remains fairly rare. And yet, as Jeffrey R. Di Leo has commented, "studies of the university without the ability to step outside of one's academic position […] are doomed to be merely reproductions or validations of existing conditions" (Di Leo, 2016: 167). Even as methodological and perspectival difference might threaten dispersal, we need that difference in order to improve and evolve. And here is where, in closing these musings, I want to give a nod to the work of *Innovations in Practice*. This journal is one of

those great treasures: an institutional perspective that considers and reaches beyond its walls in both vision and impact, and its success gives the lie to some of the issues discussed here. Long may it continue.

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