

Learning about Learning – Together

Janice Miller-Young

University of Alberta, Canada

Peter Felten

Elon University

Patti H. Clayton

PHC Ventures, IUPUI, UNCG, & Kansas State University

Whether we are nudging the world toward cleaner water, widespread food security, enhanced intercultural understanding, or any other envisioned future, the work of “building a better world” (Hartman, Kiely, Friedrichs, & Boettcher, in press) that is at the heart of democratic civic engagement (DCE) is a matter of *questioning* and *learning* and *acting*. We believe the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) – i.e., inquiry into learning – has the potential to further deepen our ability to question, learn, and act together – especially when it is understood and enacted through the values and practices of DCE. By that, we mean when it (a) positions all involved as co-teachers, co-learners, and co-generators of knowledge and practice, and (b) takes as a goal the development of civic capacities in those doing the inquiry. This challenges traditional roles and relationships in teaching and learning and the way we study them that too often frame students, community members, and staff merely as objects of study by expert faculty. We believe that SoTL can and should be enacted democratically, with everyone involved co-creating the questions and the processes that help us learn about learning; and we invite everyone involved in service-learning, civic engagement, and SoTL to move in this direction.

What might such SoTL look like? Patti describes a glimpse:

I experienced something like it years ago in North Carolina. The Center for Excellence in Curricular Engagement, which I led, had for some time supported two long-standing community-faculty pairs of partners. All four of them had long contributed ideas and practices to the Center’s efforts to cultivate a culture of co-educating, co-learning, and co-inquiring. Over the course of many conversations, we each inquired into our own learning, critically examining our learning outcomes and processes from our long work together. We focused particularly on understanding ways we could enhance our own future practice. Both what we

learned and how we inquired into that learning then became the foundation for a conference session we co-facilitated titled: “Who’s Doing the Learning? Faculty and Community Partners as Learners in Service-Learning.” We engaged participants in considering four questions as related to partnerships: (a) What are you learning through service-learning? (b) How are you learning through service-learning? (c) Why is it important that you learn through service-learning? and (d) How might you measure your learning? For each question we examined similarities to and differences among student, faculty, and community partner learning that emerged from our own inquiries.

This brief example illustrates what we have come to call DCE-SoTL: SoTL that is interested in everyone’s learning and that sees everyone as able to study learning and improve action accordingly – rather than defaulting to the approach of faculty (only) investigating student (only) learning. In this thought piece we call for putting such co-creation at the heart of SoTL and explore what happens when we do so. We are inspired by the Service-Learning and Community Engagement (SLCE) Future Directions Project (FDP) thought piece by Bandy and colleagues (2016) who are asking similar questions: “reimagining assessment” as a set of ideas and practices “explicitly grounded in, informed by, and in dialogue with the (contested) values of SLCE understood and enacted as democratic civic engagement” (p. 97).

We contend that the co-inquiry, co-learning, and co-action of DCE invite – indeed, require – a distinct and new conception and practice of SoTL. We must broaden:

- the learning being investigated beyond that of students;
- the set of scholars doing the investigating beyond faculty; and
- the purposes of the inquiry beyond understanding academic learning.

Why might this matter? Such DCE-SoTL views inquiry, learning, and action as co-created processes that draw on and enhance the knowledge and resources of all partners. It holds the potential to deepen both our understanding of and our capacities for engaging meaningfully and effectively in the collaborative inquiry, learning, and action on which “building a better world” depends. And it therefore represents an important shift for the SLCE movement to embrace.

In what follows, we frame DCE-SoTL within the context of current SoTL literature and practice. We then examine two examples to illustrate the potential, and the difficulty, of enacting DCE-SoTL. We conclude by suggesting that DCE-SoTL has much to contribute to advancing the public purposes of higher education as it is well-suited not only to inquiring into but also cultivating civic capacities.

From SoTL to DCE-SoTL

How is SoTL generally understood? We find Hutchings and Shulman’s (1999) definition helpful: SoTL

requires a kind of ‘going meta,’ in which faculty frame and systematically investigate questions related to student learning—the conditions under which it occurs, what it looks like, how to deepen it, and so forth—and do so with an eye not only to improving their own classroom but to advancing practice beyond it. (p. 10)

Originally seen as the work of individual faculty inquiring into student learning in their own courses, SoTL now also occurs at multiple levels, including classrooms, departments, disciplines, institutions, and national and international communities. Sometimes SoTL has a purely local focus of improving teaching, and sometimes it aims for broader influence through generating or testing theory, models, and best practices. It is enacted in a variety of contexts and with a wide range of disciplinary methods and theoretical perspectives. As it has evolved, SoTL has retained its focus on student learning – usually student disciplinary learning. Recently, SoTL scholars have become increasingly interested in engaging students as partners in inquiry (Werder, Pope-Ruark, & Verwood, 2016).

In an attempt to honor the diversity of SoTL activities while providing some useful guidance to structure and evaluate the work of SoTL scholars, Felten (2013) proposed five principles of good practice:

1. Inquiry focused on student learning
2. Grounded in context
3. Methodologically sound
4. Conducted in partnership with students
5. Appropriately public

These five principles are intended to serve as guidelines rather than as a prescriptive set of directions or a precise conceptualization of SoTL. They are specific enough to emphasize the focus on student learning, the inclusion of student perspectives, and the attention that needs to be paid to related literature as well as the local context from which evidence of learning and information about teaching and learning processes are drawn. They are broad enough to include a range of approaches to inquiry and forms of dissemination.

Crafting a distinctly DCE-informed approach to SoTL requires three significant modifications of these principles. First, DCE-SoTL embraces a wider conception of partners involved in the inquiry, including not only faculty and students but everyone on and off campus who is engaged in teaching and learning; and it defines such “partnership” as co-creation, with its implications of shared power and responsibility (Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2014). Second, DCE-SoTL aims to understand and cultivate the learning of all partners, not only that of students. Third, DCE-SoTL has a particular interest in civic learning. Disciplinary learning is not neglected but is also not privileged over other domains, including especially learning in the civic domain – meaning the knowledge, skills, attitudes, perspectives, and identities required for nurturing healthy communities and vibrant democracies. These three modifications re-frame SoTL by reimagining who is doing the inquiry and whose learning is being inquired into, how inquiry is being done, whom the relevant audiences for disseminating such inquiry might be, and why the inquiry is being undertaken.

Thus, modifying Felten (2013), we suggest that good practice in DCE-SoTL involves these five principles:

1. Inquiry focused on the learning of any or all partners, including their civic learning
2. Grounded in context of the SLCE initiative, including campus and community and the relationship between them
3. Methodologically sound, which includes reflecting the perspectives of all relevant participants
4. Conducted in partnership with all who are engaged in the teaching and learning project

5. Appropriately public, which may mean shared in a variety of formats and venues for any of the full range of stakeholders to use and build on

These principles are not offered as boundaries or constraints but rather are intended to outline the essential components of DCE-SoTL as we are beginning to conceptualize it. We invite further development by the SLCE community. As just one example, might we develop guidelines to help determine what constitutes “*appropriately public*,” suggesting balance (over time if not moment-by-moment) across the full range of goals and audiences most important to all the partners?

Toward DCE-SoTL in Practice

Reaching toward the aspirations of DCE-SoTL is challenging in the context of contemporary higher education institutions and cultures. We offer two brief examples from our own work as illustrations of what is possible – and what might be particularly vexing – when it comes to enacting DCE-SoTL.

Peter describes:

At Elon University in North Carolina, I have been involved in a number of partnership-based course redesign teams. Details of the process vary, but in general these involve students and faculty working together to inquire into student learning and then using what they find to inform the co-creation of a revised course. Several of these design teams have focused on SLCE courses. In these cases, a faculty member collaborates with three or four students and one or two community partners to improve a course. A design team often interviews students and community partners from previous sections of the course, collects class documents and (with permission) student work, and then analyzes this information to try to determine what is and is not helping students learn. This process often leads to new insights for everyone on the team; for instance, a faculty member wrote: ‘I . . . gained a new appreciation for the sacrifices community members make when they . . . work with the university’ (quoted in Delpish, Darby, Holmes, Knight-McKenna, Mihans, King et al., 2010, p. 106; see also, Moore, Alt-vater, Mattera, & Regan, 2010).

Although the positive outcomes of this inquiry process for both the courses and the partners have been documented (Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2014), these redesign teams typically enact only some of our proposed principles of good DCE-SoTL practice. The teams usually work as *partnerships*

(all members of the team sharing responsibility for the process) that are firmly *grounded in the context* of the faculty, student, and community members’ experiences. Consulting with staff from the campus teaching center, they use *sound methods* to inquire into student learning and to plan for course redesign. In summary, their work embodies the second, third, and fourth principles of DCE-SoTL; the first and fifth principles, however, are not fulfilled. The inquiry focuses exclusively on *student learning*, and this does not always include civic learning. Also, the product of the team’s work is a syllabus, a document that has limited *public dissemination* since only the students, faculty, staff, and community partners collaborating on the subsequent offering of the course see the tangible results of the team’s course re-design work. In short, although student-faculty-community teams working in partnership to study and then redesign SLCE courses have the potential to enact DCE-SoTL, this collaborative approach to inquiry, learning, and action does not necessarily accomplish that aspiration.

As another example, Janice offers:

At Mount Royal University in Calgary, I was invited to co-facilitate a multidisciplinary faculty self-study related to learning about reciprocity in global service-learning (GSL) courses (Miller-Young et al., 2015). Faculty from business, science, history, indigenous studies, social work, and nursing explored our own learning about reciprocity and how we enacted it in our GSL courses. Our study’s goals and process evolved over time, coming to encompass inquiry into the learning that was occurring as a result of the study itself. Self-study members each participated in individual Decoding the Disciplines interviews (Pace & Middendorf, 2004) followed by an iterative cycle of individual and collaborative written and oral reflection; we analyzed our written and transcribed artifacts through the lens of transformative learning theory. We found that the probing structure of the interview was valuable in pushing us toward deeper thinking and emergent understandings about reciprocity and that the multidisciplinary nature of our group was a key ingredient in generating new learning during the study. We noted, however, the anxiety that our disciplinary differences sometimes created, and we found the study quite time consuming, requiring not only gathering, analyzing, and synthesizing evidence about our own individual learning but also co-synthesizing and co-writing.

In this study, DCE-SoTL principles one through three were relatively easy to enact. The study fo-

cused on faculty learning, not student learning, and that learning was arguably civic in nature as it was related to reciprocity (e.g., the ways in which power was and was not shared in partnerships). It was *grounded in context* in that each group member attempted to understand her own learning and practices as they were happening, through an emergent process. Finally, it included established participatory- and action-focused *methods of inquiry* in which all co-inquirers were involved in cycles of critical reflection so that knowledge and ideas for future change were co-generated. However, the fourth and fifth principles were harder to follow. The study was neither co-constructed nor conducted in *partnership* with the students and community members who were part of the GSL courses. Although the faculty members involved in the study were at the same time inquiring individually into other aspects of their GSL courses – such as their students’ learning about reciprocity and their community partners’ perspectives regarding collaboration – they each only shared this data for analysis within the self-study group; in other words, students and community partners were not directly involved in informing and shaping the research aims and outcomes of the self-study. Further, writing a scholarly article, one of the ways in which we made the project *public*, created some tensions and difficulties for the group. We found it challenging to summarize the learning generated through the self-study because it continued throughout the process of writing the article and because the nature of the learning was different for each member of the group, resulting in some members feeling that the final article did not fully reflect their own story.

The Public Purposes of DCE-SoTL

Despite the challenges of DCE-SoTL, some of which we have indicated in these examples, we believe the five principles we outline above offer the kind of aspirational “vision of the possible” that has been essential in the development of SoTL over the past three decades (Hutchings, 2000, p. 4) and that the SLCE FDP is supporting the SLCE community in articulating. These principles encourage us to think of and enact SoTL related to SLCE as co-learning, co-inquiry, and co-action – all of which are, we believe, essential if our work is to fulfill its potential contributions to “building a better world.”

This ultimate rationale highlights one distinguishing facet of DCE-SoTL. Every instance of SoTL, DCE-SoTL or not, is grounded in some sense of purpose – some question or challenge, some desired enhancement of practice that drives the inquiry. From its beginnings, the guiding pur-

pose of SoTL has generally been to improve student learning – in turn making the practice of teaching more fulfilling, providing evidence of quality teaching in processes of faculty review, and graduating students who are more knowledgeable or skillful or otherwise “better” thinkers, learners, and professionals. DCE, however, requires us to think differently about the purpose of the inquiry.

Democratic civic engagement foregrounds consideration of the *public purposes* of higher education. The *Democratic Engagement White Paper* (Saltmarsh, Hartley, & Clayton, 2009) speaks of such purposes in terms of “enhancing a public culture of democracy on and off campus and alleviating public problems through democratic means,” “learn[ing] the norms and develop[ing] the values of democracy [by] practicing democracy as part of one’s education,” and cultivating “capacit[ies] to “learn in the company of others and not to rely solely on the expertise of the academy” (pp. 6-7). DCE-SoTL thus not only inquires into civic learning but also aims to cultivate it and refine it through critically reflective practice.

For each of the five principles we propose, the shift that occurs as we move from SoTL to DCE-SoTL is a result of deepening, expanding, and integrating the learning-focused purposes of SoTL with these public purposes. Indeed, we believe that DCE-SoTL has the potential both to improve understanding of how teaching and learning can contribute to these purposes and to advance these purposes directly. Co-created inquiry requires and fosters an asset-based orientation, critical thinking, empathy, openness to diverse perspectives and approaches, communication, and abilities to leverage conflict and tension creatively. Such an approach to SoTL, then, can further enhance our ability within the SLCE community to collaboratively inquire, learn, and engage in constructive action.

Note

The authors are grateful to the participants at our 2016 Canadian Alliance for Community Service Learning conference workshop and our 2016 International Association for Research on Service Learning and Community Engagement conference session; their ideas, questions, and concerns helped shape this work. We also appreciate suggestions from student and staff readers of an earlier draft as well as the SLCE FDP editorial team.

References

Bandy, J., Bartel, A., Clayton, P. H., Gale, S., Mack, H., Metzker, J. et al. (2016). Values-engaged assessment:

- Reimagining assessment through the lens of democratic engagement. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, 23(1), 96-101.
- Cook-Sather, A., Bovill, C., & Felten, P. (2014). *Engaging students as partners in learning and teaching*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Delpish, A., Darby, A., Holmes, A., Knight-McKenna, M., Mihans, R., King, C. et al. (2010). Equalizing voices: Student-faculty partnership in course design. In C. Werder & M. Otis (Eds.), *Engaging student voices in the study of teaching and learning* (pp. 96-114). Sterling, VA: Stylus.
- Felten, P. (2013). Principles of good practice in SoTL. *Teaching & Learning Inquiry: The ISSOTL Journal*, 1(1), 121-125.
- Hartman, E., Kiely, R., Friedrichs, J., & Boettcher, J. (in press). *Building a better world: The pedagogy and practice of ethical global service-learning*. Sterling, VA: Stylus.
- Hutchings, P., & Shulman, L. (1999). The scholarship of teaching: New elaborations, new developments. *Change*, 31(5), 10-15.
- Miller-Young, J., Dean, Y., Rathburn, M., Pettit, J., Underwood, M., Gleeson, J. et al. (2015). Decoding ourselves: An inquiry into faculty learning about reciprocity in service-learning. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, 22(1), 32-47.
- Moore, J., Altvater, L., Mattered, J., & Regan, E. (2010). Been there, done that, still doing it: Involving students in redesigning a service-learning course. In C. Werder & M. Otis (Eds.), *Engaging student voices in the study of teaching and learning* (pp. 115-129). Sterling, VA: Stylus.
- Pace, D., & Middendorf, J. K. (2004). *Decoding the disciplines: Helping students learn disciplinary ways of thinking*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Saltmarsh, J., Hartley, M., & Clayton, P. H. (2009). *Democratic engagement white paper*. Boston: New England Resource Center for Higher Education.
- Werder, C., Pope-Ruark, R., & Verwood, R. (2016). Students as co-inquirers. *Teaching & Learning Inquiry*, 4(2), 1-3. doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.20343/10.20343/teachlearninq.4.2.2>.

Authors

JANICE MILLER-YOUNG (jmilleryoung@ualberta.ca) is the academic director of the Centre for Teaching and Learning at the University of Alberta. In addition to overseeing the programming and planning of the Centre's institution-wide initiatives, she facilitates professional development in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning. Her interests include faculty learning through SoTL practice, and strategies to uncover and bridge the gaps between novice and expert thinking. Inspired by the philosophy of "co-" which she has learned and observed in her work with service-learning colleagues, she endeavors to bring this approach to all her professional and personal collaborations.

PETER FELTEN (pfelten@elon.edu) is assistant provost for teaching and learning, executive director of the Center for Engaged Learning, and professor of history at Elon University. He regularly researches, writes, and presents with student partners. His publications include the co-authored books *The Undergraduate Experience* (2016) and *Engaging Students as Partners in Learning and Teaching* (2014). He also is president (2016-17) of the International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning. In his teaching, Peter partners with students and nonprofits to document the oral histories of people who have lived for decades in the local community.

PATTI H. CLAYTON (patti.clayton@curricular-engagement.com) is an independent consultant and SLCE practitioner-scholar (PHC Ventures) as well as a senior scholar with IUPUI and UNCG and a Visiting Scholar with Kansas State University. She facilitates professional and organizational development, co-produces practice-oriented scholarly resources, and is currently co-facilitating the SLCE-FDP (www.slce-fdp.org). Her current interests include civic learning; the integration of SLCE and relationships within the more-than-human world; walking the talk of democratic engagement as co-inquiry among all partners; and the power of such "little words" as *in*, *for*, *with*, and *of* to shape identities and ways of being with one another in SLCE.