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Visions of the Possible: Engaging with Librarians in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

ABSTRACT

This article encourages thoughtful discussion on cross-disciplinary partnerships among those researchers, practitioners, and librarians engaged in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning. Through personal experiences, examples from the literature, and the goal of meaningful collaboration, the authors describe four models of engagement with librarians in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning. We propose that it is time for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning and its practitioners to more fully engage with librarians because they bring complementary perspectives, powerful areas of expertise, and significant insights into students' learning experiences.

KEYWORDS

scholarship of teaching and learning, librarianship, collaboration, partnership

INTRODUCTION

A signal of the maturation of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) is its interrogation of the field's pervasive metaphor of the "big tent" (Huber & Hutchings, 2005, p.30). An interesting thread emerging from this discussion examines who engages in SoTL (instructors? students? administrators?) and invites us to consider others whose greater involvement would strengthen the field as a whole. We draw from the literature where possible, but even more from our own experiences and perspectives in this work. We are three faculty members—specifically, two academic librarians and a traditional disciplinary expert—who range from new to the field to senior scholars. We propose that it is time for SoTL and its practitioners to more fully engage with librarians because they bring complementary perspectives, powerful areas of expertise, and significant insights into students' learning experiences. Below, we share our "vision of the possible" (Hutchings, 2000) for the roles of librarians in SoTL.

COMMON GROUND

It is useful to articulate some of the common ground academic librarians share with traditional scholars of teaching and learning,¹ particularly with respect to disciplinary knowledge, teaching activities, and research. Library and information science (the formal discipline of most academic librarians) encompasses the study of how people interact with information through the cycle of production, dissemination, and use. It involves the economics, power dynamics, social conditions, ethical considerations, historical contexts, and technologies that underlie the flow of information in society, as

well as the means we use to organize and make sense of the information around us. The teaching that librarians do, often under the broad heading of information literacy instruction, can encompass aspects of all of this, from facilitating student discussions around information use, dissemination and curation, fundamentals on source materials, bias, the phenomena of fake news and viral media, and why certain ideas are more widely published than others to searching highly specialized databases to find evidence supporting a particular project. Many sessions provide opportunities for students to encounter and evaluate a range of information sources and develop skills in managing and tracing information through citations. Much of this work is integrated into assignments where students develop disciplinary habits of mind, overlapping with the work of discipline-expert instructors.

Many librarians teach full courses that combine information literacy and research skills with disciplinary curricula, first-year experience seminars, and general education courses at all levels. Most are also involved in course-integrated instruction, either as embedded co-instructors who work with students throughout a semester or as facilitators of “one-shot” workshops tailored to a particular assignment. Even if they do not have traditional instruction portfolios, academic librarians and paraprofessional library staff² teach frequently. They develop a range of learning materials for both on-site and online learners, and they participate in myriad instructional moments—in individual course sessions, in workshops, in their own classrooms, in office hours consultations, and at the reference desk in the library itself. Most library-based teaching, however, differs from other instruction on campus in that it typically occurs in collaboration with a discipline expert. Classes, activities, and assignments are planned, ideally but not always in practice, in collaboration to achieve both the information literacy goals of the librarian and the discipline content aims of the instructor. Most librarians are accustomed to developing working teaching relationships with instructors and many have developed similar working relationships in SoTL.

Librarians also conduct research on teaching and learning, but like many others, they do not always refer to it as SoTL. It more commonly appears as studies of information literacy or information literacy instruction. There is rich literature in library-focused academic journals that documents teaching and learning about information in various contexts and disciplines and at levels from primary school through graduate studies to workplace and lifelong learning. Additionally, many of the areas of study within information literacy research overlap with current themes in SoTL. There is considerable common ground in examining undergraduate research, and in looking at threshold concepts (Meyer & Land, 2006; Townsend, Brunetti, & Hofer, 2011) or bottlenecks (Middendorf & Pace, 2004; Wishkoski, Lundstrom, & Davis, 2019). Librarians have also done work that intersects with writing instructors, and like most of the academy, are concerned about students’ ability to read and understand academic discourse. As well, librarians look at learning in different contexts, assisted (or impeded) by different technologies or teaching methods, and ways of incorporating critical pedagogy in instruction.

MODELS OF ENGAGEMENT

In light of these parallels in disciplinary knowledge, teaching roles, and research activities, we offer four different and increasingly engaged models for librarians in SoTL: as illustrated below in figure 1, these are consultant, developer, partner, and scholar.

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Figure 1. Four models of librarian engagement in the scholarship of teaching and learning

There are surely others in both theory and practice, but for now, we present these four roles to demonstrate a range of involvement with traditional practitioners of SoTL and more generally in the field. Additionally, as we situate these roles specifically within SoTL, we envision them as different from librarians' regular instructional and consultative roles with faculty and students.

Librarian as consultant in the scholarship of teaching and learning

Perhaps the most familiar model of engagement is when a librarian acts as a consultant for the literature review for a colleague engaged in SoTL. In all research and scholarship, literature reviews are important as both processes and products. The breadth, depth, and relevance of the search itself and then the presentation of the search's results speak to the credibility of the researcher and the significance of the project. The quality of the literature reviews can make or break academic papers and presentations. Done well, literature reviews provide a data source that demonstrates the rigor of the researcher's approach to a research question and situates a line of inquiry within the prior and parallel work. The literature review also informs new projects on the voices present (and absent) in the existing literature, the theoretical frameworks supporting previous work, the types of methods and evidence used in other studies, and various findings about specific topics.

There are particular challenges in conducting literature reviews related to the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning. Unlike many other disciplines, there is no single database (such as Chemical Abstracts or MLA Bibliography) that brings together the literature in the field where one might reliably find all the important prior work. For those engaged in SoTL, literature reviews often (and should) take researchers outside of their home disciplines, for the literature is dispersed, and much of the more interesting work appears outside of the scholarly canon. An increasing amount of SoTL is done outside of English-speaking academia, where authors may not have equal access to traditional publication venues. Much of this work appears in blogs, personal pages, newsletters, institution sites, scholarly journals in other languages, none of which are well indexed by any of the scholarly databases. Additionally, the terminology in SoTL is fluid, and there is no controlled search vocabulary like Medline's or ERIC's, allowing one to confidently assume that one or two key terms will pull up all the relevant work.

Librarians, however, are very comfortable working in these kinds of ambiguous contexts. Regularly immersed in the information flows of multiple contexts, they are party to many academic conversations and their myriad research dialects and expectations. In fact, Otto (2014, p. 87) claims that "More than perhaps any other academic unit, the library has the advantage of being at the centre of connections to all the university's fields of learning." This meta-disciplinarity positions them to see

patterns; ferret out useful information from spaces between disciplines by drawing on a range of languages and tools, including those that can search across different disciplinary databases and global repositories; and bring a range of study designs and analytical perspectives to projects focused on teaching and learning (Bradley, 2009; Knapp, 2012). Even if they are working in a new subject area, this routine of networked thinking leads to a disciplinary agility that quickly adapts to new contexts.

A criticism of some of SoTL is its lack of this broader contextualization, particularly with respect to existing knowledge and theory about learning (Hutchings & Huber, 2008a). Incomplete reviews of the literature are frequently cause for comment and/or rejection by reviewers (Chick, Poole, & Blackman, under review), can weaken the scholarship in the field, reduce the possibility for cross-disciplinary insights and collaborations, and leave this scholarship open to charges of myopia and a lack of rigor (Kanuka, 2011). On the other hand, effective literature reviews build on similar studies in other contexts and connect lines of inquiry across disciplines, including relevant learning theory and science.

These difficulties can contribute to the practitioner's fear of being the amateur (Pace, 2004, p. 1171; Hutchings & Huber 2008b, p. 239; Felten, 2013, p. 121; Poole & Chick, 2016, p. 1). As co-author Caitlin McClurg describes (text box 1), accustomed to these challenges and the range of goals of a literature review, librarians can help scholars of teaching and learning "step into the unknown" to shape or edit a literature search to ensure it avoids these pitfalls and more fully supports the project.

Working with a librarian during the planning stages, rather than just during the final write-up, may also surface parallel studies with reusable instruments and protocols from other areas, saving valuable time and more explicitly connecting the project to other research. Librarians can also help researchers see SoTL literature review as a form of data collection, and in some situations (for example, a systematic review), the found articles and other materials as the actual data source. Just as focus group data provides insights into how students think about a particular topic, reviewing the work of other scholars illuminates common questions and findings about particular aspects of teaching, as well as their impacts.

Many of these consultations start small, with an email request for suggestions about where and how to look for particular kinds of resources. Librarians can then provide materials, instructional sessions, and pointers to those researching teaching and learning to help get the search started or provide guidance after an initial search, and then the researcher carries out the actual search by retrieving, organizing, and integrating relevant sources in the larger work of the project. Librarians can also meet other needs of scholars of teaching and learning. They can inform research data management, or planning for securely storing and sharing documents, drafts, and data for the project's lifecycle by, for instance, utilizing institutional repositories and developing filing systems with file names, login procedures, and organizations that keep the data appropriately discoverable and usable. Those researching teaching and learning can also consult with librarians to identify places to disseminate the

Text box 1. The expertise of librarian as consultant: Stepping into the unknown

Very often, I understand what a staff member wants from the literature, and I can report how likely that information is readily available based on retrieval patterns from literature searches. Where it gets interesting is when a scholar is stepping out of their discipline and both of us are unfamiliar with the content of certain body of literature that neither of us have read or studied before. This exercise is an excellent reminder of how many of our students feel when they are confronted with learning something new, and it can be quite humbling.

work. Their involvement in current discussions of scholarly communication, open access, copyright, predatory journals, and knowledge mobilization beyond the scholarly journal can also inform decisions about where and how to go public with their projects. Librarians will also go beyond a journal's impact factor as the main selection criterion by providing insight into other bibliometrics that may expand the reach of the project.

Librarian as developer of the scholarship of teaching and learning

A less common but powerful model for librarians is being embedded within teaching and learning centers. Working essentially as specialized educational developers, librarians in this model enjoy a sense of membership in the unit and even a physical proximity to the center staff.

Librarians are frequently embedded within departments across campus where they are research specialists in that area, not only helping faculty with their disciplinary research but also contributing to research that provides big-picture insights into the development and flow of knowledge within the field. They may, of course, do this in less intensive roles, but with at least part of their workload firmly within the relevant field, they can devote more time and attention to such an intensive scholarly project. This is a familiar model for librarians embedded within health-related fields, where they work with faculty on systematic reviews of a particular intervention. These reviews, common in the literature, examine the evidence from multiple studies that reach a high bar of rigor to identify trends across the literature and areas where more work is needed. In the library literature itself, evidence summaries, or reviews of published articles that review and contextualize an individual study, are also common. These two kinds of scholarship are absent thus far from literature on teaching and learning but would provide useful directions for the field.

Caitlin experienced this model with her 2016 assignment to the Taylor Institute for Teaching and Learning for 30 percent of her role. Still in her home department within the library, she had space and resources within the center and was publicly listed as a member of its staff. Hoseth (2009) has considered how librarians in this context can work with other educational developers to help discipline-specific faculty or even entire programs design effective pedagogies for library research and other information literacy skills. Beyond this traditional subject matter, though, this more focused role of librarian as developer meant that she had to develop deeper knowledge of SoTL, ready like educational developers for “practices require that we ‘know in’ [not just ‘know about’] that discipline by participating in shared problem solving, discussions, debates, and commitment to learning and teaching” (Taylor, 2010, p. 60). She conducted searches alongside scholars of teaching and learning and helped faculty with revisions to their literature reviews for related conferences and grant proposals. She also worked with research assistants and center

Text box 2: Reciprocity of librarian as developer: Bringing it back to the library

The most fruitful conversations involve exchanging ideas, musing about disciplinary differences, and considering the value of other scholars' work, no matter how foreign it is documented or presented. When I brought some knowledge about SoTL back to my colleagues, the vast majority were enthusiastic and intrigued. We discussed how much SoTL could open up the possibilities for librarians to try different methodologies and approaches (such as lesson study, a collaborative approach where several instructors observe, teach, revise and repeat an instructional session), work with different colleagues in their liaison areas, and disseminate at different venues and in new publications.

staff to develop a special library collection strong in SoTL, collecting and processing books and journals handpicked by the center staff that circulate through LibraryThing and TinyCat. Caitlin describes this reciprocal role of librarian as developer (text box 2).

Like her educational developer colleagues in the same building, Caitlin also facilitated some workshops focused on aspects of SoTL (such as on literature reviews), developed resource materials (such as an online resource guide for SoTL that included general journals, databases, associations, and conferences, as well as related disciplinary material), and participated in faculty learning communities sponsored by the center. Ultimately, she had the freedom and the official space in her workload to develop her own projects, and work on her own professional development within SoTL. She became more familiar with the literature, discovering a rich new world of conferences and journals where she might disseminate her own work. She attended local and international conferences focused on SoTL, gave presentations on this role for both SoTL and library audiences, and co-authored this article.

Librarian as partner in the scholarship of teaching and learning

An even more involved model of engagement is the librarian as partner in SoTL. Here, librarians are full collaborators or members of a team throughout a project, from design to data analysis to

Text box 3: Librarian as partner: implications for traditional scholars of teaching and learning

The conversations I've had with librarians have been so insightful. Their out-of-class, one-on-one consultations where students explain what they think their tasks are in an assignment can reveal understandings and misunderstandings I just don't get to see. We all know this is one of the benefits of working with librarians in our classes, but going further and documenting those moments in a collaborative SoTL project would help expand our reach into students' experiences of learning.

dissemination. They contribute to the vision, direction, scope, and scale of the project. They bring their perspectives and areas of expertise to the data analysis, as well as the work of writing, presenting, and publishing. As Nancy Chick reflects, the librarian offers an important partnership for scholars of teaching and learning (text box 3).

A natural site for partnered inquiry about teaching and learning is where the teaching activities intersect, typically in the librarian's instruction activities within a course. Librarians are accustomed to thinking about and assessing teaching and learning at the scale of many research projects on teaching and learning: a single class period, assignment, or lesson. By teaching in such discrete units, many librarians have developed strategies for breaking down complex tasks into thin slices that are more amenable to studies of teaching and learning. The librarian may want to

find out if and how students benefit from her teaching approach for searching, information literacy, and research methods, and faculty are interested whether this unit in the course leads to stronger student research projects. (See, for example, Perruso Brown & Kingsley-Wilson, 2010.) Coming together as partners in SoTL may also lead to a more integrated project that focuses on a single concern, such as students' conceptions of the purpose of research within the discipline.

Librarians also have access to moments in student learning that regular course instructors may not. Students may feel more comfortable expressing their confusion, discomfort, or frustration with librarians. Students often seek out librarians for "mediation between non-academic discourse of entering undergraduates and the specialized discourse of disciplinary faculty" (Simmons, 2005, p. 298). They are safe advisors who can help them understand an assignment, talk through a research process, and answer

“stupid” questions without judgment. This dynamic gives librarians unique access to the intermediate, messy, and revealing stages of learning—those moments that are often invisible to instructors yet essential for understanding and improving student learning (Bernstein & Bass, 2005). During these conversations, librarians tease out the students’ thinking in something akin to informal think-alouds that make visible students’ metacognitive processing of what they’re learning (or not) in class. This potential to explore these bottlenecks situates librarians ideally for partnerships with course instructors in SoTL. Margy MacMillan developed such a partnership after helping students in a particular class with what they initially expressed as questions about citing. Margy and the course instructor came together and, by comparing notes, discovered that students were really struggling with reading the scholarly articles, which led to a collaborative project (MacMillan & MacKenzie, 2012). This example illustrates one of the benefits of partnering with librarians in SoTL: Margy heard students articulating their confusion in a way that was different from how they sought help from their course instructor.

Librarians sometimes work with students through multiple classes and even entire programs, giving them insight into how students move through course and program sequences. This longitudinal perspective, combined with the access to those intermediate stages of learning, positions librarians as ideal and often unrecognized partners in SoTL. They play an integral role in knowledge transfer in “zones of intervention” (Kuhlthau, 1994) seeing the development of understanding over the course of a student’s career, or gaps where prior learning is expected but not present, or even how students carry their learning beyond the program. Recent library research has looked at the transfer of learning from undergraduate to graduate contexts (see, for example, Foster, Doyle, & Yukmenko, 2018) and to the professional and personal contexts where research is useful.

These kinds of experiences with students situate librarians as ideal collaborators in SoTL’s goals of understanding student learning, designing responsive and evidence-based teaching practices, and contributing to the broader literature in the most effective ways.

Librarian as scholar of teaching and learning

At the most fully engaged in SoTL, librarians are sole researchers, well equipped to conduct studies drawing on their existing expertise, experiences, and contexts. Within the context of teaching information literacy, for example, librarians have investigated questions about reading, undergraduate research, threshold concepts, teaching with technology, and teaching specific students (such as English-language learners, graduate students, students in specific disciplines). For example, Rosenblatt (2010) analyzed papers written by upper class sociology students to see how well they were using sources. Willson (2012) asked students to record their search strategies as they did the independent work of information literacy sessions in 10 different classes.

Dunne (2016) conducted an ethnographic study, embedding herself with five students in the final weeks of their undergraduate degrees to understand the research process from their perspectives.

Text box 4: Librarian as scholar: Colleagues with different perspectives

I see students at micro stages in their learning, and work with them at many points in their programs. These opportunities lead to questions that may be outside the bounds of course-based scholarship of teaching and learning. Like many librarians, the teaching I do does not always produce assessable student work and so requires different methods to find out ‘what is’ and ‘what works’ (Hutchings, 2000), and ethical protocols that allow voluntary, informed consent outside of the classroom. Librarians and their literature may be useful sources of unconventional questions and methods.

Margy describes how librarians bring different perspectives to SoTL (text box 4).

In fact, while not explicitly called SoTL, there is a rich history of such research in librarianship. This research draws on a range of methods and takes place across disciplinary contexts. Currently, as is the case in other disciplines, it is more often disseminated in their disciplinary journals, and rarely tagged with “Scholarship of Teaching and Learning” as keywords, making it less findable to other scholars with the same focus. However, this is changing. At a recent Association of College and Research Libraries conference, a panel on SoTL attracted a standing room only crowd of more than 150 interested librarians. This panel has been complemented by webinars, workshops, and a growing body of literature explicitly linking SoTL with information literacy instruction.

Librarians working explicitly as scholars of teaching and learning will only advance the field. In addition to expanding the types of studies (such as systematic reviews, scoping reviews, evidence summaries, meta-analyses that synthesize and evaluate the work that has been done), librarians’ unique pedagogical situations and perspectives would complement the questions being asked, where they are being asked, and how they are being answered.

CHALLENGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

While librarians are already involved in SoTL, an intentional conversation about this range of models of engagement may invite more librarians and institutions with differing capacities, but there are challenges to be considered. While many librarians are interested in conducting research, not all of them have institutional support to do so, which may limit the available time they might have to work on these studies. Faculty interested in developing these relationships may want to start with librarians they already know through work on committees or in classrooms. There may also be librarians specifically assigned to support SoTL work through a campus center for teaching and learning, or through the library itself. Sharing questions about student learning and ideas for improving activities and assignments can provide the basis for deeper discussions of SoTL, potential projects, levels of engagement, and workload capacity.

As with many scholars of teaching and learning, librarians may have initial feelings of “doubt and insecurity” with the “perceived foreignness of the language, concepts, and methodologies of SoTL” (Simmons, et al., 2013, p. 13). Nevertheless, recognition of the relevance of their own backgrounds may “enable [their] academic or professional [selves] to re-assert [themselves] in the context of SoTL work” (p. 14). Librarians may also have a disciplinary advantage in dealing with this perceived foreignness due to their everyday work across or within other disciplines.

Additionally, as many of those engaged in SoTL already know, collaborating on research across disciplines may require more explicit conversation about expectations and norms around methods, dissemination, and division of work. Another challenge with interdisciplinary collaborations can be the perceptions about whose responsibility and expertise is most relevant. When it comes to student information literacy, librarians can be as protective of disciplinary knowledge as anyone else in academia, so the familiar strategy of focusing on a shared concern for student learning can help with this negotiation. It may also be useful to remember that while collaborators may all have been reading about the “problem” under investigation, they have likely been reading in two completely different pools of literature. (For more on cross-disciplinary collaboration, see the coda in Manarin, Carey, Rathburn, & Ryland, 2015).

In some ways, the most significant challenge is institutional and budgetary. In most cases, librarians' spheres of work are already mapped, and any expansion or change costs time and money. Working with centers for teaching and learning or offices of faculty development may pave the way for increased opportunities for engagement. Relevant administrators can be convinced of the value of SoTL to the institution (see, for example, Bernstein, 2013) and the value of librarians within SoTL, as we suggest in this article. Then, the challenge is logistical. Assignment of an actual subject librarian role within these sites is ideal. Dedicated budget lines are the most obvious support, but teaching and learning grants are also avenues for these models. Caitlin's embedded role was negotiated by the director of the center and the library director as simply a partial reallocation of duties while remaining on the payroll in the library with no cost to the center. SoTL then, upon completion of the pilot, became a functional role within the library structure, much like data and scholarly communications.

CONCLUSION

This article began, as most collaborations do, with a conversation. Initial discussions included common ground between SoTL and library work, common values focusing on learning and common experiences in working with students. In taking this discussion public in conferences focused on SoTL, we have found it resonates with others in both scholarship and librarianship. In the subsequent process of deeper exploration and conversation, we have learned so much more about each other's teaching and scholarship by making explicit the tacit understandings of our disciplines. Our hope is for these conversations to happen at other institutions and, more broadly, within the larger field of SoTL.

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Margy MacMillan is a retired librarian and professor emerita of Mount Royal University (CAN), who is still playing in the busy intersection of SoTL and librarianship.

Nancy Chick is Co-President Elect (with Chng Huang Hoon) of the International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning and Director of the Endeavor Foundation Center for Faculty Development at Rollins College in Winter Park, Florida (USA).

NOTES

1. The scholarship of teaching and learning was originally envisioned as the work of "the professoriate" (Boyer, 1990), and the most common type of project has been instructors of record studying something within a single course.
2. Paraprofessional library staff are typically support staff who have a bachelor's degree or a diploma or certificate in library studies, but not a master's degree or other advanced qualifications.

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