

# Applying Method to (Seeming) Madness: Doing SoTL in Your Class

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The process of teaching a classroom full of large numbers of late-teenage denizens of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is something akin to madness. Many of our students can think of many other things they would rather be doing, and many of them are doing many of those things they would rather be doing while sitting waiting for you to begin and then after you have begun. Expecting a sizable chunk of them to learn is seemingly madness, too. But we do teach and our students do learn, and we are not mad. What may be closer to madness is not taking a methodological approach to teaching and learning. Puzzling over which elements of your teaching can be improved can be difficult. Perhaps the news that you are not alone will give you some solace. There is even better news. There are relatively easy ways to methodologically optimize your teaching and your students' learning. Enter the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL). One way to truly know if our teaching is resulting in student learning is for us to conduct research in our classrooms. In this essay, I provide a primer on the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) and highlight why we should all be doing it.

Boyer (1990) first broadened the construct of scholarship to include activities that investigate pedagogy and student learning. His work led to the coining and more commonplace use of the term Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), and Halpern et al. (1998) first established such a definition for the field of psychology. Examples of SoTL can be seen in any issue of the journal *Teaching of Psychology (ToP)* and a wide variety of other disciplinary and interdisciplinary pedagogical journals (e.g., *International Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*). If you have implemented any of the methods and techniques suggested in *ToP* or have used any of the tips gleaned off listservs and from journals and colleagues, you are involved in Scholarly Teaching. SoTL involves you taking it up a notch.

If you want to optimize your teaching and your students' learning, you will want to do pedagogical research at some level. This can range from organized self-analysis and reflection about your teaching and its effects to a structured examination of how you design your class and assess your students' learning. Doing this research (and calling it "research") does not have to involve the use of complex statistical models or hours of interviewing or content analysis of student writing. You could do all that, but the method you use will depend on your question. Some instructors go beyond their gut reactions and the advice of friends and colleagues and instead conduct formal or informal studies of their teaching in terms of designing syllabi and courses, preparing lectures, or evaluating learning. These instructors often rely on the published literature on teaching and learning to modify their own practices and almost always use some rudiment of the scientific method. Essentially, they start by identifying a problem, then review the literature to see if and how the problem has been dealt with,

then modify what they do, and then measure student outcomes to see if the changes they have made have resulted in changes in student learning. This basic process, which is the core of the scientific method and hallmark of social science training, provides rigor and robustness for scholarship whether it involves the study of cognition, personality, development, or pedagogy. Instructors who are methodologically working to improve teaching and learning are “Scholarly Teachers” (Richlin, 2001, 2006).

This type of teacher may create a course portfolio to document their systematically collected observations for further reflection and course modification. This allows for the identification of problem areas. Unlike the teacher who may also informally analyze student problem areas, the scholarly teacher takes pains to venture into pedagogical publications in search of solutions. This use of an organized methodology is primarily done for the teachers’ own benefit and to make their next class better. The results of these reflections and course modifications may be written up in a teaching portfolio (Seldin, 1997) and may be used to review the instructor for merit or promotion, but is not sent out for publication or even shared with peers.

Scholarly teachers catapult into SoTL when they conduct formal investigations of teaching and learning (regardless of method), place the results in the context of relevant published pedagogical literature, and then submit it for peer review and subsequent publication. Notably, it is the dissemination of one’s own investigations using a peer-reviewed procedure (as compared to posting your work on your own website or emailing it to a listserv or colleagues) that entitles one to the SoTL stamp. (For a full discussion of competing definitions of SoTL, see Gurung & Schwartz, in press. For a review of the state of SoTL as recognized and celebrated in psychology, see Gurung, Ansborg, Alexander, Lawrence, & Johnson, in press.)

The discipline of conducting SoTL and being a scholarly teacher has many benefits. It is important to use the best methods possible to examine your own teaching and to optimize your students’ learning. There is a wealth of resources if you are unfamiliar with the methods you need to test your specific questions, the sort of observations or evidence of learning you need to collect, or how to analyze the results (Gurung & Schwartz, in press; McKinney, 2007; Richlin, 2007; Savory, Burnett, & Goodburn, 2007).

By its very nature, SoTL directly impacts how effective your teaching is in terms of student learning. Engaging in pedagogical research will help you become a more effective teacher because you become increasingly aware of your classroom practices and make strides toward systematic change. You will learn to be mindful of your teaching practices and gear everything you do toward clearly assessable outcomes. Another benefit to thinking about how you teach and diving into the literature on teaching is that it will energize you for the classroom. Being energized to teach from reading the literature can also inspire you to do pedagogical research of your own. Pedagogical research is real, quantifiable, and rigorous research. More and more departments are counting SoTL publications toward decisions about tenure and promotion, though this is not yet universal (McKinney, 2007). Outcomes from pedagogical research also make natural components of teaching portfolios, which are often used in tenure and promotion decisions. Beyond these benefits, engaging in pedagogical research can be very satisfying. It allows you to solve the mysteries that may plague your non-conscious mind after both difficult classes (Why did it go that bad?) and particularly exceptional ones (Why did that go so well?). Most of us wonder about our techniques, our course designs, and how our students perform and behave, but not all of us take the time to investigate these issues in depth. Pedagogical research provides us with understanding of a myriad of issues and helps us gain

perspective on the complex interplay of factors that is education. SoTL may just help you stay sane, too.

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