

REFLECTIONS ON PRACTICE

From Specialist to Teacher-Scholar: The Influence of SoTL on the Journey of an Early Career Academic

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Recommended Citation:

Toh T. C. (2022). From specialist to teacher-scholar: The influence of SoTL on the journey of an early career academic. *Asian Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 12(1). 88-95.

ABSTRACT

As an early career academic, I have had the opportunity to transition from being a teaching assistant (TA) in a specialised science department to a lecturer in an interdisciplinary residential college. In parallel, as I get increasingly engaged with the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL), my professional identity evolved from being a specialist to a teacher and eventually, a teacher-scholar. This paper documents how SoTL has influenced my approach to teaching and my reflection on the challenges and opportunities that I have encountered. I will also share how SoTL has helped me reconcile the differences between a teacher and a researcher. I hope that my experiences will provide comfort and support for fellow educators as we progress through our teaching journeys.

Keywords: Teaching and learning, research and teaching, higher education, reflective practitioner, residential college

CONTEXT

As a marine biologist by training, my teaching career started as a part-time teaching assistant (TA) in the NUS Department of Biological Sciences while completing my graduate studies. My role was to support the lead instructors by taking on diverse roles, such as administration of the module, preparation of laboratory materials, marking, leading field trips, and laboratory work. Throughout the four years while I was with the Department, I had the opportunity to support a dozen biology undergraduate modules at various levels.

Upon graduation, I took on a short stint as an instructor within the university's Bachelor of Environmental Studies programme which comprised students from two departments: Biology and Geography. As I had greater autonomy over my teaching practice, I revised the module's content and introduced activities that I thought were useful in improving teaching and learning in my classroom.

Presently, I teach in an interdisciplinary residential college (RC) in NUS that adopts "Living and Learning" as the key pedagogical approach (Inkelas, 2016). Within the RC, the students and teaching staff come from diverse disciplines including engineering, the sciences, medicine, business, as well as arts and social Sciences. Beyond the formal teaching curriculum, RC staff members are also deeply involved in out-of-classroom learning activities through mentoring students in their recreational and academic activities. More recently, I had the opportunity to lead initiatives that aim to improve student learning within the RC and contribute to the collegial teaching community that we have here in NUS.

The impetus of this reflective piece stems from the contemporary discussion on how the transition from a specialist to a university teacher can be "a stressful period characterised by feelings of uncertainty, self-doubt and inadequacy", to the extent that a "loss of expertise" could result in "a phase of insecurity that lasts for one and a half to three years, and sometimes even longer" (van Lankveld et al., 2017).

In this reflective piece, I will discuss the role of the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) in helping me navigate this period of transition in my teaching journey and how it has impacted my teaching practice and professional identity (Figure 1). I hope that my experiences will resonate with other early career educators, and provide comfort and support as we develop our teaching careers.

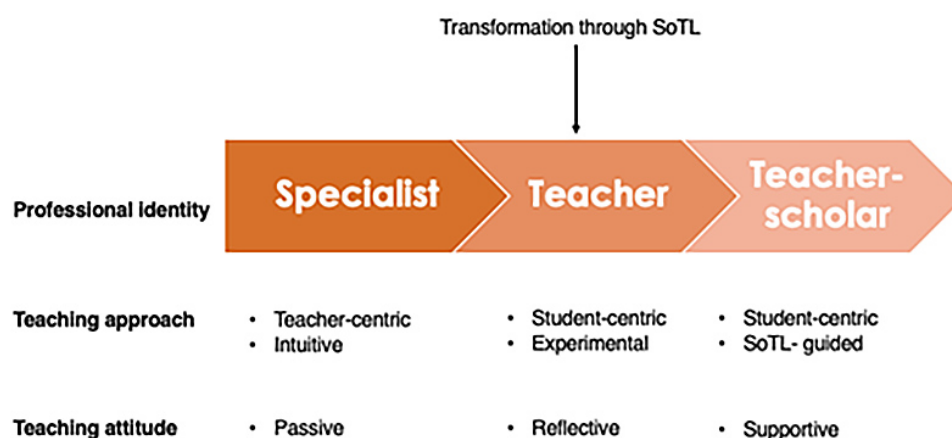


Figure 1. The evolution of my profession identity over time and the influence of SoTL on my teaching approach and attitude.

Teaching intuitively without SoTL

As I began my teaching career as a part-time TA, I was confident in my knowledge of the subject that I was teaching as I believed that my specialist training in Biology at the undergraduate and graduate levels was adequate in preparing me for my new role. I taught my first class by repeating what the lead instructor said during the briefing, thinking that I could “model after how others teach”. During each briefing, I fervently took down notes so that I could regurgitate to my students during class and convey the key learning points within the limited time I was allocated. By placing my focus on content delivery, I would present a “mini-lecture” as I believed that direct instruction was the most effective way to teach. While this teaching approach was efficient, I observed that most students were largely disengaged as they were either focused on copying notes or trying to stay awake. Furthermore, since direct instruction is largely teacher-led (Jamieson et al., 2005), I often found myself mentally and physically drained after each session. The confirmation that this approach was ineffective was when I received my post-module student feedback. My students gave me a feedback score of 3.7 (out of 5) and suggested that I should “provide more feedback” and “elaborate more about the assignment guidelines”. In addition, I noted in my teaching journal that this approach was “extremely rigid” and that I “lacked ownership of my teaching”. This first experience was disappointing and frustrating, as I felt the effort I had invested in teaching did not improve my students’ learning.

Teaching experimentally without SoTL

This setback prompted me to re-evaluate my practice and intuitively as a scientist, I started to test different teaching approaches for subsequent modules. In this “experimental” approach, I scrutinised the qualitative feedback provided by my students and attempted to address each problem individually. One initiative was to provide consultation sessions for my students to clarify their doubts about the assignments and provide feedback after their submission. Although these sessions were beyond the allocated contact hours, I felt that this approach helps my students learn better and they appreciated that I “explained what is required and expected” of the assignments. During the consultations, I noticed that students who attended the consultation were visibly more engaged and actively sought feedback on how they could improve. While my student feedback scores steadily improved to around 4.5 (out of 5), I realised that this was only one measure of success, and perhaps more evidence was needed to determine my impact on student learning.

In my second teaching stint, I was the sole instructor for the module and this opportunity gave me greater ownership in designing the class content activities. My preparation began with the examination of module content and student feedback, coupled with the experimentation of class exercises, such as simulated debates, to improve student engagement in a technical module. This “reflectively experimental” approach helped me actively engage the students and they appreciated the “considerations and thought poured out to plan the module”. In contrast to my previous experience as a TA, this experience was extremely fulfilling as I was able to explore different teaching approaches and had greater interaction with the students to identify their learning needs.

As my teaching approach transitioned from “teacher-centric and intuitive” to “student-centric and experimental”, I noted an evolution of my identity from a specialist to that of a teacher. While my teaching feedback improved, it remained variable over the years. As I was keen to develop my teaching, I accepted a lecturing position in a RC that offers an interdisciplinary curriculum. However, I did question if my professional identity as a specialist would get diluted as I embark on more teaching commitments and I would have less capacity for research. Furthermore, teaching in an interdisciplinary learning environment would mean that my disciplinary background might be less relevant, and I would have to embrace disciplines beyond my specialist field, such as political sciences and sociology.

Teaching transformed through SoTL

As I nervously settled into my new role as a lecturer in the RC, my teaching practice was radically transformed after I attended the Professional Development Programme (Teaching) provided by the Centre for Development of Teaching and Learning (CDTL). Through the programme, the exposure to SoTL literature prompted a critical evaluation of my practice. For example, I revised the learning outcomes of a module that I was co-teaching by constructively aligning the assessments and scaffolding the topics (Biggs, 1999). SoTL also reassured me that my anxiety in teaching in diverse environments like the RCs was not unfounded (Shibley, 2006) and it soon became apparent to me that such enhancements would not have been possible if I were to continue teaching intuitively.

I must admit that I was overwhelmed by the SoTL literature at the beginning. I vividly remember telling my mentor that the experience was likened to “jumping into a sea of literature not knowing what to look for”. In response, she encouraged me to take small, continuous steps to learn what I need instead of trying to gobble down the literature. As I “learn to teach”, SoTL provided guidance when I wanted to apply different teaching methods. I became more confident in using active learning to engage my students (Meyers & Jones, 1999). For instance, I used games to teach complex interactions and encourage collaborative learning (Dillenbourg, 1999). Furthermore, instead of relying on my teaching feedback as the sole measure of student learning, I drew on diverse sources of evidence, including students’ work and assessment scores. For example, through my students’ reflective journals, I could determine that my students were capable of describing and applying complex concepts. My peer reviewers also commented that the learning activities promoted “knowledge application and independent thinking and learning” through a “high level of student engagement and active learning”.

Teaching innovation and leadership enabled by SoTL

It was also through SoTL that I was introduced to the conversation on the teaching-research nexus (Brew, 2010) and the concept of a teacher-scholar (Lueddeke, 2003). This discourse deconstructed my false dichotomy that I could either be a specialist or a teacher, and I could finally reconcile the conflicting identities (Kuh et al., 2007). With my newfound identity as a teacher-scholar (Figure 2), I started integrating my disciplinary research, teaching practice, and educational leadership to enrich my teaching. I continued to pursue my research on marine conservation as it keeps me abreast of the scientific developments. This in turn was integrated into my teaching materials and module development. Vice versa, my teaching enabled me to identify novel topics and knowledge gaps in my disciplinary research. For instance, I recognised that environmental education and behavioural studies were under-represented in marine conservation. Consequently, I picked up social science research skills and crafted interdisciplinary research projects in partnership with my students. Similarly, my research increased my engagement with the scientific and teaching community broadened my professional network that I used to enrich my students’ learning by curating dialogues with experienced leaders.

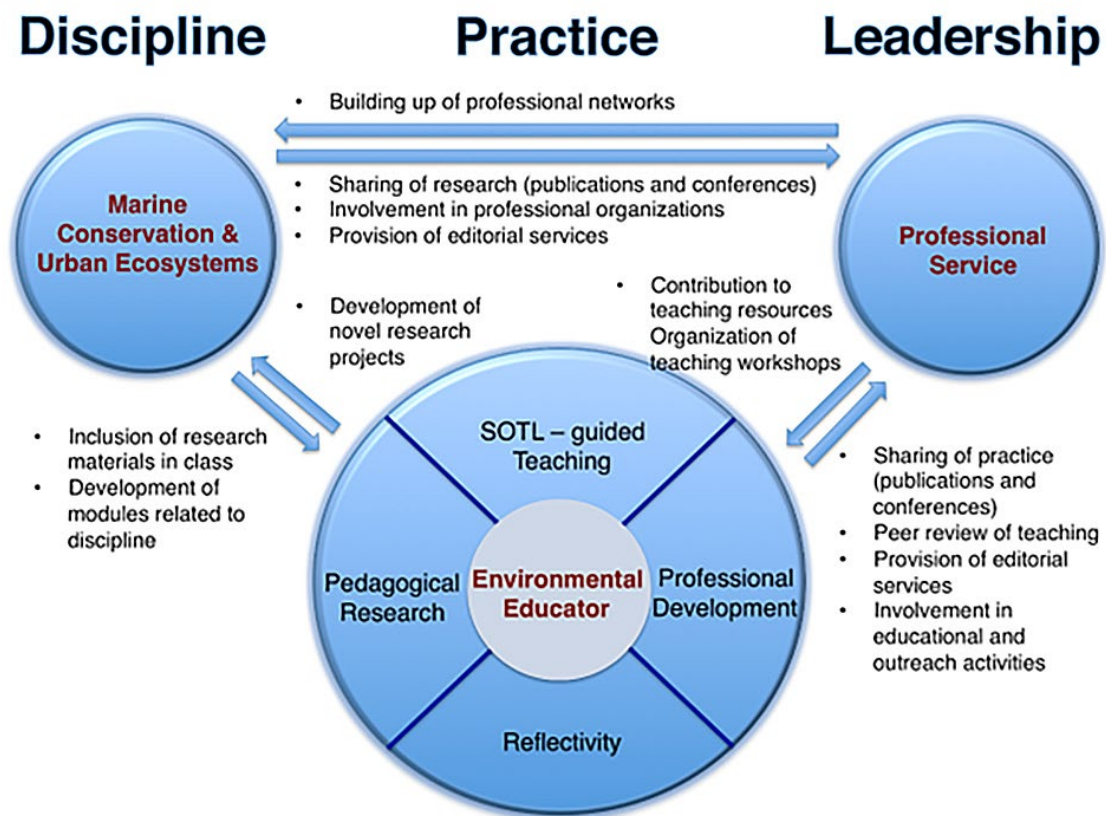


Figure 2. A conceptual model which integrates my disciplinary research, teaching practice and educational leadership as a teacher-scholar.

As I grew more comfortable as a teacher-scholar, I was able to extend the use of SoTL to curriculum design and pedagogical research. For example, I developed an interdisciplinary module with a sociologist, by applying Rowland's (1996) four principles of module design, and using constructive alignment (Biggs & Collis, 1982) to scaffold assessments. While this co-teaching model was a new experience, the students appreciate the module because it involved "two professors from different disciplines" and the "skills taught in the class were extremely applicable", largely because we were keenly aware of the challenges prior to the start of this teaching partnership (Toh & Ortega, 2018). Furthermore, I was able to develop research projects to examine how my module was able to enhance metacognition to achieve broader curricular outcomes and how it can be applied in higher education (see Toh & Siok, 2018).

Beyond my classes, SoTL offered teacher-scholars an avenue of peer support which was complemented by a culture of "community of practice" (Blanton & Stylianou, 2009) within the university (Geertsema & Chng, 2017). In NUS, I could readily access help from CDTL and RC colleagues to improve my pedagogy. Their recent advice to articulate the purpose of assessment and to test students "in context" (Taber, 2003), led me to link my quizzes to news articles and to use feedback more "visibly" to review the concepts (Hattie, 2012). After this intervention, the reported learning value of my quizzes improved, students noted that "it is a good way to test what they learned" and their mean scores improved. As a beneficiary of this collegiality, it inspired me to curate platforms for my colleagues to discuss their SoTL experiences (Toh et al., 2021).

CONCLUSION

My journey in teaching has guided me to learn widely, apply scholarly and innovate reflectively. The engagement with SoTL has influenced how I approached teaching and given me the support needed to be a more confident and skilful teacher. SoTL has also enabled me to reconcile the conflict between my identity as a specialist and a teacher. Donning my new identity as a teacher-scholar, I was able to integrate my diverse role as an educator and researcher to enrich my students' learning. Fundamentally, SoTL has shaped my teaching belief that a teacher-scholar should be reflective and evidence-based practitioners who can adapt to the different learning needs of the student to prepare them for the future.

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