

# UNEXPECTED LESSONS FROM ADOPTING SCHOLARSHIP OF TEACHING AND LEARNING PRACTICES: COLLABORATION, CURRICULUM, AND DEPARTMENT CULTURE

Douglas W. McLaughlin\* and Ivan K. Guillory

*Department of Kinesiology  
California State University, Northridge*

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**McLaughlin DW and Guillory IK.** In an effort to implement scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) practices in our teaching, we identified several unexpected but important lessons that went beyond classroom instruction. First, we discuss SoTL within the context of higher education and how SoTL practices may respond to critiques of higher education. Next, we discuss our own experience with SoTL in terms that extend beyond classroom teaching and learning. The unexpected lessons pertain to collaboration, curriculum, and departmental culture. Collaboration can promote a response to the increasing isolation in higher education. Curriculum can be developed that responds to the fragmentation of the Kinesiology subdisciplines by promoting integration. Departmental culture can be enhanced when collaborative SoTL practices are supported. In conclusion, the SoTL makes evident the need for integration of the subdisciplines of kinesiology in order to promote the noble purposes of higher education.

**Key Words:** Kinesiology, scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL)

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## INTRODUCTION

The scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) has long been neglected in higher education. The publication of Ernest Boyer's *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate* (1990) gave SoTL some much needed credibility. Academic organizations and journals with an explicit focus on SoTL were subsequently established. The primary focus of SoTL is on "improving the learning of the teachers' students, while satisfying several key elements of scholarship: a scholarly inquiry leading to the production of a public artefact and the peer review of that outcome" (Trigwell, 2013, p.99). An early advocate for and adopter of SoTL practices was Sandra McGuire.

Sandra McGuire is "one of the most respected and sought-after speakers and consultants on improving student learning and success" (McGuire, 2015, p. ix). In *Teach Students How to Learn*, she details strategies informed by SoTL

research that she had implemented through the Learning Skills Center (LSC) at Cornell and later at the Center for Academic Success at LSU. McGuire states that "[e]ven though learning centers like the LSC at Cornell and the CAS at LSU have existed for decades, I have observed in my 43 years of teaching that the learning strategies taught there have not reached the mainstream" (McGuire, 2015, p. 7). She laments that "[t]here is a disconnect between faculty and learning strategies that is harming students" but that "learning strategies can dramatically improve performance" (McGuire, 2015, p. 7 and p. 15, emphasis in original). Clearly, more can be done to adopt the SoTL strategies to improve student success. But why have SoTL strategies not gone mainstream? Why have faculty not adopted the learning strategies that can improve student's performance?

In part, the neglect of SoTL is a reflection of the priorities and incentives that guide higher education in America today. Based on our experience,

institutions of higher learning prioritize and incentivize research over teaching, even at institutions that historically prioritized teaching over research. American educator Ernest Boyer identified the consequences of prioritizing research above all else. Ernest Boyer lectured on the significance of scholarship at the 1995 conference of the National Association of Physical Education in Higher Education (NAPEHE). The following year a special issue of NAPEHE's journal *Quest* was dedicated to the implications of Boyer's work for Kinesiology, taking seriously the role of teaching. John Charles (1996, p. 152) examines how "the curriculum and scholarship might be structured to promote connectedness within the university." Lidstone et al. (1996) consider the implications of Boyer's work for promotion and tenure standards. McNeill (1996, p. 148) reflects on how "universities and their programs are no longer well-connected to the human enterprise. We have, collectively, abrogated a larger responsibility to humankind in favor of personal reputations and quick gains. The research enterprise of the modern university... is largely built upon egos who do the research, not on the needs of society and a need to improve the human condition" (McNeill, 1996, p. 148). Both Boyer's work in general and the special issue of *Quest* devoted to the implications of Boyer's work for kinesiology make clear that the stakes are high. Furthermore, they situate teaching, and the scholarship of teaching, as critically important elements of higher education.

Teaching, research, and service are often considered the three pillars of higher education. How they get operationalized, prioritized, and incentivized have significant implications for bolstering or weakening each pillar. Many critics, in the spirit of Boyer (1990), have lamented the overemphasis on research to the detriment of the other pillars. The corrective, however, is not a wholesale push to promoting the other pillars. As McPherson (2018, para. 3) argues: "There are obviously a number of things institutions need to be paying attention to, and not everything should be put aside in favor of teaching." But a careful balancing of the pillars should be undertaken, for "in far too many parts of American higher education, teaching has been assigned an extremely low priority" (McPherson, 2018, para. 3).

"Student success" may be a rallying cry in higher education, but without institutional support and incentives in place, it rings hollow. But even if steps are taken to prioritize and incentivize teaching and learning, there is one important remaining concern. Many faculty members are not equipped for that transition. McPherson (2018, para. 3), a former president of the Spencer Foundation and Macalaster College and expert on the relationship between education and economics, notes that "[t]he main business that most college faculty are in is teaching undergraduates, and they get very little training in most cases for that work." This concern is echoed by Stevens (2018, para. 6) who claims that "unlike other professions, the teaching profession in higher education is unique in that we generally are not prepared for the task." In order to be successful at the business of teaching undergraduates, steps must be taken to educate college faculty. For while it is generally a necessary condition to be an expert in content knowledge, competency in pedagogical content knowledge is not often a condition for hiring faculty in higher education. Therefore, a concerted effort to educate college faculty on pedagogical content knowledge should be made. This is an education that should be based on SoTL.

Given this background, we will describe the unexpected lessons that were learned in the process of engaging in and implementing SoTL practices. While we focused on the impact on student learning in a prior article (Guillory & McLaughlin, 2018), this article focuses on the lessons learned while engaging in the SoTL that go beyond teaching and learning. Specifically, it focuses on the value of collaboration, the lessons for curriculum design, and the benefits for departmental culture. It concludes with a discussion of how these lessons have significance for comprehensive kinesiology departments and how implementing SoTL practices can benefit all three pillars of higher education.

## METHODS

In December 2016, both authors attended a keynote address entitled "One Simple Way You Can Help Your Spring 2017 Students" by Sandra McGuire, Director Emerita of the Center for Academic Success at the Louisiana State University. We were interested in answering the questions: how could we

help our students? According to McGuire, the answer was simple: metacognition. Implementing that answer into our teaching practices was a whole other matter. Her presentation was not only clear and informative, but it also demystified the concept of metacognition, provided compelling stories of student success, and presented SoTL strategies that could be easily incorporated. While she was presenting, everything seemed straightforward and easy to grasp. That is what happens when the presenter is an expert in teaching and learning with over 4 decades of experience. Fortunately, McGuire (2015) had already compiled in great detail much of the content with supporting evidence in her book *Teach Students How to Learn: Strategies You Can Incorporate into Any Course to Improve Student Metacognition, Study Skills, and Motivation*. Still, implementing McGuire's insights and the SoTL practices in our classrooms remained a daunting task.

While we were both curious and interested in how we could incorporate SoTL strategies into our own teaching, we did not know where to begin. We decided to team up. We would work together and support one another. We had both attended prior lectures and workshops that were sponsored by our University's faculty development program, but we felt as though we were merely provided with an introduction rather than the tools necessarily to implement SoTL strategies. The next step was to further our education.

We returned to several readings from past lectures and workshops. In addition to McGuire (2015), we reviewed the scholarship on SoTL (Ambrose, 2010; Boyer, 1990; Fink, 2003; Gibbs & Coffey, 2004; Gilpin & Liston, 2009; Laurillard, 2005; Richlin & Cox, 2004; and Trigwell, 2013) with an eye toward how we could incorporate SoTL practices into our courses. While we were introduced to numerous different strategies, we identified just a few SoTL practices that we felt comfortable and confident implementing that would benefit the course content and structure. We consulted additional sources for strategies we intended to use. For example, we consulted Novak and Cañas (2007) and Novak (2010) on how to facilitate the use of concept maps. We were surprised to learn that a colleague had previously published on the use of concept maps, but only much later in the process. While a discussion of

the numerous SoTL practices that could be adopted is interesting in itself, it is not the focus of this paper but the above mentioned sources do provide a good introduction to SoTL practices.

Based on our preparation, we set out to incorporate SoTL strategies in our courses. Our analysis of that implementation for student learning has been previously published (Guillory & McLaughlin, 2018). In this paper, we are focusing on the unexpected lessons gleaned from our SoTL practices that have an impact on us over and above teaching and learning. Before getting to the impact, it is necessary to understand the process we took to complete the original study. As mentioned above, we reviewed the literature and identified SoTL practices to adopt in our coursework. That was in many ways the easy part. Witnessing an experienced SoTL expert demonstrate a technique in a workshop is vastly different than attempting to facilitate that technique yourself. What seemed smooth and effortless when the SoTL expert lead it at a workshop now seems clumsy and difficult when leading the same activities in our own classrooms. While this may be expected, it is still humbling and sometimes discouraging. Doubts of "why bother?" arise. Given other professional demands and priorities, it makes it easy to not persist and take the path of least resistance, returning to past practices. Partnered with a colleague, the challenges of implementing SoTL practices are mitigated. There is consolation in confiding with a vested partner. A vested partner can provide advice and encouragement. Together, pooling our experiences of success and failure, we are able to increase our confidence and hopefully improve our facilitation of SoTL practices.

Perhaps the most significant impact of our collaboration is assessing the SoTL practices. It is important to note that we come from very different subdisciplines, one from the sciences and the other from the humanities. In one sense, our specializations need not matter, we are both interested in student success. But in another sense, our perspectives on student success are different. For example, exercise sciences course often have a sequence of prerequisite courses while the humanities courses have a single prerequisite course or no prerequisites at all. This means we have different expectations regarding student preparation for our courses. Despite our

differences, we learn about and have a deeper appreciation for the challenges each other face.

Having a partner during the assessment phase was very beneficial. We discussed the implementation and facilitation of strategies. We discussed the significance of data and how best to interpret it. And we discussed what changes and improvements could be made regarding the implementation of future SoTL practices. While it may have been easy to give oneself the benefit of the doubt on one hand or been too hard on oneself on the other hand, neither extreme is particularly helpful in assessing the SoTL practices. As vested partners, we could keep each other accountable by encouraging the other to navigate the middle ground. Rather than take it easy when things went smoothly, we could still encourage each other to consider what could be done to make additional improvements. Rather than getting too frustrated when things went poorly, we could help each other determine what could be salvaged and what could be corrected. In our development as practitioners of SoTL strategies, we could identify what where the next steps. For example, group concept maps may have worked well, but what are the limits of this tool? What might group concept maps miss about student's individual learning? A possible solution would be to utilize a sequence of individual and group concept maps, assigned throughout the semester, in order to better assess individual learning while maintaining the benefit of group problem-solving.

The end of the semester is not merely a time to assess what has happened but also an opportunity to prepare for what to do, and what changes to make, for the coming semester. The process is set up to repeat. A SoTL classroom is in many ways a dynamic classroom that requires a dynamic, engaged approach to teaching. A new review of literature, either on new strategies or deeper into previous strategies, may be warranted. The SoTL tools that will be used for the coming semester need to be identified. The facilitation of those tools must be considered. Consultation with the vested partner must be ongoing, particularly as challenges arise as they invariably do in teaching. And finally, the assessment phase begins which ushers in the end of the semester, reminding us that a new semester awaits.

## RESULTS

While the above section outlines the process we took to implement SoTL practices, it also provides the necessary context for this section that elucidates the important but unexpected lessons we learned in the process. These lessons provide avenues of inquiry for addressing the challenges of higher education discussed in the introduction. Going beyond direct instruction, these lessons potentially have broad implications across all three pillars of higher education. These lessons, related to collaboration, curriculum, and department culture, will be framed by and shown to address common critiques of higher education. It should be noted that these insights are at best provisional. While the merits of each lesson are introduced, further research is necessary to substantiate and fully elaborate their significance. As such, this serves as a prologue to a future, continued research agenda.

### *Collaboration*

In a recent column on higher education, professor Jonathan Wolff (2019, para. 1) laments that "Once academic work was collaborative and enjoyable – now for many it's a series of lonely billable hours." He is speaking to a sense of isolation that has become a hallmark of higher education. In the race to increase research productivity, faculty retreat to their labs or bunker down in their office with their doors closed and locked. Wolf (2019, para. 9) even quips that "I set up the furniture in my room so there was nowhere for the casual visitor to sit. Impromptu meetings became terse and to the point."

In *Crack in the Ivory Tower*, Brennan and Magness (2019, p.9) suggest that "we faculty...don't personally benefit from our colleagues being good teachers. We benefit from them being star researchers. They help us write better and publish more ourselves. They also bring the school research prestige, which rubs off on the rest of us. If our colleagues are smart, people assume we're smart. Teaching helps students..., but students don't vote on tenure." This emphasis on research is not a function of personal interests or a reflection of character, but rather reflective of the responses to the incentives that are put into place in higher education. Rather than freely choosing isolation as a form of cloistered devotion to research, often faculty resort to isolation

as a survival mechanism to meet research expectations by avoiding all else.

Such a system that incentivizes personal isolation and counters the etymological origins of the college, which comes from the Latin for partnership, is deeply problematic. Brennan and Magness (2019, p.19) offer several lessons to address the perverse incentives, the final one being “that *good rules economize on virtue*. Most people are neither devils nor saints. They sometimes do the noble thing, often do the selfish thing, and sometimes do the wrong thing even when it doesn’t serve their interest.... [W]e should as much as possible try to create rules that align the public interest with individuals’ private interests.” It is difficult to envision a shift in higher education that creates such sensible rules.

In his column, Wolff (2019, para. 13) recounts visiting a department 25 years ago “where publishing was fairly rare, and if someone produced a book, it was a cause of year-long celebration. How did they spend their time if they were not publishing, I asked?” While it seems inconceivable that such a department existed 25 years ago and impossible that such a department could exist today, their collective response is instructive. “Don’t confuse research and publication, they replied. We read. We write new courses. We have seminars. We talk about ideas. If someone has a manuscript, we all read and discuss it. We support each other” (Wolff, 2019, para. 14). It is evident that they valued scholarly contributions but not for their own sake. Rather, they valued each other, and each other’s contributions, as an integral part of the life of the department, even incorporating research into teaching and seminars. They were modelling a collaborative approach to higher education.

A collaborative approach is important. Too often, the respective skills and knowledge of individual faculty are not brought to bear collaboratively on complex problems. A standard reductive approach is to break a complex problem into smaller parts that is then solved by individual faculty. Too often, this has a result similar to a group writing project by students who divide up sections. When different students write separate sections or different faculty solve different smaller problems, the final result lacks coherence and continuity. When faculty from diverse backgrounds with different skills

and knowledge work together on a problem, not only is the curse of isolation resolved, but new solutions can be forged. Hal Lawson (2007, p. 225) argues that such a “cross-disciplinary framework is designed to foster a unified, integrative discipline.”

Our process was a truly collaborative effort. Rather than dividing and conquering the task of facilitating SoTL practices by cutting up the elements between us only to paste together our independent answers, we worked together every step of the way. We did not always agree on every aspect, but collaboration need not mean complete agreement. We debated the sequence of developing concept maps as individual or group assignments. We debated how and when to convey feedback. These debates not only encouraged us to think through the decisions we made but required us to listen critically to each other’s perspectives. This led to an enriched appreciation for differences in pertaining to subdiscipline, course structure, and content knowledge. We did not set out to be collaborative in this way, but it was a welcome outcome of our efforts to implement SoTL practices and lead to a second unexpected lesson related to curriculum.

### **Curriculum**

Most concerns about the lack of quality instruction pertain to course instruction rather than systematic issues. These concerns are encapsulated well by Steven Pearlstein, winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Commentary, when he contemplates whether attending college is worth it: “The reality is that while university provosts, deans and department chairmen give lip service to improving educational quality and accountability, they haven’t done much about it.... [F]rom an organizational perspective, the absence of quality control and the lack of focus on the experience — what is taught, how it is taught and how it can be improved — is a big problem” (Pearlstein, 2018, para. 18). This critique takes seriously the big picture of instruction, which at the departmental level would need to focus on the curriculum.

For Kinesiology departments, the shift from professional preparation to academic subdisciplines raised concerns about fragmentation. This is reflected in the American Academy of Kinesiology and Physical Education’s 2006 Academy Papers on the Kinesiology Core curriculum in Volume 59(1) of *Quest*

that focuses primarily on subdisciplines. The shift to subdisciplines is also reflected in the core curriculum of most Kinesiology departments in the United States. Perhaps it will always be necessary to introduce the subdisciplines in discrete courses, but in order to combat fragmentation it may be necessary to require the promotion of collaborative work in advanced coursework that integrates the subdisciplines. Lawson (2007, p. 225 – 226) endorses cross-disciplinary study that “entails thematically-organized courses and seminars. These curricular experiences do not employ the names of arts and sciences disciplines (e.g., Sociology of Sport; Physiology of Exercise) because thematic organization necessitates the integration of two or more disciplinary perspectives focused on the field’s special phenomena of interest (e.g., sport, exercise, dance). Research follows suit and oftentimes entails teams of researchers who are oriented toward the uniqueness and the field and each other.” So conceived, kinesiology curricula could be designed to better prepare students to address the public interests that kinesiology is poised to address.

In addition to concerns about fragmentation, there are also concerns about the sequencing of classes and prerequisites adequately preparing students for advanced coursework. McGuire (2015, p. 162) notes that “It is daunting to face a classroom of students who have not been adequately prepared for the material we are responsible for teaching them. But the semester does not have to be one long, arduous, soul-destroying struggle.” Rather than being resigned to passing along students who never really grasp key skills and knowledge, “We must establish high and clear expectations, provide constant feedback, give our students extra resources and learning strategies, keep their feet to the fire, and stay connected. Most unprepared students will not only do much better in our courses but also learn to succeed in all of their subsequent courses. The payoff will be enormous for them and for you” (McGuire, 2015, p. 162). McGuire argues convincingly that at any step along the way, meaningful steps can be taken to help students succeed. But it also raises interesting questions for faculty who design curriculum.

McGuire’s (2015) simple key to helping students learn is metacognition, the ability to “think

about your own thinking.” She notes that “As they make the transition from being passive learners to proactive learners, students gain the ability to monitor, plan, and control their mental processing” (McGuire, 2015, p. 16). An interesting parallel relates to metacognition of faculty related to the curriculum. As noted above, faculty may be content knowledge experts, but often lack critical pedagogical content knowledge necessary to devise a quality curriculum and instruction. Psychologist Sian Beilock notes that “As you get better and better at what you do, your ability to communicate your understanding or to help others learn that skill often gets worse and worse.” (Grant, 2018, para. 5). Grant recounts the difference between asking an Olympian and a coach how to learn to do three and a half somersaults as a springboard diver. The Olympian’s “answer: Go up in a ball and spin fast. He was so naturally talented that he never had to learn the mechanics. He simply did it” while the best explanation Grant (2018, para. 9) received was from a coach who “spent seven years trying to get that dive right and was able to walk me through the physics with stunning clarity. The physical limitations that prevented him from becoming an Olympic-caliber diver himself led him to gain the knowledge to become an Olympic-caliber coach.”

This example is clearly an oversimplification, but it is still illustrative. We identified several situations in our departmental curriculum that we could not reconcile. While there would be no use in complaining about students who were not adequately prepared in prerequisite coursework, there was reason to question why course sequences were what they were. Perhaps courses were originally conceived as serving different purposes but over time shifts in course content occurred that led to the need for consideration of curriculum changes. The adage that “This is the way we have always done it” did not hold up to critical scrutiny. Raising such concerns leads to the third unexpected lesson.

### ***Departmental Culture***

Major trends in higher education are not definitive of all aspects of higher education. Incentive structures may generally promote research at the expense of teaching and service. SoTL may typically be neglected, ignored, or dismissed. But the general and typical may not apply to all institutions, or all

colleges at a specific institution, or all departments in a specific college. Whether holdouts to problematic incentive systems or adopters of SoTL practices, departments can develop a culture that values the three pillars of higher education. "Boyer's identification of a fourth form of scholarship, the *scholarship of teaching*, and his discussion of the role of teaching in the modern university... challenge us to reconsider the value we place on teaching and the manner in which institutional values, expectations, and practices impact retention and promotion of faculty" (McNeill, 1996, p. 140). But it takes a concerted effort to promote and incentivize this approach.

Knudson and Meaney present an example of just such an approach. PALIR is "an initiative by the leaders of the Department of Health and Human Performance (HHP) at Texas State University to minimize barriers to implementation of active-learning instruction by providing classroom infrastructure and pedagogical training to interested faculty" (Knudson & Meaney, 2018, p. 328). Importantly, they recognize the need and value of training and supporting faculty to adopt active learning instruction. "Training to increase faculty confidence and skills in using active learning reduces important barriers to faculty's adoption of the new pedagogy.... Faculty often need support to try new, and to them risky, instructional strategies. Beyond skills and confidence, faculty need to feel protected from potentially lower student evaluations of their teaching if students remain resistant to taking more collaborative and active roles in learning. (Knudson & Meaney, 2018, p. 330). They assessed the initiative as "effective in stimulating interested faculty to implement active-learning experiences in their classes, engaging in additional SoTL, and in enhancing the visibility of the department as a leader in active learning and the SoTL at the university" (Knudson & Meaney, 2018, p. 330). In addition to classroom infrastructure and training, it is also important to provide protections in personnel evaluations. While the initiative is meant to diminish the potential for lower student evaluations, it may not totally eliminate decreased evaluations. Therefore, it is necessary to have protections and incentives for faculty to develop long term practices that promote active learning and improve student success that

mitigate any concerns about short term consequences that arise from lower student evaluations.

While we did not have the same level of institutional support, we did identify departmental support. While we were aware that some colleagues were interested in SoTL, it was only after we started assessing our implementation of concept maps that we realized that a colleague had previously published on the topic. While there were few if any departmental barriers in our SoTL endeavors, it would have been helpful and encouraging to know that we had allies within the department from the outset. There may be much to despair in higher education, so it is important to shine a light on our efforts to promote SoTL and establish a culture that encourages such efforts.

## DISCUSSION

Our efforts to implement SoTL practices not only impacted our instruction, it also provided the basis for unexpected lessons on collaboration, curriculum, and departmental culture. In the Forty-First Amy Morris Homans Lecture, Diane Gill identifies integration as the key to sustaining kinesiology in higher education. Gill (2007, p. 285) argues that "Academic excellence demands that we value, and act like we value, integrative scholarship, to highlight kinesiology's unique contribution in higher education." Integration applies to the subdisciplines of kinesiology as well as to the pillars of higher education. "Integration links discovery to application; integration links scholarship to professional practice; and integration defines kinesiology's unique academic role in higher education" (Gill, 2007, p. 281). The subdisciplines and the pillars are mutually informing. Taking integration seriously has implications for what we do and value as well as how and why we do it.

Brennan and Magness (2019, p. 11) warn that "Higher education has a purpose only in the way hammers have a purpose. Just as hammers can be used for any number of purposes—for example, to build a hospital or to murder a romantic rival—so can higher education be used for any number of purposes. Individual 'users' of the tool have their own purposes, which may conflict with the noble purposes higher-ed supposedly serves." The mission and value

statements of universities and colleges elaborate the public goods and ideals that guide the purposes and practices of higher education that faculty are called upon to support. That means being advocates of SoTL. As McPherson (2018) recognizes, “we simply can’t have teaching being done without thinking in a serious way about how to prepare faculty well and how to create environments in which they’re able to do good work.” Recall, this does not mean that we have to focus exclusively on teaching. Rather, to do good work we must integrate and balance the pillars of teaching, research, and service. Much work must still be done to achieve balance. This article is just a first step in documenting how our experiences in SoTL

research provided unexpected lessons that go beyond teaching and learning and affirm the noble ends of higher education. Much more work will need to be done to elaborate and affirm these lessons. But for now, it is perhaps fitting to close with Boyer (1996) who challenged an audience of kinesiology and physical education professors with these words: “We sit back and pretend that change is going to happen outside us. The truth is that it will happen within us. We are the transformers of our own academy, and if there is to be change, it is in this group and not in the stars.”

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**\*Address correspondence to:**

Douglas W. McLaughlin, Ph.D.  
California State University Northridge  
18111 Nordhoff Street  
Northridge, CA 91330–8287  
Email: douglas.mclaughlin@csun.edu