Distance Learning and the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

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INTRODUCTION

Distance learning and the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) are both ancient, yet both are new. Distance learning is now associated with online learning using digital technologies, but it goes back to learning by rudimentary means of correspondence between someone with something to teach and those with a desire or need to learn. Oral stories and traditions preserved and passed on the teaching of individuals and cultures. With the development of writing, epistles, letters, scrolls, then books became the favored medium. In the late modern age, correspondence courses used overland mail delivery for those exchanges, but that was replaced with audio (telephone, audio tapes) and video (television, video tapes) means. The common thread for all those centuries of such distance learning is that the process tended to see learning as transmission of information and knowledge from a knower to relatively passive receivers (students).

The best teachers at any time in history have always been scholars of teaching. They have known that people learn best when most involved in the inquiry, when most able to question, analyze, interpret, evaluate, reflect, reconceive or reimagine, and communicate. These great teachers studied their students as their students studied what was being taught, and adjusted their teaching based upon what the students were actually learning; able to do with that learning. Not content with having students merely accumulate information or knowledge, these teachers created a continuous learning-loop of knowledge, experience, experimentation and application, assessment , reflection, revision, and new knowledge. These teachers were Socratic constructivists in practice, if not in name.

What is new is that now distance learning almost exclusively means online learning, where teachers and students can be anywhere and the learning process can occur synchronously and, largely, asynchronously. The digital age is transforming not only distance learning, but learning itself. As Milliron says, "In today's higher education world, asynchronous learning is the power tool. Moreover, the associated techniques for using asynchronous learning to support in-class and online instruction are bringing learning to life in new and exciting ways" (2004), digital technologies plus cognitive and learning theories make for unanticipated opportunities for the educational process.

Yet with the expansive, if uneven, growth of distance learning, there has not been sufficient attention given to its processes and outcomes by those doing the scholarship of teaching and learning, or SoTL (Hake, 2007), not including examples like Buchanan (2001), Garner et al. (2005), and Hostetter & Busch (2006). Concurrent with the ongoing effort, spearheaded by Ernest Boyer in the 1990s, to recognize various forms of scholarship as valid, including the scholarship of teaching (Boyer, 1990), is the application of SoTL to all forms of academic teaching and learning, including distance learning.

BACKGROUND

Distance learning is learning removed from the physical presence of the teacher and, usually, other students. Thus, distance learning today is done from computer stations or home computers. As more of the world is connected to the Internet and has email access, the potential for online distance learning increases. But what is the quality of such distance learning?

That is a question that has been compared to the parallel question, "what is the quality of classroom or face-to-face learning?" Assumptions have abounded: that classroom teaching is necessarily better because of the human contact factor; that teaching via digital technologies is better because of all the multimedia ways subjects can be presented. Many studies (but not all) have settled on the view that between both ways of teaching and learning, there is no significant difference given that technologies may be used in various

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ways and effectiveness (Oblinger & Hawkins, 2006; Russell, 2001; Schulman & Sims, 1999).

Research on teaching in recent decades has concluded that traditional classroom teaching results in a focus upon lower-order thinking and learning (memorization, isolated knowledge) and not on the higher-order thinking and learning desired (analysis, synthesis, interpretation, evaluation, transference to different contexts, problem-solving). Distance Learning can learn from classroom teaching while seeking even better results.

Can we all agree to quit striving to make online education as good as face-to-face and stop comparing it to traditional education? Or is this a necessary comparison to make for any of a variety of reasons? How can we keep from falling into the rut of simply comparing new methods, strategies, and media to what we know? (McDonald, 2002)

Arguments have been made that asynchronous distance learning, while still relatively new and unstudied, can result in deeper learning than classroom, synchronous learning (Lou et al., 2006. Hacker and Niederhauser claim strong empirical basis for saying that online learning can be "even more conducive than traditional classrooms" in using basic learning principles (2000, p. 81). These kinds of research are examples of what happens when pedagogical and educational assumptions are questioned. Kreber states that:

when teachers engage in inquiry-based learning about teaching through content, process, and premise reflection, they may drawn on, first, their experience-based knowledge of teaching, and second, formal or theory-based knowledge of pedagogy to provide evidence for the validity of their assumptions. (2006)

Through such inquiry, online learning can address the not inconsiderable skepticism about the learning effectiveness of distance learning. The newness of online learning has, so far, precluded a significant body of research on its effectiveness from becoming part of professional and public knowledge (Waterhouse, 2005, p. 250). But as that newness fades, SoTL research must supply that knowledge.

SoTL continues to disclose, across all and in every academic discipline, that what is important is not what the teacher does, but how the students experience the learning process and what they can do with that learning. The great teacher is simply one with whom students learn in significant, enduring ways. The methods or techniques of teaching are not the key; the students' active learning and discernible learning outcomes are. SoTL is a focus upon learning outcomes and is needed by all of higher education. Huber and Hutchings state it boldly: "Our argument, then, is that the scholarship of teaching and learning is an imperative for higher education today, not a choice" (2005, p. 13). Therefore, there is a great need to build up a body of research literature about distance learning by SoTL scholars from which all who teach via distance learning can benefit. This research contributes to a contemporary need to re-imagine academic organizations, structures and theories of teaching and learning (Palloff & Pratt, 1999).

THE SoTL LINK

The scholarship of teaching and learning has become an international momentum for improving student learning. As such, an understanding of SoTL and its effectiveness in changing the way teaching is approached internationally in all disciplines and in all formats, including online and distance learning, is significant.

With the rapid and constant development of online technologies and of academic courses, programs and degrees online, high levels of funding and support staff are required for implementing distance learning initiatives. However, how is it known what methods of online teaching and which technologies are most effective in improving student learning in particular contexts? In distance learning it is bad business and questionable pedagogy to base outcomes upon unreflective assumptions or conventional hopes.

The scholarship of teaching and learning, through its inquiry-led, evidence-based approach to teaching and learning, calls for the gathering of evidence from the actual educational contexts in order to measure the scope and quality of students' learning and how best to create an online process for creating optimal pedagogical results. SoTL, therefore, helps the teacher become a scholar of how people learn and how best to teach one's discipline or topic so that it is learned well (Weimer, 2006; McKinney, 2007). Simply trying to replicate classroom methods in a virtual environment is to miss unique opportunities that digital contexts provide. SoTL can transcend assumptions about learn-

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