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Essays on Teaching Excellence

Toward the Best in the Academy

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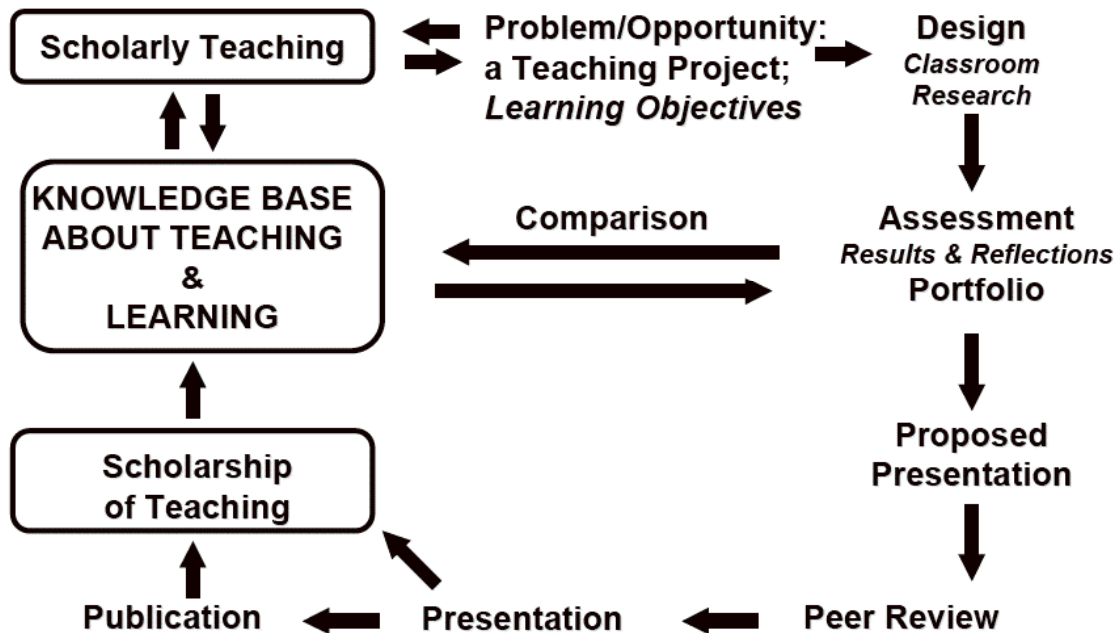
Developing the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Using Faculty Learning Communities

Milton D. Cox, *Miami University*

Faculty Learning Communities (FLCs) have proven successful in producing teaching projects, as evidenced by a survey of institutions with FLCs. It follows that these groups should provide ideal conditions for a subsequent development of those projects into peer-reviewed publications and presentations, or the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL). This essay offers faculty practical advice for producing such SoTL products based on what started as a teaching project in an FLC. My advice is based on work with FLCs for 28 years on my campus and others (Cox, 2003).

Let us begin by considering a definition of SoTL and FLCs. When Boyer introduced SoTL in 1990, there was confusion about its meaning. Our teaching center at Miami University defined SoTL as peer-reviewed presentations or publications on teaching and learning and relied on this illustration below to depict the multiple ways one could move toward either a publication or presentation after beginning with a teaching problem or opportunity. This cycle, adapted from Richlin (1993), describes scholarly teaching projects (as pictured in the upper half) that culminate in SoTL (as pictured in the lower part). For detailed discussion, see Cox (2008).

The Ongoing Cycle of Scholarly Teaching & the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL)



Adapted from Richlin 1993

An FLC is a special type of community of practice. FLCs are multidisciplinary groups of 8-12 members consisting of faculty or a mix of faculty, graduate students, and administrative professionals. They work collaboratively on year-long, scholarly projects to enhance and assess teaching and learning. Group activities include tri-weekly seminars during which projects are developed and shared with the goal of building capacity and developing competence in SoTL. Participants select a focus course in which to try out their innovations. They also assess resulting outcomes, including student learning, and may prepare a mini-portfolio to chronicle results. They may select and work with student associates to engage student perspectives. Finally, they present individual and/or group project results to their institutions and at national conferences.

Teaching Projects

The starting point for developing SoTL in an FLC is a teaching project, problem or opportunity involving student learning, often called Classroom Research (Cross, 1998). This project may involve an attempt to change student behavior by adding a new pedagogical

approach, content, assessment, or curriculum. It may involve an innovative approach to a course learning-objective that is currently problematic, such as moving from lectures to cooperative groups; engaging problem-based learning in a course; adding a case study approach; introducing a service-learning component; addressing a variety of learning styles; using responders; engaging web-based or online components; or having students construct electronic course learning portfolios. Another type of FLC teaching project may address institutional challenges or opportunities, for example: the first-year experience; advising; inclusion; or transforming the overall approach to learning. Such projects have been the focus of topic-based FLCs at a variety of institutions. Although they may have been pursued in a scholarly fashion, they may not have culminated in SoTL (i.e., a refereed presentation or publication). So, even if it remains a teaching project known only locally, such an endeavor can be enriching for its author, her colleagues, and the institution itself.

Based on our experiences at Miami University, I have compiled the following set of recommendations both for developing teaching projects and for moving them beyond one's institutional boundaries: design before you start; keep your colleagues, department chair, and students informed about your project; obtain IRB (Human Subjects) approval in case you want to present or publish results; keep it simple, especially if you are a relatively new faculty member (since new approaches could lead temporarily to lower student evaluations); find a support group of others developing teaching/learning projects, such as an FLC.

Presenting and Publishing SoTL

Every discipline has a culture of conference presentations. Presentations of SoTL at a traditional disciplinary conference usually take place in a teaching section of the conference and conform to the culture established in the discipline. However, as a relatively new field, SoTL is developing its own culture. Sample venues of teaching and learning conferences include the Lilly Conferences and the International Society of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (ISSOTL). To locate topics of interest at recent conferences, visit conference websites. The Miami Lilly Conference website lists over 30 theme tracks (topics of 5 or more sessions along with titles and abstracts.)

I recommend that session presenters have handouts, including Powerpoint slides and references and allow around 20% of your presentation time for questions and discussion since participants want to share what they are doing. Also, model your topic (e.g., if your session is about cooperative learning, have participants engage in an exercise during your session). Include student work and include assessment results. Session evaluations provide feedback for improving your project and scholarly approach.

There are an increasing number of print and/or online venues for publishing SoTL in disciplinary or multidisciplinary journals. For our journal, the *Journal on Excellence in College Teaching*, which has been publishing peer-reviewed SoTL for 18 years, we receive many manuscripts that describe interesting teaching projects. Unfortunately, we have to turn many away because the author fails to define the problem clearly or indicate why it was a problem or he fails to establish a baseline or fails to place the project in the context of what others have done or to provide evidence of change. Members of an FLC can read each other's manuscripts critically and call attention to these shortcomings early in the project design when it is not too late to revise the approach.

Resources for Supporting SoTL Development

The development of SoTL projects in FLCs works best if participants understand the definition of SoTL and are familiar with SoTL publications themselves or with journal peer review procedures or if they are engaged with topics currently under discussion (see Lilly Conference presentation theme tracks). Consultation with the institution's offices of assessment and institutional research, and inclusion of suggestions from colleagues in psychology and educational psychology can strengthen the evidentiary base of a project. However, we have found that the most effective support comes from fellow members in an FLC, who provide insights, encouragement, and a critical perspective.

At first, some faculty doubt that they can become SoTL experts in a short time because it took them several years to become experts in their disciplines. However, Classroom Research is designed for the

intelligent non-expert. There is not much jargon and progress reports and follow-up projects are still acceptable for presentations. We have found that faculty in FLCs can develop into SoTL presenters in just one year. Interestingly, pre-tenure faculty members, in their second through fifth years who are members of our teaching scholars FLC have entered SoTL development as novices and have presented the results of their teaching projects at a national conference 8 months later.

A survey conducted in 2005 with 395 respondents (a 61% response rate) produced interesting findings regarding the impact of FLCs on participants. “Understanding of and interest in SoTL” ranked third as a result of FLC participation. Also, those surveyed reported the following teaching projects: revised a course (160), incorporated approaches to reach different learning styles (150), designed and employed technology in a course (141), designed guidelines for learning processes (123), and improved grading schemes or rubrics (110). Our FIPSE-funded project fast-tracked the start of FLC programs at 5 institutions.

FLCs can provide for a very productive environment for the development of SoTL. Palmer (1998) notes, “The growth of any craft depends on shared practice and honest dialogue among the people who do it. We grow by private trial and error, to be sure--but our willingness to try, and fail, as individuals is severely limited when we are not supported by a community that encourages such risks” (p. 144). To obtain more detailed information about FLCs and their role in developing SoTL, see Cox (2003a & 2003b).

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Essays on Teaching Excellence

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