Editorial

On the Proliferation of SOTL Work in the Aftermath of the Covid-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

In this editorial, I reflect on the implications of the increased interest in SOTL work brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic. I identify three areas for consideration: the need to support novice and emerging SOTL practitioners, the need to allow space and time for academics – particularly emerging academics – to engage in scholarship of teaching and learning, and the need to identify strategies to relieve some of the burden faced by journal editors and reviewers. In addition, I provide an overview of this issue of the journal demonstrating how the issue, in its entirety, promotes a more caring and inclusive approach to teaching, learning and the scholarship thereof.

The Covid-19 pandemic caused significant loss of life across the world; it caused disruption to daily activities, exacerbated mental health challenges and led to serious economic strife for many. In some parts of the world, particularly in the global South, it continues to wreak these effects. Though much of the world has returned to relative normalcy, the pandemic continues to exert a profound impact on us, individually and collectively. One outcome of the pandemic has been a proliferation of interest in scholarship in teaching and learning. The rapid transition to online and blended modes of instruction – necessitated by the pandemic – has caused many academics to give serious and scholarly attention to their teaching and learning, curricular and assessment practices. This has included many established researchers from various academic disciplines. While this is no doubt a positive development, in that it raises the possibility of the enhancement of teaching and learning as a scholarly endeavour, it also necessitates careful consideration.

A first area of consideration is how to support novice and emerging scholars in teaching and learning. Even before the pandemic, many SOTL scholars were novice or emerging academics and the pandemic has now brought a new wave of scholars into the field, many of whom, despite being established researchers in their disciplines, are novices within SOTL. This places onus on journals like *SOTL in the South* and others like it to operate in a more developmental manner, but also to build networks that can support the growth of SOTL researchers and practitioners. *SOTL in the South* aims to do this through the developmental stance it takes with its contributors; in the future, we hope to initiate a reviewer mentorship programme; and we also use our biennial conference to nurture young and emerging scholars of teaching and learning. But, the responsibility also lies with institutions of higher learning to initiate, support and promote programmes that enhance scholarship of teaching and learning within those institutions.

This gives rise to a second area for consideration: the need to capitalise on the impetus given by the Covid-19 pandemic but not allow scholarship of teaching and learning to be blindly (and blithely) co-opted into performance management metrics. If teaching and learning is indeed a core function of higher education institutions, academics – particularly emerging academics – need to be supported to be creative in their classrooms, something that is difficult to achieve when many academics already report feeling overwhelmed and overburdened. Indeed, in this journal, Vorster (2020) has argued against building SOTL expectations into performance and promotion criteria. Again, this not only requires change on the part of universities (which need to support academics without imposing on them unrealistic expectations of performance), but also change on the part of journals such as

SOTL in the South (which need to move away from traditional notions of 'impact' and value the power of reflection and creativity and understand the crucial importance of context).

Finally, a third consideration is the impact the increased interest in SOTL will have on journal editors and reviewers. There is a limited number of established SOTL scholars and as a new wave of scholars enter the field, there will be increasing pressure on established scholars to serve as reviewers. Already, many journal editors report finding it increasingly difficult to identify good reviewers who are willing to take on review tasks. Again, this is because reviewing is often the easiest aspect of academic work to say *no* to, given the enormous pressures many of us work under. This means journal editors are under increasing pressure from two sides – an increased number of submissions on the one end, and increasing difficulty in having those submissions reviewed constructively on the other end. This may require thinking of new ways of assuring quality of research as peer review is increasingly seen as the "least worst" option available, to quote a former editor of the *British Medical Journal*.

This issue of *SOTL in the South* should be read as being underlain by the concerns raised above. Support for SOTL scholars and their work and efforts is important because scholarship in teaching and learning contributes to the necessary endeavour of constructing more inclusive higher education spaces. This includes the need to value diverse forms of knowledge and 'decolonise' institutions of higher learning. The first two papers in this issue address the question of decolonisation of higher education, albeit in two different contexts: Athulya Aby examines the need for decolonisation of architecture curricula in India, while Natasha Madhav and Philip Baron consider perceptions of decolonisation amongst lecturers and students in software engineering at a private higher education institution in South Africa. The third paper, by Tshepiso Maleswena, argues against a meritocratic view of student success in higher education. Maleswena argues that "meritocracy is decontextual and therefore disadvantageous to the development and implementation of a holistic approach to student success".

If the first three papers in this issue identify 'challenges' in higher education – the need to decolonise curricula and implement holistic approaches to student academic development – the following three papers posit some 'solutions' to these challenges. Curwyn Mapaling and Christopher Hoelson review the literature on humanising pedagogies within higher education, arguing a need for greater engagement with this topic. Shanthni Selvarajan, Lavanya Balachandran and Sue Chang-Koh discuss the benefits for learning obtained through a university-wide, service-learning, community

engagement programme in Singapore. Thirdly, Johannes Bester and Erica Pretorius demonstrate how reflective and authentic learning activities can be built into a civil engineering module at a university in South Africa. What comes up strongly in all three of these contributions is the need to develop curiosity, creativity and critical thinking on the part of students if we are to effectively and holistically meet their present and future learning needs.

The final two peer-reviewed articles then turn our attention to teachers, and the need for supportive faculty development programmes that not only encourage scholarly teaching but also emotional well-being. Lianne Keiller, Champion Nyoni and Chantel van Wyk reflect on the principles that might underpin a health professions faculty development programme for sub-Saharan Africa. They argue that "contextually relevant experiences and recommendations from faculty developers and educators should be the driving force behind the development of programmes" in order to achieve "sustainable growth within the field". Samantha Kriger, Cyrill Walters, Armand Bam and Jonathan Jansen then examine the particular impact that the Covid-19 pandemic has had on female academics with children, vividly showing how social norms and gender roles – and a lack of institutional support – place particular burdens on female academics thus affecting their emotional well-being.

The issue concludes with a triptych of reflective pieces, all of which emerge from scholars brought into scholarship of teaching and learning by the Covid-19 pandemic. All three contributions reflect on the authors' responses to emergency remote teaching and learning brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic. Newlin Marongwe reflects on the importance of communities of practice to support academics in responding adequately, particularly to the technological needs of students. Nokukanya Thembane and Andrew Makkink, both working in a health professions context, share the specific strategies they employed to continue to offer work-integrated and experiential learning opportunities to their students, despite the onset of the pandemic. In Thembane's case, this involves collaborating with industry partners to offer remote laboratory experiences and, in Makkink's piece, it involves the development of an online, case-based simulation exercise.

In combination, the papers in this issue of *SOTL in the South* demonstrate not only the depth and breadth of SOTL work, but also the importance of this work through the development of more caring and inclusive approaches to teaching, learning *and* the scholarship thereof.

Acknowledgements

References

Vorster, J.-A. 2020. SoTL: A mechanism for understanding and finding solutions to teaching and learning challenges. *SOTL in the South*, 4(2): 6–21.