

Contextualising contexts – Scholarship of Teaching and Learning and cultural difference

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ABSTRACT

SOTL has an originary moment and a well-rehearsed history. It has been constructed as an approach to understanding teaching and learning with a focus on reflective practice to improve practice and student learning, but it excludes sociocultural influences. This paper argues that by concentrating on the 'classroom', and cognitive measures of success, SOTL conforms to a Western view of what is valuable in education. This instrumentalist perspective allows the process of SOTL to seem universally applicable. It is argued that this instrumentalist approach is a black-box perspective, analogous to the black box of the mind seen in behaviourism. Using Chakrabarty's notion of "provincializing Europe", some structural elements of SOTL history are analysed with an eye to provincialising SOTL. Following this, a personal teaching experience across two cultures is described to demonstrate the inability of SOTL to comprehend the behaviour of students across different cultures without providing more contextual information. Differences between East Asian and Western views of cognition are presented to suggest that cultural differences in conceptions of learning have a significant effect on what happens in the classroom. In conclusion, if SOTL is to be meaningful internationally, it needs both to embrace and be explicit about sociocultural influences and, crucially, it needs to be decentred from Western hegemonic practice.

Introduction

The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (as 'SOTL') has an imputed originary moment and a well-rehearsed history. In the first two parts of this discussion I will consider aspects of that history in order to highlight how an approach to understanding teaching and student learning that looks universal – it can be done by any teacher in any classroom in the world – is limited in its ability to generalise by a failure to consider broader contexts. As it has been constructed, SOTL excludes – if not intentionally, then by a form of systematic default – cultural, political and material influences on student learning.

I briefly align SOTL with Chakrabarty's (2000) idea of "provincializing Europe" to invite a consideration of returning SOTL to its place of origin, its particular cultural moment, to better understand aspects of it that are both *of* that time and place, and those that are not. Then I briefly outline a description of a personal teaching experience that occurred when I moved from Australia to Singapore, which had jolted me into an awareness of my own (Western/Global North) assumptions and blind spots. These assumptions, in turn, have implications for SOTL as a *method* of investigation. I then want to consider some ways in which these limitations of approach might be addressed through bringing richer evidence to bear on how we consider the scholarship of teaching and learning in practice.

Throughout this paper I use the term 'SOTL' quite deliberately as a signifier for the scholarship of teaching and learning as it has been constructed since 1990. In quotation marks, I also use the term 'classroom' to refer to any formal learning and teaching environment (which could be the online environment) that focuses on an interaction between a teacher and students.

I should also add here that in its intention and scope, this journal, *SOTL in the South*, provides a forum for the interrogation of SOTL in some of the ways I describe, to historicise it, challenge its assumptions, and take the theory and practice of SOTL in new directions. As Leibowitz (2017:1) suggests in the first issue:

The geopolitics of knowledge is being opened up for questioning, but there is continual deference to the globally renowned, and scant attention is given to institutional contexts and what these contexts mean for scholarship and for teaching and learning.

Also in the first issue, Samuel (2017) calls for a SOTL in the South to take a dialogical stance that seeks opportunities to disrupt, and Banda and Banda (2017) describe a socially responsive dialogic pedagogy that brings the knowledge of everyday life into the classroom. These articles provide major challenges to the SOTL of the global North in terms of theory and actual pedagogical practice, and new directions for SOTL in the global South. Here, issues of inclusivity and social justice require a change to the kind of evidence brought to SOTL and to the scope of SOTL interventions.

From a position geographically and ideologically closer to the centre, Maheux-Pelletier, Rukholm, Groen and Vézina (2017) question the relationship that Francophone scholars of teaching and learning, particularly those in Canada, have to the Anglophone centre. Their article questions whether they can find a space inside mainstream SOTL, or whether they are "swallowed up" by it, becoming invisible. They propose not using the term SOTL for what they do. This article recognises the dilemma that exists when a useful approach to the investigation of pedagogical practice clashes with linguistic differences and the cultural differences embodied in different languages. Practice, according to this article, needs to be reformulated.

In spite of these new directions, one aim of this paper is to provoke reflection on the centre itself, to interrogate its historicity, its theoretical and methodological confusions, and to suggest that by making the sociocultural contexts of the centre visible, a more productive global conversation about higher education teaching and learning can take place.

Reverse Black Box

University websites around the world routinely promulgate SOTL, inviting faculty participation and offering guidance on how to do it. This testifies to SOTL's current acceptance as part of the everyday life of the academy, though it does not have the status of disciplinary research. Nevertheless, even ten years ago, SOTL had not established itself to the degree that it now has.

The opening statement of the University of Wisconsin (La Crosse) page on SOTL (Uwlax.edu 2017), typically declares that, "The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SOTL) is a systematic inquiry into what, how, and *why students learn or do not learn what we teach*". (Emphasis added.) As the last part of this quotation makes clear, the variables arise from student performance, not, it seems, from the teacher or the curriculum. "What we teach" suggests a fixed curriculum. This definition conforms to what Kreber (2013:858) calls a "narrow view" of SOTL as the investigation of "what works" or does not work, but which does not locate the classroom in the larger context of the "desirability of what we do in and through higher education". Nor does it locate the classroom in a sociocultural context. In a similar discussion on the narrowness of approach, Boshier (2008) suggests that one of the shortcomings of SOTL is that it focuses on the 'classroom' and on the direct interaction of teachers and students. Further, the only student learning that counts as worthy of investigation is that which is under the direct gaze of the teacher. This is a perspective embodied in the "what we teach" quoted above. It is more about the teacher than the students.

Institutional websites like that cited above are bound to formulate definitions of SOTL that can easily be applied to practice. After thirty years of debate, however, the literature on SOTL still routinely expresses concern for a lack of clear definition and what it means to do it (Kizito & Clarence-Fincham 2017; Booth & Woollacott 2015; Fanghanel, McGowan, Parker, McConnell, Potter, Locke & Healey 2015; Potter & Kustra 2011; Thomas 2011). In a chapter significantly titled 'Situating the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning' Huber and Morreale (2002:16) suggest that it "may be unnecessary to attempt a precise definition of SoTL". The "distinctive character ... lies in its invitation to mainstream faculty ... to treat teaching as a form of inquiry into student learning", to share results, and critique and build on one another's work. Felten (2013) sums up this view of what he refers to as an "amateur culture" as follows:

In the United States, the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) tends to be classroom-oriented, rather than theory- or hypothesis-driven ... This inductive, grounded approach emerges in part because faculty often learn and practice SoTL on their own or with colleagues in ad hoc professional development settings.

SOTL coming from North America often appears 'naturalistic' and theoretically innocent. It is a matter of *teaching* as a form of inquiry into student learning, and it is teacher-generated. As Boshier and Huang (2008:645) point out, referring to "the subordinate position of the 'L' in SoTL", there is an "unproblematized valorization of teaching" and the primacy of the teacher in formal learning situations. Most learning, they propose, "occurs without the help of a teacher". Leaving out the 'L' in SOTL, Prosser (2008:4) calls the scholarship of teaching and learning "evidence-based critical reflection on practice aimed at improving practice". For Hutchings, Huber and Morreale (2011) it originates in

the 'classroom' from a wish to understand one's own practice. In both of these, the emphasis is on teachers reflecting on their own practice for improvement.

While SOTL is generally seen as an inquiry into teaching itself, the aim is to improve student learning, "focusing on the performance of students and how that can be enhanced" (Bernstein 2013:36). For the teacher, it is like reflecting on how to become better at fine-tuning a car. The following SOTL steps from Bishop-Clark and Dietz-Uhler (2004:4) deserve quoting in full for the way they illustrate my argument that SOTL has been constructed as narrow both in its focus on the quality of cognitive performance of students (as influenced by teacher performance), and in the explanatory evidence it brings to bear:

- Why did this teaching strategy (activity, lecture, discussion etc.) work or not work?
- Why did it or did it not achieve the intended learning outcomes?
- What information (e.g. exam scores, student writing) will I need to determine whether the teaching strategy achieved the intended learning outcome(s)?
- Once I have the info, how can I use it to determine whether the teaching strategy was effective?
- How, where and with whom will I share my experiences?

In terms of its intentions and its use of evidence, this is a very instrumentalist view of SOTL.

The American-grown SOTL as outlined here also shares a number of important features with the phenomenographic tradition of research into teaching and learning that Webb (2007) suggests has been influential on teaching research in Sweden, the UK and Australia. Webb (2007) describes the phenomenographic approach to teaching and learning as one that remains "within the setting", that is, within the intellectual space mutually occupied by teacher and students. The object of investigation is student cognition in relation to student experience of the learning and teaching circumstance. Ashwin and McLean (2005:4) describe this limitation, in relation to phenomenography, as an "abstraction from educational purposes and values, and from political and social realities". They also point out that, to adherents of phenomenography, this is a conscious choice. Clegg (2007) associates phenomenography and its relation to SOTL with the work of Michael Prosser and Keith Trigwell (1999) and comments that it has been justly criticised for being limited in its range of questions, neglecting broader social questions.

Here, I would like to draw an analogy with the idea of Behaviourism as a black-box theory. The black-box description of Behaviourism derives from the idea that the human mind is unknowable, and that we can know all we need to know about behaviour (and behavioural change) by analysing inputs and outputs, stimulus and response. I liken SOTL that focuses on the 'classroom' to the 'Reverse Black Box', where the 'classroom' is the box within which all inputs and outputs occur, while anything outside the classroom is black, not deemed relevant to the understanding of student learning. Sociocultural influences on learning constitute the black, or empty, space.

In anticipation of the last section of this discussion, another perspective on the reverse black box might be introduced. In his comparative study *The geography of thought*, Nisbett (2003:xvi) evinces abundant evidence that

Westerners have a strong interest in categorization, which helps them to know what rules to apply to the objects in question, and formal logic plays a role in problem solving. East Asians, in contrast, attend to objects in their broad context.

What Western thinking, thus defined, involves (as part of the scientific method), is the isolation of the object of investigation from its surroundings. My contention here is that the way SOTL has been constructed and theorised demonstrates this tendency to isolate teaching and learning to a set of techniques, and that in its exclusion of the broader contexts of teaching and learning – cultural, political, material – it is an essentially Western epistemology.

The last question to be considered in this section as part of the ‘reverse black box’ idea is the vexed notion of context specificity and generalisability. SOTL’s strength is seen to be in its context specificity. More than that, Haigh (2012) notes that it is context specificity that is a key defining quality of SOTL. In emphasising context, however, SOTL is not likely to produce generalisable results that others “can build on” (Woodhouse 2010:3). Gibbs’ (2010) comments on context and generalisability alert us to the way context in relation to SOTL can be viewed in two ways. First, when we say that SOTL is context specific, we mean that inquiry begins in a specific and limited setting, what Felten (2013) very aptly calls an “inductive, grounded approach”. The strength of this is that it focuses on real practice, and draws its conclusions from real practice. However, Gibbs, and subsequently Blair (2013), seek a better explanation of that setting or context, the experience of contextualised teaching and learning, by enlarging the scope of evidence and shifting the space within which enquiry takes place. We might then ask what causes the learning and teaching setting to be context specific and it is this question, and a sense of two levels of context, that inform the title of this paper.

Gibbs (2010) argues that SOTL studies should pay more attention to contextual variables, providing more information that enables readers to understand the limits of the study’s generalisability. He also encourages a greater use of theory as a way of allowing better transfer to other contexts. By using theory to support the analysis of a ‘contextualised’ context of learning and teaching, we can gain a better understanding of what happens in the ‘classroom’. Grauerholtz and Main (2013:158) make a similar point, suggesting that SOTL findings “should not be *assumed* to be generalizable or transferable across settings,” nor should teaching “methods be viewed as isolated behaviours” as they are “social acts informed by cultural traditions”. They should be described in terms of “specific histories and larger social contexts”. Effectively, what these authors suggest is that the context specificity of SOTL (with its focus on what works and what does not work) is *decontextualised*, because it is not explicit about all the factors that make it context specific.

Ramon Jacobson’s and Nikolaj Trubsetzkoy’s ideas of “markedness” (Battistella 1996; Jacobson 1975) provide another heuristic for understanding broader (global) implications of this question of SOTL and context. In unmarked and marked pairs (for example male/female in English) male is unmarked and can refer both to people who are male, as well as to humankind, while female is marked (linguistically

and ideologically) by its distinction from male. Unmarked terms are taken for granted, socially neutral, and often used as universals. They are the ground against which the marked figure is visible (Brekhus 1998). The marked term can represent the marginal, or even the extreme. Unmarked contexts are at the centre, while the marked contexts are at the periphery.¹ SOTL undertaken in the United States, for example, is generally unmarked – its sociocultural specificity appearing to be neutral. It does not require context. ‘Peripheral’ SOTL, however, is always marked and contextualised. As we have pointed out elsewhere (Chng & Looker 2013), there is an interesting difference between the titles of a number of significant books on learning:

- *How people learn: brain, mind experience and school* (Bransford 2004)
- *How learning works: seven research-based principles for smart teaching* (Norman, Susan, Mayer, DiPietro, Bridges & Lovett 2013)
- *Teaching the Chinese learner* (Watkins & Biggs 2001)
- *The Chinese learner revisited* (Chan & Rao 2009)

The first two titles, emanating from the US (and using US-based research) confidently assume generalisability, and they are unmarked. The second two are marked, implicitly signalling their contextual *difference* from the neutral centre. To test this further, I would invite readers to do a search on the internet using the terms ‘the Asian learner’ and then, ‘the American learner’ or even ‘the Western Learner’. In the first two pages of Google, the first set of terms produces many direct hits; the second, nothing that is directly related to the idea of Americans as learners. The last is perhaps the most interesting because it throws up more examples of the Eastern or Chinese learner, reinforcing the sense that the American, or the Western learner, remains unmarked.

Provincialising SOTL

A critical history of SOTL might reveal more about why SOTL developed in a particular culture and location (Maheux-Pelletier *et al.* 2017; Chng & Looker 2013). Chakrabarty’s *Provincializing Europe* (2000) can provide the framework to ‘provincialise SOTL’. Chakrabarty’s (2000:14) purpose in provincialising Europe is “to find out how and in what sense European ideas that were universal were also, at one and the same time, drawn from very particular intellectual and historical traditions that could not claim universal validity”. What difference would it make to SOTL if it were seen as a set of ideas that have “very particular intellectual and historical traditions” particularly when those ideas are contrasted (as below in the final section) with quite different ideas about education and learning? Another part of Chakrabarty’s argument that can easily be applied to SOTL is the notion of the historicism of ideas encapsulated in the phrase “First in the West, then the rest”, whereby ideas that begin in the West in time and place (appearing to be universally applicable), travel to other places where they are adopted and given a local inflection. While SOTL-like work has occurred previously, SOTL, as it is now spoken of, began in America, spread quickly to Canada, Australia, the UK, New Zealand, and is beginning (two decades later) to be adopted in places like Malaysia and Singapore.

¹ See Maheux-Pelletier *et al.* (2017) for a discussion of where Francophone research into teaching fits in relation to the unmarked centre.

I want to pick up the last point in the earlier section about context, and take it in another direction in relation to SOTL: to reconsider SOTL's tacit claim to be universally applicable as an approach to investigating teaching and learning. In her discussion about the universalising tendency of sociological theories generated in the global North, Connell (2007:57) suggests that the ability to universalise can be a consequence both of the inherent nature of theories to universalise, and of method. "Intellectuals in the periphery cannot universalize a locally generated perspective" she continues, "because its specificity is immediately obvious" (Connell 2007:57). It is method that we need to pay attention to here, in relation to SOTL. Taking a cue from Gibbs (2010), what SOTL work requires in order genuinely to be seen as context specific, is *more* context. As with the periphery, this context becomes visible, rather than simply left out of account. The 'reverse black box' tendency of SOTL to focus on an instrumentalist and limited context to the exclusion of the sociocultural, political, and material aspects, makes it look as if the 'classroom' itself is context free. This is a tacit claim to universality – it can be done at anytime, anywhere, and its analysis is not marred by sociocultural or political specifics. What might change this is if, as Gibbs (2010) suggests, more context provides richer explanations, then the sociocultural specificity would be more explicit, and the use of theory can help to translate it to other circumstances.

There has been, for the last couple of decades, an almost ritualistic way of discussing SOTL – including by this writer (Looker 2011). As with all such discursive rituals, it has variations that do not alter the structure. What is significant here is less the 'accuracy' of the account, than the need to repeat it. It goes something like this: 'Boyer's *Scholarship reconsidered* (1990) gave rise to a new movement that considered the practice of teaching a site for scholarship. After this, the scholarship of teaching and learning excited many people, it spread, and the number of its adherents grew. A problem, however, is that we still do not know how to define it (or do it, or write it in such a way that others can use it).' The fundamental establishing narrative I detect across works on SOTL is nicely encapsulated in the beginning of the abstract for Sharon Thomas' (2011:1) 'Broadening conceptions of what constitutes knowledge and evidence in SOTL':

In the two decades since the publication of Boyer's (1990) seminal work, the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning has earned an increasingly venerable reputation as a legitimate area of scholarship. What remains contentious, however, is the form that such scholarship takes.

Kern, Mettetal, Dixson and Morgan (2015:1) begin by noting the twenty-fifth anniversary of *Scholarship reconsidered*. They then comment on how SOTL has blossomed. This is followed by a paragraph in which they lament that there is still confusion about the role of SOTL and its "contribution to scholarship". Woodhouse (2010:1) marks ten years since the publication of Hutchings and Shulman's *The scholarship of teaching* (1999), notes that proponents have high hopes for its impact, and regrets that "it is easier to demonstrate increased SOTL research activity than to identify evidence of ... transformative effects". The next section of the article is devoted to describing the evolution of SOTL from Boyer. Potter and Kustra (2011) offer a more compact version:

Although it has been nearly twenty years since Boyer popularized the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) in *Scholarship Reconsidered*, unsupported assumptions abound, particularly regarding the relationship between SoTL and scholarly teaching.

For more recent variations on this theme, see the introductory sections of Booth and Woollacott (2015) and Banda and Banda (2017). When I fell into this trope myself (Looker 2011) it seemed a natural way to enter a discussion of SOTL and cultural difference. It is almost as if retelling this story will squeeze out some essence of the scholarship of teaching and learning. At the same time, the repetition of this narrative is a naturalising process, disguising the fact that it is a (repetitively) limiting historical construction.

A number of writers have pointed out that the scholarship of teaching and learning (as 'SOTL') arose within a pre-existing culture of faculty/educational developers in the USA and with different traditions in the UK and Australia (Hutchings, Huber & Ciccone 2011; Brawley, Kelly & Timmins 2009; Bender 2005). Nevertheless, Hutchings, Huber and Ciccone (2011:49) firmly place the scholarship of teaching as a creation that flows from Boyer:

The scholarship of teaching and learning, *as a distinct concept*, can be traced to former Carnegie Foundation Ernest Boyer's seminal 1990 work, *Scholarship Reconsidered*. But as the concept began to take shape in campus discussions and initiatives, it benefited from a variety of earlier (and in most cases ongoing) traditions. (Emphasis added.)

Furthermore, reading these accounts acknowledging a more complex history of the beginning of SOTL makes it abundantly clear that all references are North American. This is a North American history.

In *Southern theory*, Connell (2007) suggests that sociology needs to free itself from being defined in terms of the global North, the metropole, and a classical canon created mainly in the USA. She concludes that social sciences might instead be seen as a set of projects proceeding from varied social starting points towards an unpredictable future. One of the conditions for achieving this requires decentring the theoretical control of the global North that has long prevailed in the discipline and maintains sway over the practice of sociology – even in cultures that are marginalised by it. SOTL may be seen in a similar way as proceeding from the global North to produce an approach that appears almost innocently universal (through exclusion of context). Provincialising SOTL means first asking why there is a need to routinely repeat and reinscribe its history. Why has this historical narrative not begun to include, as an essential part of the narrative, what has happened in other countries, such as Sweden, South Africa and Malaysia, where 'SOTL' is also used as the rubric for scholarship of teaching and learning?

Further to this point, Canagarajah's (2002:37) persuasive argument about "the hegemony of Western academic journals [which] is so complete that the superiority ascribed to them has been somewhat internalized by periphery scholars themselves" can be applied to the publication of SOTL. To date, the major SOTL journals are in the global North, even though, as Clegg (2007) suggests, scholars outside the 'centre' of SOTL, such as those in South Africa, are undercited.

Can we imagine a form of SOTL where investigations of student learning not only proceed from varied social starting points, grounded in local contexts, but also produce generalisable understandings from within local knowledge and culture? *SOTL in the South* provides one of those different points of departure.

A teaching anecdote

In 2010 I moved from the University of Newcastle (Australia) to Nanyang Technological University (Singapore). This section describes a comparison of a particular learning activity undertaken at both universities in a course for PhD students in higher education teaching practice. I am aware of inherent limitations in this description as a form of analysis, but one of the points of this is to use a teacher-generated understanding of the classroom to show some of the shortcomings I see in the SOTL approach outlined above. In other words, I am imitating what might be the beginnings of a typical SOTL investigation of what works and what does not work in the classroom.

The example from Singapore derives from a course with around 300 students divided into classes of 30, and describes student responses to a particular activity in three successive (different) classes of 30. The classes vary slightly from one another other but contain only a small number of Singaporean students (less than 10%), a large number of students from the People's Republic of China (about 55%), fewer from India (around 20%), and the remainder is a mixture of Vietnamese, Indonesian, Malaysian, a few from Eastern European countries, and one or two from Iran and Western Europe. The comparison is made with a PhD class in Australia taking an almost identical course over a period of three years (2007-2009), with 25-35 students in the class, depending on the year. It contained predominantly Australian and Western European students, with a small number of South-East Asian students.

The activity took place in the first module of the course, which begins with a general discussion about the nature of learning, narrowing down to more specific discussions of learning theories. The idea is to get students to think as openly as possible about different meanings of learning and the process of learning, in order to consider learning in the context of higher education. They are asked individually to write on a Post-it note how they would describe human learning. They then stick the responses randomly on the wall and are directed to spend ten minutes reading what has been posted, and to attempt to cluster the notes into conceptual similarities. The idea is not to come up with clear clusters of concepts, but to generate conversation.

In Australia, this led to noisy activity in arranging and rearranging the notes on the board, and I generally had to stop it because the students had plenty to say. There had been a consistent response to the activity over the years. It did, as intended, provoke a lot of discussion which fed into subsequent discussions.

In Singapore, however, once the notes had been put on the board, the students stood together in a group, silently staring at them. No one moved, and there was almost no talking. My attempts to encourage them to shift the notes failed. The same reaction happened in all three classes (with different students).

In the last class, a German student, the only Western European in the class, voluntarily gave me some feedback. He said that he had attempted to move one of the Post-it notes, but sotto voce one of the students had said, "You can't move that, it's mine."

This response was so completely different from any experience I had had before in Australia that I was completely lost for an explanation. I consulted a colleague from a Malaysian Chinese background who has taught in the same course, and who has lived and taught for significant periods in both Canada and Singapore. She immediately said, “No, what you did wouldn’t work here.” The next section is based on some of the suggested reading she gave me, and some that I found myself. It provides a much broader framework within which to analyse the situation and serves as an example of how I think SOTL must contextualise the teaching context. The point to keep in mind here is that if SOTL is about ‘what works’, how can we account for an activity that works in one context and not another?

Extending the contextualising of SOTL

The movement described here from a Western context (Australia) to an Asian context (Singapore) involves a number of potential pitfalls. The comparison of the two situations can too easily be construed as going from a teaching context where the activity ‘works’, or achieves what is intended, to one in which it does not work. To be clear, that was how I first experienced it – as an indication of the extent to which I had myself assumed that cultural differences are irrelevant to the effectiveness of certain kinds of classroom techniques. The first question I asked myself was: “Why didn’t that work?” Part of this discussion is to be aware of my own immersion in a cultural point of view that seemed natural, or universal, and had allowed me, up to that time, to take SOTL and its approaches for granted. I want to use this ‘critical incident’ as a means of interrogating the assumptions and processes of SOTL as it manifests itself within Western thinking, to provincialise both it and myself.

An objection may be raised here against what appears to be a contradiction, which is that I am rehearsing precisely the process I have critiqued: using my own experience of the classroom to reflect on what ‘works’ and what does not work (Hutchings, Huber & Ciccone 2011; Prosser 2008). From the beginning, the great appeal of SOTL to faculty has been, as Bernstein (2010:1) suggests, that “an attitude of inquiry about teaching and learning is no longer limited to faculty members who specialize in education research”. There is something quite powerful and liberating about this for teachers. The question now is to ask how those reflecting on their teaching can stand back from themselves as reinscribers of their culture, to take a more structural and critical view of what happens in the ‘classroom’. This is a form of inquiry that can take into account the fact that “Knowledge cannot be understood outside of the cultural parameters that condition its emergence and modes of reproduction” (Weir & Hutchings 2005:89).

Two points can be made here about contradictions at the heart of SOTL as it is generally formulated. First, an essential part of SOTL is the distinction made between scholarly teaching and the scholarship of teaching and learning (Richlin & Cox 2004:127) where scholarly teaching involves using pedagogical research as the foundation for teaching, while the scholarship of teaching and learning involves “formal peer-reviewed communication”. More recently, Huber (2013) has called this going “public with what you find so your peers can review it, critique it and build on it”. If, however, SOTL is grounded in specific contexts (Felten 2011), and not generalisable (Gibbs 2010), who are the peers for whom the published work is relevant? Banda and Banda (2017) note that Franzese and Felten (2017) draw attention to the way SOTL findings are difficult to replicate when the research is context based. They add that the “faculty and classroom designs and implementation heuristics of the SOTL strategies [outlined by them] have a Western and monocultural orientation” (Franzese & Felten 2017:63). By

what mechanism, we need to ask, will published work make enough sense for others to build on? And what happens when people in quite different sociocultural contexts publish in 'international' SOTL journals? For whom are they creating the building blocks? One possible answer to this, if we are not able to expand the scope of SOTL to encompass an understanding of sociocultural context, is that SOTL becomes a form of intellectual insularity, where the only people one can talk to are those who share sociocultural circumstances and assumptions.

Secondly, I am acutely aware here of Li's (2004:128) contention in his chapter 'A Chinese culture of learning', that of four impediments to better research into understanding learners from different cultures, "the greatest ... is the ... persistent reliance on Western concepts without attending to indigenous or emic cultural meanings and their psychological manifestation in learning". One could also ask what it might be like to reverse the West-to-the-rest trend and ask what would happen if Chinese metaphors and theories of education were part of the analysis of Western education as well as Chinese education (Singh & Huang 2012). There is a deeper point in Li's critique of the use of Western theories to analyse Chinese student learning, and this goes to the problem of SOTL appearing to be culture free. It is that many comparative studies of Western and Eastern learning are grounded in Western notions:

[of] processes, motivation, efficacy, and effectiveness of learning [and] cannot be readily applied to studying learners in very different cultures. The reason is quite simple: these concepts and theories were developed by Western people to study Western people based on Western cultural norms and values. ... it is perplexing why Western concepts still assume unquestionable validity and potency in much cross-cultural research on learning. (Li 2004:129)

Li does acknowledge that formal education is now conducted in a similar way throughout the world. Students go to school and university and have teachers, so that the formal classroom setting that I have been referring to as the 'classroom' is similar in China, South Africa and the USA. However, Li (and others, such as Nisbett 2004) demonstrate that cultural beliefs about learning – what undertaking learning means, what the broader purpose of education is, and so on – are really different across cultures, and an integral part of learning behaviour: "The views children construct about learning may crucially shape how they approach, engage in, and ultimately achieve learning" (Li 2004:125). His chapter clearly elucidates evidence of significant differences in the relationship between learning beliefs and learning behaviour in both China and the US. Importantly, Li (2004:132) detects conceptions of learning as "defined, experienced and pursued, by Chinese learners themselves". Of importance here is his argument that the Western emphasis on "cognitive processes over other human capacities and functioning" (Li 2004:128), and the Western research focus on the end results of learning achievement, are not applicable to the Chinese learner. The steps in undertaking SOTL quoted above from Bishop-Clark and Dietz-Uhler illustrate the degree to which SOTL conforms to this characterisation of Western approaches to learning and teaching research.

In a similar vein, Oyserman, Coon and Kimmelmeier (2002:4) point to a tension between the assumption that European Americans are "uniquely high in individualism and low in collectivism" and the parallel assumption that psychological models developed within the individualist framework are universal models, rather than "models derived from and applied to an individualistic worldview". Their extensive paper reconsidering aspects of individualism and collectivism finds that Americans are

“robustly lower” in collectivism than people of Chinese origin (Oyserman *et al.* 2002:28). If we go back to the idea of provincialising SOTL, one thing we can do is recognise that Western measures need to be seen as part of the context of origin, without necessarily generalising.

Nisbett’s (2004) *Geography of thought* – initially recommended to me by the colleague mentioned above – is of particular interest to this discussion because it sprang from one of Nisbett’s unnamed Chinese PhD students challenging him about the western tendency to universalise, with the following:

The Chinese believe in constant change, but with things always moving back to some prior state. They pay attention to a wide range of events; they search for relationships between things; and they think you can’t understand the part without understanding the whole. Westerners live in a simpler, more deterministic world; they focus on salient objects or people instead of the larger picture; and they think they can control events because they know the rules that govern the behaviour of objects.

This is the same as the challenge I felt in my classes in Singapore when confronted with a situation I could not make sense of. One of the many valuable aspects of this book is that it enculturates Western thought, provincialises it, and draws attention to how it is enabled to behave *as if it’s universal* by decontextualising the objects of its attention. This helps to locate SOTL in the terms in which Gibbs talks about it as decontextualised. Prior to undertaking this study, Nisbett acknowledges he had himself assumed universal relevance for the nature of human thought – that everyone shared cognitive processes and reason in the same way. Cultural differences are not cognitive differences but the result of exposure to different aspects of the world. The book, however, explores what are profound differences in the way the world is seen and thought about from East Asia (Japan, Korea, China) to the US. A pervasive notion in Nisbett’s book is the way East Asians of different nationalities actually *perceive* context, whereas Westerners take little notice of it. And, as Li (2004) points out, these differences cannot be seen in dichotomous terms. In the context of learning, they need to be understood from within the view of learning held by the learners themselves.

Finally, in a study of how Japanese and American mothers use language with their infants (cited in Nisbett 2004), Fernand and Morikawa (1993) found that the American mothers labelled objects more frequently and consistently than the Japanese mothers, while the Japanese mothers used objects to engage infants in social routines more often than the American mothers. In other words, at the level of primary language learning, cultural differences are shaping the way the children interact with the world around them.

I am including this material for two reasons. The first has to do with evidence. What evidence can we bring to SOTL contexts to gain a better understanding? Secondly, the research I am citing here provides further illustration of the need to acknowledge the effects of cultural differences on education. My own understanding has followed a similar path to that of Nisbett, beginning from a position of thinking that teaching activities that ‘work’ in one context will work in another. What I discovered is that intra-classroom reflection will not help to understand the deeper contexts in which teaching takes place. It is a dead end. The deeper structure of Western SOTL is also based on assumptions about successful cognitive functioning within a Western framework, not on the broader context required to understand East Asian education.

Conclusion

Writing about East Asian students studying business in the UK, Ng (2007:50) concludes:

Western instructors often assume that their notion of the value of knowledge and how it can be conveyed and learnt has little to do with culture. [My findings and those in other research] suggest that culture influences all dimensions of learning.

The effect of this is to assume that certain forms of Western cognition are universal. They can, however, only be seen as universal if the complexities of context and relationship are backgrounded, where the best measure of learning is whether students achieve our intended cognitive outcomes.

It is true that, as an idea, SOTL has been taken up around the world, yet there is still a sense of centre and periphery, where it is the periphery that marks its cultural difference. Banda and Banda (2017) demonstrate the vital importance of not only widening the evidence brought to the interpretation of student learning (as I have done), but throwing the net further to incorporate what happens outside the classroom as a way to make more meaningful what happens inside. Nevertheless, we are still at a stage where Banda and Banda feel the need to recount the SOTL background in order to reject aspects of it, find what they can use, and remake it. They are still writing in relation to that history of SOTL – *as I am myself* – not yet as a project beginning from a different social starting point.

I do not wish to say here that this is a matter of scholars in different cultures adopting the protocols of SOTL and making them their own. That would be to miss the point and to fulfil the movement Chakrabarty outlines whereby ideas generated in the West are eventually disseminated to the rest of the world, and where people can adapt them to their own circumstances. The point is to require the kind of change in the Western (and Anglophone) provinces that also gives them their place in a genuinely international dialogue among *provincial, always acculturated equals*. This requires a change in approach, an enlarging of the context outside the 'classroom', and the explicit acknowledgement of the limits of the context – see, for example, Stephen Block Schulman (2016). It may require the willingness of scholars of teaching and learning to be interrogators of their own sociocultural positioning as teachers, and perhaps the adoption of a form of thick description that seeks to understand the experience of the 'classroom' crossed with cultural, material and political influences.

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