

Report on the Impact of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning on the UW-System

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Overview

In Fall, 2006, the UWS Leadership Site for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) developed a web-based survey to assess the impact of SoTL on the UW System. All OPID Teaching Fellows and Scholars for the past several years were contacted and invited to complete the survey. In addition, all OPID faculty and administrative representatives (two from each UWS campus) were contacted and asked to distribute information about the survey and request completion from faculty on their respective campuses. The result was that 223 faculty from across the system completed the survey. Respondents from each of the fourteen campuses were represented.

The survey was divided into five parts regarding the impact of SoTL. The first set of questions queried respondents about the **personal** impact of SoTL on their teaching practices. The second set of questions investigated the impact of SoTL on the respondents' **students and classrooms**. The third part of the survey looked at how being involved in SoTL has impacted the respondents' **departments**. The fourth set of questions asked respondents to judge the **institutional** impact of SoTL on their campuses. Finally, we asked questions about the **disciplinary** impact of SoTL.

The results of this survey were presented at the International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (ISSOTL) conference in Washington DC, November 2006, by Tony Ciccone and Renee Meyers. A summary of the results is provided below.

Summary of Findings from UWS SoTL Impact Survey

Personal Impact and SoTL

The survey results indicate that, for these respondents, engagement in SoTL research has had a profound personal impact on them (see questions 1-8 on survey). The general overall response to the first eight questions on personal impact is "strongly agree." For example, 60% of the respondents indicated that they were more interested in teaching and learning issues since becoming involved in SoTL initiatives and research. Likewise, over 50% of respondents said that they talk more with colleagues about teaching and learning questions, and feel they are a better teacher since becoming involved in SoTL work. The results also show that respondents have a strong interest in continuing to read SoTL research, and do SoTL investigative work.

These results are very positive, and show a strong personal impact on UWS individual faculty members. Respondents indicated a renewed interest in teaching and learning since becoming involved in SoTL work, stressed that they are more acutely aware of how to access research that can help them become better teachers, and are

interested in helping to build a community of SoTL researchers across UWS disciplines and campuses. Qualitative comments from respondents support these survey findings:

I am now more intentional in how I think about teaching and learning.

SoTL is critical to understanding, improving, and evaluating student learning. As a result of SoTL research, I have a much better understanding of how students are “making sense” of the course material.

One of the great things about SoTL is the ability to talk with other faculty about teaching strategy and ideas. The networking with SoTL colleagues has been the major benefit for me.

In a world (academe) that still does not know what to do with interdisciplinary research or how to truly support collaborative initiatives, I find OPID and the SoTL work to be an oasis. It has provided opportunities to connect across campuses and across departments—to meet diverse colleagues and to share ideas in a rich and meaningful way. Additionally, it has focused on the main objective of a university—one that academe often shunts aside and forgets: good teaching and life-long learning. Thank you.

Because of SoTL, I see more vividly how I fall short. The old adage “the more you know, the more you know you don’t know” rings true. But this is not a complaint. On the contrary, I enjoy my job more, and I feel like I actually make a difference—not just in the clichéd “students are our future, and teachers impact students” way but also in the way my SoTL work and interests impact my peers.

Classroom Impact and SoTL

In terms of the impact of SoTL on respondents’ classrooms (questions 9-13), the results are also quite positive. Approximately 70% of the respondents “somewhat or strongly agreed” that they tell students about the results of their SoTL work. Over 90% of the respondents said that they “somewhat or strongly agree” that they now teach differently because of the results of their SoTL work, and they incorporate the results of their SoTL work into the design and teaching of their courses. A fair number of these faculty respondents (56%) “somewhat or strongly agreed” that they seek to involve their students in SoTL work

These results show that UWS faculty are not only engaging in SoTL research but are also communicating findings from that research to their students. In addition, they are using their investigative SoTL work to redesign their courses, to develop new ways of teaching, and to re-evaluate the content of their courses. In short, the impact of SoTL on these faculty members’ classrooms is clearly evident. These faculty are now making informed teaching and learning choices based on their own, or others, SoTL research. It is no longer a “trial and error” process, but is grounded in research findings about how students best learn. The

centrality of this impact on classrooms and students can best be summed up with comments from the respondents themselves.

The greatest impact has been on my own teaching and the courses that I have re-designed and re-developed

SoTL has made me look carefully at my teaching methods as well as how effectively my students learn.

Being connected with the SoTL movement has given me permission to experiment a lot more in my classes.

My SoTL project has completely changed the way I view both teaching and research. I have become a strong advocate of SoTL research on my campus.

I have redesigned my curriculum based on the outcomes of my research. Additionally, my students have applied aspects of my work in improving their study skills and their appreciation of the discipline as a whole.

Departmental Impact and SoTL

At the departmental level, the existence of impact is somewhat less clear. Respondents to the survey indicated that they seek to get their departmental colleagues involved in SoTL work (approximately 70% said they somewhat or strongly agree with that statement), and even more of the respondents have talked with one of their departmental colleagues about their SoTL work (90% of respondents somewhat or strongly agreed with that statement). However, a smaller percentage of these respondents have presented their SoTL research findings to departmental colleagues (47% somewhat agree or strongly agree), and results are very mixed regarding whether departmental colleagues value SoTL research or consider SoTL research in promotion and tenure cases.

These results suggest that SoTL researchers across the system are trying to impact their departmental colleagues, but that progress is slow. There is some indication that departmental colleagues are talking about SoTL research findings informally, and are also presenting findings in more formal campus-wide formats. However, there appears to be less impact when one examines how departments view SoTL research in promotion and tenure cases, and how they value SoTL investigative work overall. Some of the respondents' comments confirm these findings:

I am non-tenured yet, and do not know the exact impact of my SoTL work at this time . . . my department values my research though they aren't clear about what it is about . . . nor are they especially interested. I count on the SoTL campus community to support that part of my professional life. Right now, I would say

that without this community, I am not at all certain of my potential for success here.

While my university department has not actively embraced SoTL work, I have engaged in a communication-in-the-discipline SoTL project with communication colleagues from three other universities. SoTL has enhanced my desire to participate in interdisciplinary and inter-university projects.

No respect in the department for this work. They are teachers and they say they know it all. . . They just don't get it here.

My SoTL experience has been shared by the faculty in my department and the faculty in mathematics departments in the UW System.

Institutional Impact

The impact of SoTL at the institutional level is somewhat mixed (according to the survey results). It was encouraging that respondents indicated many of their campuses have teaching and learning centers (67% agreed), that there are SoTL campus-wide events each year on their campus (85% agreed), and that SoTL work is valued on their campus (76% agreed). Less encouraging were respondents answers when asked if SoTL research was considered in tenure and promotion cases at their university (32% agreed; 31% didn't know), or when asked if most faculty and academic staff are aware of the SoTL movement (54% agreed). Interestingly, respondents felt that administrators were more aware of the SoTL movement (65% agreed) than faculty and academic staff. Approximately 67% of respondents thought that SoTL work was connected with institutional initiatives affecting student learning on their campuses. Some relevant comments include:

I also believe that we have administrative support (at least the Dean of Arts and Sciences and the Chancellor) for SoTL on our campus. I do not know how that plays out on the tenure table.

Funding via grants is key to getting faculty to participate. My campus has done a great job of making grant/stipend dollars available.

Disciplinary Impact

In general, there does not seem to be a lot of broader disciplinary impact from SoTL work in the UW System. Some UWS scholars have presented papers at national disciplinary conferences (approximately 58% agreed with that statement), but only forty-six percent of respondents indicated that their disciplinary society had a SoTL interest group or division. In addition, the data suggest that while some UWS scholars are presenting their work at disciplinary conferences (national, state, or regional), approximately the same number of scholars have *not* presented at disciplinary conferences. There were no qualitative comments that addressed disciplinary impact.

Demographic Data

Most of the respondents to the survey were full-time faculty members, and responses were received from all of the UWS institutions. The majority of survey respondents have been involved with SoTL initiatives or research for 1-6 years, approximately the lifespan of SoTL work in the system. In addition, most respondents have undertaken (approximately 80%), and presented (approximately 70%), 1-4 SoTL research projects. Unfortunately, to date, fewer respondents have actually *published* their work (65% of respondents have not published their SoTL projects). Since publication has the possibility of producing impact both within and outside the system, more effort needs to be focused here.

Summary and Implications

The findings of this survey warrant three conclusions. First, respondents to this survey report a great deal of personal impact from being involved in SoTL work and initiatives. Second, faculty involvement in SoTL work is impacting what occurs in the classrooms, and by extension, their students' learning. Third, the impact of SoTL in the UW System has more limited impact at the departmental, institutional, and broader disciplinary levels. The implications of each of these findings is explored in more detail next.

Personal Impact of SoTL

The results of this survey indicate that, for this group of respondents, involvement in SoTL activities and research has had a clear and strong impact on their personal development as teachers. These faculty respondents are reading more research and literature on teaching and learning, have become more interested in teaching and learning issues and questions, talk more to their colleagues about teaching and learning questions, feel they are influencing their students' learning because of improved teaching practices, and believe they are now better teachers overall. In addition, their involvement in SoTL initiatives has piqued their interest in doing additional SoTL research on teaching and learning.

Clearly the personal impact on these respondents has important implications for teaching and learning in the UW System. These findings suggest that faculty who engage in SoTL activities and research are actively developing their teaching abilities and practices, and are becoming more knowledgeable teachers because of these efforts. Moreover, they are actively engaged in discussing teaching and learning issues with their colleagues. This discussion process is vital to their development as teachers because it is in discussion with colleagues that learning about innovative teaching practices typically occurs. So engagement in collaborations, whether through discussion or research, provides an important venue for faculty improvement of teaching practices.

In short, involvement in SoTL initiatives is the impetus for an array of personal changes by these respondents in their teaching practices. Once involved in collaborative relationships with other UWS colleagues in SoTL, they become more knowledgeable about teaching and learning through increased reading, they discuss teaching and learning issues more with these colleagues, they become more interested in finding out answers to

teaching and learning questions through continued research, and they perceive themselves as better teachers. These findings suggest that involvement in SoTL is an important avenue for improving teaching in the UW System, and can have profound transformational effects on those who participate.

Impact on Classrooms and Students

As important as personal impact is, it is even more important for teachers to have an impact on their students' learning. These results suggest that engagement in SoTL work engenders a stronger focus on student learning, and changes in teaching practices that result in improved student learning. Survey respondents indicated that they now teach differently because of the results of their SoTL research, that they incorporate the results of their SoTL investigative work into the design and teaching of their classes, that they have changed the content of their courses based on SoTL work they have read or completed, and that they tell their students about the results of their SoTL work.

The classroom impact identified in these respondents' survey answers is a significant finding. By implication, these results show that involvement in SoTL research not only improves teaching practice, but also improves student learning. That is, as a result of SoTL work, faculty are redesigning their classes and changing their teaching methods. In addition, they are bringing the results of their own work on teaching and learning into the classroom—telling their students about it, using it to redesign their class, changing the content of their courses. All of these actions are focused on improving students learning opportunities, and on creating classroom climates where students are encouraged and expected to learn to their highest potential.

Departmental, Institutional, and Disciplinary Impact of SoTL

At the more macro-levels of the university and discipline, the impact of SoTL is less clear-cut. It was encouraging to note that at the departmental level, these respondents are actively engaged in discussions with departmental colleagues regarding SoTL research; still, in general, departments across the UW System do not particularly value SoTL research (perhaps because they do not understand what it is) and are reluctant to consider it in tenure and promotion cases. The picture that emerges is one of a fairly large core of faculty in the UW System (from all campuses) that are working individually or collaboratively on SoTL research, but these faculty are often not nestled within a single department on any given campus. Instead, faculty are engaged collaboratively with like-minded colleagues from across different disciplines on the same campus, or from the same discipline on different campuses. This interdisciplinary or inter-campus work is extremely valuable, but it may also be time to make concentrated efforts to engage entire departments in this work. The implications of such a move would be that departments could then all talk constructively about the same teaching and learning issues, could identify curriculum issues that could be improved by SoTL investigative work, and could participate together on research around teaching and learning issues that would benefit their students.

At the institutional level, there is evidence of the beginnings of a teaching and learning culture, including campus-wide SoTL colloquiums, and centers that coordinate SoTL initiatives and research, on many campuses. But more attention

should be paid to valuing SoTL research and the inclusion of SoTL research in the tenure and promotion process. In addition, connecting SoTL work to institutional initiatives affecting student learning will continue to be important for future endeavors.

Finally, at the disciplinary level, many respondents indicated that there are SoTL papers paneled at their national disciplinary conferences, but few indicated that their disciplinary society had a SoTL interest group or division. In addition, only about one-third of the respondents indicated that they had presented their own SoTL research findings at a national, regional, or state disciplinary conference. It should be noted that much SoTL research is likely presented at SoTL-oriented conference rather than disciplinary conferences. However, if the SoTL movement is to have an impact on disciplinary modes of teaching and learning, then disciplinary societies must create a space for presentation of SoTL findings.

In sum, the picture emerging from this data suggests that the UWS SoTL initiatives are affecting the personal development and growth of teacher-scholars on its campuses. Faculty are learning more about effective teaching practices, teaching and learning issues, and improving their own teaching through engagement, and collaboration, with other faculty across the system on SoTL research projects. This engagement is closely linked to classroom revisions and changes that affect, and improve, the student learning process. In short, as faculty become engaged in SoTL work involving scholarly inquiry into student learning, they simultaneously improve their own teaching practices. SoTL becomes a “habit” that results in benefits to both the faculty member and the students. Ultimately, these benefits could reach across departmental, institutional, and disciplinary boundaries. To date, some of these benefits are already evident but much work remains. As these data indicate, as the practice of SoTL continues to become embedded in campus cultures, everyone at the university (departments, faculty, administrators, and most importantly, students) will be positively influenced.