

# Completely different or not so far apart? Exploring the relevance of SoTL research across disciplines

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## Extended abstract

The enhancement of teaching and learning in higher education has attracted increasing attention over the last decades. Among the approaches used to develop teaching in higher education, generic courses and workshops take the lion's share (see Neumann, 2001; Healey, 2003). However, a predominant focus on instruction scarcely mirrors typical academic settings, where research, writing and publications drive scholarly discourse. The field of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) addresses this discrepancy. In SoTL, academics use scholarly means to investigate their own teaching practice (see Pope-Ruark, 2012). As research on teaching is executed by scholars working within a certain discipline, the question remains whether such teaching research has any relevance for teachers in higher education outside the author's own disciplinary field. As a result, this paper investigates how academics from a variety of disciplines evaluate the relevance of other academics' research in their own teaching.

The methods used to research our question are a review of existing literature and the qualitative analysis of feedback comments provided by academics concerning the relevance of colleagues' presentations of their teaching research projects. The literature review defines SoTL (see Pope-Ruark, 2012; Potter & Kustra, 2011) and discusses the impacts of disciplines on teaching and learning in higher education. Some authors assume that teaching mirrors discipline-specific concepts of knowledge creation (see Neumann, 2001; Healey, 2003), while others advocate a generic view of teaching (see Bamber, 2012). Our qualitative analysis was carried out in the context of the Certificate in Teaching in Higher Education at University of Innsbruck, Austria. As part of the certificate, participants define a question concerning their own teaching practice, investigate it empirically and describe their research in a written case study (University of Innsbruck, 2013b). This process is supervised by a faculty development expert. After completing their research, authors present their results and discuss them with an academic audience. These presentations are hosted by the vice rector for student affairs and teaching and the vice rector for human resources. For this paper, feedback comments provided by the case study audience for quality assurance purposes were analysed with a two-dimensional framework. The first dimension places academics according to faculty background along Becher & Trowler's disciplinary characteristics (2001) in hard pure, soft pure, hard applied or soft applied sciences. The second dimension of the framework is largely based on Peterssen's differentiation of teaching and learning arrangements (2009). These allow allocating the topics named relevant in academics' written feedback to thematic clusters. We differentiate among comprehensive teaching concepts (TC), teaching arrangements (TA) coordinating methods, media and classroom organisation, teaching methods (TM) linking teaching objectives and contents, teaching techniques (TT) as singular teaching or learning activities, and the organization - or setting - of teaching (TO) (see Peterssen, 2009). Our framework dismisses Peterssen's teaching principles category. A SPSS-based data analysis then helped us identify patterns in the feedback comments concerning (a) which aspects of teaching and learning in higher education were presented, (b) which themes

were mentioned in the responses and (c) which disciplines presenters and commenters originated from.

Based on the analysis of 112 response forms submitted by 231 participants, our research resulted in the following findings. Members of hard applied and soft pure sciences represented the highest number of attendees and presenters. The most recurrent presentation themes were teaching methods, followed by teaching concepts and teaching arrangements. In most sessions the discipline represented by the highest number of attendees was at least one of the presenters' disciplines. The most frequent participant feedback concerned the general relevance of the case study presentations. The most relevant teaching themes for the respondents were teaching techniques and teaching methods. The least frequently mentioned themes were teaching organisation and teaching concepts. Furthermore, we tested whether a link could be established between disciplinary background and the relevance of teaching themes expressed in the feedback comments. Members of soft sciences indicated significantly higher relevance compared to hard sciences for the teaching concept and teaching techniques themes and in terms of generally appreciative comments. To summarise, this means that the SoTL case study presentations are appreciated across all faculties as platforms facilitating cross-disciplinary exchange about teaching. Moreover, presenters' and attendees' disciplinary closeness represents a decisive factor for attending the case study presentations and thus for finding relevance in the teaching themes presented. However, the high number of general comments and responses relating to teaching techniques could also be interpreted as an indication of academics' difficulty to express themselves in didactic terms. Beyond this general appreciation, disciplinary preferences for certain teaching themes exist. Finally, the high number of general comments also suggests that SoTL does not directly provoke specific consequences in other academics' teaching.

Despite the limited scope of our research and some methodological shortcomings, our findings have implications for teaching and learning development in higher education (see also Kreber, 2001). The high number of attendees' appreciative comments observed in our analysis and the arguments proposed by literature suggest that SoTL can represent a relevant source of learning about teaching. Designing teaching research projects according to SoTL criteria enables academics to generalise research implications and thus increase the relevance of each other's research on teaching beyond a specific discipline. As a result, SoTL provides a useful approach for the enhancement of teaching and learning in higher education. In order to successfully implement SoTL, a teaching development program first needs to define and communicate research standards to enable academics to share their empirically supported findings about teaching. Second, SoTL research methods need to be trained to encourage the generalisation of findings outside their original contexts and thus increase the relevance of academics' teaching research across different fields. Third, in order to disseminate SoTL results, opportunities and incentives need to be made available to publish research and thus make it accessible across disciplines. At Innsbruck University, a website has been installed to promote online publications in the field of SoTL (see University of Innsbruck, 2013a). Fourth, supervisor support for carrying out teaching research is crucial. This way, the development and distribution of teaching expertise can potentially trigger further discipline-specific teaching development among disciplinary Communities of Practice.

In conclusion, our findings confirm that SoTL research is relevant for academics from a range of disciplines. The generic nature of SoTL research methods enables scholars from different backgrounds to access each other's research. However, discipline remains a decisive factor for academics to seek relevance in other academics' research. It can thus be concluded that

the potential offered by SoTL research for teaching development in higher education may not first and foremost depend on whether academics' disciplines are completely different or not so far apart, but on whether academics can discover and acknowledge its relevance and whether the transfer of learning from teaching research is supported. In order to facilitate the crossing of disciplinary boundaries and the impact of SoTL findings on teaching practice, a reconsideration of the role of teaching and learning professionals is necessary. They need to actively determine standards for teaching research, create opportunities for SoTL publications and enhance the impacts made by SoTL research within and across disciplines. This clearly takes faculty development beyond the provision of teaching and learning enhancement courses and places it alongside established academic ways of building knowledge.

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