

FACULTY LIFE, SOTL

SOTL — WISCONSIN STYLE

JANUARY 10, 2014 | LEAVE A COMMENT

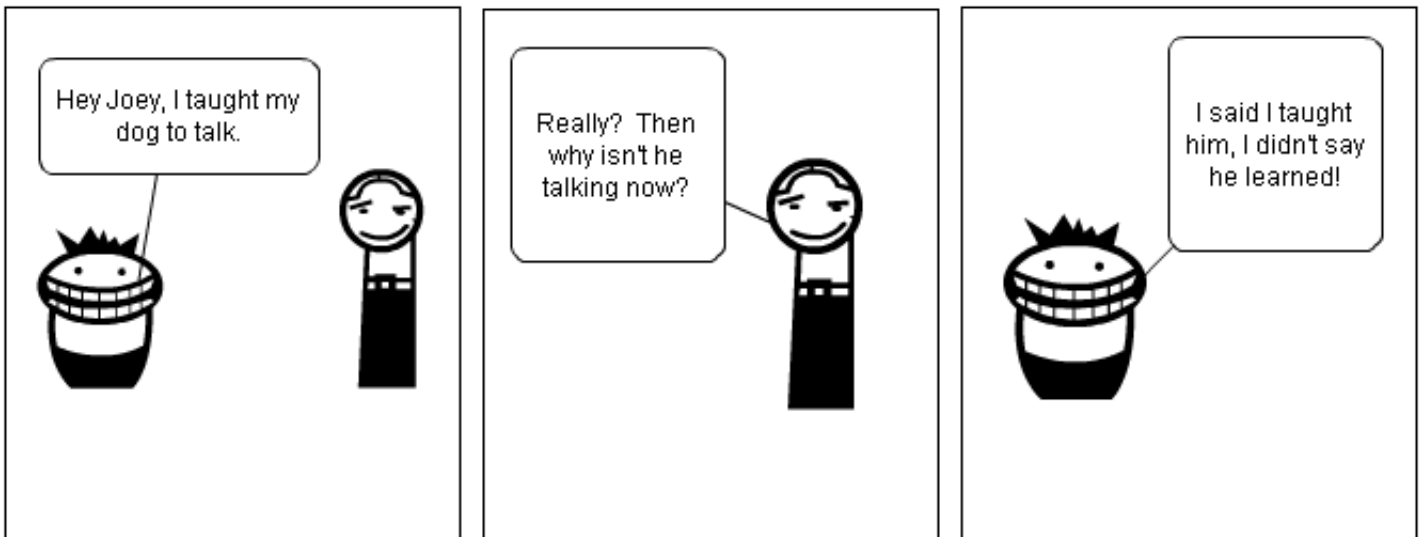
When I first became involved in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) as a UWGB Teaching Scholar in 2004, and then again as a Wisconsin Teaching Fellow in 2006, I had certain doubts. At an early Wisconsin Teaching Fellows & Scholars meeting, I jotted down a list of several questions I had about SoTL and its approach to teaching and learning — most of them emerging out of my perspective as a humanist. I worried that attempts to measure learning, if taken too far, could be reductive not only methodologically but also practically — meaning SoTL might nudge teaching practice toward an exclusive focus on those aspects of learning that can be readily quantified.

I continue to believe that educators need to defend a robust (and non-reductive) concept of learning, but I have come to see SoTL (especially as it is practiced at UWGB and within the UW System more generally) as an ally in this cause. If there is a “party line” among the SoTL practitioners in the UW System, it’s a commitment to a process — the process of systematic investigation into teaching and learning as a means of improving student learning. To be clear: “systematic” here is not a code word for “quantitative” research. Plenty of SoTL work being done in Wisconsin is qualitative research very much in keeping with humanistic traditions. Perhaps what’s most heartening about SoTL in the UW System is the inclusive and open-knit community that exists across the state. Faculty and academic staff from a wide variety of disciplines are doing both quantitative and qualitative research into learning and are benefiting tremendously from a mutual exchange of ideas.

Within the UW System, the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) has been nurtured and shaped in large part by the [Office of Professional and Instructional Development \(OPID\)](#). The UWGB Teaching Scholars program, founded in 2000 with support from an OPID grant, was modeled on the Wisconsin Teaching Fellows and Scholars (WTF&S) program, which is also a year-long program aimed at both improving teaching and guiding participants through a SoTL project.

In addition to these two programs, the SoTL “infrastructure” within the UW System includes a regular spring conference and a systemwide Faculty College, which takes place the week after Memorial Day each year. On the UWGB campus, we also have an annual Faculty Development conference in January, which has often provided a venue for sharing and learning about SoTL.

As I see it, there are several distinctive features of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning as it has developed within the System (with encouragement from OPID).



Formative Assessment by Anonymous

First, there is a strong emphasis on student learning. There is a joke about a man who excitedly told a friend “I taught my dog to talk!” When the friend requested a demonstration, the man replied, “I didn’t say that he learned.” Among SoTL practitioners, a guiding assumption is that there is no teaching without learning. Thus, it follows, that claims we make about student learning need to be supported by evidence — just like the other claims we make as scholars.

Because I know that some of my colleagues are skeptical of the assessment movement and other attempts to measure or quantify learning, I will rush to mention a second quality of SoTL in Wisconsin. SoTL practitioners tend to be very broadminded about what kinds of evidence are appropriate. Indeed, as more humanists and artists and others who are not social scientists have become involved in doing SoTL, the movement at large has become increasingly complex and cosmopolitan, methodologically [1]. SoTL scholars, in other words, use a wide variety of direct and indirect methods for evaluating and documenting student learning. Within the UW System, especially, new SoTL scholars are encouraged to begin working with methods that are comfortable and familiar to them.

A third and related aspect of SoTL that is especially notable in Wisconsin is its cross-disciplinary nature. The WTF&S program, the Faculty College, the spring conference, the UWGB Teaching Scholars program, and the annual UWGB Faculty Development Conference all include participants from across the disciplines and professional programs. These events and programs thus bring together instructors from widely varying fields, from mathematics and biology to English and philosophy to psychology and political science to nursing and business. I have both experienced and observed a great deal of cross-disciplinary sharing over the years [2]. This interdisciplinary ferment has fostered a

number of collaborations, including two excellent books on the “Signature Pedagogies” of the various disciplines and professions (published in 2008 and 2012) and a forthcoming book that my colleague Professor Regan A. R. Gurung and I are editing, with chapters co-authored by interdisciplinary teams.

Notes

1. For evidence of the diverse and evolving methodologies of SoTL, see Kathleen McKinney, ed., [The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning In and Across the Disciplines](#) (Indiana University Press, 2013.). My 2012 [podcast discussion of SoTL with Regan Gurung](#) may also be of interest.

2. Last year, with Professor Ryan Martin, I co-authored a study of the impact of the Wisconsin Teaching Fellows & Scholars program from 2000 to 2011. One of our findings was that the program encouraged collaboration. The full report, which was commissioned by OPID, is available [here](#).
([back to the article](#))



David Voelker

Associate Professor, Humanistic Studies & History

Co-Director, UWGB Teaching Scholars

Co-Director, Wisconsin Teaching Fellows & Scholars

◀ RESEARCH ◀ SOTL ◀ TEACHING FELLOWS ◀ TEACHING SCHOLARS