

## The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning and Student Assessment

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ALL TEACHERS OF HISTORY know at least something about student assessment. Their knowledge may not go beyond what it takes to create a “bubble” test, but unless they do not work in an educational system, they have evaluated many students over the years. This is an important task because evaluations lead to grades, grades lead to credentials, and credentials are the “coin of the realm” in all educational systems. That students expect to be assessed should be apparent to anyone who has ever heard the plaintiff cry, “Will that be on the test?” But what about faculty? How many of them expect to be held accountable for what their students learn? Elementary and secondary school teachers certainly know that assessment is like a mirror. What their students learn reflects back on them. But there is often a disconnect between student and faculty assessment in higher education. While all professors take responsibility for creating and disseminating knowledge, most do not like to be held accountable for whether their students master it. Scholars of teaching and learning want to change that.

Ten years ago almost no one in the American academic community had ever heard of the “scholarship of teaching and learning.” Perhaps a few knew that in 1990 Ernest Boyer had identified teaching as a form of scholarship in *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate*.

Today that book is considered by many to be a classic, and the “scholarship of teaching and learning” has a familiar ring.<sup>1</sup> Lee Shulman, Boyer’s successor as president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, is largely responsible for that. Picking up where Boyer left off, Shulman began by making the case for teaching as a scholarly activity. It should be “public,” he said, the topic of an open and ongoing conversation in the academy. It should be grounded in theory and subject to peer review for both formative and summative reasons. Shulman referred to this as the “scholarship of teaching.”<sup>2</sup> More recently, he and others have turned the “scholarship of teaching” into the “scholarship of teaching and learning,” an important modification with very significant ramifications for the task of assessment.<sup>3</sup> Scholars of teaching and learning engage in reflective practice, making a systematic effort to study the relationship between what they do as teachers and what their students learn in their undergraduate and even graduate classes. Put another way, the “scholarship of teaching and learning” (or SoTL as it is known among its devotees) is all about assessment.

To illustrate my point, let me pose some of the “research” questions now being asked by leading SoTL practitioners:

- “What will have the greatest impact on the quality of student learning?”
- “What will most contribute to our understanding of learning in the disciplines?”

These same practitioners also have high ambitions. They ask:

- “What will most change the faculty’s notion of everyday practice?”
- “How do we make use of the scholarship of teaching and learning to support transformative agendas in higher education?”<sup>4</sup>

In short, SoTL practitioners want to remake the ways in which college and university faculty think about what they do in the classroom.

### **An Argument for Reflective Practice in History**

The basic principles of SoTL may be generic, but in practice SoTL is discipline specific. This is because different disciplines live by different epistemological standards. SoTL in history is not necessarily the same as SoTL in other disciplines. What constitutes SoTL in history? There are five basic elements. The historian who is a SoTL practitioner:

1. explains to students what historians do;
2. shows them how to use historical sources, insights, and tools;

3. provides constant and consistent feedback about the use of those sources, insights, and tools;
4. assesses teaching after the fact; and
5. shares discoveries about the relationship between teaching and learning in history.

How can these principles be applied in the classroom? Let me offer some examples.

When I was in high school I did not know how to read history. I was under the false impression that the facts on the pages before me were more important than anything else. Eventually, I learned that it's what the facts amount to that counts. There is a lesson here for student assessment. As SoTL practitioner David Pace has pointed out, historians employ a "hierarchy of importance" in the reading that they do. In the classroom the SoTL historian:

- charts this hierarchy, identifying for students its constituent parts;
- teaches students how to distinguish between the central thesis of a text and the corroborating evidence;
- teaches them to know when argument and evidence mesh and when they don't; and
- makes sure to find out whether they know this or they don't.<sup>5</sup>

It is not uncommon for historians to say that they want to teach their students to be "critical thinkers." I have heard more than a few make this claim, but what does it mean? Exactly what do critical thinkers do? Is critical thinking in history different from critical thinking in other disciplines? These are assessment questions because they deal with student learning. The SoTL historian has thoughtful answers for each and every one of them. She/he can identify the "critical thinking" skills she wants her students to master. He/she can explain them to colleagues and model them for students.

If providing constant and consistent feedback to students is one of the things that SoTL historians do, then they are fortunate to have technological tools that weren't available even as recently as a decade ago. Digitized platforms for managing instruction and communicating with students (e.g. Blackboard) are commonplace now. According to Randy Bass, an American Studies professor at Georgetown University, "new technologies enable faculty to 'see' student learning and think in ways that we could not before."<sup>6</sup> His "Visible Knowledge Project" explores how online environments change the way college students demonstrate their understanding of a discipline, which, of course has implications for the methods of assessment that their teachers can use. For example, one

historian in the project is experimenting with online discussions and the electronic exchange of written work in an advanced undergraduate course whose objective is to teach undergraduates what it means to think and write like a historian.<sup>7</sup>

But the benefits of technology aren't confined to student assessment. The Internet makes it possible for scholars of teaching and learning to assess each other. This, in turn, has ramifications for student assessment. Since the 1970s, many American colleges and universities have used student course evaluations. In fact, they are now a regular part of American higher education. Such evaluations play an important role in high stakes decisions like tenure and promotion. Student input should be an important part of the process by which teaching faculty are assessed. But it should not be the only source of reliable information about their work in the classroom. College and university faculty must take more responsibility for evaluating themselves and each other not only because they have more expertise than their students in a given discipline but also because they are the teachers.

Access to information about the teaching methods and materials used by colleagues has been one of the biggest obstacles to assessment of this kind. The electronic course portfolio is one way to solve this problem. As a form of scholarship, it can facilitate peer review and professional development in teaching. It also offers a new opportunity to see and evaluate student work. By placing that work into its academic context, the electronic course portfolio opens the door to a nuanced conversation about the relationship between teaching and learning in a discipline. Such portfolios do exist in history as well as other disciplines but not in any profusion.<sup>8</sup> Listservs like H-Teach and H-Survey are a step in the right direction. But the day is still to come when scholars will regularly "publish" their courses for others to see and from which they can learn.

Of course, many faculty are more than a little resistant to the development and institutionalization of yet another form of professional assessment. There is time involved and uncertainty about the payoff.<sup>9</sup> But if we believe that the relationship between teaching and learning in history is complex, requiring creativity and flexibility, how can we not want to learn more about the work of others? Gaining better access to it can only be enriching. Better methods of student assessment will be one of the primary benefits.

### **How Well are We Doing?**

The scholarship of teaching and learning has made an impact on the historical profession. In 2004 the authors of the most recent evaluation of

graduate education in history said that “all graduate education...should address the teaching of history as an intellectual challenge, a challenge that brings historiography into conversation with pedagogy.” *Perspectives: The Newsmagazine of the American Historical Association* has been a venue for articles about SoTL in recent years. Even the *American Historical Review* has entered this conversation.<sup>10</sup> Assessment is an important part of at least some of this literature.<sup>11</sup> But it remains to be seen just how much SoTL has affected or will affect the way historians conduct themselves in the college and university classroom. There is still much work to be done before any conclusions can be drawn about whether historians have become reflective practitioners. But there can be little doubt that one of the main concerns of that work should be the impact of SoTL on student assessment.

## Notes

1. “What Do We know about Where the Scholarship of Teaching’s Being Done,” *The Teaching Professor* 19 (November 2005), 6.

2. Lee S. Shulman, “Teaching as Community Property: Putting an End to Pedagogical Solitude,” *Change* 25 (6), 6-7. See also, Lee S. Shulman, “Course Anatomy: The Dissection and Analysis of Knowledge Through Teaching,” in *The Course Portfolio: How Faculty Can Examine Their Teaching to Advance Practice and Improve Learning*, Pat Hutchings, ed. (Washington, D.C: American Association for Higher Education, 1998), 5-12.

3. Eileen T. Bender, “CASTLs in the Air: The SOTL ‘Movement’ in Mid-Flight,” *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning* 37 (September/October 2005), 40-49.

4. Dan Bernstein & Randy Bass, “The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning,” *Academe: Bulletin of the American Association of University Professors* 91 (July-August 2005), 39.

5. David Pace, “Decoding the Reading of History: An Example of Process,” in *Decoding the Disciplines: Helping Students Learn Disciplinary Ways of Thinking*, David Pace & Joan Middendorf, eds., New Directions for Teaching and Learning, Number 98 (San Francisco: Josey Bass, 2004), 17.

6. Bernstein & Bass, “The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning,” 38.

7. Marshall Eakin, “Learning to ‘Do History’,” Visible Knowledge Project, <https://crossroads.georgetown.edu/vkp/>

8. See, for example, my portfolio for an introductory course in American history to 1877 and T. Mills Kelly’s portfolio for a survey course in Western Civilization, both on the Web site of the American Historical Association at: <http://www.historians.org/teaching/AAHE/aahecover.html>

9. Sherry Lee Linkon, “How Can Assessment Work for Us?” *Academe: Bulletin of the American Association of University Professors*, 91 (July-August 2005), 28-32.

10. Thomas Bender, et al., *The Education of Historians for the Twenty-first Century* (Chicago: The University of Illinois Press, 2004), 100; Gerald Shenk & David

Takacs, "History and Civic Participation: An Example of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning." *Perspectives* 40 (April 2002), 30-32; David Pace, "The Amateur in the Operating Room: History and the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning," *American Historical Review* 109 (October 2004), 1171-1191.

11. William W. Cutler, III "A Competency-Based Approach to Teaching History Surveys," *Perspectives* 40 (April 2002), 27-19;

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