

SUMMARY OF FREE RESPONSES TO SIX QUESTIONS POSED IN AN ON-LINE SURVEY OF THE FACULTY REGARDING THE STATUS OF SOTL AT ILLINOIS STATE UNIVERSITY, 2007

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Introduction

In addition to quantitative data (results available in a separate report) that the faculty provided in the 2007 follow up to a similar SoTL study conducted in 2002, the 152 faculty who completed the 2007 survey had the chance to write free responses to a series of six questions related to SoTL. The number of those who wrote free responses ranged from 119 on one of the questions to only 60 on another question. Total respondents for the other four questions were 93, 88, 80, and 68.

Methodology

Using the verbatim transcriptions of the free responses to the six questions, we have carefully read, interpreted to the best of our ability, and categorized the answers question by question. In a few cases, answers—automatically entered by an on-line survey program into word-- end in the middle of a sentence or even the middle of a word, making it difficult to follow the line of reasoning or to harvest a complete thought that might be suitable for use as an illustration. In other cases, the process has not made it perfectly clear when one faculty member's comments end and another's begin. So the count of total responders might be off by one or two in some questions. For the most part, however, such problems proved to be only a minor inconvenience.

Interpretation of free-response answers, when no follow-up questions are possible, and the grouping of answers into meaningful categories is subjective. We have made considerable effort to get to the crux of what the faculty member was thinking and then to classify that response appropriately. Under each of the six questions, repeated below, the reader will find our classifications, the numbers of responses that fit into each classification, and example comments to help provide clarity. For some of the six questions, faculty gave multiple answers, so the totals in those cases exceed the number who responded. For instance, 93 respondents listed 118 benefits that they believe flow from SoTL work.

The Six Free Response Questions

Question 1: How would you define the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning?

More than three-quarters (N=119) of the 152 faculty who submitted a response to the 2007 on-line survey included a commentary on the concept of SoTL. Because the University has an operational and readily available definition of SoTL, it seemed logical to match faculty responses with the official Illinois State definition: "systematic reflection on teaching and learning made public." In particular, we wanted to see which parts of the definition the faculty utilized and which the faculty did not include in their attempt to define SoTL.

The number of definitions we analyzed was 101. Nine of the 119 wrote something but did not attempt a definition. Of those nine, three offered a sarcastic or otherwise negative comment, such as this one. [Note: spelling and punctuation are as transcribed.]

If you are worrying about definitions you're not likely to be getting anything important done.

Another nine faculty submitted a definition that is identical or very close to "systematic reflection on teaching and learning made public." We consider such adherence to the Illinois State definition a plus, because obviously these faculty members are aware of the University

definition, but not helpful in analyzing how the other faculty perceived SoTL. So subtracting 18 (9 plus 9) from 119, we end with 101 usable responses (table 1).

Table 1. Elements of the official Illinois State definition of SoTL, by number of faculty that included a reference to them*

<i>Element of Definition</i>	<i>Number of Faculty Including Element</i>
Systematic	11
Reflection	80
Teaching/Learning	89
Made public	26

*We accepted words that approximate the Illinois State wording, such as “study” for “reflection” and “dissemination” for “made public.”

A high proportion of the 101 respondents understood the concept of research about the teaching and learning process, but far fewer included the part about going public with one’s findings in their definitions. The fact that almost none (only 11) mentioned “systematic” or its equivalent is less surprising, perhaps because academics often think of research as automatically being systematic. Below are three of the comments that captured, independently, the local definition of SoTL.

formal inquiry using quantitative or qualitative methods to integrate or develop new knowledge about teaching and learning that is disseminated

investigating a teaching-learning problem with the same kind of rigorous protocol as any research problem would be investigated and then sharing the results openly with others.

I suppose I would define the scholarship of teaching and learning as the study of and reflection upon pedagogy -- strategies, trends, practices, and theories -- and the study of and reflection upon learning -- how students learn best, learning environments, student/teacher interactions, etc. I also take "scholarship" to mean the making public in some way of that study and reflection, through publication, workshops, conferences, and other forums.

Question 2: What do you see as the benefits, if any, to pursuing the SoTL for faculty, staff, students, institutions of higher education, and/or the community at large?

A total of 93 faculty answered this question. Four said they had no comment; and seven were entirely negative, such as the person who said, “I think we need to concentrate on the teaching first,” or the professor who felt that the benefits of SoTL equaled “none.” Eight fell into what we called the “Yes, but” category, listing some minor benefit and then going on to downplay the importance of SoTL. A good example of a “Yes, but” is this response.

It would be great to have faculty discussions on pedagogy. There are journals in most peoples disciplines on pedagogy, however, they are seen as second rate and not taken seriously. The biggest obstacle to getting folks to spend time on these issues, is ISU's noble lie: That we value teaching. We don't. We tenure people who do research.

The other 99 comments were quite positive (see response categories in table 2).

Table 2. Perceived benefits of SoTL, by number of times faculty designated each benefit (N=99)*

<i>Perceived Benefit</i>	<i>Number of Times Designated</i>
Improve teaching and learning	62
Increase faculty research	9
Foster Illinois State's mission	7
Contribute to knowledge base	6
Improve interdisciplinary climate	6
Rejuvenate faculty	4
Unclear meaning (but positive)	3
Permit combination of teaching and research	2

*Some faculty listed several benefits.

Improvement of teaching and learning is the logical choice as a benefit of SoTL; and it appeared over and over again, in a variety of guises. Here are five examples.

As my mentor in graduate school was fond of saying, "Teaching is infinite; we can always teach better, learn more." Any effort that helps structure in on-going, critical reflection in our work can only help us as we continually assess our instructional approaches.

SOTL should facilitate changes by providing reliable knowledge, theory, application methods, and by helping to develop tools and facilities for continually improving and adapting teaching and learning processes for new conditions and needs.

Most of us were trained to study our disciplines and make research advances specific to our own discipline's knowledge base. We were not trained to be effective teachers, yet that's a significant part of our duties here at ISU (it is, after all, a teaching institution). So, SOTL work helps to drive pedagogy. It forms a basis of evidence-based practice related to teaching and learning, which should be important to us all.

Reflective teaching makes teaching better, and thus more enjoyable, for faculty and students.

Obviously, many professors, while very active in research methods in their field, are untrained in the communication of information to students. They don't know a whit about how learning happens, or what facilitates learning for students. Faculty with no pedagogical training who elect to pursue SoTL benefit themselves and their students by making their pedagogies more effective. Faculty who read SoTL scholarship can achieve similar benefits by applying new methods in a mindful way.

For the other benefits, aside from enhancing teaching and learning, we have chosen one comment to illustrate each. We begin with increasing faculty research and continue through the final six, in order.

The study of learning and teaching also crosses nicely with my primary area of research in my discipline so it would complement rather than distract from my primary research products.

SoTL is in the best interest of the public we serve as a state university. It questions whether we are indeed doing what we are supposed to for our students and hence, the larger community.

I see this as a vital component of true inquiry-based pedagogy and important to scholarship and theory in curriculum (broadly defined). It seems to me that the boundaries blur quite a bit when it comes to SoTL within colleges of education and I think it would be very beneficial to address this.

I would learn about other research, both conducted by professors and students.

My funded SoTL and service-learning projects have also enhanced my vita.

helping to improve what we do, to be more effective

break down the artificial borders between traditional scholarship and pedagogy

Question 3: If you have conducted SoTL, please briefly describe or provide the title of one of your recent projects.

Of the six questions, the one asking faculty to give examples of their recent SoTL projects evoked the smallest number of responses, only 60; and 10 of the 60 gave evasive or otherwise not very relevant answers. Another two faculty were focusing on teaching in the K-12 schools and not on the college-level, while a third referred to ways of improving his chemistry class (or scholarly teaching), leaving N=47. Even with the 47 “good” SoTL answers, however, one cannot be entirely sure that the faculty member went public with the results. We decided to count these responses as if they did go public. In fact, the response by one of the CASTL team working on this review of responses falls into this indefinite category—even though that member did indeed make his/her work public (but failed to so state when originally responding). Please see table 3 for themes related to SoTL projects Illinois State faculty conducted.

Table 3. Type of SoTL project, by number of recent SoTL projects involving Illinois State faculty

<i>Type of SoTL Project</i>	<i>Number of Projects in Category</i>
Course delivery	22
Assessment of learning outcomes	19
Course content	6

This group of 47 projects divides nicely into three categories. Many of the 22 course-delivery projects involved use of technology, from web-based quizzes to clickers in the classroom to delivering a complete class on the Internet. Here is one example dealing with technology that does not indicate going public.

I've been interested in improving student learning for those who enroll through distance-learning technologies.

Another faculty member had gone public with her or his delivery methods, which might or might not have included technology.

I have written 3 essays for Modern Language Association publications on how to successfully teach Holocaust literature.

Assessment of learning outcomes is something that engages faculty at Illinois State. Faculty-reported developing projects ranging from the classroom to the off-campus experience.

We examined the impact of cognitive style on success in our programming sequence.

I studied the college level coursework of preservice teachers to determine whether it was sufficient to prepare teachers to make referrals to school-based speech-language pathologists.

Relationship of intern and extern experiences to academic success and workplace acclimation

The research that has been accepted for publication was a qualitative study that investigated the perspectives of special education practicum students during their first field experience.

Course content served a bit as a catchall for the remaining six ideas. Here is one of the six ideas reported that also received an award.

Experiential learning activity that required in-class application of content to the actual classroom experience. We study insurance and the students were required to create a "grade insurance" product for marketing to other students. This was a published and award winning project.

Question 4: If you have used SoTL work, please give one example of how you have done so.

This question could have been somewhat misleading. The principal investigator's intention was that faculty would offer an example of how they had read or heard about an SoTL study and then applied it to their own SoTL research or their teaching, and many of the 68 who responded on this question had done so. Others took it to mean that they conducted SoTL research and then applied their findings to their subsequent work. Five of the 68 responded but gave no useful reply, leaving N=63 (table 4).

Table 4. Change as result of SoTL work, by number of faculty who changed

<i>Source of Change in Faculty</i>	<i>Number of Faculty Claiming Change</i>
Changed as result of others' work	40
Changed but source not clear	13
Changed as result of own work	10

Change for the betterment of teaching and student learning as the result of exposure to someone else's work is a positive outcome of the efforts directed toward SoTL over the last decade at Illinois State. Sources beyond the respondent varied from attendance at on-campus workshops to the use of scholarly literature.

I utilized several large classroom teaching techniques from the last SoTL opportunity I attended. I have really appreciated and learned much from all of the CTLT events I have attended. They have either caused me to evaluate my practices, change my approaches or enhanced my classroom teaching.

From attending the workshops before each semester, I have learned new ways to put together writing projects; in turn, assignments were re-thought and re-written to better reflect my expectations. I've learned more "theory" about certain teaching styles and have tried to apply these things to syllabi, homework, AND presentations/lectures.

I have used some published studies on approaches to teaching specific literary works.

Created learning activities based on the published work of other historians on teaching history.

Self-produced change based on SoTL research brought responses from 10 faculty members. Here are a couple of those responses.

I frequently refer to my study when explaining to my students the benefit of their projects once they get into the field.

Keeping detailed results of each iteration of the senior project allows me to make succeeding versions better (I hope).

Question 5: What roles can students play in SoTL?

The 88 faculty who responded to this question provided 108 comments. A fairly high number, 19 of the 108, did not know how students could help with research or made unclear comments such as "They are customers, aren't they?" Add to the 19 the one comment below from a faculty member who did not believe students can play any role in SoTL work, subtract 20 from 108, and end up with N=88 pertinent responses (table 5).

Students seldom have the perspective to fully understand what quality education is; rather, they operate largely with a short-term perspective aimed at getting the best grade for the given semester. Beyond the letter grade, few aspects of the quality of their education affect them.

Table 5. Potential roles of students in SoTL, by number of times faculty included a reference to each role

<i>Potential Student Role</i>	<i>Number of Times Identified</i>
Conduct research with faculty or alone	38
Reflect on own learning	29
Be a subject for SoTL research	21

CASTL reviewers found the inclusion of students as more than research subjects to be a positive outcome of this inquiry. For the most part, the faculty did refer to them as assistants and co-investigators; but a few said they believed Illinois State students could conduct meaningful SoTL research on their own. See the sample of related responses below.

Gather data Preliminary analysis

Varied roles. They can participate in research design, data collection, or support the research endeavors of their professors in other ways.

I want to involve my students in this research! My students will be teachers - they need to know how to conduct this research, as well as influence it from the perspective of their own experience. The field will be richer with their voices! They are the subject of much of this research. They could be involved in research design.

Students can play a very important role! They can participate in writing proposals, conducting the research, and preparation and presentation of the results. Participation has been especially beneficial to my students interested in pursuing careers in education/teaching.

There are student level publications where they could share their own SoTL research.

Students as reflecting members of the teaching-learning process was not something the review crew had anticipated, but this comment was among the first that we read on this question.

We can structure in SoTL activities that help students reflect on their own learning and their own approaches to learning. This is important. Students should not simply be the means to our research ends.

As we read on, the reflection connection caught our attention—until we had to add a specific category for it.

The main role of students is to provide feedback in terms of what is working and what isn't.

A way needs to be found to get honest student feedback on what works and what doesn't seem to work..... If you look at something like www.ratemyprofessors.com, it's clear that many, if not most students believe that a "good class" is one in which it "takes only moderate effort" to "earn" an "A." "Moderate effort" is of course not going to result in very much learning.

I'd like to get feedback in focus groups on the success of a particular assignment, along with feedback on what students gained (or didn't notice) through doing a project. Often it can seem that a project or approach works well in the classroom, generating discussion and promoting learning, when only later we find that students did not understand part of the assignment or did not grasp.

They can communicate with their professors about what, specifically, they have problems with in their learning. For instance, I have a student who informed me in her journal that she has a hard time listening to lectures and figuring out what to write down. I shared with her strategies for mind mapping and picture notes. We'll try that for a while, and see if she feels more confident.

More than a score (21 to be exact) of Illinois State faculty relegated students to subject status in SoTL, one even referring them simply as "guinea pigs." Another said, they had "Very little [use] other than being respondents if there is any rigor to the study at all." Perhaps this instructor was recalling the fact that, as human subjects, students have to agree formally to the use of their answers, by, as another faculty respondent wrote: "authorizing their work for research projects and making themselves open to new pedagogical techniques in the classroom."

Question 6: What actions and initiatives do you think the campus community should engage in, if any, to promote SoTL?

From 82 faculty members came 93 ideas, of which five were unclear to the reviewers. Exactly a half dozen of the remaining 88 were negative, and among the negatives were comments from some who felt the University has been putting too much effort into SoTL. Another 14 comments suggested that Illinois State ought to stay the course and not do any additional promoting of this endeavor, which these commentators tended to think was going pretty well as is. See table 6 for the ideas about promoting SoTL work on the campus.

Table 6. Ideas for promoting SoTL at Illinois State, by number of times faculty suggested the idea (N=68)

<i>Ideas for Promoting SoTL</i>	<i>Number of Times Faculty Suggested</i>
Make more valuable in ASPT process	26
Build collaboration in SoTL matters	18
Provide more funds	13
Publicize better	9
Utilize leadership better	2

One can draw the conclusion that at least 26 faculty believe SoTL is not a full partner with disciplinary-specific research when it comes to the rewards of the ASPT process and other campus decisions regarding faculty productivity. A sample of such comments follows.

We need an initiative to get SoTL research equal status in tenure reviews as other types of research. If the design is sound, it should not be underrated.

Convince faculty that they will be rewarded for research on teaching.

Make it count full-on as tenure-based research...not teaching activities.

It would be nice if the work were appreciated by the distinguished professor nominating and voting crowd. I won't hold my breath though.

Building an SoTL community on campus and elsewhere through in-person collaboration and other ways brought 18 responses. Here is how four of our campus colleagues phrased their replies.

More department-level work on this as well as the promotion of interdisciplinary inquiry. Furthermore, there is much to be learned from collaborative work with colleagues at other universities that are research institutions.

I think faculty would benefit from seminars or other public discussion of evidence-based teaching or best practices derived from SoTL.

I imagine the campus community participating in fairly structured activities such as workshops, seminars, and perhaps in surveys such as this one. I don't like to organize such things so I don't have very good suggestions for this question.

Really like the recent implementation of supporting small group development within the university and colleges.

Funding provided the grist for 13 of the 68 promotional ideas. No one said there was enough funding available, however.

Continue the conferences, provide grants to encourage research, travel funds to present findings.

Provide monetary incentives for attending sessions.

URG funding for SOTL

more funding opportunities - the existing ones (at least those I'm aware of) are narrowly focused on larger, cross-disciplinary, collaborative efforts.

With constant turnover of faculty, it is imperative that SoTL leaders and practitioners spread the word about what Illinois State has to offer. Nine advanced ways of promoting SoTL, and we repeat two of the suggestions below.

Presentations at departmental meetings across campus to promote SoTL to faculty who have never considered these issues might be a nice addition.

Advertise it as an appreciated form of creativity.

Finally, a couple of faculty said leaders in the academic hierarchy need to take a higher profile role if SoTL is to attain a higher status on campus. Here is how one of the respondents put it.

I think it could be a larger part of Chairs' work and it might become a larger part of faculty members work. If Chairs become Instructional Leaders, our teaching might get better and more SoTL occur. There could be much greater support and expectation for peer review of teaching among faculty.

Conclusion

Despite the comments from a few disgruntled faculty, those who chose to answer the free response questions on the 2007 survey of SoTL at Illinois State seem to have a favorable impression of this important research direction. We have tried to summarize the answers to some extent, but the best way for readers to get the flavor is to read the comments themselves. Some appear above, but all are available through the CASTL team and its leader, Kathleen McKinney.