

8/05/2024

SoTL Scholar:

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Date:

8/23/2024

Topics of interest:

First-Year Student Success

Themes/Keywords:

SoTL in First-Year Experience, Living Learning Communities, First-Year Interest Groups, Summer Bridge Programs, Service Learning

Reflection

My Spring 2024 participation in the University of Wyoming Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) group, facilitated by Dr. Dilnoza Khasilova, introduced me to other faculty and staff on campus who share an interest in the science of pedagogy. Dr. Khasilova's guidance was invaluable, as she not only led the group but also invited guest speakers who helped us deepen our understanding of the IRB process and other critical aspects of our research. Through this experience, I learned how to narrow down my research questions, collaborate effectively with a team of like-minded faculty and staff, and create an impactful SoTL poster. With IRB approval now complete, I'm ready to begin a project researching best practices for the First Year Experience (FYE) course for Fall 2024. The project will incorporate qualitative and quantitative methods to understand the most beneficial aspects and perceived deficiencies of our FYE course.

Definition for SoTL

I have come to understand that SoTL expands best pedagogical approaches by placing science and research at the center of teaching and learning. The scholarly definition of SoTL, according to Boyer (1990 and 2013), is paraphrased here:

The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) is a systematic, research-based approach to examine teaching practices and student learning in order to improve them. It involves educators investigating their teaching methods, assessing student learning outcomes, and sharing their findings with the academic community to enhance educational practices. It differs from program assessment in that it is a scholarly pursuit, so the bounds of knowledge are expanded after good research in SoTL. With that in mind, SoTL bridges the gap between teaching and research.

This definition rings true to me because it includes the goal of SoTL, which is to improve teaching and learning, but it also incorporates the notion of sharing with a greater community of researchers. It informs future pedagogy.

The project I'm undertaking is an expansion of the program evaluation of the FYE course to determine which classroom techniques are most helpful to students. This project differs from program

assessment in many ways. First, it involves scientific research methods to inform the necessity of improvements. Also, when complete, the research will be widely shared in order to expand the realm of knowledge in SoTL. When I initially incorporated these questions for program assessment, the goal was simply to make improvements in the FYE program. These improvements took the form of changes in the professional development of instructors. Another difference between program evaluation and SoTL is that the latter should not be conducted by a stakeholder in the program - great program assessment is done by third party consultants who do not have any stake in the findings (Linfield & Posavac, 2019). Now, by incorporating SoTL, I am also delving into scholarly resources related to my own questions. This includes synthesizing my research with other scholars. In addition, the goal in this SoTL research goes further. It is to share these best practices of the FYE teaching with a wider audience.

My methodology is to ask a set of additional questions when students fill out the semester course evaluation. These questions include a mix of quantitative and qualitative questions that will drill down to the most helpful and least helpful aspects of the course from the students' perspectives. Their answers will be compared to items in the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) impacts on retention and persistence.

Related Grand Principle #2 *Understand and improve ways to encourage student engagement*

SoTL Grand Challenges were presented by the International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning ([Grand Challenges for SoTL](#)). The challenge that speaks to my goals in the FYE course most is Challenge 2: How to encourage students to be engaged in learning. My research interest is in first-year student success. Being engaged in learning is one of the greatest indicators for college persistence (Strydom, 2017). Analysis of items in the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) has found that 19 pedagogical practices have been found to positively impact retention and persistence, including:

1. Asked questions in class or contributed to class discussions.
2. Made a class presentation.
3. Prepared two or more drafts of a paper or assignment before turning it in.
4. Come to class without completing readings or assignments (reverse coded).
5. Worked with other students on projects during class.
6. Worked with classmates outside of class to prepare class assignments.
7. Tutored or taught other students (paid or voluntary).
8. Participated in a community-based project as part of a regular course.
9. Used an electronic medium (chat, Internet, etc.) to discuss or complete an assignment.
10. Used email to communicate with an instructor.

11. Discussed grades or assignments with an instructor.
12. Talked about career plans with an academic staff member or advisor.
13. Discussed ideas from your readings or classes with academic staff members outside of class.
14. Received prompt feedback from lecturers on your academic performance (written or oral).
15. Worked harder than you thought you could to meet an instructor's standards or expectations.
16. Worked with academic staff members on activities other than coursework (committees, orientation, student life activities, etc.).
17. Discussed ideas from your readings or classes with others outside of class (students, family members, co-workers, etc.).
18. Had serious conversations with students of a different race or ethnicity than your own.
19. Had serious conversations with students who differ from you in terms of their religious beliefs, political opinions, or personal values. (Kinzie, Strydom, & Loots, 2017. 191).

Identifying pedagogical practices that make a difference in engaging the learner helps guide the question that interests me: Which of these practices are students in the STEP 1102 course actually doing?

The other Grand Challenge that applies to my interest is Challenge 4.: How identities affect both teaching and learning. This applies to another program that I manage: First-Year Interest Groups (FIGs). In a living-learning community, students with similar interests live together on the same floor of a residence hall. At the University of Wyoming, FIGs go one step further and include common coursework. Since 1998, the University of Wyoming has incorporated FIGs in the residence halls. Comprised of 12 to 24 students who live on the same floor of the residence halls, FIG students are enrolled in two to four of the same courses during their first semester in college. Social opportunities, academic gains, and overall satisfaction are three benefits of FIGs that are most mentioned in the research (Inkelas et al., 2007; Pike, 1999; Zhao & Kuh, 2004). Some of the FIGs I manage are identity-based, such as the Women in STEM, Gender Inclusive, or Gamers and Gaming FIGs. I hope to evaluate how students who are able to be supported by those who share their identities and interests have greater success than those who are not.

Questions for Reflection

1. Does student engagement require motivation, or does motivation require engagement? How do the two relate to one another?

2. How can one measure student engagement across multiple sections of a course when each section has a different instructor?
3. How can one engage in variable-based SoTL research without creating a disadvantage to students in the control group?

Suggestions

1. Student engagement includes two components: time and effort spent on learning and allocation of resources that organize opportunities to encourage learning. In this definition, half of the aspect of student engagement relies on student motivation, but the instructor can clearly make courses engaging enough to motivate student time and effort in material. The onus is placed on both the instructor and the learner.
2. Even with the most unified approach to professional development of instructors for the same course, as it happens for the First Year Experience class, STEP 1102 where faculty are provided with eight one-hour sessions to learn the course material and pedagogical methods, there will still be differences in teaching practices. A survey to all students must take the section number of the course into account. If the data shows that an instructor is not providing an engaging environment, there can be ways to remediate for future semesters. This is an aspect of assessing the curriculum, not a type of SoTL, but it is necessary for the improvement of the course. To engage in SoTL research, the student data should be followed longitudinally to show the effects of the pedagogy on future retention and graduation rates.
3. It is the hope that a control group is given adequate teaching methods to succeed as learners while a variable group will be offered an alternative method in the hopes that the whole field of SoTL knowledge can grow. The variable group may very well show no differences, but that is still something that can be learned from the research.

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