Editorial

Introduction to the special issue

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The inaugural SOTL in the South Conference held in Johannesburg, South Africa, in July 2017 coincided with the launch of this journal. The conference provided the occasion for this second, special issue of *SOTL in the South*, which includes a selection of papers submitted for publication after being double-blind peer-reviewed.

In 2015 and 2016, South African universities were rocked by rolling student protest action aimed at addressing two primary concerns: the high cost of higher education, and the need to 'decolonise' higher education practice, curricula and spaces. Occurring against the urgency of this socio-political backdrop, the first SOTL in the South conference was in part organised around the student calls for curriculum reform, situating them in the theory and practice of the scholarship of teaching and learning across the broader 'global South'. As the conference website makes clear, the #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall student campaigns have led to a "growing debate in South Africa about the appropriateness of the content of our curricula, and an interest in looking towards the South for additional or alternative methods and content". This point is addressed by Yunus Ballim in his reflective contribution to this special issue and was also the subject of his keynote address at the conference.

How do the events in South Africa connect with models and debates about the meaning, content and function of higher education emanating from the developing world? What can South-South dialogue achieve in our understanding of the scholarship of teaching and learning and its place in curriculum reform? And importantly, how can we consolidate, in the words of the conference organisers, a "rigorous and creative scholarly SOTL community in the South [to] enrich international theories and ideas"?

Most of the papers in this special issue emanate from South Africa, with important additional contributions from both Australia and Singapore. In part, the provenance of the articles reflects a systemic challenge facing SOTL in the global South, which is the dearth of funding to support meaningful South-South dialogue. This is a challenge acutely felt by both the conference organisers,

and the editorial board of this journal. It also materially reflects the discussion in several papers concerning the persistent dominance of the global North in shaping dialogue about the scholarship of teaching and learning.

Significantly, however, the papers in this issue represent a challenge to that dominance in two ways: first, they provide a critical and theoretical challenge to both the intellectual and cultural foundations of SOTL; and, perhaps even more significantly, the case studies challenge conventional views through actual SOTL projects with students that reframe notions of the value of knowledge, disciplinary boundaries, desired education outcomes, co-creation of curriculum, and the relationship between education and community. In other words, these projects represent the performance of a SOTL of the global South.

A key aspect of this performance of SOTL focuses on partnership. Many of the papers are authored by groups of colleagues whose work is not just about co-writing a paper, but also about exploring what it means to work together across boundaries with a focus on new approaches to student learning. Karabo Sitto, Corné Davis and Lerato Matema, for example, show how they have worked together to break through both multi- and interdisciplinary boundaries to create 'multiple levels of knowing' and develop a holistic form of transdisciplinarity through praxis, with the intention of understanding "real-world inequality in the work place". In their reflective piece, Lynn Coleman and Lucia Thesen carefully analyse the effects of their frequent conversations on how their views of academic development evolve within the sociopolitical and theoretical context of South African higher education.

At the same time, several papers focus on encouraging partnerships among students themselves, and between students, community, and industry. This can be seen in Kim Berman and Shonisani Netshia's efforts to engage students in collective (and challenging) deliberations on "alternative ways of envisioning the world and interpreting their experience". Similarly, for Laura Arnold, the development of honours-level student writing depends on pedagogic partnerships between research supervisors, postgraduate writing consultants, and the students themselves. These partnerships are built on the premise that academic writing is discipline specific and cannot be learned in a single context, requiring scaffolded development.

Mohamed Sameer Hoosain and Saurabh Sinha show how engineering projects can be deployed to have a positive impact on communities. Again, this project relies for its effectiveness on the creation of partnerships that go outside the traditional classroom, between university students, school learners, and non-profit organisations. Lionel Green-Thompson, Patricia McInerney and Robert Woollard also offer some challenging reflections on how the medical curriculum can be constructed to engender accountability to communities, shifting the focus of medical education away from lecturing on individual practice, to connectedness. Both these articles explore ways of addressing the alienation many students in South Africa (and elsewhere) experience in relation to the discourses and practices of higher education, as well as the subsequent alienation from the communities in which they grew up.

In addition to partnership, these papers point to another major concern: the primacy of context. Context is fundamental to SOTL but also problematic as it is a point of negotiation in terms of sharing

findings across contexts. One dimension of deep context is provided by a quotation from Deborah Rose (1996:7; cited in Catherine Manathunga's article) concerning the meaning of country to Aboriginal and Torres Straight Islanders: "Country is not a generalised or undifferentiated type of place … country is a living entity with a yesterday, today and tomorrow, with a consciousness, and a will toward life." Meaning cannot be separated from the specifics of context that is neither undifferentiated, nor a replica of anywhere else. In many of the articles here, the meaning of the research is situated in the material circumstances and relationships specific to the projects. Hoosain and Sinha's article is a very clear example of this.

What the reader gets from this issue, however, is an understanding of how to approach the process of SOTL in a way that is inclusive, creative and boundary crossing. Again, Hoosain and Sinha, for example, take the concept of Engineering Projects in Community Service (EPICS), developed in the United States, and show how the concept can be adapted to better suit the particular context, not only of South Africa, but of Johannesburg. Green-Thompson and colleagues likewise seek explicitly to place their curriculum within the context of the communities in which their students live, and will, in the future, work. In Berman and Netshia's paper, context depends on the interpersonal dynamics resulting from what their particular students bring with them to the course. For Coleman and Thesen, context is both given and negotiated. The background to their dialogue about academic development is one of "profound questioning and contestation in the post-apartheid university". Peter Looker's article suggests that too often the scholarship of teaching and learning in the global North is conducted in a black box that excludes the sociopolitical influences that give shape to forms of pedagogy.

The big question arising from this is what can be shared across contexts. The papers in this special edition do not claim to offer universalities in their findings, nor do they imply or advocate narrow exceptionalism. Indeed, one of the explicit aims of Manathunga's article is to highlight the common elements across the SOTL literature, with references to authors from Colombia (Arturo Escobar), across African countries (Francis Nyamnjoh, Harry Garuba, Abena Busia, Achille Mbembe) as well as from her own contexts of Australia and Aoteoroa/New Zealand. Both Manathunga and Looker draw attention to context to reorientate and disperse it away from the 'centre', to problematise the relationship between the necessarily context specific and universal and, in Looker's terms (borrowing from Chakrabarty) "provincialise SOTL". Both Manathunga and Looker draw on Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe*, first published in 2000, as a way of interrogating the idea of dominant discourses from 'Europe' that marginalise the very contexts so productively elaborated in the articles in this issue.

References

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