Abstract

Contextualising Contexts – Scholarship of Teaching and Learning and Cultural Difference

SoTL has a well-rehearsed history and originary moment. It has been constructed as an approach to understanding teaching and learning with a focus on reflective practice to improve practice and student learning. The focus is narrow, and does not take sociocultural influences on learning into account. This paper argues that the narrow focus of SoTL on the ‘classroom’, and on cognitive measures of success, conforms to a Western view of what is valuable in education. This narrowing of focus to an instrumentalist perspective allows the process of SoTL to seem universally applicable. Using Chakrabarty’s notion of “provincializing Europe”, some structural elements of SoTL history are analysed with an eye to provincializing SoTL. A personal teaching experience across two cultures is analysed to demonstrate the inability of SoTL to comprehend the behaviour of students across different cultures without providing more contextual information. Differences between East Asian and Western views of cognition are presented as means of demonstrating that cultural differences in learning have a significant effect on students learning. Finally, for SoTL to be meaningful internationally, not only does it need to be an approach that can comprehend cultural difference, it also needs to be genuinely decentred from Western hegemonic practice.

Key words: SoTL, context, contexualising, generalisability, universalising, provincializing, cultural difference