

## Developing a syntax for SOTL

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### ABSTRACT

This article presents an overview of conceptions of a scholarship of teaching and learning (SOTL) as reflected by one specific conference held in South Africa. The data draws inductively on the abstracts and reflective analysis of the presentations made which interpreted the relationships between teaching and research excellence in higher education (HE). A team of critical reviewers of these inputs summarised the interrelated conceptions of SOTL: firstly, as a *micro-level* description of “best practices” (pedagogical action); and secondly, as a *meso-level* alignment between individual/ disciplinary/ departmental pedagogical practices and the HE institutional environment (institutional action). The latter agenda spanned staff capacity-building initiatives, collaborative curriculum planning, institutional quality assurance regimes and the use of institutional data analytical approaches to planning. Many presentations also argued that the micro- and meso-levels need to be more aligned strategically to matters of social justice and reconstruction of the HE system at a *macro-level* (social action). This transformative agenda requires individuals, disciplines and institutions to become more comfortable with boundary-crossings across disciplines, more shared work in collaborative curriculum planning, and increased awareness of the co-optive econometric and epistemic Eurocentric discourses surrounding the HE system. A syntax for SOTL, especially in developing world contexts, should consciously aim at interpreting the tensions and intersections between micro-, meso- and macro-levels of influence. This should not mean capitulating to (externally-driven) agendas, but engaging in a form of “epistemic disobedience”, which consciously challenges the sources of SOTL choices in relation to their appropriateness for specific situated contexts of the marginalised South. A sensitive and relevant SOTL for the South agenda is robust (conscious of its choices), responsive (cognisant of the likely consequences of options) and resilient (conscious of long-term sustainability and uncertainty).

## Introduction

Ernest Boyers' (1990) seminal work *Scholarship reconsidered* provoked Higher Education (HE) in the USA to move beyond dichotomous binaries between teaching and research. Instead, he suggested that HE academics should embrace a greater clarity of their roles in the pursuit of *scholarship*. He elaborated four overlapping and interconnected definitional types of scholarships: of discovery, of integration, of application, and of teaching and learning. His provocations were directed at the elevated prominence of research (the scholarship of discovery), which tended to create hierarchies of privilege and stature amongst academic peers and between competing institutions. Staff promotion tracks within HE privileged academics' research outputs and therefore, became the benchmarks goals for academe. This sometimes spawned research for research's sake, foregrounding quantity over quality of contribution. Drawing from the lived experiences and reflections of academics across both research universities and teaching universities, Boyer (1990) reported that academics from both institutional types suggested a need to pay attention to how innovative knowledge was being generated at the intersection of methodological, disciplinary and paradigmatic boundaries. He referred to this as a scholarship of integration which promoted dialogues across multiple partners to activate new scholarship. Boyer furthermore, argued that "discovery" was increasingly valued when translated into practical action (a scholarship of application) within the world of everyday workplace contexts and society more generally. Teaching spaces became regarded as the forums to activate all of the above dimensions of scholarships. A SOTL thus came to be interpreted as simultaneously about discovery, integration and application. Boyer's work has influenced many divergent contexts elaborating on redefining goals, purposes, structures and programmes within the HE system.

A recent UK-based report by the Higher Education Academy (2016), *Transforming teaching: inspiring learning*, reviewed the international literature inspired by Boyer's definitional categories and reflects that SOTL has become an ever-expanding territory. Drawing on resources from online databases (e.g. EBSCO host, Google Scholar), leading international journals and scholarly publications, the report outlines SOTL's influence in redefining the nature of HE disciplines, institutional structures, and its role in supporting educational developmental agendas and re-examining student engagement in the process of HE planning.

Bok (1990) nevertheless argued that underpinning this expansionist agenda is the need for clarity on the definitions and vocabulary to understand the *quality* of SOTL. Whilst Bok defined this in largely operational terms,<sup>1</sup> this present article is directed towards examining quality conceptually. The article critically explores whether dominant interpretations of quality might mask localised challenges in specific contexts, especially those that sit at the margins of dominant privileges. In particular, it explores whether the specific setting of developing world contexts has generated particular ways of dialoguing and sharing views about a SOTL. This latter conversational discourse about SOTL is regarded as a "syntax of the South".

The South here refers to any spatial setting which sits at the margins of dominant hegemonic and normative discourses. It is a conceptual category, and may therefore, by implication, include those

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<sup>1</sup> Bok referred to six standards of excellence for quality SOTL: scholars who disseminate their scholarship must "have clear goals, be adequately prepared, use appropriate methods, achieve outstanding results, communicate effectively and reflectively critique their work" (Bok 1990: 877).

individuals, disciplines, fields, departments or institutions which are geographically located in a physical northern environment. For example, one could consider racial minorities in the US context as constituting a conceptually “southern identity”. Similarly, one might exclude those Australian and New Zealand advocates that draw reference from the dominant northern hegemonic worldviews, as not sharing a “southern” orientation. This emphasises that “southern-ness” is a contestable categorical descriptor, which could also embed a hybridity.

### Research methodology: learning from the field

The data for this article was generated from one specific conference held in 2016 hosted by a South African HE institution which perhaps reflects a kind of hybridity. This setting is arguably conceptually regarded as “southern” because of the institution’s interpretation of its developmental goals and mission to counter the dominant forces of South Africa’s iniquitous past (UKZN 2007). Like most South African universities, the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) acknowledges the need to address matters of redress and transformation in its institutional goals. It interprets its mandate as crafted in response to the history of racialised and class apartheid of the past (Makgoba & Mubangizi 2010). This institutional setting and responses are by no means homogenous. Multiple critiques of its agenda have been offered (Chetty & Merrett 2014; Samuel 2017) which are reflective of constructing an institution bringing together different historical institutional legacies, and varied staffing and student demographics. Simultaneously, the specific institution draws identities from agendas that are from both a developing and developed world perspective.

This conference constituted the 10<sup>th</sup> annual conference of the organisation about matters related to SOTL. Abstracts and presentations were invited in relation to the theme of the conference: *The scholarship of teaching and learning: advancing teaching innovation and research excellence in higher education*. The agenda was announced by Renuka Vithal in her opening of the conference. She commented that separation between teaching and research are artificial creations when one attempts to develop a SOTL agenda (Mutula-Khabange & Dhunpath 2016). SOTL is multi-dimensional, as it ebbs and flows, and shifts into seamless connections with many dimensions co-affecting knowledge, practice, policy and identity.

As a way of consolidating the ebbs and flows of the conference, I was tasked with providing a synthetic overview of the varied presentations.<sup>2</sup> Each day, a team of data producers provided me with critical reporting of the presentations made at the sessions in which they were involved. These critical reporters were part of the overall conference planning team, and were in most cases conveners of the sub-themes and had overseen the acceptance of papers for the conference programme. Their interactions with the chairs of sessions was mandatory as part of this reflective process. They also had intimate knowledge of the input of the abstracts having aided presenters in refinement of their foci and acceptance onto the programme. A daily mock TV studio was hosted by one of the data producers who interacted with the keynote speakers that reflected critically on the feedback they received from the audience during their sessions. I was also part of the conference planning team and a convener of one of its strands. During the conference, the team of data producers shared written and verbal

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<sup>2</sup> My previous roles as Dean of the Faculty of Education at UKZN, and as one of the facilitators of a PhD in Higher Education studies, were perhaps regarded as the adequate credentials required for this task.

insights which were synthesised into recurring patterns and arguments. My summative oral presentation constituted the first form of analysis of the conference arguments, sharing the participants' views of SOTL. This oral presentation was later refined into this article. The data production process constitutes an inductive gathering of data from the field of a wide range of participants engaged in what is deemed a SOTL.

It should be noted that the conference has evolved from its early history as an institutional reflective exercise. Over time, it became a national space to which practitioners across the South African context were invited to present their perspectives on SOTL. The conference has now also attracted international presenters. Of the total 260 delegates in this 10<sup>th</sup> iteration, there were 169 (67%) from the host, UZKN; 73 (29%) from other South African institutions, and 18 (7%) from international universities. This weighting of people from the South is noted (Mutula-Khabange & Dhunpath 2016).<sup>3</sup> The article reflects the recurring perspectives of the syntax of this conference. Whether this was in any way unique when compared to the dominant conceptions of SOTL outside of a northern context, is a matter for reflection which this article offers.

The article consists of four sections. The first points to the recurring *generic* conceptions about what SOTL is as emanating from the conference. It explores the distinction between “scholarly reflection” and a “scholarship of teaching and learning”. It shows how matters relating to educational pedagogy (teaching, learning and assessment) are being adopted by researchers. Many of the researchers did not necessarily have backgrounds in the field of education and interpreted crossing over into this field as a means of finding new vocabulary to describe their challenges and innovation. This section is dominated by *micro-level operational* considerations. Section two elaborates the scope of the agendas of these operational considerations, usually reported by lecturing staff foregrounding examination of their “best practices”. Matters relating to the languages of negotiating teaching and learning, as well as the medium of informational technology, are part of this agenda.

The third section of the article largely reflects the views of institutional managers and quality assurance agents who acknowledge the value of developing alternative policies and practices to support the teaching and learning agenda. Their worldviews are constructed by an outward gaze towards accountabilities and institutional systemic efficiencies. Nevertheless, the possibilities and practices of what is referred to as “institutional research” (IR) recur in this data set. The attempt to link the practices of academics to the wider agenda using institutional data produced at a more *meso-level* is emphasised.

The closing fourth section critically examines the above micro- and meso-level considerations of the conference. It notes that the HE agenda is increasingly being driven by concerns about the relevance, appropriateness and worthwhileness of the HE system and its curricula in a developing world context (such as South Africa). The conference also argued that SOTL cannot ignore the wider social justice

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<sup>3</sup> I would like to thank the organisers (Rubby Dhunpath and Renuka Vithal) who afforded me the opportunity to synthesise the overall conference engagement. This process of fusion was possible through the collaborative efforts of the following team to whom I am indebted: Saras Reddy, Nyna Amin, Ansurie Pillay, Serela Ramklass, Tilly Moodley, Reshma Subbaya and Sarojini Nadar. However, I take full responsibility for any misinterpretations or elaborations of their arguments and the ones presented during the conference.

campaigns that are driving a critique of the HE system at a *macro-level*. The conference coincided with major nation-wide student protests in the HE system related to matters of student access, finances, funding and decolonisation of the curriculum. The article concludes by reflecting on activating an *epistemic disobedience* as part of a disruptive agenda of SOTL (Mignolo 2011). This constitutes a conscious effort to find new syntaxes about the selections about SOTL that have been made in the past, and could be made in the future. Collectively these micro-, meso- and macro-level elements constitute a syntax for a SOTL in the South.

## Section one: pedagogical action: defining and overlapping (the micro-Level)

### What is SOTL?

The data production team reported that conference attendees consistently argued that SOTL cannot be considered a singular entity and that its multiple dimensions all compete for supremacy. Lee Shulman, one of the keynote speakers who elaborated Boyer's original conceptions of SOTL, suggested that academics should create spaces to debate worldviews about their SOTL practices. However, such an agenda should not be driven by an interest in including or excluding different opinions and values. Shulman suggested that academics should resist the tendency to define outsiders and insiders based on paradigmatic perspectives, philosophical preferences or simply boundary gatekeeping. This agenda is likely to activate more dissension rather than promoting the goal to enhance SOTL through examining its multiple interpretations.

The argument was made that quality education simultaneously embraces the head, hand and heart. The cognitivist and operational dimensions of SOTL, Shulman suggested, are perhaps already well-established. Some conference delegates interpreted this call as an appeal for a more humanitarianist celebration of the fullness of our being, which includes both our intellectual and moral selves as academics and students (Palmer 1998; Kwo 2010). These delegates critiqued institutional managers for promoting a de-humanising and de-professionalising agenda. It was argued that many institutional policies construct academics as automatons of production. This commentary perhaps reflects these academics' experiences of the institution valuing them primarily in terms of their functionary contribution to serving outputs regimes: student throughput, graduation or research publication outputs. A fuller and more fulfilled academic was considered as one who has harmony across their ethical and cognitive practices, whilst simultaneously concerned with their knowledge contribution.

Whilst this fuller version of the SOTL agenda might be seen to be a matter of individual personal psychological resolutions, the conference presentations repeated a call to align individual and institutional structures to achieve a more ecological sustainability. It was argued that our educational systems are perpetuating multiple forms of violence on both academics and students, by not recognising the complexities of negotiation and self and structural expectations, and personal and social responsibilities. Compassion and empathy were regarded not as an "emotional sensitivity", but an alignment of the pursuit of trust, honesty, integrity and justice. This was defined as activating critical trust to unlearn inhumane practices which have violently seeped into the fabric of the HE system. One conference-goer articulated this as recognition that "I am not just a teacher; I am a just teacher", a phrase which exemplifies the call for SOTL to be infused with elements of a greater humane justice.

The presentations made at the conference expanded Shulman's notion of curriculum planning to embrace both attention to content knowledge (CK) and pedagogical content knowledge (PCK). He has argued elsewhere (Shulman 1986; 2005) that propositional disciplinary CK should be coupled with signature ways of activating it within the process of pedagogy (teaching, learning and assessment). These signatures are considered unique for different disciplines and professions (Jacobs 2013). But a range of conference presenters suggested that CK and PCK should be underpinned by deeper knowledge of the politics of knowledge-making: the deeply connected sociological and political project of creating more spaces for challenging historical curricular forms of injustices. In this regard SOTL could be seen as an active dialogical reconstructive and disruptive force (see section three below). It embraces wisdom and practice. It needs to be felt rather than cerebrally understood. SOTL research is about enacting this fullness to counter what has become stultified and ritualistic in the name of "academic endeavour".

SOTL is constitutively a complex, difficult process attending to multiple forces, responding continually to changing contexts and driven by multiple sources of influence. The syntax emerging from these reflections suggest that scholarship within SOTL is not achievable through quick-fix responses. As Gayatri Spivak (2016) suggested in a previous teaching and learning 2014 conference, we need to acknowledge the value of "slow cooking": brewing our minds, hearts and hands with the opportunities for considered long-term, sustainable educational choices. Spivak also cautioned that many academics' curriculum discourses about SOTL could be considered as capitulating to fashionable rhetoric. She suggested that this rhetoric often did not question its compliance with irrelevant externally constructed worldviews and emphasised that as HE specialists, we might be choosing iniquitous options and consequences.

#### "Scholarly teaching" or a "Scholarship of teaching and learning"

This sub-section compares "*scholarly teaching*" and a "*scholarship of teaching and learning*". These two conceptions might be regarded as part of a continuum of possibilities. "Scholarly reflection" (A) emphasises questioning of the operational pragmatic elements of teaching and learning decision-making. Within this worldview the academic is concerned with enhancing the quality of their pedagogical action (best practices) through reflecting on their practice. However, a "scholarship of teaching and learning" (B) is primarily concerned with how the academic chooses to activate communities of fellow scholars/researchers to co-examine the kinds of interventions that have been embarked upon. Through the use of systematic inquiry methodologies, the aim is to generate the abstractions and principles which are governing the action of teaching and learning. The focus is on establishing a community of practitioners to co-share and debate the choices that are made, based on the systemic research inquiry process, including the dissemination of the knowledge that is gained in scholarly circles such as conferencing, and journal and academic publications. It should be noted that both (A) and (B) are concerned with the relationship between elements of theory, context and practice.

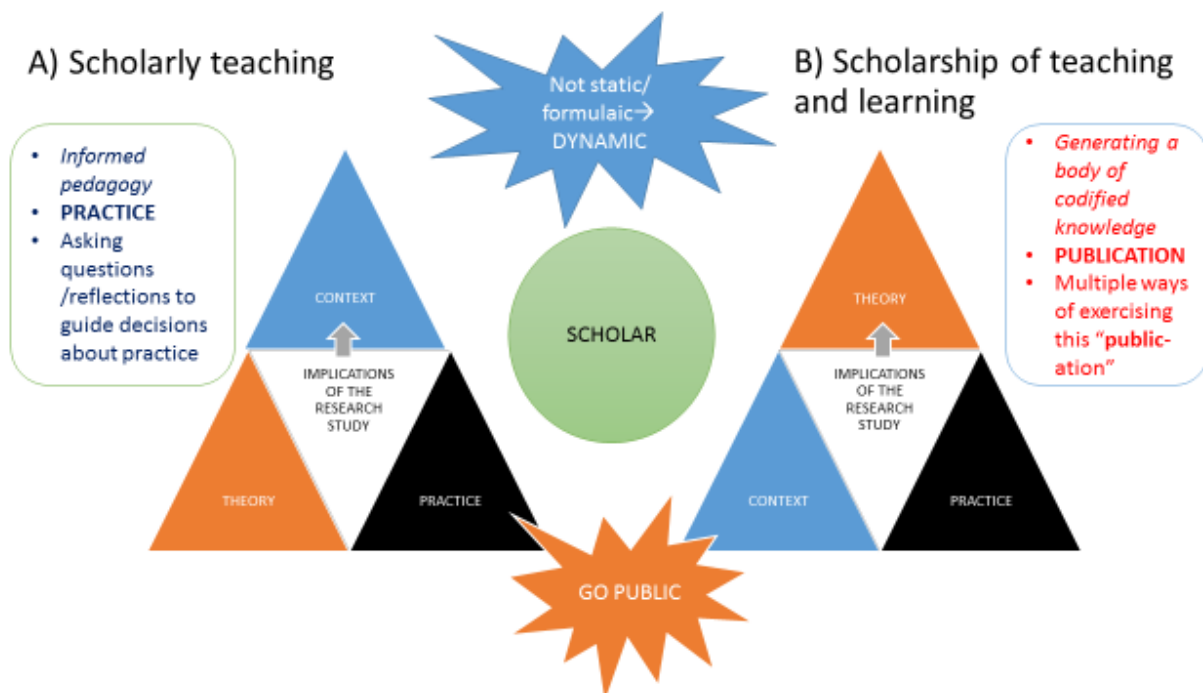


Figure 1: "Scholarly teaching" (A) and a "Scholarship of teaching and learning" (B)

- "Scholarly teaching" tends to foreground issues around how to activate relevant practice, but does not discount that these choices are motivated by responsiveness to context as well as underpinned by theoretical assumptions.
- A SOTL might be less concerned with the practices themselves; instead it prioritises how to develop communities of practice, as academic scholars that consciously reflect on the intersection between theory, practice and context choose to disseminate their new exploratory knowledges in the public sphere. This public-ation of one's scholarship could be translated into a variety of spaces ranging from within the classrooms one teaches, to sharing amongst the connected practitioners who share pedagogical interests or within the academic publications industry which values the dissemination of theoretical, methodological and robust critique of emergent views to generate new knowledge about teaching and learning. "SOTL" appears to be driven by the concern of going public, whilst "scholarly teaching" foregrounds the nature of the practices themselves.

It is important to note that earlier discourses of the UKZN conferences tended to foreground the celebratory elements of "best practices" in their foundational formulations. However, more recent shifts have promoted a theoretical discourse that explores the abstract critical engagement with teaching and learning issues. This does not mean that this shift was disconnected from contextual spaces; in fact, the spatialities of specific contexts generated the kinds of abstractions that were possible. Some academics have chosen to locate their scholarly pursuits within the realm of "informed practices" and pragmatic considerations (A). Others have been driven by their interest in creating a codified body of abstract knowledge about teaching and learning (B).

Both conceptualisations, however, are clear that there are no universal solutions for all times and spaces. This is a commentary on the rapidity of change in a socially interconnected world, but could also be driven by academics realising that academic pursuits are Janus-headed: peering into their past

whilst simultaneously selectively choosing directions for new futures. Academia is not about celebration (either of practice or theory), but about analysis (conscious decision-making). One delegate emphasised the expansion of the agenda of going public about one's analytical choices and reflections, as a matter of ensuring that one's ideas do not perish or stand up to general scrutiny. Academic presentation and publication in communities of practice are not about intellectual masturbation: the promotion of self-indulgent rhetoric. Instead, they are about actively putting one's ideas up for challenge to seek new alternatives.

## Section Two: best practices – a widening scope ... and silences

This section does not comprehensively list all the agendas that have come to be embedded as part of the activities of SOTL as enunciated at this illustrative conference. The following examples suggest how the scope of SOTL best-practices research is evolving. Some presenters reflected a concern about researching matters of *transition and articulation* between the formal school sector and the HE system, within the various zones and thresholds within the HE curriculum itself and between the exit point and the world of work/employment post-HE. Furthermore, the agenda of SOTL practice has articulated the need to examine how *pedagogical spaces* are designed architecturally to stimulate the activation of student voice and participation. Such activation is not simply a matter of the curriculum alone (i.e., the designed intervention for active teaching and learning). Analysis has also included foregrounding what *sense students make of the multiple texts* (physical and virtual) that they are surrounded with in their curriculum offerings. In this regard the emphasis has shifted from the selection of texts towards examining how students experience and make meaning of the texts in their everyday lives.

New emphases are also being directed towards examining how *time* is distributed towards varied teaching and learning goals within classroom activities. Presenters here foregrounded the notion that much time is directed toward filling in the void with "educational noise". Students were reported as learning to engage with superficial responses during classroom action. Presenters at the conference commented that little time was given to activating deeper critical epistemological reflections and questioning in the lecture halls. This could arguably be a response to the increasingly large classes with which academics have to contend. Many reported being underprepared for such large class pedagogies.

Another focus of innovative practices responded to the fact that the HE curriculum did not adequately manage the quality of its *service learning*, its community engagement and its social responsiveness interventions during the development of graduates. While this was a constitutive dimension of professional education programmes, most academic curricula tended to neglect this focus. These multiple issues offer vantage of the ever-expanding set of operational curriculum considerations that characterise a SOTL focus.

However, I foreground one issue which dominated a third of all the papers delivered at the targeted conference which constituted the intellectual space for data production of this article: namely, the potential role and limitations of *information technology* (IT) to enhance the quality of teaching and learning within the HE system. This is perhaps responding to policy-driven imperatives as HE managers are increasingly suggesting that IT is a more cost-effective and efficient resource to activate SOTL. It is



usually associated with a modernising and progressive education system which imitates current global strategies. It is also embraced as a solution to deal with massification, the lack of time for one-on-one student-staff interaction or simply to address the backlog of physical room to accommodate students in resource-constrained pedagogical spaces. It is argued that, blended learning, using combinations of both traditional and technologically-driven engagements, is narrowing the gap between face-to-face institutions and open-university systems. More attention is being directed towards how IT can provide means to “flip the classroom”. This entails reorganising face-to-face lecture-hall interactions to concentrate on dialogical support rather than the dissemination of information. Students are expected to read and engage the subject-matter knowledge through accessing the content online. IT is being seen as a way of generating peer support amongst cohorts of learning in online communities; it offers the possibility for enhanced communication between lecturer and student and activates the possibility that learning can be fun and self-initiated. New modes of delivery from social media such as WhatsApp and Facebook are increasingly being seen as tools for teaching and learning. Particular pedagogical strategies have adopted the promotion of gamification into their pedagogy, drawing on well-used design principles which have captured the attention of many.

However, many of these innovations reported at the conference tended to foreground the activation of the *medium* of teaching and learning. A focus on IT tends to be easily seduced by the *technology* rather than the impact of the technological activities and engagement with the process of qualitative *learning*. Technology (form) rather than teaching/learning (purpose) became the focus. It is quite possible that the innovation merely cements old, hardened, authoritarian forms of pedagogy if sufficient attention is not paid to the process of learning and teaching, and ontological questions about where and how knowledge is seen to reside. The methodological approach also presumes that university students will indeed embark on pre-lecture preparation and will be largely able to identify and articulate the kinds of difficulties they may be encountering in the public spaces for the flipped classroom.

Technological innovation might improve motivation and enjoyment, but further research must include a focus on whether this improves deep-quality learning. It is noted that many younger researchers are migrating to these forms of IT-driven pedagogies, perhaps because they are more comfortable with the potential it offers, drawing from their own experiences of using IT. This also resonates with the younger generation of students who reportedly prefer this kind of (potentially) “non-public forms of engagement” using creative pseudonyms and masking of identities. The perils of such pedagogical spaces are not as prominently acknowledged amongst those who adopt a strong advocatory stance to IT as an innovation. For example, little critical reflection is being made on how this IT highway is another form of expansionism of market spaces created by the corporate giants who lie behind this new form of colonial expansionism. Whilst enjoyment may be what students want, it is not necessarily what they may need to develop a critical lens about the epistemological and ideological agendas underpinning many IT platforms (Schmidt & Cohen 2013). Overemphasis on the practices of IT pedagogy might also detract from deeply critical reflection about whether course competencies are indeed being met.

This section on SOTL practices also needs to reflect on whether *creative imaginations* are indeed being generated by the newer forms of practices that are being designed. The quality of a curriculum under SOTL review should also include how uncertainty and unpredictability are nurtured as the necessary

tentativeness which underpins scholarship. Are we indeed operating to activate a culture of naïve certainty in which ready-made solutions are seen to be available merely for consumption? How is it that the reflections on practices of SOTL tend to be under-represented by discourses from the performing and visual arts? How are professional courses dealing with the fact that their signature scholarships involve a *pedagogy of the self*: an activation of the deeper harmonisations of the beats of our head, heart and mind? These silences continue to be heard in our rampant campaigns for efficiencies of teaching and learning pedagogies.

### SOTL's silent agendas

A disappointing concern emerges when one reflects on the repeated agendas of the SOTL activities listed as matters of priority within the menu of conference reports and presentations. Our discourses seem to be still fixated within patterns of victimhood and pathology. For example, a recurrent feature of this specific teaching and learning conference has been its commentary on the marginalisation of indigenous languages within the formal HE environment. Whilst this debate has shifted to establish alternative pedagogical interventions to reposition the marginalisation of languages in everyday actions in many HE institutions in the southern context, the formal conference presentations have stagnated in bemoaning the lack of successful participation of students who do not share the dominant discourse of English literacies. Moreover, the debate does not adequately challenge the complexity of an intersected HE internationalised context. This is not to support a capitulation to dominant hegemonic forces. Simply, the conferencing around this matter and the development of scholarship seemed to be locked in a “looking-over-the-shoulder-to-where-we-have-come-from” gaze, rather than actively sharing and disseminating the multiple strategies for how this challenge is and has indeed been addressed (albeit with varying challenges and opportunities). Scholarship is not about pathologising; scholarship of SOTL must engage how the margins and the periphery constantly need to dialogue with each other. It appears as if a disconnect is occurring between those who are writing and presenting about language matters, and those who are engaging with activating alternative strategies in practice. Why is the latter category of academics not adequately entering the space of scholarship around these matters?

In this regard Lee Shulman (2016) suggested that we need to move beyond our “pedagogopathologies”. He suggested that as scholars of SOTL we have become preoccupied with *amnesia* (a selective forgetting of priorities), *fantasia* (a romanticisation and simplification of what is possible in a complex intersected world), *solitaria* (an obsession with private hoarding rather than disseminating possible leverage pedagogical possibilities), *inertia* (reverting to habituated rituals as if educational choices are acontextual or timeless) and *nostalgia* (believing that we once lived in a golden age in the past) (Jenvey 2015). The levers for change are not in the practices alone, but in how academics and scholars view our non-pathologised practices. This suggests that the periphery-centre debates should embrace not only arguments about opposition and competition, but also actively assess subversion and dialogical strategies for the unlocking of potential.

Activating SOTL entails countering a learnt pedagogical solitude. It entails crossing disciplines, to draw on and build on new memories, to activate spaces to construct our thoughts carefully, to forge ahead to refine our ideas, to look forward and not dwell on the past, to develop strategies to think about and revise our programmes, to embrace research potential as a means to connect within contexts and

to enrich communities (Mignolo 2011). This includes how we choose to actively disseminate, communicate and represent our new-found knowledges within a broader public space.

The following adjectives and phrases recur when thinking about this new responsibility of SOTL: disruptive, innovative, imaginative, creative, reflective, critical, illuminating, situated, inclusive, responsive, exceptional, surprising, positive, combative, improvised, spontaneous, adaptive, resisting the illusion of generalisability, and finding both the darkneses and the lights in our teaching and learning. SOTL (not only for the South) will be judged in relation to its ability to generate honesty, modesty, empathy, truth, beauty, joy, fertility, simplicity, and humanity, and not convenient truth-making. SOTL learning journeys move through the blockages of our own pathologies towards a scholarship of interconnection. Our comfort must acknowledge that this journey is never completed.

### **Section Three: institutional action – intersecting Agendas (the meso-level)**

Another variant of SOTL has focused attention not on practices alone, but on the internal institutional systems that hinder or enable practices. This foregrounds the role of managers and quality promotion and assurance agents who are keen to evaluate the quality of what works in producing the targeted outcomes of the system. However, the presentations at the conference seemed to suggest that this agenda should not be hijacked by only the management elite of institutional organisations. Instead, it suggested that the leadership of SOTL, its legitimacy and credibility, are best promoted when all participants within the HE system (academics, administrators, managers and students themselves together with other stakeholders) come to co-define the agenda of Institutional Research. The conference presentations seemed to suggest that the IR agenda could be interpreted as a disguised form of surveillance by line managers and senior management. This was interpreted as fostering accountability regimes holding academics responsible to address inefficiencies. Some presenters argued that the so-called inefficiencies in the HE context could not all necessarily be laid at the doorstep of academics alone. Structural and systemic inequities in the wider society (e.g. poverty, poor schooling) generated whole cadres of under-prepared students. However, this does not absolve academics from responding appropriately to create opportunities for success via the kinds of curriculum they design and practice to address these inequities.

Arguments presented at this conference opened the debate about whether IR can only be regarded as such when officially sanctioned by the gatekeepers of research evaluation of the institutional systems, i.e. by the managers of the systems. The papers suggested that a range of IR is possible, spanning descriptive, evaluative, analytical, theoretical, and philosophical as well as practical strategies. Most often reflection in this category was concerned about whether adequate baseline, foundational data exists at institutional level to conduct this kind of systemic research analysis. This might be a specific concern for institutions that do not have sufficiently robust administrative systems for record-keeping, updating of data and activation of these resources in research and/or institutional decision-making. The advocates of this strand of SOTL are suggesting that IR constitutes a unique branch of scholarship, requiring the harmonising of a range of paradigmatic perspectives, jettisoning the view that only quantitative analyses are favoured. Whilst the call for “evidence-based research” is welcomed, it was suggested that narrow definitions about what constitutes “evidence” still prevail. This raised both methodological and conceptual issues about conducting IR research to activate SOTL.

The focus on SOTL using an IR lens foregrounded different elements of the institutional system: the lecturers/academics, student and lecturer identity constructions, the strategies for activating student learning and its co-requisite teaching actions. Within the realm of review of *academics as part of IR* a range of concerns emerged about what promotes (or not) critical self-reflection and dialogue. Questions include an examination of the environment of trust and reciprocity, elaboration on what constitutes safe spaces from which to interrogate the ideologies present in lecture rooms, the notable levels of stress caused by an over-emphasis on administrative tasks, and negotiation of work-family-life balances, which could result in absenteeism and burnout. The IR agenda foregrounding academics as the key elements also foregrounded matters around academics' reflections about space and time to deal with the core business of their work, their job satisfaction and their opportunities for voluntary or mandated professional development.

Not surprisingly it seemed that IR included matters of a *human resource (HR) dimension* as well: about reasonable remuneration, respect in the work place and collegial working environments. Some presentations in this broad category of IR addressed matters of what constituted a stimulating work environment that is intellectually challenging. Also in this category were studies which foregrounded how promotions were being managed recognising or not both research productivity, as well as teaching and learning productivity. How promotion criteria and teaching portfolios were being constructed for promotion possibilities was also seen as part of IR. However, is this disguised HR preoccupation surfacing in an HE conference because of the limited scholarship spaces that currently exist to critique and theorise HR itself? Is this agenda indeed about SOTL?

IR has also focused on the construction of *identities of its key role-players* as systems, policies and enactments, and the macro-contextual landscape shift. Some research has been directed towards understanding how activists and change-agents reconstructed their academic and their ideological selves in relation to these forces. This is argued to be a part of the quest for inclusive African identity (See Chikoko 2016; Odora-Hoppers 2002).

Increasingly, an agenda of IR has been directed towards emphasising not teaching, but the *quality of learning* that is activated. For example, the Council on Higher Education quality enhancement project noted the focus on students' experiences of HE shifts (or lack thereof) in policies and practices (CHE 2015). This emphasises the intersection between "learning to teach" (an issue of academic professional development in pedagogic design and delivery) and "teaching to activate learning" (a focus on how students learn from the organised teaching spaces) (Southwood 2012). This latter learning could affect both student learning and teacher learning. It activates a broadening of the focus on SOTL to concern itself not only with students as the sole beneficiaries/recipients of SOTL. It has also activated a shift from a narrow, technical skills-based curriculum pedagogical activities based understanding towards the promotion of holistic partner-centred practices. This has stimulated further reflection on how the hard skills of content knowledge are inadequate for generating targeted exit level competences. More often than not the discourse of curriculum development is shifting towards "soft skills" which enable graduates to generate complex responses to settings where they will practice in the future.

In reflecting on the multiple student protests not only locally but also internationally, Thabo Msibi (2016), a local UKZN keynote speaker at the conference, commented that academia needs to

interrogate what lies behind the agenda of *students' critique*. He suggested that we need to desist judging too quickly that the agenda is driven by hooliganistic tendencies or an attempt to destroy the HE system. He reflected critically on the multiple directions of symbolic, real, verbal and curricular and experienced violence that were being activated against students, and suggested that students' destructive physical violence was being exaggerated. These campaigns are illustrative of a new generation of students newly defining the goals of an education system. New patterns and new agendas for expectations and visions for HE were being orchestrated, not all of which are necessarily directed towards greater forms of broader social justices.

Another dimension of IR is being directed by those designing and managing *support services* for students. This spans the range of personal, psychological, health, and accommodation as well as academic support. However, despite considerable institutional platforms and programmes providing psychosocial support to students, the uptake of such is not ideal. This opens further research questions about how to review student support, how to evaluate impact, or how to establish partnerships of design and delivery strategies with respect to this dimension of SOTL, since HE experiences are surely being fashioned through these interventions. The question that needs to be asked is who should be the collaborating partners involved in designing such interventions?

All of these IR issues seem to be suggesting that more questions rather than workable solutions have been found. Will this institutionalise a growing agenda where research focus will be directed? Who are the likely advocates for and beneficiaries of these newer directives? The presenters in this conference seemed to be suggesting that the SOTL agenda cannot be confined to micro-level descriptions of practices inside classrooms. They seemed to point to the fact that the micro-level context is both shaping and being shaped by the institutional meso-level environment within which the pedagogies of teaching and learning are being executed. Both levels constitute the agenda of IR as a necessary dimension of SOTL, perhaps challenging traditional conceptions which confined SOTL to operational considerations. These sentiments echo the agenda reflected in the Higher Education Academy report cited in the opening section of this article (HEA 2016). Moreover, some conference presentations were also pointing to the connections with the macro-systemic social environment.

#### **Section Four: social action – SOTL in the south (the macro-Level)**

A repeated refrain throughout the conference, and noted by the data production team, cited the proverbial "*elephant in the room*" which constituted the backdrop to an examination of how to reflect, critique and act within the HE terrain that is under severe critique by forces of contestation. The turbulent and uncertain environment of the 2016 student protests (which daily generated new victims and perpetrators of violence) challenges the quality of the support students are receiving to access and participate in HE. Whilst this focus is at the forefront of the agenda of universities in the South, it also reverberates across international settings where the affordability and relevance of HE education are being challenged. Does this widening agenda suggest that we are in the death throes of the (public) university system, as newer forms of engaging knowledge development are mushrooming: private (for profit) HE institutions; workplace training institutes, and instrumentalist technical training systems geared to produce the next generation of the labour force (MacGregor & Makoni 2010)?

The agenda as reflected in the conference also highlighted that universities were increasingly being challenged to broaden their scope from Gibbon's Mode 1 type of knowledge which emphasised codified disciplinary knowledges (propositional content knowledge). Increasingly, the workplace settings where students were seeking future employment required students to engage in pragmatic useful action (Mode 2 knowledge). This expands the notion of knowledge *about* practices, to knowledge *for, in and through* practices. Du Preez and Simmonds (2016) extend this notion to argue that HE ought to generate a Mode 3 knowledge. This adds an expectation that knowledge is a strategic resource that could be harnessed to service a social democratic agenda.

These multiple expectations about the kinds and purposes of HE knowledge highlighted that there is perhaps more than one elephant in the room. Different elephants are competing for stamping grounds to assert their own agendas about what constitutes a more relevant, worthwhile and rewarding HE curriculum. Whilst student protest discourses are ostensibly about the financing of HE (the #Feesmustfall movement), they are also about concerns regarding the alienation that the majority of students of HE feel. The #Rhodesmustfall campaign critiques the HE system, its structures, its curriculum and its pedagogy which create patterns of marginalisation and peripheralisation (I return to the matter of a decolonised curriculum in HE later in the argument). Jansen (2017) further cautions that it would be simplistic to homogenise any of the student voices and the fallist movements since the terrain has become polyglot and pluri-vocal.

However, the challenge might not only be about the elephants in the room. Instead it might more likely be about the *many rooms that are in the elephants*. This refers metaphorically to the ways in which both students and academics have imbibed and internalised particular interpretations of the purposes, functions and goals of HE and academic study. We are all, perhaps, complicit in an agenda of capitulating to essentialising the curriculum to produce commodified marketable outputs which can be traded on the factory floor of future workplace settings. Subtly, HE, and its students and academia, have become embroiled in producing employable graduates (with the quality of "graduateness" that is deemed appropriate). Too often academics are confronted by students who argue that academic study is too taxing and that the standards set are too high. Some even argue for a watering down of the exit-level expectations set by the academics (sometimes claimed in the name of irrelevance or imposition of Eurocentric values).

Valuing the "worthwhile contribution" that students are likely to make in a socially troubled world beset with violence, xenophobia, patriarchy, homophobia and other social injustices, recedes as a focus as we teach individuals to become more selfish and individualist, rather than campaigning to generate active critical citizenry who serve the interests of the wider society. This raises the question of whether, even though the delegates at this conference were predominantly from the South, their perspectives were being created elsewhere. Have we internalised the very demons we critique?

A SOTL must recognise who are our enemies, friends and strangers and how and why we are choosing the quality of relationships and strategies with them in the way we do (Chang 2008). It may be argued that a genuine (if such could exist) SOTL in the South agenda, which attempts to respond to the specificities of our localised contexts, is notable for its rejection of a utilitarianist approach. Some argue that an African SOTL focuses on intersecting the personal and the social good (Singh 2001), and recognises the need to move beyond individualistic matrices, but also aims to establish communities

of practice to address wider systemic injustices (Higgs 2016). A southern SOTL is one which recognises contestation, trouble and uncertainty as necessary ingredients for solution-finding. Interpreted problems are the very resources to search for new dialogues across partners who have previously been excluded, oppressed or even deliberately jettisoned. But does this “SOTL in the South” conception not echo the international discourses which value permeable boundaries between different disciplines, celebrate contested identities and actively promote interdisciplinarity (Nadar, Reddy, Van der Walt, Siwil & Gerle 2014)? The sociological agenda of SOTL is already an established discourse (Spelt, Biemans, Tobi, Luning & Mulder 2009; Spivak 2005).

Perhaps, by contrast, a SOTL in the South dialogical stance is distinguished as being not about a politeness of shared knowledges: a SOTL syntax for the South is about deliberately seeking opportunities to trouble and disrupt our comfort zones, our habits, rituals and routines which fossilise the boundaries of knowledge (Samuel, Dhunpath & Amin 2016). Some scholars argue that this disruption is about generating innovation and excellence, whilst others suggest that it consciously cultivates critical citizenry who challenge the foundational rationale of HE. For the latter, HE is more than simply about creating “work-ready graduates”. As a relatively limited (and perhaps elitist) small output of the total population who are able to afford and succeed in HE, working towards a collective good is not an onus, but a responsibility. A southern SOTL cannot therefore be restricted to developing practical operational outputs; it is deeply implicated in a sociological reconstructivist project agenda. Numerous presentations at the conference suggested that practice alone cannot define SOTL. A SOTL of the South is a political and theoretical commitment. Such scholarship entails knowing what, how and why we act the way we do; furthermore, it cannot be only about self-nurturing and introspection. It is paradoxical that university systems which should be promoting these dialogical interrelations amongst academics and their pursuits do not actively support the opportunities for disrupting the boundaries of disciplinary silos. Truly supporting SOTL is perhaps antithetical to the existence of continued discipleships as characterised by the present HE structures. One delegate commented that we punish rather than reward inter-structural dialogues across different colleges, schools and disciplines since “the unit of the one” has become the yardstick of efficient productivity of students and academics in the neo-liberal HE environment.

### Closing comments

This article presented the views of academics at one academic conference who suggested that their interests might be primarily located at resolving matters at circumscribed spheres of operation at the micro-, meso- or macro levels. However, it appears that their conceptions of SOTL are being influenced by the need for integrated alignment between these three spheres of influence where tensions, contradictions and paradoxes emerge across these levels. The innovation that is likely to be produced for SOTL is argued to derive from the erasing of boundaries between these different levels/spheres of influence, recognising the need for greater dialogue across boundaries that are self-created and systemically perpetuated. The imaginative agenda should be driven by a campaign to realise better forms of social justice for all within the HE system (academics, managers and students) as contributions are made within the wider society.

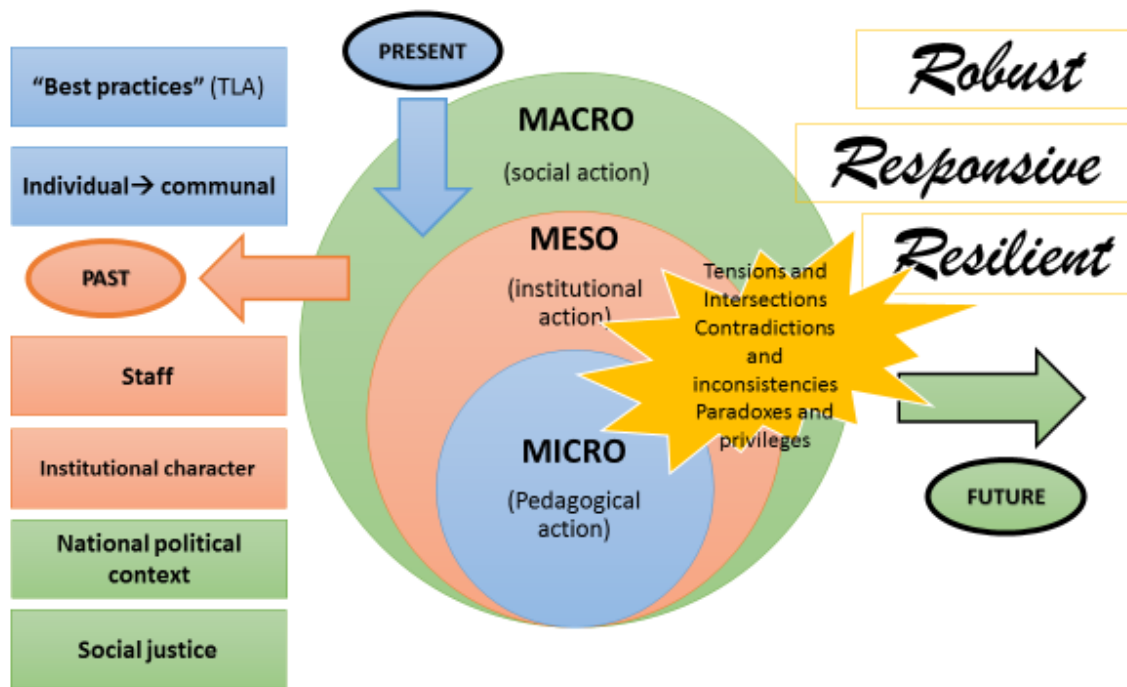


Figure 2: Intersecting tensions and contradictions across levels of SOTL

It might not be apparent that this article is centrally about the agenda of decolonisation, a foregrounded critique of the HE system for its co-option of westernised, Eurocentric patterns of privilege. Indeed, in attempting to find a vocabulary and syntax of SOTL, it enunciates the complexity of the process of redefining new levers for SOTL, especially in an interconnected, internationalised world. Decolonisation cannot be simply about replacing one set of colonialities within another newer form of marginalisations. It is naïve to believe that decolonisation will make it possible to get rid of everything associated with western or northern worldviews and replace it within a romantic cocoon of southern concerns alone. A SOTL in the South critically engages the ways in which knowledges are designed, exchanged, managed and distributed across the globe, especially with the advent of the powerful highways of IT. Denying access to the interconnected world would be a form of epistemic suicide, since these agendas are being constructed at an enormously rapid rate of expansion. This does not however, mean that a contextualised valuing and philosophical orientation from the South cannot be infused to disrupt existing hegemonic forces. A decolonised scholarship involves the need to harvest the IT revolution to promote fluidity of perspectives, and porous exchange of contested principles and values to engage in a disruptive force. Disruption is not inherently destructive; it is a bridge-building force. The responsibility of HE practitioners, including managers, administrators, scholars, researchers and students is to engage in a form of epistemic disobedience which challenges our borrowing of metaphors from outside our contextualised spaces, to question their relevance for the specific spaces of localised contexts (Mignolo 2011). This is likely to be a forever-contested space of critical debate (Bozalek, Leibowitz, Carolissen & Boler 2014). A SOTL in the South is transgressive in its critique of the managerial agendas which confine the creative possibilities of our epistemic explorations – our need to erase and establish new territories of research (Amin 2016). Whilst recognising the need to affirm the previously marginalised, the newer agendas of a SOTL of the South cannot remain descriptively celebratory or advocatory accounts of the alternative. Instead they ought to be led by a strong theoretical accountability of responsiveness, relevance, resilience and robustness. Our vocabulary and syntax of a SOTL by, from and about the South will evolve as we



dialogue attentively with mutual valuing of academic debate and respect for divergent opinions. The enormity of the levels of contestation this will entail should not be under-estimated. But, as all languages develop through seeking a common ground of shared rules of engagement – not just to solidify but generate new ways of thinking, seeing and being – so too will SOTL, both internationally and in the South, seek to create new texts, new discourses, and new imaginative possibilities through its continued contested agendas. We need to be vigilant about the kinds of epistemologies we promote or critique, consciously aware that the journey is paved with multiple possibilities which endorse some views and simultaneously silence others. Our “epistemic disobedience” (Mignolo 2011) will be our guide.

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