

SoTL and Transformation at HBCUs and other MSIs

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Background

Scholarly and creative activity is an essential part of the life of the professor at many types of institutions, from liberal arts colleges to master's-focused institutions to research universities. Historically, most individuals, including those inside the academy, have thought of scholarship as focusing on the "basic" research of discovery and, perhaps, on applied research. Ernest Boyer, in his landmark book of 1990, Scholarship Reconsidered, reminded us of these two kinds of scholarship, as well as of a third kind, the "scholarship of integration," the scholarly work that seeks to integrate knowledge across disciplines and sub-disciplines, often on a particular theme that can only be addressed in an interdisciplinary manner.

Perhaps Boyer's greatest contribution at the time, however, was the presentation of an argument that validated the scholarship of teaching (later expanded to the scholarship of teaching AND learning) being conducted by Boyer's colleagues at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (notably Lee Shulman and Pat Hutchings). The case for the scholarship of teaching and learning (SOTL) was significant in that it argued for the legitimacy of scholarly work on teaching (and learning) within the disciplines and beyond the field of education. It called for the application of such scholarship with the same kind of scholarly rigor that scholars used within their disciplines, and perhaps most importantly it called for recognition of the legitimacy of this work by faculty colleagues within the disciplines and by leaders in higher education.

Effective teaching, to some, is considered only to be possible through a scholarly approach to the task. After all, the teacher (professor) should always be concerned that his/her students learn and should always be open to assessing the success of various teaching strategies, classroom behaviors, and cultures on student learning. Such an approach to teaching is called **Scholarly Teaching** -- the act of *systematically* collecting and using data to inform oneself on teaching effectiveness as related to student learning. Scholarly Teaching utilizes techniques such as reflection, assessment, course re-design, and collegial collaboration and consultation.

Sharing and peer review are essential attributes of scholarly work within most disciplines. In the scholarly world, most would say that scholars have an obligation to make their work public and to offer it for the scrutiny of colleagues and peers. In many ways, the failure to make one's scholarly work public effectively makes it non-existent,

certainly irrelevant. But why is the same not true for work on teaching and learning? Why should one NOT want to share the results of experiences and learning outcomes with others? If for no other reasons, such sharing might well lead to improvement of one's methods, and, of course, such sharing could result in the transmission of good ideas to others so that, in the long run, more students can benefit from the employment of teaching methods that have been found to be successful.

This *systematic* study of teaching/learning and the *public sharing* of such work through presentations or publications, and sometimes through peer review processes, is referred to as the **Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL)**. Its focus is on innovation, documentation, replication, and generalizability.

There are three critical questions that all faculty members should ask concerning their teaching.

- *How does an instructional program, policy, practice, class, teaching strategy, etc., improve or enhance student learning?*
- *How do I know that learning has been enhanced?*
- *How can I use this information to inform others, as well as to inform my future teaching activity?*

These three critical questions form the basis for this paper. Although deceptively simple, addressing these practical questions takes the same careful planning and application, detailed recording, and time that any scientific study requires.

Why Care About SoTL at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs)?

Given the explosion of interest and engagement in SoTL over the past two decades, it is somewhat surprising -- and disappointing -- to note that a disproportionately small amount of work in this field is being conducted at HBCUs and MSIs. There are many reasons why we all should be concerned about the relative paucity of published work on teaching and learning at these institutions.

To begin with, these institutions graduate a significant proportion of college and university students from the nation's two largest and fastest growing minority groups: African Americans and Hispanics—23.6% and 47.5%, respectively. Moreover, there is every reason to believe that these two groups will comprise upwards of 50% of the U.S. workforce by the middle of the 21st century. Obviously, we can ill afford to be inattentive to teaching and learning issues within these two populations, particularly since these students frequently underachieve at the college and university level in most disciplines, often as a result of poor preparation at the secondary level. For this reason, if none other, HBCU's and MSI's, because of their large rates of enrollments and graduation of Hispanics and African Americans, are the nation's best laboratories to address teaching and learning issues, which have a unique importance to these groups, AND to share their results with faculty in other institutions, including Traditionally White Institutions

(TWIs). In other words, these institutions are in a unique position to provide successful models for enhancing academic achievement for ALL students: a goal that must be considered essential in a democratic society.

Colleges and Universities Are Dynamic Organizations

The evolution of faculty life is reflective of the dynamic nature of colleges and universities. These institutions are in constant states of change for predictable reasons. In fact, if they do not change, they become obsolete quickly. A major reason that colleges and universities are changing is that the very subject matter of their courses is rapidly changing and expanding. Students, frankly, have more and different things to know with each passing generation. Some futurists argue, for example, that information is doubling every four to five years, and for this reason, colleges and universities are in a constant state of having to revise and reform their curricula and to package knowledge in new and creative ways. The rise of interdisciplinary studies in recent decades typifies this phenomenon.

Likewise, colleges and universities are responsive to national priorities—and to extramural funding priorities. In the late 1950's and early 1960's, for example, there was a significant increase in science teaching following the launch of Sputnik by the Soviet Union. Today, recent national priorities in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics have spurred significant academic and research advances in our institutions of higher learning.

New advances in teaching and learning are also influencing how we teach at the collegiate level. One has only to look at the uses of the Internet in higher education to recognize the enormous changes in the way teaching and learning are taking place, both synchronously and asynchronously.

Teaching and Learning Reforms in Undergraduate Education

Far beyond the usage of power point, distance learning and other electronically based teaching tools and strategies, many other reforms are taking place in higher education, many of which are driven by new theories and data derived from research. At the heart of many of these reforms is an increased interest in student learning, rather than a uni-dimensional emphasis on teaching. After all, teaching effectiveness, in the final analysis, can only be measured by student learning. As a result, faculty members have been “experimenting” with a variety of teaching strategies across the country and around the world in an effort to enhance student learning. All of these reforms and strategies are in dire need of systematic assessment to determine their effectiveness with the diversity of learners in college classrooms and within the various academic disciplines. It is probably safe to say that teaching effectiveness is dependent, at least in part, on *who* the learners are and on *what* the subject matter is to be learned.

The foundation for these reforms is grounded in the following assumptions—and a few others—about teaching and learning, many of which are substantiated by data:

- Teaching should be a *public*, generalizable event and not an activity done in secret without public scrutiny from peers and others.
- Because knowledge is connected, relational, and socially constructed, learning is enhanced by providing students with opportunities to connect subject matter learning to hands-on experiences (experiential learning).
- Learning is enhanced through active processes in which students build upon prior knowledge and experiences and are provided opportunities to interact directly with other students (active learning), particularly since previous learning and experiences are typically idiosyncratic and culture-bound.
- Learning occurs inside *and* outside of classrooms.
- Learning is influenced by the social context of classrooms and institutions.
- The faculty member should be as much a facilitator as a sage, especially since lecturing in and of itself is often the *least* likely teaching strategy to advance learning on many subjects.
- Learning is advanced through documentation, analysis, reflection, and sharing.
- One size in teaching/learning probably does not fit all students, disciplines, or topics!

SoTL at HBCUs and MSIs

HBCUs and MSIs vary with respect to size, mission, and student demographics, and range from community colleges to research universities. They are NOT all alike. Yet each of these institutions has a mission that emphasizes academic achievement for underrepresented minority students—students who all too often underachieve in higher education. But what separates these institutions from other institutions is a firm belief by most of their faculties that the students CAN learn and that it is their *responsibility* to facilitate that learning. The track record of success of these institutions is remarkable. HBCUs graduate almost 25% of all African American baccalaureate degree recipients annually and MSIs graduate almost 50% of Hispanic baccalaureate recipients each year. These impressive statistics are achieved with a cohort group that contains many students who are *unable* to gain admission to many other colleges and universities. Yet these graduates go on to achieve Ph.D., M.D., and J.D. degrees at rates that surpass those of minority graduates at other types of institutions. For example, HBCUs represent more than half of the top 20 institutions in the country that produce African American undergraduates who later receive the Ph.D. degree—most of those Ph.D.s from the most distinguished research universities in the country!

We recently conducted an informal survey of SoTL projects currently underway at HBCUs. The goal of this survey was to determine the goals of these projects and the types of funding that supported them. We examined websites, publications, reports, conference programs, and national initiatives; and conducted personal interviews with some of the researchers to get preliminary insights into SoTL activities at HBCUs. What we found is that much scholarly teaching, but very little SoTL activity, is being conducted and that most of the funding is internal rather than external. Primary researchers engaged in some of these projects found that obstacles such as support, both

financial and institutional, and unexpected challenges to implementation in the classroom hindered the projects' progression. Publication of results is also another gap in the SoTL process.

Some sample current and recent HBCU SoTL projects, with their associated leaders and funding agencies, include:

- **Benedict College:** Rhonda C. Grego (1999) and Gwenda Greene (2000) (FIPSE)
- **Claflin University:** Miriam Chitiga (2004) (FIPSE)
- **Clark Atlanta University:** Janice Liddell (Bush Foundation)
- **Fisk University:** Adam Meyer and Ormond Smyth (1997) (FIPSE)
- **Hampton University:** April Burriss (2004) (FIPSE)
- **Howard University:** Lorraine Fleming (2005) (NSF and CASTL) and Orlando Taylor (2004) (FIPSE)
- **Johnson C. Smith University:** Phyllis Dawkins (FIPSE)
- **Knoxville College:** Ronald Bailey (2000) (FIPSE)
- **North Carolina A&T State University:** Karen Hornsby (2005) (CASTL)
- **North Carolina Central University:** Paula Harrell and others (1996) (FIPSE)
- **Prairie View A & M University:** Veronica Abdur-Rahman (1997) (FIPSE) and Gerald Gaither (2001 and 2003) (FIPSE)
- **Shaw University:** Kenneth Mitchell (2004) (FIPSE)
- **Spelman College:** Beverly Guy-Sheftall (1998) (Carnegie), Mona Phillips (1999) (Carnegie), and Glenda Dickerson (1996) (FIPSE)
- **Texas Southern University:** Cherry Gooden and Angela Anderson (2004) (FIPSE)
- **University of the District of Columbia:** Alice Thomas (2001) (CASTL)

These researchers emphasize the notion that scholarly teaching and the scholarship of teaching and learning are practices that go beyond lecturing. Strategies for these projects include a variety of practices, including learning communities, service learning (not volunteerism), collaborative and cooperative learning, peer teaching, teaching circles, experiential learning, and problem-based learning models.

One program that appears to be headed towards positive results in creating a better atmosphere for learning is the Building Engagement and Attainment for Minority Students (BEAMS) project. The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and the Alliance for Equity in Higher Education (AEHE) developed the BEAMS program to improve students' overall experiences at MSIs. BEAMS is a five-year initiative designed "to improve retention, achievement, and institutional effectiveness at MSIs that are members of the alliance." Although not formally considered a SoTL project, BEAMS does address questions of learning at participating MSIs and helps them to adjust their curricula in order to increase learning. Interestingly, many HBCUs who have not participated in other formal projects on teaching and learning have joined the BEAMS project. This program has the potential to help institutions demonstrate proven results during the accreditation process. Perhaps this need, along with the program's proven

results, is what sparks so much interest. But in the same way that social justice cannot be the sole motivation for SoTL work, neither can accreditation be the only goal.

There is much work yet to be done in the field of SoTL, and MSIs are an especially fruitful place to consider how minorities can benefit from the advancement of teaching theories and techniques. But how do we support and increase faculty ability to conduct SoTL work at MSIs, with faculty already bearing the burden of heavy workloads and limited funding? One method of scaffolding SoTL work at MSIs, and specifically HBCUs, would be through the development of teaching circles. Teaching circles can serve as settings to develop new strategies for teaching, to share the work that is happening in an instructor's class, and to create answers to stumbling blocks in the research process. A teaching circle consists of a small group of faculty (2-5) working together on specific issues of teaching and learning. This circle can even include students and/or teaching assistants -- whoever is necessary to create a group designed to enhance collaboration, professionalism, scholarship, and a sense of community on teaching and learning. Of course, this group would be more formal than an average meeting between teachers. The goals of the meeting would be directed toward addressing a relevant topic or problem and should be facilitated by institutional incentives and rewards. Ideally, the group also would be interdisciplinary.

Equally important, inter-institutional teaching circles and inter-institutional learning communities could prove to be quite useful in understanding the effectiveness of various teaching strategies at HBCUs and MSIs. These inter-institutional circles and communities could provide a framework for comparisons to be made across institutional types within the HBCU and MSI communities. These comparisons could be documented and later submitted for publication and possible extramural funding. A good example of inter-institutional faculty learning communities is currently underway through a FIPSE-funded project involving Howard University, Talladega College, Jackson State University, and Xavier University of Louisiana. This project is examining the impact of various types of student learning communities on academic achievement in the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields. The learning communities are using such strategies as linked classes, thematic seminars across disciplines, problem-based projects, and interdisciplinary student seminars and group research projects. Faculty members across the four institutions share the effectiveness of their work through electronic and face-to-face meetings by reporting comparative academic performance data comparing learning outcomes resulting from these new strategies with traditional teaching strategies, mainly unlinked "silo" teaching (lecturing) disconnected from teaching and learning in other courses.

There are other important advances that need to occur outside of institutions before we can make successful progress in SoTL at MSIs. First, we need an up-to-date database of SoTL activity at MSIs, a place where current and future SoTL scholars can benefit from previous scholars and meet others who are interested in this kind of work. This type of site will greatly increase scholars' abilities to find the gaps in the research and design projects that will be useful to a larger audience. For face-to-face interactions, an annual HBCU/MSI SoTL institute for faculty and graduate students, with an

associated electronic journal publishing the outcomes of the institute, would also be helpful. These activities would elicit more funding opportunities and increased participation in the larger SoTL community.

Clark Atlanta University should be congratulated for launching this first SoTL conference that focuses on student learning at HBCUs and MSIs. Our faculties, and especially our students, will be the beneficiaries of this and future conferences.