

Shawa, Lester Brian

## **Advancing the scholarship of teaching and learning using learning theories and reflectivity**

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## Advancing the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning using Learning Theories and Reflectivity

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LESTER BRIAN SHAWA<sup>1</sup>

∞ The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) remains a mostly elusive notion. For universities to genuinely contribute to SoTL, they must delineate clear parameters of engagement. For example, while some engage SoTL at the academic level, others examine it from an institutional policy perspective. Others view it from national and international frameworks that impact teaching and learning in universities. Engaging SoTL at the academic level, this article uses a postgraduate diploma module, Higher Education Context and Policy (mostly attended by university academics from South African universities) to show how a facilitator could draw from learning theories and reflectivity to teach and advance SoTL. More specifically, it demonstrates how a facilitator could mediate the module utilising a social constructivist learning theory perspective.

**Keywords:** scholarship of teaching and learning, postgraduate diploma in higher education, learning theories, reflectivity, social constructivist learning theory

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<sup>1</sup> University of KwaZulu Natal, South Africa, shawa@ukzn.ac.za.

## Spodbujanje dodelitev štipendij za poučevanje in učenje z učnimi teorijami in reflektivnostjo

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LESTER BRIAN SHAWA

☞ Štipendija za poučevanje in učenje (SoTL) večinoma ostaja nedorečen pojem. Univerze morajo jasno opredeliti parametre delovanja, če želijo resnično prispevati k SoTL. Nekatere ustanove sodelujejo pri SoTL na akademski ravni, druge jo preučujejo z vidika institucionalne politike, tretje pa jo obravnavajo z vidika nacionalnih in mednarodnih okvirov, ki vplivajo na poučevanje in učenje na univerzah. Za prikaz dodelitve SoTL na akademski ravni so v članku uporabljeni: modul diplome na podiplomskem študiju, Kontekst in politika visokošolskega izobraževanja (večinoma so se ga udeležili univerzitetni akademiki z južnoafriških univerz) in način, na katerega bi spodbujevalec poučeval in spodbujal dodelitev SoTL na osnovi učnih teorij in reflektivnosti. Prav tako članek podrobno opisuje, na kak način lahko spodbujevalec posreduje modul ob uporabi socialno-konstruktivistične teorije učenja.

**Ključne besede:** štipendija za poučevanje in učenje, diploma na podiplomskem študiju, teorije učenja, reflektivnost, socialno-konstruktivistična teorija učenja

## Introduction

While much attention has been paid to the notion of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) since its first use by Boyer in his 1990 publication, *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities for the Professoriate*, the meaning of this term remains elusive, and it is used differently by different scholars. For example, some perceive SoTL as the work of academics in their pedagogical and research activities with their students, others as institutional policies that support activities such as staff development and promotion, and still others as the national and international frameworks that impact a university's scholarship (Fanghanel, Pritchard, Potter, & Wisker, 2016).

This article engages with the understanding of SoTL as the work of academics in their pedagogical work with their students. While much has been written on academics and their engagement with teaching (see, Flint, 2016; Hång, Bulte, & Pilot, 2017), few studies share how academics could draw on both learning theories and reflectivity to advance SoTL. This article, therefore, uses a postgraduate diploma in a higher education module, Higher Education Context and Policy, to show how a facilitator could draw on both learning theories and reflectivity in mediating a university module while advancing SoTL. More specifically, it demonstrates how a facilitator could mediate the module by utilising the social constructivist learning theory and reflectivity.

One of the significant problems associated with university academics is a lack of the pedagogical training that is necessary for the mediation of subject content as expertise in subject matter does not necessarily mean that an academic can teach effectively. The combined use of learning theories and reflectivity could provide academics that have limited pedagogical knowledge with fundamental resources to deepen their contribution to SoTL. While universities worldwide have introduced short staff development programmes or induction courses that contribute to developing SoTL in Higher Education (HE) (see Reddy et al., 2016; Remmik et al., 2011; Subbaya & Dhunpath, 2016), these are not usually sufficient to have an impact. There is thus a need for continuous learning of the 'art and science' of teaching and learning in order to improve academics' praxis (theory and practice merged). The postgraduate diploma in a higher education programme discussed in this article is designed to stimulate a continuous reflective, critical, and innovative spirit among university academics in the field of HE to make a sustained contribution to SoTL.

This article thus adds to conceptualisations of SoTL by arguing that both learning theories and reflectivity should be employed in advancing it and that experiences need to be shared. A reflective understanding of SoTL that draws

on learning theories advances the notion that academics need to use learning theories in their teaching, to reflect on what they do, and to share their experiences. Leibowitz and Bozalek (2016, p. 110) contend that ‘SoTL is distinguished from other forms of higher educational development in that it involves a degree of reflection, research or scholarship which is usually achieved in the process of academics researching their own teaching and learning contexts.’ This article is in line with such a concern.

The article is presented in seven sections. The first is the introduction while the second section briefly explains learning theories and elaborates on the social constructivist learning theory that provides the article’s theoretical point of view. The third section briefly examines reflectivity in teaching and learning while the fourth discusses the elusive nature of SoTL and argues for the need to use learning theories and reflectivity in enhancing SoTL. The fifth section describes the postgraduate diploma in higher education programme – the Higher Education Context and Policy module – and the pedagogical activities as well as the nature of assessment for the module, all of which are framed within the social constructivist view. The sixth section applies the social constructivist learning theory’s view to the mediation of the module and draws conclusions on how a facilitator could use this view and reflectivity to advance SoTL. Finally, the seventh section presents the article’s conclusions.

## Learning theories

This section briefly examines the major learning theories (behaviourist, cognitive, constructivist, and social constructivist) from which facilitators could draw their pedagogical knowledge in advancing SoTL. Learning theories in HE help immensely in guiding and developing academics’ pedagogical knowledge (Fry et al., 2009; Kay & Kibble, 2016; Shunk, 2012; Taylor & Hamdy, 2013).

Behavioural learning theories came to the fore after the publication of Watson’s *Psychology as the Behaviourist Views It* in 1913 (Schunk, 2012). Proponents of the behaviourist learning perspective, such as Pavlov (1849-1936), Watson (1879-1958), and Skinner (1904-1990) argue that learning is manifested by a change in behaviour (Peel, 2005). They argue that the environment is critical in stimulating student responses and that the primary role of the teacher is to introduce such stimuli and reinforce student responses (Schunk, 2012). In this approach, behavioural objectives are fundamental, and academics employing such an approach need to pay sufficient attention to the way they reinforce student behaviours.

Cognitive learning theorists are concerned with how the mind operates to store and remember knowledge acquired from the environment (Schumm & Bogner, 2016). They posit that learning is a mental activity and, as such, teaching methods should focus on understanding how students learn cognitively. In his social cognitive theory, Bandura (1998) expounded the view that people not only use cognition in learning, but learn from others in a social setting. He referred to this as ‘observational learning’, which is made up of four components: attention – ‘what people observe from modelling influences and what they retain’; retention – the ‘active process of transforming and restructuring the information conveyed by modelled events [...]’; behavioural production – ‘translating symbolic actions into an appropriate course of action’; and motivation – whether or not one is incentivised to exhibit an acquired behaviour. Cognitive theories thus show that, while the environment is important as claimed by the behaviourists, learning chiefly depends on how students use the mind to engage with their own learning. In enhancing SoTL, academics drawing on cognitivism thus need to seriously reflect on how they assist students in harnessing cognition in learning.

In contrast to the behaviourists and cognitivists, constructivists take a different ontological stance that sees reality not as a “given” but as constructed. In providing an example of advancing SoTL based on learning theories and reflectivity, this article draws on the social constructivist theoretical point of view.

### *The social constructivist learning theory point of view*

The social constructivist view is mainly associated with Vygotsky (1886-1934), who viewed reality as socially constructed. He argued that learning is a social process that is useful in developing cognition (Shunk, 2012; Subban, 2006). Viewed this way, learning is a process of enculturation or appropriation, in which learners gradually internalise the knowledge and skills learnt through social interaction (Kay & Kibble, 2016). Subban (2006) states that this view of teaching and learning regards the social context as vital in the development of higher order functions in learners.

Vygotsky (1978) posited that learning occurs at the interaction of two related aspects: the interpsychological (interpersonal) and the intrapsychological (internal), with the former a necessary condition for the latter. This means that an external experience (at the external level) is internalised by the learner into an intrapersonal experience. Thus, for Vygotsky, learning started at the social level.

John-Steiner and Mahn (1996) argue that semiotic mediation is the key to fostering the connection between the social level and the individual in

Vygotsky's social constructivist learning theory. Vygotsky himself listed a number of examples of semiotics. Kay and Kibble (2016) state that semiotics can include a range of factors, such as cultural tools, language, symbols, calendars, processes, art, maps, writing, writing tools, technology, and machinery. For Vygotsky, semiotics enables human beings to understand or master nature and, in so doing, they begin to master or know themselves (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996). Thus, semiotic mediation is powerful in the learning process as it assists the learner's mind in internalising the external into the internal in a process Vygotsky termed 'appropriation' (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996; Kay & Kibble, 2016).

Vygotsky introduced the notion of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) to the learning process to explain the knowledge attained by learners within the social context. He defined it as the 'distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers' (Vygotsky, 1978). This suggests that the learner has the potential to learn more from an adult or knowledgeable other. As such, teaching entails purposeful instruction that allows the learner to achieve his/her ZPD in an on-going process (Subban, 2006). Although not directly introduced by Vygotsky, this process has been referred to as 'scaffolding' (Shunk, 2012). Paying attention to the ZPD is very useful in enhancing SoTL as it enables academics to understand the level of knowledge students bring to a course, to design appropriate learning activities, and to enhance their reflectivity. It should be noted that while the concept of ZPD is applied to university learning, Vygotsky applied his understanding to children (Fani & Ghaemi, 2011).

In summary, the social constructivist perspective posits that reality is socially constructed and that the social context is vital for higher order learning; learning involves a process of appropriation or enculturation of the external into the internal; semiotic mediation is vital; teaching requires an understanding of learners' ZPD, and that scaffolding is important in enhancing learners' ZPD. As a result, particular teaching and learning methods are preferred. Academics are thus called on to adopt particular methods and strategies in their classrooms. Among others, these include working in teams (to facilitate social learning), attention to diversity in engaging with participants (to facilitate learning from different perspectives), understanding students' prior knowledge (to promote appropriation and the ZPD) and reflecting on experiences (to facilitate one's construction of reality). This theoretical point of view guides the analysis of how the module under consideration could be mediated.

## Reflectivity in teaching and learning

For Schön (1983, 1987), reflectivity or reflective practice occurs in two ways: reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. The former refers to the thinking that academics employ to deal with unexpected situations in the classroom in order to improve the learning experience while involved in actual teaching, while the latter involves reflecting on what happened in the classroom so as to improve practice in the future. Thus, reflectivity happens both at the time of teaching and in reflection on lessons that have been delivered (Shannon & Fells, 2016; Tajik, 2016).

At both levels, reflectivity goes beyond mere thinking and involves an inherent quest to find solutions. It thus necessarily involves a sound understanding of what is being taught, what will be taught, or what has been taught in order to enhance future engagements (Scanlan & Chernomas, 1997). Reflectivity calls for academics to be self-aware and confident in engaging with their teaching so as to be critical of their activities (Quin & Vorster, 2015).

A SoTL that is framed within an understanding of learning theories and reflectivity means that academics draw on learning theories to improve their pedagogical practices, while reflectivity helps them to critically engage with how these practices could be effective and improved for future engagement.

## Conceptualising SoTL

In advancing SoTL, academics, policy-makers, university administrators and other stakeholders should pay careful attention to its conceptualisation in order to delineate the parameters of engagement. This section demonstrates the contested nature of SoTL and clarifies the understanding of SoTL proposed in this article.

Boyer (1990, 1996) espoused four interrelated meanings of scholarship: as discovery, as integration, as application, and as teaching. The scholarship of discovery encompasses the university's role in contributing to human knowledge through research, while that of integration demands an interdisciplinary praxis (Boyer, 1996). The scholarship of application calls for reflective praxis, 'moving from theory to practice and from practice back to theory' (Boyer, 1996, p. 17) and, finally, the scholarship of teaching projects the desired impact on others; as Boyer posits, 'the work of the professor becomes consequential only as it is understood by the other' (Boyer, 1990). Scholars note that Boyer's meanings of scholarship are interrelated, with each contributing to the others (Glas-sick, 2000).



However, Boyer's concepts have not gone unchallenged (see Boshier, 2009; Glassick, 2000). For example, the difference between scholarly teaching and the scholarship of teaching was not clearly delineated by Boyer, as remains the case. Nonetheless, he provided a locus of intellectual debates surrounding the term SoTL that remain ubiquitous. Many authors have sought to elaborate on the 'ambiguous' terms. In seeking to differentiate between good teaching, scholarly teaching, and SoTL, McKinney (2003), cited by Maurer (2016), argued that good teaching is that which enables students to learn. In contrast, scholarly teaching uses evidence on the teaching-learning connection and SoTL as the production and dissemination of new evidence about teaching and learning, in peer-reviewed fora from which other teachers may learn.

McKinney (2006, p. 39) further conceived SoTL as a 'systematic study of teaching and/or learning and the public sharing and review of such work through presentation, performance or publications'. Earlier, Shulman contributed to the debate by positing that for work to qualify as SoTL, it must be public, available for peer review, and critiqued according to accepted standards and be able to be reproduced and built on by other scholars (Glassick, 2000).

Commenting on the elusiveness of SoTL, Boshier (2009) contends that it is problematic in five senses. The first is that it is used as a synonym for other activities, such as the notion of scholarly teaching. According to him, such usage is problematic in that the scholarship of teaching does not mean the same as scholarly teaching. Secondly, he argues that the definitions provided by Boyer remain conceptually confused. Third, he posits that SoTL is difficult to operationalise. Fourth, Boshier argues that much discourse concerning SoTL is anti-intellectual and located in a narrow form of neoliberalism. In this regard, he points to a very relevant issue that hinges on a culture of measuring teaching and learning. A case in point is the lack of clarity in the measurement of how academics achieve the aspects of SoTL espoused by Boyer in their teaching. Finally, Boshier states that uncritical dependence on peer review to measure scholarship means that if a piece of work does not pass peer review, it lacks scholarship. All these critiques underline the need to delineate carefully the parameters within which to engage with SoTL.

More recently, scholars have analysed SoTL as applied at the institutional level (see Boose & Hutchings, 2016; Vithal, 2018; Timmermans & Ellis, 2016) and how it contributes to a community of scholars (Boose & Hutchings, 2016).

Reacting to the limited, evidence-based conceptualisation of SoTL, Kreber (2013) posits:

[...] knowing what strategies to use in particular situations to enhance students' learning is an important aspect of the scholarship of teaching,

yet deciding what to do in particular situations cannot be based exclusively on evidence yielded on studies on what works. (Kreber, 2013, p. 860)

In framing an understanding of SoTL in this article, it is argued that, as stated by Kreber, rigid adherence to evidence-based teaching or ‘what works’ could limit the reflectivity required to interrogate one’s own practice. It is in the spirit of reflectivity that this article shares at a personal level how a facilitator could mediate a module by drawing on learning theories. The article was also motivated by Huber and Hutchings’s suggestion in the 2005 Carnegie report on SoTL cited by Kreber and Kanuka (2006) that one important aspect of SoTL hinges on small-scale efforts to reflect on one’s classroom teaching and share what is learned. As noted earlier, Leibowitz and Bozalek (2016) also highlight the importance of reflection and scholarship premised on academics researching their own teaching and learning contexts.

Given that one of the ultimate objectives of SoTL is to enhance the student learning experience, excellent knowledge of subject matter is not sufficient: academics also require pedagogical knowledge (Kreber & Kanuka, 2006). This entails an understanding of teaching and learning as praxis, one that could be enhanced by understanding learning theories and their application. The following sections turn to the programme and the course.

### **The postgraduate diploma in the higher education programme**

The postgraduate diploma in higher education is an honours-level equivalent programme offered in the School of Education of the College of Humanities at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. The courses towards the programme are run by a unit in HE, a directorate under the Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Teaching and Learning Portfolio that plays multiple roles in implementing university-wide staff development programmes, conducting institutional research and promoting the field of HE as an area of scholarship. Students register for eight modules pegged at 16 credits each. This programme attracts academics in different disciplines in universities, most of whom have no prior training in the field of education.

The programme aims to contribute to the professional development of HE practitioners with a focus on teaching and learning. By the end of the programme, participants are expected to:

- demonstrate critical awareness of the local current HE contexts and policies, with particular emphasis on teaching and learning,

- access and critically review local and international literature pertinent to teaching and learning,
- explain and critique their own practices in relation to teaching and learning in HE,
- plan innovative practices to promote professionalism in teaching and learning,
- demonstrate competent and ethical practices to enhance teaching and learning in the institution.

In line with the expectations of the university, the programme aims to contribute to the strategic goal of promoting excellence in teaching and learning and to the vision of the university, which is to advance African Scholarship, interpreted in the following ways:

- Local literature, policies, and resources are sourced and prioritised.
- In assignments and class interaction, participants are required to integrate their knowledge and experience of the local context with local and global HE theories and literature.
- The participants are diverse in terms of disciplinary background, personal characteristics such as race and age, and the nature and length of their experiences in HE. Such diversity is valued and used constructively in the programmes' teaching and learning activities.
- Priority is given to collaborative and critical reflection among the programme participants on their knowledge, experiences, and values.

The programme has three core modules: Higher Education Context and Policy; Practice, Reflection and Portfolio Development in Higher Education; and Research in Higher Education. Participants are offered the following six electives: Designing and Evaluating Curricula in Higher Education; Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, Assessing Learning in Higher Education; Supervising Research in Higher Education; Diversity and the Student in Higher Education; and Technology for Higher Education Pedagogy.

### *The Higher Education Context and Policy module*

The Higher Education Context and Policy module was selected because the author has more knowledge of its pedagogical underpinnings. The module is a 16-credit-bearing one, which focuses on broad issues in HE and introduces participants to a range of trends, debates, and policies that affect the sector, both internationally and nationally. It enables the achievement of the programme's first learning outcome – *to demonstrate a critical awareness of the local current*

*HE contexts and policies, with particular emphasis on teaching and learning.*

More importantly, the module invites participants to reflect on their everyday practices as HE practitioners. At the end of the module, participants are expected to:

- articulate diverse views of the purposes and values of HE,
- describe and critically engage with trends in HE,
- relate the impact of trends, debates, and policies to teaching and learning in HE in South Africa,
- critically engage with the HE policy context in South Africa,
- reflect critically on their professional practice in relation to the HE context in South Africa.

#### *Facilitation of the module*

The module is usually presented under five broad topics:

- Topic 1 conceptualises HE policy praxis;
- Topic 2 examines the roles/purposes/values and functions of HE;
- Topic 3 discusses the global issues and trends in HE;
- Topic 4 examines these issues and trends from a South African perspective;
- Topic 5 critically engages with transformation in South Africa and the policy context.

The discussions continuously feed into the teaching and learning focus of the programme.

#### *Pedagogical approach of the module*

The postgraduate module template for the Higher Education Context and Policy module vividly captures the pedagogical philosophy of the module:

The pedagogical approach underpinning the teaching in this module is one of active learning. The students, who are practitioners in the Higher Education sector, are viewed as “participants” in the learning process. They are believed to develop understanding through integrating existing knowledge and beliefs with new knowledge and experience. This is viewed as a developmental process. Participants are invited to share their experiences, to reflect on and interrogate their current practice, and juxtapose this with alternate practices and theories. The module teacher, thus, assumes a role as facilitator, charged with eliciting and respecting participants’ existing understandings, modelling various pedagogic

approaches and ensuring access to learning resources. In these ways, participants in the module are encouraged to participate actively, to develop critical reflexivity and to work collaboratively. (O'Brien, 2013, p. 3) This approach shapes the activities and assessments.

### *The nature of pedagogical activities*

Pedagogical activities for the module are carefully designed based on the social constructivist view and include group work, individual write-ups, guest speakers, oral presentations, case studies, and oral and written assessments. For example, in conceptualising policy praxis (Topic 1), participants are asked to interrogate their understanding of policy and their practice in HE and are provided with readings to broaden their understanding. They work in heterogeneous groups to share their understanding of the concepts, make oral presentations and interrogate what a policy praxis might mean for South Africa. The facilitator then asks participants to submit brief individual write-ups that further probe their general understanding and practice in the sector. This assists content planning and mediation especially in identifying guest speakers who offer presentations on the South African HE context, providing participants with opportunities for further critique and engagement.

In presenting Topic 2: The role/purpose/values and functions of HE, participants are provided with pre-readings that hinge on the functions of higher education. They prepare presentations in heterogeneous groups on the functions of HE as presented in the literature. Later, they consider the South African context given the challenges of access and social injustice that are part of the apartheid legacy and reflect on how these could be challenged through a policy landscape. As practitioners, they share their experiences and plans to contribute to resolving these challenges as agents of change through their teaching and general practice in the sector.

In facilitating the topic on global trends, participants are given prescribed readings that they engage with prior to class. They employ a case study approach to examine the trends that have impacted a particular region or country. For example, participants might want to look at the impact of the Bologna process, neoliberalism, internationalisation, decolonisation, Africanisation, globalisation, transformation, modularisation, and funding on a specific region or country. In this way, they begin to see the connection between the global and the local. Participants are encouraged to critically engage with such discourses and begin to find their own informed voices.

In Topic 4, participants are required to engage with the trends in HE, drawing on their own experiences in South Africa. This requires reflective

activities in which they share with the whole class how they experience the impact of trends in their universities, how these affect (or might affect) teaching and learning in the sector, and how they could mitigate some of the negative aspects in their spaces.

Transformation is very topical in South Africa. While this topic starts with conceptualisations of transformation in general and in South Africa, participants are invited to explain their own understanding of transformation and how they have experienced it in their institutions. They read and discuss a range of policies such as White Paper 3: A programme for the Transformation of Higher Education (1997), the National Plan for Higher Education (1997), the Transformation and Restructuring: A new Institutional Landscape for Higher Education document (2002), the Higher Education Qualifications sub-Framework (A sub-framework of the National Qualifications framework) (2013), the White Paper for Post-School Education and Training: Building an expanded, effective and integrated post-school system (2013) and some institutional policies from South African universities. This helps the participants to situate government policy within HE policy discourses and allows for critique.

The facilitator takes time to clarify, brings to the fore prevailing contradictions, and allows genuine critiques to prevail. Participants respond by constructing their views from an informed social constructivist learning perspective.

### *The nature of assessment for the module*

The module is assessed using three assignments: an oral presentation or a short written assignment (20%), a mid-length written assignment (30%), and a comprehensive article (50%). Cumulatively, the assignments aim to assist participants to reflect on teaching and learning by drawing on their own practice to explain the policy landscape; critiquing articles relating to policy and change; discussing how the South African HE policy landscape responds to global as well as local trends; and examining how transformation in South Africa is presented in policy documents and what this might mean in their everyday practice.

## **Application of the social constructivist view and reflectivity**

This section explains how the facilitator employs the social constructivist view in the module's pedagogical activities and the nature of the assessments and reflectivity to enhance SoTL. The mediation of the module adheres to the

many assumptions propounded by Vygotsky's social constructivist learning theory.

### *Mediation of the social constructivist view*

In interrogating their own experiences and practice in HE, the participants can reflect on such experiences and develop cognition. In this way, they tap into the external or the social level influences to elucidate their individual actions. For Vygotsky, this is the interaction between the interpsychological (interpersonal) and the intrapsychological (internal) – learning viewed as starting from social interaction.

The write-ups that participants provide to the facilitator inform the way the facilitator re-organises lessons and the selection of special guests or presenters. In other words, the write-ups help the facilitator to determine the participants' ZPD level. Thus, assessment of write-ups and group presentations enable participants to learn from knowledgeable adults – the facilitator as well as the guest speakers, a process referred to as scaffolding.

Using heterogeneous groups enables participants to learn from varied viewpoints. Group work and presentations promote interaction that facilitates a social learning environment that contributes to participants' understanding of the content and enables them to critique their assumptions. This indicates the importance of the social context for higher order learning as espoused by Vygotsky.

Case study approaches are useful in enabling the participants to learn from what is happening elsewhere and compare this with their own experiences. This assists their construction of knowledge that helps them to critique their own situation and improve their practice. Here participants tap into semiotic mediation and improve their appropriation of knowledge.

Sharing with the whole class is an excellent way of assisting the participants to learn to substantiate their arguments and learn to listen and be attentive to others' opinions. This facilitates learning together, in which the facilitator and the participants are involved in learning and re-learning. It offers an excellent social context that Vygotsky regards as vital to higher order learning.

Reading and critiquing policies enable the participants to actualise the semiotic mediation that is necessary for appropriation. They learn to construct their own voices to help improve their praxis. This is also achieved when critiquing journal articles on policy praxis.

The assignments are crucial as they help the facilitator to assess participants' ZPD so as to scaffold their learning. Furthermore, they help participants to construct their views and learn to substantiate them. For example, a

comprehensive article allows them to draw on what they have learnt from their social context: others' experiences, policies, and their own experience and practice and thus form an informed view of the praxis. This exercise helps the participants to fully develop their critical mind and contribute to debates within the field.

### *Reflectivity on the application of the social constructivist view*

As argued by Schön (1983, 1987), the facilitator for this module draws on both reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action in enhancing learning experiences and contributing to SoTL.

Drawing on the social constructivist view, the facilitator's reflectivity concerns how the participants interrogate their experiences in HE; the quality of their write-ups in showing evidence of learning; the benefit of working with heterogeneous groups; the way they utilise case studies in understanding the field; the way they read policies and actualise semiotic mediation, and the way they engage with assignments.

The facilitator asks critical and probing questions such as: In what way did I utilise Vygotsky's view that learning ought to start from social interaction? How did I determine the participants' ZPD through their presentation and assessments to facilitate learning? How did I help the participants to actualise the semiotic mediation that is necessary for learning? In general, how did I help the participants to construct their own arguments within the field? Each question is approached with an openness to critique oneself to improve one's practice.

Depending on the circumstances, these questions may apply to one level of reflection or to both reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. The questions aim to assist the facilitator in rethinking how to improve the planning, design, and execution of the learning experiences by drawing on the social constructivist learning view and reflectivity.

Numerous studies demonstrate how the social constructivist view helps to improve classroom experiences. Flint (2016) shows how a social constructivist approach assisted students in improving their learning and facilitators in exploring future course designs based on student feedback and instructor experience in diverse learning environments. Hsueh and Lan (2015) used a social constructivist approach to web-based English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning and found that collaborators performed better than individuals in terms of vocabulary gain. Similarly, Hång, Bulte, and Pilot (2017) show how a social constructivist approach helped them to improve the curriculum as teachers became more open-minded, friendly, equitable, engaging, and collaborative.



## Conclusion

Amidst contested conceptualisations of the notion of SoTL, this article engaged the view that concerns the pedagogical activities of academics, advancing a view that draws on learning theories and reflectivity for academics to reflect on what they do and to share their experiences. It used a postgraduate diploma in a higher education module, Higher Education Context and Policy, to show how a facilitator could draw on learning theories and reflectivity in mediating learning, thereby contributing to SoTL. More specifically, the article has shown how a facilitator could use the social constructivist learning theory advanced by Vygotsky to facilitate learning in contributing to SoTL. The social constructivist theoretical view helped to explain the facilitation of the module, its pedagogical approach, and the nature of pedagogical activities as well as assessment. Finally, the article presented the probing questions that a facilitator needs to ask of themselves in relation to the social constructivist theory in order to achieve reflectivity that could facilitate improved learning.

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## Biographical note

**LESTER BRIAN SHAWA**, PhD, is Senior Lecturer in Higher Education Studies and coordinator of the Postgraduate Diploma in Higher Education at the University of KwaZulu Natal in South Africa. His research interests include Higher Education policy, governance and management; Higher Education pedagogy and curricula; quality discourses in Higher Education and Teacher Education.