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Pixel [Hrsg.]: Conference proceedings. International conference "New perspectives in science education", 10th edition. Virtual event, 18-19 march 2021. Bologna : Filodiritto Editore 2021, 4 S.

Hannah Arendt's philosophical thoughts on plurality as theoretical foundation for SoTL projects

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Abstract

Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) is both a theory and a movement in higher education.[1] The idea behind the concept is for academics who work as teachers and tutors to analyze their own teaching habits by means of scientific inquiry, turning their personal experiences in higher education into the subject of their own research. Addressing specific challenges they face as teachers from the perspective of their own academic discipline, they can develop research-based solutions to real-life problems – and, of course, critically discuss them with their colleagues. This way, SoTL creates a strong connection between teaching and research which is meant to improve the overall quality of higher education by application of a more scientific approach to teaching.[2] As SoTL research can be conducted across all academic subjects, many different approaches and methods are used to research teaching and learning in the different fields of higher education. Although it provides researchers with a wide variety of ideas and data, this very diversity within the field of SoTL also makes it hard for some researchers to understand and appreciate SoTL projects with a very different approach.[3] Our research centers around this diversity debate, focusing on the question whether the basic tenets of SoTL may not already entail a certain plurality of theories. By reconstructing Hannah Arendt's thoughts on plurality[4] and applying them to SoTL, our essay will therefore show to what extent Hannah Arendt's thoughts on plurality can provide a theoretical foundation for the diversity of SoTL projects.

Keywords: Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), Hannah Arendt, plurality, diversity

1. Introduction

First introduced in the 1990s, SoTL has long since evolved into an established and widely implemented approach to higher education. Today, it is used to improve the quality of higher education at universities all over the globe. However, there have always been critical voices, too, some even going as far as to call SoTL *a thorn in the flesh of educational research* as it tends to be used not only for initiatives which match the concept's original intention: "much of what is represented as being in the scope of SoTL is unpublished, not available to critical evaluation, not disseminated beyond its original context and unconnected with any previous literature and scholarship".[5] In the light of this opposition, Schmohl recently called credible SoTL research an alternative to so-called "vulgar didactics" within post-secondary education.[3,6] He characterized SoTL as a way to counter a currently widespread, trivializing attitude towards didactics. In their 2020 article, Canning and Masika present a similar view. After analyzing the recent use of SoTL as the theoretical groundwork for more and more trivial projects, they even draw the conclusion that SoTL should be "thrown on the ash heap of educational history" in order to pave the way for more scientific forms of research on higher education.[5]

The fundamental idea of SoTL is that university teachers can and even should analyze their own approach to didactics by means of scientific inquiry. Through examination of the specific challenges they face in higher education, professors gain a deeper understanding of how their students learn – and of their own contribution to this process, providing a new perspective on the impact of familiar models and strategies in higher education. At the same time, teachers benefit from a very strong feedback loop within the community of researchers sharing this approach. One of the cornerstones of SoTL is that both publication of the results and discussion with other scientists and educators is considered *conditio sine qua non*: Every project is meant to be shared and discussed, providing new impulses for everyone involved. This way, SoTL combines teaching and research with the main goal of improving the quality of teaching in higher education by sharing new information and ideas.[2,6]

According to educational scientist Huber, an important condition for getting involved with SoTL is the genuine desire for exchange with other academics teaching in higher education.[7] At the same time, this desire represents a challenge whenever SoTL researchers try to transfer approaches and methods developed to teach very specific subject matter to another academic discipline: SoTL

researchers may find that methods which have proven successful in one field may turn out incompatible with other subjects, not due to a lack of flexibility inherent to the model transferred, but due to vast differences between subjects and students' way of approaching them. As SoTL projects are often interdisciplinary efforts – or, at least, reviewed by academics from very different fields – this can lead to uncertainty and disagreements about the quality of SoTL projects. Therefore, many experienced SoTL researchers today emphasize that a model or a set of guidelines should be part of any SoTL project in order to standardize findings and provide direction to those looking to apply and review them.[2,6,7] Nevertheless, SoTL is characterized by the fact that scholars from different disciplines can explore their subject-specific teaching and must therefore always allow for a variety of different approaches. Although guidelines are necessary, it is equally important for researchers participating in SoTL projects to be able to appreciate the plurality within the field.

In this essay, we aim to provide a fresh perspective on the diversity of SoTL projects. First, we outline the main SoTL characteristics: openness, diversity and plurality. Second, we analyze to what extent Hannah Arendt's writings on plurality can be applied to SoTL. Our goal is to show how political philosophy can be used to improve educational research. Concerning its methodology, this essay uses both a hermeneutic perspective and an interpretative approach in which Arendt's thoughts on plurality are reconstructed and placed within an SoTL context.

2. Openness, diversity and plurality: basic concepts of the SoTL movement

The story of what today we call SoTL begins back in 1990 with educational scientist Ernest Boyer deploring the then-low status of learning and teaching in higher education, especially in comparison with other academic activities.[8] Boyer's ideal of "being a scholar" does not only entail great skill in discovering new insights by scientific means, nor is he content to merely remind academics that integration and application of their research must be the next step. Boyer also considers *education* to be of great importance for any true scholar – the education of others, that is. He argues that everyone working in academia should not only be skilled as a teacher but also possess a professional attitude towards teaching.

"Going public" with one's own considerations and one's research into the theory and practice of teaching and learning is considered an inherent part of this professionalism:

"The scholarship of teaching is about improving student learning within the discipline generally, by collecting and communicating results of one's own work on teaching and learning within the discipline".[9]

Thus, the "openness" to create exchange and dialogue within the community has always been considered crucial for the SoTL movement. As Shulman points out, this also means that teaching – as seen through the lens of SoTL – must be regarded as some sort of scholarly "community property that can be shared, discussed, critiqued, exchanged, built on".[10] Trigwell et al. use a model which sorts SoTL activities into four categories of how communication on teaching can be organized (e.g., by informal conversations, reports, white papers or by publication in academic journals).[9] Bernstein and Bass, on the other hand, describe less formally structured ways to document and publish inquiry into student learning, stating that SoTL researchers need "to imagine new genres for sharing insights that are much broader than our current models of publishing".[11]

Felten, in turn, emphasizes the particular framework necessary to appropriately present SoTL research:

"Because SoTL inquiry typically is iterative and highly contextual, the most appropriate ways to go public should capture and reflect the evolving nature of this form of research. In many cases, that is not possible in a traditional scholarly journal".[12]

Due to their open and diverse character, SoTL projects can vary greatly and provide a diverse set of answers to the same questions. *Openness* within the framework of SoTL must therefore refer to two different ways of putting the SoTL mindset into action. On the one hand, it means that teachers share their approach or methods with the public, e.g., in the form of *open educational resources.* On the other hand, openness must also entail a community to support scholarly discourse on teaching, e.g., by means of publications or conferences. Therefore, scholarly teachers should aspire to an attitude that both enables and values feedback offered by peers and students alike (through evaluations, colleagues observing classes or peer supervision).[2]

Since the ideas that underlie each academic discipline's perspective on education are based on heterogeneous epistemologies, methods and concepts, the way these SoTL values translate into research – and, in the long run, back into higher education – may greatly vary from one SoTL project to another. This is why engaging in conversation on teaching and learning across the disciplines as part of SoTL confronts participants with great *diversity*.

In order to deal with this challenge, it is important for SoTL researchers to deal constructively with the complexity and ambiguity of educational research. From data collection and organization to interpretation and discussion, they need to keep an open mind – in their own inquiries as much as with regard to the work of other scholars in the SoTL community.[6] In this light, SoTL can be regarded as a pluralistic concept which emphasizes scientific diversity. Moving on this consideration, the next chapter will explore how theoretical assumptions on plurality by the German political thinker Hannah Arendt provide a theoretical basis to address diversity and openness of SoTL.

3. Hannah Arendt's philosophical reflections on plurality as a theoretical foundation for SoTL projects

Plurality is a central element in Hannah Arendt's political theory. In her book "The human condition", Arendt identifies *equality* and *diversity* as the main conditions of human action. Since all humans belong to the same species and are able to understand each other due to a common way of using language, we are "equal". Yet, at the same time, we are "diverse" because each individual is irreplaceable and each one has a unique perspective on shared issues or concerns. Taken as a whole, these perspectives can be described as human plurality: "Plurality is the condition of human action because we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live."[4]

Applying Arendt's theoretical considerations to SoTL projects, we can easily identify both equality and diversity as what drives the community: All SoTL researchers are equal in their goal of laying the scientific groundwork for their own teaching.[1,6] At the same time, their diversity is reflected in their different disciplines, their personal teaching experiences and research methods.[6] In addition, SoTL projects are always framed in a specific context, which makes each project unique.[7] Thus, SoTL projects can be described as a collection of diverse perspectives on the study of teaching experiences – a collection which we can, in turn, describe with Arendt's concept of plurality.

According to Arendt's political theory, *the public sphere* is the place where people can present and discuss their different perspectives.[4,13] In this regard, Arendt is inspired by ancient Greece and its ideal of a state in which citizens can interact as free and equal individuals. "Being free", in this context, means that there are no (allegedly) necessary activities keeping people too busy to exchange ideas with others. For example, in ancient Greece, labor was a necessity that led to lack of freedom.[13] At the same time, Arendt also understands the concept of being free and equal in the sense that no one rules or is ruled by another.[4,13]

SoTL researchers can enter the public sphere by publishing their projects or by engaging in scientific discourse through conferences. However, it remains unclear to what extent SoTL projects can remain detached from the necessities of life, considering that they are created by teachers as part of their work in higher education. Nevertheless, it could be argued that SoTL projects are not, strictly speaking, part of the necessary occupations of these academics. This would make them optional projects based on genuine interest – an assessment which certainly holds true with regard to publishing and discussion among SoTL participants.[2,7] The desire for exchange with other teachers[7] and discussions about SoTL projects[2] are also very compatible with Arendt's theoretical considerations and suggest communication structured by the principle of equality.

There is, however, one more critical issue related to plurality: It is not always easy for individuals to accept a variety of views and, in the case of SoTL, to respect diverse research methods and procedures. Arendt advocates acknowledging different perspectives presented in the public sphere and at the same time emphasizes the importance of maintaining one's own position – as long as it is logically sound.[14] In order to live plurality, the ability to think in terms of other approaches and to use one's imagination to comprehend them is crucial.[15]

These theoretical considerations also appear useful for making SoTL researchers aware of the inherent plurality of SoTL, reminding them to keep an open mind when facing different approaches to research. At the same time, however, it is still important that SoTL research meets certain scientific standards. The development of guidelines and models for SoTL projects thus seems to be just as important as appreciation for the plurality within the community.

4. Conclusion

This paper has shown that Arendt's thoughts on plurality can, in principle, be successfully combined with SoTL, applying the different aspects of Arendt's theories to SoTL in order to gain a new understanding of the inner workings of both projects and community. However, it also becomes clear that certain aspects, such as freedom from the necessities, seem worthy of further discussion, and

that Arendt's theoretical considerations about plurality cannot always be easily adapted to SoTL. In order to make an overall statement about how Arendt's theoretical reflections on plurality might provide a theoretical foundation for the SoTL concept, more in-depth research is required.

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