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Inquiry-Based Self-Reflections: Towards a New Way of Looking at the *Scholarship of Teaching and Learning* within German Higher Education

Tobias Schmohl

Abstract

In this article, I will review recent literature on S*cholarship of Teaching and Learning* (SoTL) to develop a working concept which may be combined on a theoretical level with the German tradition of looking at *Bildung*. If we continue to work in this direction – that is, if we engage in further research activities to bridge the international *scholarship* discourse with the German concept of *Bildung* in Neo-Humanism and if we manage to bridge those strands with our institutional and disciplinary projects – we soon might be able to construct a theoretical framework based upon these lines of discourse. In this respect, this article is part of a series of efforts to bring forward German *higher education* as an independent research discipline, with a unique set of epistemological references and with its own institutional anchorage. When incorporated at the heart of tertiary education, the notion of *scholarship* could even contribute to develop new faculty in German higher education.

Contents

1 International Discourse on *Scholarship* and the German Way of Looking at *Bildung*

In Germany, most educational research on teaching and learning is rooted in pedagogical departments focussing primary and secondary education. Theories and models that call upon *Bildung*[1] or *Didaktik* are commonly associated with institutions or actors in these fields.

Unfortunately, pedagogical researchers rarely focus on issues of *university* teaching and learning – and if they do, they most often try to apply concepts and models borrowed that do not originate from the specific academic settings but are borrowed from secondary or post-secondary education. Chairs cover areas like teacher training (the so-called *Lehrerbildung*) or how to impart discipline-specific knowledge in school settings (the so-called *Fachdidaktik*). There is only a handful of research-based institutions in the German university landscape that address specific issues of *higher education* and their impact is nowhere near the impact of research institutions covering teaching methodology in primary or secondary education. Yet, as we can see when looking at other countries, the university as an institution does hold a great potential to improve educational practice in a systematic, cross-disciplinary and research-based way. When it comes to teaching and learning issues in the context of higher education, the term *scholarship* has recently been discussed controversially in this context.[2]

Already in 1999, Prosser and Trigwell (1999, p. 8) pointed out that, cardinally, the 'improvement of learning and teaching is dependent upon the development of scholarship and research in teaching'. Yet today, there seem to be very different interpretations of what *scholarship* means and which theoretical references are associated with it. Recent empirical research on how academic staff members use the term *SoTL* proves that there are different meanings involved. For instance, Trigwell, Martin, Benjamin, and Prosser (2010, p. 162) state that conceptions of SoTL

> range from common sense ideas about knowing a lot, to complex ideas concerning the relating of teaching and learning to the structure of knowledge within a

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1 With respect to its full connotations, this German concept is not easily translatable to English. In this article, I will apply the term *Bildung* to refer to a specific neo-humanist conception used (among others) in a terminological sense by Humboldt (1810/1903). Therefore, I will not translate it here into an English paraphrase. For similar ways of dealing with this concept, see, for instance, Søby (2003) or Krumsvik et al. (2016).
2 See, for instance, the EuroSoTL conference 2017 which took place at Lund University in June 2017: http://konferens.ht.lu.se/eurosotl-2017

discipline and the communicating of resulting insights about teaching and learning to colleagues and to peers (Trigwell et al., 2010, p. 162).

These results show distinct parallels with how SoTL is described in the relevant literature. Other studies, conducted for example by Kreber (2003), by Ginns, Kitay & Prosser (2008), or by Larsson, Mårtensson, Price & Roxå (2017), have come to a similar conclusion. Their empirical findings match with our observations in educational settings made at the University of Hamburg when conceptualizing SoTL together with an interdisciplinary group of scholars during their master's studies (Schmohl, 2017b, p. 321).

When the concept of *scholarship* is used in a terminological way, it usually refers to a debate on university pedagogy within the United States in the 1990s. Ernes Boyer, a former President of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching,[3] introduced the concept in his widely-cited Carnegie Foundation Report *Scholarship Reconsidered* this way:

> We believe the time has come to move beyond the tired old "teaching versus research" debate and give the familiar and honorable term "scholarship" a broader, more capacious meaning, one that brings legitimacy to the full scope of academic work (Boyer, 1990, p. 16).

Boyer aims at establishing a more holistic view of one's role as a teacher at the university level – throughout the disciplines. To describe this role, he uses the concept of *scholarship* which until then, was commonly linked to original research. With his re-interpretation of this concept, Boyer tries to appeal to his colleagues' professional *ethos*, in order to achieve some shift in the way they see themselves and their profession. According to Boyer, *scholarship* can be divided into four activities of academic practice: *discovery*, *integration*, *application* and *teaching*. These activities correspond to four epistemic modes or 'intellectual functions' of knowledge acquisition, which he identifies with the concepts of research, synthesis, practice and teaching (Boyer, 1990, p. 24).

The scholarship of discovery includes knowledge acquisition by systematic inquiry. This activity 'comes closest to what is meant when academics speak of "research" ' (Boyer, 1990, p. 17). It involves being committed to knowledge and to scientific investigation by means of disciplinary methodology, as well as to the principle of freedom of research.

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3   The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching is an education policy and research centre, founded in Princeton, NJ, and currently located at Stanford, CA.

The scholarship of integration refers to the act of putting knowledge into (disciplinary) contexts: 'By integration, we mean making connections across the disciplines, placing the specialties in larger context, illuminating data in a revealing way, often educating nonspecialists, too' (Boyer, 1990, p. 18). What Boyer describes as an act of integration here is to fit scientific knowledge into larger intellectual patterns.

The scholarship of application links research activities with practice. Boyer also describes it by using the term engagement. One of the key questions here is how knowledge can be responsibly applied to problems and become helpful to others.

> Indeed, the term itself may be misleading if it suggests that knowledge is first 'discovered' and then 'applied.' The process we have in mind is far more dynamic. New intellectual understandings can arise out of the very act of application [...], theory and practice vitally interact, and one renews the other (Boyer, 1990, p. 23).

Boyer combines these three basic activities of academic proficiency with *teaching* – which in his opinion should be considered equally important: '[T]oday, teaching is often viewed as a routine function [...]. When defined as scholarship, however, teaching both educates and entices future scholars' (Boyer, 1990, p. 23). By taking this perspective on teaching, it is obvious that issues like curriculum design, lesson planning, assessment etc. become much more relevant in scholarly everyday work: They are moved from the periphery to the heart of a scholar's *profession*.

This view of a more holistic nature of academic professorship is close to what has been discussed concerning the concept of *Bildung* during the movement of German Neo-Humanism:

> With good reason, the ancients used the Latin word *humanitas* to describe one's personhood or one's *Bildung*. [...] [T]he content of history is nascent *humanitas*, is nascent *Bildung*. This is where science receives its peculiar meaning. We see that science's task belongs specifically to human nature. To the being of the finite spirit. (Droysen, 1857/1977, p. 14; my translation)

Here, a holistic concept of personal education and intellectual self-formation is addressed, which links disciplinary competence with a notion of self-reflective, autonomous and self-responsible personal development. In this general sense, *Bildung* refers to nothing less than 'the ultimate task of our existence' which is

to 'give the fullest possible content to the concept of humanity in our own person [...] through the impact of actions in our own lives' (Humboldt, 1793/2010, p. 58; my translation, T. S.).

To the German Neo-Humanists, *Bildung at the university level* could be described as a scholar's personal, inquiry-based self-formation. *Bildung* in this emphatic sense was deeply interwoven with the further-development of scientific progress – they assigned *Bildung* a higher potential to bring forward science than the mere conducting of research activities:

> Science has [...] been extended more by university teachers and less by academics, and these men have achieved progress in their disciplines particularly through their teaching agency (Humboldt, 1810/1903, p. 257; my translation).

The *nexus of teaching and research* (which is recently being discussed when it comes to SoTL, see for instance Halliwell, 2008) reaches back to this Neo-Humanist's line of discourse. Their way of looking at the concept of scholarship and giving it a broader meaning linked with the Neo-Humanist notion of *Bildung* could be a stimulating impulse for the recent tendency to conceptualise scholarship in a broader and more holistic sense in reference to personal qualities and character traits.[4] But even critics of the wider scholarship concept explicitly suggest taking this view into account.[5]

From my perspective, the recent discourse on the professionalization of teaching in German higher education could be enriched a lot by taking up the perspective provided by the scholarship movement. Hence, I would like to give a literature review on the use of the term *scholarship* in the context of higher education, focusing on conceptual issues[6], which shows that what is discussed as *SoTL* recently could be easily linked with the classical concept of *Bildung* in German Neo-Humanism that I outlined above.

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4   For example, Carolin Kreber (2013, 2007) recently put special emphasis on the concept of authenticity, which had an impact on the concept in recent discourse.

5   For instance, Boshier and Huang (2008, p. 654) after critically analysing the recent discourse on *scholarship* emphasise that teaching and learning is 'a unitary and thus inseparable process'.

6   An outline of the current debate on the term *SoTL* focusing on its application can be found in Schmohl & Jansen-Schulz (this volume).

2   Towards a More Self-Aware Conception of Being a Teacher in Academia

Both, German *Bildung* and the concept of *scholarship* focus on the individual person that engages in self-formation on their own authority and in a reflective manner. Both concepts are formulated in very general terms.

When Boyer suggested reconsidering the term *scholarship*, the idea at first had rather a broad and unspecific meaning (e. g., Richlin, 1993) before more systematic differentiations followed. Lee S. Shulman, for instance, defined scholarship in Boyer's sense with a more *Bildung*-like focus as a mode of personal knowledge production. He introduced three conditions to define an activity as scholarship:

> It should be public, susceptible to critical review and evaluation, and accessible for exchange and use by other members of one's scholarly community [...]. Scholarship properly communicated and critiqued serves as the building block for knowledge growth in a field (Shulman, 1998, p. 5).

Shulman argues that these three conditions are rarely fulfilled with respect to teaching (Shulman, 1998, p. 5): Teaching seems to be practised inside lecture halls without any efforts to make it accessible to people outside the teacher–class relation. Moreover, Shulman points out that at the university level, teaching is very rarely evaluated systematically by colleagues, or even just observed by any peers (Shulman, 1993, p. 2).

Following Shulman, these are only some of the reasons why innovative approaches to university teaching rarely build on previous activities of others. Moreover, academics do not seem to live in a culture where they develop their teaching with regard to literature on or best-practice examples of teaching and learning issues in their fields (Brew, 2003, p. 170). As a result, compared to other scholarly activities, they do not engage in the same way in investigations about how others handle teaching and learning problems that are specific to their disciplines. A reason might be that the teaching of others is not accessible to them, or they are not used to doing so in this specific context (Shulman, 1993, p. 1, 1998, pp. 5–6).

Shulman argues that in contrast to this predominant (but defective) judgement, teaching, too, should be regarded as a scholarly activity: much alike the activity of classical research. Therefore, it should follow the aim to contribute to progress in a disciplinary field:

> [E]very course is inherently an investigation, an experiment, a journey motivated by purpose and beset by uncertainty. A course, therefore is as much an act of inquiry and invention as any other activity more traditionally called 'research' or the scholarship of discovery (Shulman, 1998, p. 5).

After Boyer pointed out that teaching should be regarded as a scholarly activity and after Shulman followed his lead by introducing *openness* (towards the public, towards critical review, and towards other scholars, so they can build upon it) as a key criterion to call an activity *scholarly*, the *scholarship of teaching* started to become popular in an international context. In 1999, Randy Bass noted its status as a 'movement' in the field of higher education (Bass, 1999, p. 8). Quickly the term was adopted by scientific boards and programme directors to describe a more professional attitude towards high-quality teaching in their fields of responsibility.

3   Getting Past the Conception of Teaching as a Craft

However, this general approach does not match with what Boyer and Shulman had in mind when they compared scholarship with activities of reflective inquiry. This may be one of the reasons why Shulman drew a distinction between *scholarly teaching* (in his terminology referring to excellent teaching in higher education) and the scholar*ship* of teaching (referring to teaching as a form of inquiry):

> A scholarship of teaching is not synonymous with excellent teaching. It requires a kind of 'going meta', in which faculty frame and systematically investigate questions related to student learning – the conditions under which it occurs, what it looks like, how to deepen it, and so forth – and do so with an eye not only to improving their own classroom but to advancing practice beyond it. This conception of the scholarship of teaching is not something we presume all faculty (even the most excellent and scholarly teachers among them) will or should do (Hutchings & Shulman, 1999, pp. 13–14).

To relate a teaching activity to what is meant by *the scholarship of teaching*, one must check whether it involves reflections on a meta-level and whether it can provide more than only specific solutions to practical issues. To put it in a different way, the *scholarship of teaching* is not primarily about '*solutions* worth implementing', but about 'discovering *problems* worth pursuing' (Bass, 1999, p. 9). It

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is rooted in academic practice but goes beyond a strive for *pedagogical professionalization, instructional effectiveness* or the *improvement of teaching quality*.[7]

Scholarship starts with an orientation in the existing knowledge of teaching and learning, it moves on to the formulation of a problem, and it proceeds from there to critical reflection and investigation including context variables (Schmohl, 2017b, p. 319). The subsequent step involves the design of interventions that are supposed to influence the problematic situation with respect to the context. This stipulates a change of the mind-set that predominates our attitudes towards problematic teaching situations, as Bass describes: 'Asking a colleague about a problem in his or her research is an invitation; asking about a problem in one's teaching would probably seem like an accusation' (Bass, 1999, p. 1).

To reach the status of *scholarship* in teaching, we need to overcome the misconception of teaching as a craft – or as an act that aims towards finding concrete solutions for specific classroom problems. To describe teaching as an extended act of traditional scholarly activity, we need to describe it in terms of an integrative concept of scholarship. This concept includes

> a broad vision of disciplinary questions and methods; it includes the capacity to plan and design activities that implement the vision; it includes the interactions that require particular skills and result in both expected and unexpected results; it includes certain outcomes from that complex process, and those outcomes necessitate some kind of analysis (Bass, 1999, p. 2).

In this perspective, the concept of scholarship of teaching does not apply when it is merely used to address actions one must conduct as a teacher. Instead, the concept should be extended to the wider perspective of *learning activities* that teaching is meant to encourage. With this widened focus, the expression *Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL)* has become a buzzword in discourse on higher education. Like the former concept of *Bildung*, it addresses all levels of university education across all disciplines. Built around systematic inquiry into the most critical teaching and learning issues, it serves institutions around the globe as a key concept for the development of new faculty.

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7   For this context, the term *scholarship of academic development* can be applied (see Schmohl, 2017b).

4 A New Set of Intellectual Questions Arises

If the aim of teaching – as Paul Ramsden (2003, p. 5) stated – is 'to make student learning possible', from a SoTL perspective, we should follow Trigwell and colleagues (2010, p. 156) in their effort to make 'transparent how we have made learning possible'. This will involve sequences of 'reflection, inquiry, evaluation, documentation and communication' (Trigwell et al., 2010, p. 156) which – in sum – may be described as core activities of a SoTL attitude. More generally, the purpose of the SoTL movement is

> first and foremost to legitimate a new set of questions as intellectual problems. Arriving there, the discourse surrounding the scholarship of teaching can begin to chart what is yet uncharted terrain, a landscape that will feature the convergence of disciplinary knowledge, pedagogical practice, evidence of learning, and theories of learning and cognition. Ultimately, it will be a discourse based on disciplinary protocols of investigative practice calibrated to the idioms of particular campus and institutional cultures (Bass, 1999, p. 8).

For SoTL to come into place, it is necessary to look closely at what is discussed on a theoretical and practical level concerning the topic of teaching and learning in one's discipline. It is also vital to have some means of exploring and documenting the dynamics of one's instructional efforts.[8]

At this point, the conception of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning becomes clear: It is an attitude towards one's own teaching (and even more so, one's role as a scholar, which directly results from this attitude). When adopting this attitude towards teaching, scholars perform certain actions which can be described as SoTL 'characteristics' (see e. g. Trigwell et al., 2010, p. 167): For instance, they make an effort to get in touch with recent discourse on teaching and learning in their disciplines; they reflect on their role as a teacher and on their particular teaching contexts; they focus on (explicitly or implicitly) underlying teaching approaches; and they communicate their observations and the actions they have performed to a community of scholars.

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8   Glassick, Huber & Maeroff (1997, p. 36) suggest to analyse six analytical 'phases' of an intellectual process of evaluating the quality of *inquiry* in terms of scholarship: clear goals, adequate preparation, appropriate methods, significant results, effective presentation, and reflective critique. These phases are formulated in a broad way to match with all four of Boyer's concepts of *scholarship*. Their purpose is to describe a general 'standard of scholarly performance' that is open to critical evaluation and which will therefore contribute to their recognition as legitimate forms of scholarship (Glassick et al., 1997, p. 22).

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5   The Concept of SoTL

I would now like to integrate the components of SoTL that I have introduced so far by revisiting the development of the concept in a systematic conceptual way. Talking about SoTL means starting from what has been discussed as the concept of *scholarship* Boyer introduced and following Shulman by distinguishing it from the concept of mere *scholarly activity*.

Following this conception, *scholarship* with emphasis on teaching and learning differs from regular teaching at the university level in at least two aspects:

1. it is rather *open* and
2. it is conducted as a specific form of systematic *inquiry*.

Both conditions had also been introduced by Shulman and Boyer. Nonetheless, both need further specification.

5.1   Openness

The term of (1) *openness* refers to three essential aspects: (1.1) a willingness of teachers to share their approaches and teaching methodology with the *public* (e. g., open educational resources), (1.2) an attitude that enables and values scrutiny and feedback by *peers and students* (e. g., evaluations, collegial classroom observations, peer supervision),[9] and (1.3) entry into a community of scholarly discourse on teaching (e. g., publications, conference presentations).[10]

The concept of (2) *systematic inquiry* is more complicated. Therefore, I would like to take a closer look at it in the next section.

5.2   Inquiry

What followers of the SoTL movement associate with the term (2) *inquiry* differs, but it is still possible to bring the notions together in an integrative conception and to line them up in a sequence of iterative processes.[11] It is an unan-

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9   Glassick and colleagues (1997) place particular emphasis on this point.

10   The need for critical review of one's teaching by peers and students is emphasised by Shulman (1998, p. 5); Brew (2003, p. 170); Trigwell et al. (2010, p. 156); Shulman (1993, p. 2); Glassick et al. (1997).

11   See Kreber (2003, p. 106) for a comparison of SoTL conceptions held by experts and regular academic staff; as well as Larsson and colleagues (2017) for an empirical study on SoTL held by members of the SoTL community in comparison with experts in the field of educational research. Kreber shows that there is a high consensus on the suggestion that *inquiry* (as well as critical reflection) is constitutive for the SoTL concept. Similarly, students of a master's degree programme at the University of Hamburg derived an approach towards SoTL inquiry focusing on disciplinary methods (see Schmohl, 2017b, p. 321). In contrast to these conceptions, authors like Prosser (2008, p. 4) would not agree to include inquiry in the SoTL concept. To them, SoTL instead is merely 'a practically-oriented activity, conducted collegially, and increasingly being conducted alongside traditional research within the disciplines'.

swered question in recent SoTL discourse whether methods of inquiry should rather be derived from the ways research is conducted in one's discipline or whether a set of SoTL methods should be stated in reference to educational or pedagogical research strands (see Larsson et al., 2017, for further literature on this issue). But we need more than methods to construct a research methodology.

By defining SoTL as a form of inquiry starting from practical problems, it is consequent to base it upon an action research conception:[12]

> Inquiry begins with situations that are problematic – that are confusing, uncertain, or conflicted, and block the free flow of action. The inquirer is in, and in transaction with, the problematic situation. He or she must construct the meaning and frame the problem of the situation, thereby setting the stage for problem-solving, which, in combination with changes in the external context, brings a new problematic situation into being. [...] [I]nquiry is very close to the notion of *designing* (Schön, 1995, p. 31).

In order to implement the methodology described here, several more conditions have to be fulfilled: One first has to (2.1) familiarise oneself with existing knowledge on teaching and learning issues in one's discipline and – by doing so – develop some theoretical understanding of what is being observed.[13] Having established a concept of a puzzling phenomenon at hand leads to tacit knowledge (Polanyi, 1966), that makes it possible to observe a phenomenon as a problem in the first place (2.2). This tacit knowledge contains the whole set of a scholar's experiences, perceptions, approaches, anticipated teaching outcomes etc. I have suggested before to call this set a group of scholars' intersubjectively shared *culture* (Schmohl, 2017a). In respect of teaching, it may, for instance, be described in terms of a relational model as suggested by Trigwell (2003, p. 25).

Inquiry in a SoTL sense also includes (2.3) the act of 'giving rise to new forms of knowledge' (Schön, 1995, p. 31), which is drawn from teaching practice and re-influencing it. This way, both, the discipline and one's own teaching are promoted by engaging in SoTL. This is a pragmatist's view most people using the SoTL concept would probably agree with.

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12 See Amundsen and Wilson (2012) for specific literature on action research conceptions within the educational development literature in higher education.

13 Karl Popper (1974, p. 105) states this argument precisely. He points out that 'all scientific discussions start with a problem', but theoretical knowledge always determines and therefore precedes what can be observed as a problem: In other words, 'we approach everything in the light of a preconceived theory' (1970, p. 52); and even more so, he maintains that 'our ordinary language is full of theories [...] observation is always *observation in the light of theories*' (1959, p. 59).

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The most peculiar thing about inquiry in terms of scholarship is that (2.4) the scholar conducting it is part of his or her own field of reflection (Schön, 1995, p. 31): Scholarly teachers always act as practitioners and – at the same time – as observers. This has implications on the level of objectivity one can expect – because situations observed in such an epistemological setting are always shaped by one's experience – be they 'internally evolved anchorages' (Sherif & Sherif, 1969, p. 205) or 'internal epistemic activities' in general (Feyerabend, 1982, p. 70).

Therefore, (2.5) a new form of *going meta* is needed – not only in the sense Boyer had in mind with this expression, but also calling for a philosophy of science perspective on reflective examination methodology:

> The new forms of scholarship [...] are infused with a tacit knowing that their practitioners usually cannot describe (at least without observation and reflection devoted to that purpose), and they are inimical to the conditions of control and distance that are essential to technical rationality (Schön, 1995, p. 34).

6   Conclusion

Boyer's concept of *going meta* relates to reflections on one's actions as a teacher and research into teaching. As I pointed out (see 2.4), we need to proclaim a new epistemology *of our teaching* in order to consequently implement *scholarship of teaching and learning* (including *openness* and *inquiry* in a design-based sense) at the heart of our research-based universities and other higher education institutions. If we try to introduce a pragmatist's concept of inquiry (see 2.3), we need to overcome the predominant conceptions of academic teaching building on *didactics*, *imparting knowledge* or *pedagogical intervention*. The resulting concept would be much closer to the old notion of what was meant by *Bildung* in Neo-Humanism.

We could use this link to critically examine the values of a predominantly economic mind-set based on an *efficiency model* and the conceptualizations of knowledge and learning in terms of an 'atomistic, mechanistic and explicit' cognitive or social entity that result from such a way of thinking (Becher & Trowler, 2001, p. 10). In other words: If we strive for an incorporation of SoTL into both the mind-set of individual scholars *and* the academic culture of university teaching as a whole, we need to take a close look at what it means 'to introduce an

epistemology of reflective practice into institutions of higher education dominated by technical rationality' (Schön, 1995, pp. 31–32).

In his widely read article *Those who understand*, Shulman stated that he envisioned 'the design of research-based programmes of teacher education that grow to accommodate our conceptions of both process and content' (Shulman, 1986, p. 13). In Germany, it took us more than thirty years from this statement onwards to introduce a research-based master's programme *Higher Education* in postgraduate education at university level that follows the idea of SoTL – and it was no small feat to do so (Reinmann & Schmohl, 2018). Similar efforts at the institutional level are now visible at Paderborn University, where a new SoTL module has been developed and implemented recently (see Kordts-Freudinger et al., 2017), at the University of Lübeck, where SoTL has been established as part of their postgraduate education agenda (see Schmohl & Jansen-Schulz, this volume) or at the University of Frankfurt, where teaching portfolios are used to engage a systematic inquiry into one's own teaching (see Linde & Wildt, 2012, p. 240).

Of course, the first steps are always the hardest. From here on, SoTL-based ways of engaging in self-reflective teaching and the development of new faculty based on *Bildung* are at least visible on the horizon. Perhaps, these four institutional activities could pave the way to a broad, self-reflective, research-based and *Bildung*-like engagement in SoTL activities in Germany.

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