It’s my assumption you’ve convinced you to read more of teaching and learning scholarship. Here are some questions that I frequently hear from faculty.

How can I find interesting and relevant articles in teaching and learning scholarship?

Mount Royal University librarian Margy MacMillan suggests the same strategies that you might instruct students to use (Chick, 2018). These include keyword searching, following breadcrumbs (i.e. tracking citations in articles you have already read), and, of course, asking a librarian.

In my workshops, I often joke there is no “PubMed.” You can find teaching-related articles in many disciplinary-focused databases, but the best place to start may be the popular student source—Google Scholar. Because of the field’s commitment to inclusion, many scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) journals are open access.

How can I discern good scholarship in the field?

As the field has matured, so have its quality standards and ability to integrate standards into practice. Most teaching and learning scholarship published today meets standards. Those teaching and learning scholarship is multi-disciplinary, you also can expect it to meet standards within specific fields.

How can I relate to research that seems so different from my discipline?

There is a common misconception that teaching and learning research is primarily based on quantitative social science research methods. Learning sciences aren’t the only voice. Rest assured that scholarship is being done not only about teaching and learning in your field, but also that your research methods are asking and answering questions. Because teaching is itself a multi-disciplinary endeavor, so is research on teaching.

More or Less? What Can We Learn from Research on Teaching

Have you ever tried to look up research to solve a teaching and learning challenge in your classroom? While such “surgical strikes” in the research literature may be useful, they may not expose us to the profound implications this growing body of evidence has for our teaching practice.

Whether you call it the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), discipline-based educational research (DBER), pedagogical research, teaching as research, or something else, all of these forms of teaching and learning scholarship share a common focus on enhancing our understanding of teaching and learning in higher education. As this emerging field passes the 25-year mark, it may be time to get acquainted (or re-acquainted) with current research, consider the bigger questions that scholars in the field are now asking, and determine what role this vibrant, incisive, and multi-faceted research might play in your ongoing work as a teacher-scholar.

Many assume that teaching and learning scholarship is intended primarily to provide practical information for college teachers. To some extent, this is true, as research in these areas can provide evidence to support best practices in the classroom. There are outstanding pieces that, for example, demonstrate the effectiveness of clickers, the utility of team-based learning, and the applicability of meta-cognitive strategies (Avargil, Lavi, & Dori, 2018; Martyn, 2007). That being said, if faculty (or university presidents) are looking for easy answers, the equivalent of tips or tricks, this body of research will likely disappoint.

REPRESENTING STUDENTS LEARN

Thriving in Academe is a joint project of NEA and the Professional and Organizational Development Network in Higher Education (www.podnet.org). For more information, contact the editor, Douglas Robertson (douglas@fsu.edu) at Florida International University or Mary Ellen Farrar (mefarrar@illinois.edu) at NEA.
Let us consider a common faculty dilemma: What should teaching and learning scholarship be? Would you agree with the following statements?

A. Post them online after class.
B. Students who do not study at all.
C. Don’t post; students take notes using their devices (e.g. laptop or tablet).
D. Don’t post; students take notes during lectures.
E. Don’t post; students take notes using their devices (e.g. laptop or tablet).

The answer may surprise you. A landmark study of 2014 indicates that by the end of the course, 95% of students are more engaged in their studies.

Imagine a situation in which you first teach your students a module, and then test them on that subject matter, 30 days later.

If you were to sort students into groups according to study strategies (as below), which do you think would perform best?

A. Students who study for multiple hours the week before the examination.
B. Students who do not study at all.
C. Students who don’t study at all but take a multiple-choice quiz immediately after learning the materials (30 days before the examination).
D. Student who do not study but answer a series of open-ended questions immediately after learning the materials (30 days before the examination).
E. Don’t post; students take notes during lectures.

Let’s start with the good news. Based on the study in question, conducted in a large art history course (Butler & Roediger, 2007; Lang, 2013), students who studied did better than those who didn’t. Notably, however, students who did not study but simply answered a few open-ended questions immediately after the module (option D) outperformed all others. You read that right: students who did not crack a book performed better than students who studied diligently. Whaa?

Why did those students outperform the others? How might this apply to your students? You may want to know more — perhaps much more — about this study and others like it. You also may have questions, or possible explanations, that the study does not answer or address. (How did those students study? What if you used different question types in the examination?)

What have we here, then, is a study about something you may have known existed (retrieval practice), in a discipline (art history) that is most difficult to learn about a practice you may not do (examinations), at a university where you probably do not work. On surface, this may sound unappealing. However, I have found that this research engages faculty in constructive conversations, not just as teachers but as scholars. Put another way, if this study can’t provide definitive answers, it does open lines of thought and inquiry.

Case 3: Good to Great?

Our anonymous president (see “TALES FROM REAL LIFE: THE PRESIDENT PROVOKES A REACTION” for more) and his colleague, with the help of the university administration, decided to review the results of a large art history course (Butler & Roediger, 2007). The study showed that students who did not study but simply answered a few open-ended questions immediately after learning the materials (30 days before the examination) performed better than students who studied diligently. Whaa?

Why did those students outperform the others? How might this apply to your students? You may want to know more — perhaps much more — about this study and others like it. You also may have questions, or possible explanations, that the study does not answer or address. (How did those students study? What if you used different question types in the examination?)

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When I present this study, I have a few “hallelujahs” but more often I get faculty who respond very negatively.

If the study’s purpose is, as many assume, to shame people into adopting active learning, then I would argue it has failed. Rather, I would suggest the primary purpose is not to change practice but to provoke. The implication is that we have accumulated a body of evidence about teaching and learning that is growing larger and also more incisive and insightful. We must consider our ethical responsibilities vis a vis that body of knowledge. What does this research mean for active learning, their conclusions have changed the entire conversation about teaching. That, I believe, is the hallmark of not just good, but great scholarship. And I think our friend the college president might even agree we need more, not less of that.

TALES FROM REAL LIFE: THE PRESIDENT PROVOKES A REACTION

A recent conference I attended was held on the campus of a university near my home. I had the opportunity to hear a keynote address given by a former president of another institution. The president’s speech was well-received by attendees, and several audience members came up to me afterward to express their agreement with his views. However, I found myself in the unusual position of disagreeing with the president on most points. I felt that his views were too narrow and simplistic, and that he failed to take into account the complex and multifaceted nature of higher education. I also felt that his views were not grounded in evidence-based research.

The president’s views were not entirely without merit, however. He did make some valid points about the challenges facing higher education today, and he emphasized the importance of collaboration and innovation. I think we can all agree that these are important issues, and that we need to work together to address them. However, I believe that we must also be willing to challenge and question the status quo if we want to make real progress. This is where I think the president’s views fall short.

In conclusion, I believe that we need leaders in higher education who are willing to take risks, who are willing to challenge the status quo, and who are willing to listen to different perspectives. I also believe that we need leaders who are grounded in evidence-based research and who are willing to learn from others. I hope that the president will continue to be an active and engaged leader, and that he will continue to be willing to engage in constructive dialogue with others.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Interested in teaching and learning scholarship? Check out these resources:

- A list of readable and searchable journals on teaching and learning (https://cetl.kennesaw.edu/teaching-journals-directory/)
- A blog on teaching and learning (https://derekbruff.org)
- A podcast on teaching and learning (https://teaching-and-learning-thinking.org)
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To get a sense of the range of scholarship out there, consider the following:

- A landmark study of 2014 indicates that by the end of the course, 95% of students are more engaged in their studies.
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