



10th Anniversary Invited Reflections

The People Behind the Publications: Reflections on a Decade of Reviews

ABSTRACT

This article reflects on my personal experience as a TLI reviewer. It draws upon a decade of learning with and from colleagues, and connects the lessons learned from being both a reviewer and producer of SoTL output. I signpost the challenges and opportunities that belie the role of a TLI reviewer and celebrate the success the role brings. Through the role of TLI reviewer, I have learned how to reshape feedback and structure guidance to support the submissions of manuscripts to TLI.

KEYWORDS

review, reflection, developmental feedback

INTRODUCTION

Teaching & Learning Inquiry (TLI) has become synonymous with the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), as a vehicle to inspire discussion, publish meaningful research and enable contribution to SoTL debates. In their inaugural edition of the journal, founding co-editors Nancy Chick and Gary Poole reminded the international SoTL audience that “ultimately, TLI will be a beacon for such high-quality work that includes and even calls attention to both more traditional models and those not traditionally seated at the SoTL ‘family table’” (Chick and Poole 2013, 1). Ten years have passed since the inaugural issue, one which set the tone for how we attempt to define, research, and disseminate SoTL.

Ralph Waldo Emerson the famous American essayist, best captured the principles of scholarship when he wrote “scholarship is to be created not by compulsion, but by awakening a pure interest in knowledge.” These poignant words resonate with the origins and founding principles of TLI. The journal has connected journeys, challenged intersections, advocated for the benefits of engaging in SoTL but most profoundly, told the stories of the people behind the publications. TLI has taught me to continue my quest into the process and products that SoTL inquiry brings and to be curious and creative in my attempts to dissect the cardinal questions that weave their way into the SoTL tapestry.

So, what have I learned through the TLI lens? What messages has TLI brought me and how has review of manuscripts changed over the decade? These questions form the corpus of my personal reflection that follows.

REFLECTION

When invited to be part of the inaugural TLI editorial board, I recall the excitement and trepidation, the hope and humility, the opportunities yet obstacles, and the understanding of the

importance of the role as reviewer, mentor, and critical friend. These feelings have not changed, but the manner in which I now approach the review process has. I have learned how to value contributions, recognise difference, and enable contributors to develop their thinking and outputs along with the changing landscape of SoTL. For me, the power of the review role rests not with the written but with the reason for contribution. I am curiously interested in the reasons for submitting the manuscript, the personal and collective gains from publication, and the support I could offer to further develop the manuscript.

From my humble beginnings as a reviewer almost a decade ago to the present time, I have learned to read with purpose, to better understand how papers function to narrate and document different research stories within and beyond SoTL. The most exciting aspect has been how authors plan their submission and consider the dynamics of the paper they submit. Over the years I have been fortunate to review submissions from those new to SoTL but equally those who are more experienced. The submissions have built a compendium of learning that embraces a common theme of public SoTL. Through the review process, I have focussed on how to better understand how SoTL is used to tackle interesting, complex, and new insights in higher education. The unique international perspectives have been instrumental in framing the future for SoTL outputs. For me, the greatest learning has been reviewing the methodologies used and considering what methodology/ies best supports the future for SoTL outputs. Many of the manuscripts reviewed choose to use qualitative methodologies. This was interesting yet difficult to initially appreciate. I traditionally use scientific methods that interrogate the analytics and compare numeric values. Reading narratives was useful but equally alien to my research world. I had not yet considered the value of narratives and how SoTL research is central to the person. As I began to delve further into different methodologies used by SoTL researchers, I began to embark on a journey of redefining my questions. I realise I was so obsessed up until this juncture in finding answers, that I almost lost the ability to ask different questions. I learned that individuals engage with SoTL because they genuinely care about making a difference in the lives of those they teach or influence. This was a powerful discovery enabled only through my role of privilege, as a TLI reviewer.

Reviewing for TLI has not been without its problems. Whilst the process is fascinating, insightful, and positive, the commentary and feedback delivered to those who submit needs to be carefully considered. There is little formal training in the art of reviewing. Reviewers are selected on their ability to focus and support contributors and contributions and SoTL expertise is only part of the criteria necessary for successful reviewing of manuscripts. What became increasingly evident for me was that humility is at the heart of the process. Humility represents the ability to understand the person and direct feedback to support and enrich the final product. Humility equally works in making explicit how the manuscript could be improved or repurposed for submission. TLI has worked to develop a framework for supporting reviewers and ensuring that feedback is meaningful and helpful. This has most recently culminated in the Gary Poole Distinguished Reviewer Award, an award that recognises how reviewers impact not only the submission, but the person behind the paper. TLI has taught me how to direct feedback for learning and development and not simply value it as a product of the review. I have learned how to compose feedback so that it reminds the author/s of the purpose of the paper in line with the values of SoTL. TLI has taught me how to question, challenge and interpret the value of SoTL in different contexts and cultures.

One incredible experience was working with a group of international academic staff to develop a SoTL article. All of these academics had experience in producing discipline specific research outputs but

were inexperienced in writing SoTL articles. I supported the group by drawing upon my experience as a TLI reviewer to scaffold the writing process. I particularly used principles of decoding (Pace 2004) to illustrate processes and protocols in making explicit the purpose of the writing and the impact of the interventions. This culminated in successful publication in TLI and sparked an interest in the group in continuing the SoTL journey and thinking more strategically about the value of SoTL in their work. From the success of the publication, the group submitted an abstract, which was accepted, for the 2019 ISSOTL conference and invited me to be a lead part of their panel discussion. I found the experience humbling and used to it to connect my learned with my lived experience of being a SoTL scholar. I firmly believe that TLI gave me the opportunity to develop and hone my mentoring skills; to think carefully about supportive and developmental feedback; and inspire a renewed energy for producing SoTL output. These values have defined my ability to support, communicate, appreciate, and engage communities of practice in pursuit of publications and discussions within SoTL. I realised how my feedback extended beyond the written and opened the eyes of those new to SoTL. I was in awe of how my words to the group enabled a renewed passion for not only what SoTL is, but moreover what it does. TLI cultivates connections and community. It does not dictate perfection but purpose. In listening to the empowering words from “The Hill We Climb” by Amanda Gorman (2021), I realise how the juxtaposition of place, space, and semantics can forge unions beyond the desired purpose: “And, yes, we are far from polished, far from pristine, but that doesn’t mean we are striving to form a union that is perfect. We are striving to forge our union with purpose.”

CONCLUSION

The past decade for TLI has simply and significantly set the scene for the next one. It has given voice and vision to SoTL and attempted to boldly challenge SoTL’s impact and influence. With this foundation we can now begin to build new ideas, ask different questions, and co-construct a journal that is truly inclusive and diverse. The challenge for SoTL remains difficult as we begin to redefine what SoTL is and how it is perceived. We ask not so much about the submission but moreover, about the TLI service. Who will TLI attract to serve as editorial board members moving forward? What types of publication are useful in showcasing the different forms SoTL takes? How do we embrace a multitude of SoTL practice whilst celebrating the narratives that define the publications? I return to the sentiments of Chick and Poole (2013) and question whether TLI has, or will continue to, call attention to both more traditional models and those not traditionally seated at the SoTL “family table.”

These questions are somewhat rhetorical but serve to challenge the status quo and further strengthen the pillars of SoTL woven into the fabric of TLI.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

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