

**The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning and its Implications on Research
Approaches for Composition and Rhetoric Faculty**

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Abstract

The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) is one of the fastest growing areas of inquiry in higher education today. (Gibbs, 2013). Composition and rhetoric courses are ubiquitous in American colleges and universities, and often in universities abroad where English is the language of instruction. A survey of research being published in composition studies in the United States shows an almost unanimous preference towards Critical Theory and Postmodern analyses of topics related to class content, yet fails, in many cases, to provide any insights into either student learning outcomes or pedagogical implications for the composition classroom. This study was an attempt to compare research methods of SoTL and composition and writing studies using the model offered by Divan, Ludwig, Matthews, Motely and Tomljenovic-Berube (2017) in order to help composition teachers, begin to formulate research questions that may have a more immediate impact on teaching and learning outcomes in the classroom.

Keywords: SoTL, Composition and Rhetoric, Research Methods

Introduction

According to Gibbs (2013) The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) has been described as the fastest growing academic development movement in higher education. SoTL entails the systematic study of teaching and learning, using established or validated criteria of scholarship, to understand how teaching (beliefs, behaviours, attitudes, and values) can maximize learning, and/or develop a more accurate understanding of learning, resulting in products that are publicly shared for critique and use by an appropriate community (Potter & Kustra, 2011). SoTL seeks to answer the questions such as, Are my students learning? How do I know that they are learning? Is my teaching helping students learn? What opportunities can I design that best facilitate students' learning? (Dickson & Trembl, 2014) Across the academic landscape SoTL projects, grants, communities, and institutes are being created, even in a time of overall funding cutbacks. As a leader in the field, The Carnegie Academy for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, for example, offers a clear vision on how to improve teaching and learning at institutes of higher education across the U.S. Their annual Summit on Improvement in Education focuses on meeting the global demand for higher learning by focusing on the best models for enacting education reform based on proven methods of the improvement sciences — valuing inquiry and evidence instead of intuition and anecdotes. Further, universities around the world are focusing more on faculty development and providing teaching and learning certificate programs to new faculty members; recognizing the need to develop scholars into educators as well. SoTL, too, is maturing as a discipline and has a clearly defined set of principles of good practice (figure 1).

Principles of Good Practice in SoTL
Inquiry focused on student learning
Grounded in context
Methodologically Sound
Conducted in partnership with students
Appropriately Public

Figure 1. Principles of Good Practice in SoTL

In the field of Writing Studies or Composition and Rhetoric, instructors are often tasked with transmitting basic academic skills to freshman students. These skills include identifying agency, developing a sense of audience and tone, creating organized and cohesive paragraphs, synthesizing research, developing a personal writing style, and improving students understanding and ability to think critically about the world around them. Writing courses offer the chance for new students to become initiated into the new language and culture of academia, in order to lay the foundations of success in their chosen fields of study. Writing instructors, then, and the field as a whole, I believe, could benefit from a research agenda that is more focused on the methods of improving teaching and learning in order to ensure that these important skills are being transmitted in the most effective and efficient manner.

Research Questions:

1. What types of research are most prevalent in the field of Composition and Rhetoric/Writing Studies?
2. How do research methods in Composition and Rhetoric/Writing Studies compare to those in SoTL, and what are the implications for the field?

Methodology

In this initial study, I examined 19 research studies published from February to December 2017 in *College Composition and Communication*, a leading academic journal in the field of Writing Studies and Composition and Rhetoric in the United States. Using the framework of Divan, Ludwig, Matthews, Motely and Tomljenovic-Berube (2017), I attempted to conceptualize the type of research currently being conducted in the field in terms of qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods approaches. The framework for data analysis that I used followed these criteria:

1. Type of data collected: surveys, interviews, focus groups, other.
2. Data was presented in tables, quotes, graphs, visual diagrams, case studies, themes, other.
3. Approach was qualitative, quantitative or mixed methods, other.

Findings

My analysis found that 16% (n=3) of the papers analysed using a mixed-method approach with each one leaning more toward qualitative methods. 84% (n=16) were strictly qualitative and none of the papers were strictly quantitative.

The most common form of data collection was Document or Historical Analysis, 47.37% (n=9). Student Interviews and Student Writing combined comprised 42.1% (n=8). Only 1 study utilized a survey for data collection.

The preponderance of data collected, was presented in the form of tables (47.36%, n=9). Quotes from either students or academics comprised 31.58% (n=6), Visuals/Diagrams comprised 10.53% (n=2), and 10.53% (n=2) did not use collected data to complete their research.

Table 2

Summary statistics for all research articles (n=19) analysed by research method, source of data collection and data presentation style.

Research Method	Total (N)	Percentage (%)
Mixed Method	3	16%
Qualitative	16	84%
Quantitative	0	0
Source of Data Collection		
Surveys	1	5.26%
Student Interviews	3	15.79%
Doc./Historical Analysis	9	47.37%
Student Writing	5	26.31%
Other	1	5.26%
Data Presentation Style		
Tables	9	47.36%
Quotes	6	31.58%
Visual/Diagram	2	10.53%
Other	2	10.53%

Discussion

In the study conducted by Divan, et al. (2017) the researchers found that quantitative approaches were used 37.21% of the time, qualitative approaches were used 29.59%, and mixed methods approaches were used 33.18% for SoTL. The researchers analysed articles published in three leading SoTL academic journals. This represents a fairly even distribution amongst methods and is in stark contrast to most other fields of study. For example, my initial findings are not surprising, in that, qualitative research methods (84%) would normally be the most commonly used method in the Humanities. In fact, it is essential to providing the field with a shared theme, an historical framework and a meta-language to debate, discuss, research and write. Research that critically evaluates pedagogies, discourse or literature has immense value to various fields including Composition and Rhetoric. My contention is only that since faculty in our field are tasked

with transmitting basic academic skills, we may benefit and be more inclusive if the research emanating from leading journals was more in line with that coming from the field of SoTL.

Additionally, the data collected from SoTL research is predominately taken from student data (88.34%), followed by academics (21.08%) (Divan, et.al, 2017). According to my research only 42.8% of research in the field of Composition and Rhetoric took data directly from the students, through either interviews or through analyzing the students writing. In a field where the main goal is to improve a skill, not necessarily a theoretical understanding, student writing and student perceptions should be more prevalent in the research.

Analysing the research further, of the 19 articles that I examined, which represents a year's worth of published material in one of the leading journals in the field, there was very little mention of actual teaching or learning, very little if any mention of research or scholarly pursuits being used to enhance the classroom experience or teaching practices. The question of why that is the case, is what initiated my desire to explore the current research methods. There are many different models for explaining the practice of teaching and the practice of scholarship, but only SoTL actually seeks to inquire about student learning. There are overlaps of course, and many scholars do spend their time in the classroom crafting lessons to enhance student learning, but I believe the field would benefit from those same scholars researching about the learning taking place inside the classroom. Potter and Kustra (2011) examined the difference between what is referred to as 'scholarly teaching' and SoTL. They argue, "Although SoTL is not a necessary part of scholarly teaching, one may enter into the practice of SoTL at any level, because it is relevant to all of them in some way" (p. 12). They continue to mention the many different levels that one may enter into the practice of SoTL, at the level of reflective practice, evidence-based teaching, or at the theory guided teaching level. The more that scholars are introduced to the ideas and principles of SoTL and to the importance of inquiring about teaching and learning practices, the more opportunities there may be to discuss ways in which SoTL research and data collection methods may be incorporated into fields such as Composition and Rhetoric.

Conclusion

This survey of research was an initial attempt to conceptualise the research priorities in the field of Composition and Rhetoric. As a practitioner in the field and someone who believes strongly in the scholarly inquiry into teaching and learning, my purpose was to suggest a shift in focus in the research agenda in my field. This was a small sample, but I believe an accurate representation of the overall emphasis on research priorities in the field. I would argue that due to the outcomes writing courses seek to meet: to produce a basic academic style, to assess the needs of audience, purpose and context through critical reading and writing, to produce writing that demonstrates analysis, synthesis and a knowledge of various rhetorical styles, to evaluate, paraphrase and summarize academic texts, we, as teacher scholars should incorporate into our research agenda, studies which seek to strengthen these skills.

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