

Signature Pedagogies: A Cautionary Tale

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ABSTRACT

The idea that each discipline in higher education has its own unique "signature pedagogy" has gained popularity since Lee Shulman first proposed the idea in 2005. But can the focus on signature pedagogies in scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) work be a problem as well as a benefit? This essay explores both the history of signature pedagogies and the possible downside of the use of this concept to frame SoTL research and teaching informed by SoTL.

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One of the most influential articles ever written about post-secondary history teaching is Lendol Calder's (2006) "Uncoverage: Toward a Signature Pedagogy for the History Survey." Calder, who is a central figure in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) in the humanities, begins his essay with an anecdote about a famous historian and award-winning teacher who, after hearing Calder present about how not to teach the undergraduate history survey, said that he might not be teaching correctly, but he was teaching in the "proper and customary way" (p. 1358). For three decades, college and university faculty have been struggling with this exact issue—how to take full advantage of what SoTL researchers like Calder are learning about teaching and learning, while staying true to what they perceive to be the "proper and customary ways" to teach their discipline.

In 2005, Lee Shulman, who was then president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, proposed a way to solve this dilemma. Shulman had carefully studied medical education in the United States and had taken what he learned in that discipline and used it to look critically at other disciplines, especially in American graduate schools. He concluded that each academic discipline has what he called a "signature pedagogy," a specific way of teaching that was the result of decades of carefully crafted teaching interventions by many individuals who shared their knowledge, their experiences, and their teaching results with one another (Shulman, 2005). To put it in the words of Calder's interlocutor, time and experience had produced "proper and customary ways" of teaching in each discipline.

According to Shulman (2005), signature pedagogies are "types of teaching that organize the fundamental ways in which future practitioners are educated for their new professions" (p. 52). At least some of the students of those master teachers went on to be teachers themselves and further elaborated those signature pedagogies. Eventually, signature pedagogies, whether in medical education, writing and composition, physics, history, or soil science, have become accepted as best practices in teaching the various disciplines across higher education in various national contexts. Some of these signature pedagogies have a global reach—the case study method in graduate schools of business and law being prominent examples—while others are more national or regional in scope and implementation. Whatever the discipline and whatever the national or international context, the goal of the signature pedagogy is to teach a new generation of students to think like a historian, a physicist, a nurse, a geologist, or whatever. The presupposition behind signature pedagogies, and I would add, decoding the disciplines, is that each discipline has its own peculiar ways of knowing, and the best way to introduce future practitioners (students) to those ways of knowing is teaching methods that are rooted in and provide visible evidence of those epistemologies.

When I first encountered Shulman's article and heard him speak about signature pedagogies in 2005, I fell in love with his proposition. The idea that history had its own signature pedagogy seemed to be just what I had been groping toward ever since my first encounters with SoTL in 1998. Because I'm a historian, I spent the next several years researching the history of history teaching at the post-secondary

level, and the more I learned, the more I found myself agreeing with Shulman, at least for my own discipline. It seemed to me that over the past hundred years or so historians have been refining their ways of teaching around a set of generally accepted values—the notions that students ought to be able to read a variety of sources closely and carefully, noting such things as authorship, perspective, context, chronology, and so on, and then be able to make meaningful connections between and among these sources, which would ultimately result in works of history in various forms that were analytical, precise, engaging, and aware of their limitations. Along the way, I was powerfully influenced by the work of Sam Wineburg, Laura Westhoff, Stéphane Lévesque, Leah Shopkow, David Pace, and Lendol Calder, just to name a few. My teaching improved, my scholarship of teaching and learning improved, and I like to think that my students' satisfaction with their learning improved as well.

Sometime around 2010, I sat down to write a book about what these signature pedagogies of the historian looked like in an era when more and more of the raw material of history was being made available in digital form and, increasingly, was being created in digital-only form. What would it mean to our ways of knowing as historians when the raw material of our work had never had an analog existence? How would our students learn to work with those born-digital materials and, when they did, what sorts of new and different conclusions about the past might they draw? How would their learning change or their conclusions differ when they had to start engaging in what Franco Moretti calls the “distant reading” of the vast corpora of texts and images and other data that are increasingly available to them (Moretti, 2005)? How would they represent those conclusions in possibly new and different ways? In short, would they think differently about the past once their sources were digital rather than analog, and how would our signature pedagogies in history help me make sense of those questions?

One of the big conclusions I reached in writing that book was that rooted as we have been in analog sources, historians have created rich and varied ways of thinking about the past, but at the same time we have become increasingly conservative in what we expect from our students. In other words, our signature pedagogy was based in a century of devotion to the close reading of texts, with some additional work related to images, data, and on the fringes, sounds. We were, I came to believe, bumping up against a significant roadblock created by the digitalization of all that raw material and, most importantly, the very different ways that our students were finding, making sense of, and using that digital content. In short, we have become too wedded to the “proper and customary ways” of teaching history. Evidence of this problem is indicated in the results of the impressive but limiting Tuning Project of the American Historical Association, which largely replicates those customary ways of teaching and does not even mention cross-disciplinary ways of thinking (Quam-Wickham, 2016). I would argue that the future in which our students will live is not disciplinary, but rather is cross-disciplinary. The rise of new fields like biophysics, computational linguistics, and the increasingly complex linkages between folklore studies and game design are just three simple examples of that cross-disciplinary future. As David Reichard and

Kathy Takayama (2013) have argued, when it comes to SoTL, there is tremendous power in cross-disciplinary conversations about both student learning and research about that learning.

And so, what I've learned from a careful survey of my own disciplinary home makes me worried about the effect that our love affair with signature pedagogies might be having on SoTL as a whole. Since its earliest days, the best work in SoTL has resulted from a dynamic shuttling back and forth between the specific (disciplinary styles) and the general (SoTL methods borrowed from other disciplines). Two examples that demonstrate the power of this approach include the work done by those engaged in "decoding the disciplines" (Miller-Young & Boman, 2017) and the diverse collection of essays on cross-disciplinary SoTL published by Indiana University Press several years ago (McKinney, 2013). Of late, I've come to believe that this love affair and the resulting flood of publications about signature pedagogies is leading us into a new set of disciplinary silos right at the moment when we need to be reaching across disciplinary boundaries in our SoTL work.

I want to be very clear that I do not think that the SoTL research on signature pedagogies is wrong or misguided. Nor do I think that using the results of that research is bad for our students or for our own professional development. I have tremendous respect for the scholars working on signature pedagogies and for the positive impact that they have had on colleagues in their disciplines (Felten & Chick, 2018). My concern, rather, is that the increasing popularity of signature pedagogies as a genre of SoTL research is leading the entire field onto paths that will, in the end, bring us back to where we started—the "proper and customary ways" of teaching in the disciplines—and can work against helping us cultivate cross-disciplinary ways of thinking in our students.

There is also a potentially problematic relationship between the notion of signature pedagogies and what we might call "pedagogical inertia." Anthony Ciccone (2009) wrote that signature pedagogies, "represent core values and thus evolve slowly.... This is as it should be because signature pedagogies exist because they have proved effective over time" (p. xiii). In other words, the very staying power of signature pedagogies in a discipline proves their worth. But what if a pedagogical style has been around for a long time because faculty prefer it? My own discipline is a classic example of this problem. In the late 19th century, historians began to move away from teaching in small seminars and shifted instead to the "I lecture, you listen and take notes" model of teaching. This teaching method, which became the signature pedagogy of the historian, is very efficient. It can be used as easily with 100 or 200 students as with 10 or 20, and it requires little preparation after the first iteration, beyond tweaking a lecture here or there to account for new scholarship. If students did well on the exams—saying back to the professor what was said in lecture—then it was clear enough that the pedagogy was working. Historians have become so enamoured of this style of teaching that we replicate this model in our conferences, pedantically reading our papers to one another and leaving the audience no more than 5 to 10 minutes to actually engage

with the presenters. It's no wonder that so many students find history classes boring or, even if they were entertained, can barely explain anything complex about the past just five years after graduation. I would submit, therefore, that my own discipline is an example of why Ciccone's way of thinking about signature pedagogies can be problematic.

Another potential problem with signature pedagogies is that they are too often rooted in specific national or cultural styles of learning. Business schools around the world use the Harvard Case Study Method in their courses, and it is quite possible that, of all the signature pedagogies in academia today, the Case Study Method in business schools is the most ubiquitous. However, despite it having proven effective over time, not everyone finds the case study approach to be useful or effective in their own national contexts (Jack, 2018). Moreover, critiques of the Case Study Method emphasize the degree to which this way of teaching privileges a very specific American variant of capitalism that does not always fit with local contexts. When it comes to teaching, we know that one size definitely does not fit all, but too often signature pedagogies are written about as though there is one size for each discipline.

A third problem is that signature pedagogies are far too often adapted to a series of dominant and sometimes hegemonic notions about ways of thinking and learning. Indigenous people have known for a very long time that their ways of knowing are often very different from the pedagogical practices imposed on them by the dominant systems of education in a given society. The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning is coming around to an understanding of the ways that SoTL research and writing is predicated on dominant narratives about knowing and thinking, but any attempt to be more aware of Indigenous ways of knowing runs right up against the whole notion of a signature pedagogy. To be clear, I am very specifically not arguing the signature pedagogies are culturally imperialist, although they certainly can be. Rather, I'm arguing that they are, nonetheless, predicated on certain assumptions about how a discipline can be learned and practiced that are rooted in the dominant narratives about learning and thinking in a given society. So, for instance, the Western Apache of the American Southwest do not think about or understand physical geography the same way that geographers schooled in the Western tradition do. The signature pedagogy of geography, as taught by Western social scientists, aims to develop spatial cognition in students that will allow them to describe the relationships between the physical landscape and such things as cultural practices, historical developments in human societies, or changes in the physical landscape itself. The results of these investigations are often depicted in maps that rely on European-derived methods of mapmaking (Komoto, 2009). For the Western Apache, this way of thinking about the physical landscape makes little to no sense because, for them, maps function not to describe physical realities like elevation and slope, but to locate stories in physical space. They want maps to answer questions like What happened here? Who was involved? What was it like? What lessons does it teach us? Places are thus named to communicate, not to describe, and anyone who is so inclined can name a place in their land. These are the things that the Western Apache want from a map, not

information about distances, topography, or man-made structures. In fact, the very notion that a map can fix information in space and time amuses them (Basso, 1996).

What, then, is a SoTL practitioner to do? How can we avoid letting our fascination with signature pedagogies lead us into unproductive silos? One way to avoid the potential traps placed in our path by a too easy acceptance of signature pedagogies is to force ourselves to read outside of our own discipline, and the further from home the better. In my own case, over the past 10 years I've learned more from reading the work of SoTL scholars in chemistry than from reading the work of my disciplinary colleagues in history, not because the historians aren't doing interesting and generative work, but because the chemists are forcing me to really think about the underlying assumptions of what I'm trying to do in my courses (Maeyer & Talanquer, 2010; Sjöström, 2013). We share some things in common, chemists and I, but there is an awful lot that happens in their classes that is entirely strange to me and would be even more confounding to my history students. And, I suspect, my colleagues in chemistry might just feel the same way about the arcana of historical research and analysis.

A second way to break free from the potential pitfalls of a too easy acceptance of signature pedagogies is to try teaching your disciplinary ways of knowing—not the content of the discipline, but the epistemologies—to an entirely unfamiliar audience. One of the most transformative moments in my teaching career happened when I taught a large group of fifth grade students how to think like a historian. They figured it out much more quickly than my university students, in part because they were unencumbered by a decade's worth of history teaching that emphasized the memorization of historical content that could then be regurgitated on standardized tests. Those children just wanted to know how to figure things out. Once I showed them what to do, in their naive yet sophisticated ways they produced new historical knowledge that was sophisticated, interesting, and precise. In short, those fifth graders learned in just two hours what it sometimes takes my university students half a semester or more to figure out. What I learned from that experience was that my teaching needed to change to account for the unlearning that needed to happen in my classrooms before the real learning could begin. I also realized that somewhere between the fifth grade and university historians have beaten all the fun out of learning about the past. Since then I've worked hard to make my courses more fun, more relaxed, and yet still rigorous—a choice that my colleagues haven't always approved of.

Finally, I want to conclude with a word of warning. Please realize that many of your colleagues may be uncomfortable with, and may even actively dislike, any challenge that your teaching poses to the signature pedagogy of their discipline. Signature pedagogies are comfortable because they are so ubiquitous, and they are ubiquitous because they are so comfortable. As long as we accept that they are valuable, that they exist because they have proved effective over time, then where is the need to change? Why shake up the “proper and customary way” of teaching one's discipline? And what might it imply about your colleagues and their teaching if you find that a new, different, or not very “signature” way of teaching is yielding

better results from your students? Signature pedagogies have real staying power and our colleagues are often heavily invested in them for some very good reasons that do not make those colleagues bad teachers. In fact, many are sure to be excellent teachers who produce amazing results with their students. Disciplinary silos created by signature pedagogies are not, by definition, bad. They are, however, limiting and, I would submit, the last thing we want to do as educators is force our students into epistemological silos they have a hard time getting out of.

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