Retrospective: Sparking the Magic of SoTL at Mount Royal University

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ABSTRACT

In this invited article, we reflect on how the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) came to be at Mount Royal University (MRU). We caught up with Dr. Jim Zimmer, Associate Professor in General Education and former Associate Vice-President of Teaching and Learning to discuss the early days of SoTL at MRU and his perspectives and role in laying the foundations for SoTL at MRU. We also discuss how Jim has seen SoTL evolve over the last 10-15 years and some of the key catalysts that, in his view, formalized SoTL as an integral part of MRU.

INTRODUCTION

The following narrative account is based on a conversation between the authors, where Cherie Woolmer, Chris Ostrowdun, and Michelle Yeo interviewed Jim Zimmer about his recollections and insights. We hope other institutions and SoTL scholars find our reflection about SoTL at MRU useful, as work continues to establish and grow SoTL in various contexts.

HISTORY OF SoTL AT MRU

As Michelle recalled, SoTL was not a common term when she joined MRU in 2007, which at the time was classified as a college. Jim was among a core group of champions at MRU who helped introduce the institution to SoTL. "Jim saw the potential of [SoTL] and took all kinds of steps to make it a reality, and … now I would say it's really part of the fabric at Mount Royal," Michelle explained.

Jim described first encountering "what we now think of as SoTL … back in the mid to late 1990s … [when] attending conferences of the American Association of Higher Education." At the time, Jim was director of the Academic Development Centre (ADC) at MRU, "and at that point, [SoTL] was being referred to as 'classroom research' more often than the 'scholarship of teaching and learning.'" Inspired by these conferences, Jim and others at the ADC decided to "take a run at a proposal for establishing a classroom research arm in the ADC." While that initial proposal "didn't go ahead," it helped plant "the seed for what became the Institute for Scholarship of Teaching and Learning a few years later."

The mid to late 2000s were a time of transition for MRU. Michelle, in 2007, was part of one of the first cohorts of new hires ahead of the institution's transition to university status: "The transition to an undergraduate university culminated in [late] 2009, when the institution officially changed its name in a ceremony presided over by the provincial premier" (Yeo et al., 2015, p. 284). Over the next decade, over 200 full-time faculty would be hired, making up more than half of the total full-time faculty, "which led to both renewed energy" and, at times, "tension between the existing and the emerging cultures of the institution" (p. 289).

At that time, Jim recalled following the SoTL work of the Carnegie Foundation and pioneers in Canada such as Gary Poole, Nicola Simmons, Julia Christensen Hughes, and Joy Mighty. "SoTL seemed to be a near-perfect marriage of research and teaching and potentially a great fit for Mount Royal given its longstanding commitment to high quality teaching and learning." Moreover, he said, "Having had the opportunity to work with a lot of faculty members across the institution through the ADC, I felt strongly that there would be a significant uptake of SoTL at Mount Royal, and that's proven to be the case."

One of many changes in MRU's transition from college to university was the expectation for scholarship as part of the faculty role and the need to build a research infrastructure and policy environment. Jim noted that "as a new university,

we had a 'blank slate' to work from and, as a result, we were able to embed considerations for SoTL into key strategic and policy documents from the outset. We didn't have to swim upstream against an established research culture."

Jim noted that for faculty now faced with expectations of doing research, SoTL presented an opportunity for scholarly work that would mesh nicely with their longstanding interest in teaching. "We were keen to bring SoTL forward as a legitimate form of scholarship on our campus, recognized and valued in processes such as faculty annual review and tenure and promotion. We wanted to ensure that SoTL was taken seriously as research, and we hoped it would be viewed as an institutional priority in our new university."

To this end, Jim explained that considerable effort went into ensuring that SoTL was referenced in the institutional academic plan, that it was identified as a pillar in the strategic research plan, and that it was explicitly recognized as a form of scholarship in the faculty roles and responsibilities document. Subsequently, he noted that SoTL was captured in newly created tenure and promotion documents and in the collective agreement. "We were quite deliberate about ensuring that SoTL was integrated in as many documents as possible as we moved through our transition to university status, and we were really fortunate to have an existing SoTL literature to inform us," he explained, citing key works by scholars such as Mary Huber, Pat Hutchings, Lee Shulman, Randy Bass, and many others.

In tandem with policy considerations, Jim noted that "all of the work would have been for naught without a coalition of faculty members who were on board with the idea of bringing SoTL into the institution." Jim and colleagues rallied a sizable group of faculty members from academic departments across the institution to sign on in support of a proposal to create an Institute for Scholarship of Teaching and Learning at MRU, a research institute that would encourage and support scholarly inquiry related to teaching and learning on campus and beyond. MRU's General Faculties Council approved the proposed institute in late 2008, and, as Jim noted, "we were gratified that our preparatory efforts paid off and excited at the potential this new institute held for MRU."

The Institute was launched in 2009, and Dr. Richard Gale was appointed as its inaugural director. Knowing that the Institute would require external funding to support its operations, Richard and Jim worked closely with the Mount Royal Foundation to secure two significant donations from corporate donors in Calgary. These donations "helped us get some things off the ground," such as the Teaching Learning Scholars Program and various grant programs, which continue to be in place today. MRU recognized the growing value of the Institute and conveyed long-term support by integrating the Institute into the university's budget.

SoTL Symposium

Soon after the Institute was created and SoTL was finding a foothold at MRU, there was a desire to create events for SoTL practitioners from MRU and elsewhere

to gather and share their work, network, and forge scholarly community and collaboration. This led to the launching of the Symposium on SoTL in 2010, an annual event held in Banff, Alberta, Canada. The Symposium was created by the Institute's founding director, Richard Gale, and has continued under subsequent, current, and interim directors Janice Miller-Young, Brett McCollum, Michelle Yeo, and Collette Lemieux. Jim fondly describes the symposium as "a highlight of my academic calendar each year. Beyond the obvious attraction of a few days in Banff, the community that has evolved around this event is very strong and really enjoyable." While the Symposium has grown since the early days, it has remained an intimate event, with around 250 participants each year. Jim noted that "people seem to appreciate the intimacy of the event and the opportunity for fireside coffee conversations with a colleague or small dinners out in Banff—reconnecting with people they originally met at the event who return year after year."

Since its inception, the Symposium has had a practitioners' focus, "one where the people 'doing the work of SoTL,' faculty members and increasingly students, have an opportunity to share their work and talk about it with others," Jim remarked. "I'm pleased that we've been able to sustain that focus, and I think the Symposium's attendees are as well."

Evolution of SoTL

When we asked Jim how SoTL has evolved, he observed that "the SoTL tent has opened up a bit from the original conception of research done on one's own students, in one's own classroom, to a broader and more inclusive community." He noted the ongoing trend of shifting from a paradigm of "research on students" to a paradigm of "research with students," pointing to developments such as undergraduate research and Students as Partners, as well as appointments such as MRU's Canada Research Chair in SoTL.

Jim observed that, in his eyes, the work of SoTL often reflects the trends, developments, and advancements in higher education and the broader society:

When I first became interested in "classroom research" and SoTL in the late 90s and early 2000s, much of the work seemed to focus on learning technologies and delivery innovations, mirroring the emergence of the worldwide web, ubiquitous access of faculty to computers and software applications, and the introduction of learning management systems.

He hopes that as the field evolves "we see more of our SoTL work focused on contemporary priorities such as diversity and inclusion, Indigenization, and maybe things like work integrated learning."

Thinking about the future of SoTL, Jim hopes "that we continue to see growth in the number of faculty members and institutions championing the work, such that it becomes a mainstream form of research and scholarship at universities across Canada and elsewhere." He went on to say, "I expect that we'll continue to have incremental growth in the number of faculty members taking SoTL on board, not

necessarily as the singular focus of their research program, but as an important element of their scholarly work."

Jim believes the growth and integration of SoTL within faculty research programs "would be positive, not just for SoTL, but for the quality of teaching and learning on our campuses, and the types of hands-on research experiences that students have access to." He hopes over the next 10 years to "see more intentional linkages between the work of SoTL and important questions that transcend the individual interests of a faculty member and that tap into issues of importance to an institution or the broader society such as social justice, diversity and inclusion, and Indigenization."

Early work on some of these broader considerations has already begun, such as with the gifting of a Blackfoot name, Mokakiiks, by Miiksika'am, Elder Clarence Wolfleg in 2020 to formalize the renaming of the Institute for SoTL as the Mokakiiks Centre for SoTL. Mokakiiks means "a lodge for wisdom," which is "not a static place for the accumulation of knowledge, but rather a gathering place of wise people, who get together to continue learning and then share their wisdom with future generations" (Mokakiiks Centre for Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, 2022).

The Magic of SoTL

The uptake of SoTL at MRU, Jim expressed, has been "wonderful to witness, really gratifying." Throughout his roles at MRU, Jim has seen how SoTL has touched and impacted individuals and the institutional community in multiple ways. "At the level of the individual faculty member, I think that their SoTL work has helped them better understand the learning of their students and shed light on aspects of their teaching." More than that, however, Jim believes that for some faculty, SoTL has provided an exciting new direction for their scholarly work and helped breathe renewed energy into their careers. "I have had a number of faculty members thank me for helping to bring SoTL to MRU and for the way that we collectively have supported it over the years. When you hear things like that, it is tremendously rewarding, just magic."

While MRU has established a strong foundation in SoTL over the past decade, Jim believes that new initiatives and programming will help to ensure that SoTL thrives at MRU into the future. He hopes, for example, that MRU's support for undergraduate research and Students as Partners translates to even more students involved in SoTL, not just as participants, but as partners and co-researchers. "As an undergraduate university with a strong teaching-learning culture, an established foundation in SoTL and a commitment to undergraduate research, MRU is poised to make gains in this area." He also sees opportunities for leveraging SoTL to inform strategic teaching-learning initiatives and teaching-learning policy development at the university. "The Mokakiiks Centre's recent appointment of a CRC [Canada Research Chair] in SoTL, with expertise in Students as Partners, as well as a postdoc researcher are really exciting developments that will help chart

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the next ten years for SoTL at MRU. The future seems bright."

We thank Jim for this retrospective look at how SoTL developed at MRU and his thoughts on where SoTL at MRU and as a field are headed. We have a new appreciation for the structural thought that went into preparing a fertile ground for SoTL to take root at MRU. No movement is without growth challenges and opportunities, and we look forward to continued evolution over time as scholars both inside MRU and beyond engage in SoTL.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Chris Ostrowdun (he/his/him), PhD, costrowdun@mtroyal.ca, is a Postdoctoral Fellow at Mount Royal University. His research leverages sociocultural and critical theories to study disability and inclusion in education.

Jim Zimmer, jzimmer@mtroyal.ca, is an Associate Professor in the Department of General Education at Mount Royal University. He served as Mount Royal's Dean of Teaching and Learning from 2008-2019 and as Associate Vice-President, Teaching and Learning from 2015-2019.

Cherie Woolmer, cwoolmer@mtroyal.ca, is Assistant Professor and Canada Research Chair (Scholarship of Teaching and Learning), based in the Mokakiiks Centre for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning. Her research program focuses on student-faculty partnerships in higher education. She co-facilitates Mount Royal's SoTL Development Program, runs workshops and book studies on issues relating to pedagogical partnerships and SoTL, and offers consultations with faculty and students engaged in SoTL.

Michelle Yeo, myeo@mtroyal.ca, is a Professor in the Academic Development Centre at Mount Royal University and directs the Mokakiiks Centre for Scholarship of Teaching and Learning. Her research interests include student learning and experience (SoTL), faculty development (SoEd), and decolonizing practices in higher education.

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