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Enhancing Student Academic Success through Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

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Abstract

This theoretical paper explores the impact of Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) in enhancing student academic success. Adopting the Action Research as an approach, this paper is informed by a critical reflective theory, which is robust for enhancing student success, promoting active learning, self-assessment, critical analysis, adjustments of study approaches, and identifying areas for improvement. The idea behind SoTL is to be an informed, critical, inquisitive, questioning, and reflecting teacher who focuses on improving their teaching practice to help their students learn and improve student academic success. However, according to discourses, academics are not able to employ the scholarship to enhance their teaching methods, which makes the scholarship's goal of enhancing students' learning less successful. This paper responds to the following question: How has the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning impacted student academic success? The paper argues that academics can have a greater influence on their students' academic success if they become actively involved in SoTL. This paper contributes to the continuing discussion on the relevancy of action research and SoTL on enhancing students' success.

Key words: action research, critical reflective theory, SoTL, students' academic success

Introduction

The concept and practice of Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) have been around for a while. Its foundation has been the transformation of teaching and learning through action research since its origin and goal. However, several studies contend that rather than concentrating on action research to enhance student academic success, scholarship should better understand our students' learning experiences and outcomes within our fields and how to enhance those experiences and outcomes (Leibowitz & Bozalek, 2018; Pitso, 2013). Furthermore, discourses contend that the research of teaching and learning ought to focus on both individuals and teams of academic professionals from various disciplines who collaborate to enhance students' learning in those fields (Swart, et al., 2017). Assuming a learning partnership rather than a conventional instructional connection, SoTL promotes and values the lecturer-student co-construction of knowledge (Chaka, et al., 2022). Similarly, Makura and Toni (2016) assert that a theory of SoTL will only be effective if it fundamentally embodies what is important in education and deserving of defence, which in their argument is a student-centred approach to teaching. In line of this assertion, Pitso (2013) agrees with them that student intellectual autonomy must result from carefully designed active learning experiences that support lifelong learning and enable all students to become more independent thinkers (Makura & Toni, 2016; Pitso, 2013), as there is a growing emphasis on a student-centred vision of university instruction.

SoTL was conceptualised with the idea to be an informed, critical, inquisitive, questioning, and reflecting teacher who focuses on improving their teaching strategies to help their students learn successfully. Furthermore, to share their strategies widely with others to improve teaching and learning in their field and higher education at large. However, according to several reports and studies, many lecturers are not able to employ action research and the scholarship to enhance their teaching methods, which makes the scholarship's goal of enhancing students' learning less successful (Campbell & Neff, 2020; Motala & Menon, 2020; Mpungose, 2020). To improve their own programmes and courses, lecturers are encouraged to conduct a more thorough and critical analysis of student learning through a variety of activities known to SoTL including reflecting on their own teaching methodologies and practices.

Thus, there are still gaps in the ongoing evaluation of the scholarship's influence on higher education when lecturers are not participating in these growth processes. Perhaps the best way to describe it is as an approach that combines scholarly research with any of the intellectual tasks that make up teaching, course design, classroom facilitation, experimenting with new pedagogical concepts, counselling, creating student learning outcomes, and assessing curricula (Harvey, et al., 2016). The purpose of the scholarship is not achieved and the field of teaching and learning scholarship is missed when these activities are not carried out with serious consideration of students' learning and success (Weatherton & Schussler, 2021). SoTL must be perceived as an academic and practice evidence-base from the beginning. Essentially, this concept needs to acknowledge the significance of adopting a critical and research-based approach to education to improve the standing and the calibre of the teaching position relative to research. Against all the backdrop, the study is unique because it seeks to explore the impact of the scholarship of teaching and learning in higher education with the aim of improving student learning success through action research.

Critical Reflective theory as a theoretical framework for enhancing student academic success

The term "reflection" was first used in the 14th century to refer to the return of light from a surface (Reynolds, 2011). To improve students' academic performance, Reynolds (2011) and Strange & Mumford (2005) define the reflection process as considering a topic, concept, or goal. Dewey (1933) is frequently credited with starting the discussion on reflection theory in education by describing it as turning a subject over in the mind and giving it serious consecutive consideration (Leshkovska & Spaseva, 2016). This theory is pertinent to this research study since it actively, persistently, and carefully examines any belief or purported body of knowledge considering its supporting evidence and the conclusions it tends to lead to. Reflective theory, in this case, encourages lecturers to actively engage with students not only in the classroom but also through their publications of their work to support students' academic progress (Olivier et al., 2019). There are two factors that make their SoTL publications important for fostering academic success; firstly, they can address the state of uncertainty, hesitancy, confusion, and mental difficulty that gives rise to thinking; secondly, they act as a means of hunting, searching, and enquiring in order to find information that will dispel uncertainty, settle disputes, and eliminate confusion (Lockhart et al., 2018). Habermas (1971),

as cited by Lockhart et al. (2018), saw reflection as a tool for creating various types of knowledge based on three fundamental interests: emancipatory, technical, and practical. This perspective is crucial when discussing the students' academic success because it directs lecturers to address all the interests of students when trying to help them succeed academically. According to Christie et al. (2015), Mezirow (1990) defined reflection as an analysis of the rationale behind one's beliefs, mainly to direct behaviour and reevaluate the effectiveness of the methods and techniques employed in issue it is solving. Accordingly, reflection starts with a problem that prompts critical reflection, which in turn opens the door to change that may arise from introspection or the pursuit of alternative viewpoints to support academic achievement. More recently, Simper et al. (2023) defined reflection as an exploratory, self-critical process in which lecturers examine how their pedagogical choices affect their situated practice to improve those practices and raise their students' academic success rates.

Expertise in academia is continuously built by careful reflection on teaching experiences rather than merely having experience (Wieser, 2016). Subotzky and Prinsloo (2011) assert that lecturers acquire significant technical information through SoTL in their preparation programmes, but learning by doing happens when they start practicing, therefore, its influence on fostering academic achievement in higher education cannot be disregarded. A cycle of experience, reflection, and improvement facilitates this experiential learning; but ongoing development and progress are impossible without the crucial component of reflection (Cavilla, 2017). Being able to reflect is a powerful sign of having mental control (Cavilla, 2017). This is also evident through SoTL since publications allow academics to evaluate their teaching methods and interactions with students. As a crucial human activity that allows people to recollect their experiences, reflection may help lecturers use SoTL as a tool to improve their academic performance (Subotzky & Prinsloo, 2011).

To learn from experience, academics must think about a portion of teaching and learning and then reimagine, reenact, or recall the experiences, feelings, and triumphs of it (Mpungose, 2023). Mpungose (2023) further defines reflection as the process of analysing what you are doing using skills like feeling, seeing, or noticing; then drawing lessons from what you see, feel, or notice; and ultimately, wisely, even intuitively, modifying your practice. The process of reflecting helps us understand what we have learnt, why we have learnt it, and how that learning increase occurred. Furthermore, reflection is the process of connecting a particular learning increment to a broader learning perspective to comprehend the overall picture. Being

introspective can be helpful for enhancing professional craft and improving student academic performance since it enables academics and students to overcome obstacles by reframing events and contemplating alternate courses of action (Tinto, 2017).

Literature review

Over the past thirty years, there has been much debate over the quality of university teaching and learning as well as the types of instruction that promote effective learning. However, more lately, teaching as scholarship has surpassed teaching alone. A key idea in developing effective teaching methods in higher education and, as a result, raising the standard of student learning is the scholarship of teaching and learning. In attempts of employing the literature to address the study question, the impact of SoTL in promoting student academic success was explored.

The role SoTL in promoting student academic success

Since the concept of teaching and learning scholarship has existed for many years, there are many variations in how it is interpreted and articulated. Despite the differences in interpretations, academics such as Motala and Menon (2020) note that SoTL has the potential to promote students' academic success in higher education if actively utilised. As stated by Naicker et al. (2022), Rice (1991) proposed that the development and use of several distinct elements—"content knowledge" or "synoptic capacity," "pedagogical knowledge," and "pedagogic content knowledge"—should form the basis of SoTL. In ensuring the SoTL's effective impact on students' academic success, Shulman as cited by Motala & Menon (2020), distinguished three types of teaching knowledge in the middle of the 1980s; curricular, pedagogical, and matter knowledge

Building knowledge about teaching requires content knowledge, which is linked to the comprehension of pedagogical information (Motala & Menon, 2020). Pedagogic content knowledge is the information that bridges the gap between pedagogical and content knowledge. Pedagogical content knowledge is more than just the sum of its parts; it is a unique combination of the two. It is essential to academics' capacity to instruct, and with pedagogic topic competence can take risks, adjust methods and techniques that don't seem to be working, and employ other approaches when class dynamics change. To help with a better understanding of a mushroomed knowledge domain, researchers have attempted to unify many aspects of SoTL and presented its models (Bishop-Clark & Dietz-Uhler, 2012). Leibowitz and Bozalek (2018) quote Kreber and Cranton's (2000) paradigm, which states that SoTL includes both learning

about teaching and putting that knowledge into practice, this presents a paradigm that is predicated on the kind of reflection and comprehension that academics can achieve for enhancing the students' academic success.

SoTL positive role on student academic success is influenced by the research outputs; hence academics must use content, process, and premise reflection to reflect on their curricular, instructional, and pedagogical expertise as they progress their teaching research (Moutlana & Moloi, 2014). The main objective of SoTL in higher education, according to Boughey (2011), is to enhance students' learning by increasing the pedagogical content knowledge of academics. Through research on teaching and learning, faculty evaluation and development, graduate student pedagogical and content training, practice, reflection, and codification of teaching, as well as traditional and contextual classroom research, scholars can add to pedagogical content knowledge (Trigwell, 2013). The main role of SoTL should be to enhance academics' pedagogical topic knowledge to enhance students' educational experiences. Enhancing the quality of instruction and learning can be achieved by research in the classroom; hence it is crucial to remember, though, that teaching in higher education is as varied as the fields. This suggests that every subject's investigation will have its own special feature.

Critical reflection in SoTL research

Academics must have an interest in enhancing classroom instruction, and more significantly, they must have the power and capacity to carry out independent research. (Taylor & Boyer, 2020). This contrasts with the perception of academics as knowledge transmitters held by policymakers and those who are ignorant of the day-to-day operations which take place in a lecture hall, placing "lecturers as researchers" or "academics as investigators", this is because academics' individual-based and context-specific tacit knowledge can offer distinctive perspectives for both the teacher community and the academic research community (Hyland, 2016). In an academic-conducted research, reflection is key as Hyland (2016) emphasised how crucial it is for academics to reflect on their methods and incorporate their findings into their developing theories of instruction and learning. In a SoTL research, the cognitive act of reflection has been recognised as an essential element (Myatt et al., 2017; Manarin et al., 2021). For instance, Jen (2021), Miller-Young and Yeo (2015) claim that the action research approach requires a self-reflective spiral of planning, observing, reflecting, and acting, while Dobbins

(2024) points out that a crucial aspect of action research is the collaborative reflection on the connection between the quality of learning and the quality of teaching. However, in all essence, the scientific endeavour mostly depends on reflection in both forms. Nevertheless, without a strong notion of reconstruction and a transformational objective, research undertaken by lecturers runs the risk of missing the important component and remaining focused on routine technical concerns.

The role of action research in enhancing teaching practices

Action Research (AR) enhances teaching practices and student learning outcomes by allowing academics to systematically examine their own classroom practices, identify areas for improvement, implement targeted interventions, collect data to assess effectiveness, and reflect on the results, leading to evidence-based adjustments that better cater to student needs and improve overall learning experiences; essentially bridging the gap between theory and practice in the classroom. AR is a contemplative method of progressive problem solving that is guided by individuals who collaborate with others in groups or as a "community of practice" to enhance their approach to problem solving. For academics, AR offers a systematic way to reflect, collect data, and improve instruction, thus relevant for promoting the student academic success. It starts with a question or observation about teaching practice, followed by data collection, analysis, and reflection. The insights gained can then be used to make informed changes and improvements to your teaching strategies.

AR empowers academics to engage in reflective practice, data-informed decision-making, and continuous improvement through cycles of planning, action, observation, and reflection. By customizing research questions, collaborating with colleagues, and grounding decisions in evidence, AR fosters professional development and improves student outcomes (Tekin & Kotaman, 2013). AR enables academics to take ownership of their practice, ensuring that teaching strategies are effective, relevant, and responsive to the needs of diverse learners within their classrooms and communities.

In the planning phase of action research, academics pinpoint an area for improvement, like student engagement, and devise a detailed plan with timelines and resources (Jensen, et al., 2017). This meticulous approach ensures focused, manageable action steps toward enhancing teaching practices. In this phase, teachers identify specific areas of their teaching practice that

they want to improve. This could be informed by personal observations, student feedback, or larger educational goals. Effective planning involves setting clear objectives, defining research questions, and designing interventions or changes to implement in the classroom. Teachers must also consider factors such as student diversity, classroom dynamics, and available resources during the planning process.

Linking action research process to reflective theory

The goal of reflecting on one's experiences or activities is typically to better understand them or the consequences of such actions in order to improve them in the future; by better understanding these occurrences and habits, this type of introspection enables lecturers to better manage them going forward. For academics in the classroom, the reflective process regularly produces new information that guides their actions. Unfortunately, the knowledge generated by these academics through the reflective process is not always prioritised among the various information sources that lecturers are expected to employ in the classroom. Lecturers are expected to employ formal forms of information, including textbooks, district curricula, teaching standards, content standards, and behavioural programs, among others, to acquire new things and make decisions in the classroom. Despite the importance of these kinds of information, the reflective knowledge that academics generate via their pedagogy is the culmination of these kinds of knowledge as it is applied in the classroom. Therefore, the unique foundation for the formation of reflective knowledge is the activity and implementation of an academic's pedagogy in the classroom.

For academic knowledge to be used and shared across the teaching profession, action research provides a means of formalising it. The creation of knowledge is the focus of research, usually in relation to a concept, idea, phenomena, or subject. Action research generates knowledge about inquiry in practical educational settings because it allows lecturers to learn from their experiences and grow in their careers and personal lives since the Action research's participatory component makes it distinct from other types of educational research.

Methodology

To evaluate how SoTL contributes to students' academic success, this study used a theoretical analysis approach. Kivunja (2018) defined theoretical analysis as scholarly study grounded in

theoretical decoration, analysis, and interpretation. This approach only applies to researchers' attitudes and wishes to understand the phenomenon about the selected theory; it is not typically used in all investigations (Van Breda, 2018). According to Jasso (1988) as cited by Hulland (2020), this strategy can have an impact on research methodology and design, particularly on studies that rely on theoretical sense-making. In researchers' view opinion, the approach being considered is a systematic body of knowledge, with the theoretical and conceptual materials serving as both the research process and the research findings. In other words, the researchers' beliefs, experiences, and reflective reasoning regarding the theory form the basis of the research process, findings, and conclusion. In this paper, researchers make use of theoretical deductions, observations, and supporting literature to apply theoretical analysis, and then subject these to researchers' own subjective, interpretive, and social understanding in order to formulate strong arguments. A comprehensive literature analysis in areas of interest was selected based on a number of criteria, including but not limited to the reflection process, student success, and the principles of scholarship of teaching and learning. The study employed a qualitative methodology and a great deal of secondary material to understand the role of SoTL in promoting the academic performance of the students. Content analysis was used to analyse secondary data, which entailed carefully locating, contextualising, and categorising concepts and themes related to the study title through the analysis of textual material and words (Malobela, 2024). In an attempt to raise awareness of the significance of human rights education in the academic community and public secondary schools, tried-and-true theories ought to be forced and re-established. The ultimate goal was to preserve the field of SoTL and ensure its continued existence in the digital age (Cole, 2022).

Discussion

The role of SoTL is well notable in attempts to enhance student success. Considerable emphasis on product and knowledge advancement in higher learning institutions that openly promote SoTL for their teaching and learning through written, oral, and episodic accounts. However, some academics are being involved in SoTL related activities to get attention and reward, and in the product-driven SoTL, the emphasis of research is on improving one's career and social standing, through the emphasise on research outcomes including publications, conference attendance, grant access, international reputation through social networks, rated scientist positions, reviewer standing, and so forth (Pitso, 2013). For this reason, it is therefore reasonable to assume that this involvement to SoTL creates scholarship of teaching and

learning to be supplementary to already-existing scholarships of application, integration, discovery, and thus, limiting the impact SoTL can have on improving the teaching and learning for improving the student success. Scholarship serves as the foundation for SoTL activities simply because the research on teaching and learning advances the researcher's interests. Similar to the knowledge progress view, this type of SoTL activity aims to contribute to the body of human knowledge as well as the intellectual atmosphere of the university.

In addition to improving the researcher's social and professional standing, the connection between reflection theory and the action research approach to SoTL helps academics incorporate innovative teaching strategies to guarantee that the success rate of students is given priority. It is significant to note that maximising students' learning is viewed as something that can be accomplished in the long run in the higher learning institutions that view SoTL work as directly related to the researcher's rewards. Students' learning and the influence of SoTL on teaching and learning are rather neglected in this approach to SoTL. In addition, Manarin et al (2021) believe that if the SoTL work does not maximise students' learning and influence on its practice, it is incomplete.

Therefore, it is reasonable to infer that, despite its optimism, the role of SoTL on teaching and learning to enhance the student academic success is still typically weak but remain hopeful. It is possible to conclude, given the overall literature, that SoTL is more focused on the researchers' interests than on influencing teaching and learning methods. Furthermore, it might be argued that the term "SoTL" is occasionally employed without being based on the body of existing literature, as is the case with mobile sessions and SoTL conferences. The results of the literature indicate that SoTL has a great deal of potential to influence practice and change how teaching and learning are carried out, but it requires a solid foundation in SoTL literature and practice. It can be fairly concluded that the use of SoTL to alter teaching and learning is still in its early phases based on the transformation efforts that the literature is alluding which are at the awareness and advocacy level.

Conclusion

This paper explored the role of SoTL on enhancing student academic success through action research. It argues that academics' inability to actively participate in SoTL impact on their ability to engage in action research for enhancing their students' academic success. The process

of reflecting on their teaching to enhance students' academic success through action research remains a difficult task to engage in, as a result, there is no improvement on the part of academics in enhancing the success in their classrooms. The university's effort to assist academics responsible for high impact modules are less effective since academics do not reflect on their teaching, thus not being able identify their area of concern where they can be assisted to approach the struggling modules to enhance their students' academic success. The inability to identify the areas of concern lead to high rate of struggling students and which also affects the university throughput and affect the financial side of the university. The paper argues that academics can have a greater influence on their students' academic success if they become actively involved in SoTL. This paper contributes to the continuing discussion on the relevancy of Action Research and SoTL on enhancing students' success.

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