

## Investigating Common Problems of Practice: Connecting High School and University Faculty through SoTL

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### ***Elon Teaching and Learning Partnership***

Prominent authors on teaching and learning at the K-12 level (Going Public With Our Teaching, 2005) and at the University level (Gale, 2008) recently have argued that collaborative communities of inquiry will allow participants to address deeper pedagogical questions and contribute more meaningfully to the collective understanding of teaching and learning. Our project began with the question: What happens when teacher-scholars come together across disciplines and across teaching levels to create a collaborative community of inquiry? We report here on the initial progress of the first cohort of 15 high school teachers and university professors in the Elon Teaching and Learning Partnership, funded by the Arthur Vining Davis Foundations. Our participants teach in the humanities, social and natural sciences: all reported that they feel very confident in their abilities as teachers but almost all were SoTL novices and reported low initial confidence in their ability to carry out classroom research.

<b>ETLP Timeline</b>	
<i>Spring 2008</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• recruit and select participants</li> <li>• 2 whole group meetings</li> </ul>	<i>Fall 2008</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• initiation of projects</li> <li>• 2 small group meetings</li> </ul>
<i>Summer Institute 2008</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• form small groups</li> <li>• discuss research questions &amp; methods</li> <li>• search professional literature</li> <li>• consult with guest scholars</li> <li>• IRB instruction</li> </ul>	<i>Winter/Spring 2008-09</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• small groups meet monthly</li> </ul>
	<i>May 2009</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• present results at showcase</li> </ul>

The following preliminary conclusions are based on interviews with participants, observations of group work, and participant work products (drafts of research proposals, reflective journal entries, & IRB applications).

### ***How do the research questions evolve?***

The participants have thus far developed interesting and workable research questions, focusing on transfer, problem solving, critical thinking, writing, metacognition, academic service learning, and student-student interactions. Initial questions were generally broad, many implied a need for experimental manipulation and examination of differential outcomes. After the 3 day institute, questions were more specific and more likely to be oriented toward a detailed examination of student learning in context, although some are focused on examining the impact of new methods, activities, and materials.

### ***How do methods evolve?***

Methods were a big focus of the 3 day institute. Ideas for methods tended to be derived from research questions and influenced by group discussion and conversations with guest scholars. Science-trained participants needed to be convinced that they could use qualitative analysis of student work, reflective journals, & think-alouds.

## ***What difference does it make that we do this together?***

Our central research question examines the effect on participants and their work of working in collaborative groups across teaching levels (high school teachers and college professors), across disciplines (social and natural sciences and humanities), and across classroom research/SoTL experience levels. Gale (2008) suggests that collaborative investigation can take many forms, depending on whether researchers are working in common, connected or comparable settings and asking common, connected, or comparable questions. Because of their non-shared settings, participants could not assume that others knew what happened in their classrooms. As they described their individual problems of practice to each other, they needed to be increasingly explicit, bringing greater clarity to their own thinking and to their colleagues' understanding. In one of the three groups, the realization that their problems were common across disciplines and teaching levels was a powerful influence, and, over the course of the institute, their projects became more deliberately focused on comparable and connected questions tailored to each of their unique teaching and learning contexts.

## ***Continuing Questions***

We have preliminary evidence that it is possible to create a collegial, productive, community of inquiry across the traditional boundaries between secondary and higher education and across disciplines. Based on self-report, the participants, who were already confident, experienced teachers, have become more confident in themselves as classroom researchers (from 2.9/5 on a Likert-type scale prior to the institute to 3.9/5 at the end of the institute). The group discussions and degree of coordination of projects indicate the participants are coming to view their individual "problems of practice" as exemplars of broader, deeper pedagogical questions, and have come to expect that research is a collaborative activity. In the upcoming months we will look into these issues more closely. We will also ask:

1. How do the research projects continue to change over time?
2. How does involvement in classroom research influence the participant's approach to teaching and learning more generally?
3. How and when do participants "go public" with their research?
4. What impact do the individual projects have on the participants' home departments and schools?
5. How are they viewed and valued by their supervisors?
6. How does degree of prior SoTL/classroom research experience influence the participants' experience within the community of scholars?

## ***For further reading***

Gale, R. A. (2008) Points without limits: individual inquiry, collaborative investigation, and collective scholarship. In E. Robertson & L. Nilson (Eds.). *To Improve the Academy: Resources for faculty, instructional and organizational development, Vol. 26.* (pp. 39-52). Professional and Organisational Network in Higher Education (POD), San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Hatch, T., Ahmed, D., Lieberman, A., Faigenbaum, D., White, M. E., & Mace, D. P. (Eds.) (2005). *Going public with our teaching: An Anthology of Practice.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Hubbard, R. S., & Power, B.M., (2003). *The art of classroom inquiry: A handbook for teacher-researchers.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

McKinney, K. (2007). *Enhancing learning through the scholarship of teaching and learning.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.