Conversations on SoTL in Asia: Highlights from the 2nd SoTL-Asia Conference, 21-22 Sept 2017

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With the aim of bringing together academic teachers and others in higher education interested in supporting student learning, especially those in Asia, the inaugural SoTL-Asia Conference 2017 was organised by the National University of Singapore.

A/Prof Chng Huang Hoon, Associate Provost (Undergraduate Education), shared in her welcome address that the key aim of this conference was for participants to gain a better understanding of the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL), in particular, how we as educators can begin to think about and do SoTL in our own classrooms in Asia (video).

“...it is my hope that we leave [SoTL-Asia 2017] with an understanding of what SoTL can mean for ourselves, and how we may begin to think about and do SoTL in our own classrooms in Asia.”

A/Prof Chng Huang Hoon giving the welcome address.

Over 60 participants representing universities in Singapore, Malaysia, Hong Kong, Japan, and the Middle East took part in the two-day conference from 21 to 22 September 2017.
The conversation began with Professor Peter Felten’s enlightening talk, which invited participants to consider three fundamental questions:

1. What is SoTL, or more specifically, what is SoTL Asia?
2. What is SoTL for? What works?
3. What does SoTL do? What is it meant to do?

Prof Felten stressed how contexts shape inquiries. Through examples from different disciplinary contexts, he showcased what quality SoTL looks like and how such inquiries have had an impact on student learning. He then requested participants to think about what SoTL meant in their respective contexts and introduced the idea of student partnership in SoTL inquiries.

“**What happens if we consider SoTL from a different assumption, that is, we view SoTL as community-oriented practice instead of as individual practice?**”

Professor Peter Felten, from Elon University, asked participants to think about how they would define SoTL in their own teaching contexts.

The conversation continued with a thought-provoking talk by A/Prof Peter Looker of Nanyang Technological University, who argued that SoTL, which started in the West, must be contextualized. Teaching, he said, is neither a static process nor an isolated behaviour; rather, it is a dynamic interaction of social acts informed by cultural traditions. During his talk, A/Prof Looker gave examples that illustrated the thought patterns between both cultures that further supported his argument for contextualization. While the contexts, be they cultural or disciplinary, may be different, A/Prof Looker believed that theories and principles are the links that can translate rather than generalize across cultures and disciplines.
In the next session, Prof Grahame Bilbow of Hong Kong University, provided insights into his experience in facilitating SoTL at the institutional level through what he termed a “modified community of practice”.

Prof Bilbow stressed the importance of meso-level dialogues in facilitating SoTL, since important decisions about teaching usually happen at this level. Course leaders, coordinators, and department management teams have a high degree of autonomy to shape the directions of the curricula and courses. Recognizing this diversity, Prof Bilbow highlighted the need for international benchmarks to maintain the quality of pedagogical professionalism. He shared criteria and standards of the UK Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF) and a course where he engaged department heads and other academic leaders at his university in SoTL work using the UKPSF. Amidst this, Prof Bilbow underscored the importance of aligning value, content, and context.

“To what extent can external benchmarks (e.g. UKPSF) scaffold SoTL dialogue when academics submit their teaching portfolios for evaluation?”

Prof Grahame Bilbow: SoTL enables student learning to be taken seriously and can help enhance teaching and learning in an institution.
In two parallel sessions that exemplified doing SoTL in different contexts, Prof Toru Iiyoshi and Ms Jeanette Choy led a discussion on Technology Enhanced Teaching and Learning (TETL), while A/Prof Wu Siew Mei and Dr Adrian Michael Lee shared examples of SoTL in the disciplines.

To bring the SoTL-Asia dialogue to the next level, A/Prof Johan Geertsema, Director of CDTL, again emphasized a key theme of the event, namely the importance of inclusivity and respect for diversity.
“If the main goal of engaging in SoTL is higher quality teaching in order to enhance student learning, then we need to be sensitive to the different disciplinary and also cultural contexts within which teaching takes place. Second, with due consideration of these contexts, we need to foster concrete inquiry by academics into their direct effect on student learning and encourage them to share the outcomes of their investigations through appropriate platforms such as the Asian Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning.”

A/Prof Johan Geertsema: inclusiveness and mutual respect for diversity are key to engaging in SoTL.

**From the Perspective of a Student Journalist**

As a student, attending SoTL-Asia was inspiring. It showcased the professional passion and zeal of dedicated educators. Though coming from a diverse array of disciplines, all participants showed an honest, genuine interest to develop their pedagogical skills.

Questions were raised and issues were tackled; there was also the recognition that there are cultural differences between the East and West, which has an impact on teaching practice. More importantly though, is the epiphany that teaching is not a static process; rather, it is a dynamic, organic process that requires constant adaptation to acclimatize to cultural differences. Indeed, it is the fundamentals, or the underlying mechanisms, that are to be appreciated.

**About the Author**

Dean TIN is second-year undergraduate at the National University of Singapore, specializing in Life Science. Apart from writing, he enjoys the finer things in life: reading, fine dining, and jazz.