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PROJECT TITLE: SoTL and Sexual Assault: Sundering Silos

Abstract

Among those engaged in the multi-disciplinary work of responding to sexual violence is a persistent problem caused by the “silo effect” – institutions working on the same issue but in isolation from one another. This means that important information is not being shared among professionals, leading already victimized people to navigate foreign systems, often resulting in secondary victimization. This study examines how two scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) concepts, “signature pedagogies” and “threshold concepts,” specifically, can be used to promote cross-disciplinary teaching and learning, community-building, collaboration, and the establishment of shared education and research priorities among institutions tasked with responding to sexual violence. Influenced by the “connected knowing” produced by service-learning approaches, in a series of monthly gatherings, this research brings together victim-facing practitioners (e.g., in mental health, law, medicine, and law enforcement, etc.) from on and off campus, faculty who study sexual assault, and members of the student body to engage in teaching and learning activities that build upon these concepts to promote cross-disciplinary conversation, community-building, and collaboration. Throughout the series, active learning exercises oriented around these concepts will function as catalysts to accomplish these objectives in a study driven by the overarching question: How can signature pedagogies and threshold concepts serve to diminish disciplinary silos and help establish transdisciplinary education and research priorities? This study is fuelled by the notion that use of these concepts facilitates important teaching and learning opportunities extending beyond postsecondary classrooms that can transform knowledge-sharing relationships on the front-lines of sexual violence.

1. Grounded in Context

This unique scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) project studies how teaching and learning concepts can be used to address a pervasive and pressing social issue. Specifically, it examines how “signature pedagogies” and “threshold concepts” could promote cross-disciplinary teaching and learning opportunities, engendering community-building and knowledge sharing among various institutions tasked with responding to sexual violence.

This unorthodox approach to SoTL is informed by our team’s immersion in the teaching and learning world (as Department Head, a SoTL postdoc, and an inquiry-based *Global Challenges* series instructor, respectively) and our collective interest in sexual violence-related studies and issues. One member of our research team is a sexual violence researcher and instructor who, as part of her education and employment at the University of Calgary and in the local community, has worked with a spectrum of victim-facing practitioners, and has workshopped, lectured, and taught about sexual violence on and off campus [1]. Evident in this work and pronounced in the literature are

troubles caused by the “silo effect” — institutions working on the same issue but in isolation, detached from and uninformed by one another [2]. In cases of sexual violence, the silo effect means that when working with people who have been sexually assaulted by others, victim services, policing, medical, and legal professionals work alongside, but not necessarily with, one another. Victimized persons are therefore left struggling to navigate multiple systems, often resulting in secondary victimization [3]. This study is motivated by the assertion that the silo effect can be significantly diminished by deploying these conceptual SoTL tools.

This research consists of facilitating and studying a series of multi-disciplinary monthly gatherings that invite 25 victim-facing practitioners from on and off campus (e.g., counsellors, law enforcement/campus security, medical personnel, law, etc.), faculty who study sexual assault, and members of the student body to learn with and from one another, culminating in the collaborative establishment of transdisciplinary education and research priorities. Research participants will collectively develop priorities for education and research that *all* future victim-facing practitioners should be exposed to, no matter what their disciplinary training. This aim is motivated by growing recognition of transdisciplinarity as “an epistemological innovation to foster multi-perspectivity, context-sensitivity and stakeholder involvement” [8]. During the snowball recruitment and informed consent processes, those interested in participating will be asked to come to gatherings curious, reflective, committed to preserving confidentiality, and interested in mutual learning. Participants will be asked to consider knowledge not as hierarchical, but instead as a framework in which multiple forms of knowledge – whether professional, academic, and/or lived experience – are valued equally, not in spite but *because* of their differences. This approach is informed by Palmer’s “communities of truth” [4], a view of knowledge as interactively produced by “knowers” with valuable, if divergent, kinds of knowledge gathered around a subject. This kind of approach promotes “interdisciplinary cognizance,” sparking understandings of interconnected relationships “between subject areas that were previously disconnected” [5]. This series is influenced by the “connected knowing” [6] produced by service-learning approaches, understood broadly as integration between instruction and community engagement in action and reflection to achieve deeper understanding and effective community action [7].

2. Scholarly Inquiry into Teaching and Learning

The research questions that drive this project include:

1. With guided use of signature pedagogies and threshold concepts as a teaching and learning framework, what and how will learners from these various disciplines teach one another, and what will they learn from each other? [8]
2. What individual and collaborative reflections about multi-disciplinary work are opened up by use of “signature pedagogies” and “threshold concepts” as teaching and learning instruments?
3. What transdisciplinary education and research priorities will participants collectively identify? What teaching and learning tools will they draw upon as they generate these priorities?

Research indicates that even collaborative multidisciplinary efforts among institutions responding to sexual violence are fractured by doubts about the expertise and credibility of team members approaching this work from other disciplines [11]. The promotion of cross-disciplinary teaching, learning, community-building, and collaboration drive this study so that the disciplinary silos that prevent knowledge sharing can be diminished and ideally, eradicated. SoTL’s multi-disciplinarity means that the exercises and lessons from it are uniquely attentive to the kinds of challenges that can emerge in cross-disciplinary efforts. SoTL scholar, Janice Miller-Young, for example, asserts that multidisciplinary collaboration “is a practice that requires time, energy, patience, and persistence. Conflict and tension may be unavoidable but have such potential to create new insights”, and accordingly, we should recognize the value of “such difficult and risky work” [12]. Dzidic et al. [13] indicate that SoTL’s “multidisciplinary engagement and focus ... based on mutual respect and support, and flexibility through empathy have fostered successes ... characterized by equity, collaboration, genuine participation and empowerment.”

In studying the facilitation of multidisciplinary engagement, we draw on literature documenting the teaching and learning successes achieved from partnerships between professional and academic institutions. Usher [14] observes that professional institutions and universities benefit from collaborative efforts: university involvement can promote reflective practices that help surface and challenge tacit understandings flowing from “repetitive experiences of specialized practice.” When organizations work with university educators and students, they create significant benefits in their own approaches to learning and problem solving. In these cases, “the scholarship of

teaching and learning may best be thought of not as discrete projects and investigations, but as a set of principles and practices that bring people together and energize their collective work.”

3. Activities Aligned with Inquiry

Teaching and Learning Activities

Participants will gather on a monthly basis for six months, for three to four hours at a time. As an incentive to share their time with us, parking costs will be covered and these will be catered events where participants can literally and figuratively “break bread” together. Early in the series, participants will be introduced to “signature pedagogies” [9] and “threshold concepts” [10] notions that describe discipline-specific teaching methods and ideas fundamental to a discipline, respectively. In multidisciplinary groups, they will share with one another how various ways of teaching and difficult concepts central to their disciplines inform the way they do their sexual assault-related work and intra-disciplinary training. This early focus upon having participants articulate their disciplinary footing is intended to facilitate their identification of the bridges between, and the barriers that hinder, the establishment of common priorities. As the series progresses, participants will be invited to work through sexual assault case studies, from their own disciplinary and/or experiential standpoint, and by adopting the imagined standpoint of another, to promote dialogue about the demands and challenges faced by others responding to sexual assault from different disciplinary perspectives.

Data Gathered

Participant-Generated Data Informed by the value of reflective practice pronounced in service-learning literatures, exercises will be followed by reflective prompts asking participants to describe their learning experiences. Sturgill and Motley (2014) observe that reflection allows for people to integrate new concepts within what they already know, facilitate connections and deeper understandings of material, and assess assumptions. They cite Russo and Ford who “describe reflection as one of the fundamental components of the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL)” [6]. Reflections will include “minute papers” [15], adapted “critical incident questionnaires” [16], and exercises like periodic journaling [17] to document participants’ learning and how it has impacted their perceptions of multi-disciplinary collaboration. These reflective exercises constitute one of four forms of data generated in this study.

Ethnographic Data A second type of data gathered for this study is inspired by Miller-Young’s recommendation that these multidisciplinary, collaborative teaching and learning processes be documented via ethnography [12]. Ethnographic methods (such as observation and immersive fieldwork), allow for the collection of rich, detailed and “thick” [18] contextualized data in collaboration with participants [19]. Using ethnographic methods to observe and document the interactions between participants, we will provide an interpretive account of the interactive work that participants engage in [20]. A key point of intersection with SoTL is ethnography’s assertion that there is powerful social activity that can be discerned from everyday experiences [18] and that this can be understood through the observation of ordinary understandings held by study participants about their experience, conduct, and thought [21].

Transcribed Recordings of Select Activities Participant conversations, as they occur in the context of select activities will also be recorded, transcribed, and analyzed. These recordings will capture participants’ descriptions of various aspects of their own and of collaborative work and how these constructions might shift over time [22]. Analyzing how people engage in cross-disciplinary conversation yields important insights, since talk can position this or that approach as untenable, while constructing this or that idea as beneficial to all. Looking at these exchanges can therefore point to discursive entry points and bottlenecks in multidisciplinary collaboration [23].

Graphic Recording Each gathering will conclude with a collective reflection exercise that will be documented by a graphic recorder. These illustrated reflections will visually document, in real time, collectively generated evidence of the important collaborative work undertaken in this study.

The final form of research data consists of collectively established transdisciplinary education and research priorities. These priorities will also be represented by the graphic recorder – both to facilitate neutral representation of the collective priority determinations, and because visually represented documents of this sort invite participants to continue to revisit them [24].

Schedule

In terms of both a monthly schedule and our analysis, we will facilitate these gatherings over a six-month period and have budgeted for two months of preparation, and ten months for analysis and dissemination. These data will be examined in accordance with general qualitative research practices [25] and will involve iterative periods of review, reflection, recording, and revisiting where, as the data is generated in its multiple forms, we will oscillate between analysis, explanation, and theory construction [26].

4. Impact & Knowledge-Sharing

With this project, we endeavour to accomplish three outcomes. We will facilitate the collective development of transdisciplinary education and research priorities that will form the basis of subsequent sexual violence teaching and learning related training and studies, co-constructed and endorsed by those on the front lines. Second, we aim to increase understanding about teaching and learning activities that promote cross-disciplinary and cross-experiential conversation and collaboration, particularly among groups with a documented history of conflict and isolation. Finally — and not insignificantly — the structure of the research itself works toward undermining the silo effect by promoting community-building via regular, low-stakes, cross-disciplinary and cross-experiential gatherings and opportunities to reflect upon this shared work both individually and collectively.

The outcomes of this research will be disseminated locally, within the University of Calgary, by sharing them with UToday and the Gauntlet and in various Taylor Institute workshops. We will make our work known to relevant audiences beyond the University of Calgary by sharing our work with local media outlets and seeking publication of our work in both academic (e.g., peer-reviewed journals) and non-academic (e.g., on open access sites) settings, and we plan to present it at relevant local and international conferences.

The impact of this work will be sustained beyond the funding period, both in the tangible transdisciplinary education and research priorities that will inform future training and studies, and in the teaching and learning opportunities that participants will have experienced and left with, that will, ideally, carry over into their practices outside of the series.

5. Collaborating with Students

We have budgeted for 75 “Student Research Assistant” hours to create room, once the gatherings have finished, to invite a few student participants to also become paid, co-inquirers, welcomed to participate in analysis and dissemination of the research. This will further the teaching and learning aims of this study by creating opportunities for our research team to expand students’ research participant experiences into opportunities to become involved in a sizeable, local research project, growing and contributing analytic insights in this unique and innovative teaching and learning study.

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Ethics

☒ Ethics certification is required, and a draft completed.