

Short Communication



Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Health Professions Education: Triggers, Drivers, Accelerators and Chaos

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Abstract

Background: The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) in Health Professions Education (HPE) has evolved into a multidisciplinary field emphasizing evidence-based, reflective educational practices. SoTL is recognized as essential for educational improvement but is often initiated in response to educators' curiosity, perceived gaps in student engagement, and external events that force rapid adaptation.

Methods: A review of existing literature was conducted to identify factors that initiate, drive, and accelerate the implementation of SoTL in HPE, and to explore the resulting complexity or "chaos" that can ensue from these efforts.

Results: The development of SoTL in HPE is shaped by four key categories: triggers, drivers, accelerators, and chaos. Triggers include a desire to enhance student outcomes and responses to crises like the pandemic. Drivers consist of institutional curriculum reforms and opportunities for scholarly collaboration. Accelerators encompass strategies such as integrating SoTL into promotion criteria, providing funding, faculty development, and fostering communities of practice. However, the process can also produce chaos, as external shocks and inherent educational complexity demand adaptability, resilience, and creativity from educators.

Conclusion: Successfully advancing SoTL in health professions requires intentional cultivation of supportive institutional cultures, investment in professional development, and valuing educational scholarship. Acknowledging both the structured and chaotic aspects of educational environments better prepares educators to innovate and improve learning outcomes, ultimately benefitting the broader healthcare field.

Introduction

The scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) in health professions education (HPE) has emerged as a vibrant and essential field, reflecting a shift toward evidence-based and reflective educational practices. Over recent decades, SoTL has evolved from traditional HPE into a multidisciplinary domain that draws from both the health sciences and educational research.¹ It emphasizes systematic inquiry into teaching and learning, encouraging educators to investigate, document, and share insights that enhance student outcomes and professional practice.² Central to SoTL is the commitment to public dissemination and critical peer review, fostering a culture of collaboration and continuous improvement. Contemporary frameworks, such as those outlined in AMEE Guide No. 142, advocate for a more inclusive definition of scholarship, recognizing diverse forms of scholarly engagement and impact within HPE.³ This ongoing evolution underscores the field's dedication to advancing teaching excellence and preparing future health professionals for the complexities of modern healthcare.^{1,3} The SoTL has become a powerful catalyst

for change in HPE, although its development has been far from straightforward.⁴ The landscape is shaped by a complex interplay of triggers, drivers, accelerators, and, at times, chaos. As we reflect on the recent disruptions and innovations in higher education, it is timely to examine how these elements interact to shape the future of SoTL in HPE.

Materials and Methods

To obtain the most important articles that address the topic under study, the author conducted an extensive search in reputable sources such as Scopus, PubMed, and Google Scholar. The search was performed using keywords such as "Scholarship of Teaching and Learning", "Educational Scholarship", "Health Professions Education", "Medical Education", "Triggers", "Drivers", "Driving forces", "Accelerators", and "Chaos". Ultimately, 17 articles, mostly published in the last ten years, were reviewed.

Results

A review of the literature showed that achieving SoTL in

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HPE requires triggers, driving forces, and accelerators, and ultimately, its implementation can lead to chaos. Therefore, the results of the study are presented in four categories as follows.

Triggers: What Sparks SoTL Engagement?

SoTL is often ignited by a sense of curiosity and a desire to improve student outcomes. For many educators, the initial trigger is a recognition of gaps in student engagement or learning, or a personal experience of teaching that prompts deeper inquiry. The COVID-19 pandemic, for example, served as a global trigger, forcing educators to rapidly adapt to online modalities and re-examine their teaching practices.⁵ This disruption highlighted the need for flexibility, adaptability, and a willingness to embrace new roles as both teachers and learners.

Other common triggers include:

- Institutional mandates for curriculum reform.⁶
- Student feedback indicates unmet needs.⁷
- Exposure to new pedagogical theories or technologies.⁸
- Professional development opportunities that encourage reflective practice.⁹

These triggers often push educators out of their disciplinary comfort zones and into the realm of SoTL, where the focus shifts from content delivery to evidence-based exploration of teaching and learning processes.

Drivers: Sustaining the SoTL Journey

Once engaged, several drivers sustain and deepen SoTL involvement. Chief among these is the pursuit of improved educational outcomes—not just for students, but for educators themselves.¹⁰ The collaborative nature of SoTL, which often involves interdisciplinary teams, provides a sense of community and shared purpose that can be highly motivating.

Key drivers include:

- Institutional support and recognition of SoTL as legitimate scholarship.¹¹
- Access to professional development and mentorship.⁴
- Opportunities for collaboration and dissemination of findings.¹²
- The intrinsic satisfaction is derived from seeing tangible improvements in student learning and well-being.¹³

However, these drivers are not always present. Many SoTL scholars report feeling isolated, undervalued, or constrained by institutional cultures that prioritize disciplinary research over pedagogical innovation. Overcoming these barriers requires intentional efforts to foster supportive environments and reward systems that value SoTL contributions.⁴

Accelerators: Catalysts for Change

Accelerators are the factors that propel SoTL forward, often transforming isolated efforts into broader institutional or

systemic change. The pandemic, while chaotic, acted as a powerful accelerator by necessitating rapid innovation and flexibility in teaching.⁵ SoTL scholars, already accustomed to navigating uncertainty and complexity, were well-positioned to lead these changes.

Other accelerators include:

- The development of communities of practice that share resources and expertise.¹⁴
- Strategic professional development programs focused on SoTL methodologies.¹⁵
- Institutional policies that embed SoTL into promotion and tenure criteria.¹¹
- Access to funding and resources for educational research and innovation.¹⁵

These accelerators not only enhance the quality and impact of SoTL work but also help to legitimize it within the broader academic community.

Chaos: Navigating Complexity and Uncertainty

Despite the presence of triggers, drivers, and accelerators, the path of SoTL is often marked by chaos. The complexity of educational environments, the diversity of student needs, and the unpredictability of external events (such as global pandemics) create a landscape that is anything but orderly. As Regehr aptly noted, education research is less like rocket science and more akin to chaos theory—nonlinear, unpredictable, and deeply contextual.¹⁶

This chaos can be both a challenge and an opportunity. On one hand, it can lead to frustration, burnout, and resistance to change. On the other hand, it fosters resilience, creativity, and a willingness to experiment with new approaches. SoTL scholars, by embracing the messiness of teaching and learning, are uniquely equipped to generate rich, context-sensitive understandings that drive meaningful change.¹⁷

Discussion

This review highlights the dynamic interplay of triggers, drivers, accelerators, and chaos in shaping the SoTL within HPE. Triggers such as institutional reforms, student feedback, and disruptive events like the COVID-19 pandemic prompt educators to critically examine and innovate their teaching practices, often moving beyond traditional paradigms.⁵⁻⁷ These initial sparks are sustained by drivers including institutional support, professional development, and the intrinsic motivation to enhance both student and educator outcomes.^{4,11,13} However, the journey is frequently challenged by insufficient recognition and support for SoTL, underscoring the need for cultural and structural change within academic institutions.

Accelerators—such as communities of practice, strategic faculty development, and policy integration—can rapidly propel SoTL initiatives from isolated efforts to widespread educational transformation.^{11,14,15} The pandemic, while chaotic, exemplified how external shocks can act as powerful accelerators, fostering adaptability and

innovation among educators. Yet, the inherent complexity and unpredictability of educational environments mean that chaos is an ever-present factor, demanding resilience and creative problem-solving from SoTL scholars.¹⁷ Embracing this “productive chaos” enables the generation of context-sensitive insights that drive meaningful, lasting change.

In sum, advancing SoTL in HPE requires intentional efforts to nurture supportive cultures, invest in ongoing professional development, and recognize the value of educational scholarship. By acknowledging and leveraging both the order and chaos inherent in this field, institutions can better prepare educators and learners for the evolving demands of healthcare.

Recommendations for Medical Education

To harness the full potential of SoTL in HPE, this study proposes the following:

- *Foster institutional cultures:* Develop environments that value and reward SoTL equally with disciplinary research, providing time, resources, and recognition for educational inquiry.
- *Support professional development:* Offer sustained mentorship, communities of practice, and opportunities for skill development in SoTL methodologies.
- *Encourage flexibility and reflection:* Promote adaptive teaching practices and reflective inquiry, especially in times of uncertainty and change.
- *Prioritize well-being:* Recognize the impact of SoTL on both educator and student well-being, and integrate these considerations into educational policy and practice.

Conclusion

The SoTL in HPE is a dynamic, evolving field shaped by a constellation of triggers, drivers, accelerators, and chaos. By acknowledging and embracing this complexity, we can better support educators in their pursuit of excellence and innovation, ultimately enhancing the learning experiences and outcomes for all.

Competing Interests

The author declares no competing interest.

Ethical Approval

Ethical approval was not obtained and is not applicable for this study.

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