Constructive friction? Exploring patterns between Educational Research and The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

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ABSTRACT: While educational research (EdR) and the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) are overlapping fields there remains considerable friction between the two. Shulman, (2011, p. 5), recounts a situation when an EdR colleague accused him "of contributing to the bastardization of the field by encouraging faculty members who were never trained to conduct educational or social science research to engage in studies of teaching and learning in their fields.". Miller-Young & Yeo (2015) argue that defining SoTL as a field independent of education has created unnecessary tensions as there are more similarities than differences. However, they also maintain that SoTL scholars could benefit from a better understanding of EdR theories and methods. So what underpins differences between each of these fields and how might they be explained? What patterns can be identified in the conceptualisation of SoTL and EdR? This study explores empirical, interview-based viewpoints from new and experienced SoTL-ers and educational researchers respectively. Participants were purposefully selected, drawn from attendees at two conferences in 2015: Euro-SOTL and EARLI (The European Association for Research on Learning and Instruction). In analysing the material some aspects have come forward as central: community membership and governance, scope and purpose of inquiry, and intended recipients of inquiry results. Some dimensions therefore stand out as crucial in identifying patterns within and between the two communities: what and who determines the value of the contribution to the field and why it is valuable. This empirical study is intended to deepen understanding about the relative attributes of either community in order to advance understanding and further develop fruitful and constructive inter-relationships.

1   BACKGROUND

While educational research (EdR) and the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning are overlapping areas there remains considerable friction between the two. Lee Shulman, a well-known advocate for SoTL, recounts a situation when a colleague in EdR accused him "of contributing to the bastardization of the field by encouraging faculty members who were never trained to conduct educational or social science research to engage in studies of teaching and learning in their fields." (Shulman 2011, p. 5).

This quote illustrates a critique frequently voiced in the literature by scholars in EdR. Macfarlane (2011) declares that SoTL "has resulted in work which is low in quality, lacks theorisation and often fails to draw on, or even acknowledge, a substantial existing body of relevant literature on teaching in higher education" (p. 128). Kanuka (2011) notes that many "education academics are concerned that SoTL is eroding the scholarship in their field of study" (p. 2). She continues by advising SoTL-scholars with a disciplinary background other than EdR to "take the time to learn about education research traditions, the extensive corpus of literature in teaching and learning in higher education that exists—not the least of which are theories of learning—and conduct SoTL in an informed manner, ensuring the scholarship stays in the scholarship of teaching and learning" (p. 9). Boshier (2009) goes as far as to claim that "SoTL is anti-intellectual and located in a narrow neoliberalism" (p. 13) and doubts whether SoTL is a worthwhile use of time and resources.

Both EdR and SoTL are in the same field; the field of higher education research. They are both making contributions to this field. Clegg (2012) claims that higher education is an "adjoining area" (p. 671). She describes the area as inhabited by various communities of practice where EdR can be seen as one, SoTL another, academic development a third. The situation can be described as an area where the relationships between the various communities are either in the making or under reconstruction. This process is arguably harmful for the field of higher education research since it becomes unclear to people outside what value they should attach to the claims made. The field speaks with many voices and these voices have not agreed upon how to coordinate what is being said.

In such a situation, conflict is more likely to appear than not. The boundaries between the communities become areas of friction and the criticism offered is coloured by the premises of the community formulating them. Therefore, it is important to listen to voices from both sides cautiously. In the interests of exploring these differences we examine the issue further from a data-driven perspective. The study we present examines how academics conceive EdR and SoTL and what characterises the nature of either tradition.

Our goal in this study is to provide some empirically grounded insight into conceptions of both areas and related approaches to engaging in either tradition.

2   METHOD

We conducted an interview-based study to examine variations in academics' conceptions of the scholarship of teaching and learning and of educational research. That is, we were concerned with their beliefs about what constitutes EdR or SoTL. Purposive sampling (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011) was used to identify and interview ten participants from the SoTL community and ten from the EdR community. These were drawn from the EuroSoTL and EARLI conferences in 2015 respectively, as they were deemed to attract attendees (largely in Europe) who would identify themselves in each of these communities. The sample for each group had five experienced and five novice academics in the respective communities. In total 20 interviews were conducted by the four researchers.

Community	No of experienced respondents	No of novice respondents
SoTL	5 (SoTLe)	5 (SoTLj)
EdR	5 (EdRe)	5 (EdRj)

Table 1. Research design.

2.1 Interview protocol

The participants were invited by email to participate in a 30-minute interview while at the conference, or where this was not possible, they were interviewed later by Skype. The interviewees received a consent form to sign, prior to the interview, indicating that the data collected would be ethically and responsibly managed and that all their contributions and details about their home institution would be anonymised. The interview focused on three central themes: the first two were about establishing their conceptions (beliefs) about SoTL and ER. The final theme was about their perceived identity in relation to the community that they identify with. The following is a list of questions that guided the interviews.

1. How would you describe yourself (identity) – in relation to this community (SoTL or EdR)?
2. What is good EdR– how would describe it /recognise it/ what are the components?
3. What is good SoTL – how would you describe it /recognise it/ what are the component?
4. You came to this conference, what motivated you to do that?
5. Have you also engaged in the "the other"? If you have been to a SoTL/EdR conference, what motivated you to do that?
6. What are your intentions when you engage in Ed Research/ SoTL?
7. What do you see as the difference between Ed Research and SoTL?

3   RESULTS

The interviews were digitally recorded and later transcribed by an independent transcriber. Four researchers independently analysed the data using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This process involved each researcher independently reading each transcript and gathering themes they found into the data. The four researchers then exchanged analysis and met for discussion. From that, overarching themes were developed and each researcher then reanalysed the data again independently to determine whether the themes formed an overarching framework that could usefully categorise the data. These themes were found to be robust in framing the findings in the study. The themes from the first step are illustrated in Table 2. In this paper we discuss the foremost central themes that distinguish the two communities. They are: membership, purpose, scope, and beneficiaries. Other themes that appeared but will require further analysis encompass areas such as sphere of influence and the anticipated impact and the aspiration of the inquiry.

During the second stage of the analysis we found that the themes had dimensions within them. That is, each theme could be characterised by varying dimensions or polls within each theme (see table 2).

Theme	Dimensions	
Membership	*Exclusive* Typically members will have a shared set of practices and perspectives and will converge on a set of understood set of principles or norms.	*Inclusive* Members are varied and in terms of their disciplinary background, roles and responsibilities. The diversity is embraced.
Purpose	*Teaching and Learning Research* The primary focus is the advancement of the educational research agenda.	*Teaching and Learning Practice* The primary focus is the advancement of teaching and learning practice.
Scope	*Macro* Investigations are typically beyond a specific situation. Participants are sampled to avoid bias so that any claims made have appeal to a wider, more general audience. Objectivity is seen as a requirement.	*Micro* Investigations are typically within a specific situation, where the participants are known to the investigator/teacher. Subjectivity is an advantage to understanding practice with a limited and specific context.
Beneficiaries	*Educational Researchers* The main beneficiaries are the researchers who are concerned with the direct advancement of knowledge within their field. Immediate application is not the primary focus.	*Students and university teachers* The main beneficiaries are the students. The primary concern is the direct advancement of practices that can improve the quality of the student learning experience. Immediate application is the central primary focus.

Table 2. Themes and dimensions of differences in EdR and SoTL.

Table 3 illustrates quotes that form the dimensions within the themes.

Dimension	Quotes related to educational research	Quotes related to SoTL
Membership	*Exclusive* "[SoTL participants] cannot be considered as education researchers." (EdRe1) "[Educational research] means that you have to be well informed by the existing literature. So that the researcher is not simply pursuing a personal hobbyhorse […] they need to be able to locate what they're doing within the existing literature. […] they need to choose, appropriate research methods, methods that […] rest upon the understanding of the literature." (EdRe2) "People have kind of backgrounds in education and read before they do the research something in the field, and they prepare for it and, you know methodologically they're prepared to do this kind of research. This is something what in my opinion concern educational research." (SoTLn5)	*Inclusive* "[I] can learn a lot from this community. Eh, somebody who, eh, can be inspired with different ideas […] I feel a part of this community." (SoTLn5) "The field seems very diffuse, very diverse." (EdRe2) "There are people doing stuff on all the different subject areas […] And, the question is whether they're generic or discipline specific. And there are people doing surveys, and there are people doing case studies and, you know, there, there's still a big […] variation". (SoTLe3)
Purpose	*Teaching and Learning Research* "I really do think that educational research is really focused on what the students do and what the results are of/if	*Teaching and Learning Practice* "It will inform my practice. It will inform my own teaching. […].the beauty of my understanding of SoTL

	the students/student's work." (SoTLn4) "My main intention is to, contribute to, to knowledge growth. And knowledge advancement, and theory advancement. And, spread that knowledge on a as broad scale as possible." (EdRe4) "I just want to understand things better. I want to see how things, how, what explains something and what, what is the effect of something, so there is a researcher dimension." (EdRe1)	anyway is that you don't need to divide it out by, discipline […] while they did this and this happened with the students, and the students responded this way, what happens if I flip that around and use it in my context." (SoTLn4) "[…] more of the SoTL literature would be aiming to enhance the quality of student learning, or the quality of teaching that's taking place to deliver that. […] There's a more explicit agenda of quality enhancement." (SoTLe5) "I think many people in the field of scholarship of teaching and learning would claim that their work had a direct application. Whether they're actually, warranted in making that claim." (edRe2)
Scope	*Macro* "It also needs to be done by somebody who doesn't have any connection to the actual teaching of that material or the course." (SoTLn4) "You know… maybe larger sample groups, eh, before and after type stuff, I think." (SoTLn4) "There needs to be the kind of idea that I explore something which I distance myself from." (EdRe1)	*Micro* "[Those teachers that do research as scholarship] they want to, eh, improve they're skills and the pedagogical knowledge, so they, use eh, different methods, and they do research on learning and, learning process and teaching process. For they own learning let's say." (SoTLn5) "[SoTL] actually researching their own students. And that's very, very dangerous, because of course they have a dual relationship, as a researcher and as a teacher." (EdRe2) "Good SoTL research first again is helpful to me and my students." (SoTLe2)
Beneficiaries	*Educational Researchers* "I think that in educational research you should not rush too fastly to the practical improvement of education." (EdRe4) "[Educational research] I see as, eh, something that is more contributing to the kind of a general knowledge." (SoTLe4)	*Students and university teachers* "In scholarship of teaching and learning, it's much more focused on the application. […] It should drive practice." (SoTLe4)

Table 3. Quotes that illustrate the dimensions within the themes.

In our analysis we find that experienced those respondents who were more experienced in ER and/or SoTL had an expanded awareness of the complexity of their fields. In comparison the novice respondents demonstrated limited awareness. In particular novice educational researchers tended not to know of the existence of SoTL. In the next phase of the analysis we will examine this in more detail.

4   DISCUSSION

This study, in contrast to much previous literature, empirically explores various conceptions of educational research and scholarship of teaching and learning respectively held by members in each community. Although our data points to some similarities and overlapping characteristics between the two communities, our aim in this paper is to highlight what distinguishes the variation of the conceptualised differences. In analysing the data some themes appear central to distinguish patterns within and between the two communities. What we find significant is that although the two communities share similar dimensions, what distinguishes them is the degree to which they exercise them. For example, at one extreme the membership of the EdR community tends to be exclusive, that is, members of the community share a set of values and practices. The membership of the SoTL community on the other hand is conceptualised as more inclusive, meaning that a diversity of disciplinary backgrounds and research methods are applied and embraced. This relates to underlying aspirations of each community. In the SoTL community the aspiration is to change practice with immediate effect on student learning. The goal of the investigations is for the development of the students and to inspire colleagues to also improve their teaching. While it would be unfair to say that educational researchers are the primary beneficiaries of the educational research, the EdR community's aspirations appear to be more confirmatory of their own collective knowledge base, where the immediacy of the impact and the effect on practice is somewhat secondary.

Our congregated data do not show much evidence of the sometimes-harsh criticism found in literature. There are perceived differences within the two communities about 'the others', as displayed in our result-section, but the differences are expressed with greater nuances than previous literature. This study therefore provides a deeper understanding of the relative attributes of each community that can serve to advance and further develop fruitful inter-relationships. Our findings offer empirically based explanations of the differences between the communities and the degree to which they may hold differing values. These in turn, if being made explicit and nuanced, could hopefully contribute to a constructive rather than destructive friction between educational research and scholarship of teaching and learning.

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