

Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) and Useful Pedagogies

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Introduction

In 2023/4, Strathclyde's Academic Development team initiated a new staff development programme aimed at supporting colleagues in teaching, teaching-focussed and learning-support roles to engage in, or enhance their engagement with, Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL).

Our motivation for doing so reflected a number of internal and external drivers. These included: **demand from Faculties** for specific development opportunities that would support colleagues to undertake scholarly work; **a strategic focus** on enhancing the quality teaching and learning at Strathclyde (evident through, for example, the success of our Learning and Teaching Improvement Framework and related practices); an **efflorescence of learning and teaching practice sharing** through various initiatives such as MicroCPD Mondays and Strathclyde's Staff Peer Support Networks; **the post-COVID landscape** wherein the disruption associated with the pandemic prompted reflection and contemplation about the value and appropriateness of various learning and teaching practices; the importance of evidencing scholarship for **academic promotions** particularly to Teaching Fellow, Senior Teaching Fellow and Principal Teaching Fellow roles; and recognition of the potential to **enhance Strathclyders' contributions to discourses on learning and teaching** both nationally and internationally.

Key outputs of this initial investment in Academic Development support for SoTL included **the development of a SoTL information hub** on SharePoint, a series of **capacity building workshops**, and the formation of several **collaborative SoTL groups** with direct support from Professors Mick and Ruth Healey. The first collaborative writing initiative involved some 30 staff from across Strathclyde's four Faculties, who were accompanied to undertake literature reviews and research into 7 distinct areas of scholarly inquiry. In 2024, the groups began publishing peer-reviewed scholarly work that will appear on the University's website as an evolving, edited, and peer-reviewed collection entitled 'Useful Pedagogies'.

¹ The views and opinions expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views or positions of the University of Strathclyde

In recognition of the success of this work, and the possibilities to extend our academic development support for SoTL, it is timely to pause and consider the wider significance of these initiatives at Strathclyde. Beyond their intrinsic benefits, SoTL activities have the potential to uncover and articulate key elements of a distinctive Strathclyde curriculum. They can identify pedagogical approaches that enable Strathclyders to deliver an educational strategy that reflects our founding mission and current priorities. They do so through systematic inquiry that aims to better understand student learning, classroom dynamics, and how these can be transformed for the benefit of students and society.

Before considering these implications more fully, it is important to define the terms 'curriculum' and 'pedagogy', demonstrate how they are interrelated, and reflect on the ways in which they coalesce within a coherent set of educational strategies and priorities at Strathclyde.

Pedagogy as Curriculum Enacted

The term 'curriculum' was first used in Scotland in the 17th Century to describe a collection of courses followed by students (William, 2013). Today, the word is still commonly used to define a prescribed 'plan for learning' that students follow at each stage of their education. However, more holistic definitions, e.g. Dilly Fung's notion of 'connected curriculum' (Fung, 2017) equate the curriculum with the totality of students' experience(s) within educational processes.

Curriculum implies **transformation**. A helpful way to think about this is through the analogy of a vehicle (e.g. Fotheringham, Strickland and Aitchison, 2012). The curriculum-as-vehicle is a useful metaphor for exploring the ways in which the curriculum 'advances' local and national agendas and priorities e.g. internationalization, digitalization, economic prosperity, sustainable development, widening access, quality enhancement. Barnett (2009) also uses 'vehicle' as a means of describing students' development or 'journey' through a programme of study.

The potential of curriculum to transform individuals and society can only be realized if those who are responsible for its design, delivery, quality-assurance and enhancement strive continually to improve and rethink it. Unless stakeholders adopt **innovative approaches to the curriculum**, they risk '*re-educat[ing] the followers of yesterday, rather than the leaders of tomorrow*' (Mazur, 2023). To be truly transformational, our aspirations for the curriculum should coalesce around a distinctive approach to teaching, learning, assessment and student support; one that seeks to empower all students to thrive within an ever-changing world.

Within this context, the word ‘pedagogy’ is often used to refer to the methods and practices used to **deliver** the curriculum and **engage** students in the learning process. Pedagogy is, in other words, curriculum enacted. Pedagogy can refer to a variety of approaches and strategies for enhancing students’ educational experiences and promoting effective learning. Thinking in this way, helps us to look beyond the content of the curriculum to explore ways in which we can ‘share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of our students’ (hooks, 1993: 13).

Useful Pedagogies at Strathclyde

The University of Strathclyde was established in 1796 as the ‘place of useful learning’, with a mission to make the world better-educated, prosperous, healthy, fair and secure. The University retains this commitment today through its socially progressive values and its aim to make a positive difference to the lives of its students, to society and to the world. This distinctive approach is evident in, for example, the significant progress that has been made with respect to **widening access** to university education and **sustainability**.

Strathclyde welcomes students from a diverse range of backgrounds, recognising the barriers that exist for many, and it supports students to successfully overcome these through high-quality support. Sustainability is at the heart of our curriculum and research activities both through our commitment to deliver against the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and the ways in which our activities focus on some of the key challenges of our world today.

To be the ‘place of useful learning’ has implications both for the curriculum, and how the curriculum is enacted through pedagogy. However, just as the curriculum varies across subjects and disciplines, there is no one pedagogical approach that adequately and completely encapsulates Strathclyde’s educational strategy and vision.

Nonetheless, there are methods and practices that broadly align with our present and future aspirations to improve society through education.

Useful learning, for example, implies that **all students, regardless of background, have equal access to educational opportunities**. Relevant approaches should promote diversity and inclusion, helping to build more equitable learning and – more widely – enable students to endeavour make society a fairer and more inclusive place. The curriculum should reflect principles of decoloniality and anti-racism.

Useful pedagogies are also inherently **values-based**. They should support students to develop ethical perspectives and social responsibility in the context of their subjects and disciplines; helping them to become conscientious citizens who are empowered to make a positive contribution to the world they inhabit.

A useful curriculum should also **integrate technology in a balanced way, in order to enhance learning experiences**, thereby making education more accessible and engaging. As an International Technological university, Strathclyde students should be given adequate opportunities to develop digital and AI-literacies alongside a number of other graduate and employable skills.

Useful approaches to learning **should place students at the centre**, and invite students to co-create learning experiences. Such a stance would oppose any approaches to teaching that place undue emphasis on the interests and preferences of the teacher, or indeed an approach to curriculum design that focusses too narrowly on curricular content that ‘must be covered’. Situating students’ needs, interests, and abilities at the heart of the curriculum can **encourage active participation and engagement, promote critical thinking and creativity, and equip learners with the skills needed to adapt and innovate in a rapidly changing world**. More importantly, the aim of curriculum and pedagogy alike should be to awaken in students **a love for learning**. Lifelong learners are those who are both committed to, and capable of, pursuing knowledge and personal growth, to the benefit of themselves and society, throughout their lives.

Strategies to deliver a useful curriculum will include **providing opportunities for learners to connect learning to real-world problems and scenarios**, thereby making education authentic, meaningful and applicable. Such approaches can prepare students to tackle societal, environmental and sustainability challenges in communities around the world. **Useful pedagogies should also encourage collaboration among students**. Activities that foster teamworking, the development of communication skills, and empathy can help students to learn from one another and understand diverse perspectives.

Strathclyde 2030

Strathclyde’s strategy document – [Strathclyde 2030](#) – reflects the University’s aspirations for ‘*a distinctive and innovative curriculum that builds academic excellence and provides opportunities to widen our students’ knowledge and experience.*’

Strathclyde 2030 uses the example of industry, business, public and third-sector partnerships to demonstrate the Institution’s ‘*commitment to making a positive impact on the world around us*’. This approach ‘*underpins and permeates our education programmes and enables our students to gain the knowledge, skills and experience they need to excel in a dynamic and evolving global environment*’.

Strathclyde 2030 also includes KPIs around widening access, student satisfaction and retention, graduate outcomes, and education for sustainable development. While these

KPIs allow the university to measure its progress towards clearly defined strategic targets, scholarly communities of practice at Strathclyde have the potential to contribute to the systematic, evidence-informed enhancement of student support and teaching, assessment and feedback practices.

The Role of Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL)

The **Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL)** is a systematic approach to the study of teaching and learning in higher education. The ultimate goal of SoTL is the enhancement of curriculum, teaching and learning practices.

For Martin et al. (1998 in Healey, 2000), scholarship involves a number of interrelated activities. These include **engaging with the scholarly contributions of others**; **gathering evidence** and **critical reflection** on their own teaching practices and student learning; and **disseminating** both pedagogical practices and theoretical ideas about teaching and learning.

For Boyer (1990), SoTL involves viewing learning and teaching practices through various lenses to better understand 'what is going on in the classroom'. This definition lends itself to a wide range of SoTL activities including reflection and inquiry on learning and teaching practices; strategies to enhance teaching and learning; curriculum development; the promotion of research-informed teaching; and student engagement in disciplinary or SoTL research.

Crucially, **all SoTL work should be made public**. In other words, it should be available for peer review and critique. As such, it must satisfy certain quality standards to be considered a scholarly contribution.

Given its potential to systematically study and therefore enhance both curriculum and pedagogy, SoTL at Strathclyde has tremendous potential to interrogate our teaching approaches to ensure that they are both useful and improving. In other words, that our curriculum and pedagogies reflect our founding mission and are coherent with present and future educational strategies and quality standards.

By leading to the creation of scholarly work that can be debated and disseminated amongst supportive groups of peers, SoTL can strengthen existing communities of practice involving scholars, students, and those whose teaching and/or support of learning is informed by scholarship. This will ensure that effective and innovative practices flow across the university, particularly in areas of focus such as education for sustainable development, Generative AI, decoloniality and entrepreneurial education, and that all who teach and/or support learning are encouraged to adopt a posture of learning within a culture of inquiry, innovation, and continuous improvement.

The Edited Collection Useful Pedagogies can be found on Strathclyde University's website:

<https://www.strath.ac.uk/workwithus/trainingconsultancy/professionaldevelopmentseries/ourservices/>

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