

A Model for Engaged Teaching at York University:

Moving Towards Research-Informed Practice



Associate Deans Teaching and Learning Council
Sub-Committee on Research and Innovation in Teaching and Learning

Prepared by:
Geneviève Maheux-Pelletier & Emily Rush (co-chairs)

With:
Rosanna Chowdhury
Lisa Dufraimont
Celia Haig-Brown
Jeffrey Harris
Tamara Kelly
Luca Montana
Brian Nairn
Tom Scott
Carolyn Steele

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Introduction

A strong teaching and learning culture relies on active engagement with teaching as a professional activity that is open to self-reflection, dialogue, research, and critique. To thrive, it needs more than an institution-wide vision and strategy; just as importantly, it is shaped by instructors' on-the-ground practices for impactful student learning. These practices can take a variety of forms, ranging in aims and methodology. However, this variety can also lead to questions in how the practices should be positioned, adopted and encouraged within a university.

When the Sub-Committee on Research and Innovation in Teaching and Learning was struck at the beginning of 2019, we were inspired by the report produced by the IIRP Working Group on Quality of Teaching & Learning. Its recommendations included strategies such as encouraging faculty members to develop expertise in teaching *for* learning, creating a system that rewards, celebrates, and promotes quality teaching and learning, and advancing engagement in the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL). From these ideas, we formulated the goal of developing a teaching and learning model that speaks to the many facets of teaching at York. This document is meant to encourage various ways of engaging with teaching as a deliberate practice as well as identify paths for growth. It also offers language and perspectives to recognize effective teaching practices. Last, it proposes that it may be fruitful to frame teaching as a research-oriented process. By formulating hypotheses about how to best facilitate learning, finding evidence¹ of that learning, and sharing these findings in collegial ways (essentially, by engaging in SoTL), tremendous opportunities are afforded to the scholar-instructor, their students, and our teaching and learning community as a whole.

A Model for Engaged Teaching at York University aims to describe the many dimensions of teaching one can engage with throughout their career. Teaching embeds many activities, from planning and delivering learning experiences and reflecting upon practice, to adopting a responsive teaching stance and expanding reach beyond the classroom. In addition to providing York's instructors with a clear sense of the kinds of teaching related, research-informed practices that exist, this model makes important distinctions that have implications for program, resource and policy decisions. An explicit conceptualization of the various forms Engaged Teaching can take at York is a precursor to important discussions across a range of areas including academic hiring, teaching dossiers/portfolios, and the funding of teaching-related projects through opportunities such as York's *Academic Innovation Fund*.

What is Engaged Teaching at York?

Engaged Teaching at York is rich and diverse. In all its forms, Engaged Teaching is shaped by an instructor's thoughtful approach to teaching and their private reflection upon practice. It is about crafting intentional student learning experiences as much as it is a professional practice informed by formal and informal research and open to collegial dialogue. It can also be a form of scholarship that seeks to systematically and methodically observe student learning with the aim of enhancing it and sharing these results broadly for critique and collaboration. Figure 1 below presents a model of Engaged Teaching at York that encompasses four dimensions of practice, adapted from Kern et al. (2015). These quadrants recognize and legitimize a wide range of practices rather than prioritizing certain actions over

¹ Evidence, in this document, is understood in the broadest sense. It includes, but is not limited to, archival data, interviews, texts and documents, and quantitative data. In the context of learning, it is any information such as student work and artefacts, self and peer assessments, evaluations, and reflective observations gathered before, during, and after the process of teaching and learning to help the instructor determine if or how learning occurred.

others. As such, the model avoids conceptualizing research on teaching as more than or preferred over mindful teaching practice (Potter & Kustra, 2011).

This model represents Engaged Teaching practices as situated along two continua. The focus of the left side of the model is on improving one’s own teaching, while the focus of the right is on dissemination of teaching-related knowledge in a manner that is appropriately public. The horizontal axis indicates the degree to which knowledge about teaching is communicated, from being a somewhat private activity happening with students in a classroom to sharing teaching practices with a broad audience. The vertical axis represents the nature of methodology used to examine teaching, from being informed by experience to being informed by research.

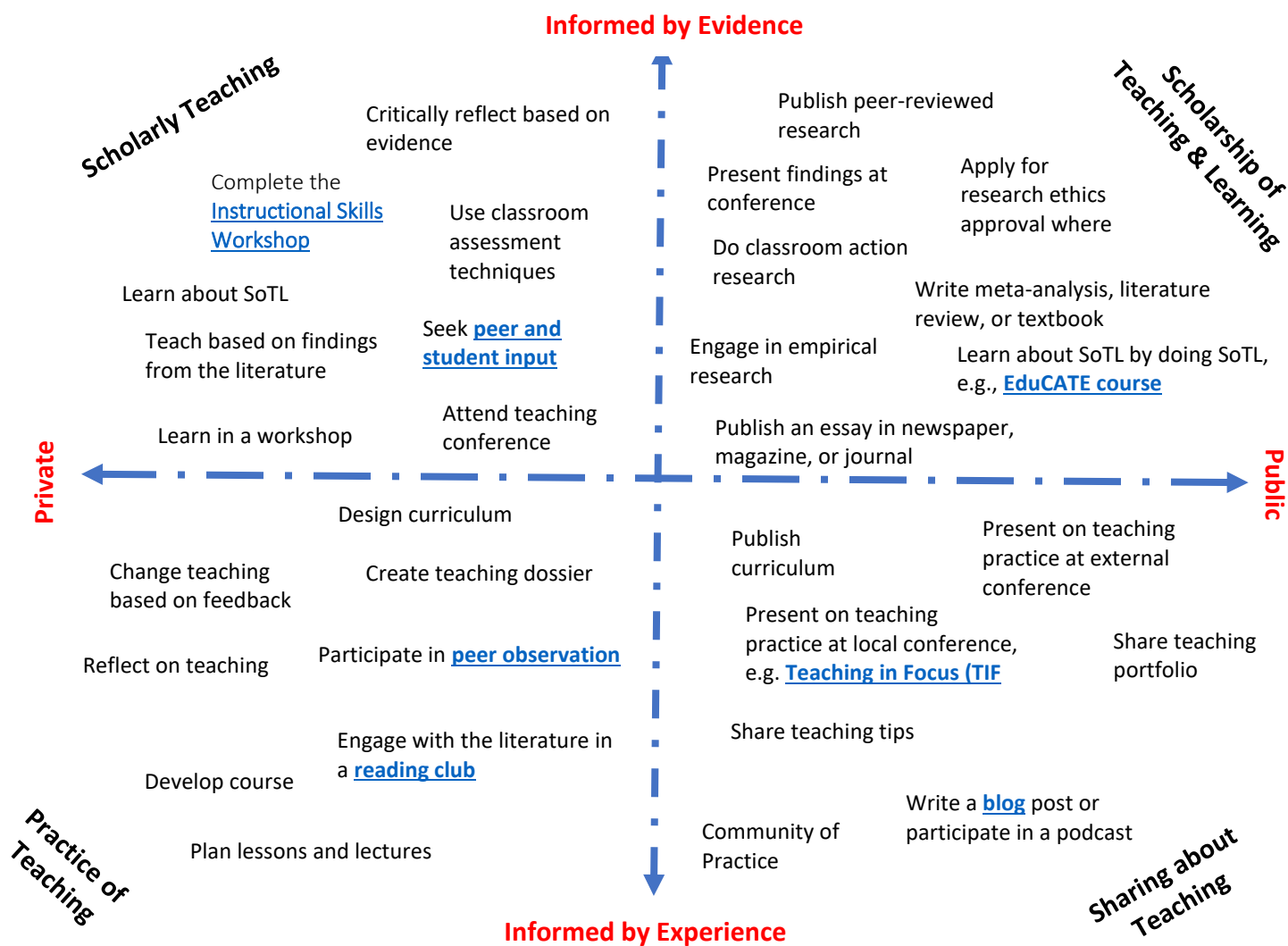


Figure 1: Dimensions of Engaged Teaching at York (Adapted from Kern et al., 2015)

‘Informed by Experience’ Dimension of the Model (see also Table 1 below)

Practice of teaching includes teaching and learning activities that are implemented in the classroom or the curriculum and can be shared within an institution (e.g., curriculum development, documenting teaching practice in a teaching portfolio). Changes in the practice of teaching are grounded in reflection and based on one’s teaching experience, their disciplinary lens, and discussions with colleagues. They may also be the result of incidental changes that occur upon engaging with the literature on teaching and learning. These are activities discussed privately and, generally, they are not subject to assessment beyond student evaluations or a suggestion stemming from a consultation or casual conversation.

Sharing about teaching includes teaching and learning activities that are implemented in the classroom or the curriculum with the explicit sharing of findings with others through informal and semi-formal means. The focus is on teaching itself with some informal evidence of student learning rather than a formal method of investigation. The sharing happens in various ways, including blog posts, a presentation at an internal teaching and learning conference, teaching articles, and workshops, and aims to provide ideas for teaching, opportunities for community building, and a space for others to reflect on their own teaching.

Table 1: Characteristics of Engaged Teaching at York, ‘Informed by Experience’ Dimension

	Practice of Teaching	Sharing about Teaching
Description	Teaching and learning activities implemented in the classroom or the curriculum	Teaching and learning activities implemented in the classroom or the curriculum
Informed by	Personal reflection; Discussions with colleagues or teaching consultant	Discussions with colleagues to help self and others reflect on teaching
Methodology	Reliance on informal evidence of student learning and teaching experience	Reliance on informal evidence of student learning and teaching experience
Dissemination	Often private, but could be shared within the institution (e.g., curriculum development committee, documenting teaching practice in a teaching portfolio)	Shared semi-formally with appropriate communities outside of one’s immediate teaching context
Purposes and Opportunities	Manage daily or weekly lesson planning; Expand incidentally on one’s teaching; Develop reflective practice; Document practice for self and internal purposes (e.g., teaching awards, year-end review of performance)	Increase impact beyond one’s classroom; Influence the teaching and learning culture locally; Demonstrate leadership capacity; Further inform one’s pedagogy through the sharing of practice
Challenges	Offers only limited opportunity for growth; Informed by generalizations rather than reliable evidence; Not validated by external review	May be judged by others as lacking rigour; May not lead to systematic change

‘Informed by Evidence’ Dimension of the Model (see also Table 2 below)

Scholarly Teaching includes teaching and learning activities implemented in the classroom or the curriculum based on best practices and critically reflected upon through research (e.g., literature, workshops, conferences), with some assessment of the approach implemented. For example, a teaching activity may be informed by the literature, and following its implementation the strategy may be assessed via classroom assessment techniques or a survey about the student experience. It may also be shared at the local level (at a departmental meeting, learning workshop, etc.).

Scholarship of Teaching and Learning includes teaching and learning activities that are implemented and assessed in the classroom or the curriculum (e.g., designing a course, facilitating classroom activities, trying out new pedagogical ideas, advising, writing student learning outcomes, evaluating programs). This work is grounded in the literature, systematic in methodology, resulting in outcomes that are ‘publicly shared for critique and use’ (Potter and Kustra, 2011, 2). As a systematic and research-driven approach to teaching, SoTL aims at improving student learning and results in outcomes that are publicly shared. It invites disciplinary experts to treat teaching as a form of scholarship by engaging in an iterative process whereby they make ongoing teaching decisions based on a student-driven view of learning, observe the learning that occurs, and communicate these results.

Table 2: Characteristics of Engaged Teaching at York, ‘Informed by Evidence’ Dimension

	Scholarly Teaching	Scholarship of Teaching and Learning
Description	Teaching and learning activities intentionally implemented in the classroom or the curriculum; Explicitly aims to improve student learning	Teaching and learning activities that are implemented and assessed systematically in the classroom or the curriculum; Aims to improve student learning; Aims to develop expertise in teaching and learning
Informed by	Best practices literature; Critical reflection upon practice; Informed by evidence of student learning	SoTL and disciplinary literature about teaching and learning
Methodology	Some assessment of the approach used, e.g., via classroom assessment techniques or a student survey	Robust research methodology (qualitative, quantitative, and/or mixed) May require ethics approval
Dissemination	Shared at the local level	Publicly shared for critique and collaboration
Purposes and Opportunities	Inform teaching decisions by evidence gathered from the immediate context; Build portfolio for external teaching awards; Gather contextually relevant knowledge about programs; Further inform practice by enabling informed course planning	Create new knowledge about teaching and learning; Strengthen teaching portfolio for high profile external teaching awards; Establish or strengthen the instructor’s research agenda Elevate the status of the work as ‘legitimate body of knowledge’ held to the standards of scholarship (Ashwin & Trigwell, 2004)
Challenges	May require planning and delivering learning experiences differently from acquired practice;	Steep learning curve; Time consuming;

Time to explore the literature;
Requires ongoing adaptability to
respond to what is learned

May not be recognized at the same level as
disciplinary research
Research process may be different from
disciplinary training

A Word about Formal SoTL Research

SoTL brings breadth and diversity to the field of teaching and learning, both in terms of theoretical paradigm and methodology, as it “enables multiple voices (including academics, students, and student support specialists, for example) to be heard in the public space” (Fanghanel, 2013, 61). It welcomes a diversity of research methodologies to accommodate different research goals and the scholar’s disciplinary practices. York’s definition of SoTL includes discipline-based education research (DBER), which aims to produce generalizable findings about teaching and learning within a discipline (often in a STEM field). Such disciplinary-based education research may transcend the boundaries of a specific course, curriculum, or institution. SoTL dissemination strategies are broad, “where ‘going public’ means more or something other than publishing in academic journals” (Fanghanel, 2013, 61). It opens up teaching as a practice that welcomes critique and collaboration.

Fluidity of the Model

The dotted lines between the horizontal and vertical arrows in Figure 1 suggest that the borders between the quadrants are not intended to draw rigid distinctions between the different types of Engaged Teaching practices. Rather, they are intended to be permeable, to reflect the fluid nature of the two continua. A certain teaching activity might naturally fall into a single quadrant or pass through more than one dimension, and instructors might find themselves moving between quadrants depending on the project at hand. One may enter into the model from any quadrant and need not progress from the left to the right, or the bottom to the top. This model does not position SoTL as the apex of a developmental process. Teaching relying on private reflection upon practice is fundamental to and often sufficient for effective instruction. However, in many cases making this practice explicitly intentional and open to critique can enhance student learning, bring greater legitimacy to the instructor’s practice, lead to formal recognition, and/or boost career advancement. Hence, we encourage engaged teachers to move towards the top-left corner of the continua whenever possible and consider sharing their practice in ways that serve their own professional development goals, engage their broader teaching and learning community (top-right corner), and ultimately contribute to shaping the educational landscape of higher education.

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