

## An Old Custom and a New Borderland

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We are familiar with the concept of a zone as a place with clear parameters and boundaries for a special purpose. Zones can be physical spaces, abstract entities, or metaphorical allusions. For example, those old enough may recall having been warned before entering the *Twilight Zone*; others are familiar with driving through school zones, using zone defense, obeying no parking and passing zones, and crossing through time zones. In psychology, Vygotsky (1978) expanded our understanding of potential development by introducing the “zone of proximal development.” Finally, one dictionary defines a zone as “an area, region, or division distinguished from adjacent parts by some distinctive feature or character” (Boyer, et al, 1991, p. 1407).

In *Disciplinary Styles and the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, Huber and Morreale (2002) call the place where “scholars of different disciplinary cultures come” to exchange the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) as a “borderland” -- a newly emerging “trading zone” (p. 21). Borrowing historian Peter Gallison’s (1997) concept, Huber and Morreale (2002) further explain that in this new trading zone, “one finds scholars of teaching and learning seeking advice, collaborations, references, methods, and colleagues to fill in whatever their own disciplinary communities cannot or will not provide” (p. 19). This borderland exists between the disciplines, “where scholars are busy simplifying, translating, telling, and persuading ‘foreigners’ to hear their stories and try their wares (p. 19). According to Huber and Morreale (2002),” the increasing cross-disciplinary conversations around SoTL have broadened its trading zone” (p. 2).

We lose an intended meaning of trading zone if we focus too closely on only half of the phrase – the zone. The intended emphasis rests equally on trading. Unfortunately, in the U.S., we have become a culture where trading is nearly extinct, except among *Pokemon* card holders. We have become insistent on possessing and purchasing the new at the expense of valuing not only the object or content someone else may have to offer, but the exchange process itself. The give-and take of exchange has all but disappeared as a custom. Why place the new movement of SoTL alongside the seemingly lost custom of trading? What is the importance of this emerging SoTL borderland or zone of trading? What wares are being exchanged? What are the points of entry? Who is invited? Is this a place for SoTL scholars only?

### *Trading the Wares of SoTL*

Trading the work of SoTL within and across disciplines is a tall order. As we know, each discipline carefully crafts its approach and language surrounding inquiry, discovery, and knowledge. It is these distinctions and habits of inquiry that make it possible for SoTL work to be heard more easily within each disciplinary border. Disciplinary styles do shape the scholarship of teaching and learning. In fact, according to Huber and Morreale (2002) “their very divisions, which some find disturbing, can be sources of strength for the scholarship of teaching and learning” (p. 21). Huber and Morreale do not argue for losing these distinctions or for making their distinctiveness fuzzy for the sake of SoTL. Instead, they encourage “cross

disciplinary conversations” and predict that “reading—and raiding—across the fields” will expand the parameters of this new trading zone (Huber & Morreale, 2002, p. 2).

*It is in this borderland that scholars from different disciplinary cultures come to trade their wares—insights, ideas, and findings—even though the meanings and methods behind them may vary considerably among producer-groups (Huber & Morreale, 2002, p. 2-3).*

What may begin in the classroom of an instructor within a department and field becomes framed and informed through the disciplinary lens of the SoTL researcher. The research problem and the question become tempered by the challenges and critiques of other scholars and a review of the literature within and outside the original discipline. The methodology and research design, crafted around the question, begin a conversation that will transcend the borders of disciplines. The results, still anchored within a specific context, point the way for cross-disciplinary conversations that challenge assumptions about learning and teaching, no matter the disciplinary home. Although the nature of the work may not be generalized beyond the context studied, it is more often the question and the lifting of assumptions that spread across disciplinary borders, informed by the particular context of inquiry being shared as “wares.” In these conversations, we discover we share similar concerns, similar troubling challenges to learning, and discover a way of reframing our efforts to help students learn. As colleagues or scholars involved in the work of SoTL, we offer our interest, curiosity and disciplinary lens to the discussion as our “wares.” How then may we enter this zone? In looking carefully at the emergence of this special place between the disciplines, several points of entry come into view.

### **Points of Entry into Trading Zones**

The borders of our disciplines often make it difficult to see the trading zones between them and the many possible entry points. I am reminded of an art lesson in which I was instructed to draw the spaces between the rocks at the shores of Green Bay in Door County. Initially, I couldn't see the spaces between them because I focused on and was familiar with looking only at the rocks. I drew all day in the hot sun, learning to see instead the spaces that connected rock to rock – the wonderful, surprising places that I had paid little attention to became my focus, for a time. This focus did not diminish the beauty and detail of the rocks in my drawing; in fact, they emerged with a different quality about them. I saw that the spaces had their own curious and surprising aspects of study. By visiting those spaces, I learned about drawing rocks as well as the places between them that I had missed. I had not seen the value in looking between the rocks in my original efforts. I began to see the value only by looking, encouraged by those whose expertise challenged me to go beyond the familiar. How then may we enter this zone? We can draw our attention to three points of entry into the trading zone for SoTL:

- Programs of Inquiry
- Formal Events and Artifacts
- Informal Dialogue

*Programs of Inquiry*

SoTL Programs with a structured a process of systematic inquiry escort participants to the SoTL trading zone. The scholars in these programs, including the Center Scholars, Wisconsin Teaching Fellows, Wisconsin Teaching Scholars, and Student-Faculty Partnership Grant awardees, find a point of entry that is well-marked. They have examples from scholars before them, exposure to literature, and program facilitators who act as guides --experts already familiar with the SoTL trading zone. Through their “problematization of student learning,” challenges in teaching and learning become reframed as questions for scholarly inquiry (Bass, 1999). These programs map out a clearly delineated process for entering into the emerging borderland of SoTL.

One of the first crossings of disciplinary borders into the SoTL trading zone happens during the initial phase of SoTL inquiry. The programs above have in common the design feature of bringing together scholars of different disciplinary interests. As they shape their individual SoTL projects in the company of other scholars, their research question, methodology, analysis, and findings are put on the collaborative table for scholarly, cross-disciplinary conversations. What happens? The scholars’ assumptions, comfort zones, and disciplinary habits of mind and inquiry are explored through the supportive and critically reflective lens of multiple scholars from multiple disciplines. As the scholars’ research design evolves, their assumptions are challenged, and their research questions are refined and honed. Understanding of disciplinary habits, problems of scholarly concern, and literature outside of their fields are exchanged. The inquiry is molded by the tools of each discipline’s perspective, and is reflected upon by the scholar. Programs of Inquiry lead them to multiple and extended visits to the SoTL borderland, where their rigorous and well crafted wares take shape amid critical discourse and scholarly rigor.

### *Formal Points of Entry*

A second route into the SoTL trading zone may be more easily recognizable. Formal entry points may represent the highly visible opportunities for exchange between disciplines. They include the easily accessible concrete events and artifacts generally available to anyone in the community. Disciplinary journals, interdisciplinary journals, general SoTL and higher education or teaching journals create such formal points of entry.

In addition, formal exchange occurs through the organized contexts in which events, including conferences, symposia, colloquium, brown bags, guest speakers, department meetings, and retreats intentionally foster a temporary trading zone around SoTL. The annual CIPD and OPID programs invite new visitors to the SoTL borderland. These visits are focused, temporary, and often highlight the wares available from those who have been in Programs of Inquiry.

Unfortunately and all too often, the formal points of entry serve as gateways for the choir to mingle. While Programs of Inquiry may lead serious scholars to the SoTL zone, the formal points of entry invite the curious, potential scholars, skeptics, the reluctant or indifferent to “come to the table” as well. If we expand the meaning of “wares” to include not just the products or results of scholarly inquiry, but the beginning points of future inquiry, we can include the assumptions, questions, problems, and challenges about teaching that speak to all of us, across disciplines. In other words, we bring ourselves as teachers with expertise within our disciplinary experience (lengthy or brief) as our wares to trade. Our exchanges are made (and highly relevant) at the front end of inquiry, not solely around the results and findings. It becomes a continuous conversation within and across disciplines. We who sponsor and participate in Programs of Inquiry need to consider how to ensure that the trading zone is not

perceived as a members only club with a private entrance known only to scholars of teaching and learning.

### *Informal Points of Entry*

The speed of exchange, direction, and destinations of SoTL wares are equally and potentially more *invisible* than the Formal Points of Entry may seem to imply. For instance, if we were to tie a string to the ideas, questions, and findings of a SoTL project, tracked the exchange routes of these “wares” across campus, what would we see? An Informal Trading Zone with many tracks would be revealed --invisible footprints mapping casual exchanges would become evident.

Certainly not all faculty will engage in SoTL. At a given institution, it is likely some faculty will engage in SoTL work throughout their careers as a core aspect of their research agenda. Some will occasionally pursue inquiry around student learning based on their classroom contexts. Depending on the institution, a considerable amount of faculty may never engage in SoTL. Are the wares of SoTL scholars destined to be exchanged by a small segment of faculty who speak a similar language, who have similar wares to exchange? I think not. The Informal Points of Entry ensure that the emerging SoTL borderland does not invite, engage or lure only the scholars or those who attend formal events. The SoTL trading zone is not an elite place “for scholars only” or those who access the formal artifacts and events. All colleagues at our institutions play critical roles in circulating among those with wares to trade, meeting the traders, sampling their wares, and coming in contact with their creative work as they go about their work as faculty.

For example, I am reminded of a casual stroll through an art show. Though I do some artwork, my work is *not* being shown. I visit looking for something specific or nothing specific, with the hope of purchasing, or lack of intent to purchase. I go to look, be stimulated, exposed to, provoked, refueled, inspired, and to get ideas. In a sense, I am a consumer, though I have the choice to offer my wares. In others’ work I see possibilities for reframing (literally) my own photographs; I wonder why certain things appear as they do, to the artist, or to me; I consider other approaches, raise new questions, and engage in a conversation in my mind that may never reach verbal articulation. My reactions to the work, verbal and nonverbal, communicate to the artist how I see his or her work, what I find of value, relevant, or inspiring. We exchange. Our conversations allow me to explore the work further, to understand better what the artist sees, what he or she is trying to make evident. Sometimes, the “wares” instead become the backdrop to the social encounters and reconnections that take place. Furthermore, the exchange may not be limited to the immediate time and place. The impact of the work on my work continues over time. Inspiration from trading or being in the zone may take time to come to fruition, well beyond the obvious boundaries of time and place, and long after the show has packed up and moved on. I may share my reactions and observations with another individual or group, and the ideas travel, living on in our reflections and conversations. The exchange may not be equal in substance, but our valuing, presence and reactions to each other’s work have the potential to change me and to add to the work itself. It is an exchange.

The wares we can bring to the table include our surprises with teaching, our challenges with student learning, our questions arising from our experience, and our reactions to the wares brought by others throughout our informal interactions. As scholars, consumers, colleagues, or travelers in the borderland of SoTL we can be eavesdroppers, innocent bystanders, avid critics, skeptics, advocates or idea-swappers. In the blink of an eye, a brief, informal exchange of

“corridor talk” can whisk the non-SoTL scholar to the portal of SoTL as if having been beamed up (Downey, Dumit, & Traweek, 1997). We underestimate the value of these momentary flights into the “zone” and sharing of wares. Our time in the zone may be fleeting. These informal exchanges are more spontaneous than planned. Crossing into the SoTL borderland need not entail a journey of great magnitude or length. Curriculum planning, strategic planning, preparation for accreditation, email exchanges, spontaneous conversations, lunch discussions about department meetings, departmental program assessment, retreats, and hallway talk can provide momentary entrance into the SoTL trading zone. I imagine a virtual SoTL trading zone with *multiple* points of entry for all members of the higher education community, and for all members of the UWM community accessible within the permeable borders of our daily encounters.

### *Center Scholar Traders*

This monograph then, invites us to the wares created through a Program of Inquiry among scholars. They have traded and exchanged their wares through critical reflection and rigorous inquiry. Through Formal Points of Entry (this monograph; CIPD programs) open to all members of UWM, their work provides numerous Informal Points of Entry for colleagues to continue to swap their wares. To help enable the cross-disciplinary conversation, their exchange in this monograph utilizes the headings from the SoTL case studies presented in *Opening Lines* (Hutching, 2000).

1. Framing the Question
2. The Context
3. Gathering the Evidence
4. Emergent Findings and Broader Significance
5. Conditions for Doing the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning
6. Benefits of the Work
7. Lessons Learned
8. Opportunities for dissemination
9. References

Despite these shared headings, each scholar’s original question is uniquely situated within their classroom encounters with student learning. From this point, the Center Scholars vary in the framing of their inquiry. For example, C. Erik, Timmerman clearly explains how his questions, including, “*What is the nature of the student-professor relationship in an online class and how does technology influence it?*” fall squarely within the research concerns of his field, organizational communication, and allow him to use this literature to inform his study. While he applies principles of communication to explore his research question, his findings prod those outside of communication to question their assumptions about online learning and teaching.

Two other communication faculty framed their research question more broadly regarding large lectures. SoTL scholar Kathryn Dindia presents her research questions about large lectures and online lecture formats in general terms of interest and relevance across disciplines. Jack Johnson focuses on the problem of establishing and maintaining faculty and student communication in large lecture/discussion format courses. His focus on feedback is problematized through his expertise in communication. Johnson devises a strategy to test an alternative faculty-student feedback process and to better understand students’ perceived need for feedback. While he cannot draw conclusions across all disciplines, his study can help us

question our assumptions about feedback across disciplines, and raise questions couched within our own contexts as to how our practices are impacting student performance. Holme's study engages us to question with him whether or not "information availability is inherently valuable." He examines how the availability of lecture notes online affect note taking. Holme draws from literature on note-taking from multiple disciplines, employing methods suited to his research questions. Center Scholar Paul Roebber draws from the literature within and outside of his discipline in order to explore the perennial problem of linking theory to practice in atmospheric science, and the potential mismatch in learning styles between students and faculty. His inquiry is grounded in the difficulties within his discipline, and the data is clearly drawn from his classroom subjects, yet poses curricular questions beyond his field. Each of the scholars found themselves in familiar and unfamiliar territory, speaking to and spoken to from multiple perspectives.

### Conclusion

This monograph is not the trading zone. Rather, it is a point of entry for cross disciplinary conversation as an observer, eavesdropper, visitor, skeptic, scholar, or colleague. The 'wares' it presents document the trading zone that was created throughout the process of being a Center Scholar. However, the insight, ideas, findings, and questions cut across disciplines. The SoTL work of the five scholars within the borders of this monograph is a beckoning to the trading zones of SoTL, where disciplinary inquiry is distinct, yet questions, methodology, and findings cross disciplinary borders.

Changes in higher education often appear at the margins, emerging and struggling to survive in the cracks between well defined and traditional practices. For example, we have witnessed changes in curriculum and departments, and practices in diversity, multiculturalism, and hiring policies. If the change becomes supported, adopted or mandated (unlikely), it becomes part of the culture's norms, values, or structures; if not, earnest efforts and movements simply wither away and disappear. The scholarship of teaching and learning noticeably appeared on the margins of teaching and scholarship, and has made important strides over the past two decades to move toward a valued and recognized practice. If the scholarship of teaching and learning is here to stay, it may very well hinge on the effectiveness of the trading zones being created, visited, and made accessible, welcoming, flexible, and worthwhile, but most of all, intentional. Whatever the future of the scholarship of teaching and learning, "it will no longer be mostly a matter of parallel play" (Huber & Morreale, 2002, p. 20). It will behoove us to cross one another's borders in the pursuit of learning more about learning. One of the challenges SoTL faces is acting on the advice of Huber and Morreale (2002) to develop "trading zones" from which it can gather strength and momentum. Whether visitor or scholar then, the pass-key shared by all who enter these zones is our commitment to student learning:

*Their goals are to do better by their students, and they are willing (within limits) to enter the trading zone and buy, beg, borrow, or steal the tools they need to do the job. (Huber & Morreale, 2002, p. 19)*

We invite you to browse the wares of SoTL with this important goal in mind. Pass with care and curiosity.

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