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SOTL, SHE, AND THE EVIDENCE OF AN INCOMPLETE PARADIGM SHIFT. A RESPONSE TO “THE SCHOLARSHIP OF TEACHING AND LEARNING—DONE BY SOCIOLOGISTS: LET’S MAKE THAT THE SOCIOLOGY OF HIGHER EDUCATION”*

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As he notes in his paper on the scholarship of teaching and learning, Chad Hanson’s reflections were engendered at an ASA-sponsored workshop at James Madison University. As a fellow participant in that conference, I too felt that our collective discussions raised many intellectually stimulating questions. In this response to his call for a sociology of higher education (SHE), I will focus upon two things. First, I will review an idea that kept recurring as I participated in that workshop, that our discussions of the scholarship of teaching and learning (SOTL) are strongly shaped by the fact that we continue to be in the midst of a paradigm shift within higher education. Second, I will suggest that there may be good reasons to continue to conceptualize SOTL as separate from, but closely related to, a sociology of higher education.

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Hanson suggests that the scholarship of teaching and learning is “part of a broad assessment movement.” Certainly this field of research emerged during roughly the same time period as the growth of assessment in higher education. In addition, clearly the insights from research on teaching and learning should be applied to the study of assessment and the assessment movement (Weiss et al. 2002). Nonetheless, I would argue that the two are distinct. It is perhaps more accurate to say that both are part of the broader paradigm shift within higher education. This transformation involves the movement from a focus upon teaching to a focus upon learning (or, more accurately, teaching and learning).

This paradigm shift is not complete, as evidenced by a number of indicators. As in any emerging field, discussions about basic conceptualization continue. An example of this is the dialogue on how to define the scholarship of teaching (see, for example, Albers 2003, Chin 2002, and Lucal et al. 2003). Also, different acronyms are used by
different authors when referring to the scholarship of teaching and learning, including SOTL, SoTL, and STL. Indeed, Hanson’s arguments that SOTL should not be a separate field but should be incorporated into a broader sociology of higher education reflect the fact that this paradigm shift is not yet complete.

I am certainly drawn to the argument that our analyses within SOTL need to use the sociological imagination and will benefit from linkages to larger social structures. Indeed, that has been done in the articles resulting from the workshop (Lucal et al. 2003; Weiss et al. 2002; Wright et al. 2004). Further, I concur that increasing the cross-fertilization between research in the sociology of education and the scholarship of teaching and learning will benefit both. Nonetheless, I am not convinced that combining the two into a sociology of higher education is necessarily the direction in which the paradigm shift should proceed within our discipline.

The scholarship of teaching and learning can be conceptualized as an interdisciplinary area of research that is both narrower than the sociology of higher education (because it limits its questions to teaching and learning) and also broader than the sociology of higher education (because it is more multidisciplinary). I agree with Hanson that SOTL will be strengthened as sociological insights become a stronger part of this sub-specialty. I am not as certain that I want to decrease the interdisciplinary nature of the field. Parallels can be seen within other fields in sociology. While there is a broad sociology of families, for example, there is also a narrower sub-specialty focusing upon gender roles and gender relations. This area of research is multidisciplinary. There is cross-fertilization between the two, but some researchers are placed more firmly in the tradition of family sociology, and others are more closely tied to the interdisciplinary study of gender relations.

Hanson suggests that SOTL tends to be atheoretical, while a true sociology of higher education could use insights from all three major schools of thought. I will conclude by briefly using each of the three sociological traditions to reflect upon the conceptual separation of SOTL and SHE.

In examining the emergence and growth of the sociological version of the scholarship of teaching and learning, the conflict tradition would suggest that groups with competing agendas have been involved. The Projects on Teaching emerged from a grassroots social movement involving sociologists who felt that teaching did not receive the attention and support that was merited within our field. This predated and foreshadowed both the assessment movement and the establishment of SOTL. This social movement became institutionalized in a variety of ways, including the establishment of the Teaching Resources Group of the ASA and the Section on Undergraduate Education. The aforementioned paradigm shift, with the accompanying emergence of SOTL, led to reconceptualization and name changes for both of these groups. The former is now called the Department Resources Group, and the latter was recently renamed the Section on Teaching and Learning in Sociology.

When examining the membership of sections, there is a surprisingly small overlap in membership between the Section on Education and the Section on Teaching and Learning in Sociology, perhaps indicating a different set of political (as well as research) interests. Combining the scholarship of teaching and learning and the sociology of education into a single field of SHE could lead to political battles between these competing interests. At the same time, there is the potential that it could consolidate the power of the two groups and give them more organizational force within the discipline.

A structural-functional perspective would suggest that maintaining separate research traditions may also have benefits and drawbacks. While some researchers may be able to stay abreast of the literature in both SOTL and SHE, it may be more productive for most people to focus on either one or
the other. Division of labor and specialization may have positive results. A dysfunction of this structure, however, is the lack of cross-fertilization, noted by Hanson, Baker, and Chin in their respective articles. The type of conversation sparked by Hanson's commentary may help address this problem.

Finally, a symbolic interactionist perspective points to the importance of definition of the situation. To the extent that SOTL is linked to the assessment movement in the minds of faculty members, the ability of this research to have an impact upon teaching and learning may be inhibited. Because assessment has often been met with reluctance and resistance (Weiss 2004; Wilmoth 2004) this linkage can be problematic. For this reason, the melding of SOTL into SHE may have benefits. The drawback, however, may be in the resultant decrease in multidisciplinarity within the scholarship of teaching and learning as it is transformed into part of a sociological subfield. As the diverse perspectives coming from other disciplines decline, the insights produced by SOTL may become more narrowly focused.

These brief comments using different sociological lenses point to the importance of continued discussions about the conceptualization of SOTL and SHE as we ride the waves caused by the shifting paradigm in higher education. I thank Chad Hanson for helping stimulate this discussion, as that continued dialogue can only help increase the quality of teaching and learning in sociology.

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- Edward L. Kain is professor of sociology and University Scholar in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Southwestern University in Georgetown, Texas. His two research areas are social change and families, and the scholarship of teaching and learning. Two recent publications are a chapter on “Families” in Social Problems: A Case Study Approach, 2d ed., edited by Norman A. Dolich and Linda Deutschmann (forthcoming, Lexington), and “The Research Article as an Instrument of Active Learning for Teaching About Violence, Sexual Abuse, and Union Formation among Low-Income Families,” co-authored with Diane Purvin, in the July 2005 issue of Teaching Sociology.

REPLY TO MCKINNEY AND KAIN

CHAD HANSON

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MY CENTRAL POINT was that sociologists can both contribute to STL and serve the discipline by engaging in what could be called the sociology of higher education