

SoTL and University Teachers' Professional Development: The Implementation of the Teaching Practice Research Program in Taiwan

Chia-Hui Wu, National Taiwan University, Taiwan

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Abstract

In a constantly changing higher education environment, university teachers' teaching and students' learning have received greater attention. As a result, the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) is gaining ground as a practical research inquiry that closely reflects university teachers' disciplinary teaching practices and advances their professional development. This study examined the influence of SoTL practice in the Taiwanese context, with particular attention to the Teaching Practice Research Program (TPRP). TPRP is a government grant program that supports individual instructors in conducting SoTL research. By interviewing six university teachers who engaged in the TPRP, we provided evidence that the SoTL inquiry benefited their academic development and professional careers. Two critical areas of impact have been revealed: teaching effectiveness and their professional careers as higher education educators. Participants reported that drawing on evidence from their TPRP projects motivated them to advance their teaching practice to support students' learning, pursue teaching innovation, and teach effectively. Despite encountering structural barriers, such as disciplinary alienation and career stagnation, the instructors maintained a positive attitude. They valued the TPRP for supporting their professional development, driving educational innovation, fostering networking and collaboration with peers passionate about advancing teaching and student learning, and, most crucially, strengthening their identity as higher education educators. Finally, this study suggested a SoTL researcher-friendly culture that encouraged instructors in teaching advancement and accepted their efforts is needed in the current higher education environment.

Keywords: Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), teaching practice research program, higher education instructors' professional development

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Introduction

The Teaching Practice Research Program (TPRP) is a Taiwanese public grant program that funds higher education teachers to conduct Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) research. In this study, university instructors' perceptions of TPRP were examined. In particular, whether participation in the TPRP program would benefit their professional growth and careers as higher education educators was the primary focus. Before delving into this issue, it is necessary to understand the concepts of SoTL and TPRP.

The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) is a research paradigm that closely reflects university lecturers' teaching practices. In the past 35 years, the concrete definition of SoTL has been debated (Brew, 2012; Hung & Huang, 2022; Hutchings et al., 2013; Hutchings & Shulman, 1999; Kern et al., 2015; Waller & Prosser, 2023). It begins with the concept of the Scholarship of Teaching, proposed by Boyer in 1990, which elaborates on the university faculty's role in research and teaching. However, over the past 35 years, as the higher education landscape has changed, this research paradigm has broadened its definition relative to the original concept.

Hutchings and Shulman (1999) suggested that, in the SoTL inquiry, not only the issue of teaching but also students' learning should be considered. This led to a shift toward SoTL inquiry to advance teachers' teaching and students' learning, both of which are critical (Waller & Prosser, 2023). Secondly, unlike disciplinary research, the SoTL inquiry emphasized researchers' identities as both researchers and teachers, and its primary focus is on addressing actual educational issues in the classroom, particularly by evaluating students' learning outcomes and enhancing their learning effectiveness with the researchers' reflection on the teaching practice (Kern et al., 2015; Trigwell, 2021). Furthermore, its research orientation made SoTL a rigorous process with evidence-based outcomes and critical reflection (Fanghanel, 2013; Hutchings & Shulman, 1999). Combining these features, using Waller and Prosser's definition, SoTL inquiry is:

a research-informed, evidence-based, critical yet collegial reflection on teaching and learning process, with the aim of improving practice within the aligned disciplines and professions. Most often, SoTL-based research projects are conducted by discipline-based staff inquiring into and reflecting on their own practice to improve their teaching and learning. (Waller & Prosser, 2023, p. 32)

Teaching Practice Research Program

The Teaching Practice Research Program (TPRP) is a government grant program that funds individual university teachers to conduct SoTL research. It was launched in 2017 and was the first grant program for individual lecturers from the Ministry of Education, Taiwan (Fwu & Lee, 2020). The background of the TPRP implementation has several reasons, such as responding to international trends in SoTL research, addressing shortcomings in teaching improvement measures, promoting multi-track faculty promotion, and shaping a SoTL culture in higher education (Chen, 2014; Fwu, 2013; Fwu & Lee, 2020; Huang, 2020; Hung & Huang, 2022).

Like other SoTL practices, the TPRP encourages instructors to identify classroom-based challenges in their educational settings and to utilize evidence-based research to enhance teaching quality and promote students' learning effectiveness (MOE Teaching Practice Research Program, 2024). However, this government grant has distinct features. It has a national project office, established by the MOE, which manages the program's administrative work, reviews, and approves projects. It also emphasizes the role of higher-education institutions, namely universities, in supporting and shaping the SoTL community and network within and across institutions to enable lecturers to conduct SoTL inquiries (Fwu & Lee, 2020; MOE Teaching Practice Research Program, 2024).

Another unique characteristic is its standardized requirements for applicants and the overall scale of funding. The grant requires university faculty members to integrate their SoTL projects into their courses. Instructors may select the option that best aligns with their TPRP research from the courses they teach within 10 subject fields, such as STEM, Social Science, Humanities, or three thematic areas, for example, University Social Responsibility (USR); this option cannot be decoupled from the course content (MOE Teaching Practice Research Program, 2024). From 2018 to 2023, the grant annually subsidized approximately 1,500 university teachers to conduct TPRP across various disciplines (MOE Teaching Practice Research Program, 2024).

TPRP and Professional Development

The current literature on the TPRP generally focuses on its mechanisms and its impact on the Taiwanese higher education landscape. However, little research addresses the TPRP's influence on individual instructors' professional development, particularly from the lecturers' perspective. To bridge this gap, this study provided essential insights into university lecturers' perceptions of the TPRP's impact on teaching effectiveness and on individual instructors' professional growth. Our research question was: Do university teachers perceive that engaging the TPRP benefits their professional development in teaching effectiveness and their careers?

Methodologies

The purpose of this study is to explore university lecturers' perception of the relationship between the TPRP and their professional development as higher education instructors. To gather in-depth insights, this study employed purposive sampling and snowball sampling to recruit participants (Douglas, 2022). Six participants, predominantly from the STEM and Business fields, were involved in the research. All participants had experience conducting their TPRP projects from 2018 to 2023 academic years. Moreover, their teaching experience exceeded three years, with some experienced lecturers having taught for more than ten years in higher education.

Regarding data collection, this study utilized individual, synchronous online interviews with semi-structured questions (Douglas, 2022). The interviews were conducted from May to June 2024. For data analysis, this study employed a reflexive thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2019). While reflexive thematic analysis centers on thematic coding, it actively embraces the researcher's "subjectivity" and "reflexivity", recognizing that their understanding of the context inevitably informs the analysis. (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 590). Drawing on the researcher's prior experience in managing TPRP projects in higher education institutions, the researcher employed reflexive thematic analysis to conduct rigorous data analysis.

In addition, since the sample size was small, generalizing the result was not the purpose. Instead, the researcher presented multiple perspectives from participants' responses to present their attitudes toward the TPRP, their experiences engaging in TPRP projects, and how this mechanism influenced their professional development (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Through a diligent qualitative research process, this study obtained valuable information that supports subsequent research findings.

Research Findings

Through systematic investigations, this research highlighted two critical aspects of the TPRP's impact on university teachers' professional development: teaching effectiveness and their professional careers as higher education educators.

Teaching Effectiveness

Within the SoTL inquiry context, the TPRP supported university teachers in reframing their teaching to be student-centered to address classroom problems (Fwu & Lee, 2020; Hung & Huang, 2022). Based on the participants' responses, this could be further divided into strategic methods for promoting student learning and professional growth in teaching. Participants attempted to introduce diverse pedagogies to foster students' active engagement. This included adapting innovative instructional materials to meet the students' needs, dividing the course contents into smaller elements to make the content easier to understand, introducing collaborative learning strategies such as problem-based learning (PBL) to make students acquire and apply knowledge with their peers, and utilizing a flipped classroom to make students actively engaged in the learning process. These strategies were also widely used in TPRP practices within the Taiwanese SoTL inquiry community (Chung & Hsu, 2023; Hung & Huang, 2022).

Utilizing appropriate methods to assess students' learning outcomes was another critical element mentioned by participants (Fanghanel, 2013). For instance, a participant observed that students often believed they had acquired knowledge from lectures or textbook practices without applying it to other contexts. To tackle this issue, the participant collaborated with colleagues in the same field to develop error-type quizzes to promote students' self-correction in acquiring core content knowledge and to enhance engagement in effective learning. According to the participant, this targeted assessment design successfully improved students' overall learning effectiveness. Regarding lecturers' professional teaching development, participants reported that they employed evidence from their TPRP project to support teaching innovation and self-reflection, thereby enhancing their overall teaching effectiveness (Kern et al., 2015). Generally, participants reported that involvement in the TPRP supports both lecturers' teaching and students' learning effectiveness, which aligns with one of the central goals of the TPRP (MOE Teaching Practice Research Program, 2024).

Professional Careers as Higher Education Educators

Compared with overall positive responses regarding the TPRP's impact on advancing instructors' teaching development, participants were less optimistic about their professional careers after participating in the TPRP. Despite participants' concerns about their professional careers, as depicted in the following section, they also discussed how this program benefited their professional development, particularly through continuous teaching innovation, TPRP

networking and collaboration, and the strengthening of their identity as higher education educators.

In their interview responses, participants indicated that, because student composition and areas of focus in higher education changed each year, they had to refine their teaching annually to meet students' needs in a constantly evolving higher education environment. As mentioned, participants continued to adopt innovative pedagogical approaches to improve students' learning outcomes, hence providing opportunities for their professional learning through teaching practice and conducting SoTL inquiry.

Participants also noted another significant impact of the TPRP mechanism. Since providing the SoTL inquiry and teaching innovation workshops or experience sharing activities, held by the established program office, the six regional bases, as well as the institutions, it created a space for those passionate about teaching excellence and SoTL inquiries to exchange ideas, share research insights, and even generated the opportunity to collaborate with their colleagues within and across disciplines. (Fwu & Lee, 2020; Hung & Huang, 2022). Although there is little literature and direct evidence on how these mechanisms have influenced instructors' professional careers, participants in this study indicated that the TPRP community clearly promoted their academic professional development.

Thirdly, and perhaps most significantly, the TPRP strengthened participants' identities as tertiary education educators. Through engagement with the TPRP, instructors recognized that their roles encompass not only expertise in disciplinary research but also a commitment to guiding students in acquiring and applying professional knowledge (Burdick & Hallman, 2022; Nixon et al., 2001). However, this did not mean that participants shifted their identities to teachers and discarded their professional research expertise. In contrast, participants noticed that involvement in the TPRP inquiry facilitated the integration of their disciplinary expertise with their evolving teaching roles.

Structured Challenges and Concerns

While discussing the benefits of professional development for their careers, participants in this study raised several concerns that led them to hesitate to change their career paths to become merely SoTL researchers. Conversely, most participants still prioritized subject-specific research as more important to their careers than SoTL research.

Participants reported that participating in the TPRP required them to adopt different inquiry methods, which required additional time and effort to learn. Especially for those with a STEM disciplinary background, the TPRP or SoTL inquiry was considered a social science or educational inquiry, prompting them to acquire new knowledge of pedagogical theories, educational literature reviews, and social science inquiry procedures and analyses. Those from the business area also encountered a similar difficulty in the SoTL inquiry. Although they invested considerable effort in conducting TPRP research, improving teaching methods, and innovating teaching practices, their contributions were rarely recognized by peers in their disciplines, leading to feelings of disciplinary alienation. Similar findings were reported in Webb and Tierney's (2020) study.

Additionally, at the institutional level, participants encountered career barriers, particularly the lack of recognition for their efforts to advance teaching and to support students' learning effectiveness. This lack of recognition has then hindered their merit, promotion, and even

tenure opportunities, since most higher education institutions still require traditional disciplinary research for career advancement. This forced instructors into a difficult choice: investing time in high-quality SoTL inquiry and teaching innovation or publishing in their core field to gain more credit for career advancement.

Following directly from this career concern is the hesitation to publish their TPRP outcomes in journals or at disciplinary education conferences. Most participants chose instead to prioritize solving immediate classroom problems, thereby limiting the TPRP program's broader scholarly impact and its ability to influence the wider academic community.

Conclusion

This study explored the impact of the Teaching Practice Research Program (TPRP) on the professional development of university instructors in Taiwan. The findings demonstrated significant influence in some key areas, including teaching advancement, professional networking, disciplinary and interdisciplinary collaboration, and an awareness of being an educator who guides students in acquiring and applying disciplinary knowledge. Despite noting that conducting the TPRP, a form of SoTL inquiry, created career barriers due to the lack of formal recognition of their teaching efforts and their identity as SoTL researchers, participants maintained a positive attitude. They valued this governmental funding for its role in driving educational innovation, supporting professional development, and strengthening their identity as both disciplinary experts and educators.

These findings partially align with other research on SoTL and professional development, such as Webb and Tierney's (2020) comparative case study of SoTL practices in teaching-oriented and research-focused universities across two countries, particularly with the transformation of researcher identity and the challenges of career alienation. However, the Taiwanese TPRP is unique due to its top-down mechanism. By funding lecturers to conduct SoTL inquiries, promoting teaching excellence, and collaborating with universities to foster student-centered learning environments, the TPRP Program Office provides a sustained, structural support system that distinguishes the Taiwanese context from other international practices.

Regarding implications, this study suggests that a top-down mechanism benefits in fostering a SoTL researcher-friendly culture within the higher education environment. Currently, the lack of recognition of instructors who engage in the SoTL inquiry and teaching advancement is a primary barrier. Firstly, it undermines university teachers' willingness to prioritize students' learning achievement. Moreover, it hinders institutions' shift in attitudes toward acknowledging instructors' teaching excellence. This includes incentivizing their efforts, such as introducing multi-track promotion and funding for teaching-related research. Such shifts could broaden the impact of SoTL beyond individual classroom practice and influence the wider research-oriented academic community. Although some critical voices might be encountered on its bureaucratic elements, introducing a top-down mechanism from the government and mandatory institutional support might provide a solution to advance SoTL practitioners' teaching practice and to acknowledge their research efforts not only at the institutional level but also across the Taiwanese higher education landscape, thereby recognizing SoTL research as equally important as disciplinary research.

Finally, this study acknowledges certain limitations. The small sample size may not fully represent the comprehensive views of all SoTL researchers involved in the TPRP; however, these in-depth interviews provide valuable qualitative insights into how university instructors'

perceptions of the SoTL inquiry and its influence on their professional development. Secondly, the research scope could be expanded beyond STEM and business fields to the social sciences and humanities, yielding a more comprehensive understanding of lecturers' perceptions. Thirdly, this study did not cover those research-oriented higher education institutions. The perspectives of faculty at research universities are also a topic worth exploring. Further research is recommended to broaden the scales and the coverage of both disciplinary and institutional types.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The author declares that Grammarly, an AI-assisted writing tool, and Google Gemini, an AI-assisted technology, were used to proofread and refine the manuscript's language. The usage was limited to correcting grammatical and spelling errors and rephrasing statements for accuracy and clarity. The author further declares that, apart from Grammarly and Google Gemini, no other AI or AI-assisted technologies have been used to generate content in writing the manuscript. The ideas, design, procedures, findings, analyses, and discussion are original and derived from appropriate and systematic conduct of the research.

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Contact email: wujch90@gmail.com