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Introduction to the special issue of SOTL in the South: advancing student engagement in learning – experiences from Pakistan

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Editorial

Introduction to the special issue of *SOTL in the South*: advancing student engagement in learning – experiences from Pakistan

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This special issue of *SOTL in the South* is one of the noteworthy outcomes of the September 2017 SoTL Conference on *Active Learning Pedagogies in Higher Education,* hosted by the Network of Teaching and Learning at the Aga Khan University (AKU), that was held in Karachi, Pakistan. We would like to express our profound gratitude to Professor Brenda Leibowitz who gave an influential and impassioned keynote presentation at the AKU SoTL conference on the ethics of SoTL and lent considerable support and guidance to the initiative that is this special issue. Her passing leaves the *SOTL in the South* community without their strongest and most effective supporter. However, her legacy will be evident in the growth in and engagement of the *SOTL in the South* community, which was her vision.

The theme which unites all the articles in this special issue is *Advancing Student Engagement in Learning*. In each one, there is a focus on ways in which the student experience in universities of the global South can be improved through progressive student-centred pedagogy, be that through the use of a technology to enhance engagement, effective supervision and guidance, design of a course that enables the authentic voices of students to be heard and be a part of pedagogical research, or a useful and thoughtful framework for clarifying students' understanding of and engagement in higher order thinking. Also, each paper reflects a particular way of thinking about pedagogy, challenging the readers not only to attend to the outcome of the research but also the particular ways in which the outcome was reached and the perspectives and ideologies that informed the authors' work.

Most would agree that critical thinking is an important outcome or goal of a university education. We are all sensitive to the fact that the development of critical thinking (CT), in the context of learning, may assist students to become more reflective in their own thinking and develop healthy and disciplined 'skepticism' in the analysis of the thinking of others among other benefits. As faculty, our

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experience in teaching for critical thinking obliges us to confront its complexity, the 'slipperiness' of its definition and, in particular, the challenge of its assessment. In the first of five peer-reviewed papers for this special issue, the authors (Sadia Muzaffar Bhutta, Sahreen Chauhan, Syeda Kausar, Raisa Gul, Shanaz Cassum, and Tashmin Khamis, all of the Aga Khan University) tackle the assessment of critical thinking with a view to reflecting both the interdisciplinary and indigenous nature of the concept in the context of their university in the global South. They implicitly acknowledge the centrality of assessment in guiding student learning and that well-articulated criteria for assessment provides transparency and fairness for all. This paper illustrates the challenging process of identifying and clarifying key CT skills and dispositions, determining the representative constructs that can be measured at various levels of quality, and establishing reliability of these levels, with the goal of creating a set of rubrics for CT. The creation of a valid and reliable method of assessment for CT, that is appropriate to the context in which it will be used (in this case, graduate students in the disciplines of medicine, nursing, and education) is a substantial undertaking. In sharing the process leading to the development of these rubrics, the authors encourage and give guidance to other SOTL researchers to pursue the same goal for their students.

The second peer-reviewed article in this special issue, entitled 'Students Perspective Regarding Clinical Preceptors (CPs) in the Baccalaureate Undergraduate Nursing Programme in Karachi Pakistan' explores nursing student views of the quality of supervision that they receive during their clinical practice. Clinical supervision, for the most part, is provided by CPs: nurses with a minimum of three years of clinical experience and a baccalaureate degree. The role of the CPs evolved from a demand for clinical supervision that cannot be filled by nursing faculty members. Ironically, movement of skilled nursing professionals to the West is a major factor in the need for CP supervision and, during the authors' research for this article, two of their colleagues did just that. One of the significant attributes of professional programmes in universities is commitment to high standards of supervision provided by personnel external to the university programmes. This research is an indication of that commitment and reflects the importance of SOTL across learning environments and the practices therein. With a qualitative research approach, the authors sought to establish the strengths and limitations of CP supervision, with an intention to address areas where improvement is necessary to maintain the quality of education in their nursing programme. In line with the philosophy of SOTL, the intentions of the research included supporting other nursing programs to engage in the CP supervision model to address the lack of availability of regular nursing faculty to fulfil this critical supervisory role.

In the global South, the digital technology revolution in education is as obvious as anywhere else on the globe. Options for internet connectivity continue to improve and the use of digital devices are fully embedded in the society, most notably in the urban centres. With the growth of digital technology, learning environments can be thought of in terms of time rather than place and, in some measure, this has democratised learning. One of the grand challenges of designing digitally-based learning experiences is to ensure that the needs and capabilities of the intended users are a priority in the design process. Authors Azra Naseem, Kulsoom Ghias, Murad Khan, Sohail Bawani, Kausar Skhan, and Tashfeen Ahmad of the Aga Khan University were motivated to design a technology-based intervention to advance a need to improve bioethics education in medicine. They share with readers their participatory process in the design of a mobile 'just-in-time' learning (JiTL) application for students and faculty in a Pakistani medical school. JiTL refers to learning that is taken up by learners

when and where they decide that they are ready to or need to learn. The authors position their work in the context of the patriarchal and hierarchical culture of their country arguing that the more informed doctors and nurses are about ethical practices in medicine, the more likely they are to think through difficult ethical dilemmas with the needs of the patient at the centre of their decision-making processes. They also appeal for change in the culture of medicine in which there are a multiplicity of competing demands that reduce the time for continued learning. The description and assessment of the participatory process reveals that it is a necessary, complex and time-consuming process, highly dependent on the time and effort of potential end-users. The challenge for participatory educational design, appears to be the maintenance of participants' engagement in design areas in which they have limited knowledge and interest.

The fourth paper in this special edition also focuses on technology to support engaged learning. The authors, Zehra Jamil, Azra Naseem, Eman Rashwan and Sumrah Khalid of the Aga Khan University, report on research findings on the three phases of course design and development, course implementation and course evaluation of a blended learning (BL) initiative in embryology in a medical school in Pakistan. BL is a format in which technology plays a role in supporting learning but face to face learning (F2F) remains part of the course design. The rationale for this work was based on feedback from students who were dissatisfied with didactic lectures, minimal time for them to engage in the class, and limited time to learn the complexities of embryology. This is typical of the motivation for SoTL, as the effectiveness of student learning should be our central concern. Enhancing the course with technology-based opportunities for guided self-study, online discussions with teachers and peers and formative assessment of knowledge before engaging in F2F, can result in the use of F2F in a much more engaging, interactive manner. Although students were able to use the technology-enhanced opportunities to facilitate their understanding, the authors report on many aspects of the BL curriculum that students found challenging. Although these were unintentional outcomes, they found that students were strategic in using the available technology and introduced the use of their own communications platform (WhatsApp). This finding reminds us that students are not passive recipients of our pedagogy, just as they resist being passive recipients of our knowledge. Technology can serve to emancipate the learner to shape education in a way that is efficacious for them.

The fifth peer-reviewed article, a collaborative effort between a faculty member, Nosheen Ali (Aga Khan University, Institute for Educational Development) and seven graduate students in a course entitled 'Environmental Education' reflects a multiplicity of perspectives in pedagogy that are concordant with reclaiming control over the direction of higher education in the global South. Acknowledging that the 'life worlds' of most of her students were diametrically opposed to what they were encountering in their higher education experience in a private university in Karachi, Pakistan, the teacher animated the students through eco-pedagogical experiences that encouraged "creative self-expression (which) helped to unravel educational dogmas and disciplinary regimes, creating space for a cooperative re-imagining of how we might inhabit ourselves, the classroom and the planet alike". These encounters served to support the revelation of stories of the ecology of students' place and histories, and the spiritual lens through which they see meaning and purpose in the former two concepts. The underlying intention in the article is to encourage decolonisation, which is described in the article as "shifting the identity of its object so as to re-position those who have been objects of research into questioners, critics, theorists, knowers, and communicators" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2017:4).

The result of this collaborative work is a series of richly descriptive and compelling narratives of students' and the faculty member's experience of, and in, nature. This paper serves as a reminder of the alternatives to Western pedagogies and research methodologies that advance student engagement and understanding in ways that are both rigorous and enlightening.

This special issue of *SOTL in the South* ends with two reflective papers that speak to key roles of university faculty members in the global South that are vital to student engagement and success and consequently critical to the wellbeing of societies in the global South. In the first paper, Pammla Petrucka, Associate Professor in the College of Nursing at the University of Saskatchewan in Saskatoon, Canada, and the Nelson Mandela University in Tanzania, addresses the supervision of graduate students, a unique and multifaceted form of pedagogy. This faculty role is made more complex by the interdisciplinarity of research, the burgeoning of new knowledge, and ways to share that knowledge, and by changes in the very nature of what we know as 'a university'. Dr Petrucka argues the case for SOTL researchers in the global South to apply their energy and intellect to the assessment of current models of the faculty supervisory process and the socio-economic contexts in which they exist. She provides an unambiguous overview of the persistent Western influences that have impeded the growth of indigenous supervisory models and practices. The author asserts that, with an obvious need to enhance intellectual capacity in universities of the global South, particularly those located in low-middle income countries (LMIC), "The time has come to make the implicit explicit, within this context, sharing the exemplars, revealing the best or promising practices, challenging the parameters, and building the evidence for potential future directions regarding the PhD supervisory process in southern LMIC contexts". Dr Petrucka has laid out a compelling case for increased SOTL activity on the graduate student supervisory role by faculty in universities of the global South. She has also lucidly articulated the reasons for creating indigenous solutions to indigenous issues in this geographical area.

The second reflective paper shifts our focus to a pedagogical experience that affects positive changes in faculty views and practices as teachers in the classroom. This SOTL paper is a result of a collaboration by faculty members and members of the Teaching and Learning Network (TL_net) at the Aga Khan University, which is a private institution, distributed across three continents including Africa and Asia. In writing this paper, the authors examine their own practice and the efficacy of implementing a pedagogical intervention (the Instructional Skills Workshop or ISW), developed in Canada and successfully used in countries across the world. The authors provide us an analysis of learning events in this intensive workshop of 24 hours and evidence of a shift in views by participants on the teaching role. The critical element in the workshop is the interdisciplinary peer interactions in presenting short teaching episodes and the giving and receiving of peer feedback. The subtle and important subtext in this paper is the effort to assess the usefulness of a workshop that has a long history in Western colleges and universities, in the context of a single integrated university with campuses in Pakistan and across East Africa.

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