

Becoming a SoTL Scholar

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Identity Exploration



Multidisciplinary



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CHAPTER 16

THE IMPORTANCE OF AUTONOMY AND COMMUNITY FOR SOTL ENGAGEMENT

How Six Scholars Embraced Change to Assert Their SoTL Values and Identity

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In the past decade, much of the research has focused on the understanding of what it means to be a SoTL researcher and the challenges of conducting SoTL in postsecondary institutions (Bass 2020) that tend to value traditional disciplinary research. While much of the literature speaks to “doing SoTL scholarship” (Felten 2013), less focus is on the researchers themselves: “being” a SoTL scholar. A case in point: we are six women scholars from different disciplines, institutions, countries, and academic levels and roles, as demonstrated in table 16.1 later in the Research Design section.

Our collaboration began in 2019. Similar to Miller-Young, Yeo, and Manarin in [chapter 17](#), we have grappled with the concept of identity formation and lived tensions within SoTL and the sense of belonging generally within institutions; both are well documented (Castelló et al. 2021). However, for SoTL scholars, identity is often ambiguous or uncertain, sometimes described as being betwixt and between in a liminal space, leading to feelings of exclusion or being caught at the margins. These experiences create tensions between

our identities as disciplinary scholars and SoTL scholars. (Kensington-Miller et al. 2015; Simmons et al. 2013; Webb and Welsh 2021).

In this chapter, we ask: how do we respond to tensions in academia as SoTL scholars? How we navigate these tensions as we shape our identities as SoTL scholars and brokers is important for sustaining all our work within SoTL. The tensions we experience include competing norms in an academic system that imposes a set of values that are not completely ours. Tensions also arise when the status quo is disrupted, when we work outside predefined identities and portfolios. They also come from having to play within the rules if, or for as long as, we choose to stay in academia. At times, we are stuck maintaining the same structures we are constrained by: “Another manifestation of the power of disciplines to legitimize particular types of scholarship is the need for scholars to engage in two tracts of publishing—one to make the individual happy and one to make the institution happy” (Godbold et al. 2021, 387). Yet, we have overcome this disconnection, by forming a community through which we can articulate and uphold our shared values. These values include “a commitment to make a difference in the lives of students regardless of our role definition, a belief that SoTL is essential and valuable, a willingness to challenge boundaries between research and teaching, between different identities and between disciplines” (Godbold et al. 2021, 388).

We aim to demonstrate how we have used these tensions productively. In this way, we bring an empirical lens to Manarin and Abrahamson’s call for embracing SoTL as “the vehicle for transition, inquiry, and growth, working between disciplines and sharing a common practice” (2016, 1). Through these tensions, we demonstrate how we have learned and become active change agents, “elevat[ing] and complicat[ing] the role that inquiry into teaching and learning might play in institutional change and the expansion of higher education.” (Bass 2020, 3)

Our Research Trajectory

Our group first published research on brokers who facilitate SoTL across institutional and disciplinary boundaries (Kensington-Miller et al. 2021, 2022) and how they often play at the margins of disciplinary cultures (Kubiack et al. 2015). We argued that brokers understand the diversity evident in SoTL work (Booth and Woollacott 2018) and develop the ability to speak the languages of many disciplines within the SoTL context. As a result, brokers have an understanding of disciplinary cultures, but are not tied to a traditional territory or discipline (Chng, Leibowitz, and Mårtensson 2020). Yet, our research on brokers, as different from traditional academics, did not address the ways that brokers respond to the tensions that arise within institutional contexts because of this difference and how we learn from these tensions as we shape our identities as SoTL scholars and brokers.

What we realized was that in some instances, brokering was most successful when it went against the grain of institutional culture as it bridged different significant networks. We then considered the dynamic structures and levels of assistance necessary to support SoTL within our institutions as we attempted to make sense of our diverse experiences and institutional contexts (Kensington-Miller et al. 2021). We now take our collaborative research a step further by examining what we learned about the tensions that emerged from working against the grain and how we applied this learning to our ways of working as SoTL scholars. We examine how we respond to tensions in academia emanating from the differences between traditional educational structures and cultures and the more flexible, fluid, and collaborative culture and structures inherent in SoTL work (Campbell-Perry 2022; Leibowitz and Bozalek 2018; Chng, Leibowitz and Mårtensson 2020). While our work as SoTL scholars is context-driven, we attempt to capture our common agentic responses to the academic tensions experienced by many SoTL scholars across different institutional contexts and levels of SoTL experience. By acknowledging and defining these responses, we hope to stimulate further theoretical and practice-based discourse

not only about the tensions emerging from difference and liminality but also about SoTL practitioners' ways of working with such tensions.

Theoretical Framework

This chapter builds on decade-long research about the nature of the third space or marginal spaces in academia (Whitchurch 2013; Veles, Carter, and Boon 2019), and how “blended professionals identify with an ever fluid context within academia” (McIntosh and Nutt 2022, 6). The following theoretical and conceptual framework considers some of the most recent theory and research in this critical field of inquiry which continues to evolve as SoTL and other forms of integrated practice contribute to the formation of alternative ways of being and ways of knowing within traditional academic contexts. In addition, this book's other chapters offer an extensive review on identity construction within the field of SoTL which we have drawn on to inform our theoretical framework and discuss briefly below. Our theoretical framework helps expand upon, and complicates, one of Felten's principles of good practice in SoTL; good practice is “grounded in context” (Felten 2013).

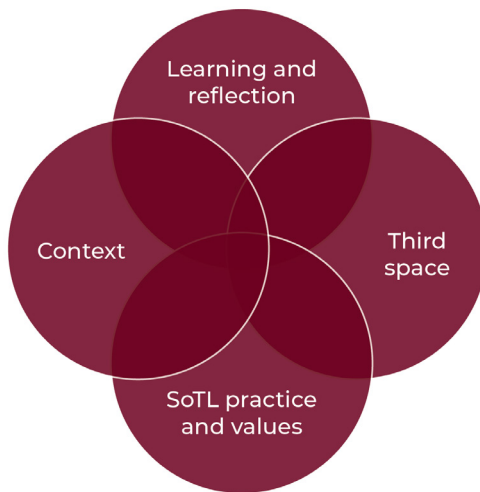


Figure 16.1. The ever-fluid context of SoTL within the academy

Identity Construction

Disciplinary and interdisciplinary identity construction, as part of SoTL work within academia (Simmons et al. 2013; Kensington-Miller, Renc-Roe, Morón-García 2015; Webb 2016), includes the relationship of transdisciplinary and collaborative SoTL practices within traditional institutional contexts (Manarin and Abrahamson 2016; Miller-Young, Yeo, and Manarin 2018; Godbold et al. 2021; Huijser et al. 2021; Lee et al. 2022). A new SoTL identity is often challenging because the demands of the academy often conflict with academic values. Manarin and Abrahamson discuss the tensions that SoTL scholars contend with as they navigate competing values in academia. These tensions lead to “troublesome spaces,” which can be “both enabling and disabling” (2016, 1).

In this chapter, we suggest that as SoTL scholars, we sometimes adapt to academic expectations and cultural norms, but because of the troublesome knowledge or contradictions we experience as SoTL scholars, we chart new pathways for colleagues and ourselves. We suggest that being different, and learning from our differences, helps us as SoTL scholars and brokers to navigate tensions within our academic contexts and address “relations of power” (Beech et al. 2021, 396).

Third Space Professionals

In their work on integrated practitioners who work within third spaces in academic contexts, McIntosh and Nutt (2022) discuss the “uncomfortable tension between recognized and contested identities in the academy” (5). Although McIntosh and Nutt recognize that there is a healthy debate about the definition of third space professionals, they summarize particular definitions that are similar to the descriptions of SoTL practitioners and are consistent with our findings from this study. For example, they cite Veles, Carter, and Boon (2019) who argue that third space professionals are often “complex, collaboration champions, working cross-institutionally, often in a thematic way, and operating outside their predefined work portfolios on various collaborative projects” (4).

Yet, despite this collaborative work, Ackerman (2022) suggests that there is a degree of invisibility within institutions and a sense of imposter syndrome among those in the third space workforce. Ackerman examines how third space professionals respond to invisibility and imposter syndrome in third space work by becoming “positive disruptors” which, she argues, institutions should nurture to bridge barriers and boundaries across roles and structures in higher education.

Through the analysis of our narrative research, we discovered we shared commonalities in the ways we addressed tensions within academic contexts as SoTL scholars but also recognized that these commonalities were not static and would continue to change in the future.

Research Design

The purpose of our study was to examine how we respond to tensions in academia as SoTL scholars. Our aim was to learn from these tensions, recognising that how they shape our identities as SoTL scholars and brokers is important for sustaining our work within SoTL. We begin with the profiles of our group, synthesized in table 16.1.

Methodology

Our empirical research was guided by narrative inquiry and analysis. This approach to research, which prioritizes stories of experiences, was a valuable lens in which to understand SoTL scholars’ experiences of becoming and being SoTL scholars. As an approach to SoTL research, stories share events, but also convey emotion, tell parallel stories, and represent knowledge differently. Through the individual story, researchers can explore how institutional and societal cultures are at play and how the participant constructs their identity as an individual embedded within the culture. The common form of narrative inquiry includes biography and autobiography, frequently shared in interviews (Fontana and Frey 1998).

Narratives are a valuable data source as they have the potential to validate the experience of ordinary people, especially ordinary

Author	Country	Current Role	Previous Roles	Disciplinary Background	Years of SoTL Engagement
Analise	Canada	PhD candidate Sessional instructor	Teaching assistant	Cell biology and genetics, data science	6
Andrea	Canada	Associate professor of teaching, education	Secondary school teacher	Teacher education	13
Ann	US	Professor, higher education and student affairs	Student affairs Institutional researcher/ Enrollment management	Higher education	5
Barbara	New Zealand	Associate professor, education and social work	Academic developer Secondary school teacher	Mathematics and biochemistry	12
Geneviève	Canada	Director, teaching and learning centre	Professor Educational developer	Applied linguistics	9
Heather	US	Professor, art and design education	Community organization leader	History	8

Table 16.1. Profile of the authors, as of 2020–2023

women who are liable to be omitted from many research projects (Coates 1996; Fraser 2004; Reinhartz 1992; Riessman 1987). The stories are composed and received in “interactional, historical, institutional, and discursive” contexts (Riessman 2008, 105); therefore both the speaker and researcher are active investigators who bring meaning to the text (Burr 1995; Riessman 2008; Sparkes and Smith 2008).

In our research interviews, a conversational, transactional partnership is developed between the interviewer and the interviewee as they construct knowledge (Koro-Ljungberg 2008; Miller and Crabtree 1999; Rubin and Rubin 2005). The interview is not mining the experience of an interviewee, but temporarily constructing a shared discourse amongst diverse professionals.

Our methodology includes a purposeful sample of SoTL scholars, multiple methods of data collection, and an analytical approach that views interpretation as a dynamic process between the individuals and the group, emphasizing the co-construction of knowledge between researchers and participants (Frechette et al. 2020).

Methods and Analysis

As recommended by Frechette et al. (2020), we adopted multiple methods of data collection: 200-word autobiographies written at two points in time, responses to the autobiographies, and semi-structured group interviews. Written in 2019, our first autobiographies documented our journeys to involvement in SoTL. Our second autobiographies, written two years later, focused on tensions we experienced as SoTL scholars. Our analyses of the autobiographies were used to generate the interview protocol. During Zoom group interviews, we focused on “interviewee-oriented” (Fraser 2004, 185) conversation in order to avoid mining for information or cross-examining (Kvale 2006). Following the interview, each group member transcribed their own interview as a way of locating ourselves within the transcript (Lapadat and Lindsay 1999), incorporating reflexivity (Hobson 1996), and member-checking the content.

Thematic analysis offered an accessible and flexible approach to analyzing the qualitative data (Braun and Clark 2006; Fereday and Muir-Cochrane 2006). Interacting with the data involved thematic coding through a seven-stage process (Fraser 2004). First, the transcripts were read, multiple times, and we generated initial codes. During the weekly meetings, the codes were discussed and collated into potential categories. This was repeated with the annotated autobiographies, which reinforced the emerging categories. We continued to check if the categories worked in relation to the coded extracts and the entire data set.

Ongoing analysis and discussion supported a refinement of the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells. The credibility of this research is demonstrated through evidence (i.e., use of the participants' words or quotations from transcripts), as detailed substantiation from participants provides an insider's view (Charmaz and Mitchell 2001). The reliability of the interview data is also supported by the sincerity of the research. Through transparency in ethics, transcription, and data interpretation (Tracy 2010, 842–43), this project sincerely reflects the co-construction of knowledge through the constructionist interview. Finally, we produced a report of the data, including a selection of vivid, compelling extract examples.

Findings

In addressing our research question about how we respond to tensions in academia as SoTL scholars, we identified four main areas—accepting autonomy; finding community; embracing change; aligning our values—where tensions emerged across all our narratives. Here, we contribute snippets from our narratives that demonstrate how our various positionings were experienced and made sense of as we responded to the lived tensions that shaped our identities as SoTL scholars and leaders.

Accepting Autonomy

SoTL scholars often feel a sense of isolation and lack of community within their institutions. Although viewing themselves as

boundary crossers (Kubiak et al. 2015), they often feel like they do not completely identify with any one discipline. Many of us described this feeling as: “*being an outsider in their disciplinary culture*” or engaging in “*other scholarship*.” Although our group members mentioned a limited or absent connection with our disciplinary home as somewhat unsettling, we also recognized its benefits. Freedom from the constraints of disciplinary expectations afforded a sense of autonomy. Our group members were able to (re)create scholarship and identity on their own terms. One participant discussed how the sense of autonomy empowered her to “*grow into a confident scholar*.” Another participant described it in this way,

I also get left alone. . . . As long as I do my teaching and my teaching is good, nobody really cares what I'm doing with the rest of my time, so that frees me up to do a project with the faculty pharmaceutical sciences, or with somebody in engineering or with a colleague in Scotland.

Free from having to conform with expectations related to a specific discipline or culture, SoTL scholars can define their identity on their own terms:

It is challenging but also if we embrace it, if we get messy with it, and we sort of relish the fact that we're non joiners, then it can be a really interesting place to be because you can kind of slither in between people's expectations.

Several other group members noted that a sense of autonomy caused them to rethink who they were or wanted to be. As one participant mentioned,

SoTL and DBER [discipline-based educational research] allowed me to engage in self-reflection around my own education and training. And ultimately to question the status quo of my own training and evaluate what was missing, why, and how I might be able to address certain issues.

One's level of autonomy can depend upon career choices, but agency is only activated when we are comfortable defining ourselves professionally:

Many of you are in a position where you are safe enough to be able to push back and say, "Well, says who?" Right? As for me, I'm no longer in that particular uncomfortable spot because I removed myself from it and I chose a different path. My path was not an easy one to follow because I first embraced the traditional academic path, then I rejected it.

Autonomy as productive tension affords opportunities to rethink traditional definitions of disciplines, roles, scholarship, teaching, and learning. Yet, this uncomfortable positioning necessarily meant that we looked for community elsewhere.

Finding Community

Although none of us has "SoTL" as an official title or department, each of us engages in SoTL from our own unique disciplines and positions. This sense of "otherness" within our own institutions was both common and obvious. As a result, we all sought out other communities in which to engage, often outside our home institutions. Many of us reflected on attending SoTL conferences and "*finding a home,*" "*finding my people,*" or "*being part of a family.*" Many of us found developing community outside the institution much easier in part because it can flatten an otherwise hierarchical landscape:

I do find it's actually easier to work outside the institution . . . because it just seems to be so many different hierarchical structures and people are title sensitive and they care about this discipline over this discipline.

We appreciated the "*sense of belonging, the inclusiveness as well as the differences in our positions, our faculties, our universities, our countries*" that being part of heterogeneous groups afforded us.

Our experiences finding a community of SoTL scholars within our institutions varied. For some of us, SoTL work is encouraged

and recognized as a valued form of scholarship. When “*the ethos [at the institution] is to reach out and collaborate with people,*” this contributes to a sense of a community within SoTL inside one’s institution. In other cases, relationships within the institution felt fraught or at least initially awkward:

Although outwardly I am welcomed, I am an intruder. I feel like the “new kid on the block” trying to fit in, wrestling with who I am and how my identity as a SoTL scholar can be productive here. I am slowly building relationships, trust, and their confidence in me . . .

Yet, no matter the stage of our careers, we all felt we needed to go outside of our discipline to find a community that supported our values:

I find that the people associated with DBER care a lot more about the people that they work with, like their students or their colleagues. . . . Just talking to them gets you out of your bubble, like to share a little bit and then there's like commonalities and differences. . . . Community is big.

In other words, finding community within the institution often means finding appreciative colleagues wherever they might be:

I really don't feel like I belong in my faculty as an inward facing member. . . . [I like the] idea of taking what I have and facing out from the faculty of education to other parts of the institution.

Many of us sought out opportunities to proactively and intentionally create community. One mentioned she didn’t “*know how you do SoTL without collaborating*” while another one explained that she leveraged her influence to mobilize decision makers in creating formal teaching and learning support at her institution: “*I organized faculty and chairs to push for a teaching and learning center.*”

We noted that SoTL work was the sphere where our ideas and work were valued: “*Maybe in academia you just need a place, even if it's*

not the exact place you intended for you to be in, you just need somewhere that you're getting support." Creating communities was a powerful response to the tensions we felt in other areas of academia where traditional disciplines were granted more power or prestige over pedagogical knowledge. Collaborating with disciplinary experts can elevate the value of SoTL:

In many cases I'm working with people in chemistry or engineering, who have no background in curriculum and pedagogy, and yet are educators. Right?? It's a unique body of knowledge . . . which is applicable everywhere on campus.

As SoTL brokers, we also build community by valuing others who engage in SoTL and validate the work that they do:

So [SoTL] really gives me language to explain to folks that what they're doing is a valuable scholarly approach to their teaching. [A professor] said, "I really hate the very notion of publishing research. This is not why I'm here." And we are able to validate her and say, "That's great that you just want to know for yourself and your students what works."

Finding or creating a SoTL community and spearheading collaborations are ways of navigating the challenges of being an outsider and lacking authority in some academic contexts. As a group, we understood that, in higher education, a collaborative stance towards research often does not yield much traditional recognition, but it brings value nonetheless. One of us humorously characterized it this way: *"I haven't had a title at the university. Can you imagine having a title like Director of Collaboration?"*

Embracing Change

Across our narratives, one pattern was abundantly clear: our individual journeys towards and within SoTL have been punctuated by changing roles and non-traditional career paths, compared to the typical tenure-track academic. At times, our unconventional identities caused tension through misunderstandings and confusion for our colleagues, such as *"you're going against the norm, and you have*

to justify why.” This was akin to the imposter syndrome that some of us experienced: “At first I felt like a fraud, that I had nothing to offer coming from a STEM background, but the leader of our [writing] group worked with our diversity.” Eventually, a reframing of who we are takes place: “Saying I’m a SoTL researcher always brought confusion about what it is, so it is easier to say I’m a social scientist who does SoTL research.” While a member of our group put it simply: “I call myself a scholar, sometimes a SoTL scholar, but it depends on the audience I guess,” another one drew connections between her SoTL research and the other work she receives recognition for:

I am a higher education scholar, and a part of higher education is teaching and learning, therefore part of higher education is SoTL—so for me it’s not a tension it’s part of who I am because that should be what higher ed is about now.

These examples of reframing are attempts to translate who we are as scholars in terms that are more widely understood by other colleagues: “That’s a lovely place to situate yourself.” But it remains nonetheless a clear affirmation of our positioning as well as our relationships with others:

I don’t think my identity as a SoTL researcher has changed—it’s my identity of fitting into a new group of people, and how I work with those people. There’s a huge tension there but it doesn’t change who I am.

It becomes productive when the change we have seen in ourselves gives way to change in our broader context: “It doesn’t matter if my heart is not convinced 100%, I’m going to do it. Then you convince the people around you.” Owning this process of adaptation within ourselves leads to broader, system-level change, albeit small and incremental, as demonstrated in the following conversation about making change:

Member 1: Even though you’re saying “I chart my own path,” it’s not just your own individual path you’re actually changing to make change in the institution. You’re working

with those colleagues to support them to grow as people and as scholars. But it's also going to affect the institution, you know, you're a change agent.

Unconvinced, member 2 replied: “*I’m doing it so that I can model for somebody else that these things are possible, but I’m not sure it ever gets seen to be totally honest.*” Unyielding, member 1 explained it in a way to convince all of us:

I understand it's not a whole department, but you're working with those other people in those other departments to make change. They're changing their teaching, they're changing their scholarship, and we're changing their identity.

As we navigate different boundaries and adapt, changing our own identities and influencing others, we realize that change is a natural process that leads to more reframing of our own thinking and actions:

If SoTL transcends student learning, if it has goals and aims that go beyond that, and if it helps thinking through one's teaching and what their aspirations about teaching might be and how they might realize this through SoTL, it becomes this big, less defined thing. And then, the boundaries are no longer so clear; we go in all sorts of directions depending on why it is that we're doing SoTL.

A broad understanding of the scope and possibilities afforded by SoTL work gives us freedom to explore, adapt, and cross boundaries once imposed upon us: “*I’m going to go there and I’m going to make my little networks and make myself useful to people. I’m going over here, because, at least, I come in peace. I come with something to offer.*”

As a new sense of belonging develops, new relationships also emerge and further reinforce our identity as SoTL practitioners: “*I met other people who talked and breathed SoTL and I knew I had found my research ‘home.’ Being a SoTL researcher made sense.*” Once a new sense of community is born, further change takes place within us. Thus, tension becomes productive, as we are able to channel our

difference to adapt, make new connections, and lean on others to continue to grow:

I really like working with other people because they bring [SoTL] stuff that I don't know, and so it's one way of learning. When you're working with people that are actually doing different stuff and have different voices about or different angles that they come from, I really get energy on that.

Change means that we have to have some comfort with new responsibilities, people, and ideas. Drawing on a wider community and personal autonomy, we were able to navigate the tensions in SoTL scholarship by being open to change.

Aligning Our Values

Aligning personal and professional values is part of our response to the tensions we experience as SoTL scholars. This is harder when we do not have others doing SoTL work to identify with, or when our faculty or department does not support or value SoTL scholarship. When disciplinary identity is the only kind valued and the dominant discourse, having a SoTL identity as well as the disciplinary research identity brings tension to give the former away as it is considered less or not important.

In describing our SoTL identity, we used a number of different metaphors suggesting a sense of deception (*trickster, chameleon, Trojan horse*) in order to subvert the hegemony that seeks to oppress and marginalize us. One member described the challenge that she has “*all these hats on,*” while another described “*identity as a prism. And I think that that's kind of interesting for all of us as we think about our SoTL identity as just being one facet, and I now understand that my SoTL identity is multi-faceted. I can now make connections across multiple initiatives I am involved in.*” To be true to our values, we looked at ways to develop acceptance and credibility and being in SoTL through our actions: “*I see myself as a scholar of teaching and learning and so therefore I have to get myself in the door, and then subvert through my actions.*” We adapt to the requirements of our positions in order to develop acceptance and credibility, while anchoring all of

our work in the same teaching and learning concepts. For example, one member noted that, regardless of the course or research they are engaged in, they were able to apply the same SoTL concepts: *“There are conceptual threads that run through everything I do, but how I apply those things is different.”*

A SoTL identity is often tied up with being part of a team or a collaboration, having similar values, rather than by oneself: *“It’s talking to your colleagues; it’s like helping this person, and so in a way you’re a scholar that’s like helping disseminate information but you’re probably strategically disseminating information and then building community.”* It is having *“other people who talked and breathed SoTL”* despite geographic location, disciplinary background, and academic position. Embracing the *“values of collaboration”* and the learning that comes from these collaborations were opportunities to align our personal and professional values:

Maintaining my beliefs about what makes sound SoTL research and my self-identification as a SoTL leader who values 1) collaboration 2) the absence of hierarchical power relationships 3) accountable to those I am working with and 4) supportive and resourceful, despite institutional forces with different values.

As SoTL scholars, part of our values in collaborating is to support others doing SoTL: *“If there is only one person like me at my institution who’s doing this kind of stuff and sees themselves as a scholar of teaching and learning who’s willing to work with others, then I have to do it, and I do it.”* These are *“the people that care deeply about teaching and the institution,”* and we had *“amazing conversations about what we thought was important, what we valued, why we thought it was important.”*

Our values meant we *“committed time and energy to making sure that others published and they did. I realized that’s what I want to do, I want to help faculty publish their SoTL research. . . . I’ll put in whatever it takes to help you.”* One of us used a vivid metaphor to explain non-competitive collaboration as a core value in her SoTL work: *“I*

equated [doing SoTL] to when I played volleyball. I always was the setter. I didn't spike, so my goal was to get it set up so someone could spike it."

Aligning our personal values, a belief in the benefits of SoTL, with our professional actions “*has enabled me to grow into a confident scholar, who can tackle wicked problems rather than trying to frame learning (narrowly) as an action verb.*” A SoTL identity relieves the tension between a recognized academic identity and personal values of work in higher education:

I realized that my “official” title at the time—professor and chair of a department—was not my identity. It was part of it, but there were so many other strands that were not recognized through titles or even compensation. . . . I came to these realizations slowly and throughout wrestled with my identity as a SoTL scholar.

This is not an easy recognition, and many institutional structures (appointment, promotion, tenure, etc.) may hinder this alignment of personal and professional values. Thus, the tension between fulfilling professional responsibilities and aligning our scholarship with our personal values leads many SoTL scholars to intersectional identities.

Discussion and Conclusion

Our intention, in this chapter, is to explore how we, as SoTL scholars, respond to tensions in academia. As our findings have shown, the themes of accepting autonomy, finding community, embracing change, and aligning values underpin our identities and actions as scholars, colleagues, and mentors. Much of the change we encourage in SoTL is driven by autonomous decisions and desires to make academia a more collaborative place for us and others. This drive for change can be classified under four general headings: navigating the academic hierarchies and spaces in ways that work for us; a personal disposition where we don't accept the status quo and look for ways to use SoTL to align our values with academia; actions we take to make change for ourselves and for others (often through collaboration); and strong reasons that drive us to change

how we engage in academia where we recognize the value of SoTL in our journeys.

SoTL has provided space to allow for work that requires lots of time to change the academic system. Often the journey and identity development as SoTL scholars starts by changing how we relate to academia—allowing us to find community, collaborators, mentors, and ultimately a sense of belonging. Building on this, we are then able to engage in professional development to improve our teaching, help our peers improve theirs, and ultimately improve the academic learning environments for faculty, staff, and students. The SoTL path is still a relatively new path, however, and we each navigate the path in the way that allows us to engage in work that we value and that has potential to benefit many others.

Our narrative inquiry work of the last four years has led us to take stock of an important shift in ourselves: as SoTL scholars, we have been empowered to use these tensions to our advantage, to shape and re-shape our SoTL identity as we learn and enact change within the academy (Beech et al. 2021). We acknowledge that there will continue to be tension in doing SoTL work within traditional definitions of disciplines, scholarship, teaching, and learning (Bennett et al. 2016; Webb and Welsh 2021), but our findings demonstrate how we use these tensions productively, having “step[ped] into a new way of knowing where the troublesomeness dissolves” (Manarin and Abrahamson 2016, 1). Now is the time to turn the notion of troublesome knowledge of SoTL on its head.

Despite our different contexts and roles, we found commonalities in our SoTL identities through our autonomy, community and collaboration, and the way we respond to change and our values. As SoTL scholars, we seek and embrace change within academia. Inevitably, tension arises when the status quo is disrupted, and such tension triggers more changes either within self, the communities we choose to participate in, and/or the institution. However, as we broker these diverse academic and disciplinary boundaries, we approach change incrementally, as well as productively, where our expertise adds value. Rather than experiencing the tensions that serve

to work against us and shut us down as barriers, we found instead that they could open a productive space to shape our identities as SoTL scholars. Beech et al. (2021) suggest that we are motivated to engage with others when our identity is developing and we are confronted with differences. This takes the form of community, both within and across our institutions. Through a degree of autonomy, we are able to forge our own way within our departments and our institutions, and be intentional in selecting our communities.

Disciplinary communities are well established but because SoTL does not have the same normative crystallization, we have to be intentional in finding other SoTL scholars with similar values to connect with. SoTL space is less defined (or nebulous) with fewer hierarchies, and it is more common to work with groups outside our disciplinary home. The SoTL sphere has become a space to learn, grow, and develop our identities as SoTL scholars, often away from the traditional conventions and hierarchies. Mariaye, Murden-Louise, and Ramasawmy (2023) document how pairing informal and formal spaces for conversations around teaching results in professional growth of both experienced and novice SoTL scholars. SoTL has provided an avenue for self-reflection and to question the status quo. Ackerman (2022) describes this as the way that third space professionals, such as SoTL scholars, respond to invisibility and imposter syndrome in third space work by becoming positive disruptors. We have been able to turn our invisibility into a superpower; we are able to fly under the radar and to work freely across disciplines, with scholars of our choice. This has meant that we are learning to measure our academic worth and develop our academic identity; we do this internally rather than by the measures the institution imposes. Through autonomy, each of us has developed and expressed a strong sense of personal self as a SoTL scholar and a commitment to a purpose.

Our sense of “otherness” drew us to new communities where we felt we fitted in, whether within third spaces, within our institutions, outside our institution, outside our discipline, or at SoTL conferences and writing groups. In these communities, we found

we were valued as newcomers as well as for our expertise. By changing our roles, and for some our career paths, we reframe what we do to fit in with the conventional. SoTL scholarship has given us freedom to explore and adapt, create new connections, lean on others while continuing to grow. New relationships continue to shape our SoTL identities. We draw strength from this process, modelling for others coming through the SoTL journey how we learn from being different as we adjust to tensions in academia. We often use deceptive metaphors to describe our SoTL scholarship. Nevertheless, we also invert these terms as we adopt an identity as a positive disruptor (Ackerman 2022), based on a series of actions: first developing acceptance and credibility in the disciplines and then, like pulling a rabbit out of a hat, we bring in our SoTL work. We wear different hats as necessary. We are team players, moving around to different positions such as those in a volleyball team, being supportive and resourceful of those doing SoTL and validating them despite institutional forces with different values. We are SoTL leaders who value and broker new collaborations where there is the absence of hierarchical power relationships, and members are accountable to those they work with.

Our work provides a theoretical understanding of how identity develops. It offers another perspective in bringing SoTL research to a more productive place, a place where they can learn to occupy the SoTL space that is often troublesome and full of tensions. While we recognize the limitations of working within a small group of six, we hope that our different contexts contribute to understanding how we shape and develop our SoTL identity as we respond to the lived tensions of our work in academia.

Reflection Questions

Questions for emergent SoTL scholars:

- What type of community could help you thrive within SoTL, and what can you do to find or create it?
- What do you value most in your SoTL work? How do these values align with your professional identity/identities?

Questions for established SoTL scholars and brokers:

- In your leadership role, formal or informal, how can you foster the autonomy and the legitimacy of your SoTL colleagues?
- How can you help create a sense of community for those who engage, or wish to engage, in SoTL in your context?

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