

# Becoming a SoTL Scholar

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Elon, North Carolina  
[www.CenterForEngagedLearning.org](http://www.CenterForEngagedLearning.org)

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Series editors: Jessie L. Moore and Peter Felten  
Copyeditor and designer: Jennie Goforth

The cover art was drawn by fellow SoTL scholar Kathleen McKinney, Endowed Chair and Professor, Emeritus, Illinois State University. It was inspired by the Zentangle® Method of pattern drawing. Learn more at [zentangle.com](http://zentangle.com).

### **Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Names: Miller-Young, Janice | Chick, Nancy L.

Title: Becoming a SoTL Scholar / Janice Miller-Young and Nancy L. Chick

Description: Elon, North Carolina : Elon University Center for Engaged Learning, [2024] | Series: Center for engaged learning open access book series | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2024936229 | ISBN (PDF) 978-1-951414-10-8 | ISBN (PBK) 978-1-951414-11-5 | DOI <https://doi.org/10.36284/celelon.oa6>

Subjects: LCSH: Education, Higher – Research | College teaching | Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

Classification: LCC LB2331.B43 2024 | DDC 378.125



Doing SoTL



Faculty



Reflective Essay

## CHAPTER 2

# BECOMING A TEACHING AND LEARNING SCHOLAR BY DESIGN

Strategies for Scaffolding a SoTL Career Trajectory

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As a registered nurse, nursing researcher, and relatively new academic, I gradually became a teaching and learning scholar as I recognised my passion to improve nursing students' learning experiences. Over time I developed a strong desire to positively impact quality education for all students and observed colleagues engaged in the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL). As I began to dip my toes into the world of SoTL, I came across a [2013 video titled "Key Characteristics of SoTL,"](#) published by the Center for Engaged Learning, where Pat Hutchings highlighted that SoTL involves people "bringing their habits and skills as scholars to their work as teachers . . . habits of asking questions, gathering evidence of all different kinds, drawing conclusions or raising new questions, and bringing what they learn through that to . . . students' learning." This description of SoTL resonated with me, and it provides a grounding both for my development as a teaching and learning scholar and for this chapter. I also lean on Linda Evans' (2011) work on researcher development which she defines as "the process whereby people's capacity and willingness to carry out the research components of their work or studies may be considered to be enhanced, with a degree of permanence that exceeds transitoriness" (82). I offer this chapter as a reflective essay and potential roadmap for future scholars looking for a more permanent identity as a SoTL scholar.

While I come to SoTL from a nursing background largely focused on research in nursing education, I have grown to understand and

appreciate that SoTL scholars come from diverse academic backgrounds, disciplines, and research expertise. Miller-Young and Yeo (2015) highlight how the field of SoTL is fundamentally interdisciplinary and therefore embraces a diverse range of research methods and world views. SoTL scholars also enter the field in a variety of ways. For example, some may design their journey into SoTL with “planned serendipity” as described by Green in [chapter 4](#) or through a more organic nature as discussed by Winet in [chapter 10](#).

Despite the diversity of SoTL, I have also observed commonalities among SoTL scholars in the many ways they can participate in and contribute to the field. In this chapter I offer some examples from my experiences in becoming a SoTL scholar and propose strategies for scaffolding a SoTL career trajectory that are relevant to a variety of disciplinary, institutional, and cultural contexts. I present approaches for: 1) practicing SoTL, 2) using SoTL to develop curricula, 3) contributing to the SoTL community, 4) aligning with strategic priorities, 5) scaffolding research funding, 6) leveraging relationships, and 7) building multidisciplinary collaborations, moving from local, to national, to international contexts. While each academic’s path to becoming a teaching and learning scholar is unique, these strategies can be employed to get there by design. I present these approaches in a linear fashion, however there is overlap between them, where each approach can inform and enhance another (figure 2.1).

### **Strategy One: Practice SoTL**

When I first began querying my own teaching practices and how they impacted student learning, I was beginning to practice SoTL without even knowing it. I began trying new teaching techniques and observing students’ responses. I then began to lean into my nursing disciplinary research expertise and formally study my teaching practices and how they impacted student learning. For example, I developed and studied a new simulation for fourth-year nursing students aimed to help them develop prioritization and delegation skills. I found the simulation was an effective teaching

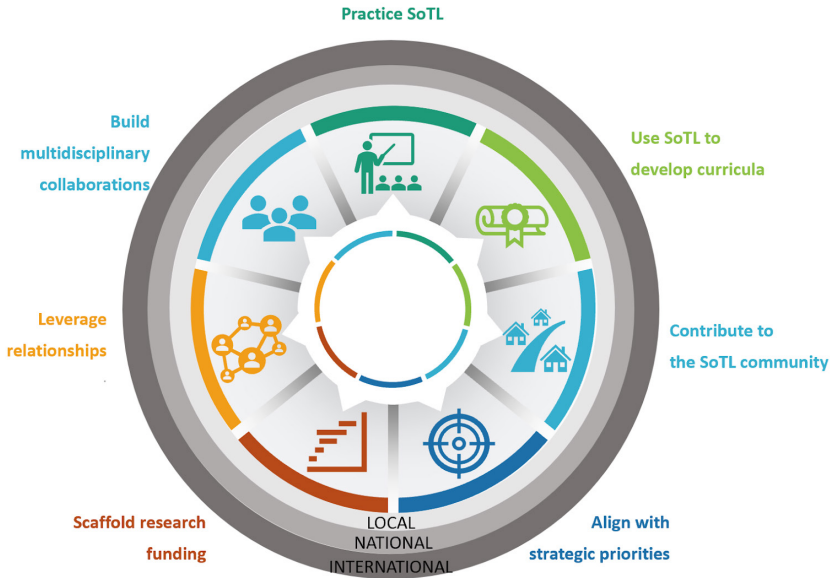


Figure 2.1. Strategies for building a SoTL career

and learning strategy and shared my findings with others locally through faculty blog posts, and more broadly through a conference presentation and in a peer-reviewed nursing education journal. While I had not yet come to define myself as a SoTL scholar, I was practicing SoTL and my curiosity about how teaching practices impacted student learning continued to grow.

Upon reflection, having literature to guide my beginning SoTL practice may have been helpful. I encourage new or hopeful SoTL scholars to begin by identifying teaching and learning issues or pressure points. I also suggest getting to know more about SoTL through reading articles that provide overviews of the field (e.g., Divan et al. 2017; Felten 2013; Manarin et al. 2021; Miller-Young and Yeo 2015) as well as the other chapters of this book.

While my experience as a novice SoTL practitioner was positive, it is important to understand this may not be the case for everyone. Simmons et al. (2021) describe how some teaching-focused faculty may experience barriers to practicing SoTL, including lack of access to funding, isolation, high workload, and SoTL not being valued by

the institution. In such cases, I encourage potential SoTL scholars to lean into supports from outside their institutions, such as disciplinary societies that may have SoTL initiatives, and the International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (ISSOTL), and to develop relationships with more experienced SoTL scholars for support and guidance. There are also SoTL development programs available; the University of Saskatchewan in Canada launched a Masters of Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in the fall of 2022 and a PhD in 2023. While programs like this are relatively new on the teaching and learning landscape, it will likely not be long before other programs like this emerge around the world.

### **Strategy Two: Use SoTL to Develop Curricula**

Developing a productive program of research focused on advancing teaching and learning practices in higher education can provide evidence to inform teaching, learning, curriculum development, evaluation practices, and policies in higher education. Miller-Young et al. (2017) describe this as “leading up in the scholarship of teaching and learning” (1). While individual SoTL studies can be utilized to implement innovative teaching approaches in classrooms, collaborating with other SoTL scholars to develop the curriculum for and teach core components of SoTL is another way to engage in applied scholarship, and then share and disseminate SoTL work for the broader benefit of others.

For example, during my postdoctoral fellowship, I collaborated with colleagues across my local teaching and learning institute and the broader university community to develop and deliver SoTL-informed teaching and learning certificate programs to support graduate students, postdoctoral scholars, and academic staff in building their teaching skills. I engaged in research and conducted program assessment to evaluate the impact of the certificate programs. Programs similar to these certificates have shown significant short- and long-term positive impacts for instructors, students, and institutions, such as improvements in student learning, shifts towards learner-focused teaching approaches, and enhanced

instructor confidence and enthusiasm following the completion of certificate programs (e.g., Stewart 2014; Butcher and Stoncel 2012). Supporting others in developing their teaching practice through SoTL-informed teaching development programs is just one way to lead up in SoTL.

Another way to use SoTL to help develop curricula is by leaning into teaching and learning leadership roles. For example, when our faculty was looking to launch an innovative graduate certificate program to offer advanced nursing practice knowledge along with practical experience for registered nurses wishing to acquire specialized skills, I was appointed to lead the Innovations in Teaching and Learning Certificate and chair the Graduate Certificate Committee. In this role, I shared my teaching and curriculum development expertise with others through teaching, mentorship, and more formal workshops and retreats. This opportunity was another way to ensure SoTL was used to inform and implement innovative teaching approaches across our programs for the broader benefit of others.

I encourage new and prospective SoTL scholars to seek out opportunities to use SoTL to inform curricula in their contexts. This may be through developing new initiatives and programs, using SoTL to redesign existing courses or assignments, or engaging in teaching and learning research to evaluate new and redesigned curricula. No matter the context, using SoTL to inform curricula is another way to engage with and contribute to the field.

### **Strategy Three: Contribute to the SoTL Community**

As you make connections with colleagues who are interested in SoTL, it is important to immerse yourself in the SoTL community to understand, promote, communicate, and disseminate good teaching practices (Poole and Simmons 2013). I found participating in events such as teaching and learning conferences and workshops helped me to build networks, create awareness of various teaching and learning approaches and techniques, and promote my understanding of SoTL cultural norms. Joining teaching and learning committees,

peer reviewing articles and conference abstracts, supervising or examining SoTL theses, and adjudicating teaching and learning awards provided essential opportunities for me to experience and contribute to SoTL work and to immerse myself in the SoTL community. It also increased my understanding of disciplinary commonalities and differences across research, teaching practices, and experiences of student learning.

While in traditional academic roles, submitting and publishing teaching and learning scholarship to peer-reviewed disciplinary and SoTL journals is important and encouraged. But there are also other ways to contribute to the field. I found ways to contribute to evidence-informed, open access teaching and learning resources to share expertise in ways that had influence beyond my individual teaching practice. To further engage in SoTL work, Billot et al. (2017) encourage sharing SoTL work with students and local colleagues through informal and formal activities, tailoring messages for different audiences, and helping institutional leaders understand the broader significance of SoTL work for their faculty and institution. For prospective SoTL scholars who work at less supportive institutions or are not in tenure-track positions, these informal opportunities to share SoTL are one way to potentially increase understanding and support for this important type of scholarship.

As I developed a greater understanding of SoTL and found my local and national SoTL communities, I began to engage in SoTL work at international levels to further build my SoTL networks and scholarly agendas. For me this included volunteering at international teaching and learning conferences and seeking out opportunities to contribute book chapters, such as this one! For prospective SoTL scholars, *ISSOTL has a number of committees* (e.g., advocacy, convenings, publications, and recognition committees) that offer excellent opportunities to build relationships and engage in cross-disciplinary and cross national SoTL work. ISSOTL also offers a number of *international interest groups* that are member-led and organized around shared interests to foster connections, share ideas across broad networks, and engage in global SoTL initiatives. For

those looking to become a SoTL scholar, there are many dynamic and multifaceted ways to immerse in the SoTL community. Aligning these opportunities with personal and academic interests is a strategic way to become a teaching and learning scholar by design.

### **Strategy Four: Align with Strategic Priorities**

In addition to promoting student learning and fostering positive student outcomes, scholarly teaching involves supporting one's departmental and institutional missions and objectives, including those at the national and international levels (McKinney 2013). Organizations often utilize policies and reward structures to promote and support strategic change at individual, faculty, and institutional levels. Becoming familiar with and then targeting SoTL work to these priorities can provide the catalyst to grow as a SoTL scholar. However, Baron and McCormack caution us in [chapter 6](#) that much more needs to be done across higher education institutions to strategically recognize and reward SoTL as serious research.

It took me some time to realize that strategically aligning my SoTL interests and work to the larger whole, including institutional goals, national priorities, and international professional organization directives, could help me identify synergies in and support for my SoTL research. It also helped me identify gaps and make visible underexplored areas. For example, my faculty strategic plan highlighted advancement of nursing education as a key research pillar, yet there was a lack of SoTL research being conducted across our faculty. I aligned myself with this priority by engaging with SoTL to improve teaching practices, facilitate creativity in teaching and learning, and support nursing educators in becoming the best teachers they can be. My institution identified encouraging pedagogical innovation and evidence-based teaching practices as a key priority within their academic plan, so I focused my research on supporting high-quality and high-impact teaching and learning experiences by concentrating on students' learning needs and identifying effective teaching and learning approaches that had not yet been examined. Further, our national nursing body identified nursing education as

a national research priority. To support this priority, I aligned my research to develop, evaluate, and promote use of evidence-informed pedagogical approaches that foster learning for nursing practice.

In a literature review focused on supporting SoTL, Fanghanel et al. (2015) highlight international initiatives to raise the profile of teaching and learning in a systemic way that have emerged in several parts of the world. These authors encourage individuals and institutions to consider how aligning with international SoTL networks could help develop research-informed teaching across international borders. A good example of an international priority related to teaching and learning is ISSOTL's strategic priority to focus diversity efforts explicitly on issues of inclusion for members of equity-seeking groups: racialized members, disabled members, members from cultural or ethnic minorities, members with non-heteronormative identities, low socioeconomic status members, and members with caregiver responsibilities (ISSOTL 2019). Aligning with SoTL strategic priorities at the local, national, and international levels is one way to tactically develop a SoTL research agenda.

### **Strategy Five: Scaffold SoTL Research Funding**

SoTL can be a common ground for scholars within and across disciplines to engage in research around critical educational issues in higher education. Although some SoTL projects may require very minimal funding, obtaining research funding to support SoTL projects may increase the perceived legitimacy and value of such research (Miller-Young et al. 2017). I discovered that when I articulated clear alignment between my SoTL work and broader institutional, national, and international priorities it became easier for me to scaffold research funding for SoTL scholarship. For example, I wanted to explore a local teaching and learning question about how our nursing students developed virtual caring skills. I spoke to various established SoTL scholars to help identify local pockets of research funding and leveraged my relationships to get invaluable feedback prior to submitting, which led to success in garnering research funding. I used these small grants to support undergraduate

student opportunities to work with SoTL research projects and learn how they are developed and how results can contribute to new knowledge and practice. By locating and applying for small external disciplinary grants that support education and higher education research, I began to establish a funding track record.

Once I was successful with local funding opportunities, I explored my research findings closely to identify larger problems worthy of further investigation that would be competitive for national funding. I shared my findings with multidisciplinary colleagues from education, medicine, and social work, and we identified the teaching and learning of virtual caring skills as an issue across caring professions. We were able to come together and successfully apply for a national research grant that aligned with a national priority of working in the digital economy and global health and wellness for the 21st century. Our initiative focused on supporting development of virtual caring skills in students in caring professions. As with disciplinary-focused research, I found that when SoTL research is scaffolded to address problems that are relevant locally as well as more broadly across disciplines and institutions, I was more likely to be successful with competitive national and international research funding. Taking time to reflect on how SoTL projects can be funded and potentially scaffolded to larger research projects is a strategic way for prospective SoTL scholars to develop a SoTL research portfolio.

### **Strategy Six: Leverage Relationships**

As I began to develop my interest in SoTL, I quickly recognized the importance of identifying and connecting with individuals who care about and lead SoTL work. These connections can begin organically, for example as the story Winet tells in [chapter 10](#) of a coffee date that led to a meaningful pivot in career path, or through more formal mentorship as explored in [chapter 14](#) where McCullum discusses the journey of first engaging as a SoTL mentee then becoming a SoTL mentor. The work of Roxå and Mårtensson (2009) reminded me how teaching and learning practices and cultures are strongly influenced by the small but “significant conversations” that are

based on trust and center around intellectually intriguing topics. I purposefully sought out individuals who care about and lead SoTL work and asked questions to identify synergies in our SoTL interests. This helped deepen my learning and strengthen connections. I also unabashedly shared my goals of wanting to become a SoTL scholar. These significant conversations led to connections with other SoTL scholars and leaders who share similar interests. Over time I grew a SoTL network that started locally and then grew across faculties and institutions, nationally and internationally.

As I began to leverage relationships to grow my SoTL network, I also identified the importance of finding colleagues who spoke the same SoTL language. Palmer wrote about “communities of congruence,” where like-minded people who use the same language can come together to practice it, grow accustomed to it, and have it affirmed by others (2007). For me, this was finding fellow healthcare educators who were also interested in understanding and improving students’ learning experiences. While there were certainly disciplinary differences, the core language and pedagogy used across the healthcare disciplines was familiar.

While I began to develop my SoTL network at my institutional center for teaching and learning and through local teaching and learning events, I understand for others, a community of congruence may not be available locally. In these situations, prospective or hopeful SoTL scholars may consider exploring open access and virtual regional, national, and international teaching and learning events to develop their SoTL relationships and networks (e.g., Euro-SoTL, SoTL in the South, LatinSoTL, Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education [Canada], SoTL Asia, or the International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning [ISSOTL]).

While some of my SoTL relationships came into existence via fortunate coincidence, I did not rely on such coincidences alone to build my SoTL network. I tenaciously developed relationships with SoTL leaders who were in unique positions to see possible connections that could help me build important networks within and across disciplines, institutions, and countries. These relationships were key

to more purposefully developing my SoTL network. While I had mostly positive experiences, I acknowledge and respect that each individual's social location will shape their experiences and may encourage or discourage the formation of relationships, especially in relation to equity and power (Marquis et al. 2021).

Developing relationships with colleagues interested in SoTL helped me build a support system for knowledge sharing and problem solving, and it provided a means of gathering feedback, advice, and critical appraisal of work. Williams and colleagues (2013) reminded me that as meaningful connections, interactions, and social networks grow they can also support cross-fertilization of ideas and the dissemination and adoption of SoTL values and practices. For prospective or hopeful SoTL scholars, building and leveraging relationships with SoTL scholars can promote collaborative SoTL projects, strengthen teaching and learning collaborations, foster future research opportunities, and form the foundation for strong teaching and learning communities.

### **Strategy Seven: Build Multidisciplinary Collaborations**

Mackenzie and Meyers (2012) suggest that collaborative SoTL work involves “communicative processes between individuals working interdependently that result, over time, in a variety of outcomes from meaningful conversations about learning and teaching, to collaborative course developments and the sharing of resources, through to acting as critical friends, engaging in shared research projects, and co-authorship” (1). Building collaborations with like-minded researchers, leaders, educators, undergraduate students, graduate students, and postdoctoral scholars who value teaching and learning can strengthen and support SoTL career progression. Faulconer (2021) suggests that one of the first steps is to identify collaborators that bring several areas of expertise that complement your own. Collaborators could include, but not be limited to, those with teaching experience (teachers), learning knowledge (students), research expertise, methodology knowledge, data analysis skills, and

knowledge mobilization talents. Having unique perspectives from across disciplines and institutions can be invaluable to a research team. With your collaborators, you might begin by considering aspects of student learning, course design, pedagogical strategies, and student experiences that could be a foundation for a project with broad interest across the team.

For novice SoTL scholars, collaborating with more experienced colleagues can be a safe space to begin to engage in SoTL work. Those more experienced might also consider interdisciplinary collaborations. Miller-Young (2016) highlights how multidisciplinary connections help foster learning about SoTL, exploring diverse disciplinary approaches and becoming “co-educators, co-learners and co-generators of knowledge” (4). For those with more SoTL experience, garnering and allocating funding to provide undergraduate students, graduate students, and postdoctoral scholars opportunities to engage in mentored SoTL research helps build capacity, supports dissemination opportunities, and may have significant, positive, long-term impact on student learning and engagement in SoTL. Making the most of SoTL collaborations requires trust and respect, along with a willingness to try new things and an openness to be challenged in new ways. When done well, SoTL collaborations at disciplinary, institutional, national, and international levels can encourage and promote SoTL work and advance SoTL scholarly agendas (Mackenzie and Meyers 2012). An example of an opportunity to take part in or build a collaborative, multi-disciplinary, and multi-national team is ISSOTL’s **International Collaborative Writing Groups Initiative**. These writing groups provide participants with a unique international experience to collaborate on a SoTL-relevant topic and develop and complete a SoTL project. Intentionally engaging, building, and fostering collaborative and multidisciplinary teams is another way to purposefully grow as a teaching and learning scholar.

## Conclusion

The process of becoming a SoTL scholar is unique for everyone. While I presented the strategies for becoming a SoTL scholar as linear, in reality they are iterative and multifaceted, and they intersect at multiple points to inform and enhance each other. It is my hope this chapter will provide an inclusive road map for others, no matter the discipline, country, or context, to plan and design a SoTL scholar pathway and trajectory to get there by design.

## Reflection Questions

- Reflect on each of the seven strategies identified in this chapter and use the table below to highlight your current progress as a SoTL scholar at a local, national, and international level.

Strategy	Local	National	International
Practicing SoTL			
Using SoTL to develop curricula			
Contributing to the SoTL community			
Aligning with strategic priorities			
Scaffolding SoTL research funding			
Leveraging relationships			
Building multidisciplinary collaborations			

- What strategies in the chapter resonated with you the most and why?
- What strategies are missing from the chapter that you feel are important in establishing a SoTL career trajectory?
- How might you implement some of these strategies to grow your SoTL career?

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