

# 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



Identity Exploration



Student



Reflective Essay

## CHAPTER 4

# THE BRAIDED THREADS OF LEARNING, CHANGING, AND BECOMING

Reflections on My SoTL Adventures (So Far)

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When I first saw this book's call for proposals with the editors' declaration, "We believe that it's time to map out what it looks like to be a SoTL scholar and how to get there by design," I was immediately excited to read the book. I had recently finished my PhD in teacher education at the University of Wollongong in New South Wales, Australia, and relocated interstate start work as an academic developer at the University of South Australia in South Australia, Australia. I had been involved in the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL)—primarily through the International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (ISSOTL)—for five years through somewhat serendipitous means, taking up invitations to collaborate with colleagues on SoTL projects as well as attending and presenting at SoTL-focused conferences. I anticipated the value of this book as I started to make increasingly strategic and intentional moves for my career.

This chapter is a reflective essay of my story thus far as I'm becoming a SoTL scholar. I take up the invitation from Mick Healey, Kelly E. Matthews, and Alison Cook-Sather (2020) "to share the messy, unfinished, personal work of living and to critically analyze learning and teaching as [I] experience that work" (195). I have delved into academic literature and critical reflection of my experiences, and I have endeavoured to express what I have learnt along the way so that others can go on a similar quest. Happily, the act of writing this chapter has helped me to map out my plans for

the future, so this book—or at least, this chapter—has indeed lived up to my initial hopes!

### A Metaphor for “Becoming-Through-Doing”

To explore what it means to be and become a SoTL scholar, I draw upon Anna Stetsenko’s (2008, 2017) transformative activist stance, which “suggests that people come to know themselves and their world as well as ultimately come to be human *in and through* (not in addition to) the processes of collaboratively transforming the world in view of their goals” (2008, 471, emphasis in original). In emphasizing the agency that people have over their lives and their worlds, Stetsenko posits that there is “*no gap* between changing one’s world, knowing it, *and being* (or *becoming*) oneself; all three dimensions *simultaneously emerge* from this process” (484, emphasis in original). I imagine these three dimensions as threads that are plaited or braided and that continuously lengthen and intertwine over time (figure 4.1).



Figure 4.1. Braided threads inspired by the transformative activist stance (Stetsenko 2008, 2017)

This metaphor of a braid has guided my reflections by helping me to follow the threads to look closely at each element—learning/knowing, changing/transforming, being/becoming—in turn. I have used it to think about what I have learnt about SoTL, and how I will deepen this knowledge in the future; to see where SoTL has stretched and changed my sense of self, and how I can pursue ongoing transformation; and to recognise how I have already and will continue to be and become a SoTL scholar. These reflections

are presented in the following sections as I consider how developments in these areas have led me to where I am now and where I could go from here.

Importantly, the braid metaphor communicates how each of these elements—learning/knowing, changing/transforming, being/becoming—are entwined parts of a whole. I cannot truly examine them in isolation, and each informs the others as time passes and the braid lengthens. Stetsenko (2017) suggests that this braid I see can be described as “becoming-through-doing” (210), where the intertwined threads are both the process and the product of my adventures in this space. This leads me to the notion of planned serendipity, where I intentionally pursue certain opportunities while remaining open to others, not knowing exactly where they might lead. Motivated by the idea of “becoming-through-doing,” I take the next available step and find my path as I walk.

Through my introspection that follows, I offer an example of embodying the transformative activist stance and exploring its elements as I look closely at each thread to explore how I am learning/knowing SoTL, changing/transforming myself and my world, and being/becoming a SoTL scholar.

### **Learning/Knowing SoTL**

Learning about SoTL has made my approach to teaching and learning much more intentional, while conversing with others and articulating my knowledge and intentions has deepened my understanding of SoTL.

### **Learning What SoTL Is**

At first, it was difficult for me to get a clear sense of what SoTL is. I took an immersion approach at my first ISSOTL conference in 2016, soaking in ideas to try and get a hold of a workable definition. Toh Tai Chong (2022) had a similar experience, likening it to “jumping into a sea of literature not knowing what to look for” (92). The elusiveness was at times confusing, as I thought, “Is it this? Yes, but there’s more to it than only this. Is it that? No, not quite. What about that? Hmm, that depends on who you ask.”

My growing appreciation for nuanced and diverse representations of SoTL has only made it more complex to simply define. Khairiyah Mohd-Yusof and Narina A. Samah (2022) attest that “the progression of SoTL is evident by how it has been conceptualised, practised, modelled, applied and embraced by academics within specific contexts and disciplines” (8–9). Indeed, as Nancy L. Chick, Lorelli S. Nowell, and Bartłomiej A. Lenart (2019) posit, “the diversity of scholars, teachers, and practitioners in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning is a strength but also makes it a complex field to understand and navigate” (186). In [chapter 2](#), Lorelli Nowell reflects that “having literature to guide my beginning SoTL practice may have been helpful.” Indeed, I have found an oasis in Peter Felten’s “Principles of Good Practice in SoTL” (2013). I appreciate both the simplicity and robustness of these principles for understanding SoTL: it is “(1) inquiry into student learning, (2) grounded in context, (3) methodologically sound, (4) conducted in partnership with students, and (5) appropriately public” (2013, 121).

I have learned even more about SoTL by engaging in SoTL projects and applying Felten’s principles. For example, I explored *student learning* in an inquiry into how learning analytics can be used to inform learning design (Eady et al. 2022). Conversations about SoTL with international colleagues have revealed the necessity of explicitly describing my *context* because our words have different meanings and interpretations. I have intentionally chosen *methodologies* that are appropriate, with ISSOTL conferences (in my experience) being an excellent avenue for discovering alternative options. Through *collaborating with students* to explore how a Facebook group can be used to promote student success (Green, McMillan, et al. 2020), I came to a deeper understanding of the value of students as partners in this work. Finally, I have tested out what is *appropriately public* by disseminating my research and reflections in journal articles, conference presentations, and occasional blog posts.

I certainly don’t want to give the impression that I always fully implement all the principles of good SoTL practice. I wrestle with “conducted in partnership with students” in particular and find

myself challenged by Sophia Abbot's insights in [chapter 3](#) regarding students' exile in SoTL. I take solace in Felten's acknowledgement that "full partnership may not be practical or appropriate in all SoTL projects" (2013, 123). Regularly revisiting these principles reminds me what (ideally) SoTL can be and gives me a gentle nudge in the right direction.

### **Applying a SoTL Lens**

Thinking through a SoTL lens has prompted me to examine what John Warner (2020) calls "teaching 'folklore,' the practices handed down instructor to instructor. I was doing what had been done unto me, no matter whether I thought it was effective" (207). For me, these elements of teaching folklore have included things like weekly didactic in-person lectures, attendance requirements, rigid grading approaches, and strict assessment deadlines. I am still learning what my position is on several of these (and many more besides!), but it has been fascinating to delve into SoTL literature and find the nuance in practices that I had once thought were obvious or unchangeable.

In addition to reading SoTL literature to explore these practices, I highly value conversations with colleagues that help me to see my own work through a SoTL lens. These conversations take varied forms, from informal chats with those in my office or peers at a conference, to loosely formal collaborations with international colleagues, to professional learning networks like the International Collaborative Writing Groups (ICWGs) with ISSOTL. ICWGs are also mentioned by Lorelli Nowell in [chapter 2](#) and by Michelle J. Eady (2024) in [chapter 15](#), with a similar initiative alluded to by Bruce Gillespie, Michelle Goodridge, and Shirley Hall in [chapter 11](#). For me, these varied and ongoing discussions have been tremendously fruitful and represent great future potential for continuing to learn and know more about SoTL. These sustained connections with colleagues have pushed me to critique my practices and consider new perspectives and approaches. I have had similar conversations with my students, making explicit to them what I am doing and why, and encouraging them to articulate the same for themselves. I

anticipate that these explorations will continue to inform my work as both an educator and a researcher.

## Changing/Transforming My Identity

Engaging with SoTL and collaborating with others to explore teaching and learning has stretched me in many ways. Taking on a leader attitude as a SoTL advocate and enabler is one way that I can contribute to others' transformation.

### SoTL-Led Changes

Since my first ISSOTL conference in 2016, I have been a part of several different SoTL teams and projects that have embedded me in the field of SoTL and pushed me to think deeply. A few of the projects involved conducting SoTL research, like using learning analytics to inform learning design (Eady et al. 2022), exploring how student success can be supported through social media (Green, McMillan, et al. 2020), or delving into the topic of ungrading (Green, West, and Delahunty 2022). Other projects were focused on understanding SoTL as a field, like the Small Significant Online Network Group that I co-established with international colleagues after we met at the 2016 ISSOTL conference (Green, Eady, et al. 2020; Eady et al. 2019; and that Eady also discusses in [chapter 15](#)). These collaborations—which, as in [chapter 2](#) (Nowell), are a combination of relationships that began “via fortunate coincidence” and that I pursued with determination—have changed my teaching and research practices, and my identity as a teacher and SoTL scholar.

I've been further transformed through my involvement in an ISSOTL ICWG. As a group, we have explored how SoTL—which is so often seen as separate from and less than discipline research and knowledge—could be re-positioned as both the fulcrum between, and a fluid ribbon wrapped around, the “critical components of discipline mastery and non-academic life skills” (Eady et al. 2021, 268). Based on a relational foundation forged at the 2019 ISSOTL conference, we have challenged each other and our concepts of what SoTL is and can be. We have shared these ideas through conference presentations and journal articles, and we have plans for a future



book. We feel like we are on the edge of something important here, with the potential for reconfiguring how SoTL is viewed both by those within the field and those currently outside of it.

Indeed, it is through these various collaborative endeavours that my understanding and experience of SoTL has been pushed and transformed. Undoubtedly, the processes of working alongside others, articulating what we do and why, and going public have compelled me to test and refine my ideas and thereby transformed me as a scholar.

### **Transforming through Leading**

I am intrigued by what Joy Mighty (2013) identifies as “perhaps the most important lesson that I have learned in relation to SoTL—the critical role of leadership” (114). I have benefitted from the influence and leadership of others, both directly (such as the collaborations and conversations mentioned above) and indirectly (through reading literature and learning from others’ experiences). I am excited about the ways that I can lead others into and through SoTL in the future.

Being a SoTL leader is not predicated on having a formal leadership position. As Nicola Simmons and K. Lynn Taylor (2019) acknowledge, “leaders need not be in formal leadership roles, but rather are those engaged in activities that support others’ work” (2). The fact that my current role as an academic developer doesn’t necessarily have an official SoTL leadership component will not stop me from being an influencer and change agent in this space. As I consider what this work may look like, I have wondered whether I will mainly lead and support others as they conduct SoTL research without being an active contributor to SoTL myself. For instance, I have facilitated induction sessions for new academic staff at my institution to introduce them to SoTL. Simmons and Taylor (2019) found that “the most common role for [academic developers] vis-à-vis the SoTL seems to be providing resources for others” (10), which I certainly see as a valuable piece of the puzzle, but I want to do this and more. I suspect that being an early career researcher plays into these desires, as I am encouraged (by the system, colleagues, and myself) to pursue large-scale research projects replete with funding

and dissemination strategies. I intend to lead others as I actively contribute to SoTL research, rather than “only” providing resources for others to do this work.

Whether my focus going forward will be in supporting others or contributing to SoTL myself, I can see myself transforming into a SoTL leader. As I work alongside fellow SoTL advocates and SoTL-curious colleagues, I find myself embodying Mighty’s (2013) assertion that “the importance of leadership among peers cannot be underestimated when it comes to promoting SoTL” (115).

### **Being/Becoming a SoTL Scholar**

As I reflect on my career thus far, I realise that SoTL has been the through line for everything that I do. Whether I’ve noticed it or not, it has been there all along from my undergraduate degree through to now.

#### **SoTL in Teacher Education**

Ten years ago, when I was studying my undergraduate degree in initial teacher education, I was struck by the dissonance of lecturers who effectively said in the same breath, “Lectures are a terrible way to educate students. Now, sit there and listen to me talk at you for this two-hour lecture.” My frustration at this approach informed my Honours research project: while my peers were investigating empathy in Indigenous children, or exploring how students can deconstruct children’s literature, I turned my gaze to the elements of the degree itself that prepared my peers for their future teaching careers (Green, Eady, and Andersen 2018). Years later when I started teaching (on a semester-by-semester casual contract basis) in the same degree, I sought out active learning strategies for use in lectures and tutorials, and I experimented with ways to teach adult learners within and outside of these traditional settings. As mentioned above, this sparked a range of SoTL projects that enhanced my teaching practices, deepened students’ learning experiences, and changed who I was becoming.

As I learned more about SoTL, I found it resonated strongly with my work and approach in teacher education. In fact, the link

between the two appeared so obvious to me that I was surprised when others in the school of education dismissed SoTL as somehow less than or undesirable. This matches Sophia Abbot's observation in [chapter 3](#) that "each person entering SoTL faces some kind of marginalization." Even as a social scientist—often a position of privilege and dominance in SoTL spaces—"like the rest, [my] work still frequently faces questions of legitimacy and value by colleagues." For me, seeing SoTL as a fluid ribbon that connects and supports discipline mastery (in this case, teacher education) and transferable skills (such as critical thinking and problem solving) (see Eady et al. 2021) was a helpful reframing that legitimised my position and revealed a way for me to be a SoTL scholar in teacher education.

### **SoTL in Academic Development**

As I approached the end of my PhD, I began searching for academic jobs that would suit my expertise and interests. I applied for several lecturer in teacher education positions, but it was a lecturer in academic development role that really grabbed my attention and spoke to what I'd been learning and who I was becoming. Here was an opportunity to take what I saw as basic elements of good teaching—things like active learning, lesson planning, curriculum alignment, and making intentional and justifiable teaching choices—and promote them across the university for the benefit of all students and staff.

A key factor that gave me confidence to step into this role was the synergy I sensed between SoTL and academic development. This was affirmed as I immersed myself in literature about academic development and literature about SoTL, and how the two interrelate. Peter Felten and Nancy L. Chick (2018), for instance, explored how SoTL is a signature pedagogy of academic development. Indeed, I have come to the dawning realization that many of the SoTL scholars that I admire are also academic developers. I find that I now read their work in a new light, as though they are exemplars for what my career could look like. I see how academic developers can play key roles in developing and leading SoTL scholars by introducing discipline-based colleagues to SoTL, supporting

deep dives into teaching philosophies and practices, and collaborating with colleagues to implement and contribute to SoTL projects. Although I am still working out what it means for me to be an academic developer, it is clear to me that SoTL will be intrinsically woven into what I do and who I am in this space.

### **Braiding the Threads Together**

Having explored the threads of my learning, transforming, and becoming in turn, I can see how they are entwined. Learning what SoTL is has deepened and shifted my identity as an educator and researcher—in my previous role as a teacher educator, and in my current role as an academic developer. Applying a SoTL lens to my work has transformed my practices and given rise to informal leadership opportunities. Looking at the braid of my work-in-progress career, I can indeed see how I am “becoming-through-doing” (Stetsenko 2017, 210). By joining SoTL projects, reading and contributing to SoTL research, and interacting with SoTL networks, I have been simultaneously and increasingly learning/knowing SoTL, changing/transforming my identity, and being/becoming a SoTL scholar.

The process of writing this book chapter and reflecting on my own lived experience as a SoTL scholar has been “inextricably linked to the ongoing processes of developing identities, clarifying [my] values, and learning through writing” (Healey, Matthews, and Cook-Sather 2020, 3). By examining each thread and noticing the braid they are creating, and in determining how I can communicate this through writing, I have been able to see more clearly both the process and the product of my adventures in this space.

### **Planned Serendipity**

There has undoubtedly been a lot of serendipity in my SoTL quest. What might have been, in some alternate reality, if my colleague hadn't invited me to the 2016 ISSOTL conference (let alone various SoTL endeavors since)? What if I had encountered more overt resistance, or less support, in those early days? Would I have

made my way into SoTL, without these formative opportunities? Perhaps. After all, there are many paths I probably could have taken. Nevertheless, I am exceptionally grateful for the path that I have been able to take, and the relationships that have grown along the way.

In acknowledging these moments of serendipity, I recognise the privilege that I have that has enabled me to take advantage of these opportunities. One colleague in particular has been a powerful advocate on my behalf and has smoothed my path many times. I echo Sophia Abbot's acknowledgement in [chapter 3](#) that "my CV reflects their 'relentless welcome.'" As a doctoral student, I had flexibility and autonomy to pursue areas of interest in both paid and voluntary capacities that have furthered my career. ISSOTL's commitment to welcoming and supporting students has likewise been very influential in my involvement.

I have also demonstrated agency by taking the initiative and seizing opportunities that presented themselves, as well as considering where those opportunities arise and thoughtfully being present in those spaces. I see this approach as a kind of planned serendipity, where I intentionally enter spaces and create capacity so that I can take up the as-yet-unknown opportunities that I may have in the future. Developing and sustaining key relationships has given me further access to these spaces and opportunities.

Now I have a chance—and a desire—to be intentional about my next steps. I like to make plans but hold them loosely: having goals and objectives, setting deadlines, and moving with purpose and direction, while maintaining the flexibility to adapt and overcome as challenges and opportunities arise. I will therefore make and re-make plans for the SoTL career I want to build. The braided threads of my transformative activist stance have provided a useful framework for my reflections in this chapter. In the same fashion, the plans that I make for my future will be informed by this agentic metaphor as I look forward to more adventures through SoTL.

In writing this book chapter, I have given myself a valuable opportunity to reflect on my own story, engage with literature

on identity and SoTL, and clarify my intentions for my ongoing work as a SoTL scholar. My hope is that reading this book chapter has given a glimpse of what it may mean to learn and know SoTL, to change and transform self and world, and to be and become a SoTL scholar.

Writing this book chapter has been an opportunity for the kind of introspection that “leads us to ask, ‘Who am I?’—not as an existential crisis but as an exploration of relevant parts of our identities” (Poole and Chick 2022, 4).

Who am I? I am a SoTL scholar—learning and knowing, changing and transforming, being and becoming.

### Reflection Questions

- What teaching and learning experiences have been transformational for you? How have they informed changes to your practice and influenced your career choices?
- When you look back on your own adventures into and through SoTL, where have you demonstrated agency? How can you enact the approach of planned serendipity in the future?
- How are you learning/knowing, changing/transforming, and being/becoming? What similarities and differences do you notice between Corinne’s reflections and your own?
- For Corinne, relationships and collaborations have been key entry points into SoTL and have sustained and deepened her connections to this community. Who has led you into SoTL spaces? Who are you leading?

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