

Becoming a SoTL Scholar

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Doing SoTL



Polytechnic



Reflective Essay

CHAPTER 9

FROM INDUSTRY TO SOTL

Making the Case for Taking the Leap

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The scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) has been affectionately termed the “big tent,” suggesting that SoTL has a place for everyone, and offers the opportunity for scholars of all stripes to join the conversation (Huber and Hutchings 2005). But despite this proverbial welcome mat, many challenges persist, discouraging many from a foray into the SoTL tent. These challenges include both institutional and structural barriers, such as tenure and promotion policies, but also contextual and personal factors, such as acclimatizing to unfamiliar disciplinary definitions, language, methodologies, and ways of thinking, as well as the so-called “imposter syndrome” (Clance and Imes 1978; Mathany, Slow, and Aspenlieder 2017; Miller-Young, Yeo, and Manarin 2018; Webb 2019). Moreover, as described in **chapter 1** (Miller-Young and Chick), the ongoing professionalization of SoTL may impose real or perceived barriers to who is eligible to be regarded as a SoTL expert, and under what circumstances. Much of the literature describing these challenges comes from the university sector, in which faculty typically have doctorates and are experienced scholars.

There is comparatively less known about the expansion and sustainability of SoTL in other areas of higher education, such as in community colleges and polytechnic institutes. In this chapter, we focus on vocational faculty in one such sector: the large polytechnic institutes in Ontario, Canada. This sector, characterized by

its industry-focused applied learning and innovative, experiential approaches to education, differs from its university counterpart in two important ways: First, because polytechnics are teaching-focused institutions, there is typically no explicit mandate for faculty to engage in research and scholarship activity. Second, faculty members come from a broad variety of disciplinary backgrounds, ranging from skilled trades, such as chefs and electricians, to clinical professionals, such as nurses and paramedics, to those with doctorates in liberal arts and sciences, engineering, and information technology. Thus, within this context, there are a large proportion of vocational faculty who not only have never engaged in SoTL, but who have never professionally engaged with research or scholarship of any kind (Hoekstra, Dushenko, and Frandsen 2010). Faculty in this context may identify primarily as industry experts, then as educators, and much less commonly, as academics. As such, the prospect of SoTL engagement represents something bigger than just an exploration into a new area of inquiry. Rather, it entails an entirely new way of thinking, learning, seeing, and doing for a group of faculty who may not even identify as educators, let alone as scholars. For these reasons, a “foray” into the big tent might feel much more like a walk on the tightrope.

Why, then, would a vocational faculty member in this context embark on such a journey? In this reflective essay, we describe the many benefits of SoTL engagement to this group of polytechnic faculty members, with respect to professional growth and identity development, the propulsion toward innovation in practice, and the opportunity to form social connections. In our reflection, we contemplate some of the particular challenges encountered by these faculty, while arguing that the many benefits realized—as evidenced by some illustrative quotations and observations—far outweigh the costs. We conclude with some key recommendations that we have found to be helpful to the vocational faculty that we support, with the hope that they might prove useful to other “non-traditional” scholars considering taking the leap into SoTL.

The Polytechnic Sector

In Ontario, polytechnic institutes have evolved from large, urban vocational colleges, offering a wider range of comprehensive programming, from diplomas and certificates to baccalaureate degrees and postgraduate programs. Polytechnics are characterized by their extensive interactions with industry, not only through partnerships and applied learning opportunities for students, but also with respect to curriculum development, research, and teaching. These close connections have led to exceptional specializations in programming and considerable expertise (Skolnik 2004). It has also led to a professoriate composed of faculty members as distinct as the programs in which they teach. Hired for their extensive industry expertise, and depending upon the industry, faculty members may or may not have advanced academic credentials and may never have engaged in research or scholarship professionally. For example, faculty teaching in apprenticeship programs are more likely to be qualified as journey persons or hold master certifications in their trade, whereas those teaching in degree programs will have doctorates or other relevant terminal credentials. This diversity creates an interesting mosaic, but also a potential dichotomy in which some faculty members self-identify as “academics” and others do not, simply by virtue of the type of credentials they hold and/or because of their extensive time in industry. Indeed, faculty members who transition from industry to academia don’t necessarily see themselves as “real” academics and are required to make a significant shift from their occupational identity to an academic one (Santoro and Snead 2013).

Further, because of their deep connections with industry, polytechnics are, by design, at the leading edge of industrial and pedagogical innovation (De Courcy and Marsh 2018). This means that faculty members are expected to deliver innovative, experiential curriculum. Yet, as in much of higher education, many faculty members in this sector do not have formal teaching credentials, and in some cases, have little or no teaching experience (Skolnik 2016). To help lessen the gap in pedagogical knowledge and skill,

many polytechnics induct new faculty members into the profession by providing preparatory teacher training programs (e.g., Hoekstra, Dushenko, and Frandsen 2010). Still, for many novice faculty members, this experience is only the first stage in the construction of a professional identity as an academic and an educator.

The Role of Identity

Thus, this sector presents a unique set of circumstances, in which teaching innovation and excellence is a priority, research is not a required condition of employment, and faculty often identify primarily as industry professionals, and not necessarily as teachers or scholars. This situation may be even more complicated for vocational faculty, according to Fejes and Köpsén (2014), as they often participate in and move between several professional communities, leading them to assume several occupational identities. This fragmentation can add to the complexity of identity formation, as faculty exist in a “liminal space” while they construct an academic identity among other conflicting identities (Simmons et al. 2013, 9). For vocational faculty members, participation in SoTL can be particularly disconcerting when there is little familiarity with research methodology, academic writing, and engagement with scholarly literature (Tierney et al. 2020). These feelings may negatively impact confidence levels, leaving faculty particularly susceptible to impostor syndrome—persistent feelings of self-doubt and fear of being exposed as a fraud or impostor (Clance and Imes 1978).

Among faculty, impostor syndrome arises when there is “a mismatch between the representation of an academic and one’s identity” (Parkman 2016, 57). In essence, those with impostor feelings lack a sense of belonging within their professional community and question their legitimacy (Bravata et al. 2020). Studies suggest that those faculty experiencing impostor phenomenon are more likely to experience negative perceptions of teaching effectiveness, negative teaching evaluations, and poor engagement with students, and

they often resist participation in scholarship and research (Hutchins 2015; Parkman 2016).

In line with the noticeable gap in the SoTL literature pertaining to vocational faculty, there is a similar lack of empirical evidence around how this group of faculty experience imposter syndrome. In one notable exception, a recent study that explored a comparable group of educators (faculty transitioning from clinical practitioners to educators) indicated that faculty had difficulties with identity ambiguity and experienced symptoms of imposter syndrome such as anxiety, lack of confidence, depression, and frustration (Freeman et al. 2022). These results are consistent with our own observations and experiences supporting faculty as they transition from industry professional to educator and, subsequently, to scholar. Taken together, within the polytechnic sector, and particularly among vocational faculty, the development of a scholarly identity, practice, and research agenda—and indeed, venturing into the “big SoTL tent”—might require an even bigger leap of faith than for their contemporaries in the university system (Hoekstra, Dushenko, and Frandsen 2010).

The Vocational Faculty Member’s Entry to SoTL

Given these impediments to SoTL engagement and their intersection with varying professional identities, how can vocational faculty who are new (or newer) to research and scholarship make the leap? At a large polytechnic institution in Toronto, Ontario, Canada, we sought to address this question by cultivating a non-competitive funding program to support SoTL engagement, regardless of previous scholarly knowledge and experience. Faculty were asked to articulate a research question or idea, in as little as a few sentences. Faculty were then provided with training and support to develop their ideas into formalized research questions and proposals, gather empirical evidence, and disseminate their findings. Throughout the process, the local SoTL community—in which novice and seasoned scholars alike were embedded—was central as a cohesive force for sustained SoTL engagement (Frake-Mistak et al. 2020).

From training sessions to data collection to subsequent dissemination of findings, the program embedded faculty within an informal community of practice, given the demonstrated impact that this can have on both personal and organizational transformation (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998). Although this social context was probably beneficial for all faculty in the program, we believed it would be particularly of value to the vocational faculty—as novice scholars—in promoting a sense of belonging and legitimacy, as their scholarly identities emerged.

From the outset, the innovation and passion for learning that these faculty members possessed was evident. In every case, it was clear that faculty had been reflecting deeply (formally or otherwise) about the learning experience of their students and wanted to try something new. For instance, one professor wished to use Lego robots to teach elemental coding concepts to non-computer science students who were required to take a coding course; another professor in the radio and media production program had eschewed textbooks in his course, with a goal of achieving a flipped classroom approach with a suite of digital open educational resources (OERs), such as videos, podcasts, and infographs. A third project conducted by applied technology faculty focused on the impact of lighting quality on student learning.

In some cases, the vocational faculty members' projects spanned entire programs: A group of massage therapy professors decided to redesign their entire curriculum to align with inquiry-based learning, and were wondering what the impact would be; an interior design professor wanted to understand how well students' programs had prepared them for their subsequent careers, and interviewed a group of recent alumni from the program about what they wished they'd learned more about during their courses of study.

In many cases, there was clear evidence of innovative thinking and a genuine desire to improve the student learning experience, but operationalizing the idea into a formalized research question with associated methodology required some additional support. Among the faculty involved with this initiative, approximately one-third

had never previously conducted research independently, and almost two-thirds were new to SoTL research in particular.

The Benefits of SoTL

Based on anecdotal reflections as well as qualitative responses from feedback forms from over fifty projects completed across a three-year period, it was clear that the experience of SoTL engagement was overwhelmingly positive for the faculty supported within the program. Beyond the typical benefits of SoTL engagement noted elsewhere in the literature, such as improvements in teaching practice, student outcomes, and course design (Cox, Huber, and Hutchings 2005; McKinney 2007; Weimer 2006), faculty commonly remarked about impacts that were not focused on their research findings or outcomes related to student learning. Their observations tended to cluster around three broad themes: professional growth and identity development, igniting curiosity and innovation in their practice, and the value of the social connections they formed throughout the process.

Professional Growth and Identity Development

Although the goal of the SoTL projects was ostensibly to explore student learning, it also served as a meaningful professional development opportunity and “gateway” into research and scholarship for a number of faculty. In particular, when asked about the best part of their experience, several vocational faculty—particularly those who had never before conducted research professionally—noted an appreciation of gaining new exposure and experience with research, scholarship, or some aspect therein. One vocational faculty member replied, “Everything—there isn’t just one best part. The personal learning (about the research question, but also just research in general, and other colleagues doing research) was so valuable.” Several others noted specific skills that they had developed, such as the ability to use a new statistical analysis software or conduct a qualitative analysis. Other participants cited benefits to their identities as educators and scholars, such as focusing their

interest on teaching, feeling more grounded as a teacher, or simply that the experience had revitalized their teaching and scholarship.

Igniting Curiosity and Innovation

In addition, some faculty expressed a sense of excitement in their work, commenting on the joy of watching their idea come to life and seeing the impact in real time, or inspiring new ways of approaching their work. Among these faculty, it was clear that the experience not only served to inform them about their teaching practices, but it also stirred a sense of renewal and an appetite for innovation, as illustrated in the following quotation:

I'd rank it as one of the three most important experiences I've had in teaching. It brought the class together in a transformative way. I can honestly say I may never experience a class like that again. But it confirmed to me why it's important to try and test out new approaches to teaching. It has real value for student engagement. That's why we do what we do: to get students to invest and believe in what we're teaching them.

Social Connections

A third common theme centred on the impact of working with colleagues and getting to know new individuals at the college. In particular, when faculty were asked about the best thing about their SoTL experience, one noted, "I'm grateful for the support I received and for the people I met during this process. It was very rewarding to be part of [a] community that was so supportive and enthusiastic about my project." Another shared that the best part was "finding a community of committed educators and scholars outside of my department."

These faculty narratives speak to the power of SoTL as an engine for professional development and transformative reflection, particularly among vocational faculty members who are new to SoTL. Although they valued the findings of their SoTL work and reported improvements in their teaching practices, what stood out

most to them was the social connections they formed, the professional growth they experienced, and the appetite for innovation that was ignited.

Challenges of SoTL

Despite these positive sentiments, faculty nonetheless encountered challenges in their SoTL journeys. For example, many had difficulty in locating relevant scholarly literature and navigating the ethics review process. These challenges may be especially pronounced in teaching-focused institutions, like polytechnics, in which library collections and ethics review processes may be less mature in their ability to support robust SoTL cultures.

In addition, as novice researchers, many of the faculty we supported often seemed caught off-guard by unanticipated issues, including the amount of time various processes required, the logistics associated with scheduling research activities, the challenges of recruiting participants for their projects, and unanticipated costs associated with the work. These speak to the inherent challenges that are often present in research and scholarship, and are probably not surprising to any seasoned scholar. However, any unanticipated barriers faced by faculty experiencing imposter syndrome and transitioning among professional identities could serve as legitimate risks to persistence and sustained engagement with the field, especially for vocational faculty, for the reasons described above.

Making the Case for Taking the Leap

Despite these challenges, we nevertheless contend—and the reflections shared here reinforce—that a foray into the SoTL tent is well worth the effort. Beyond the impact on teaching practices and understanding of student learning, engagement with SoTL has the ability to stir innovation and experimentation, reinvigorate teaching and a passion for lifelong learning, and foster social connections in ways that few other professional endeavours afford. Although this assertion is based on our experience with this particular faculty group in this particular context, we recognize that there are several other

groups of “non-traditional” scholars (e.g., adjunct faculty, graduate students—as described in [chapter 5](#) of this book, Stuart, Ogrodnik, and Suttie) for whom these benefits would also be highly relevant. In that spirit, we offer key recommendations to those considering making the leap.

Professional Growth and Identity Development

The faculty involved with SoTL at our institution identified a number of new skills gained throughout their experience, and also reported growth in their confidence as teachers and as researchers. This aligns with Shulman’s (2001) contention that the pursuit of “professionalism” in the professoriate is the most important reason for engaging in the scholarship of teaching and learning. More specifically, Shulman (2001) called for academics with several professional identities (e.g., occupational, discipline, and educator) to “discover, to connect, to apply and to teach.” By engaging in SoTL, academics, as members of dual professions, can improve their own teaching practice and positively influence student learning. And while SoTL can and does lead to improvement in individual teaching practices, “the professional imperative,” according to Shulman (2001), is both “individual and communal” as academics must fulfill their professional responsibilities for “passing on what they learn” to their peers (49). It is during this sharing process that vocational faculty members reconstruct their professional identity as a legitimate member of the academic community (this theme is echoed in [chapter 4](#) by Green). However, knowing that vocational faculty are also particularly prone to imposter syndrome, and based on the needs of the faculty we supported, we offer the following things to keep in mind:

Recommendation #1: Assume what you are exploring has already been explored. The important thing to remember is that context matters, and what might be true in one classroom in a different institution might look completely different elsewhere. Use the existing literature to bolster your research design.

Recommendation #2: Be ready to revise and repeat.

Research and scholarship are meant to be iterative and self-correcting. Peer review and feedback will eventually make for a better process and/or product, even if it is challenging to hear.

Recommendation #3: Remember that expertise has to begin somewhere; no one is born an expert.

Even seasoned scholars learn something new each time they engage in the research and scholarship cycle.

Igniting Curiosity and Innovation

As polytechnics are designed to be at the forefront of applied and technical learning, innovativeness must be a core competency for faculty. A constant theme in the literature, and visible through the preceding narratives, is that SoTL is an agent for continual learning, experimentation, change, and innovation. As vocational faculty members mature in their SoTL practice, so too does their competence and confidence in challenging prevailing practices. However, as alluded to earlier, innovation is typically messy, and incurs some element of risk. Accordingly, we advise those new to this process to consider the following:

Recommendation #4: Start small. For your first SoTL project, it can be tempting to design a large, all-encompassing investigation. Instead, think of your first project as phase 1 of your research program; you can build from there.

Recommendation #5: Assume something unanticipated will arise. Although published research reads like a seamless process, it is often messier in practice. Assume that unanticipated challenges may arise—they are a typical part of the research process.

Recommendation #6: Assume everything will take longer than you think. Like any large undertaking, it is common for things to proceed differently than planned. Anticipate this from the beginning to manage disruptions to timelines and your expectations.

Recommendation #7: Be transparent and honest with your students. Innovation and experimentation can be risky. If conducting research within your classroom, explain that you are exploring new ideas in your practice. Even if things go awry, students will tend to give you the benefit of the doubt, knowing that you are trying to make their learning experience better.

Social Connections

As noted, the opportunity to connect with colleagues throughout their SoTL projects was perceived as a key benefit for faculty at our institution, and is also noted elsewhere in this book (chapter 2, Nowell). Indeed, participation in a community of practice, as already stated, has the potential to lead to both personal and organizational transformation (Wenger 2000). As the “basic building blocks of social learning systems” (Wenger 2000, 229), communities of practice are powerful socio-cultural forces that can shape a faculty’s understanding of teaching and subsequently influence their teaching practice. For vocational faculty members, belonging to a community of practice can increase their sense of belonging to the profession (Fejes and Köpsén 2014). Likewise, Freeman et al. (2022) offer insights on how interactions with peers assist in minimizing the negative impacts of imposter syndrome and contribute directly to faculty members’ adoption of an educator’s professional identity. The sharing and reflection that occurred within the community of practice created the conditions for risk-taking and innovation that were openly focused on the shared goal of enhancing student learning.

Recommendation #8: Wherever possible, read and look at examples of SoTL, either in the literature or in your local SoTL community. It often helps to get a sense of “what SoTL looks like” as you are developing your ideas. Seeing what others have done may strike inspiration about how to approach your research question.

Recommendation #9: Where possible, talk about your research ideas and hypotheses with colleagues. These conversations may help to generate new ideas or approaches. It will undoubtedly help strengthen your research design and plan.

Recommendation #10: Celebrate! Making the leap into SoTL requires new scholars to be brave. Celebrate your accomplishment and those of others within your SoTL community. As the evidence here demonstrates, your efforts will not only improve your practice and your students’ learning, but also elevate the knowledge and discourse around teaching and learning at your institution.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we describe not only the embedded context and challenges faced by vocational faculty members at polytechnic institutes in Ontario, but more importantly, we highlight a number of benefits that result from engagement in SoTL. While some of these benefits are reported elsewhere (e.g., improvements in student learning and in teaching practice), many lie beyond the fringes of the research findings themselves, including impacts on faculty professionalism (identity), innovative pedagogy (teaching practice), and social engagement (belonging). We believe that these benefits are of particular value to this group of faculty, given the polytechnic context and emphasis on teaching innovation, as well as the novice status of vocational faculty as researchers and subsequent developing

identities as educators and scholars. We hope that this narrative provides helpful ideas to those exploring the possibility of SoTL and compels you to embrace the adventure and take the leap.

Reflection Questions

- What barriers might a person new to research face as they approach SoTL for the first time?
- Have you ever moved from one professional identity to another? How did it feel? What was most helpful?
- The authors argue that the benefits of SoTL engagement extend beyond the empirical findings of an individual research project. What do you believe are the biggest benefits of SoTL engagement? Do you think this varies based on the SoTL practitioner?
- If you were going to share your own list of key recommendations for this group of faculty (or others new to SoTL), what would you include?

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