THE SOTL GUIDE

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The SoTL Guide

(Re)Orienting the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

Nancy L. Chick, Peter Felten, and Katarina Mårtensson

Center for Engaged Learning at Elon University
Elon, North Carolina

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CHAPTER 2

Why You?

In chapter 1, we shared some common reasons that motivate academic teachers to participate in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) and some of Boyer's (1990) arguments for doing this work. In this chapter, let's turn to you. There are many different reasons for engaging in SoTL, and these reasons can change over time. You might have a general sense that you want to try SoTL, or perhaps you have an idea you want to explore but don't know where to start. Or maybe you're an experienced SoTL practitioner looking for a chance to reorient or recharge. Whoever you are and why you're here, we invite you to consider the ideas in chapter 1 that resonated with you, and to surface the specific experiences, hopes, and curiosities that bring you to SoTL. In the pages that follow, we'll encourage you to reflect and write, so have your favorite writing tools handy.

In this and subsequent chapters, you'll find our prompts for you to reflect—on what you do, what you think, what you'd like to do and think, and why. If devoting time to such ideas feels unfamiliar or awkward to you, know that SoTL invites (or even requires) reflection. In the tenth anniversary issue of *Teaching & Learning Inquiry*, Gary Poole and Nancy Chick (2022) share a taxonomy of seven kinds of introspection found in SoTL based on the previous eighteen issues of the journal. Mirroring this chapter's notion of SoTL's ever-widening ripples—beginning with an individual and expanding outward toward broader implications (figures 1.1 and 2.1)—reflection in SoTL often focuses specifically on ourselves (what we believe, who we are, what we do, and why) and our students (what they believe, who they are, what they do, and why). It also takes the form of thinking deeply about the contexts that inform us and our students. Our reflection is also (and often) as wide as the field of SoTL: what it is, what its strengths and weaknesses are, and what its "outer edges" are (Poole and Chick 2022, 2). And we think carefully and critically about SoTL as a community, especially "how we treat each other as peers" (Poole and Chick 2022, 2). These moments of "evaluating and theorizing SoTL" (the work itself and who's involved) are part of the field's "commitment to growing both outward by welcoming new colleagues and inward by monitoring how we act on (or don't) the values of the field" (Poole and Chick 2022, 10).

In this book, you'll find that much of the reflection we invite—some of it narrow in scope, some of it quite wide—is meant to guide you in developing your SoTL inquiry. The reflective and writing prompts, as well as the "Questions for You" at the end of each chapter, are more than simply questions for you to ponder. Instead, we recommend you pause when you come to them. Sit back, consider our prompt, and notice how you respond. Give yourself time to fully answer and follow where your thinking takes you. Write down your thinking, so you have a chronicle of your ideas as they develop; you can return to them later, and perhaps even share them when you're ready to share.

We also encourage you to reflect with others by talking with trusted colleagues about the questions and ideas in this chapter. As we (the authors) think about our own SoTL journeys, many of those moments of reflecting on what matters to us occurred in community and conversation with others—in workshops, in hallways, over coffee, in Zoom, via email. Reflection isn't limited to solitary thinking and writing and indeed is often richest when it's a shared experience.

Reflecting on What Matters to You

We invite you to reflect on what matters to you by considering how any of the "Many Reasons to Do SoTL" from chapter 1 speak to you (see figure 2.1.) We hope that, by following these ripples outward, you'll begin engaging in SoTL, start a SoTL project, or reimagine SoTL in a way that feels authentic and meaningful to you.

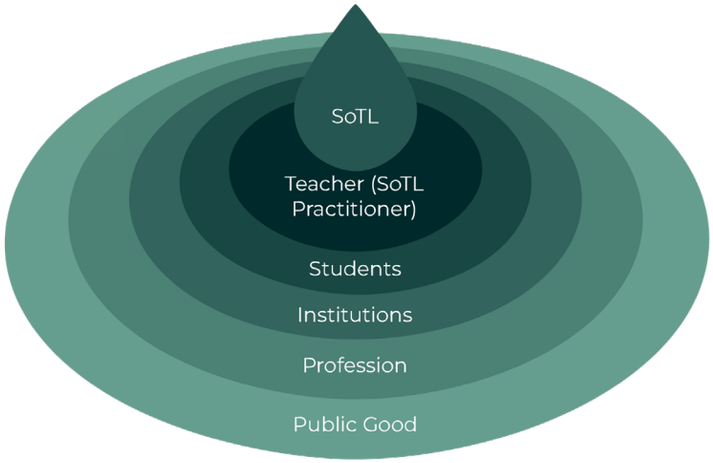

Figure 2.1. Reflecting along the ripples of reasons to do SoTL introduced in chapter 1.

You may work through all six prompts or skip to one or two that jump out to you. What's most important is that you take the time to think about what really matters to you so that your priorities guide the SoTL work you do. In chapter 3, we'll consider various entry points into SoTL— *how* and *where* to start—so for now don't worry about how SoTL works or what it looks like. Focus here on *why* you do it. Your *why* will guide your *how.*

Reflecting on Yourself

We'll start by encouraging you to reflect on yourself (i.e., your identity and your current circumstances) before thinking about the work you do. Who you are shapes what you do and what motivates you. Thinking through different aspects of your professional and personal identity can help you understand why SoTL might matter to you. Different aspects of identity evolve over time, and doing SoTL may influence your sense of self in ways that shape your career, so think about who you are right now and how you hope to develop in the future.

Your Disciplinary Self

Your disciplinary background is an important part of your identity as a scholar and academic teacher. As is the case for all of us, your discipline shapes how you think about knowledge, evidence, meaning, truth, rigor, learning, and much more. In the aptly titled chapter "Square One: What Is Research?" in *The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning In and Across the Disciplines*, Gary Poole, a psychology scholar who championed SoTL in Canada and elsewhere, reminds us that people from different disciplinary backgrounds define "research" very differently, and that these differences "touch upon the very purpose of research and the

relationship between the studier and the studied" (2013, 136). Indeed, as we illustrated in chapter 1, even the term "research" may not resonate in all contexts, so an early step in venturing into SoTL should be to reflect on what "research" (or "scholarship," "inquiry," "creative activity," or whatever term you use) means to you.

Reflect

To bring you back to Poole's "square one" idea, we look to a set of prompts inspired by the research autobiography exercise developed by librarian Margy MacMillan which she shared at a SoTL symposium in 2016 (Chick 2019b, 10–11; MacMillan 2016):

- What are your early memories of doing meaningful research? What inspired your curiosity, and what made this research meaningful and memorable to you?
- In your professional work now, what is research? How do you do it? What do you do first in a research project? Then what? Then what? How do you know when it's done? What is its goal, result, or outcome?
- What five words do you associate with the kinds of research you most like doing?

As you proceed through this book, consider how a SoTL inquiry might connect to your answers to these questions.

Your Positionality

Beyond your discipline, other aspects of your professional or personal identity may inform how and why you engage with SoTL. Your positionality—or your social identities like gender, race, geographical location, socioeconomic class, ability, and more—may elevate some interests, commitments, and concerns

BOX 2.1

Nancy's Disciplinary Self

My disciplinary background has always been important to my SoTL work. Coming from literary studies, "research" to me is a quiet, private, reflective, recursive activity. Literary scholars do research driven by the questions, "What does it mean?" and "How is it significant?" The "it" is typically a text or set of texts (e.g., novels, poems, scholarly analyses of the literature, theoretical pieces, contextual materials). We explore these questions by thinking deeply about what we've read, reading again, seeking and reading additional texts, thinking some more, writing, reading and thinking more, writing some more, and so on until we achieve an intuitive sense of coherence and completion. This understanding of what "research" means to me is inseparable from how I approach the SoTL projects I'm involved with: I'm interested in the texts students create—from formal essays to discussion posts to annotations of readings—and how they're meaningful.

in your work life that you want to center in how you do SoTL. For example, Peter's family history, with sharp contrasts between relatives who did and did not attend university, means he is particularly interested in the learning and well-being of students who are first in their family to pursue higher education.

Reflect

What about you? Consider the following questions to reflect on your positionality:

- How do parts of your identity motivate your teaching, research, or other professional activities?
- How does your positionality suggest possible areas of focus for your SoTL? For example, might you be particularly interested in student mental health and well-being, or the learning experiences of international students, those who are first-in-family, or women in science?

Consider how these aspects of your identity might inform and guide your SoTL inquiry.

Your Career Stage

Your career stage is another important part of your professional self. Drawing on our adaptation of Boyer at the end of chapter 1, we invite you to think of SoTL as a way to craft your own "productive career" that allows you to construct a work life "of dignity and purpose" (Boyer 1990, 119). What this looks like for you will vary over time. If you are just starting out in academia, your professional pressures and obligations will be different from a mid- or late-career academic. That's also the case if your professional appointment is contingent, such as adjunct or sessional instructors, or in a "third space," like an academic developer (Loukopoulou 2022; McIntosh and Nutt 2022).

Regardless of your career stage and trajectory, research by KerryAnn O'Meara, Aimee LaPointe Terosky, and Anna Neumann (2008) has shown that academic teachers in the US generally describe their careers as positive and purposeful when they are "carving out strategies to make meaningful contributions," for example, by "putting students first," "making long-term commitments to community engagement," "taking teaching seriously," and "making their scholarly learning … top priorities" (2008, 20–21).

BOX 2.2

Why Not to Do SoTL

Perhaps the most common reason not to do SoTL is a lack of time. This is an especially high hurdle if using your time for SoTL might conflict with larger goals like career advancement. If your institution doesn't support and reward teaching improvement or scholarly activity related to teaching, then you should think carefully about how much time and energy you can dedicate to SoTL, especially if you're on the path to a high-stakes evaluation. You might also have other commitments that demand your attention, making SoTL difficult or impossible right now. We don't want you to see SoTL as a burden or obligation. Instead, we encourage you—if you're able—to approach doing SoTL as an opportunity for sustained and collegial work that will help you feel more effective, purposeful, connected, and maybe even joyful.

Reflect

The questions below can help you explore how SoTL might fit into your career trajectory and even contribute to it feeling positive and purposeful:

- Given where you are in your career, what are your current professional responsibilities, ambitions, and opportunities, and how much professional time and attention can you give to SoTL right now?
- What do you want the next five to ten years of your career to look like? How could SoTL fit into or support that future?

- In what parts of your work do you find joy or fulfillment? How might SoTL enable you to spend more time and energy doing these activities?

Your answers to these questions can help you develop a SoTL practice that's tailored to your broader career goals.

Your Collegial Self

Finally, an important part of yourself is your connections to other people. Even if you're used to working independently—for instance, as the lone instructor in the classroom, the solitary scholar in your research, or the single author of your publications—your sense of self is influenced by others. Lee S. Shulman has said that one of the motivations and consequences of engaging in SoTL is to "put an end to pedagogical solitude" (1993, 6). Most researchers and scholars, he said, are automatically "members of active communities" rife with disciplinary conversations, idea-testing and -sharing, and critical feedback, but such generative communities devoted to teaching are rare and often have to be created. Much of Katarina's research has focused on academics' "significant conversations" about teaching in which they "make sense of experiences, where they deal with problems, and plan and evaluate actions" (Roxå and Mårtensson 2009, 556). This research has suggested that most Swedish academics have fewer than ten colleagues for such conversations (550).

You may already have trusted colleagues with whom you talk about teaching, or you might want to seek out new ones. The good news is that Roxå and Mårtensson's research suggests that these "conversation partners could be found anywhere": in your own or other disciplines, in your department or other departments, on other campuses, and even outside of higher education

(551). Indeed, in chapter 1, we started with Behari-Leak's description of her first ISSOTL conference, which she described as "one of the most engaging and meaningful professional experiences I have had in a while" because of the "generosity of and interaction with" others at the conference (2020, 5). As you'll see in chapters 11 and 12, you'll find plenty of opportunities to connect with SoTL colleagues in meaningful ways.

Reflect

These questions can help you reflect on how and why your collegial connections matter:

- With whom do you—or would you like to—talk about teaching and learning?
- When and where do—or could—those conversations occur? How could you make them happen more often, or for longer periods of time?
- What do you talk about when you talk about teaching and learning? If you find some of these conversations unconstructive (e.g., complaining about students), how might you redirect them to be more meaningful and constructive?

What you surface about your colleagues here may provide the inspiration for a SoTL inquiry, or perhaps the foundation for a collaborative one.

Reflecting on Your Teaching

As an academic teacher, you're always learning about teaching. Your subject matter evolves as new research emerges, the world changes, or your interests shift. The students in your classes change, as do their needs and motivations. Your approach to teaching matures as you gain more experience, engage with fellow

teachers, and perhaps teach in different formats and contexts. And with the growth of SoTL and other kinds of pedagogical research, new knowledge about effective teaching is constantly emerging.

Reflect

These questions can guide you in exploring aspects of your teaching:

- What are your strengths as a teacher? How do you know, and how could you build on these strengths to enhance your teaching?
- In what ways do you most want to grow and change as a teacher? What would you need to learn or understand to support this development?
- How is your teaching informed by different aspects of the context in which you teach? For example, how does class size (i.e., the number of students you teach), the modality of your teaching (e.g., in-person or online), type of institution (e.g., teaching- or research-focused), or when you're teaching (e.g., during a politically charged historical moment, just after a global pandemic) shape your teaching practice?
- What do you do to make visible and assess student learning? Given SoTL's panoramic view of learning described in chapter 1, how might you expand or enhance your assessment practices?

A SoTL inquiry can help you better understand and respond to your responses to these questions about your teaching.

Reflecting on Your Students and Their Learning

Since a key goal of SoTL is understanding and improving student learning, it makes sense to reflect on what you know about your

students and their learning before you even begin. One of our greatest lessons in years of doing and supporting SoTL is that student learning is complex and that we—all of us—are often wrong about our students. Our assumptions about what they know, who they are, and how they're learning (or not) may turn out to be flawed (Poole 2018; Popovic and Green 2012). This faulty ground can lead us to make ineffective choices in how we teach our students. Stephen Brookfield's *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher* encourages us "to investigate where our common sense assumptions come from," especially those that "are in the air of the professional culture we've grown up in, accepted uncritically because colleagues, textbooks, and experts have told us this is how teaching works" (2017, 21–22). In this way, the "L" in SoTL also points to *our own* learning.

Reflect

Use the questions below to explore your understanding of your own students, and perhaps to push up against the limits of that understanding.

- How would you describe your current students? Who are they–including but not limited to demographic details? For instance, where do they excel, and where do they struggle? When do they seem to learn deeply? What do they value and hope for? What do they want to do with their lives? And how do they differ from one another in these aspects?
- Given your responses to the above questions, what are the implications for what motivates students and how they learn?
- Most importantly, are you sure about your responses? How do you know?

- When you talk with colleagues about students, what do you tend to talk about? How can your collegial conversations about students inform (or perhaps distort) your understanding of students?

Your responses to these questions can be the start to powerful SoTL work.

Reflecting on Your Institutional Culture

Your institution plays a significant role in your work life, not just because it's where you spend a lot of your time but also because its culture—that is, its traditions, norms, and patterns of behavior—informs many of your priorities. You can understand your institution's support for SoTL activity by thinking across two dimensions (Miller-Young, Anderson, Kiceniuk, Mooney, Riddell, Hanbidge, Ward, Wideman, and Chick 2017, 3):

1. explicit information about what it values (e.g., institution type, mission, performance criteria, policies, budgets), and
2. its implicit teaching and learning microcultures (e.g., what individual teachers talk about, how they talk to each other, how some teaching practices are embedded and taken for granted, whether colleagues consult SoTL or other research on teaching and learning [Roxå and Mårtensson 2015]).

Plenty of academic teachers engage with SoTL without a SoTL-friendly institutional context, but they're aware of this disconnect and often seek supportive cultures off campus (more about this in chapter 12).

BOX 2.3

Peter's Evolving Focus on Student Learning

My early SoTL inquiries centered on understanding and enhancing my students' abilities to apply a core disciplinary skill, analyzing primary sources in history. I saw many students struggle to read visual sources, and I wanted to do a better job of helping them develop this skill. To do that, I drew on my training as a historian to analyze student writing about and annotations of diverse primary sources. One of the things that those inquiries showed me is that students' beliefs and prior knowledge profoundly shape their learning. Slowly, my SoTL inquiries shifted in that direction, exploring students' attitudes towards history and confidence in the classroom. To do that work, I began to draw on my training in oral history to conduct interviews of current and former students. That approach opened my eyes to just how much students' identities and relationships influence their learning in and beyond my classes. So although student learning remains at the heart of my SoTL journey, my vision is now much broader than disciplinary skill—and my SoTL questions and methods have evolved.

Reflect

These questions can guide you in thinking about what you might expect (or not) from your institution as you engage with SoTL:

- How does SoTL fit within your institutional culture, including its explicit values and implicit microcultures? If it doesn't fit well right now, what aspects of the institution's culture, values, or microcultures might SoTL support or be supported by?
- In what ways does your institution align with Boyer's belief that higher education's purpose is "not only to prepare students for productive careers but also to enable them to live lives of dignity and purpose; not only to generate new knowledge but also to channel that knowledge to humane

ends; not merely to study government but to help shape a citizenry that can promote the public good" (Boyer 1987, 119)?
- How confident are you in your understanding of your institutional culture's approach to SoTL? In other words, just as our beliefs about students sometimes are rooted in false assumptions or lore, the same might be the case here. How might you learn more by, for example, reading policy institutional documents or talking to experienced colleagues?

Your responses to these questions may inform your orientation toward and practice of SoTL.

Reflecting on the Profession

As we explained in chapter 1, SoTL originated with Boyer's desire to expand "what it means to be a scholar" beyond "the tired old teaching versus research debate" (Boyer 1990, xii). Building on this expansion, Shulman (2001) considered the implications of teaching and research as more than just things we do but also parts of our profession as postsecondary educators, claiming that "Each of us in higher education is a member of at least two professions: that of our discipline, … as well as our profession as educator" (2). He argued that these two professions aren't separate, but instead they are "intersecting domains" in which "we bear the responsibilities of scholars—to discover, to connect, to apply and to teach" (2). A SoTL lens blends our professional responsibilities as scholars of a discipline and of teaching, inviting both disciplinary and more general inquiries about teaching and learning.

Reflect

These questions can guide your reflections on how SoTL can bring together what Shulman describes as your "two professions":

- What is your discipline as a whole grappling with in relation to learning and teaching? For example, STEM fields are engaging seriously with active learning and issues of equity, and many disciplines are wrestling with how generative AI is changing what and how students should learn.
- If your institution uses a framework for national or disciplinary professional standards, how might you explore one part of that framework as it applies to your specific practice?

A SoTL inquiry inspired by your responses here will bridge what may at times feel like a deep divide between different aspects of your work.

Reflecting on the Public Good

As you saw in chapter one, a foundational vision of SoTL is for it to contribute to the public good in some way. As illustrated in Booth and Woollacott's analysis of published projects (2018), SoTL inquiries can tackle moral, ethical, or societal questions or issues that directly speak to cultural or political concerns. But they don't have to be explicit about such big or abstract ideas to contribute to a better world. In fact, Randall (Randy) Bass argues that questions about "'student success' [are] the proxy for the larger problem of 'human success'" (2020, 19). He explains, "The classroom is connected to the larger world, whether it is responding to the world as it erupts and intrudes, prepping the next generation of problem-solvers to handle the most existential challenges, or seeking to realize the promise of higher education to speak to our higher values" (2020, 19).

Reflect

As you reflect on these questions, think about your commitments to the public aims of SoTL:

- What motivates your professional work and your teaching? Do you have concerns about the public good (e.g., sustainability, democracy, justice) that could—and should—influence how you approach and do SoTL?
- What would it look like if your SoTL spoke to your "higher values" (Bass 2020, 19)?

Doing SoTL That Matters To You

We hope this chapter has helped you think deeply about the things that matter to you so that the SoTL you do is meaningful. As you'll learn in section 2 of this book, all elements of project development, design, and dissemination will be informed by the motivations that give you a sense of purpose, so refer back to your reflections from this chapter as you read the remainder of the book—and as you do SoTL.

These motivations will also help you think about your SoTL audience(s), or for whom you're doing SoTL. On some level, you're engaging in this work to affect your teaching and to help students learn, whether in the short- or long-term. Yet since SoTL is a form of scholarship, it's also conducted for a broader audience of peers (e.g., within your discipline, in the same geographical location, across disciplines, for educators more broadly), some of whom will offer critical review and feedback and some of whom will learn from and apply your work. An awareness of these audiences for your SoTL will inform many of the decisions you make as part of your SoTL project, such as the literature you draw on (chapter 5) and your mode of inquiry

(chapter 7). In the end, there's not one "right" way to do SoTL, but how you balance these two aspects of your SoTL (speaking both to your own motivations and to a scholarly community of peers) will shape how you approach the SoTL inquiries you do.

We close by admitting that each of us (Nancy, Peter, and Katarina) has answered our own "Why SoTL?" questions differently at different stages of our careers. We persist because we've found something in SoTL that feels meaningful, a touchstone that makes this work professionally and personally fulfilling, and that changes over time. We expect that will be true for you, too, starting with taking the time to think deeply about why you're drawn to SoTL right now.

Questions for You

We invite you to explore these questions in individual reflection or collegial conversation:

- What are your "whys" for being a teacher? How has this evolved over time?
- What about your "whys" for doing SoTL? How has this evolved over time?
- What's the relationship between your "whys" as a teacher and as a SoTL practitioner?
- What role has SoTL played, if any, in the evolution of your sense of professional purpose?

Supplemental Materials

Chapter 2 Compiled Reflection Prompts