THE SOTL GUIDE

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The SoTL Guide

(Re)Orienting the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

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CHAPTER 5

Situating Your Work in SoTL Conversations

> "Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion…. You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you…. The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress." —Kenneth Burke (1941)

American literary theorist Kenneth Burke's (1941) description of the parlor is frequently invoked as a metaphor to frame exploring existing scholarship as an act of entering an interactive, lively,

and ongoing conversation among scholars (10–111; see figure 5.1). This metaphor is foregrounded in Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein's (2021) writing textbook *They Say/I Say,* which asserts that the most important "moves that matter in academic writing" are "expressing your ideas ('I say') … as a *response to some other person or group* ('they say')" (3). This simple but foundational move of building on relevant research may feel familiar in our disciplinary scholarship, where some call it a "literature review" (or "lit review" for short) and others call it simply "research." But this essential step often suffers from "benign neglect" in the scholarship of teaching and learning (MacMillan 2018, 23; see also Healey, Matthews, and Cook-Sather, 2020).

There are good reasons for this neglect. It's easy to feel daunted by the task of finding relevant and helpful SoTL literature. In fact, we've written this chapter with more stepwise instructions and examples than some others because this part of doing SoTL can

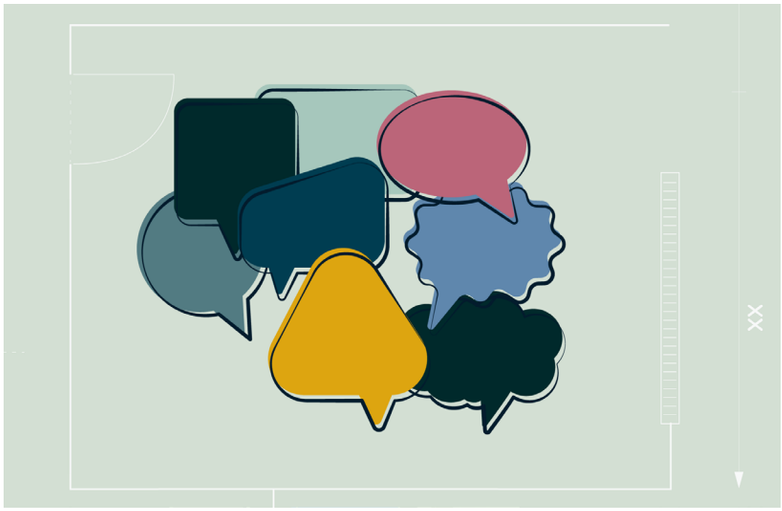

Figure 5.1. Burke's metaphor of the ongoing parlor conversation. Adapted from Burke (1941).

feel so intimidating. Most of us come to SoTL unaware of what's in the literature, what broader topics are connected to our lines of inquiry, or even where to start looking for relevant sources. As of the writing of this book, there's no single database that brings together all relevant publications, and there aren't yet agreed-upon keywords or search terms in SoTL. Also, common higher education terms like "assessment" mean different things in different countries. Because these characteristics are more about the field than the person doing the inquiry, all of us who engage with SoTL (regardless of experience) have to navigate these challenges. The good news is that they aren't insurmountable. This is also a great place to point out that librarians make excellent collaborators in SoTL inquiries; and two librarians, Lindsay McNiff and Lauren Hays, have created a useful online guide to understanding and searching SoTL literature.

UK scholars Mick Healey and Ruth L. Healey (2023) recommend seeing this part of the SoTL inquiry process as a rigorous yet creative process, an act of "meaning-making [that] is nuanced and contextualised" and that reflects your scholarly "identities and values" (4). As we suggest in chapter 2, who you are and what matters to you will, and should, guide you throughout your SoTL inquiry. Healey and Healey also stress that you can start with what you already know. If something you read or heard sparked your inquiry (see entry point 1 in chapter 3), or if you already know something about your topic, Healey and Healey recommend this prior knowledge may act as a lens for your new inquiry and a starting point for your lit review as you seek to expand on what's already at least somewhat familiar to you.

Margy MacMillan (2018), a librarian and SoTL scholar in Canada, helpfully describes the SoTL lit review as both "a process and a product" (23). In other words, looking back to Burke's

metaphor, the *process* is walking into the room, listening carefully to the conversation, and then focusing on a few of the speakers who seem the most compelling, given your interests. This is the work of searching through library databases, Google Scholar, stacks of books, reference lists in interesting and relevant articles, and other sources like recorded talks, blogs, or podcasts. Later comes the *product* of the literature review, or your "oar," in Burke's metaphor. This is the visible form that appears when you share your work with others in a presentation, poster, article, or some other way. This product is your opportunity to make sense of the conversations that are relevant to your SoTL inquiry and to use that synthesis to frame and situate your own work—and ultimately to contribute your own ideas and voice to the conversation (see more about this in chapter 10).

In this chapter, we'll describe components of a SoTL lit review, including both the process and the product. We use the term "lit review" as shorthand for a range of ways you might engage with and join the SoTL conversation to ensure that your SoTL is grounded in the literature and adds something to the ongoing scholarly discourse on learning and teaching.

Process: Exploring the SoTL Literature

To help you start exploring the literature, let's go back to Burke's metaphor of the conversation in the parlor. An overarching question for your SoTL lit review will be *What do you want to contribute to existing conversations?* Before you reflect on that question, though, you'll need to figure out which conversations you want to contribute to. Be patient here because, at this early stage, you won't yet have full answers to either of these questions. In fact, holding them open as you familiarize yourself with the

relevant literature can lead to a stronger lit review than a laser-focused search for a few recent publications that directly address your specific topic. With this outcome in mind, we encourage you to begin broadly.

Step 1: Listen Widely

Extending Burke's metaphor of a conversation in one parlor, we recommend starting your lit review process by visiting multiple parlors, wandering from one to the next (see figure 5.2). You might search several databases, scan the references of an article or book that has influenced you, consult with a librarian, attend a SoTL conference or a talk, or ask a colleague in your institution's teaching and learning center. This exploratory approach will give you a general understanding of what's out there, allowing you to mentally map the issues that intersect with your inquiry in some way—some closer to your topic, some farther away, but all potentially relevant and meaningful. You'll probably discover that your inquiry is connected to a larger issue that you hadn't anticipated, giving your work greater significance by tapping into some important concepts well beyond your specific topic. This kind of mapping will help you identify where you fit in the conversation(s) and what you can contribute.

We also recommend exploring parlors that are filled with voices you might not otherwise hear. A study on who gets cited in SoTL and why encourages all of us to resist focusing on those with established reputations or familiar names by instead "read[ing] widely and curiously" and reflecting on "which ideas and perspectives we reach for, and where we reach" (Chick, Abbot, Mercer-Mapstone, Ostrowdun, and Grensavitch 2021, 17). Our choices in reading and citing matter because, as the

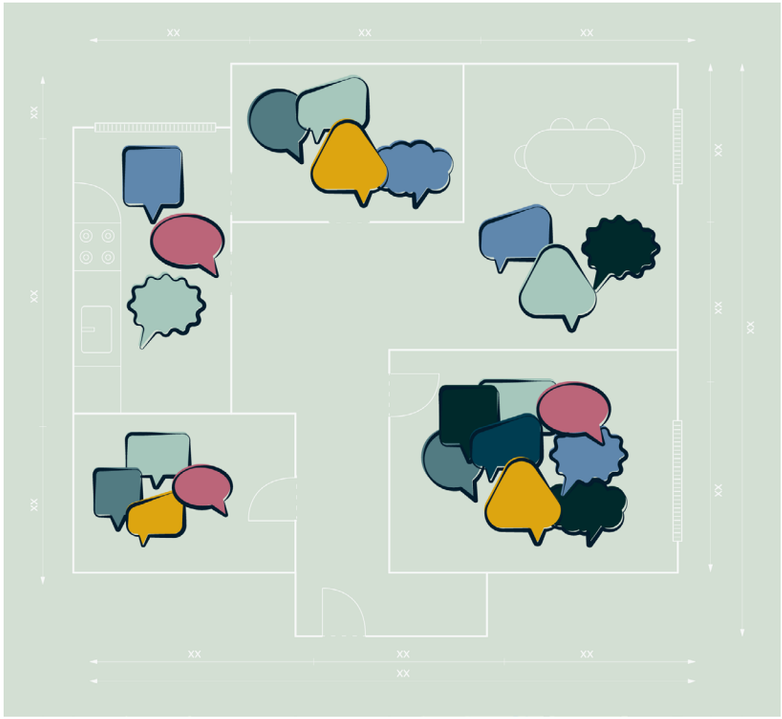

Figure 5.2. An extension of Burke's parlor conversation metaphor to multiple, overlapping conversations. Conceptualization of Burke 1941.

authors explain, "citation signifies who's read, who's published, who's funded, who's tenured, who's employed, and who's heard" (2). In addition to being conscientious about the power embedded in citation practices, a more expansive and inclusive approach to your lit review will ensure that your Burkean parlor doesn't become an "echo chamber" (8). More broadly, you'll also contribute to the health and growth of the field of SoTL.

It's worth pointing out here that you're not writing a dissertation, so your lit review doesn't need to be comprehensive. Keep returning to Burke's metaphor, and notice that he says you're listening for "the tenor of the argument" (1941, 110). Your goal

with this step is to get familiar with relevant conversations by listening widely. Give yourself the permission, time, and flexibility to follow some trails, hop up to scan the horizon periodically, and trust that paths leading to dead ends may also offer helpful lessons along the way.

An Extended Illustration

To illustrate, imagine you're developing a SoTL project to help you understand how students learn a challenging but central concept in one of your courses. One way to start would be to investigate if there are any publications about how students learn (or how teachers teach) that specific concept in your discipline. Be sure to visit that parlor to see if there's a conversation already underway. But don't stop there. To listen widely, you might also notice that your inquiry is connected to larger issues in how learning happens (figure 5.3). Your steps might look something like this:

- You might dip into the conversations about *what students do with what they (think they) already know about a topic*, which is described in some of the research as "prior knowledge" or "preconceptions." Or perhaps you explore *how students' thinking about the concept is different from ours*, sometimes written as "novice" and "expert" thinking. This may lead you to Biggs 20009, Biggs and Tang 2011, Lovett, Bridges, DiPietro, Ambrose, and Norman 2023, and National Academies 2018.
- Either of these paths might lead you to wonder about *learning as an ongoing process,* sometimes described as "developmental," or about *how much learning happens where we can't see it,* what's sometimes described as "invisible thinking" that needs to be

"made visible." At this point, you may come across Bass and Eynon 2009; Bloch-Schulman 2016; Yeo, Miller-Young, and Manarin 2023.

These explorations might then lead to some methodological possibilities for your inquiry on understanding how your students learn this course concept.

You might come across existing studies that look into how students think about a course concept by, for instance, using concept maps (Kandiko, Hay, and Weller 2013; Van Zele, Lenaerts, and Wieme 2004) or think-alouds (Bloch-Schuman 2016; Mason 2021) or annotations on a course text (Chick, Hassel, and Haynie 2009; Razon, Turner, Johnson, Arsal, and Tenenbaum 2012). Meanderings like these will take you to rich areas of research that could inform your inquiry, and that could also situate your work in conversations that already engage many educators, regardless of discipline or context. The challenge at

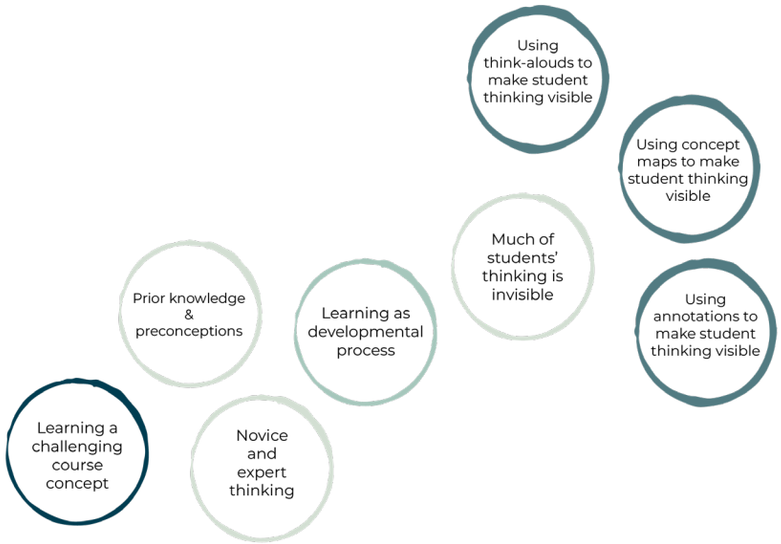

Figure 5.3. Sample steps of listening widely in the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL).

this point will be to decide which conversation (or conversations) you most want to join. Which conversation(s) offer(s) the most promise to help you understand your questions and eventually contribute in meaningful ways?

Step 2: Listen Deeply

After exploring several parlors, you can then focus on being strategic and systematic. You might ask yourself:

1. What are the one or two foundational texts that address the topic of my inquiry?
2. What are some recent studies that are highly relevant to the topic of my inquiry?

This deeper dive into the topic at the heart of your inquiry will familiarize you with both the origins of a key conversation (first question) and the current state of the literature (second question).

An Extended Illustration

To return to the example inquiry above, let's say that your question is grounded in a biology course and that step 1 (listen widely) has helped you focus on a specific point within your challenging course concept, namely that students bring some misconceptions to the course that make learning this concept difficult. Below is how you might listen deeply in your literature search.

MacMillan (2018) recommends Google Scholar for SoTL literature reviews. Its reach, which is far beyond any of the discipline-focused databases, aligns with the breadth of SoTL's multidisciplinarity. You can search for your topic along with a contextual keyword, such as "higher education" or "postsecondary." As of late 2023, a sample search for "student misconceptions biology higher education" brings up over 125,000 results, clearly

too many. One way to start filtering such an enormous result is to look at the "Cited by" numbers. Figure 5.4 below shows an article that's over twenty years old but also has a relatively high number of citations, suggesting it might provide a foundation for your inquiry into this topic.

Figure 5.4. The "Cited by" feature in Google Scholar, used to identify highly cited foundational articles relevant to your inquiry. Screenshot by the authors.

To sort through the overwhelming output, you also could click "Since 2019" on the left to find newer sources, such as this Turkish study in figure 5.5.

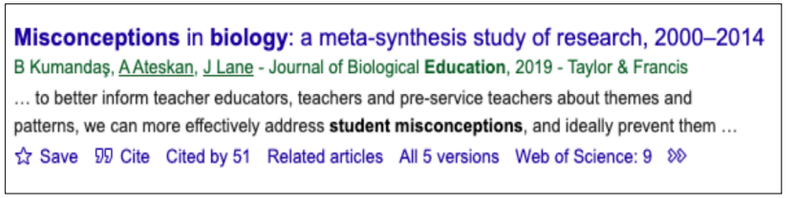

Figure 5.5. An article found by filtering Google Scholar results "Since 2019." This helps surface more recent publications. Screenshot by the authors.

You may want to situate your inquiry within the misconceptions held specifically by students in Australia, so you could add "Australia" to the search bar and perhaps remove the focus on more recent publications. figure 5.6 below shows one of the top results, a study from a biology course at a university in Adelaide.

Figure 5.6. A top result from narrowing a Google Scholar search by location ("Australia"), showing a study of student misconceptions in a biology course. Screenshot by the authors.

From there, you could click the "Cited by" link to see the subsequent articles that have cited this study, and the "Related articles" link for others. And of course if any of these sources end up being especially relevant or helpful, see if their bibliography includes some foundational sources or adjacent studies you hadn't yet found. You are now listening deeply to a specific parlor conversation, and you're well on your way in your SoTL lit review.

Step 3: Identify Your Contribution

After listening both widely and deeply, you can now situate your inquiry by asking, *What do I want to contribute to these existing conversations?* In your disciplinary work, you may be used to having to find something completely original: a question, idea, or area that no other researcher has touched. This high bar is especially present in well-established disciplines with long histories of researchers generating knowledge, leaving gaps that are smaller and smaller, even as new questions arise. This would be a prohibitively high bar in SoTL, since none of us are familiar with the entire body of literature. Fortunately, the expectation for originality is different and less daunting in SoTL. Postsecondary teaching and learning are such complex, dynamic, understudied, and contextualized phenomena that they invite ongoing,

widespread, diverse, and even repeated inquiries. It may be helpful to think of a puzzle with pieces of many types, sizes, and colors—but without the box cover showing us the final picture that we are trying to assemble. SoTL requires many hands to begin to put together a clear picture. And, as we've learned in recent years, that picture changes, so even more hands are needed to keep up with this puzzle.

There are several ways to think about how you might contribute to the ongoing conversation. Consider how your inquiry *complements* what's already out there. The context in which your inquiry takes place, for example, may differ in important ways from the contexts in prior studies. You may teach at an institution with fewer than 2,000 students, while the existing studies were conducted at institutions with ten times that many, or at similar institutions but in another country or with a different student population. These distinctions in context matter because the experiences of teaching and learning in each are meaningfully different. In "The Value of Contextualized Work and Aggregated SoTL Data," Lee Shulman (2014) imagines the potential of similar inquiries explored "in multiple particular settings," allowing educators to gain a fuller understanding of a topic and to make decisions based on the contextual factors that are most relevant to their own. If your lit review leads you to studies with questions, methods, or other aspects of project design that resonate with your inquiry, consider repeating or adapting them within your own context, situating your findings in relation to the original study, and calling attention to how your work complements the existing ones. In short, don't shy away from similarity: your contribution may be in differences that at first glance seem small but are, in fact, rich sites of originality.

You can also make a meaningful contribution to existing conversations simply because of your perspective. The lens you apply to your inquiry may differ from other scholars who've explored the same topic, context, or question. Perhaps, for instance, you teach courses in philosophy, and the relevant studies you've found in your lit review are based on chemistry classes. Your disciplinary lens and other aspects of your perspective may lead you to offer a question, method, or analysis new to the conversation. Whether you notice it or not, your perspective is foundational to your SoTL because "underlying any inquiry about teaching and learning are particular stances and world views about such things as how learning works, as well as assumptions about methodology" (Miller-Young and Yeo 2015, 38). As Torgny Roxå, Thomas Olsson and Katarina Mårtensson (2008) from Sweden explain, when we're explicit about the conceptual frameworks, world views, or theories we rely on, we share "models or perspectives that can be used to enrich perception, scaffold analysis and plan future practice" (281).

An Extended Illustration

In table 5.1, we've outlined how two articles on the same topic (inquiry-based learning) illustrate how some of these differences complement each other and become equal contributions. Imagine that you're doing a SoTL inquiry on inquiry-based learning and you come across these two articles in your lit review.

We could go further and unpack additional similarities and differences in the two articles, but we hope table 5.1 provides enough information to help you see that there is still plenty of room to contribute, even when you find several inquiries exploring similar questions. Recall that Shulman (2014) encouraged

Table 5.1. The complementarity of different projects about the same topic and question type. Comparing two articles.

"Integrating Inquiry-Based Learning into the Academic Literacy Course to Enhance Student Learning" by Nomakhaya Fidelia Mashiyi (2018)	"Using a Self-Determination Theory Approach to Understand Student Perceptions of Inquiry-Based Learning" by Fangfang Zhao, Gillian Roehrig, Lorelei Patrick, Chantal Levesque-Bristol, and Sehoya Cotner (2021)
First, the two studies asked What is? questions about how students experience inquiry-based learning:	
"How do undergraduate teacher-trainees experience an AL [academic literacy] course which integrates guided inquiry-based learning of its content?" (40)	"1) How do students perceive the level of inquiry in laboratory activities? 2) How do students' perceptions of inquiry differ, if at all, from the level of inquiry envisioned by the instructor?" (3)
However, they were conducted in different contexts:	
This inquiry focused on 46 second-year undergraduates in a once-a-week, 27-week stand-alone module on academic reading and writing in an education program at an unnamed university in South Africa. Notably, Mashiyi explains that the study was also conducted against a backdrop of nationwide student protests about the increases in student fees.	This inquiry focused on 114 non-STEM students in an introductory biology course that lasted a full semester (i.e., approximately 14 weeks) at an unnamed university in the US.
Both also used surveys with a mix of closed- and open-ended questions:	
Mashiyi's survey asked students about "their classroom experience, how the course was delivered and how it did/did not enhance their learning" (40). She explains that she intended to distribute the survey at the end of the module (late 2016), but the student protests disrupted these plans, so she had to survey the students later (in early 2017).	Zhao, Roehrig, Patrick, Levesque-Bristol, and Cotner's survey first asked students to rate "the amount of inquiry perceived in each lab" on a 0 –100 scale (7), and then to describe why "the lab that best reflects inquiry" was "a good example of inquiry" and why "the lab that least reflects inquiry … does not involve much, if any, inquiry" (5). This survey was distributed after the course had ended.
The two studies were guided by different conceptual frameworks, but both used these frameworks to deductively analyze the students' responses to the open-ended survey questions:	

Mashiyi writes about using Lev Vygotsky's ideas about scaffolding, the Zone of Proximal Development, and collaboration (all part of his Sociocultural Theory for how learning happens) to code student responses. She also inductively developed her own codes when she came across responses that didn't map onto Vygotsky's three ideas.	These authors drew on psychology's Self-Determination Theory, which that claims, "three basic psychological needs must be satisfied for an individual to thrive: autonomy, competence, and relatedness" (3), to code the survey responses according to whether students felt that inquiry-based learning met each of these three needs.

similar studies conducted "in multiple particular settings" to, in the case of these studies, give us a better understanding of inquiry-based learning. Because of the differences in location, geopolitical context, discipline, perspective, and more, these two studies complement each other, amplifying each project's SoTL-generated knowledge about inquiry-based learning. Specifically, they provide overlapping findings about how students perceive inquiry-based learning, including where students struggled, what they enjoyed or valued, what they think was helpful (or not), and where they didn't recognize it at all.

If you stepped into this conversation about inquiry-based learning and brought your own context, perspective, and students' responses and thought about your own context, perspective, and students' responses alongside these previous studies, your contribution would be clear and significant. Also, the above inquiries (and the ones in the next section) rely on surveys of students'

experiences and perceptions of their learning in inquiry-based learning, an important topic since this pedagogy has an explicit focus on what the students do rather than what the teacher does (Biggs and Tang 2011). If you, then, complemented these project designs by instead looking directly at student work produced in an inquiry-based learning environment, your project would be distinct and complementary in yet another important way. (See chapter 7 for more about project design and chapter 8 for more about the artifacts, evidence, or data you collect.)

Ultimately, as we've mentioned earlier in this book (and will continue to do), we have so much to learn that there are many ways you can design your inquiry to contribute to existing conversations.

Product: Connecting Your Inquiry to the SoTL Literature

Chapter 10 will focus on how to share your work when you're ready, but now is a good time to say a few things about what MacMillan (2018) calls the *product* of your lit review *process*, or how you represent it when you present or publish your inquiry. Rather than passing mentions or an obligatory list of citations of existing scholarship, she encourages you to envision this product as "a reliable guide to the conversations that… inform conducting and interpreting a study" (2018, 28–29). Through Burke's parlor metaphor, you've imagined your lit review process as listening to and joining some conversations, so now you can succinctly frame it that way for your audience. This approach elevates the written (or spoken) lit review as "a meaningful result of the study in and of itself" (MacMillan 2018, 23). In other words, just as you'll collect and analyze artifacts, evidence, or data related to

student learning to help you respond to your SoTL question (see chapter 8 and chapter 9), think of "the literature as data," so the existing scholarship you've collected and analyzed also helps you respond to your question (MacMillan 2018, 23). This can be a paradigm-shifting way of thinking about the lit review. Indeed, in our experience as SoTL journal editors, we've found that reviewers (and later, readers) sometimes focus on a lit review as the most interesting or useful part of an article.

A 2020 study by Canadians Alicia Cappello and Janice Miller-Young, a graduate student in library studies and a SoTL scholar who partnered on a SoTL citation analysis, offers helpful guidance for this approach to the SoTL lit review. After analyzing 18 SoTL articles, they found 74 percent of the 954 in-text citations to be "non-substantive": either not connected to the article's argument or presented with "little importance, significance, or contribution to the theme, analysis, or results of the citing article," and "typically made without additional comments or context" (2020, 7). Each of the articles also cited these non-substantive references more often than any of the sources they used substantively. Their implications are clear, if understated: "SoTL literature reviews could often benefit from more depth" (12–13).

There are two common ways you can represent your lit review with depth. Let's start by thinking at the macro level, or about the paper or presentation as a whole. When you're ready to present your inquiry, you'll choose how and where to integrate your lit review. You have two options:

1. You may use the traditional IMRaD structure of scientific articles with predetermined sections for the Introduction, Methods, Results, and Discussion, and your lit review will appear in the introductory section (Healey, Matthews, and Cook-Sather 2020).

2. Perhaps you prefer something more organic and free-form that follows a narrative, an argument, or some other kind of unfolding of your inquiry, using sections and subheadings of your choosing. In this format more typical of scholarship in the humanities, you'll weave the existing research throughout the article to establish the relevant connections as they emerge, capturing the sense of an ongoing conversation.

In either case, you'll present your lit review fairly early in your article, illustrating the initial "they say" move that describes the existing conversations you're situating your "I say" within, harkening back to Graff and Birkenstein's "moves that matter in academic writing" (2021). Later in the article, you'll connect what you find in your inquiry to earlier studies or relevant parts of existing conversations. To illustrate, we've highlighted the lit reviews in a couple of articles: Yuen Fook Chan, Gurnam Kaur Sidhu, Narasuman Suthagar, Lai Fong Lee, and Bee Wah Yap (2016) follow the IMRaD format to report on a study on collaboration, feedback, and self-efficacy in a Malaysian university, and Stephen Bloch-Schulman (2016) uses a free-form approach to explore using think-alouds in a philosophy course in the US. Neither of these is better than the other but rather a matter of style and how you choose to present your work.

You can also create depth in the product of your lit review by tending to Cappello and Miller-Young's distinction between substantive and non-substantive citations. Rather than listing multiple citations in parentheses after a general statement or at the end of a paragraph, you can be explicit about these scholars' contributions to your work. For instance, when authors express a significant point effectively, quoting their language uplifts their work. And perhaps you're focusing on inquiry-based learning and want to intentionally build upon a few studies (e.g., the articles in

table 5.1) for a specific purpose, such as highlighting how yours is complementary in presenting a different country, discipline, type of institution, or perspective. And perhaps a different paper (e.g., the one by Archer-Kuhn, Lee, Finnessey, and Liu 2020) provides the conceptual framework for the survey you use for your project. As you write about these articles, making these connections explicit speaks to the intentionality of your inquiry, the depth of your lit review, and the significance of what you find. By asking yourself, "Why did I find this person's work meaningful, helpful, or relevant to my own?" and then clearly representing this influence in the product of your lit review reflects a generous approach to scholarship.

We hope this chapter has helped you feel confident in both the process and product of your SoTL lit review. We also hope it has helped you recognize that, even if this is your first SoTL inquiry, you have something to contribute to SoTL. Your SoTL project—indeed every SoTL project that's shared broadly enough—becomes part of the ongoing conversations in Burke's parlor, where we're all trying to learn from each other.

Questions for You

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

- How does your discipline engage with research literature? What aspects of your training and scholarly practice can help you engage with SoTL literature? How might you need to develop new practices or revise existing ones to engage with SoTL literature?
- What SoTL conversations do you want to listen—and to contribute—to? Why? Where do these conversations take place?

- What parts of the lit review process are most interesting—or most concerning—for you? Why?
- What kind of products do you hope to emerge from your SoTL inquiry?

Supplemental Materials

- Worksheet: Mapping Your Literature Review
- Reading: Two articles illustrating different (yet excellent) approaches to literature reviews, highlighted by Nancy, Peter, and Katarina to help you see how the article authors use their lit reviews. For an IMRaD approach to the lit review, look at the highlighted portions of: Yuen Fook Chan, Gurnam Kaur Sidhu, Narasuman Suthagar, Lai Fong Lee, and Bee Wah Yap (2016). For a more free-form approach to the lit review, look at the highlighted portions of: Stephen Bloch-Schulman (2016).
- Video: Janice Miller-Young, an engineering scholar, discusses how she approaches a SoTL literature search in this video (6:25) produced by the Center for Engaged Learning
- Video: Olivia Choplin, a scholar of French literature, explains how she approaches a SoTL literature search in this video (8:13) produced by the Center for Engaged Learning.
- Video: Margy MacMillan, a SoTL librarian, offers guidance on searching for SoTL literature in this video (10:43) produced by the Center for Engaged Learning
- Worksheets: These online resources for the book *Writing about Teaching and Learning* include prompts for writing in diverse SoTL genres and templates for responding to reviewers