

# THE SOTL GUIDE

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# The SoTL Guide

## (Re)Orienting the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

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## CHAPTER 6

# Relational SoTL Ethics

“...education is ultimately and immediately about an encounter between persons.” —Michael Fielding (1999)

SoTL not only should be engaged with and contribute to scholarly conversations, but it also must center the people involved in the teaching, learning, and inquiry. The processes of SoTL are deeply human—asking questions, joining conversations, making meaning. The purposes of SoTL also are distinctly human — improving teaching, enhancing learning, changing institutions and communities.

The work academics do with students is complex, dynamic, important, and—as Fielding suggests in the epigraph above—fundamentally relational. Just as who we are shapes our teaching (and our SoTL), students’ identities and motivations influence their learning. The connections between and among students

and teachers can either enable or constrain learning (Bovill, 2020; Felten and Lambert, 2020). SoTL appeals to many academics because it provides both a framework and community for thinking carefully about the human connections at the heart of learning and teaching. These relationships also are central to ethical considerations in SoTL.

Teaching is full of ethical choices about fairness, integrity, care, and more. For instance, you establish a foundation for ethical behavior and decision-making in your syllabus policies about, say, the use of generative Artificial Intelligence in coursework. Ethical issues also can emerge in the moment, such as when a student in crisis asks for a major change in those policies to accommodate their particular needs. And broader ethical considerations include how to balance your own academic freedom to teach what and how you choose with both the needs and preferences of your students and also the curricular and professional standards established by your peers. Higher education scholar Bruce Macfarlane (2004) calls these—and many more teaching decisions—the “messy” choices that reflect “the real-life, everyday moral dilemmas that confront university teachers managing relationships with students and their colleagues” (1).

The ethical complexities of teaching multiply when you engage in SoTL. If your inquiry is within your own teaching context (as is most often the case), your relationship with your students takes on an extra dimension. Philosopher Gil Hersch (2018) explains, “Once teachers decide to evaluate an educational method they consider implementing, they introduce an additional goal to their classroom besides getting students to learn as best they can” (10). In this shift, although you’re primarily their teacher, you’re now also a researcher of their learning, and these two roles don’t always align. Consider how some research

practices would be ethical in many large scale studies but potentially perceived as unfair to students in classroom-based SoTL:

- As a *researcher*, for example, you might want to randomly divide students in one of your classes into two groups, providing one with an intervention you believe is educationally beneficial (e.g., a specific active learning experience) and providing the other a control condition (e.g., a traditional lecture). Many studies are designed in this way.
- As a *teacher* you might decide not to conduct a SoTL inquiry this way because, even if you judged this design to be ethical as a researcher, the randomly assigned groups—one of which withholds what is probably an educationally beneficial experience—could negatively affect the learning, performance, and autonomy of some of your students, and could be perceived by students (and others) to be unfair (Bunnell, Felten, and Matthews 2022).

Different academic teachers will balance such potential role conflicts differently, but we urge you to carefully consider how your SoTL inquiries might influence your relationships with students, as well as interactions among students. If your SoTL project has the potential to negatively influence learning or relationships in your course, you should either reconsider your plans or proceed with care and transparency.

You may be thinking that all of this concern about the ethics of your SoTL inquiry is unnecessary because you're a good person, and you care about your students. You would never put them in a risky situation, and you would certainly never cause them harm or try to coerce them to do something inappropriate. You strive to be fair in your assessment practices and professional in your relationship with students, so this chapter may even feel a little insulting. We—the authors of this book, the wider SoTL

community, and colleagues who oversee institutional ethics approvals—don't mean to imply anything about you specifically or to doubt your good intentions. Instead, this vigilance about ethics emerges from the undeniable difference in power between *any* teacher-researcher (including you) and their students. As the one with most of the power, you need to be deliberate in trying to understand how students might experience that power, regardless of your intentions.

Some scholars have even wondered if *not* doing SoTL also has ethical implications. If we make decisions about teaching based primarily on our gut instincts or stories from colleagues, we are far more likely to act on misunderstandings of our students (Cox 2011; Poole 2018; Popovic and Green 2012) and on pedagogical traditions and assumptions that would not survive critical scrutiny (Nelson 2010). Indeed, STEM education scholars in the US have documented how active learning can close pre-existing equity gaps in student learning and performance in a course (Theobald, Hill, Tran, et al. 2020) and have raised questions about the ethics of continuing with purely didactic lectures when active learning has been demonstrated to be consistently more effective (Freeman, Eddy, McDonough, Smith, Okoroafor, Jordt, and Wenderoth 2014). At its core, SoTL inquiry is one evidence-informed way for academic teachers to improve their teaching and their students' learning. As Lee Shulman (2001) argued in SoTL's very early days, academic teachers have both an "individual and a communal" obligation to systematically enhance their own teaching and to contribute to the shared work of teaching in their discipline and in higher education (3). So, perhaps, doing SoTL—or at least being informed by SoTL—is one component of being an ethical academic teacher.

Practicing ethical SoTL is no less important than asking meaningful questions and situating your work within broader conversations, but there are a couple of reasons why we wrote this chapter a little differently than the previous two. First, the rules and policies for ethical human subject research vary based on national guidelines, institutional policies, and cultural context, so external advice goes only so far. Next, plenty of resources out there will guide you through the specific decisions you'll need to make to develop a SoTL inquiry that meets the ethical mandates of this kind of research. (See box 6.1.) For these reasons, we chose to focus here on our North Star of ethical SoTL: centering relationships. This means that this chapter will help you think through broader ethical implications of your SoTL inquiry. These involve not only reducing risk and ensuring that you can share the results of your inquiry – traditional concerns of research ethics – but also tending to your relationship with students. Additionally, taking a relational approach to SoTL ethics will enhance the design of your inquiry by centering what and who matters in this work. Below, we explore two key ethical touchpoints in SoTL: planning and sharing your inquiry.

### **Touchpoint 1: Planning Your SoTL inquiry**

In your day-to-day work as a teacher, it's hard enough to see the needs and perspectives of each of your students. Fold in your additional obligations as you conduct SoTL inquiry, and things can get murkier. For this reason, as you begin to plan your SoTL project, take time to think through how students might experience your inquiry.

Many SoTL scholars begin by talking with colleagues. You could have a conversation with a SoTL-active colleague,

#### BOX 6.1

#### **Do I Need Ethical Approval to Do SoTL?**

The short answer is “Yes,” at least in most higher education systems. As you saw in [chapter 1](#), going public with your work is a fundamental aspect of SoTL, and to be able to share your SoTL inquiry with colleagues, you need to operate within the research ethics guidelines that apply in your context. This often means seeking ethical approval from your institution. In fact, some journals now require proof of this approval because SoTL typically falls under the umbrella of “research on human subjects,” which is tightly—and rightly—regulated around the world, focusing on the ethical imperative of minimizing risk for the “human subjects” (or what we in SoTL might call “participants” or “students”). Since the rules and policies are so localized, you'll want to talk to colleagues and carefully consult the relevant documentation to find out what applies in your specific context.

Engaging with the formal ethics approval process can be enlightening and rewarding, and it also can be frustrating and demoralizing. Based on his longtime experience of chairing an ethics committee at a university in the US, Ryan Martin explains that applying for ethical approval “sometimes feels overly detailed, too subjective, unnecessary, and unfriendly to SoTL” (2018, 62). If you want to dig more deeply for the kind of practical guidance you'll need for gaining ethical clearance, we encourage you to talk with your institution's research ethics staff for tailored guidance and with SoTL-active colleagues for SoTL-specific guidance. (If you don't know them, ask at your academic development unit or teaching and learning center.)

someone in your campus’s teaching and learning center, or another colleague whom you trust to serve as a critical friend who is both supportive and willing to ask challenging questions (Baskerville and Goldblatt 2009). One of the many reasons why these preliminary conversations are helpful is because you can ask these colleagues to listen to your ideas with the ethics of your relationships with students in mind. You might prime them with questions like the following:

- “Where in this plan am I—and where am I not—treating my students with respect and care?”
- “In my plan, are there points at which I seem to lose sight of my role in supporting student learning and well-being?”
- “Is there something here you think a student would object to?”
- “Given the inherent power in the teacher–student relationship, where, how, and/or when should I step back and invite someone else in (e.g., to collect consent forms from students) or delay until I’m no longer their teacher (e.g., analyzing their written responses for my inquiry)?”

These colleagues can draw on their experiences and understanding of the complexities of the teacher–student (and now teacher–researcher–student) relationship.

You’re probably already thinking about our next recommendation. If colleagues are great partners in planning your inquiry, then students are (in some ways) even better. Imagine talking with a current or former student, or a group of students, about your inquiry—why you started, what you’re wondering, how you’re thinking about conducting it—and asking them the questions above.

Let’s go even further. Students as Partners is a major movement in SoTL, emerging naturally from the field’s approach to

students and the relationship between teacher–researcher and students. Imagine partnering with a student from the very first step of your inquiry, such as the reflections in [chapter 2](#) or the entry points in [chapter 3](#), and then developing a meaningful question together in [chapter 4](#), and so on. This collaboration doesn’t guarantee an ethical, relationship-centered SoTL inquiry, but it places the perspective of a student and learner right beside you throughout the process (Bunnell, Felten, and Matthews 2022). Michelle Yeo and Cherie Woolmer (2022) invite SoTL scholars

#### BOX 6.2

##### **SoTL Partnership with Students**

“Students as Partners” (or “SaP”) in SoTL is a natural extension of the field’s approach to students and the relationship between teacher–researcher and students. To learn more, here are a few places to start:

- A foundational text is *Engaging Student Voices in the Study of Teaching and Learning* by Carmen Werder and Megan Otis (2009). You can watch their [introductory video](#).
- A more recent book, edited by two (then) students and [available online](#), is *The Power of Partnership: Students, Staff, and Faculty Revolutionizing Higher Education* edited by Lucy Mercer-Mapstone and Sophia Abbot (2020).
- *International Journal for Students as Partners (IJSaP)* is a journal devoted to this work.
- This [video](#) (10:38) on “Best Practices for Integrating Student Voices in SoTL” features Alison Cook–Sather, Mick Healey, Sophia Abbot, Hayley Burke, Huiyu Li, Roselyn Appenteng, Alicia Walker, Carmen Werder, and Kara Yanagida, and was produced by the Center for Engaged Learning.

to consider the teacher–researcher role “as an opportunity rather than a problem to be solved,” because it invites such partnership with both peers and students as you design and conduct your inquiry (39). To learn more, see box 6.2.

## Touchpoint 2: Going Public

Centering your relationship with students will help you in making some key decisions as you go public with your SoTL inquiry. Sharing your work with others is typically the point at which ethical approval is required, and for good reason. You might be presenting examples of student confusion, misunderstanding, vulnerability, or even failure. Your ethics committee, colleagues, and especially students can help you honor students’ rights to have their work and their identities treated with respect and care.

Think about how you’ll talk and write about your students. First, deciding whether to keep student work anonymous isn’t as simple as it seems. On one hand, you may think, “Of course, I’ll anonymize everything!” Indeed, in order to protect students’ identities when shared publicly, student work is often presented in aggregate or, if presented individually, with pseudonyms. But Mary E. Burman and Audrey Kleinsasser (2004) advise SoTL practitioners to let “students control the way their work is used,” honoring their “ownership” of their own work (74). Defaulting to anonymity, they explain, means that students won’t be attributed or applauded for their insights (which raises other ethical questions), so they advise asking students whether they want their work attributed to them by name. When Mariolina Rizzi Salvatori and Patricia Donahue (2005), literary scholars in the US who bring their field’s high value on authorship, went public with their inquiry on reading difficult texts, their “Acknowledgements”

section lists their students by full name, thanking them for “their graciousness in letting us cite their work” (xviii). Individual names also appear in the subheadings of sections that feature case studies of their writing. Additionally, Peter has used a two-step consent process before naming students, giving each person to be quoted the opportunity to read each quote in context before agreeing to their name being used in print (Felten and Lambert 2020). We’re not advocating for this level of identification in all SoTL inquiries, and anonymity may make the most sense in yours, but we encourage you to consider talking with your students about it and giving them some choice.

Next, consider how you’ll talk and write about your students if the learning hasn’t gone well. As we pointed out in [chapter 3](#), some SoTL projects begin as inquiry into “problems,” such as students’ inadequate or incorrect prior knowledge. A natural companion to Hutchings’s *What works?* SoTL question is *What doesn’t work?* As you can imagine, how student work is framed in these situations could, even if inadvertently, embarrass or shame students. Particularly in presentations, informal comments can come across as disrespectful or dismissive of students who are struggling to learn. (We’ve even heard audience members laugh at examples of student work presented at conferences.) To avoid this unintentional result, remind yourself—and your audience—that confusion, mistakes, and failure are not only expected in the learning process but are also part of the human experience. We’re privileged that some students trust us enough to share such vulnerable moments with us, so we should treat them with care. A simple way to do this is by trying to connect back with the students in your inquiry to discuss your work before you present or publish. Even if they’re not interested in your conclusions, they’ll feel respected by the process.

Let's consider a couple of examples. Salvatori and Donahue (2005) not only name their students but also include extended passages in which these students describe their confusion about something they're reading. How, then, do the authors write about these quotes in ways that demonstrate respect for their students? After quoting a student, they begin their analysis of the students' work with framing comments like the following:

- “The first point we want to make about Funkhouser’s response is that what she notices about the poem is *indeed worth noticing*.” (21)
- “This is the response of a reader who has grown considerably over a period of a few weeks....” (26)
- “What can we learn from Stamm’s work?” (32)
- “Both these readers single out as a difficulty the poem’s unclear references; they do not know what certain words are referring to.... They are quite right. A writer’s use of unfamiliar language can often make a reader feel that a work is inaccessible or impossible to understand.” (40)
- “Pontoski states at the end that she still feels very confused about the poem. And yet, her writing displays a great deal of understanding.” (42)

And there are more. In these moments immediately after a student quote, Salvatori and Donahue write with generosity, empathy, and respect for the student. That’s an example of ethical, relational SoTL.

Another example comes from Tom Drummond and Kalyn Shea Owens (2010), education and chemistry instructors, respectively, at North Seattle Community College in the US. Their SoTL inquiry focused on how small groups of students work together to understand a difficult concept in introductory chemistry. With permission, they video-recorded student groups in

action and then transcribed the recordings. Drummond and Owens then created a “capture” of key moments in the group work, centering what students do as they encounter something they don’t fully understand (162). By concentrating on critical times in the group conversation, this inquiry reveals the very human processes of learning. Notice how they describe these moments (including the students’ names) in the passage below:

In the [capture] we saw how [students] Matthew, Melissa, Shana, and Kathryn were being powerful and capable. We saw how their learning did not proceed in a linear way but in fluid and tentative wandering. We saw how the construction of knowledge was a group process where each was nurtured by the conjectures and responsiveness of others—some confirming, others questioning—toward new connections and understandings. We saw how each person had unique contributions, pace, and strategies. (Drummond and Owens 2010, 181)

This approach to “listening more deeply” (182) to students as they struggle is another example of ethical, relational SoTL that centers empathy and care in the process of analyzing and going public with an inquiry.

As you move forward with your SoTL inquiry, think about how you’ll tend to your relationships with students. Talking with colleagues, sharing your work with your students before you go public, and even fully partnering with students are great ways to help you design ethical, relationship-centered SoTL. These practices, and others like them, will also help you always remember that the heart of this work is “ultimately and immediately about an encounter between persons” (Fielding 1999, 22).

## Questions for You

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

- Beyond SoTL, what are your experiences with human subjects research? How could your approach to SoTL ethics be informed by—or perhaps challenged by—these other experiences?
- When might your dual role as a teacher and a SoTL-researcher be in tension? What can you do to manage that?
- How can you design your SoTL inquiry processes to be both caring and transparent for the people involved?
- How will you go public with your SoTL inquiry that honors and respects the people and ethics involved?

## Supplemental Materials

[Video](#): Several students and faculty offer recommendations for integrating student voices in SoTL in this video (10:38) produced by the Center for Engaged Learning at Elon University.