

THE SOTL GUIDE

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The SoTL Guide

(Re)Orienting the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

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Introduction

Welcome to *The SoTL Guide*! We're glad you're here. Before we get to the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), let us tell you about ourselves and how we came to write this book. The three of us—Nancy, Peter, and Katarina—met through SoTL. We started by admiring each other's work. That appreciation *for the work* led to conversations and collaborations with each other *as people*, which then led to even more admiration. Over time, we came to know and enjoy each other beyond our professional selves. We decided to write this book because we knew we wanted to share our experiences and insights from the work each of us has done with SoTL, and to capture the humanness that we (and others) bring to that work and that this work elevates in us.

We also wrote this book because we have a vision for SoTL to be an even more positive force in higher education—for those of us who teach and work in academia, for our students, and for our communities. Our definition of SoTL may be simple (see “What Is SoTL?” in [chapter 1](#)), but our vision for SoTL is ambitious. We see SoTL as more than one thing: it's a practice that improves teaching and learning in context. It's also a field that extends how

BOX 0.1

A Simple Definition

In [chapter 1](#), we define SoTL as: inquiry into teaching and learning for the purposes of improving teaching and learning in context and contributing to what we know about teaching and learning, in support of the broader aims of higher education.

we in higher education build knowledge. It's a community that offers rich relationships for those who seek them. And it's a form of scholarship with socially conscious and humane roots that call on us to make a difference in the education of students, in the careers of academics, and in the world.

We see so much promise in SoTL. This orientation towards our work in and on SoTL and to each other also shapes how we wrote this book. We chose to write *The SoTL Guide* by simultaneously embracing and resisting a stepwise approach to doing SoTL. Like the other helpful books on developing SoTL inquiries, we appreciate making the inquiry process more transparent and accessible. Unpacking the unfamiliar and identifying key steps makes SoTL a more welcoming, inclusive, and effective field. At the same time, we've seen how some of the best SoTL inquiries result from the willingness to follow what emerges, to welcome surprises, and to change direction. We hope the book's approach to developing a SoTL inquiry reflects this structured flexibility.

Stylistically, we chose to write the book in an inviting and often informal voice (and occasionally, voices) because we've experienced SoTL as a collegial practice—a form of scholarly conversation among peers who come from different backgrounds

and contexts and who come together to understand each other, to draw out and complement each other's strengths, and ultimately to strive toward shared goals in tackling complex issues in higher education.

Also, as we bring in these peers, we're intentionally adopting an approach that recognizes not only the products of their work (i.e., their publications) but also the effort and humanness that led to these products. It's too easy to reduce our peers to an article, a conclusion, even a disembodied PDF on a screen, and we want to uplift the very human work of our colleagues, especially in the wake of generative AI tools. Our approach may feel unfamiliar as you read *The SoTL Guide*, but we invite you to pause during those moments to consider what we're attempting to highlight, and why. For instance, when we write about specific SoTL inquiries, our attribution includes something about the people and their work that we see as important. We want to signal that *who is doing the work* and *where they are doing it* matter. To capture this information, we first must name the people. We include the authors' full names—or, in a few cases of unpublished inquiries, the full names of those who conducted the project. We occasionally depart from the *Chicago Manual of Style's* guidelines by including all of the authors' names, rather than using *et al.* (For more on this approach to citation, see “Naming Is Power: Citation Practices in SoTL” by Chick, Ostrowdun, Abbot, Mercer-Mapstone, and Grensavitch [2021].) We also note the contexts for their inquiries—typically the geographical region, the general type of institution, the discipline or course, and the year. Far more about context matters to each SoTL project, but in the end we decided that this information will help readers meaningfully situate each project and see all projects as meaningfully situated. In some chapters, you'll also see that we center specific scholars

whose thinking has deeply informed the overarching guidance of that chapter, so in these instances we briefly describe those scholars' roles and contexts that are relevant to that influence. And sometimes we simply name authors who we draw on to make a small but significant point. We invite you to try this approach to citing in your own work; we see this as one way to extend the interpersonal generosity of the SoTL community into our scholarly practice.

We also include many voices beyond our own throughout the book. Some writerly conventions urge us to summarize and paraphrase outside sources as much as possible, but that can also feel like an act of erasure. Writing is difficult, and the craft of putting together effective words, phrases, and sentences is part of the influential work we want to honor, so in parts of this book, you'll see more direct quotations here than you see in some other texts. That isn't lazy writing; it's collegial writing.

You may also notice that we feature colleagues from a range of disciplines, institutions, nationalities, and identities, representing some of the diversity of those who practice SoTL. Admittedly, we depict only some of that diversity, and we surely depict it incompletely. For instance, nearly all of our citations are from English-language sources, which says more about us as authors (i.e., Katarina is multilingual, but Nancy and Peter are fluent only in English, so our joint language is English) than SoTL itself, which is certainly happening in plenty of languages, as we show in [chapter 1](#).

Our ongoing, imperfect efforts to represent the diversity of the field illustrate how the SoTL we present in this book reflects not only what we have learned, but—more importantly—what we continue to learn. Writing this book together was a journey of discovery for each of us, and we know that we haven't always

lived up to the SoTL we describe in the following pages, but we believe there's great value in articulating our shared aspirations. Writing *The SoTL Guide* has been, in some ways, as much a guide for us as we hope it will be for you. We hope you'll find the ideas, the examples, the frameworks, and the questions in *The SoTL Guide* to be both practical and inspiring, both informational and aspirational.

We initially conceived of *The SoTL Guide* as a book for readers who are relatively new to SoTL, but in the same way that we learned so much from each other through this collaborative writing, we realized that more experienced scholars will find things that surprise and even challenge them in these pages. And since we have the dual role of SoTL practitioners and SoTL supporters, we also believe that academic developers will be able to adapt materials from the book in their programming (see box 0.2).

To ease your navigation on this journey, we divided *The SoTL Guide* into three sections:

- **Getting Oriented:** In the first section (chapters 1–2), we consider what SoTL is and who you are as a SoTL scholar.
- **Taking the Journey:** In the second section (chapters 3–10), we explore the process of developing a SoTL inquiry, focusing on frameworks and concepts that will help you as your work unfolds.
- **Looking Ahead:** In the third and final section (chapters 11–12), we dig into the implications of SoTL for you as a professional and as part of a community.

If you're new to SoTL, we encourage you to start at the beginning and read the chapters sequentially. If you're not new, we invite you to read in this way as well because we think we're offering something new in the book, and our approach to

SoTL—conceptualizing the field, designing a project, and situating yourself as a scholar—builds on that foundation.

We introduced ourselves and the book by noting how we met each other as peers and professionals and then, through conversation and collaboration, came to know and appreciate each other as people. Throughout this book, then, when we refer to SoTL as a scholarly conversation, we're not simply invoking a useful metaphor. Our relationships with each other—and with many other colleagues, collaborators, and friends in SoTL—developed through conversations. We mean it when we say that we hope *The SoTL Guide* inspires you not only to develop SoTL inquiries but also to join SoTL conversations and build this community. When we inquire on our own, SoTL can help us improve our teaching, but together SoTL can help us transform higher education.

BOX 0.2

A Note for Academic Developers Reading *The SoTL Guide*

We wrote *The SoTL Guide* directly for SoTL practitioners, or those who develop and conduct SoTL projects, but we can also imagine it being used as a valuable resource in academic development. As all three of us are engaged in academic development in our respective institutions (as well as nationally and internationally) we've shared our understanding of SoTL, how to develop SoTL inquiries, and a variety of activities and tools just as we've done in workshops with academic teachers from many contexts. We hope the book is both practical and inspiring for academic developers.

Since the book and its supplemental materials are open access and freely available, we invite you to use the whole book or parts of it as it fits your context. Our approach will support your engagement of colleagues who are either new to or experienced with SoTL. A few possibilities, for example, are below:

- Each section or chapter can be a stand-alone topic for workshops and conversations. The guidance, explanations, and reflective questions (which can alternatively be used as discussion questions) may provide all you need to facilitate a discussion or organize a workshop.
- Some or all of the book can be used to support an in-person or virtual SoTL program or learning community. Participants might read one chapter at a time (or just the chapters that are relevant to your focus), and then share their reflections and responses to the “Questions for You” at the end of each chapter. We can see this approach supporting the “significant conversations” that nurture changes in practice and the development of lasting collegial relationships (Roxå and Mårtensson 2009, 556).
- We also encourage you to be creative in how you use the book in your specific context.

After you use the book—in parts or as a whole, on your own or with your colleagues—we would be eager to hear from you to learn how you used it, how it went, and any other feedback you’d be willing to share.