Becoming a SoTL Scholar

Edited by Janice Miller-Young and Nancy L. Chick

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Field Definition Multidisciplinary Graphic Essay

CHAPTER 13

COMPLEX JOURNEYS AND THEORY AS SCAFFOLDING

An Illustrated Guide to the SoTLscape

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In this graphic chapter, I visually reflect on some of my own SoTL journeys, what the SoTL "landscape" looks like, and the potential role of theory within that landscape. First, I explain these graphics as briefly as possible. Since there are so many definitions of SoTL, I've learned to always begin by describing what I mean by the term (figure 13.1). As part of that definition, I also think of SoTL as a six-dimensional space (figure 13.2). (In math and physics, the dimension of a space is the number of characteristics needed to describe a location within it. A landscape implies three dimensions [North-South, East-West, Up-Down]. Time is usually defined as the fourth dimension, and more than four dimensions, theoretically, allows for time travel and multiple timelines.)

What does a SoTL journey look like when conceptualized in more than three dimensions? A SoTL trajectory may be theory- or practice-oriented (Roxå, Olsson, and Mårtensson 2008). In my experience it can also be both, as well as messy and multidirectional with many vortices, cul de sacs, and wormholes along the way (figure 13.3). Finally, I think of the multidimensional SoTL landscape as consisting of overlapping disciplinary and multidisciplinary communities of practice and boundary spaces (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner 2014). To gain a meta-level view across these communities, I can step onto the scaffold of theory (figure 13.4).

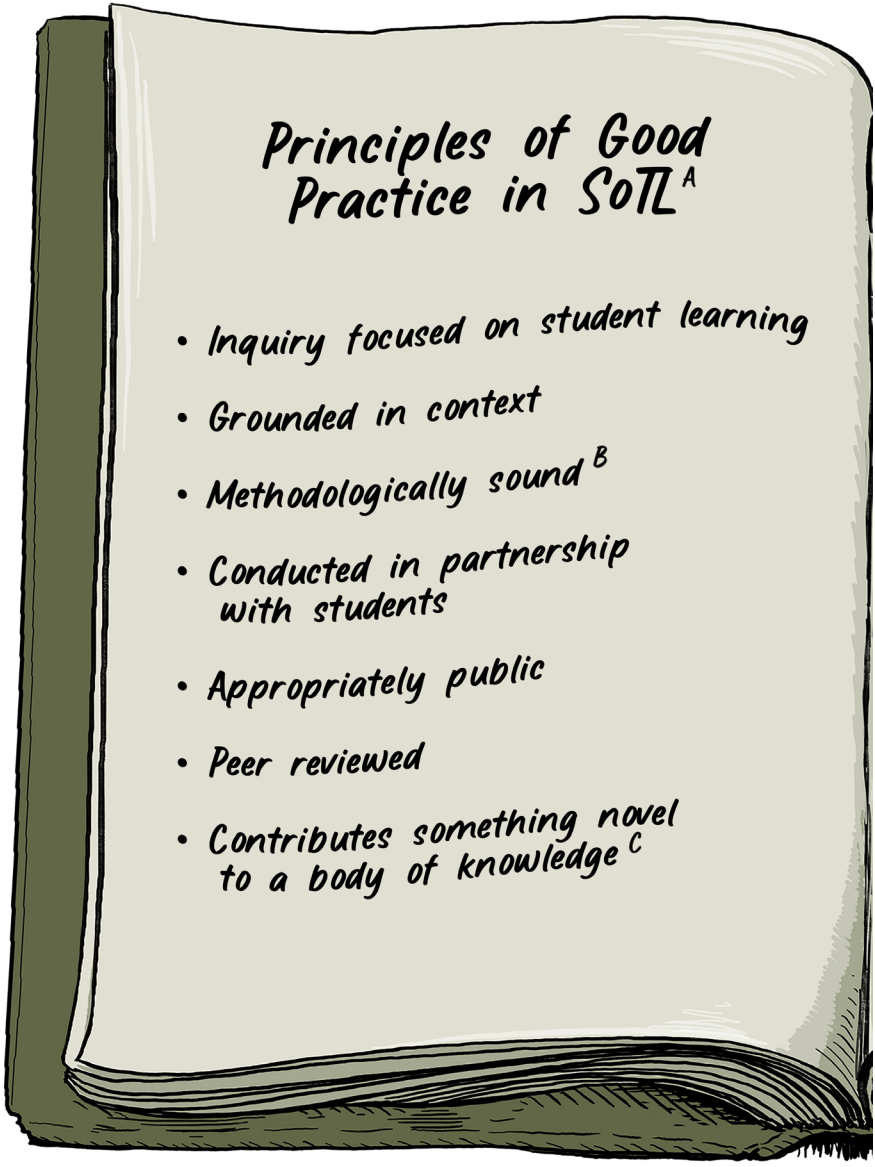

Figure 13.1. This is my own working definition of SoTL (A. Felten 2013; B. Miller-Young and Yeo 2015; C. Kanuka 2011).

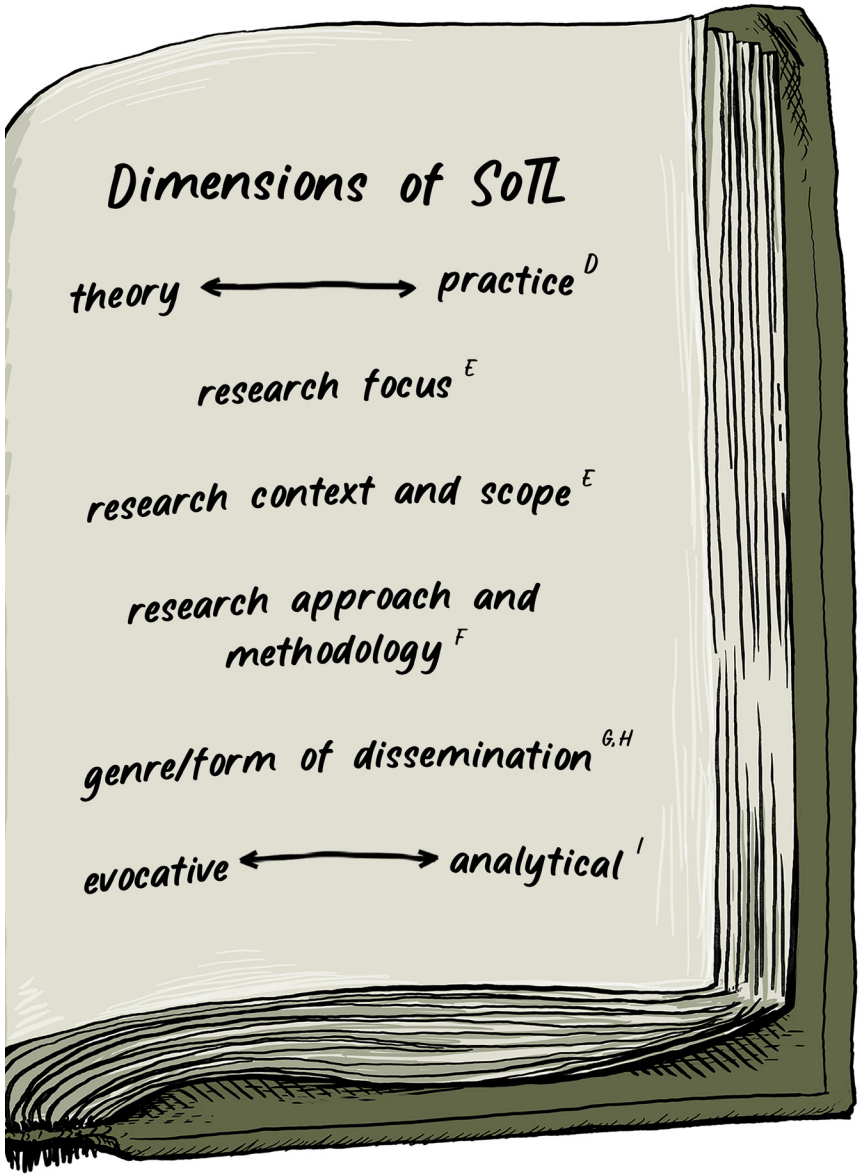

Figure 13.2. To me, any given SoTL project could be described by up to six dimensions, as listed above (D. Roxå, Olsson, and Mårtensson 2008; E. Paul, Seniuk Cicek, and Rodrigues, chapter 12; F. Yeo, Miller-Young, and Manarin 2023; G. Cook-Sather, Abbot, and Felten 2019; H. Poole and Chick 2022; I. Halpern 2023).

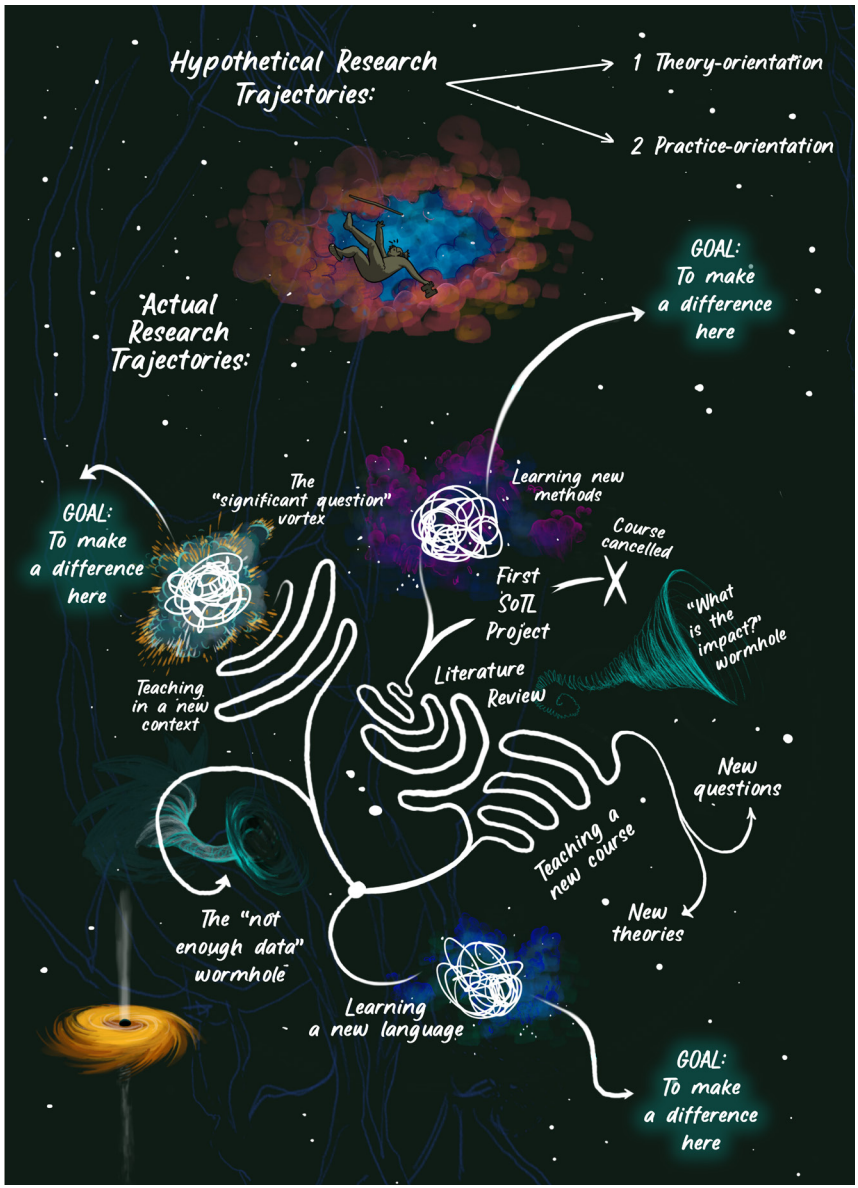

Figure 13.3. Learning to do SoTL has sometimes felt like falling through space, looking around desperately for something familiar to latch on to: a question, methods, theories, language—anything to give me some direction. On the other hand, each SoTL project has had its own messy, complex learning trajectory, shown above, some of which overlap in time.

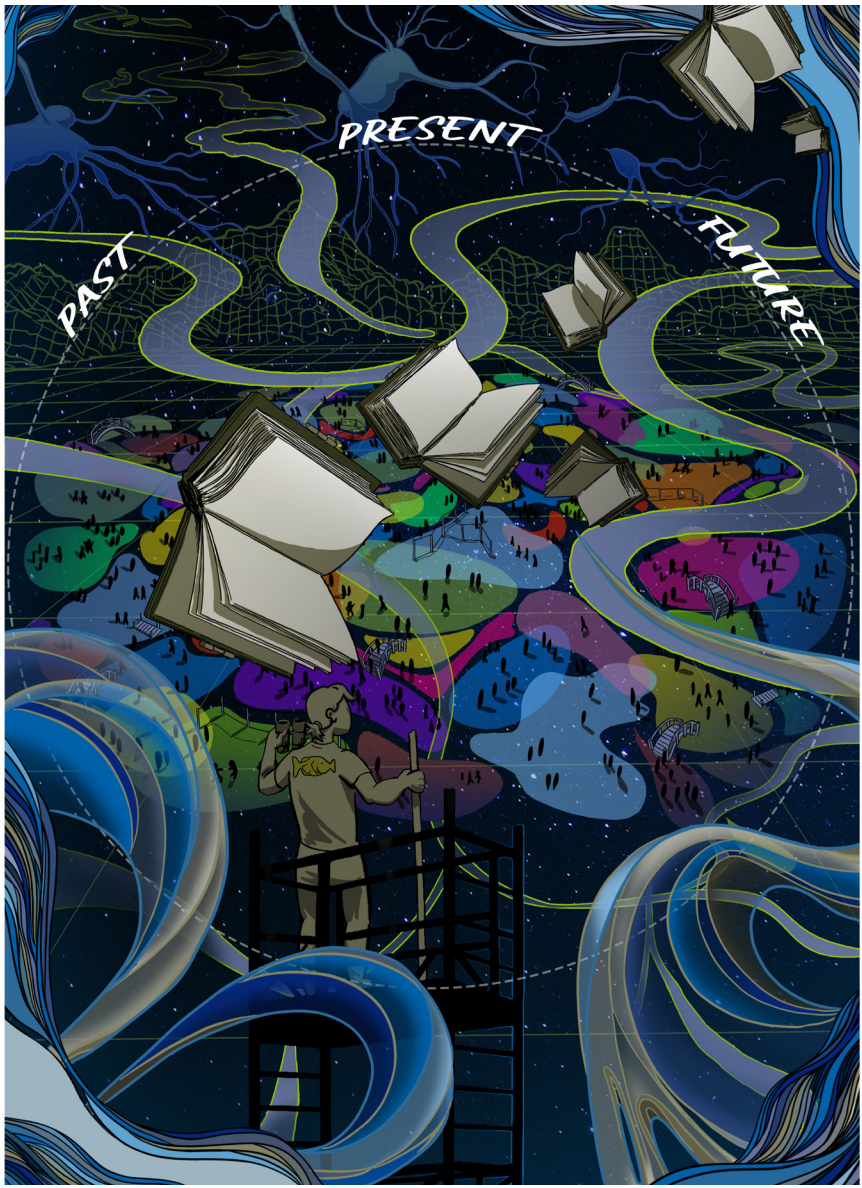

Figure 13.4. Standing on the scaffolding of theory gives a broad perspective across the SoTLscape so that I can compare and contrast my findings or connect my work with the ideas of others, thus making meaning. This theory scaffold is not permanent; it is socially constructed and can change over time. I need to always be aware of the foundation on which it rests and the material of the scaffold itself. Sometime in the future, I may need to stand on a different scaffold.

Reflection Questions

- What is your working definition of SoTL? Do these dimensions resonate with you?
- How would you visually map your SoTL journey?
- What is the role of theory in your SoTL work?
- What communities of practice do you belong to and what boundaries might you aim to cross in order to advance your SoTL work?

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