

Becoming a SoTL Scholar

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CHAPTER 1

DEVELOPING SUSTAINED SOTL JOURNEYS AND IDENTITIES

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The scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL), the multidisciplinary field that focuses on systematic investigation in teaching and learning, is now over thirty years old (Boyer 1990). No longer just a grassroots movement of individual faculty committed to taking teaching and learning seriously, SoTL has become professionalized. It is supported by an international professional organization and various national, regional, and disciplinary organizations. It is the focus of multiple peer-reviewed journals, some with “SoTL” named in their titles, and at least one publisher has a book series explicitly dedicated to SoTL. It is the scholarly work of many teaching stream faculty lines, and it has been written into many (but not enough) tenure and promotion guidelines for traditional faculty. Credentials and graduate courses focused on SoTL have emerged, and research centers within faculties and institutions have been established. Despite all of these hallmarks of professionalization, the processes for becoming a professional in the field remain idiosyncratic. We believe that it’s time to map out what it looks like and how to get there by design.

Within the literature on SoTL more broadly, few sources explore careers in SoTL. The topic of greatest interest seems to be if and how institutions recognize and reward SoTL, typically within specific institutions (Huber 2002; Kern et al. 2015; Timmermans and Ellis 2016; Gansemer-Topf et al. 2022) or for specific groups of academics (Simmons et al. 2021). A notable exception is the work of Mary Taylor Huber, who has explicitly studied those who have

forged SoTL careers. In her 2001 article “Balancing Acts: Designing Careers around the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning” and then her 2004 book, *Balancing Acts: The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Academic Careers*, she focuses on four case studies of successful SoTL scholars who’ve achieved some status on their campuses and in the field more broadly. Notably, all four gained success at research universities, which Huber chose to “illustrate most dramatically the tensions inherent in efforts that do not neatly fit into the conventional categories of academic work” (Huber 2004, 8). She further describes the four as “not typical scholars of teaching and learning” but instead “extraordinary cases” with “national and even international recognition” (7). Indeed, the stories of Dan Bernstein in psychology, Randy Bass in English, Brian Coppola in chemistry, and Sheri Sheppard in engineering reinforce the notion that—at least in 2004—“we should not kid ourselves”: pursuit of a SoTL-infused career is “probably” for those who are “not just very good but distinctively excellent,” as Lee Shulman cautions in the foreword to his book (2004, ix).

This focus on a few exceptional cases made sense in 2004 because, as Huber observes in her introduction, “‘Scholarship’ . . . is always historically circumscribed and defined” (2). Twenty years ago, we needed “Pioneers” and “Pathfinders” to show us what careers in SoTL might look like (Huber 2004, 2019; Shulman 2004, viii), but what has changed in the twenty years since then? Huber provides some insight in her 2019 article “Citizens of the Teaching Commons: The Rise of SoTL Among US Professors of the Year, 1981–2015.” Chronicling the history of “the only continuous national award for college and university teaching in the United States” (2019, 155), Huber analyzes the nominations and award material to trace the trajectory of SoTL in these awards—or more precisely, in the award winners. From the 119 nominees in its first year to as many as 500 nominations in its final years, there was “a steady increase” in SoTL engagement by the winners, rising “from nil in the 1980s to around 10 percent in the 1990s, 25 percent in the 2000s, and 75 percent in the 2010s” (163). Here, she offers additional reasons for

featuring exceptional cases: since they were nominated by upper-level administrators on their campuses and adjudicated by multiple panels of judges, they “represent a collective sense within the larger higher education community” and, according to the program’s goals, “provide models to which others can aspire” (155).

A 2017 study by Jeannie Billot, Susan Rowland, Brent Carnell, Cheryl Amundsen, and Tamela Evans also provides insight on the models of those who have successfully integrated SoTL into their careers. They interviewed twenty-three “experienced SoTL researchers” (defined as “at least three years of experience in teaching and learning research”) to explore how they’d established credibility in SoTL: what it means, how they developed it, and barriers they navigated (2017, 104–05). Billot and colleagues helpfully catalog a range of “indicators of credibility in SoTL” and include recommendations for developing it for one’s own work and for SoTL itself (107–09). This study is a demonstration of the progress of SoTL as a field stable enough to support more people who might want to stay awhile.

At the same time, others have been critical of the field’s professionalization. In “Recovering the Heart of SoTL: Inquiring into Teaching and Learning ‘as if the World Mattered’” (2023), Peter Felten and Johan Geertsema are concerned that the “rapid professionalization of SoTL” (5) will follow the trajectory of other professionalized disciplines by discouraging the diversity of approaches and practices that characterized the original vision of the field. More specifically, they draw on Edward Said to describe “four pressures of professionalization” they see already at play: “narrow specialization, certification of expertise, co-option by power, and intellectual conformity” (Felten and Geertsema 2023, 1). Indeed, they describe a gradual homogenization of SoTL toward a narrow set of inquiries seeking “what works” (Hutchings 2000, 4) about cognitive aspects of student learning and discipline-specific issues. We share these concerns. We also see a subtle but significant byproduct of this dark side of professionalization in citation practices in SoTL (Chick et al. 2021). The pressure to restrict who’s considered an expert means that

SoTL practitioners will continue to cite by reputation of the author and canonicity of the text, a practice with direct implications on “who’s read, who’s published, who’s funded, who’s tenured, who’s employed, and who’s heard” (Chick et al. 2021, 2). However, in the end, while we aren’t Pollyannas, we are hopeful. In the ongoing vigilance by scholars like Felten and Geertsema—and many others—who push back against narrowing SoTL’s borders, including in our own work and in the authors’ work in this book, we see evidence of “the heart of SoTL.” We see new and varied voices, an intentional situatedness, important questions about power and conformity, and commitments to affective and equitable experiences of learning.

Journeying into the Field of SoTL

Many academics begin SoTL focused on how it can serve as a form of professional development on teaching. Those who look farther than improving their work as teachers will find that SoTL is also a field of study. Fields are broader than disciplines because “the phenomena they study are relatively unrestricted and the methods, frequently taken from several disciplines, are diverse” (Donald 2002, 10). Kimberley A. Grant (2018) explores this notion of SoTL as a field, drawing on Sharon Friesen and David W. Jardine’s description of a field as a “living landscape” that’s both marked by internal “diversity, multiplicity, modes and forms and figures” and “amenable to a wide range of explorers” (2009, 156). Indeed, as a field, SoTL is relatively young. Although the work of systematically investigating teaching and learning has been practiced in some disciplines for many years, Ernest Boyer’s 1990 naming of “the scholarship of teaching” invited faculty from all disciplines both to engage in this work and to come together in this common endeavor. Since this origin, SoTL has been characterized by the diversity and openness to explorers that Friesen and Jardine identify as hallmarks of academic fields. The explorers who enter SoTL come from all disciplines, from different types of postsecondary institutions, from any career stage, and from across the globe.

This diversity means that there are many ways of doing SoTL, and that it is a low-consensus field made up of scholars from both high-consensus and low-consensus disciplines. Anthony Biglan explains that high-consensus disciplines share a “paradigm,” or “a body of theory that is subscribed to by all members,” “provides a consistent account of most of the phenomena of interest in the area and, at the same time, defines problems which require further study,” and produces “greater consensus about content and method” (1973, 202). Janet Gail Donald’s *Learning to Think: Disciplinary Perspectives* offers physics as one of the most high-consensus disciplines because of its “high level of agreement about methods of inquiry,” its “assumption of a single parsimonious system of explanation [that] underlies the scientific method,” its convergence on concepts that “are sought to reconcile [anomalous] physical phenomena” and have “technical rather than everyday meanings,” and more (2002, 32–33). At the other end of the spectrum is, according to Donald, literary study, characterized by “the diffuse nature of intellectual endeavor . . . and the accompanying variety of approaches to thinking processes,” resulting in such heterogeneities as “the breadth of the discipline, the multiplicity of approaches to understanding it, and the particular attention to aesthetics, feeling, and imagination” (232–233). This characteristic, perhaps more than any other, results in some of the continuing debates in the field of SoTL, including the efforts to settle on a clear definition of SoTL, what “quality” and “rigor” look like in SoTL, and who is granted entry into what has been described as a “big tent” (Huber and Hutchings 2005, 30)—all of which are wrapped up in concerns about pressures to narrow the field (Felten and Geertsema 2023). It also means that some view these continuing debates as a weakness (Boshier 2009; Tight 2017) and others as a mark of health (Simmons et al. 2013; Chick and Poole 2014; Yeo, Manarin, and Miller-Young 2018).

For those explorers who stay, SoTL becomes not just what they do but also shapes who they are. In other words, the journey involves not just the acquisition of new knowledge and skills but also a new identity. Identity is how one sees oneself in the world and it

is not static; it is something that requires ongoing negotiation and is influenced by the communities one participates in and one's role in those communities (Wenger 1998). We have specifically chosen the word "Becoming" for the title of this book to acknowledge that no matter where one is in their identity trajectory(ies), one is always in a state of learning and therefore, becoming. Identity is re-negotiated each time one engages in a new community where one is compelled to reflect upon how one's previous competencies and identities can be translated (or not) into the new setting (Wenger 2000). One has to decide whether one is on "a journey to the heart of the community or as a visitor, a sojourner whose identity is primarily anchored elsewhere" (Fenton-O'Creevy, Dimitriadis, and Scobie 2015, 33). Thus, becoming a SoTL scholar often involves reckoning with one's academic identity in multiple and complex ways, and depends upon, among other factors, one's motivations and goals for engaging in SoTL, institutional context, research experience, and disciplinary training.

Simmons and colleagues (2013) first wrote about common elements of SoTL identity formation. They described themselves as being in a liminal space and resisted the notion that a pre-determined path or a single form of expertise exists. Common themes amongst this writing group of eight scholars included the difficulties of feeling like a novice, as well as the interpersonal and intrapersonal challenges of identity formation. Other authors have addressed these challenges as well, in particular exploring the associated challenges of disciplinary boundary crossing (e.g., Miller-Young, Yeo, and Manarin 2018; Webb and Tierney 2019). While many have offered wayfinding resources (e.g., Chick 2018; Miller-Young and Yeo 2015; O'Brien 2008; Steiner and Hakala 2021), those new to SoTL may still find the space disorienting. One reason may be the multiple definitions of SoTL which exist in the literature; we believe another is the historical lack of attention to different underpinning philosophies of various disciplines and the way they do their scholarship (Haigh and Withell 2020; Löfgreen 2023).

The metaphors of boundary crossing and trading zones may not capture the depth of these disciplinary and philosophical differences. SoTL scholars have reported feeling discomfort for an extended period of time; Simmons et al. (2013) describe this as “swimming in the liminal sea” (16). Other experienced SoTL scholars have indicated it can take ten years or more to make the transition (Kelly, Nesbit, and Oliver 2012; Miller-Young, Yeo, and Manarin, chapter 17; Webb and Welsh 2021). Simmons et al. suggest we need to learn to be comfortable in discomforting spaces, giving ourselves time to develop new identities and new practices. Further, as Wenger (2000) argues, crossing boundaries requires an open engagement with differences and a “commitment to suspend judgment in order to see the competence of a community in its terms” (233). Eventually, as we remain open and gain experience, SoTL scholars may serve as brokers and convenors, facilitating boundary crossing for others or even encouraging others with different interests and backgrounds to come together in cross-boundary projects such as this one. We hope this book makes the transition easier, or at least different, for developing SoTL scholars, and we explicitly encourage them to embrace identity formation as an intellectually engaging, dynamic, and continuous process.

About This Book

This book arose out of Janice’s desire to address some of the ongoing challenges for scholars wishing to engage in SoTL. As a mid-career SoTL scholar, she has been doing and supporting SoTL for fourteen years. She started in a program specifically designed to support new scholars developing a SoTL project; she has since learned a lot through collaboration and only recently got to the stage where she was comfortable being the most experienced scholar on a team. She searched the literature for resources that would help her plan the next steps in her SoTL career trajectory and realized that most literature about “how to SoTL” is aimed at new-to-SoTL academics. Further, much of the literature on these topics exist in isolated journal articles; she felt faculty and students interested in SoTL would

benefit from having others' learning pulled together in one place, thereby amplifying, integrating, and building upon the previous scholarship on this topic. Being a novice when it comes to editing books, knowing she would learn much from an interdisciplinary collaboration, and simply because she holds Nancy in high esteem, she invited Nancy to collaborate with her on this project.

We conceived of *Becoming a SoTL Scholar* as a book for academics who are deeply interested in SoTL. We hoped to provide a collection that would illustrate a variety of entry points, pathways, and strategies for ordinary academics to develop and sustain a career in SoTL. We thought long-time SoTL practitioners would want to reflect on how that work informs their identities. Tenured faculty would look to SoTL for a way to energize an otherwise languishing passion for their work. Pre-tenured, non-tenure-track, and teaching-stream faculty would want to learn how to engage more fruitfully in this multidisciplinary space. Upper-level undergraduates and graduate students would want to know how to pursue a career in SoTL.

With these issues and audiences in mind, we issued an open call for chapter proposals. We pushed the call through our various networks and our networks' networks. We received forty-one proposals, far more than we'd anticipated. In the end, we narrowed the collection down to chapters written specifically for the academics themselves—those pursuing or sustaining a SoTL-centric career—rather than chapters written about them, such as how to support or advocate for them. (That's important and ongoing work, but a bit different from what we hoped to achieve with this book.) Just as SoTL work is very context-specific, so is SoTL identity development. With this in mind, we then selected chapters that would cover a diversity of stages in SoTL careers, institutional contexts, and disciplines in chapters written in a range of voices, styles, and genres. We also wanted a mix of practical advice, inspiring narratives, and aspirational visions, as well as realistic representations of current challenges. Ultimately, our chapter authors come from Canada, the US, and Australia, representing only a small portion

of international SoTL contexts; we hope this collection will inspire scholars from other countries to take up and build upon our work.

The resulting book is organized by the arc of an academic career. **Section 1** is for early-career academics who are thinking about a life in SoTL starting now. Twenty years ago, such thinking might not have even been a possibility, but now we have five chapters on “Beginning a SoTL-Centric Career.” A more common phenomenon is well-established faculty seeking something new to energize a career that spans decades. Historically, this is when many have discovered SoTL. **Section 2** includes five chapters that explore this experience of “Shifting Focus toward a SoTL Research Agenda.” **Section 3**, like section 1, speaks to the maturity of the field by supporting the SoTL scholars who have already built a SoTL-centric career and are thinking about ways of “Sustaining SoTL Engagement.” Finally, **section 4** goes meta by reflecting on how identity is implicated in “Becoming a SoTL Scholar.” Regardless of career stage, we theorize that we are always becoming, with past experiences influencing our current intentions and decisions, and present experiences and relationships influencing our future imagined possibilities (McAlpine, Amundsen, and Jazvac-Martek 2010).

Beyond this explicit structure of the book outlined in the table of contents, we offer other pathways through *Becoming a SoTL Scholar*. First, given our invitation to be authentic in their writing, the resulting chapters offer an impressive array of genres and forms that SoTL dissemination can take. After we’d seen the first drafts, we decided to ask authors to identify the genre they’d chosen, using their own words. Readers will see this self-identification within each chapter. Janice offers her own definitional dimensions of SoTL in **chapter 13**. Second, inspired by the recommendations in **chapter 12** for using keywords from various categories of a taxonomy, we categorized our chapters using the three trees: what, where, and how. Our “branches” are slightly different than those presented in chapters 12 and 13, which are focused on studies about student learning. For the purposes of this book, “**what**” refers to the focus

of the chapter, “**where**” is the context the article comes from, and “**how**” is the form of dissemination, or genre.

Our “**what**” includes categories that focus on how to conduct SoTL, as well as several forms of SoTL introspection as identified by Gary Poole and Nancy Chick in “Great Introspections: How and Why SoTL Looks Inward” (2022):



Doing SoTL



Field definition



Assessment of the state of the field



Practitioner identity exploration

Our “**where**” describes the context or population that is being written about:



University



STEM



Polytechnic



Humanities



Student



Multidisciplinary



Faculty



International

And finally the various genres, corresponding to “**how**” the topic is communicated, include:



Research articles that report on systematic investigations



Conceptual articles that provide frameworks or models synthesized from the literature and/or personal experience



Scholarly essays that emphasize synthesis of literature but may also include reflection or narrative



Reflective essays in which authors explore an aspect of their SoTL experience to inform and assist others in similar circumstances



Narrative essays that tell a story with a narrative arc and may include reflection



A graphic essay that illustrates a narrative and/or new conceptualizations

Chapters have been placed in one of the four sections of the book based on their intended primary audience, and the branches are meant to serve as wayfinding tools for navigating the book. Thus, while the organization is chronological in terms of the stages of an academic career and the book could certainly be read from beginning to end, as one of our editors, Jessie Moore, suggested, some may “choose their own adventure” and start with the what, where, and how’s that are of most interest to them. Either way, it is our hope that the book will make a practical and

significant contribution to the literature and to the trajectory of current and future SoTL scholars.

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