

Designing SoTL for Success: Educational Leadership and the Disciplinary Divide

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Motivation

How do we...

- ▶ ... as *individual faculty*...
- ▶ ... as *institutions*...

... create effective and impactful SoTL programs?

This question → how can we effectively position and support SoTL research?

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Research Questions

How is the SoTL literature organized, and how does this inform:

- ▶ The way we conduct SoTL research (questions)?
- ▶ The role of SoTL in institutions?
- ▶ The response of SoTL to its critics?

Taken together, these inform the design of effective SoTL programs.

Outline

In this seminar, I will argue that there are three things necessary for effective SoTL program design:

1. Articulating what SoTL does.
2. Creating an identity for SoTL.
3. Connecting a SoTL identity to a disciplinary identity.

I will focus on two levels: *individual* and *institutional*, and take a **systems thinking** approach to both.

Part 1: What SoTL Does

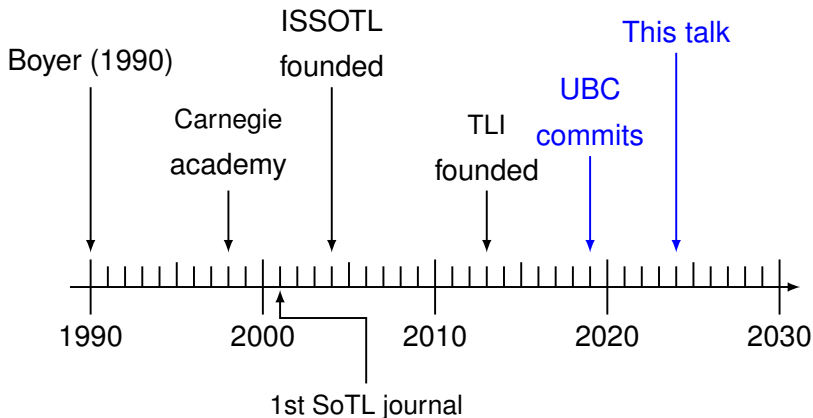
Part 1: What SoTL Does

Part 2: An Identity for SoTL

Part 3: Discipline and Identity

Appendices

Timeline of SoTL



Definition of SoTL?

SoTL argues and worries a lot about definitions¹:

- ▶ What is SoTL?
- ▶ How is SoTL distinguished from *X*?
- ▶ Is this work SoTL or something else?

This can lead to paralysis.

¹Manarin and Abrahamson (2016)

I am taking a **systems thinking** approach to SoTL.

“The purpose of a system is what it does.”

- Stafford Beer (2002)

- ▶ There is no point in claiming the purpose of a system is what it fails to do.
- ▶ Questions of definition are irrelevant from this perspective.

The Purpose of SoTL

So what does SoTL do?

1. SoTL produces scholarly, **contextually-grounded**, knowledge about teaching and learning. “Burning questions.”²
2. SoTL allows the academe to **self-reflect on its non-research role**. It is a study of “actors in the SoTL inquiry” in an era where research and teaching has diverged so sharply.³

²Wright et al. (2011), Felten (2013)

³Fanghanel et al. (2016)

Two Strands of SoTL Research

1. The first strand is **micro-SoTL**: deals with the specifics of learning interventions, and studies their effectiveness with result to particular (disciplinary) goals.
2. The second is **macro-SoTL**: it is an example of systems-level thinking in higher education, describing and critiquing the process of academic study.

Both strands of SoTL research have different challenges and opportunities.

i Side Note

There are also *meso* examples of SoTL, integrating these levels, but this is surprisingly understudied in the literature.

Examples (Teaching and Learning Inquiry 12)

- ▶ (**micro**) Kell, S. 2024. “University Students’ Perceptions of a 30-Minute Break During Class: A Realistic Practice for Wellness?”
 - ▶ *How did students engage with a 30-minute unstructured break during lecture.*
 - ▶ Specific intervention, small-scale, context-specific.
- ▶ (**macro**) Dineen, K., Thelen, S., and Santucci, A. 2024. “Whose Knowledge Is It Anyway? Epistemic Injustice and the Supervisor/Supervisee Relationship”
 - ▶ *Our aim is to critique higher education from a social justice point of view.*
 - ▶ Broader issue, non-specific, higher-education situated.

Issues in Micro-SoTL

The central criticisms of the micro strand of SoTL are:

1. How is SoTL related to **educational research**, as a discipline⁴.
2. How do you generate systematic (“true”) knowledge from limited, context-specific experiences?
 - ▶ Does SoTL have an **epistemological** stance?

These two issues are actually tightly connected: one way educational research distinguishes itself is that it is *systematic* or generalizable.

⁴Fanghanel et al. (2016)

Antagonism

This had led to a sometimes-antagonistic relationship between SoTL and education:

[I]n 30, 40 or 50 years' time, the scholarship of teaching and research will be little more than a historical footnote, scarcely remembered by anyone.

- Malcolm Tight (2018)

- ▶ Boshier (2009) describes SoTL as “conceptually confused,” “anti-intellectual,” and “located in a narrow neoliberalism.”

Pro

- ▶ SoTL is discipline-specific and contextual.
- ▶ SoTL creates immediately practical knowledge.
- ▶ SoTL is accessible and inclusive to all disciplines and levels of expertise.

Con

- ▶ SoTL research is non-generalizable, “lacks rigour.”⁵
- ▶ SoTL does not create new lines of research, only “quality assurance.”⁶
- ▶ SoTL ignores existing research⁷.

⁵Fanghanel et al. (2016)

⁶Tight (2018)

⁷Shulman (2011)

Issues in Macro-SoTL

The issues with the *macro* strand of SoTL are more complex but echo the deeper criticisms from education:

1. The Western (esp. American) focus on most SoTL research (micro *and* macro)⁸.
2. The lack of a disciplinary identity (epistemology), separable from studies of higher education.
3. The tension between SoTL-as-research and discipline-specific training.
 - ▶ How do you even *do* SoTL, especially as an outsider?

⁸Hoon et al. (2018), Tight (2018)

SoTL *contra* Boyer (1990)?

Macro is also at odds with the most common interpretation of Boyer's foundational view of SoTL:

- ▶ “[B]e well informed, and steeped in the knowledge of their field.” (p. 23)
- ▶ “[Pedagogy is] carefully planned, continuously examined, and relate[s] directly to the subject taught.” (p. 24)
- ▶ “Institutions of higher learning are not collectively caught up in some **urgent national endeavour.**”⁹

⁹Boyer (2016), p.11

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The purpose of SoTL is what it does.

- ▶ I think both of these strands of SoTL are SoTL, as they're what SoTL does.
- ▶ How do we reconcile these different approaches, and their challenges, in the design of a SoTL program?
 - ▶ Individually?
 - ▶ Institutionally?

How can we avoid these disciplinary quagmires?

Part 2: An Identity for SoTL

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Appendices

“Monstrous Knowledge”

Any successful program must address identity. SoTL is very concerned about identity:

1. SoTL as “monstrous” or “troublesome”¹⁰.
2. The position of SoTL specialists: who does SoTL?
 - ▶ Especially within disciplines.
 - ▶ Their relationship to teaching-focused faculty¹¹.
3. The legitimacy of SoTL work.

¹⁰Hobson et al. (2016), Manarin and Abrahamson (2016)

¹¹Murdock and Cohen (2024)

Disjunction

I think a cause is the disjunction at the heart of SoTL:

- ▶ A successful SoTL program (individual or institutional) must identify which of the two strands of SoTL research it follows.
- ▶ An unclear position will make success hard to define and achieve: e.g., publication, impact, reach, discovery, reflection.

Many programs do this incompletely: personally, or institutionally.

- ▶ e.g., where do **you** see your SoTL research?

Example: Louisville (Schweitzer (2000))

In the 1990s, Louisville medicine implemented a Boyer-inspired model of SoTL.

- ▶ Required proficiency in *all four* areas of Boyer's scholarship, integrated into the tenure process.
- ▶ Overlapping and unclear definitions caused confusion and extreme challenges.
- ▶ Evidence was hard to gather and to have accepted.

Led to a return to older system *but* with the idea of scholarship in teaching and integration recognized. Kentucky had a similar experience (Boshier (2009)).

Example: UBC fared better

In early 2000s, two interrelated exercises:

1. 2007: created a teaching program, the Carl Wieman Science Education Initiative (CWSEI), to improve science education¹².
 - ▶ CWSEI created a framework and culture of “scholarly teaching” at UBC, which evolved into micro-SoTL.
2. 2008-2012: created an “educational leadership” (EL) track of tenure-stream faculty, with an explicit SoTL focus¹³

¹²Wieman (2017)

¹³Bates et al. (2024)

Success?

This created a culture of SoTL that persists.

“[UBC] largely leaves the nature, level, and extent of the educational leadership contributions open to interpretation.”¹⁴

UBC earmarked ~\$2,000,000 for a large teaching and learning grant which became a major source of funding for SoTL-adjacent projects.

“[I]f somebody asks me who I am, and I tell them they [...] have some idea, they value it, they respect it. And that helps me reinforce my identity.”¹⁵

¹⁴Hubball et al. (2015)

¹⁵Bates et al. (2024), p. 26

However, at UBC not all of the problems were completely solved:

- ▶ Issues of clarity highlighted in Boshier (2009) remain a problem for SoTL-focused faculty.
- ▶ Research-stream faculty have lower benefits for SoTL: “scholarly teaching”.
- ▶ Funding, prestige, and salary are not commensurate (e.g., Murdock and Cohen (2024)).

UBC created (albeit imperfectly) an *attainable* identity for SoTL research within the university system.

Academic Systems and SoTL

This tension between ones identity as a disciplinary scholar and their SoTL identity is constrained by an academic system:

- ▶ The default purpose of academic systems is to channel knowledge into ever-more granular areas of knowledge.
- ▶ It is hard for us to break out of these channels.
- ▶ This results in much SoTL research being done in “non-SoTL” venues.
 - ▶ esp. Biology, Economics, Engineering, Computer Science, English.

SoEL

UBC's approach was different enough that some scholars (e.g., Hubball et al. (2015)) have argued it is a distinct form of scholarship:

- ▶ They conceive this kind of “scholarship of educational leadership” as distinct from the micro-SoTL focused conception of SoTL.

In our context, they're trying to give a name to *macro-meso*-SoTL projects, that don't fit into the narrow disaggregated Boyer-box.

The Role of Evidence / Impact

The final part of identity is how that identity is recognized:

- ▶ In line with Boyer, there is a focus on *impact* (doing something) and then providing evidence.
- ▶ Boshier (2009) argues this is narrowly (and naively) construed to mean peer review, especially publication.
 - ▶ This was one of the major failures of the Louisville model: too much evidence, impossible to gather.
- ▶ Even in models like UBC evidence of impact remains (i) hard to measure and (ii) difficult to collect.

How does a SoTL identity evolve?

This focus on “peer review” and evidence is due to the academic and neoliberal roots of SoTL¹⁶.

- ▶ In other words, it evolved from a 1990s US higher-education context.
- ▶ However, it also evolved *from disciplines*: the diversity of practices that are SoTL-adjacent but *not* called SoTL remains wide.
 - ▶ Discipline-based education research?

What is the relationship of SoTL to disciplinary training →
our personal positionality?

¹⁶Boshier (2009)

Part 3: Discipline and Identity

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What do we add to SoTL?

Creating a SoTL identity, within the strands of SoTL research, is essential for success. But we do not come to an identity as blank slates. What do we bring:

- ▶ From our disciplinary training?
- ▶ From our personal experiences and background?
- ▶ From our academic roles and institutions?

How can these improve a SoTL program?

Micro-SoTL

1. We know our fields:

- ▶ What are the pressing questions or skills?
- ▶ What kinds of teaching practices?
- ▶ Who are our students?

2. We have specific disciplinary skills.

- ▶ We can use these skills to create better research projects.
- ▶ *Interdisciplinary* research: scholarship of integration,¹⁷

¹⁷Boyer (1990)

Macro-SoTL

1. We understand the context of scholarship and teaching in our fields and institutions.
2. We understand how our disciplinary identities are formed and what knowledge creation is (and is not).
3. We know our positionality and our personal / cultural backgrounds
 - ▶ Especially areas that have been marginalized: e.g., Asian SoTL¹⁸.

¹⁸Hoon et al. (2018)

Example: Indigenous Ways of Knowing

In Canada, reconciliation with Indigenous people is an important priority for universities. For example, UBC's Indigenous Strategic plan:

- ▶ “Include Indigenous **ways of knowing** [. . .] in curriculum.”
- ▶ “Support research initiatives that [. . .] legitimize Indigenous **ways of knowing.**”

Many disciplines experience a kind of “culture shock” when dealing with these kinds of requests.

Disciplinary Strengths

SoTL gives higher education a venue to reflect on what disciplines know and what they don't.

- ▶ This means **all disciplines** bring unique knowledge to SoTL.
- ▶ This allows SoTL to serve as a forum for integrating knowledge from different fields.
- ▶ Especially macro-SoTL, embedded in disciplines but working *across* them.

Challenge: Siloing

SoTL is still a niche area, and the existence of “silos” of expertise is a common issue¹⁹.

- ▶ It is necessary for institutions to create systems that support interdisciplinary SoTL identities.
 - ▶ Study groups.
 - ▶ Communities of Practice.
 - ▶ Formal recognition.

More broadly: *international* conferences.

¹⁹Fanghanel et al. (2016)

Final Thoughts

1. Micro-SoTL complements discipline-based educational research esp. through interdisciplinary collaboration.
 - ▶ It also leads to practical, immediate, interventions that tangibly improve teaching and the culture of a university²⁰.
2. Macro-SoTL questions are truly unique, because they break out of the box(es) defined for SoTL. They escape the “conceptually confused”²¹ disaggregated interpretation and engage with deeper questions.

²⁰Bates et al. (2024)

²¹Boshier (2009)

Further Work

- ▶ **Empirical analysis:** examine major SoTL journals to chart the evolution of the three strands (micro, macro, meso) of SoTL research over time.
- ▶ **Practice and reflection:** developing training and teaching tools to help mentor faculty members to find their identity within SoTL and their discipline.

Questions?

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Appendices

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