

TITLE: Assessing and enhancing the rigor of SoTL research across disciplines

CONTACT INFORMATION:

Jill Marie McSweeney-Flaherty, Ph.D.
Educational Developer
Centre for Learning and Teaching
Dalhousie University
Halifax, Nova Scotia
E: jmmcswee@dal.ca
P: 902.403.8580

Matthew Schnurr, Ph.D.
Associate Professor
International Development Studies
Dalhousie University
Halifax, Nova Scotia
E: Matthew.Schnurr@dal.ca

PROJECT MINI-DESCRIPTION

Through surveying EDers, this project looks to understand the current definitions of rigorous SoTL, capture the scope of methodologies being used in practice, and assess the support available for faculty to engage in SoTL that meets benchmarks of excellence.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Since Boyer¹ defined teaching as a scholarly activity in the early 1990s, the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) has transformed into a field that seeks to provide evidence-based change to teaching and learning for faculty (micro-level) and answer pedagogical questions both across disciplines (meso-level) and within institutional structures (macro-level)²⁻⁴. This evolution has resulted in many educational developers (EDers) taking on the leadership of SoTL at their institutions, providing mentoring to faculty, staff and educational leaders from various disciplinary backgrounds in order to help them "...engag[e] in diverse forms of practice and scholarship as change agents"⁵ (p.111). The diversity of SoTL scholars means that a constant within the field is the trans-, multi-, and cross-disciplinary nature of methods and paradigms that come with their own epistemologies^{5,6}, resulting in a "...relatively loose set of practices rather than a singular or simple set of methodologies"³ (p.5).

This diversity of methodological approaches is touted as a strength of SoTL^{7,8}. However, faculty often find it difficult to apply various approaches of inquiry within the complex structures of classrooms, programs, departments and institutions, especially if they are unfamiliar with the social sciences⁶. In fact, a major criticism of the field of SoTL surrounds the legitimacy of the methods and evidence that are being used to answer important questions about teaching and learning⁹. And while "standards" and "benchmarks" have been outlined for SoTL practice⁸⁻¹⁰, top-quality SoTL still "...requires the intentional and rigorous application of research tools..."⁸ (p.123) that appropriately align with the intended inquiry¹¹.

For the "transformational agenda"⁶(p.1) of SoTL to be achieved it requires a systematic process that upholds the integrity of good scholarly inquiry. Practitioners and institutions must acknowledge the deeply rooted ontological and epistemological assumptions embedded within, as well as note the corresponding ethical consideration for conducting such research and be mindful of their limits. While embracing the diverse philosophical perspectives of SoTL practice,

EDers cannot forget to continuously support and encourage empirically rigorous and robust work at the micro- and meso-level, inclusive of quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methodologies. Understanding the potential methodological scope of SoTL work while supporting excellence (through individual consultations, institutional priorities and research ethics board processes) can be a challenge for EDers. Little research has been undertaken that assesses the rigor of current SoTL work and examines how EDers can best champion and support top-quality scholarship in their practice.

This project will address this crucial gap through the following five objectives:

- (1) outline the current definitions of empirically rigorous and robust SoTL from the literature and EDers' perspectives;
- (2) capture the landscape of SoTL methodologies in the current scholarship as well as those EDers see most often within their institution;
- (3) assess the support available for faculty at the micro-, meso-, and macro- level to engage in SoTL that encourages benchmarks of excellence;
- (4) explore how EDers can support faculty in rigorous and robust SoTL work while acknowledging diverse epistemologies; and
- (5) develop resources that can promote excellence in SoTL.

To do this, we are proposing a two-stage study. During Stage 1 a scoping review will be conducted of recent literature (2017–2018), similar to that of Divan et al.¹¹, in three of the top SoTL journals: *Teaching & Learning Inquiry*, *The Canadian Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (CJSOTL)*, and the *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching & Learning*. This stage will help to understand the proposed Objectives 1 and 2, while informing the construction of a tool for Stage 2 of the study. In Stage 2, we will use an online questionnaire (via *Opinio*, our institutional online survey system) to ask EDers on the EDC (n = 455) and POD (n = 3513) listservs about their experience of the SoTL work being conducted at their institution and the support available for robust SoTL scholarship. Achieving objectives one through four will enable us to create a series of worthwhile resources (e.g., STLHE Green Guide, peer-reviewed publication, EDC conference presentation) for the ED community (Objective 5).

This proposal captures all three priorities outlined in the 2016 EDC Living Plan. First, by understanding how best to support the development of empirically rigorous SoTL practices for faculty, we can increase the visibility of our work in postsecondary education and develop resources that can enrich the level of SoTL and in turn, enhance its standing both within the institution and the broader academic landscape (*Priority 1: A Strong EDC Community*). Building on the relationship between EDers and faculty, the co-applicants mirror that partnership in this proposal, and could produce further information on how to engage and support faculty and EDers in deepening their SoTL scholarship. Second, through engaging the community of EDers nationally and internationally to seek feedback on their institutional experiences and landscapes, we embrace *Priority 2: Member Engagement*, and will hopefully encourage collaboration and trans-institutional research that can further explore and promote excellence in SoTL research. Lastly, by acknowledging the difficult and intricate nature of supporting rigorous SoTL work across the disciplines, we align with *Priority 3: Educational Developer Learning and Growth*, and the goal of celebrating the diversity of EDs work and supporting the evolving needs and

multifaceted skills required to encourage transformational SoTL at our institutions. Beyond the priorities, this project touches each of the five areas of Educational Developer Learning and Growth, by seeking to create tangible data for EDers that can better equip faculty, centres, departments, and senior academic leaders to conduct successful, meaningful, and high-quality SoTL that directly impacts teaching quality and systematic change.

References

- 1 Boyer, E. (1990). *Scholarship reconsidered: Priorities of the professorate* . San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- 2 Gibbs, G. (2013). Reflections on the changing nature of educational development. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 18(1), 4–14. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360144.2013.751691>
- 3 Felten, P. and Chick, N. (2018), Is SoTL a Signature Pedagogy of Educational Development?. To Improve the Academy, 37: 4-16. doi:10.1002/tia2.20077
- 4 Kenny, N., Popovic, C., McSweeney, J., Knorr, K., Hoessler, C., Hall, S., ... El Khoury, E. (2017). Drawing on the principles of SoTL to illuminate a path forward for the scholarship of educational development. *The Canadian Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 8(2), Article 10). <https://doi.org/10.5206/cjsotl-rcacea.2017.2.10>
- 5 Kalu, F. , Dyjur, P. , Berenson, C. , Grant, K. A., Jeffs, C. , Kenny, N. and Mueller, R. (2018), Seven Voices, Seven Developers, Seven One Things that Guide Our Practice. To Improve the Academy, 37: 111-127. doi:10.1002/tia2.20066
- 6 Hubball, Harry and Clarke, Anthony (2010) "Diverse Methodological Approaches and Considerations for SoTL in Higher Education," The Canadian Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning: 1(1), Article 2. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5206/cjsotl-rcacea.2010.1.2>
- 7 Chick, N. L. (2014). 'Methodologically sound' under the 'big tent': An ongoing conversation. *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 8(2), [article 1](#).
- 8 Felten, P. (2013). Principles of good practices in SoTL. *Teaching & Learning Inquiry*, 1(2), 121–125.
- 9 Wilson-Doenges, G. & Gurung, A.R. (2013). Benchmarks for scholarly investigations of teaching and learning. *Australian Journal of Psychology*, 65, 63-70.
- 10 Glassick, C. E., Huber, M. T., & Macroff, G. I. (1997). *Scholarship assessed: Evaluation of the professoriate*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- 11 Divan, A., Ludwig, L.O., Matthews, K.E., Motley, P.M. & Tomljenovic-Berube, A.M. (2017). Survey of research approaches utilised in the scholarship of teaching and learning publications. *Teaching & Learning Inquiry*, 5(2).

BUDGET

We would like to hire a research assistant to help with Stages 1 and Stage of this research under the guidance of the Centre for Learning and Teaching at Dalhousie.

Research Assistant

	Hours	Hourly Rate	
January – May 2019	120 (<i>10 hours/week for 12 weeks</i>)	\$24.00	\$2880
	Vacation pay	4%	\$115.2
Total			\$2995.2

TIMELINE

		January	February	March	April	May
	Hire Student	X				
Stage 1	Scoping Review	X	X			
	Analysis of Literature		X	X	X	
Stage 2	Create Questionnaire		X			
	Apply for REB Approval		X	X		
	Data Collection			X	X	
	Data Analysis				X	X

AGREEMENTS

I/We agree to provide the EDC community, who funds this grant, with access to resulting information and resources for which the copyright remains with the author(s).

I/We acknowledge that I/we will submit an interim report and a final deliverable.