

Integrating Scholarship and Teaching

by Claire W. Lyons

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As teachers, we are constantly innovating: trying new teaching methods, assessments, and classroom organization. Nowhere has this been more evident than in our recent efforts to manage teaching and learning in a time of global uncertainty. While the pandemic may have accelerated the innovation efforts of many of us, there is no doubt that change, innovation, and exploration are part of being a teacher. Moreover, we are teacher-scholars or scholar-teachers, whatever way you want to put it. We bring our disciplinary expertise and knowledge to our classrooms. The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (or “SoTL”) integrates these elements of our professional identities. SoTL has been defined in different ways (see [What is the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning?](#)). What each of these definitions have in common is the centrality of rigorous inquiry to SoTL. The aim of this discussion is understanding how to bring our scholarly mindset to the study of teaching and, perhaps, more importantly, learning. This Toolbox is a companion and a more public introduction to [the CFI online resources on SoTL](#).

What is SoTL?

Teaching raises lots of questions for us. Some of these questions come from frustration and challenge (how come that activity didn’t work?), some from curiosity (I wonder why students don’t come to office hours?), some from unusual situations (pandemic—need I say more?), and some from pragmatics (how can I get 300 students actively involved in class?). The teaching field is replete with ‘tips and tricks’ type publications aimed at quick fixes for teachers, and many of us have spent valuable time trying them out. SoTL adopts a different approach. Essentially, SoTL is about using the tools of research and scholarly inquiry to investigate and understand teaching and learning.

SoTL has been conceptualized as answering the question of “what works?” In this conceptualization, the goal of SoTL is to measure the effectiveness of teaching interventions. (See Sara Finney’s Teaching Toolbox on [Wise Interventions](#) that might be worth investigating.) But there is a different way of thinking about SoTL, which for me was a breakthrough moment. This approach can be described as “what’s going on?” In this approach, the goal of SoTL is to understand what is happening in your own complex teaching and learning context. The approach is explained by Gary Poole in [What kinds of SoTL research can you do?](#) Adopting this mindset really engages our spirit of inquiry and frees us from feeling that we have to get a ‘result’ in order for our SoTL to count. Outcomes can be measured in many ways; see [Measuring Outcomes in SoTL](#). I encourage you to review definitions of SoTL and to identify a conceptualization that works for you.

Why SoTL?

Apart from the intrinsic motivation of satisfying your curiosity, there are many other reasons to engage in SoTL:

- The integration of SoTL into your professional life will enhance your teaching. Conducting systematic research into the teaching-learning environment can help you to maximize learning opportunities for students.

- SoTL is an excellent way to expand your scholarly activity and output. There are a variety of outlets for SoTL publications and presentations (see [Disseminating Your SoTL Work](#)). Be sure to check with your unit to find out if these publications count towards promotion and tenure.
- SoTL is a good way to engage with students. Since SoTL can directly affect the learning environment, students have a vested interest in SoTL research. Working with student researchers can help you to ask the right questions in the right way. Consider reviewing these resources for further ideas about involving students in SoTL: [Dialogue Across Differences of Position, Perspective, and Identity: Reflective Practice in/on a Student-Faculty Pedagogical Partnership Program](#), as well as the video “Why integrate student voices in SoTL?” from the Center for Engaged Learning at Elon University, which can be accessed at [Measuring Outcomes in SoTL](#).
- SoTL is a good way to engage in cross-disciplinary research since it is not discipline-bound.
- Engaging in SoTL provides data to guide improvement in teaching and to advocate for teaching approaches and resources.

How to do SoTL?

[The CFI’s new website](#) provides guidance on how to conduct SoTL. A good place to begin is to ask your own SoTL questions. The section of the website entitled [Developing a SoTL Research Question](#) provides a number of resources for mapping your ideas including worksheets and question types. Choose one or two of these resources to get started. You can then progress to reading the SoTL literature related to your area of interest (such as [Teaching of Psychology](#), in my own field) and developing your ideas further. Your [liaison librarian](#) can assist you in finding relevant sources.

One of the best ways to get your SoTL started is to learn from the experiences of others. Take advantage of the professional opportunities provided by the CFI, particularly those offered by the [Engaged Teacher-Scholar program](#). Look for the Engaged-Teacher Scholar in your college (listed on the website)! You can also head to [SoTL: Sample Research Stories](#) to hear some of your colleagues describe their SoTL research stories.

As you consider where to begin in your SoTL journey, visit the [Measuring Outcomes section](#) of the website to see how you can leverage data that you probably already have to answer SoTL questions. Analyzing existing data is a good way to identify pertinent SoTL questions. If you are not sure if your research requires IRB approval, consider reviewing [this section of the website](#) to explore the ethical issues in SoTL.

Conclusion

Given the amount of time and effort academics give to teaching and to scholarship, it makes sense to integrate those efforts in SoTL. SoTL ignites your curiosity, engages your students, and enhances your professional career, so why not find out more at [CFI: Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Resources?](#)

About the author: Claire W. Lyons is a professor in the Department of Psychology in the College of Health and Behavioral Studies and former Engaged-Teacher Scholar at CFI. She can be reached at lyonscw@jmu.edu.