

December 2017

## Exploring the Role of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in the Context of the Professional Identities of Faculty, Graduate Students, and Staff in Higher Education

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<https://doi.org/10.5206/cjsotl-rcacea.2017.3.10>

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### Recommended Citation

Mathany, C., Clow, K. M., & Aspenlieder, E. D. (2017). Exploring the Role of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in the Context of the Professional Identities of Faculty, Graduate Students, and Staff in Higher Education. *The Canadian Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 8 (3). <https://doi.org/10.5206/cjsotl-rcacea.2017.3.10>

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# Exploring the Role of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in the Context of the Professional Identities of Faculty, Graduate Students, and Staff in Higher Education

## **Abstract**

Developing an identity as a Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) researcher is associated with tensions of expanding on one's disciplinary identity and often traversing the liminal space between disciplines that result in a newfound perception of professional self. This study explores the differences that emerged in SoTL identity formation among three different groups of researchers. Focus groups of faculty, graduate students, and professional staff who identified as SoTL researchers were conducted at one comprehensive research institution. Using thematic analysis, the differences and similarities for each of these groups in terms of barriers to SoTL identity formation and motivations for developing a SoTL identity are shared. Reflecting on these barriers and opportunities, a variety of implications for practice for Educational Developers are suggested as they look to support the SoTL identity development of researchers at their institutions.

Le développement d'une identité en tant que chercheur en avancement des connaissances en enseignement et en apprentissage (ACEA) est associé à des tensions d'expansion de l'identité disciplinaire et consiste souvent à traverser l'espace liminal entre les disciplines qui aboutit à une perception nouvelle de son soi professionnel. Cette étude explore les différences qui émergent lors de la formation de l'identité en ACEA parmi trois groupes différents de chercheurs. Des groupes de discussion de professeurs, d'étudiants de cycle supérieur et de personnel professionnel qui s'identifient comme chercheurs en ACEA ont été organisés dans un établissement de recherche complète. L'analyse thématique a permis de mettre à jour les différences et les similarités parmi chacun de ces groupes en termes d'entraves à la formation d'une identité en ACEA, ainsi que les motivations nécessaires au développement d'une identité en ACEA. La réflexion sur ces entraves et sur les opportunités permet de suggérer une variété d'implications pour la pratique des conseillers pédagogiques quand ceux-ci sont à la recherche de soutien pour le développement de l'identité en ACEA des chercheurs dans leurs établissements respectifs.

## **Keywords**

SoTL, SoTL identity, professional identity, faculty, graduate students, professional staff

The number of publications within the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) has dramatically grown across Canada over the past two decades. The growth of the SoTL Canada network, the advent of the Canadian Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, and champions across the country advocating for the importance of SoTL research in advancing the quality of our institutions' teaching and achievement of learning outcomes has had a profound impact on the work of many researchers' interests and directions (Simmons & Poole, 2016).

As the SoTL discipline matures, many new researchers are beginning to study teaching and learning questions at micro, macro, meso, and mega levels (Wuetherick & Yu, 2016). The increasing number of participants within the SoTL community has led to the development of many new research networks and collaborations. The broad definitions of the field have encouraged a variety of "methodologically sound" (Felten, 2013, p. 123) approaches to scholarship that allow for different perspectives and approaches within the "big tent" (Huber & Hutchings, 2005, p. 30) of SoTL.

Within this emergence and expansion of the field, members from multiple disciplines and positions within a higher education institution identify or have begun to identify as SoTL researchers. The variety of entrance points and pathways to identification as a SoTL researcher has led to many emerging SoTL researchers moving into a "liminal space" (Simmons et al., 2013, p. 9) - that is to say, anxiously moving between perceptions of identity as disciplinary researchers and SoTL researchers. Experiencing this liminality can lead to "profound realizations and the reconstruction of academic identity" (Simmons et al., 2013, p. 9) for many scholars as they wrestle with "common conflicts and configurations" (Simmons et al., 2013, p. 9) that are present throughout higher education institutions.

As educational developers, we provide SoTL support for a range of groups across campus, including graduate students, faculty members, staff, and contingent faculty hired for full-time or part-time instructional positions that are not tenure track. This support includes assisting the development of SoTL questions, methods, ethics, and processes. While lack of disciplinary discourse and unfamiliarity with literature and methodologies are consistently highlighted as barriers to conducting SoTL research (Adendoff, 2011; Green, 2009; Hubball, Clarke, & Poole, 2010; Kenny & Evers, 2011), less research has focused on the barriers associated with identifying as a SoTL researcher. Current literature is predominantly limited to the realm of faculty and neglects the perspectives of graduate students and staff. With limited research on the differences in how faculty, graduate students, and professional staff conceptualize their professional and disciplinary identities in relation to SoTL, we undertook this study to explore these questions:

- 1) Do participants conceive of themselves as researchers in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning?
- 2) How does the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning fit within their own disciplinary or professional identity? and
- 3) What, if any, barriers do researchers perceive as impediments to their self-identification as SoTL researchers?

Given our personal experiences, as educational developers and SoTL researchers, we entered this project anticipating differences among these groups in terms of how they view their roles as SoTL researchers and the barriers they encountered in engaging in SoTL work. With a more nuanced awareness of the differences among these groups, our research team hoped to identify opportunities to tailor programming and support offered by educational developers.

## **SoTL Identity Formation: Differences Among Faculty, Staff, and Graduate Students**

Professional identity has been defined as the possession of a core set of values, beliefs, and assumptions about the distinctive characteristics of one's selected career that differentiates it from other careers (Weinrach, Thomas, & Chan, 2001). Identity formation is influenced by the importance and connection that individuals attach to their background and how they interpret their experiences. Within this developmental framework, professional identity should evolve, often going through stages, as one interacts with new environments and has new experiences (Brownell & Tanner, 2012).

Åkerlind (2007) provides a framework of researcher identity development through four stages of becoming confident, becoming recognized, enhancing research production, and increasing the sophistication of research efforts. Becoming confident as researchers is often presumed to occur during one's graduate training or early research career. Additionally, Åkerlind (2007) proposes that entering new areas of research may cause academics to return to the building confidence stage. Kelly, Nesbit, and Oliver (2012) confirm this in a reflection on their development of a SoTL identity from a Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics (STEM) background. Their reflections found that identity development takes time, can place an emotional toll on the faculty member, and requires an appreciation of disciplinary complexity that goes beyond shifting methodological preferences. In a qualitative study of nine faculty members engaged in SoTL, Adendorff (2011) outlined the interrelated challenges of becoming versed in the SoTL discourse, functioning within institutional reward systems that may disadvantage SoTL, and the identity issues associated with entering a new discipline. The degree to which a scholar engages with disciplinary research in comparison to the scholarship of teaching can have a profound impact on one's research identity, as "those who are active in SoTL and disciplinary research, it seems, can still protect their status through their disciplinary research" (Adendorff, 2011, p. 313).

Aligning with Åkerlind's (2007) stage of enhancing recognition as a researcher, Adendorff (2011) argues that in academia, one's identity as a researcher is paramount, and fostered by recognition of one's contributions and the perceived value of that work. SoTL has been associated with a negative perception from academics outside the SoTL discipline (Boshier, 2009). The methodology is considered less rigorous than more traditional methods (Richlin 2001), and a misconception exists that, if one is engaged in SoTL, then there is a problem with one's teaching (Hutchings & Shulman, 1999). As a result, SoTL may lack credibility and sits significantly lower on the research hierarchy scale (Boshier, 2009; Potter & Kustra, 2011). In this context, SoTL work may receive less recognition and reward, specifically for tenure and promotion. This issue is complex as many universities are beginning to promote the value of SoTL, yet there remains a disconnect between institutional values, the perceptions at the departmental level, and the alignment with reward structures (Buch, 2008; Kenny & Evers, 2011). As this study considers how researchers become experienced and overcome barriers to identifying as SoTL researchers we primarily focus on Åkerlind's (2007) first two stages of becoming confident and becoming recognized as SoTL researchers.

The professional identity of graduate students continues to form throughout their graduate program and their entry into postgraduate careers (Austin & McDaniels, 2006; Gardner, 2006). Relationships with supervisors, participation in academic service committees, contributions to research, and teaching experiences foster the ongoing shaping of this professional identity (Weidman, Twale, & Stein, 2001). During the formative time of graduate school, the priority and privilege attached to teaching and research, as well as the communities and support for these

activities, factor into how graduate students view the SoTL (Wulff, Austin, Nyquist, & Sprague, 2004). Graduate students interested in developing a SoTL identity face the competing demand of developing their disciplinary identity. In researching doctoral students, Sweitzer (2008) proposed a connection between the networks they engage in and their professional identity development. In this work, developmental networks are associated with the multiple relationships that a graduate student holds throughout their degree, and hence SoTL relationships may have a strong impact on how graduate students perceive themselves within academia.

While faculty and graduate student identity is often formed through their development of disciplinary expertise and the research, instructional, and service networks they develop, many higher education professional staff members have been described as “third space” or “blended” professionals that are situated as neither fully academic or fully service staff (Whitchurch, 2008, 2009). This conception of staff identity often leads to challenges and opportunities of not being associated with one particular segment of an institution. Staff within these roles (e.g., writing or learning consultants, educational developers and instructional designers, educational technology consultants) may have a “sense of ‘belonging’ and ‘not belonging’ entirely to either professional or academic domains” (Whitchurch, 2009, p. 408). This space in the middle affords the opportunity to navigate multiple relationships at all levels throughout an institution, but also poses potential challenges in regards to the strength of identity as SoTL researchers.

## **Method**

This research was conducted at the University of Guelph, a research-intensive and learner-centered university in Ontario, Canada. This university is considered to be a mid-sized, comprehensive institution with approximately 28,000 undergraduate and graduate students. The university is recognized for excellence in a number of disciplines, including veterinary medicine, agriculture, business, engineering, physical and life sciences, arts and humanities, and social sciences. Open Learning and Educational Support plays a central role in educational development activities on campus, including supporting faculty, graduate students, contingent instructors, and staff in the SoTL.

Qualitative data was collected via semi-structured focus groups. To recruit participants who identified as SoTL researchers for the focus groups, study details were distributed to faculty, instructors, graduate students, and staff via email listservs. Additionally, an announcement was posted on the University’s Educational Development website. There were no prerequisites for participants other than those that self-identify as SoTL researchers. Interested participants were enrolled on a first-come, first-served basis, with the goal of holding three to four focus groups each consisting of five or six participants.

In total, 19 people responded to the advertisement. Participants were divided into three groups based on their position at the university: faculty and contingent instructors (8); graduate students (5); and staff (6). The six staff participants represented units on campus mandated to deliver services to learners to help them excel in the higher education environment or support faculty in their efforts to effectively implement technology into their courses. No participants were educational developers. Participants were diverse, representing all colleges on campus and various levels of expertise in SoTL (Tables 1, 2, and 3). Eight predetermined questions were asked during each focus group, with additional probing questions used to foster discussion. Sessions were limited to 90 minutes in duration. Audio from each focus group was recorded and the responses

were transcribed and anonymized. Thematic analysis was subsequently used to interpret patterns within the data.

In order to prevent any conflict of interest, all communication with participants, including recruitment and facilitation of the focus groups was conducted by a member of the research team who did not directly supervise or teach any of the participants. The Research Ethics Board at the University of Guelph approved the research methodology.

Table 1  
*Demographic Information for Faculty Focus Group Participants (n=8)*

Participant Information	Number of Participants	
Stage of career	Early (<5 years, pre-tenure)	4
	Mid (> 5 years, recently tenured)	1
	Late (>15 years, tenured)	3
Number of years conducting SoTL	< 5	3
	5 – 10	3
	10+	2
Number of SoTL publications	0	1
	1-5	6
	>5	1
Distribution of effort in teaching	30%	1
	40%	1
	60%	4
	80%	1
Distribution of effort in SoTL	Yes	5
	No	3

Table 2  
*Demographic Information for Graduate Student Focus Group Participants (n=5)*

Participant Information		Number of Participants
Stage of Study	Part-time PhD	1
	PhD, mid-way	2
	PhD, final year	2
Number of years conducting SoTL	<1	2
	1-3	2
	>3	1
Number of SoTL publications	0	1
	1	3
	>1	1
Inclusion of SoTL in thesis	Yes	1
	No	4

Table 3  
*Demographic Information for Staff Focus Group Participants (n=5, 1 non-respondent)*

Participant Information		Number of Participants
Stage of career	Early	2
	Mid	2
	Late	1
Years of experience in SoTL	1-5	2
	5-10	2
	>10	1
Number of SoTL publications	0	4
	1	1
SoTL included in job fact sheet	Yes	2
	No	3

## **Results & Discussion**

Analysis of the focus group data found significant differences within and across each group of participants in how they defined SoTL, the barriers encountered to identifying as SoTL scholars, and their motivations for developing this academic identity. These results are considered in the sections below. Taken together, the definitions, barriers, and motivations identified by participants form a number of implications for educational developers.

### **Defining the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning**

The SoTL is a widely misunderstood and consequently misused term (Kenny & Evers, 2011). Therefore, it was important to understand the context in which SoTL is used by each of the participants in order to assess how their professional identity intersects with this understanding.

Faculty view SoTL on a continuum, emphasizing the broad spectrum of related subject matter and the variety of methods that are used to engage in SoTL. They chose the terms “SoTL practitioner” and “SoTL researcher” to differentiate between the use of evidence-based teaching practices and conducting hypothesis-driven research, respectively. The faculty participants indicated that the degree of formality associated with SoTL (research) was not clearly defined. Some participants believe that critical reflection on one’s own practices to understand the relationship between teaching strategies and learning outcomes qualified as research, while most prefer to think only of SoTL when using a more formalized research approach. This formalized approach is captured in one faculty participant’s definition of SoTL as “a systematic, evidence-based way for me to evaluate my teaching as well as to do research on my teaching” (Faculty participant (F3). Application of one’s research was of great importance to all faculty, as was dissemination. There was a lack of consensus as to whether dissemination had to be formal in nature, specifically through a peer-reviewed publication or if informal modes of dissemination, such as discussions with colleagues and presentations at departmental meetings are sufficient.

The broad nature of SoTL was also mentioned by graduate students, but they indicated that, because the field is so broad, what constitutes SoTL is also ambiguous and difficult to determine. One graduate student highlighted the difficulty the group experienced when trying to identify SoTL with this example:

When we were at a teaching and learning conference off campus a few weeks ago, some of the things that were topics of research interest really struck me as not something I would define as SoTL, but the conference overall very much held that theme. I think that was almost a muddying point again for me, where I was again thinking if that’s SoTL, then what’s not? (Graduate student participant, G2)

Eschewing a settled definition of SoTL, the graduate student group agreed that the term implied a formal approach to researching teaching and learning within the realm of higher education which included the intention to publish findings.

Participants in the staff focus group thought that SoTL was a term predominantly created for faculty, since scholarship has connotations of prestige and value and, as a consequence, the term encourages faculty interest. For staff participants, the connotations of a faculty-oriented term suggest that SoTL is consistently used in the teaching rather than learning context:



I think it is primarily a faculty-orientated term. Something that's meant to balance the focus that faculty typically have on being researchers in their own disciplines... It has a different meaning because I'm on the learning side and work with students as learners. (Staff participant, S5)

Staff did reiterate a number of the points made by faculty, specifically that SoTL encompasses a broad spectrum, and practitioners must be differentiated from researchers. Again, it was unclear within their definitions if the research has to be published in order for it to be considered SoTL.

### **Barriers to Identifying as a SoTL Researcher**

The themes that emerged from the faculty focus group centred on a lack of institutional or departmental value for SoTL and a loss of disciplinary identity. SoTL work is devalued by many other academics within their disciplines, which is illustrated by a number of statements made by faculty. One faculty member noted “there is a perception that SoTL research is less than research in your own discipline, and SoTL journals are tiny-tots in comparison to your own discipline” (F1). While a second faculty participant indicated

those who are leaders in their disciplines and pride themselves on leading discovery and research in their disciplines are going to devalue any SoTL as not being really in the discipline just to start, plus your track record in regards to money brought in is going to be much smaller. (F7)

Even if their colleagues do value SoTL research, the degree to which it is valued is inconsistent. Deans and Department Chairs are not permanent figures. Participants observed that SoTL may be promoted among faculty for a number of years and then be devalued or even discouraged after a change in leadership. This fluctuation in perceived value can significantly impact how SoTL is viewed by Tenure and Promotion committees. In some cases, SoTL is viewed as research and rewarded as such, or it is viewed solely as a teaching-related contribution and not rewarded as highly.

Faculty also expressed a number of fears they have in identifying as SoTL researchers. The fear of becoming “pigeonholed” in SoTL and losing one's identity as a disciplinary researcher was apparent among a number of faculty. As described by one participant, “you don't want to be typecast... ‘oh you're the SoTL researcher over there’... once you're typecast, opportunities won't be presented to you” (F1). Faculty also perceived a risk of being considered an unskilled instructor. Participants suggested there is a general notion that those who engage in SoTL do so in order to receive additional training for their weaknesses: “Some people feel that if you're learning about teaching and learning, that you are in the remedial program – that you're not really good so they had to give you more training” (F8). Overall, participants found these barriers to identifying as a SoTL researcher to be significantly less limiting than the barriers encountered in doing SoTL research itself, such as acquiring funds, completing research applications, and publishing in scholarly journals.

Graduate students shared a number of barriers with faculty and perceived these barriers to be significant. As new researchers, they are in the process of developing a professional identity. Accepting the title of researcher in general is accompanied by responsibility, which includes having a solid understanding of the literature and methodologies. At this point in their careers,

some graduate students have found difficulty identifying as researchers in their own fields, let alone identifying as SoTL researchers. One graduate student summarized this opinion:

I would say that I've conducted SoTL research, but I wouldn't say that I identify as a SoTL researcher. I think the reason being is that I don't identify as a researcher in general. I think you grow into that identity the more you do it. (G3)

If they had reached a point in their career development where they felt comfortable identifying as a SoTL researcher, some graduate students described a risk in doing so. For example, having both a disciplinary identity and a SoTL identity is a challenge, and other graduate students explained that they questioned if this was even possible: "it's almost like you have to give up your discipline to make this [SoTL] your discipline...and so until we come to terms with that being something we want we are probably holding back on identifying as that [a SoTL researcher]" (G2).

And if one lost their disciplinary identity, the same sense of belonging may not be gained by engaging in SoTL:

I almost feel that a disadvantage would be that you'd always be on the outside looking in because universities are structured by discipline. You're not part of them, so you're always on the fringe. You're doing research kind of related to them, but not really. I could almost see connections with other faculty being hard because you are not one of them. (G3)

Most graduate students considered developing their identity in their primary field of research to be the highest priority and had made efforts to maintain disciplinary integrity by separating their disciplinary work from SoTL. The degree to which this occurred varied based on the support received from an advisor and the value of SoTL within the department.

Regardless of whether one could maintain both a disciplinary identity and a SoTL identity, other risks still exist. Graduate students were cautious to highlight their SoTL work to avoid losing respect from fellow colleagues. This tension was expressed by one graduate student who suggested that "teaching is less valued in higher education than disciplinary research...there is a potential disadvantage of being taken less seriously" (G2). Similar to faculty, they also do not want to become "pigeonholed", which in this context referred to their fear of becoming labelled as teaching-centric and ultimately limiting future employment opportunities.

In contrast to the faculty and graduate student groups, staff focused predominantly on the challenges associated with making a space for themselves in the SoTL field. This involves fostering the value of research-based practices within their own units and gaining acceptance as researchers from others on campus. They reported difficulty in prioritizing ongoing research as their roles may focus on service delivery:

This ties back to the notion of professional identity, and when I think about my field of practice, typically people who work in my area are housed in student services, where there really isn't much of an emphasis on being a scholarly practitioner. (S5)

Even if SoTL activities are permitted within their job, staff still feel resistance since they do not fit the traditional researcher profile. The "Imposter Syndrome" was referred to on a number of occasions and appeared to greatly impact the staff group. This term, which was first coined in the late 1970s, describes the feelings of inadequacy and incompetency experienced by high-

achieving individuals despite a strong record of success (Clance & Imes, 1978). One staff participant shared many of these perceptions: “I’m a little overwhelmed by the whole thing. I’m excited and I’m scared... I’m engaged in this project with lots of data points. I feel like I’m outing myself a bit. I feel a bit like a fraud” (S2). Staff without a PhD questioned their credibility to conduct SoTL research regardless of the amount of experience they had in the field. Additionally, staff focused on a number of institutional barriers, including establishing collaborations and allocating time for research. Associating the discussion of feeling like imposters with the cultural and institutional barriers associated with staff positions, the self-perception of staff appears to be a barrier itself to identifying as a SoTL researcher.

### **Motivations for Identifying as a SoTL Researcher**

The professional identities of faculty, graduate students, and staff shape their motivation for engaging in the SoTL. Even while the outcome of their work may be the same – intentional inquiry and public dissemination – the unique goals and characteristics of these professional groups differentially motivate engagement.

Faculty members conceive of themselves as principally researchers (Brownell & Tanner, 2012). In keeping with the inquiry-driven practice that guides their research program, some of the faculty participants saw their SoTL researcher identity as an extension of their researcher identity: “I wanted to know if what I was doing actually worked, so I took a scholarly approach to finding that out” (F5). While their motivation for engaging in SoTL is consistent with their research identity, the faculty participants observed a tension between their self-identified positioning and institutional uncertainty that SoTL counts as research in distribution of effort and tenure and promotion practices: “if it’s published, it’s easier to make the justification that it is research” (F5) and “we are being pressured by the rewards system” (F6).

For faculty members, the motivation for engaging in SoTL was not simply a result of being already primed to ask and investigate questions. Collectively, the participants described a sense of professional responsibility for conducting SoTL in order to ensure that they are providing students with the best possible learning experience: “a lot of us started with continuous improvement. I was teaching for the first time and I had no idea if I was doing a good job or not” (F1) and

sometimes when one thing goes one way [badly], it’s not the students’ fault, it’s your fault, so you have to take responsibility. So, then you take a step back, reflect, what did you do right and what did you do wrong? (F6).

For these faculty, the desire to improve as instructors and in doing so improve the experience for students instigated their engagement in SoTL.

If the faculty members develop their professional identities in part through the institutional context that prioritizes and rewards research, one way to motivate faculty engagement in the SoTL at an institutional level is to recognize SoTL as *sine qua non* research and in so doing facilitate faculty adoption of SoTL activities as an inherent part of their work as researchers. Based on a few participants’ comments, the institution continues to separate SoTL from “real” research. One participant outlined this challenge stating: “I’ve heard people in leadership roles say it’s really not fair to count SoTL research because it’s unfair to the people who do real research in this department” (F2). With institutional and cultural separation, an opportunity is missed to motivate faculty to conduct SoTL and to reward it as part of institutional processes.

Our study shows a difference in how SoTL is viewed by graduate students in relation to motivation. For some graduate students, SoTL is viewed as a professional responsibility to improve teaching: “I got a TA position and I found that I didn’t have enough skills or knowledge to deal with this class where I was the only TA” (G4). With motivations that align with the professionally responsible and inquiry-driven professional identity of faculty, the experience of graduate students in this instance exemplifies the role of SoTL in the socialization as researcher and faculty member.

For others, however, engagement in SoTL is motivated by a desire to secure meaningful employment post-graduation: “I think [my interest in SoTL research] was that I want to build my CV in a meaningful way and differentiate it from other people when it came to opportunities I wanted to pursue after grad school” (G3). The strategy of this graduate student is consistent with Vajoczki, Fenton, Mendard, & Pollon’s (2011) suggestion to prioritize a diversified research portfolio in order to strengthen a research-based job application and to create opportunities to secure employment in the growing area of teaching-focused positions. The motivation for engaging in SoTL can be the result of both the process of diversifying career opportunities and differentiating the self in a crowded and competitive labour market.

While faculty and graduate students in this study indicated their identities were formed in relationship with research, the professional staff indicated they were primarily motivated by their commitment to learners and a desire for scholarly legitimacy. The staff participants varied in their comfort identifying as SoTL researchers. For some, the motivation to engage in SoTL was because of their role as service providers, and for others, it was because they saw their role as scholarly:

The work that I’m doing, and the colleagues in my unit are doing, is generating data or using the data for our own uses and applications and in some cases, we are sharing it in different ways as well. I began to identify when I first heard the term SoTL and understood what it meant, and thought, so that’s what they are calling what we are doing. (S5)

This scholarly work aligns with the faculty and graduate student motivation to engage based on curiosity and inquiry: “I think it goes back to curiosity and asking that question why. Sometimes I’m just genuinely interested in how did students experience this or what’s going on” (S3).

The staff participants in this study describe the experience of embodying a staff role and engaging in research in terms of affect: anxiety, frustration, doubt, and self-justification. Whereas the faculty participants focused on defending their right to have SoTL research recognized in their formal research programs, the staff participants felt the need to defend their right to conduct the research at all: “primarily the SoTL field has been owned by faculty and it’s about faculty and teaching” (S5). The desire to assert legitimacy is common in alternative-academic or blended professional roles as individuals “build their authority, in situ, via day-to-day activity [...] rather than via their position in the organization chart or specialist knowledge” (Whitchurch, 2009, p. 409). Engagement in SoTL for staff is then, in part, motivated by a desire to demonstrate research skills and to assert the staff identity as not just, or even principally, one of service.

Alongside the self-focused identity questions motivating staff participation in SoTL, staff participants articulated a surprisingly uncommon reason for engaging in SoTL work: a care and commitment to improving student learning. If faculty members or graduate students mentioned improving student learning at all, it was an implied or tertiary benefit to the primary motivators for their professional group. The staff participants, on the other hand, explicitly described their

engagement in SoTL as motivated by student learning. One participant captured this focus on the learners when stating:

There are people who have expertise in learning, who know about student learning, who I think have for many decades struggled to find a legitimate partnership in that teaching *and* learning piece of it. So, my interest in SoTL is really from the learning perspective. (S5)

It should be noted that for many educational developers, including some of the authors here, the conflict between staff and researcher identities also holds true. While some institutions categorize educational developers as faculty members, with the attendant labour policies and provisions, most educational developers occupy staff roles. For educational developers in staff positions the expectation to contribute to SoTL or to the scholarship of educational development requires similar navigation of the professional identity categories outlined within the staff focus groups. This study did not include educational developer participants; however, we see the particular contours of the educational developer-research identities as a fruitful avenue for further exploration.

The motivations for engaging in the SoTL are complex and are shaped by the unique professional identity of each researcher and the position they hold. The participants in this study outlined how the expectations and norms associated with different professional identities at the individual, departmental, and institutional level influence whether SoTL is undertaken and the degree of identification as a SoTL researcher.

### **Implications for Educational Development**

Analysis of the participant responses resulted in a number of recommendations for educational developers to consider as they support the development of SoTL. The section that follows highlights formal training opportunities and systemic opportunities identified by the participants that impact educational developers and would support SoTL identity formation.

#### **Formal Training**

Participants were asked to share formal and informal experiences that supported their identity development as SoTL researchers. All groups suggested that formal training, such as graduate education, faculty development programs, graduate certificate programs, and/or formal mentorship programs increased their awareness of the discipline and their ability to conduct SoTL research. In addition, completion of formal programs was an important contribution toward the participants' confidence in claiming the SoTL researcher identity. The participants identified that structured formal training opportunities, such as faculty development programs, created "stringent accountability" (F3) to prioritize growth and development within this area. Formal development opportunities were often seen as a key factor that transitioned faculty from a practitioner to a researcher. One participant captured the sentiment of the group when expressing:

Every teaching experience, every conversation I had, every conference I've gone to, every paper I've read, the EnLITE program [a faculty teaching development program], the Course Redesign Institute...all of it has informed me as a practitioner, but I'm not sure if all of it has informed me as a researcher of SoTL. If we are talking about a narrower

definition of SoTL research, I would say then for the formal research it's the formal training. (F4)

Graduate students expressed that SoTL opportunities resulted after being engaged with other teaching development programs. To identify as SoTL researchers, graduate students expressed the importance of having opportunities to become familiar with the literature and of participating in programs that support a stepwise entry into SoTL in a way that balances with their own disciplinary development. In particular, when discussing formal SoTL developmental programs, one participant indicated a SoTL training program they had previously engaged in, "has also been a formal way of being exposed to that research and being guided through that research, which has really been valuable" (G5).

Formal training provided staff a similar legitimization of their credentials as SoTL researchers.

The Inquire certificate [a graduate SoTL certificate program]...that for me is going to legitimize it, I can slide that certificate across the table and say I'm a SoTL researcher. I have a certificate that says I am and is approved by a governing body. (S3)

The formal programs led to a shift in legitimacy and supported staff in their ability to shed the imposter syndrome shared in their conversation. One participant discussed a SoTL project that they were completing during a formal training program and its impact on their confidence and sense of ownership: "the current project that we are working on...there is no faculty...so that's exciting because this is ours! That's the transition [to becoming a SoTL researcher]" (S2).

Formal credentials that participants obtained prior to their roles were of value to some participants. However, given the nature of SoTL as often an additional discipline, the vast majority of participants proposed that programs offered through Teaching and Learning Centres played a central role in their identity formation. Educational developers often figure in the design, delivery, and advocacy for such programs and these results suggest the necessity for reflecting on how the motivations and barriers of potential participants will interact with their willingness to engage in these SoTL training programs.

## **Mentorship, Institutional Directions, and Institutional Culture**

Although the outcomes of formal training were slightly different for each group, a consistent impact of formal programs on SoTL identity was clear across all three constituencies. Differences were identified between faculty, graduate students, and staff in terms of other training and development opportunities and their alignment with institutional directions. Faculty participants identified informal mentorship and institutional strategic directions as opportunities to develop and reinforce a SoTL identity. In comparison to structured programs, informal mentorship and the willingness of colleagues in one's teaching community to share ideas at a variety of events was thought to be "much more diverse and inclusive. Being so eclectic, you never know when you're going to get a good idea" (F6). Participating in SoTL discussions across campus allowed one participant to realize that "we are teaching ourselves as we go, which makes us scholars and researchers" (F6).

Strategic directions and documents outlined by institutions offered another point of validation of identity for the faculty participants. In particular, one faculty member drew attention

to the importance of the institution's commitment to teaching and learning through the development of institution wide learning outcomes. This institutional direction was:

validation for me - the fact that a university degree is primarily not a discipline degree - but a university degree. That put on paper and etched in stone 20 potential research areas about our teaching, all of which focus on developing the person, not the discipline. (F7)

Within the graduate student conversation, the importance of mentorship was discussed extensively as a key for entering into and building engagement toward identifying as a SoTL researcher. The mentor-mentee relationship often emerged from interactions during graduate student teaching development programs and the participants noted the key role that educational developers play to encourage and support the development of SoTL research questions and methods. Participants suggested that educational developers were the “glue for a lot of us in the formation of SoTL research” (G1).

Consistent with the obstacles that face staff in identifying as SoTL researchers, developing institutional processes that empower, rather than discourage, engagement was threaded throughout their conversation. Staff described the importance of having the opportunity to hold Research Ethics Certificates, apply for institutional SoTL grant funding, and being encouraged to present at teaching and learning conferences. If these institutional conditions were in place, staff members indicated they would provide “validity and legitimacy - oh I can do this, I'm not even a faculty member” (S5).

The staff identified that the culture and experiences within their own departments played an important role in their engagement with and identity in SoTL. Teams and supervisors who encourage evidence-based work, presentation of information at conferences, and engagement with the academic community fostered a relationship with SoTL within their staff.

I think back to my first real job... We were always encouraged to read journal articles and reflect on what we were doing, to assess our programs and to present at conferences, contribute to papers or book chapters...it was just inherent in our work environment that it was something we were expected to do. (S3)

An opportunity exists for educational developers to break down, rather than entrench, any existing silos between staff and other SoTL researchers on campus. Encouraging the involvement of this group of professionals, who often focus on student learning, is an extremely valuable contribution to the ongoing discourse in the SoTL discipline. As strategic directions further encourage learner-centred and outcomes based approaches to education, educational developers have an opportunity to create inclusive programs, policies, and networks that support the increase of professional staff voices within SoTL discourse. By virtue of their (often) central position, educational developers play an important role in building a SoTL campus network that goes beyond any individual department or rank. The participants in this study advocated for teaching and learning centres that provide opportunities for mentorship, research support, and ground up advocacy to expand institutional commitment to funding and reward structures. In particular, educational developers could draw on the desire mentioned by all three groups to engage in evidence-based teaching practice.

Finally, as teaching and learning centres engage in the work of supporting SoTL identity development, an ethic of care is important in supporting newcomers to the “big tent.” The

challenges and barriers facing participants across roles in this study support the notion that emerging SoTL researchers “be gentle with each other, knowing that we all struggle with who we are and what we do when we step across that threshold” (Chick, 2013, p. 10). While supporting one another through the “liminal space” (Simmons et al., 2013, p. 9) associated with the transition to scholarship in a new discipline, researchers entering the field need to be aware of the importance of rigorous methodologies and strict adherence to the ethical standards. An important moment for educational development support is during the design of research questions that can meaningfully impact learners, classrooms, campuses, and the higher education system. Support at this moment provides educational developers with opportunities to address concerns regarding legitimacy within disciplines, squash the negative connotations associated with being pigeonholed as the “teaching and learning faculty,” and give voice to professional staff who are deeply committed to supporting learners.

### **Limitations**

This study was conducted at one university with an established history of supports for the SoTL (Kenny, Watson, & Desmarais, 2016). While the findings may be generalizable to other universities in other geographic locations, we expect that the unique professional identities of instructors at the college-level or at predominantly undergraduate teaching focused institutions would require further research.

Several limitations are associated with the relatively small sample size (i.e., low number of participants in some focus groups, only one focus group per professional group). Our data is almost exclusively perceptual data, which creates the risk of perceptual bias if a participant shares data that is unreliable. This bias was decreased, but not eliminated, by focusing on overarching themes (i.e., those expressed by more than one individual). We were only able to recruit one contingent instructor, and these results were incorporated with the faculty responses. Contingent instructors have unique research and teaching perspectives that could provide greater depth to this discussion, and this was difficult to capture with such a limited sample.

Moreover, the perceptual data gathered here could be corroborated in the future with further investigation using additional methodological approaches such as surveys aimed at a broader participant pool. Likewise, the claims discussed here could be substantiated and nuanced with qualitative research of additional professional identity groups like administrators or educational developers.

Participants in these focus groups were drawn from SoTL researchers, and so the discussions began from a point of assuming SoTL engagement. Otherwise, the participants’ backgrounds varied widely, making it difficult to control for extraneous factors such as home discipline, years of experience, and level of training. Although we collected participant data on some of these extraneous factors, we did not explore the impact of these factors unless they were explicitly acknowledged by the participants. We want to acknowledge that the participants in this study were drawn from an institution that has a centralized teaching and learning centre providing support for SoTL. As a consequence of this existing support from the teaching and learning centre, and the intersection of participants with this centre, it is not surprising that participants would advocate for continued, or expanded, support from educational developers.



Finally, the nature of our research questions meant that each focus group included participants from one professional identity group. Future research that considers interactions among graduate students, faculty and contingent instructors, and professional staff would be useful.

### Conclusion

Faculty, graduate students, and staff in this study all outlined unique barriers to identifying as a SoTL researcher and entered the field with varying motivations. Faculty identified concerns of being “pigeonholed” and the lack of value that formal and informal institutional structures and personnel may attribute to SoTL. Alternatively, motivations for participating in SoTL aligned consistently with identities of inquiry and the professional responsibility of providing high quality learning environments. Obstacles for considering oneself a SoTL researcher described by graduate students included identifying as a researcher or expert at all, let alone in a secondary discipline, and the perceived risk of acceptance within one’s own discipline. Not surprisingly, allegiances to SoTL came secondary to becoming an expert within the graduate student’s home department. Similar to faculty, graduate students were motivated to become SoTL researchers by a sense of inquiry and professional duty, but also shared more pragmatic motivations associated with standing out in a competitive job market. Barriers for staff members centred around questioning their own credibility as researchers within roles that balance practice and research. Motivations for staff are described as focusing on understanding how to enhance the learning experience of students and as a method of legitimizing their work within their field and across the institution. The barriers and motivations outlined by faculty, graduate students, and professional staff in this study serve as an opportunity for educational developers to reflect on how formal programming, institutional policies, and informal training opportunities can support and promote the development of SoTL researcher identities.

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