Navigating the Chaos: The Value of SoTL During Times of Uncertainty

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Abstract
The value of Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) frequently is overlooked or misunderstood within higher education institutions. COVID-19's disruption of higher education has highlighted the importance of embracing roles of teacher and learner, flexibility, and a focus on systematically studying teaching and learning embrace as strategies to navigate this chaos. Based on our multidisciplinary, multi-positional, and multi-national perspectives, we make connections between the skills learned through SoTL scholarship and their applicability in times of chaos. Our intent is to highlight the skills and approaches acquired through SoTL engagement and by doing so, emphasize the valuable contributions of SoTL scholars within higher education.

Seven international scholars from Canada, the United States, New Zealand, and Australia met in June 2019 through videoconferencing to engage in scholarly reflection on the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL). The expectation was to produce a published manuscript by May 2020. We (the authors) had been selected to participate in a collaborative writing group sponsored by the International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (ISSOTL), based on our diversity of institutions and positions. In October, we met for three days to focus on our assigned subject – boundary crossing in the SoTL landscape. This workshop provided dedicated time

getting to know each other at a deeper level while beginning the seemingly difficult task of converting a broad, nebulous topic into a publishable manuscript.

For many of us, the writing group represented our first encounter with others who had a similar passion and energy for teaching and learning. Although SoTL has evolved into a recognized and respected field, our work in SoTL is not always met with the same recognition or respect within our home institutions or academic disciplines. Our backgrounds and pathways into SoTL are diverse and dissimilar, but we share a common experience of often feeling alone in doing this work.

Three months after our workshop, COVID-19 dominated the news globally, and our writing group members in New Zealand and Australia discussed possible delays to the start of their semesters with plans for online-only coursework. "Really? How will that work?" those of us in North America inquired. However, less than one month later, we too were also teaching online and working from home. Despite the disruption, we continued our weekly commitment to meet online as a group, relishing these times to share and connect as we adjusted to our "new normal". Two topics frequently dominated our conversations during these meetings: our experiences as SoTL scholars and COVID-19. Although we were dealing with the same virus globally, our countries, cities, and institutions responded in vastly different ways. Similarly, we are all involved in SoTL, but our approaches and work within it vary based on our different backgrounds, experiences, and positions.

Our group had chosen a methodology that required us to reflect on our SoTL journeys, identifying common themes in our disparate contexts. As we engaged deeper in this work, our stories on how we were managing our teaching with the impact of COVID-19 surfaced. There were strong comparisons between our SoTL experiences and the recommendations being promoted for successful teaching by our institutions in the midst of a pandemic. As the virus raged, our cities went into lockdown. While in the midst of teaching, we were required to become active learners ourselves on how to be adaptable, resilient, and compassionate towards ourselves and others. As digital learning was now pervasive across all our programs, newly implemented teaching strategies were tested, documented for their effectiveness, and revised accordingly. These skills and approaches are critical aspects of doing SoTL work and were now being recognized for their value and incorporated widely during this highly stressful period.

As researchers, we were exploring our nonlinear, often chaotic, and unplanned journeys of boundary-crossing through SoTL. However, as teachers and citizens, we were now experiencing another type of chaos and unknowing. Through these dual experiences, we began to notice parallels. What follows is our observations of these parallels; a meta reflection or a reflection on our individual reflections.

Although SoTL as a field continues to gain respect, individual SoTL scholars' contributions can feel overlooked and undervalued (Tierney, 2020). Yet, as the pandemic disrupted many traditional approaches to teaching and learning, new paradigms, skills, and approaches emerged - and required critical examination. During this chaos, our group, being SoTL scholars, found that the tools and approaches we had learned in doing SoTL were now urgently needed. In their essay examining SoTL in the context of multiple crises, Cruz and Grodziak (2021) challenge us to

consider new questions regarding teaching and learning. They argue that these questions serve "not only as a means of investigating, but also navigating, the changes to teaching, learning, and scholarship following in the wake of the current global pandemic" (p.8). As we consider their call to action, we also are poised to reimagine what the world of higher education will look like post-pandemic and believe that SoTL will be a critical piece with the new norms.

Our essay highlights three realities of the SoTL scholar experience that we found helpful in navigating COVID-19: (a) adopting roles as teacher and learner, (b) providing flexibility with teaching, and (c) engaging in ongoing scholarly research on the teaching and learning that is occurring. Cruz and Grodziak (2021) set forth important guiding questions to frame our work. While they make the point that SoTL has receded during the pandemic - a point that we concede - we suggest that our experiences of SoTL scholars have prepared us to cope with these new uncertainties. Through our examples, we demonstrate the relevance between SoTL and teaching practice and the value SoTL scholars bring during unprecedented and uncertain times. Some scholars may have the privilege of having their SoTL work valued and appreciated within their institutions and discipline. However, for those who struggle to find the legitimacy of engaging in SoTL, we hope these examples can be used to articulate and amplify the critical work of examining teaching practice. For those who have been doing SoTL work intuitively or those new to SoTL, we hope our reflections can lead them to intentional SoTL practice and recognize its value further. This essay, therefore, serves to highlight the unique contributions of SoTL scholars and the value of SoTL work across the academy. What follows are examples from our own stories to capture how our practices as SoTL scholars have influenced our responses to teaching and learning during the pandemic. Table 1 summarizes our profiles to help contextualize our examples.

Table 1
Profile of the Participants (Due to blind review, we have not provided our names).

Participants	Country	Current Role	Disciplinary Background	Years of SoTL Engagement
P1	Canada	PhD Candidate	Biochemistry, Cell Biology & Genetics	4
P2	Canada	Assistant Professor of Teaching, Education	Teacher Education	12
P3	Canada	Director, Teaching and Learning Centre	Applied Linguistics	7
P4	U.S.A.	Associate Professor, Higher Education and Student Affairs	Higher Education	3
P5	U.S.A.	Professor, Art and Design Education	History	6

| P6 | Australia | Educational Designer | Business & Economics | 2 |
| P7 | New Zealand | Associate Professor, Education and Social Work | Mathematics & Biochemistry | 10 |

Adopting Roles as Teacher and Learner

The abrupt shift from face-to-face to online teaching left many faculty members unprepared to effectively develop and revise course outcomes with appropriate and novel teaching strategies. The anxiety was especially acute during February and March 2020, when many institutions quickly went into extended lockdowns and moved to online teaching and learning with little time to prepare or plan. Even for faculty who had prior experience with teaching online, this medium was a new, and sometimes unwelcome, experience for our students. Prior to 2021, students and faculty generally chose to engage (or not!) with online learning. The pandemic eliminated this choice. Successful teaching and learning require a quick adaptation of digital software and online pedagogy (Brown, 2020; Koenig, 2020). This is reflected in the experiences of our group members. For example, although familiar with using Zoom for online meetings, P7 needed to understand how other Zoom functions (e.g., breakout rooms, polls, and chat) could be utilized to increase engagement and create community.

Even though most faculty members begin teaching with little to no formal pedagogical knowledge to guide their practice (Becher & Trowler, 2001), they are expected to leap into excellent teaching on the simplistic basis that they are disciplinary experts (Huber & Hutchings, 2005). In reality, many faculty members join academia as novice teachers and given their vast, specialized knowledge and skills; they are not always comfortable admitting their lack of teaching knowledge. When COVID-19 forced post-secondary institutions to deliver all courses online, this lack of knowledge became more apparent. Faculty members, even the more experienced, felt like novices. Given the quick pivot to online learning, many were more willing to seek out much-needed support (Lederman, 2020a; Mihai, 2021) and took time to learn new skills. P3 observed that faculty members at her institution had become vulnerable with their teaching and needed urgent support.

As a graduate teaching assistant, P1 was already familiar with playing the dual roles of teacher and learner. However, during COVID-19, P1's role took on many nuances. She was well-positioned to support other graduate assistants and faculty members with her previous experience doing SoTL – adapting to new environments, adjusting pedagogy. As activities and rubrics were altered quickly, students also served to provide feedback on their learning. Being a SoTL scholar, P1 was comfortable with the ambiguity of her dual roles, proactively engaging in one of the principles of SoTL scholarship – engaging students as partners (Felten, 2013).

P6 is an educational designer with technological expertise that she willingly shared with faculty, but they were not always aware of her expertise or would seek out her assistance. With the impact of the global pandemic, P6 was now in great demand for support. She was also sharing new technologies and realized the importance of staying current.

As support could no longer be in person, this change challenged everyone to learn and teach from virtual platforms. This experience blurred the lines between teacher and learner, and in many instances, faculty were simultaneously being both as they attempted to apply disciplinary expertise to new and unfamiliar contexts.

Being a SoTL scholar means assuming roles of teacher and learner, moving back and forth between the two roles as necessary (Boyer, 1990; Kensington-Miller et al., 2021). They are also often characterized as having a "foot in two fields" – disciplinary and other (Huber & Hutchings, 2006; Huber & Morreale, 2002). SoTL scholars are willing to learn new approaches for researching their teaching, try different methodologies, and communicate their findings in new ways (Danielson, 2012; Hubball & Clarke, 2010; Huber, 2010). Faculty's support levels to develop empirically sound teaching practices have varied across departmental, institutional and national contexts. With the onslaught of COVID-19, faculty have been thrown into the role of learner to become familiar with and apply new pedagogical techniques and tools, and institutions are now being required to provide additional support.

Because of the complex nature of the work, SoTL is often done collaboratively (Huber & Hutchings, 2006; McKinney, 2013). Similarly, our collaborative SoTL writing group benefited from pooling our diverse expertise and adopting roles as teacher and learner. There was a comfort and synergy in knowing we each had something to contribute, but no one had to shoulder the entire responsibility for our project. This approach contrasts with the academy, where a multi-layered hierarchical system generally rewards an individual; the disciplinary focus is favored over collaborative interdisciplinarity, and faculty status is championed over other academic, administrative, and support roles.

This collaborative spirit was critical as we worked with our faculty, staff, and students in our institutions during the pandemic. The usual barriers between staff and faculty were minimized as we needed to rely on one another to move courses online, find new ways to assess student learning and support each other and our students' mental and emotional well-being. Our SoTL experiences exposed us to the powerful work that can be accomplished when we embrace collaborative activities and the dual roles of teacher and learner: we help to develop skills and knowledge of others while also being the recipients of these new skills and knowledge.

The pandemic has turned the spotlight on the crucial roles of SoTL scholars. Whereas faculty members are required to learn and teach their disciplinary knowledge to others continually, SoTL scholars learn through teaching and teach through learning. By adopting dual roles of learner and teacher – often at the same time - they bring a wealth of scholarly pedagogical knowledge, now recognized for its value.

Embracing Flexibility

In addition to coursework, deadlines, academic calendars, forms, policies were disrupted by COVID-19. Long-standing services that once presented obstacles to moving online suddenly were provided virtually. For example, as a department chair, P5 had to support faculty to develop meaningful approaches to teaching hands-on studio-based art and design classes virtually. Similar to P1, she and other faculty engaged students as partners. Through town hall meetings with faculty

and students, they listened to concerns and worked through solutions to once seemingly impossible problems. Other programs, such as the teacher education program, in which P2 is involved, had mandates for certification requiring in-person instruction prior to COVID-19. Online courses have never been part of this program, and not only did these courses have to be developed from scratch, but the pedagogy similarly had to be adapted to be meaningful for practice-based contexts.

Articles emerging on teaching consistently stressed the need to be "flexible" during these unprecedented times (Givens, 2020; Martin, 2020). For example, the array of grading and attendance guidelines, often non-negotiables in syllabi, suddenly needed to be revised at the course and even institutional levels to be more flexible. Flexibility also meant implementing compassionate teaching strategies in recognition that our students' lives had been turned upside down (White & Ruth-Sahd, 2020) and to show kindness and compassion towards self and others through these difficult times (Dencer-Brown, 2020). As faculty teaching in graduate programs, P7 and P4 had to rethink keeping students engaged in the Zoom environment for three hours each week. They also recognized that some students lacked adequate technology to connect or space in which to participate fully. Hence, learning-centered approaches advocated frameworks such as Universal Design for Learning and became academia's modus operandi practically overnight.

SoTL work also requires flexibility (Chick, 2018; Gilpin, 2011) and this ability to "flex" was useful in navigating the pandemic. In our disciplinary research, we are taught to master the discipline's standard processes and approaches. In contrast, SoTL research draws from a variety of disciplinary approaches and is, therefore, more fluid and less confined to one approach (Gilpin & Liston, 2009; Hubball &Clarke, 2010). This looser structure requires additional flexibility, which SoTL scholars embrace. SoTL has exposed us to different research traditions providing us with the ability to deeply explore student learning and effective teaching from a variety of perspectives (Chick, 2013; Poole, 2013). SoTL scholars must work with the "messiness" of their imperfect teaching and acknowledge and respect the diversity of the learners they teach. Flexibility allows us to draw upon a diverse set of research and teaching tools as well as disciplinary cultures, assess their applicability to our individual work, and take risks by trying new things. This flexibility - adjusting delivery of content, assignments, and grading to meet the needs of students and limitations of remote learning - was paramount in approaching teaching during COVID-19. Fortunately, the flexibility we learned as SoTL scholars helped to minimize the stress associated with these changes.

The pandemic has highlighted the possibilities and limitations of new approaches to learning and teaching and led to insights into what works well and why, how, and for whom. Addressing this new information requires flexibility in our teaching and assessment of learning and being adaptable to new contexts. SoTL scholars are comfortable with trying new strategies and research methods; they are already engaged in this work and are poised to uncover how the lessons of the pandemic can improve teaching and learning.

Importance Of Studying Teaching and Learning

Documenting and promoting effective teaching and learning is at the core of SoTL scholarship. The abrupt shift to remote teaching spurred a number of articles focused on the influence of online/remote teaching on learning, emphasizing the problems or deficiencies with this type of teaching (Mishra et al., 2021; Toquero, 2020). Course evaluations, most of which were developed

with in-person learning in mind, had to be altered, and critiques about their usefulness have been more pronounced (Lederman, 2020a, 2020b; Leshchinskaya & Piani, 2020). The role of video conferencing and learning management system technologies have been questioned as faculty, and students struggle to adapt to them effectively (Moralista & Oducado, 2020). Simply put, the disruptions caused by COVID-19 have placed a renewed emphasis on researching teaching and learning. They have pressured institutions to examine the conditions in which the virtual learning environment can support and sustain student learning. This focus is SoTL research (Chick, 2018). SoTL scholars recognize the importance of this work and have the expertise and commitment to examine these critical issues and make evidence-based recommendations for future practices. As Cruz and Grodziak (2021) emphasize, the pandemic has challenged us to continue to ask, "what works?"

COVID-19 has been described as unprecedented. Fortunately, many of our faculty have been able to work with SoTL experts and colleagues on our campuses to make sense of the chaos. P2 helped support colleagues to consider their pedagogy in the online environment and had them reflect on how these changes influenced student learning. P4 worked with staff members in her Center for Excellence in Learning and Teaching to develop Teaching Briefs that showcased faculty member's innovative solutions for creating community, engaging students, and developing opportunities for practice within the online environment. Many faculties are interested in SoTL work but lack time and outlets for making their work "public." Teaching Briefs provided a relatively easy opportunity for individual SoTL scholars to accomplish this goal, and the examples that can be adapted to a variety of disciplines, can enhance teaching and learning across campus and beyond.

Teaching through COVID-19 has been described as building the plane while it's flying (Brown, 2020). SoTL scholars, by applying their knowledge of teaching and learning and adapting effective methods to assess novel approaches, have helped prevent crash landings and ensure a safer, smoother flight.

Perhaps more importantly, SoTL can help the academy capitalize on newly adopted ways of delivering education. As we move from solving or coping with an immediate problem brought about by the pandemic, we can start to meaningfully investigate these emerging practices and imagine a better future. What practices nurture the whole student? How can technology enhance access to a good education for everyone? A fulsome answer to such complex questions requires a willingness to learn and unlearn, the flexibility of perspectives and approaches, and evidence-informed decision making. If we employ "SoTL" to answer these questions, we can, in the words of Bass (2020), "turn [this] crisis into a set of intellectual problems to be investigated" (p. 7) and leveraged. SoTL scholars have valuable experiences and skill sets that can help make sense of and evaluate the transformations that have taken place and those we wish for as we move into a post-pandemic world.

Conclusion

SoTL has gained increasing legitimacy within higher education in the past two decades, yet many SoTL scholars still struggle for their work to be valued and recognized within their institutions and disciplines. Although COVID-19 has disrupted teaching and student learning, the skills and approaches that are part of a SoTL scholar's ethos are crucial tools needed to navigate the chaos.

SoTL scholarship is integral to an institution's teaching, and learning mission - experiencing the pandemic has illustrated the importance of SoTL scholarship in times of crisis and change. It is paramount that SoTL scholars are encouraged to articulate their contributions, and institutional leaders embrace and illuminate this valuable work.

Our intent for these reflections is to provide support and encouragement for those who are already engaged in SoTL, those who plan to engage, and those who are considering engaging. We attempted to articulate a few of the many benefits of engaging in SoTL work. For those already engaged, these benefits may not be surprising. However, through the documentation, we wish to support and promote the many rewarding qualities of our work that often get overlooked. For those new to SoTL or considering this work, we hope our reflections provide further encouragement to embrace this approach to research and teaching.

By illustrating "what" we have learned, our aim is to provide answers to "why" we have chosen to engage with SoTL and "why" it matters. It is still too early to know the future implications of the pandemic on teaching and learning and how it will affect faculty and students engaged in this work. Our reflections emerged while "in the middle" of the pandemic and we strongly recommend continuing to research and reflect as we move through and beyond. We look forward to a post-pandemic world, knowing our institutions are forever changed. These changes will continue to require simultaneously moving between teacher and learner, flexibility, and a focus on systematically studying these critical endeavours. Regardless of their position within the academy, we believe SoTL scholars are key.

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