

“Dear Author”: A Transparent SoTL Peer Review

Nancy L. Chick

Rollins College

Abstract

This epistolary article is written as an extended SoTL peer review. It contains two sections: my preparatory work as peer reviewer and my actual review. In the first section, I remind myself of the function and processes of the SoTL peer review, what the author expects from a SoTL peer reviewer, and how I see my role as a peer reviewer in SoTL. In the second section, I write my review, focusing on three common feedback areas in SoTL: how the author brings in existing scholarship, how the author describes their SoTL project, and how the author demonstrates its importance. My review concludes with some advice for navigating the potentially conflicting reviews that are not unusual in SoTL.

Keywords

Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, peer review, collegial, disciplinarity, interdisciplinarity, SoTL literature review, SoTL research design

Dear Author,

The editors have asked me to review your article in order to provide my best judgment about its fit and potential within this specific SoTL journal, and to provide critical and constructive feedback for your revision process, whether you revise to publish here or elsewhere. Before I respond to your draft, I'm going to take the unusual step of sharing my thoughts about this backstage process of the anonymous peer review in SoTL. This preface will put me in the right frame of mind, and if it also helps you understand something about the SoTL peer review, all the better.

Preparing to Write My Review

First, what is peer review? Peer review is both a process and a product. As author, you submit your work anonymously, and then editors select a few people they consider your peers and invite us to read your draft, sometimes (depending on the journal) with woefully insufficient guidance. We accept the invitation if we think we can squeeze it in within the window of something like a month. Because we're humans, we most often read the article toward the end of that month, and then

complete an online form, typically a text box for our comments to the author, a second for optional comments to the editor, and finally a checkbox list of recommendation choices. Editors collect the different reviewers' responses, and some simply follow the math of the recommendations (e.g., two "do not accept" plus one "revise and resubmit" equals rejection), or they weigh in with some editorial decision-making to balance the reviewer responses, especially if reviewers contradict each other. This is the choreography of the peer review process. The peer review product—often called "the peer review," whereas the process is called "peer review"—is the report we write and the recommendation we make at the very end. Even with helpful criteria and clear guidance, the peer review is an inherently subjective genre, and one in which writing matters a great deal. I'll say more about that shortly.

Because I don't know anything about you, there may be nothing new in the above paragraph. On the other hand, perhaps this is your first submission, or you've never been a peer reviewer. I write this out, though, primarily for me, so these processes and concerns are top of mind as I work with your draft.

Next, what do you expect from me? You worked hard on your draft. You worked hard on the SoTL project that preceded that draft. Even if you're the most mature, professional, thick-skinned academic, sharing your writing with others feels vulnerable, and you're at least a little anxious about what will happen. But you clicked "submit," you breathed a sigh of relief and then put it out of your mind, knowing it would be a while before you heard back from the journal. Time passed. Then, when your email pinged with the message from the journal's online management system and "Decision" in the subject line, your heart stopped for a second. As your cursor hovered over the unread email, you felt a sense of dread about what was about to happen. Not only would you learn the editors' decision, but you'd also see what (and how) the peer reviewers wrote. Even if you've never submitted something until this draft, you're probably aware of the popular meme about "Reviewer 2," representing the near-universal experience with a reviewer "who is rude, vague, smug, committed to pet issues, theories, and methodologies, and unwilling to treat the authors as peers" (Watling, Ginsburg, & Lingard, 2021, p. 299). The meme exists in part to make us laugh in public, knowing that most of us have cried in private, hiding in the shadow of Reviewer 2 trauma. Reviewer 2 is what you fear. Reviewer 2 is the worst-case scenario.

Call me Reviewer 1. Given the above, what do you expect (or rather, hope) from me? Even if I haven't been given much guidance by the editors, you trust me to "behave responsibly and ethically" (COPE, 2017, p. 1) by, at the very least, completing my review—and completing it on time. You hope that I don't "ghost" the editors, requiring them later to find another reviewer and delaying their editorial decision. (Yes, this happens.) You also trust me not to skim your draft but instead to read it, both carefully and with care. Writing is hard, and you agonized over parts of your draft. You want me to appreciate that hard work by taking my review seriously. You hope I bring an openness to the SoTL project you're writing about and an understanding of the passage of time, so that when I recommend revisions, I ask for changes to your draft, not to the project you completed some months ago. You also trust me to be fair in my review by responding to what you've actually written (rather than misreading your work) and to the totality of your writing (rather than taking parts out of context to focus on my pet subjects). Because you know the SoTL community prides itself on being "collegial in ways that express inclusivity" (ISSOTL, 2017), you trust me to also write my review both carefully and with care, at the very least by "phras[ing] the feedback appropriately and with due respect" (COPE, 2017, p. 7). At the same time, you know

that the SoTL community is made up of humans, and they don't always live up to their ideals, as was recently "laid bare" in a haunting essay about SoTL's "abusive relationship with humanist scholars" (Potter & Raffoul, 2023, p. 5). So while you're anxious about the editorial decision, in some ways you're more nervous about reading our reviews. As soon as you open the email, you'll see the decision in the first paragraph. After that comes the hard part, tempered by what's written in that first paragraph. In these first moments of quickly previewing the rest of the email, since you are human, the negativity bias will amplify any critical comments, even if they're constructive. The stings you'll feel from these comments may be just a few or an entire swarm. But whatever this email brings, you'll feel some degree of relief by ending the month (or more) of uncertainty.

Now, let me tell you how I see my role as a peer reviewer, or what I expect from me. Like everyone, I'm busy, so I have to set aside the time and mental capacity to be fully present when I read your draft. As a peer, I owe you that. As is often the case in SoTL, I'm reading your article from outside of your discipline. Also, even though we share the common language of English, I think I'm also located in a different country and within a different sociocultural context from your SoTL project. This means our educational systems and the larger political and cultural contexts for our work may have important differences, which may or may not be clear to me. I thus read your article from many "outsides": I don't know you or your project, I come from a different disciplinary background, and I'm in a different context. This is good. In these differences from you, I represent many of your readers in SoTL. The implications for me as your peer reviewer (and your SoTL colleague) are that I need to navigate these differences. Actually, I need to do more than that: I need to recognize, respect, and learn from them, and—in this role of peer reviewer—to remind you of them. For me (and eventually for your readers), this is challenging but necessary work in SoTL. Bear with me as I prepare myself and share with you how I've done so.

I regularly go back to two chapters in Kathleen McKinney's *The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in and across the Disciplines* (2013). I start by recalling Gary Poole's description of "the ways in which diverse disciplines attempt to work together" (2013, p. 137). In multidisciplinary fields, he explains, the individual disciplines do their own work and look to others only as needed. In interdisciplinary fields, the individual disciplines share more space, where they also share goals and value each other's approaches. In transdisciplinary fields, the individual disciplines "blur" and "are assimilated into a larger whole" (p. 139). In this 2013 piece, he argued that "interdisciplinarity is a reasonable and useful goal for SoTL" (p. 140).¹ In this 2024 peer review, I see the field still striving for this goal of interdisciplinarity, as the majority of SoTL practitioners and theorists continue to bring their disciplinary identities and epistemologies, and we're still working to build a shared space and to value each other. With this recognition in mind, I won't ask you to "blur" your background, expertise, or epistemology or try to "assimilate" your approaches. Instead, I am committed to our shared space in the field, to our shared goals of (broadly) understanding and improving teaching and learning in higher education, and to valuing your approaches. But what

¹ Whether transdisciplinarity is what SoTL *should* be is another matter, but even a decade after he wrote this piece, SoTL isn't there, nor is it undertaking the "deliberate and lengthy"—and necessary—"cross-training" for us to become "multilingual such that one can *think* in multiple languages" (Poole, 2013, p. 139). The 2023 essay by Potter and Raffoul is just one illustration of how we still struggle even with interdisciplinarity.

does it mean to “value” your approach? To answer this question, I reinforce my efforts by situating myself in Nancy Chick’s description of “Understanding and Responding to Differences in SoTL” (2013, p. 18). Conceptualizing disciplinary differences as cultural differences, she draws from Peter McLaren’s (1995) work on multiculturalism and outlines “four different and progressively more complex ways of thinking about difference and diversity” in SoTL:

a conservative SoTL scholar would promote a narrow definition of SoTL ... as the norm, suggesting that variations lack important qualities of SoTL. A liberal SoTL scholar would claim [the] ‘big tent’ definition of the field but resist attention to any ... differences on the assumption that ... such attention would create hierarchies among approaches. The left-liberal SoTL scholar would assert that good SoTL must be discipline-specific, using a narrow conception of each discipline’s approaches, which have little in common with others’. Finally, a critical SoTL scholar would resist the tendency to normalize a few approaches ...[and acknowledge] the differing approaches between and even within many disciplines. (2013, pp. 18-19)

I value your approach, then, by vigilantly recognizing our disciplinary cultures as “emerg[ing] from the complex interplay between ‘history, culture, power, and ideology,’” by reminding myself of my own positionality (i.e., this “complex interplay”), and by striving to understand yours (McLaren quoted in Chick, 2013, p. 18).

From my stance of interdisciplinarity and critical SoTL, then, I will have questions and recommendations that aren’t meant to suggest any weaknesses or fault in your work, but instead are intended to help you explain it more clearly to those of us located in different spaces. As a peer reviewer, I’m a proxy for readers who will ask, “How are your project, your findings, and your ideas relevant to me and to my teaching and learning contexts?” This means that my review needs to help you write in a way that facilitates the translational work of your future readers. Ingie Hovland’s (2021) notion of “conceptual generalization” unpacks this process (p. 42). After sharing her SoTL project on her religion students’ reading practices in fall 2019 at a large research-intensive university in the American South, she explains:

Another class, taught by a different instructor, is not the same empirical *setting* as my study (my class in fall 2019), but the same conceptual *situation* may be in play (novices learning expert reading skills in the humanities). Thus the events in my setting need to be translated into generative questions, conceptual lenses, or contestable arguments that may help another instructor understand the same conceptual *situation* in her own, different *setting*. (Hovland, 2021, p. 42)

In my review, I’ll try to help you support this “conceptual generalization” by prompting you to be explicit about your “empirical setting,” to clarify your “conceptual situation,” and to articulate your meta-level “generative questions, conceptual lenses, [and] contestable arguments.”

Finally, part of my role as peer reviewer means that I need to attend to my writing in my review. I recognize that you’ll closely look at (and feel) what I write and how I write it. I know this because I’ve been where you are many times. In fact, I just submitted a revision that was difficult to undertake after a reviewer called my final section “a real disappointment” that “offers very little beyond vague platitudes.” I struggle with writing good conclusions, and I’ve certainly written

some that are full of vague platitudes, but I didn't think that was one of them. It was hard to revise that conclusion because I didn't know what to do with that feedback—aside from scrapping it and starting anew, but with significantly less confidence in my ability to do so. I share this anecdote to remind myself to write my review in a way that leaves you with some confidence in your writing and in your ability to revise.

At long last, I'm now ready to write my review. (If you've stuck with me up to here, I'm grateful and hope my preparations have been helpful to you and not just to me. If you skipped over my preparations to get to the actual review, that's okay. They were primarily for me.)

My Review

I have read your draft with great interest. Below I offer moments from my reading, my understanding of your work, my questions, and my recommendations for your revision process. This is a strong draft. As you revise, I offer some recommendations to help you bring it to its full potential. My comments below are organized around three areas: how you bring in existing scholarship, how you describe your project, and how you demonstrate its importance.

Revision Recommendation 1: How You Bring in Existing Scholarship

First, recall Hovland's idea of clarifying your "conceptual situation" to help readers translate your specific project into their specific contexts. Somewhere early in your article, you can attend to this step with the help of your lit review. Think of it this way: your specific topic is important to us in SoTL because, although we may be in different contexts, we all wrestle with the related larger issues in our classrooms. Knowing your specific project, what are the larger themes in teaching and learning under which your project falls (e.g., motivation, prior knowledge, transfer of learning)? These larger themes may even extend farther to societal issues (e.g., scientific literacy, interactions across difference), so think expansively here. If you have a teaching and learning center at your institution, your colleagues there can help you brainstorm because they will have a good sense of these themes.

Next, I'm going to draw on some recent conversations about SoTL and citation to encourage you to self-assess how you use existing research. One thread of these conversations is about how you cite, and the other is about whom you cite. In a study of how SoTL authors integrate sources they cite, Alicia Cappello and Janice Miller-Young (2020) found that the 18 articles they analyzed from a SoTL journal relied heavily on what they describe as "non-substantive" citations, or those that aren't directly related (and sometimes aren't relevant at all) to the overarching argument (p. 11). Their article links to their citation assessment tool, which would help you review the degree of engagement of your citations. Assuming that the nature of such "non-substantive" citations means they're unnecessary or "gratuitous," Cappello and Miller-Young suggest eliminating these citations to make an article "more readable" (Cappello & Miller-Young, 2020, p. 12). In a second study, Chick, Abbot, Mercer-Mapstone, Ostrowdun, and Grensavitch (2021) argue for "a more intentional, values-driven approach to citation practices in SoTL" (p. 16). After asking if "citation signifies who's read, who's published, who's funded, who's tenured, who's employed, and who's heard, what do our citations say about the SoTL community—*no matter how unintentional?*" (p. 2), their survey of 121 SoTL practitioners found that they tend to cite primarily based on the source's reputation and whether it's "considered 'canon'" (p. 8). Ultimately, rather than Cappello and

Miller-Young's recommendation to streamline your citations for easier reading, the authors of this study prioritize an ethos of inclusive citation that's mindful of its power and acknowledges the personhood behind the citations. (See Chick, Abbot, and Ostrowdun [in press] for a tool that guides you through this citation analysis.) Despite the different approaches recommended by these two studies, there's a key takeaway: Review your citations with intention. I would suggest, for example, drawing on Cappello and Miller-Young to make sure that when you cite someone, you explain—even briefly—the meaningful connection between that work and yours. And drawing on Chick et al. (2021), you could think about the diversity of the people you're citing: Are they mostly recognizable names? Are they mostly from North America? Are they mostly established white scholars? What other patterns do you notice in the people you cite, and thus in the people you don't cite? These are worthwhile questions to consider as you revise.

Revision Recommendation 2: How You Describe Your Project

Many scholars of higher education and SoTL have demonstrated how context affects teaching and learning (Blair, 2013; Chng & Looker, 2013; Chng, Mårtensson, & Leibowitz, 2020; Felten, 2013; Johnson, 2002; Samuelowicz & Bain, 2001; Stes, Gijbels, & Van Petegem, 2008), a fact that calls for explicit descriptions of a SoTL project's "empirical setting" to help readers translate your findings from your context into theirs (Hovland, 2021, p. 42). You have a good start here, but I suspect you withheld some information to maintain your anonymity during the peer review process. As you revise, it would be helpful if you tell us more about your students, both the students who attend your university and the specific students in your study. Tell us also about when and where you did this project. Beyond dates, did any major political, cultural, or societal events occur that may have informed thought and behavior in your part of the world? Beyond geography, what should we know about your region (including how educational institutions work) if some of us are from the other side of the world?

You also want to make sure that your readers don't dismiss your article because you didn't do the SoTL project they would have done. We tend to bring indicators of things like effectiveness, quality, and rigor from our disciplines, and if we don't ground ourselves in the preparatory work I described above, we may apply the wrong criteria to your project. This is one way in which we sometimes cling to our disciplines in less than generous ways, some of the evidence of the SoTL's striving for interdisciplinarity. What indicators of effectiveness, quality, and rigor did you apply in your SoTL project, and why? Readers like me would benefit from knowing what they are, what they mean, how you applied them, and why. One common site for this application—and readers' potential misunderstanding—is in how you made sense of the students' learning experiences at the heart of your project. When you describe what and how they learned in your project, how do you know? Show us curious readers your analytical thinking process. The data you share and the quotes you selected from the students' work is informative, but tell us more. What do you make of them? I see some interesting patterns, but I'm more interested in how *you* see them responding to *your* inquiry. Understanding how you went about these processes and why will help me more fully value your work.

Revision Recommendation 3: How You Demonstrate Your Project's Importance

Finally, I come to what can feel like the most exciting part of a project: showing others why it's important. In *They Say/I Say: The Moves that Matter in Academic Writing* (2010), Gerald Graff

and Cathy Birkenstein call this move “saying why it matters” by answering the questions, ““So what? Who cares?”” (p. 92). You already have some answers to these questions because they’ve been motivating you as you conducted your project and wrote your draft. Tell me about these motivations. Why was this project—your initial question and what you learned along the way—important to you, and to your context (e.g., your institution, your students, your country)? Go further, though. Outside of your context, how are your initial inquiry, your findings, or what you’ve learned overall relevant to us—across the differences of discipline, location, culture, institution type, and more? My recommendation above about using your lit review to clarify your “conceptual situation” will help you here (Hovland, 2021, p. 42). And perhaps toward the end of your article, think back to these larger issues and propose some “generative questions” or “contestable arguments” that will get me thinking about them in my own context (Hovland, 2021, p. 42). In this way, you move from demonstrating that the project was significant to you toward demonstrating that it’s significant to me.

As I wrap up this review, I recognize that other reviewers’ feedback may contradict mine, in part because we bring differing positions and norms. This may leave you feeling confused and hamstrung, since you might not be able to satisfy all of our recommendations. You may also disagree with some of our recommendations. Both reactions are common, and both are okay, especially in a low-consensus field like SoTL made up of a “variety of approaches to thinking processes” (Donald, 2002, p. 232). Rather than contorting yourself to achieve consensus among all of your reviewers, and between all of your reviewers and your own goals, know that you—the author—have the authority to decide what feedback to act on and how to act on it. This means that you may occasionally respond to a recommendation with something like “Thank you for your feedback, but I’m attempting something different here. I’ll be more clear about it in my article, though, so you and other readers will better understand,” and then you attend to some of the translational work I’ve described above to intercept readers from raising that same critique. The editor will also hopefully provide some guidance on how they want you to navigate reviewer contradictions.

I wish you well as you revise your draft. I think you’ll make a useful contribution to the field, so I look forward to sharing your work.

Sincerely,

Reviewer 1

References

- Blair, E. (2013). The challenge of contextualising the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning. *Teaching & Learning Inquiry, 1*(1), 127–130. <https://doi.org/10.20343/teachlearningqu.1.1.127>
- Cappello, A., & Miller-Young, J. (2020). Who are we citing and how? A SoTL citation analysis. *Teaching & Learning Inquiry, 8*(2), 3–16. <https://doi.org/10.20343/teachlearningqu.8.2.2>
- Chick, N. L. (2013). Difference, privilege, and power in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning: The value of humanities SoTL. In K. McKinney (Ed.), *The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in and across the disciplines* (pp. 15–33). Indiana University Press.
- Chick, N. L., Abbot, S., Mercer-Mapstone, L., Ostrowdun, C. P., & Grensavitch, K. (2021). Naming is power: Citation practices in SoTL. *Teaching & Learning Inquiry, 9*(2). <https://doi.org/10.20343/teachlearningqu.9.2.2>
- Chick, N. L., Abbot, S., & Ostrowdun, C. P. (forthcoming). Citing with intention.
- Chng, H. H., & Looker, P. (2013). On the margins of SoTL discourse: An Asian perspective. *Teaching & Learning Inquiry, 1*(1), 131–145. <https://doi.org/10.20343/teachlearningqu.1.1.131>
- Chng, H. H., Mårtensson, K., & Leibowitz, B. (2020). Leading change from different shores: The challenges of contextualizing the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning. *Teaching & Learning Inquiry, 8*(1), 24–41. <https://doi.org/10.20343/teachlearningqu.8.1.3>
- COPE Council. (2017). *COPE Ethical Guidelines for Peer Reviewers*. Committee on Publication Ethics. <https://doi.org/10.24318/cope.2019.1.9>
- Donald, J. G. (2002). *Learning to Think: Disciplinary Perspectives*. Jossey-Bass.
- Felten, P. (2013). Principles of good practice in SoTL. *Teaching & Learning Inquiry, 1*(1), 121–125. <https://doi.org/10.20343/teachlearningqu.1.1.121>
- Graff, G., & Birkenstein, C. (2010). *They Say/I Say: The Moves that Matter in Academic Writing*. Norton.
- Hovland, I. (2021). The importance of making-while-reading for undergraduate readers: An example of inductive SoTL. *Teaching & Learning Inquiry, 9*(1), 27–44. <https://doi.org/10.20343/teachlearningqu.9.1.4>
- ISSOTL. (2017). ISSOTL Conference Pedagogy. International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning. <https://issotl.com/issotl-conference-pedagogy/>
- Johnson, E. B. (2002). *Contextual teaching and learning: What it is and why it is here to stay*. SAGE Publications.
- McLaren, P. (1995). White terror and oppositional agency: Toward a critical multiculturalism. In D. T. Goldberg (Ed.), *Multiculturalism* (pp. 45–74). Blackwell.
- Poole, G. (2013). Square one: What is research? In K. McKinney (Ed.), *The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in and across the disciplines* (pp. 135–151). Indiana University Press.
- Potter, M. K., & Raffoul, J. (2023). Engaged alienation: SoTL, inclusivity, and the problem of integrity. *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, 17*(1), 1–6. <https://doi.org/10.20429/ijstl.2023.17102>
- Samuelowicz, K., & Bain, J. (2001). Revisiting academics' beliefs about teaching and learning. *Higher Education, 41*(3), 299–325. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1004130031247>

- Stes, A., Gijbels, D., & Van Petegem, P. (2008) Student-focused approaches to teaching in relation to context and teacher characteristics. *Higher Education*, 55(3), 255–267.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-007-9053-9>
- Watling, C., Ginsburg, S., & Lingard, L. (2021). Don't be reviewer 2! Reflections on writing effective peer review comments. *Perspectives in Medical Education*, 10, 299–303.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s40037-021-00670-z>