

What (Is It) About Dialogue? We Make the SoTL Road by Walking

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Abstract

The authors of this article engaged in a serendipitous “dialogue about dialogue” in summer and fall 2023. Through correspondence and live discussions, we pondered about the nature and affordances of the act of dialogue among colleagues in SoTL. We represent diverse disciplinary and national identities yet found in our conversation kindred thinkers and unexpected points of theoretical commonality. We offer here a glimpse into the dialogue we engaged in, illuminating the complex nature of transdisciplinary and intersubjective conversation through the lenses of hermeneutics, immediacy, and vulnerability. While we do not aspire to reach a definite framework for the role of dialogue in SoTL, we explore the transformative potential of engaging deeply in exchanges that allow new possibilities to emerge. This piece has been co-created to invite others into the conversation—we offer it as an opening rather than a conclusion.

Keywords

SoTL, dialogue, transformation, co-creation, performance, academic development, educational development, hermeneutics, immediacy, vulnerability, boundaries-crossing

Introduction

A dialogue is composed of an utterance, a reply, and a relation between the two. It is the relation that is most important of the three, for without it the other two would have no meaning. . . nothing is anything in itself. (Michael Holquist, 1990, p. 38)

Nothing is anything in itself; it is in the relation between you and me that we acquire meaning: We are more than the sum of you and I, stronger because of the relational presence of both You and I. Likewise, the Scholarship of Teaching & Learning (SoTL) is more than the sum of diverse disciplines, stronger because of the relational presence of those multiple perspectives. This piece explores the dialogically relational nature of SoTL as a space shaped by co-creation *in, of, and as* dialogical plurality; in the infinite emergent possibilities of such plurality lies the transformational potential of SoTL conversations as transdisciplinary encounters that propel academia towards brighter, intersubjectively inclusive futures. In the ever-evolving field of teaching and learning, numerous meetings, conversations, and dialogues shape our understanding and practice and help us grow as professionals. This piece was born out of such an unexpectedly generative exchange among the authors, and hopes to shine some light on the workings of such encounters in SoTL and on their importance precisely because of their dialogical nature.

Our title is an explicit homage to critical pedagogy's belief in the transformative power of learning in and through dialogue (Jurmo, 1985; Kaufmann, 2010), which we share. We found inspiration in Freire & Horton's (1990) discussion of "why they decided to speak a book and how they should go about it" (*We Make the Road by Walking*; Introduction, p. x). What follows is a reconstituted dialogue excerpted from our email correspondence, virtual meetings, letters back and forth to one another, and marginal commentary in shared documents over the summer and fall of 2023. We have created a thematic rendition, which the reader might approach almost as one would read the script for a play, hearing the voices as the ideas volley back and forth. This is a somewhat experimental form. Most of the text is drawn directly from our correspondence with one another, but not in the original order, as we have prioritized the thematic over the temporal.

We invite our readers to join us in a conversational journey in which we ponder about transdisciplinary dialogue in SoTL through the lenses of hermeneutics, immediacy, and vulnerability. We offer interwoven insights as we traverse through these three interconnected themes:

- First, we share our reflections on how hermeneutics, the theory and methodology of interpretation, can illuminate our understanding of and in teaching and learning: SoTL holds transdisciplinary potential because and when it genuinely engages in and as a plurality of voices, experiences, and perspectives through dialogue as relational interpretation.
- We then delve into dialogue as a possibly liberatory method of knowledge production because of its immediacy: Noticing the benefits of informality in our letters and communications, we underscore SoTL's habit to foster spontaneous and authentic exchange of ideas, and therefore nurture the emergence of new possibilities. We suggest this habit holds transdisciplinary potential because and when it is informed by SoTLers' valuing immediate sharing towards practical impact rather than over-prescriptive rigidity that discourages diverse ways of knowing and perpetuates cognitive imperialism and neoliberal capitalization of knowledge.
- Finally, we explore dialogue as act of becoming through vulnerability: Highlighting how vulnerability can lead to personal and professional growth, we suggest that

SoTL unleashes transdisciplinary potential because and when it embraces the unexpected and unknown with curiosity and humility.

Seeking dialogically relational engagement with our reader as our unknown interlocutor entering this conversation without having participated in it *so far*, we also signpost interpretive “on-ramps” along the way that we hope enact through our writing our invitational gesture to join the conversation (with thanks to our peer reviewers whose comments inspired this idea! As our piece’s first unknown interlocutors, we’re grateful for our reviewers’ dialogical engagement as “proxy for readers,” which certainly helped us “write in a way that facilitates the translational work of [our] future readers” (Chick, 2024). In doing so, we also want to symbolize an encouragement for any newcomer into SoTL conversations to feel inherently invited to join them as emergently evolving spaces to be dialogically shaped forward.

Hermeneutic Dialogue: Relational Meaning-Making in Transdisciplinary Plurality

Hello, dear reader! We open this first section by reflecting on the exciting trepidation that foreshadows a dialogical encounter. The seemingly simple act of reaching out to someone is the extension of an invitation, pregnant with both promising potential and inherent risks involved in asking another: “Can we talk?” We invite you to consider the dialogical implications of such an invitation. For example, an email to a colleague, someone you see as a friend-in-potential, someone whose work you admire and with whom you have maybe exchanged a few words at a conference, glimpsing possibilities for kindred intellectual curiosity and shared desire to build together . . . The more you learn about them, the more you get excited about not only their work, but also their spirit. If only they had the time to help your current thinking . . . Will they say yes? Well, there’s only one way to know: asking them.

Anna’s Initial Email to Michelle

Hello dear Michelle, ...

I’m co-editing, with my colleague Sara cc’d here, a special issue for *Transformative Dialogues* stemming from the panel on SoTL as Transdisciplinary Inclusive Inquiry and Practice that we convened at the last ISSOTL – it consists of collaborative contributions developed through a dialogical methodology involving multiple rounds of conversations...

Your name and work [about the themes we’re exploring] keeps coming up in our conversations, and we’d love to invite you to co-author a piece ... if you can’t commit to being a co-author, which we’d totally understand, we’d still be immensely grateful for even just a little of your time in the form of a recorded interview/conversation, and/or any other options you might be interested in exploring with us!

Thanks for considering and all my best,

Anna

Michelle's Email Response to Anna

Thank you very much for this kind invitation! I would be very interested indeed.

... I'm also thinking about some current work I'm doing with Odd Rune Stalheim in Norway ... specifically about what hermeneutics as a methodology has to offer SoTL (which I think might be quite in line with where I think you are going with this issue)... Our process involves epistolary exchanges and has been intentionally dialogical in a hermeneutic process, so I really think this might be a perfect fit.

So all of that to say, I'm very interested... Thank you for thinking of me!

Michelle

When an invitation is sent and accepted, a dialogue begins—or rather, continues—along the road as we pick up threads of conversations generously gifted to us from others. In this case, we brought these threads forward with current and new companions in an email, a Zoom meeting, a letter—and then another, and another . . .

Michelle & Odd Rune: Here is the letter we have written to you, in response to your interest in the notion of dialogue and hermeneutics, which we have explored as part of our own letters in understanding how we've come to know in SoTL.

Dear Anna,

As Gadamer (1999) points out, letters “are an interesting intermediate phenomenon: a kind of written conversation that, as it were, stretches out the movement of talking...” (p. 369). For us, we found the affordances of the form - a letter to a new and dear friend - to be freeing, because we were able to explore our personal narratives, our theoretical understandings, and how this all relates to our experiences and being in the world in a form that allowed us to skip around as our thoughts came to us without constraint, but at the same time sit and dwell with the previous letter in order to answer.

For our purposes here, we are particularly interested in Gadamer's hermeneutics because of his interest in language. A very powerful aspect of Gadamer's hermeneutics is the notion of dialogue, where one must genuinely listen to the other and consider the possibility that that person is right. Hermeneutics is understanding that we are always experiencing others through our own lens of experience; it is never possible for it to be otherwise, for we are always-already oriented.

Gadamer (1999) wrote:

*We say that we “conduct” a conversation, but the more genuine a conversation is, the less its conduct lies within the will of either partner. Thus, a **genuine conversation is never the one that we wanted to conduct**. Rather, it is generally more correct to say that **we fall into conversation**, or even that we become involved in it. The way one word follows another, with the conversation taking its own twists*

and reaching its own conclusion, may well be conducted in some way, but the partners conversing are far less the leaders of it than the led. (p. 383)

We appreciate the opportunity to enter into this larger dialogic circle, and just as Gadamer suggests, we don't know where it will lead, but are open to its inherent possibilities.

As writers of this piece, we yearn for “genuine” conversation with our readers and yet have to acknowledge our responsibility to “conduct” a readable experience . . .

Anna: Dear Michelle and Odd Rune, this is giving me an idea of what an actual piece written in dialogical form might look like.... As I do this, I feel myself wanting to resist “bridling” our dialogue in a “static” form or asking what it will look like on paper/as a finished “product”, and yet I know that somehow we'll “need” to get there - as a reader, you don't “fall into conversation” the same way, do you -

How might we “fall into conversation” with you, dear reader? As we present our conversation's twists and turns, we are acutely aware that we're missing the perspectives and ideas that you would bring to the table; so here's our explicit invitation: If you want to jot down any thoughts occurring to you as you read, please do so and respond to this piece! We know our words are neither the first nor the last . . .

Michelle: Our conversation sent me deep into my files from my PhD, and it brought back memories of the ideas I was dwelling with and struggling with then. At the time I was thinking a lot about dialogue and pedagogy, sending me to philosophers of language. [...] Holquist explains that in Bakhtin's notion of dialogue, we are not to think of a bounded conversation. Rather language is a mass, or a tissue, of multiple meanings:

There is neither a first word nor a last word. The contexts of dialogue are without limit. They extend into the deepest past and the most distant future. Even meanings born in dialogues of the remotest past will never be finally grasped once and for all, for they will always be renewed in later dialogue. At any present moment of the dialogue there are great masses of forgotten meanings, but these will be recalled again at a given moment in the dialogues' later course when it will be given new life. For nothing is absolutely dead: every meaning will someday have its homecoming festival. (in Holquist, 1990, p. 39 - I am unsure if this is quote from Bakhtin himself, or an interpretation).

It seems to us that the limitless nature of dialogue thus conceptualized is particularly well exemplified in SoTL conversations. In fact, we suggest it is a defining element of SoTL's transformative potential: SoTL offers us recurring opportunities to critically engage with difference by encountering divergent perspectives in “a multi-disciplinary space where exchanges are possible in the form and shape of inter-disciplinary dialogue” (Cruz et al., 2024). Allowing

ourselves to fall into genuine conversation over and over with diverse partners in such a space expands our capacity for intersubjective interpretation and boundary-less exploration. Repeated exposure to dialogical engagement across difference in such fashion can agitate existing boundaries to the point of breaking them, thus creating the conditions for transformation; for example, disciplinary boundaries might get sufficiently agitated for transdisciplinary possibilities to emerge (Cruz et al., 2024). Dialogue thus conceptualized is the agitating factor allowing for intersubjective transformation along our learning journeys:

Odd Rune: In my previous exploration with Michelle, we discussed the idea of a dialogue as a journey where truth is exchanged. I wrote previously: *I think SoTL could have use of the hermeneutic dialogue as well as the awareness of our transformation we undergo when doing SoTL, and to reveal the dialogical journey (Smith, 1999). I would like to end this letter by referring to Merton (Smith, 1999) in the light of the conversations that hermeneutics offer, “If I give you my truth but do not receive your truth in return, then there can be no truth between us.”*

Michelle: Hermeneutics is interested in truth, but a certain kind of truth. Not one that is fully objective, nor one that is subjective, but rather one that builds an intersubjective understanding of the world. This process can occur between a reader and a text in the context of experience, but is never more alive than in a conversation between two or more people. I think the dialogic aspect of what this issue is working on in is exciting in this way, and I see it as a deeply hermeneutic process.

Our conversations highlighted how we bring understandings from our perspectives to our encounters with each other, and allow them to be transformed in dialogue with those brought by our colleagues. In such encounters ideas and voices interact and collide, generating dialogical micro-explosions through which something new is co-created.

Odd Rune: As researchers, we often collaborate in the written product of a study, and a struggle sometimes occurs in creating a unified text sounding like one voice communicating. Even though it is essential to bring forth knowledge in a unified and agreeable way, something might be missing in such a text. Is the «truth» right, and where have all the different perspectives gone?

Anna: I’m intrigued by how we have been discussing the notion and enactment of contributing to a co-created idea – it seems to me that in inquiry at its best, we want to hold two simultaneous truths: on one hand, we want to preserve individual voices, allowing the flourishing of the enrichingly unique perspectives they bring and recognizing them appropriately through authorship for example (Chick et al., 2021); yet at the same time, we believe in the sharing of generated ideas as community property – combating solitude, as SoTL has long championed (Shulman, 1993). How might these two ideas be connected, related, and/or in possible complementation/opposition with each other?

Michelle: You’re suggesting an apparent contradiction between the notion of preserving voices and entering into community, where ideas become community property. I think what I was trying to say was something about the affordances of

this letter writing - where each person can express themselves using their own unique voice, but in deep and extended dialogue with the Other. Through this dialogue then a third space is opened up. I think I was contrasting this, and the kind of paper you are proposing to write, with a more 'traditional' co-authored paper that appears to be written in one voice, despite having multiple authors. I wonder if in the necessary smoothing process something is lost. What I argue for here is not an individualistic perspective, but a multi-vocal one, where the dynamic of the dialogue as we have been exploring it is allowed to burst forth, creating new possibilities.

We champion SoTL as this third space, a dialogically relational encounter zone which values deep and extended dialogue with the Other, and where multi-vocal respect can be nurtured and sustained. We believe in SoTL as a scholarly community that centers dialogue itself as a valid, even necessary, form of scholarship.

Anna: I'd say it's safe to assume that those who feel a sense of belonging within a scholarly community tend to agree that scholarship is - or maybe should be? - a conversation (which, in fact, has been identified as a threshold concept in Information Literacy - American Library Association, 2015). While as scholars we probably all like to hope that we are indeed engaging in dialogue when we write, I think SoTL has a particularly explicit desire, and strong history, of doing so in practice.

Michelle: The notion of an academic discipline as an ongoing conversation is a familiar one, I think. However here in SoTL I think we are after something a little different, and this is related to your interest in transdisciplinarity. The nature of the conversation is somehow different than it would be amongst those who speak the same jargon and share a certain understanding of the topic. It seems to me part of what you are interested in is the way that SoTL needs a dialogue with more open rules for engaging, where participants are actively inclusive of others and make the effort to cross disciplinary divides.

Where voices are brought together by shared interdisciplinary dexterity, the common language through which we communicate is shared awareness of the fact itself that we speak different languages. This encounter zone destabilizes mono-disciplinary axioms and assumptions by demanding they be explicitly recognized and critiqued, thus unleashing the potential for transdisciplinary possibilities to emerge. We believe SoTL has transdisciplinary potential because and when it genuinely centers dialogically relational interpretation through and of a plurality of voices, experiences, and perspectives.

Dialogue as Liberatory Immediacy: Openness Towards Transdisciplinary Sharing

Anna: Dear Michelle & Odd Rune, I really appreciate this offer of yours, and will try to respond in similar fashion... to flesh out our ideas *on* dialogue and *in* dialogue! So, here is my (quite vulnerable ☺) offer of very-much-work-in-

progress writing; I am grateful for the opportunity to start drafting these thoughts of mine in the form of a letter to you, it has been very helpful for me.

Throughout our rapidly expanding exchanges, we did not merely aim to understand each other's meaning or interpret what we think the other must have meant and proceed on (Josselson, 2004); rather, we rejoiced in each other's perspectives as an opening to be explored further. As we read each other's letters and responded over and over in the virtual space of a Google doc, comments pinged in each other's email inboxes—"this really resonates, made me think of..."—allowing us to partially escape the linearity of the written word, while still affording us the reflective time to ponder in between our responses to highlighted portions of another's thoughts. Gadamer's definition of epistolary exchanges as "a kind of written conversation that, as it were, stretches out the movement of talking" (1999, p. 369) inspired us to take a step further and wonder about how the notifications pinging our inboxes compared to a colleague's knock on our office door, poking their head in: "Might you have a moment?" In their written form, the comment pings offered the invitation, but also benefited from a built-in stretching out: "I'm knocking, just know that I'm here *when* you'll have a moment..."—a dialogical invitation, for later . . .

Michelle: Dear Anna, thank you for your beautiful engagement through your letter. I so appreciate your thoughtfulness and the way you are dwelling with the idea of dialogue in SoTL. [...] Forgive me if these ideas are a little disjointed, I'm still thinking and in a more conversational vein I have just written down my thoughts as they are occurring, without careful refinement. But I wanted to get something to you before tomorrow!

Odd Rune: Thank you so much for letting me read your letter, allowing Michelle and me to continue our exploration of dialogue and to dig deeper into a (for me) new way of growing as a "sotler". I just found time to read your engaging and interesting letter and will respond shortly. Just wanted to let you know that I am on it and would love to keep the written conversation going.

Anna: Thanks Odd Rune, looking forward to your further thoughts! I'm very interested in how collaborative documents like this allow for extended stretching of dialogue in written form - for instance, I am fascinated by how much I often find I can express myself more "freely" in a comment, like this, rather than in text "proper" - ... how does a notification of comments/edits that pings in your inbox function/operate like a head that pops into your office? The other's call to see them, asking for your attention, inviting you into dialogue... this has potential for me -

Michelle: I like this, and your note that often the more authentic "voice" is found in the side comments. It reminds me of a study I was involved in once analyzing listserv exchanges between teacher candidates while in practicum, in which the most important text was often found not in the message, but in the P.S. at the end.

This key curiosity emerging from our dialogue revolves about the workings of dialogue as informal and oral transmission, particularly in SoTL. While transfer of knowledge through conversation may be common in many other fields as well, we find SoTLers' desire for and valuing of impact

in practice bestows to our field a particular degree of immediacy. We discovered ourselves highlighting this immediacy as a salient characteristic of SoTL conversations:

Anna: I'm particularly intrigued by how many things I can say have been transmitted to me orally. For example, it was through oral conversation that I learned from Peter Felten how he recalls Pat Hutchings and Mary Huber saying many years ago, at an ISSOTL conference, that some of the most influential SoTL may have never been published: "It's stories we tell each other, it is conversations we have at conferences and things like this that change people's minds or bend their practice or inform them in different ways. So I love the idea that I'm seeing in your work, of saying let's really focus on what is the nature of that - those conversations." (P. Felten, personal communication, August 2, 2023)

This meta-conversational insight brought us to wonder: What does the nature of orality, the willingness and desire to engage in live relational meaning-making, mean for us as SoTL practitioners? To what extent does it afford for more inclusive, permeable boundaries of what counts as scholarship, while at the same time also potentially excludes those who, for a variety of reasons, cannot participate in these exchanges as we have the privilege to do? What do you think, dear reader? What role do oral exchanges, opportunities to engage in live relational meaning-making such as conferences or meetings, play in how your experience "significant conversations and significant networks" (Roxå & Mårtensson, 2009) in SoTL communities? When and how do they nurture inclusive SoTL communities? When and how do they, on the contrary, create barriers?

Anna: Some Performance Studies (for an introduction, see Madison & Hamera, 2006) literature I was diving deep into during my PhD years might be helpful to explore the nature of SoTL conversations as live relational acts of meaning-making: "*Peggy Phelan (1993) identified in performance the ideal site of resistance against capitalist systems of production and re-production. [...] Performance constitutes the art form that most escapes finality in its intrinsically ephemeral and transient nature; it is therefore the most formative mode of knowledge creation that our students can engage with in order to reflect on the contingent and provisional nature of any knowledge.*" (Santucci, 2019, p. 111)

I am very interested in what is afforded, opened up, and/or blocked by oral forms of dialogue in their more transient nature - for example, in relation to what we have been discussing about liberation from the constraints of more formal academic language. Phelan's insights on resisting systems of re-production bears key connections to my concerns about our neoliberal academic contexts that perpetuate damagingly unhealthy glorification of prestige through patterns of competitiveness and unsustainable publication productivity. I'm also thinking about Diana Taylor (2003)'s articulation of how the "Archive", aka written documentation, has historically won in dominant discourse the hegemonic battle over the "Repertoire" by colonially discrediting and erasing oral and embodied ways of knowing. This deeply resonates with SoTL's decolonizing efforts to disrupt cognitive imperialism -

We thus found ourselves pondering about informal dialogue as an alternative, perhaps in some ways an antidote, to such glorification of prestige and production. Where that glorification often perpetuates potentially oppressive canonical traditions that reinforce the status quo, dialogue might open up possibilities for a more nurturing, holistic, even liberatory scholarly stance:

Odd Rune: Michelle and I have found that talking often has more inherent freedom as an informal way of expressing ourselves. The boundaries of the academic structure and written words are not present, and we find ourselves more relaxed, which can reveal more profound and immediate thoughts, like you mentioned Anna with someone poking through the door at your office and saying something clever. The poking through the doors resonates for me with the nature of a dialogue where I find our thoughts flow more naturally. We even see the comments function similarly to the poking at the door and how there is a distinct difference in how we express ourselves in comments versus a more formal style of writing. The comments allow us to be more direct and immediate in expressing ourselves. These are the reasons for our belief in dialogue as a method to enhance and broaden our exploration of SoTL as a transformative process. The pace of the dialogue is also beneficial, and the way it forms into a written script of our thinking, bouncing back and forth and picking up on the perspectives of the «other,» offering us a constant beginning without necessarily thinking or stressing the closure or conclusion of our exploration of the discussed phenomena.

Anna: The days in which my bold, aspirational self risks being pulled to the hard ground by my skeptical self that murmurs: “oh boy, that is a really complicated Pandora’s box that my beloved colleagues opened up with SoTL...” are usually the days in which I need to sit down in front of a blank page and write. The impostor syndrome ramps up, and the defeating sense that my written voice will never be compelling and thorough enough creeps up. Instead, there is something about the intrinsically ephemeral components of dialogical performance that allows me to breathe with more freedom when I converse with colleagues orally... As someone who often thinks in terms of theatre studies, the ability to pick up each other’s cues is something that immediately comes to mind.

In small but important ways, traits of informality and immediacy afforded by dialogue surfaced in our exchanges as a salient capacity of SoTL to disrupt rigid academic habits that monodisciplinarily gatekeep knowledge and expertise, imperialistically define what counts as evidence and flatten difference expecting others to acquiesce, and damagingly fester insecurity and intellectual isolationism. We glimpsed a possible SoTL path towards transdisciplinary dexterity that wedges in and centers the precious in-betweens by championing confidence in dialogical methods to seek intersubjective truth—reinforcing, yet again, our faith in dialogue as a valid, even necessary, form of scholarship:

Anna: In this sense, I find the notion of “Validity through Dialogue” articulated by ISSOTL’s first President Barbara Cambridge (2013) “not as a respite from traditional standards of scholarly work but as an alternative and valid way of engaging in scholarship and in deciding what and how to share with one another” (p. 21) a heartwarming shelter from our never-ending, sometimes exhausting! methodological debates in SoTL. In TLI’s inaugural issue, she encouraged the journal to “contribute to transformative change” by “engaging in reflective

openness, serving as an intermediary among diverse ideas and people, and adopting appropriate epistemologies” (p. 21) with bold, aspirational, disarming simplicity which really resonates with me.

SoTL has had to defend its legitimacy against those who see its broad epistemological spectrum and inclusive stance towards validity as lacking rigour (Canning & Masika, 2022). We interpret these criticisms as coming from narrow(er) disciplinary perspectives that consider the worldview paradigm(s) they espouse as the only viable option. Rather, SoTL embraces genuine dialogical engagement with difference at its very core, constantly keeping us on our intellectual feet: It refreshingly stimulates our positional self-awareness, and excitingly challenges us to step into the unfamiliar and explore the unknown.

Dialogically Exploring the Unknown: Transdisciplinary Becoming through Vulnerability

Anna: Sometimes I actually wonder if what attracts many of us to SoTL is maybe even a *desire* for ambiguity, for not-too-boringly clearly defined spaces; indeed, among the themes that emerged from our rounds of conversation towards the building of this special issue were notions of “valuing discomfort, liminality and uncertainty” -

Dear reader, as we think about you, we find ourselves speculating about what brought you to our piece. Maybe you’re a reader of *Transformative Dialogues*; and/or maybe you follow the work of one or more of the authors featured in this special issue; and/or maybe a keyword search for “dialogue” crossed with “SoTL” or “Teaching and Learning” brought you here, to this moment of encounter with us....

Anna: I’ve been trying to read up about the notion of dialogue as transformational from a SoTL perspective; this is something I have intuitively and intrinsically always valued in my journey as a Teaching & Learning scholar/practitioner, and indeed people do use the language of dialogue, conversationally so to speak, a lot in our field. But I have actually been surprised not to find much out there - So while the perspective of providing a comprehensive overview of the meaning of dialogue within “our field” feels absolutely daunting and not a task I would ever feel up to, I do think we might be onto something in exploring in more depth and detail how SoTL interactions function and operate as invitations into dialogue.

The most valuable pieces I found that helped my thinking forward, probably not surprisingly!, are both sort of meta-pieces on SoTL: one is Cambridge’s TLI piece on “Validity through Dialogue” (2013), and the other is Pellegrino et al.’s 2022 “Letter from the Editors” introducing IJSOTL 16.2. Noticing that many articles in that issue “are overt in their use of dialogue,” Pellegrino et al. (2022) briefly but explicitly ponder “about the use of dialogues within our discipline.” After offering an enjoyably playful dancing around how the topic might get tackled within several diverse disciplines, they conclude that “if we want to find common ground, we have to get more global” (p.1). The framework that they do choose as “more global,” by the way, comes from the context of conflict resolution, which I find

intriguingly fascinating in relation to our conversations about “intersubjective truth” and the need to consider the possibility that the other is right. I’m struck by how their seeking “common ground” for making sense of dialogical patterns in this multi-disciplinary field still leads them to unavoidably having to choose a camp, a framework, *something* to hang the rest of an argument onto. There is no escape to it, is there?

That may very well be one of the ways in which the interdisciplinarily dialogical space that SoTL invites us into sometimes becomes overwhelming—the quest for something “more global” is daunting, it pushes our boundaries by challenging us to imagine beyond, perhaps glimpse transdisciplinary possibilities . . .

Odd Rune: You mentioned something about ending up or sticking to a framework, which caught my interest. Even though we often look for patterns or find a way to structure our work or thoughts, sometimes living amidst uncertainty is essential for experiencing and exploring new horizons -

Anna: This really speaks to me; fields and spaces that embrace a principle of constant becoming make me feel intellectually at home, and my performance studies perspective certainly inevitably informs why and how this shapes my ways of identifying as part of SoTL...

Michelle: I am finding your introduction of the examples from Performance Studies to be very generative. I agree that I don’t think there is too much of an existing “proper” framework within SoTL for dialogue. But I’m loving how what you are talking about in theatre - picking up cues - is interacting with Gadamer’s ideas about how we fall into conversations rather than conduct them. I’m thinking about the old improvisation game that I’m sure you know well... “Yes, let’s.” When I took my theatre classes, we’d often warm up this way - someone saying something random like “let’s jump up and down on one foot!” and everyone would call out “Yes, let’s!” and do it. The idea is simple but profound - improvisation can only proceed if one actor accepts the “offers” of the other actors. And perhaps a good conversation, and any relationship between people, is the same.

Anna: I love how you're picking up on something I didn't quite write, but has been an integral part of my work! I recently had the pleasure to participate in a wonderful “book ensemble”, as our loving editor Luke calls us, about how improv’s power could help us transform higher education:

Emergent co-creation enacts improv’s democratic potential by unleashing human possibilities in powerful ways that move beyond understandings and applications of improv outside of its practice in the theater as merely fun ice-breaking activities and/or reductive concerns about its practicality or unwieldiness. Hence, we offer an approach that theorizes the transformative potential of emergent co-creation and suggest disruptive methods for doing so. This approach acknowledges, values, and builds on the practice of “Yes, and...”

[...] in four interrelated ways. We discuss, in turn, “Yes, and...” as relational curiosity, love through vulnerability, completion, and the dialectic of being/becoming (Holzman, 2014, 2017; Vygotsky, 1987). (Perone & Santucci, Manuscript in preparation)

Indeed I absolutely believe that improvisation provides a powerful lens to think about positively co-creative relational and dialogical interactions: genuine conversation means offering ourselves, and accepting the “offer” of the other; choosing to engage in such mutual relationship of shared vulnerability is a crucial act of trust.

It might be helpful to signpost here, dear reader, that this is a key thread emerging and woven throughout this special issue: McGowan, Woolmer and Santucci Leoni (2024) explore trust and vulnerability as a salient component of relationships in SoTL; Bunnell and McGowan (2024) also highlight shared vulnerability as an important element of a SoTL Welcome. What do you think? How do your dialogues and encounters in SoTL nurture trust?

Anna: What are the conditions for us to feel “safe enough” to trust and be vulnerable - to play, experiment, and explore? This is something I struggle with often in my work when thinking about how to facilitate spaces that are “safe enough” so that all participants may feel brave enough to step out of our comfort zones and engage in brave exploration. Coming from my inevitable perspective informed by intercultural communication, one of the things that fascinates me most about SoTL’s nature as a transdisciplinary space is that the kind of dialogue we are discussing provides crucial opportunities for intercultural development: in multidisciplinary communities and interdisciplinary conversations, we significantly exercise key intercultural skills such as perspectival flexibility, humility, openness, critical engagement with difference, curiosity, and tolerance for ambiguity. (Santucci, Manuscript in preparation)

These seem to us fundamental components for scholarly and collegial engagement in the quest of seeking intersubjective truth through genuine dialogue as we have been exploring it: considering the possibility that the other person is right, to return to Gadamer’s hermeneutics, implies an intellectual and interpersonal stance that not only accepts, but *values*, perspectival humility and shared vulnerability.

Odd Rune: So to reach new horizons, we might have to make the road by walking, referring to Freire and Horton (1990). In their introduction Formation is mentioned, which I find essential for both personal and academic development. The chapter highlights the connection between the men's biographies and the nature of their experiences and practice (Horton & Freire, 1990), which I think is one key to making a safe room for engaging with others. Showing who we are can be vulnerable in an academic setting, but bringing our life so to speak into the dialogue can open up doors for unexpected experiences and lay a foundation for further academic development. The dialogue values our personal experiences and forces us to reflect and be challenged, and by knowing each other better, the unexpected or what is underneath the iceberg could reveal itself. The dialogue could also serve

the purpose of self-discovery. Miller (1996) underscores the value of relationships and dialogues for enhancing identity and discovering self. He further refers to Buber and the notion of how we learn individually of both self and other through a process of interrelating (Miller, 1996, p. 134). A question of interest is how we connect this to SoTL and our community and the relevance of improving our scientific approach. Will not a greater understanding of the complexity of the world and the phenomena we study improve our work? And will we not look at our knowledge in teaching and learning differently when we listen and learn from the other? Taking a hermeneutic approach offers us an opportunity to pause and dig deeper and question our beliefs of the truth. Could different views and perspectives enrich our work and broaden our understanding? This will also maybe disarm our academic race and perfectionism.

Anna: I am captivated by our need to dig deeper into the notion of truth in SoTL; as we continue "making the SoTL road by walking", I feel a compelling need to protect and further the precious ways in which this field embraces, or can embrace at its best, diverse ways of knowing in its very essence. Championing "Validity through Dialogue," as Cambridge encouraged us to do a decade ago, means believing in the importance of protecting interdisciplinary respect and constantly seeking intersubjective engagement in our quest for truth. Might this dialogical piece we are co-creating here provide a "not-framework" (to harken our previous conversation about the inevitable limitations of any framework) for dialogue as brave engagement with the Other? . . .

Odd Rune: Miller refers to Taylor & Gutmann (1994) in his discussion about I and Thou in dialogues, and I find this quote quite fascinating:

The crucial feature of human life is its fundamentally dialogical character. We become full human agents, capable of understanding ourselves, and hence of defining our identity, through our acquisition of rich human languages of expression. For my purposes here, I want to take language in a broad sense, covering not only the words we speak, but also other modes of expression whereby we define ourselves, including the "languages" of art, of gesture, of love, and the like. But we learn these modes of expression through exchanges with others. People do not acquire the languages needed for self-definition on their own. . . . The genesis of the human mind is in this sense not monological, not something each person accomplishes on his or her own, but dialogical. (p. 32)

I find it especially interesting living in a time where individualism is quite valued, and have we forgotten the dialogical power in our eagerness to reach our academic career? Re-launching the idea of dialogue as a way to improve as teachers and learners, personally and academically, is noticeable.

Anna: Indeed, some of the literature I scouted about dialogue in T&L/Ed Dev spaces highlights its professional development value, for example in its application

for more holistic evaluation of teaching processes (Cruz et al., 2024) which makes great sense in the general context of SoTL as a pedagogy of Educational Development (Felten & Chick, 2018). Yet as I've shared I couldn't find much defining or otherwise digging into *what dialogue is and why it is so powerful* - I'm very excited about the ways we're trying to do so here!

Michelle: What we are doing here connects with the experience of flow - the back and forth between two or more people as a scene or conversation unfolds, where the interaction itself takes on a life of its own. I'm wondering then, if this might be an example of the kind of transdisciplinarity you're interested in - we want to talk about dialogue in SoTL, and two people bring a notion of dialogue from hermeneutics and educational research, while another brings in the notion of improvisation and reading cues... and this conversation between the people and the ideas generates a *new* understanding that wasn't possible before.

Anna: Indeed, I think of dialogue in SoTL as an agitator/disruptor/mobilizer force that has the power to "break" boundaries/silos/bonds (Cruz et al., 2024). Beyond a maybe more simplistic notion of these boundaries and bonds as merely defined in terms of disciplines, there is something I am trying to grasp towards that is about dialogue's transformative potential to enact an ethic of hospitality (Ruitenberg, 2011) in higher education by disrupting dominant neoliberal academic cultures which prize "being right" and reward individualistic, suprematist "calling out's" (Bennett, 2021) and gotcha's! Rather, SoTL's constant search for the next question to be asked positions its very own development as a field in the form of an invitation, a collective calling into dialogue of the Other that is yet to come - and thus makes that Other always-already part of the whole by doing so through intentional acts of relational hospitality (McGowan, Woolmer & Santucci Leoni, 2024).

Odd Rune: Unexpected encounters with people in SoTL have unknown possibilities. The interdisciplinary nature of people in SoTL is a foundation for fruitful collaboration across disciplines, cultures, and nationalities, as well as a personal engagement in a common interest that can enrich our work. In our unexpected and enlightened encounter, we explored the possibilities to enhance our perspectives of SoTL through a hermeneutic lens by using dialogue as a method. Our approach to exploring the meanings here resonates with Ricoeur's ideal of interpretation, which "unfolds, in front of the text, the 'world' which the text opens up and discloses" (Ricoeur, 1981, p. 111). According to Josselson (2004), Ricoeur underpins that hermeneutic aims to uncover a text's meaning, but unfolding the text's world may shed a great deal of light on the author's psychology as well. Through our dialogues, I believe that we are exploring each other's intended meanings and viewing them from another perspective through dialogical engagement in which such meanings point to other meanings and thus enlarge our vision of some aspect of human life. Through our process of dialogue, we might continually move toward self-clarification by unfolding our perception of the world in communication with others, gaining a new understanding and new opening

conclusions, slowly but steadily moving us forward in the SoTL world (Josselson, 2004).

Concluding by Opening: Inviting Our Readers Into Dialogue

Anna: Wondering about what our dialogue will look like as a “finished” piece is also making me think about the relationship between being goal-oriented (eg having clear learning outcomes for a session) whilst at the same time embracing the possibility that dialogical opportunities for conversation may take us to unexpected places, which is for me a key principle of good teaching that is both so important and challenging to live by in practice precisely because of its paradoxical nature. I feel this is true of any nurturing encounter, be it in a “typical” classroom or in a Teaching & Learning consultation; while discussing service as listening for our piece about Relational Hospitality (McGowan et al, 2024). Susannah described those moments of transformation that occur during consultations in similar terms: you never know where the conversation will take you, until something happens and you see the dialogical path forward emerge towards meaningful work and change; those conversations transfer into action and are reverberations of impact... I dare to believe that we are indeed with SoTL continuing to co-construct, day by day, a transformative space that is in constant emergence in its very nature.

Dear reader, this reconstructed rendition of our exchanges aimed to capture the fluid nature of dialogically relational meaning-making as a co-creative process of constant emergence that resists linear reproducibility. In its unpredictability lies a key reason why we see dialogue as a crucial element of how SoTL fosters transformative encounters across and through difference: embracing a dialogical relationship with a colleague means accepting the fundamental risk that we don’t know where the conversation might take us, and rejoicing in the inherently emergent possibilities. The wider the scope of the difference we encounter, the more dexterous we grow in our ability to value its potential.

No one knows in advance what will “come out” of a conversation. Understanding or its failure is like an event that happens to us. ... All this shows that a conversation has a spirit of its own, and that the language in which it is conducted bears its own truth within it—i.e., that it allows something to “emerge” which henceforth exists. (Gadamer 1999, p. 383)

Coming back around and closing the loop, we invite you to continue “falling into conversation” (Gadamer, 1999) with us and SoTL colleagues across the globe, and wonder together in “relational curiosity” (Perone & Santucci, Manuscript in preparation) what will emerge that will “henceforth exist.”

That is indeed a precious aspect of sharing one’s thoughts in a stable and replicable form: the inclusive opportunity for ideas to be accessed by more people than those we have the privilege to have direct dialogical access to in our “significant conversations” circles, our “significant networks” (Roxå & Mårtensson, 2009), which are at the same time so invaluable transformative to foster meaningful change in higher education, and yet also so riskily self-referential if their homogeneity is not intentionally questioned (McGowan, Woolmer & Santucci Leoni, 2024).

We have merely started asking some questions here, pointed at doors that feel exciting to possibly open. While the need to “conclude” this piece clashes with our desire to continue the conversation, as dialogue is never-finished in its very essence, let us find some solace in the hope that, rather than a closing, this may be an opening of future conversations to come as we all continue co-creating the SoTL road by walking, perhaps towards transdisciplinary futures, but certainly together.

Please stay in touch! 😊

Yours in dialogue, ever . . .

Anna, Michelle, and Odd Rune

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