

# **Converging Spaces? Re-Imagining the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) as the Subject of Transdisciplinary Research**

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## **Abstract**

From the big tent foundations that are a rich part of SoTL's story, this essay posits the desirability of creating transdisciplinary space(s) focused on the study of SoTL and what it might look like if the perspectives and approaches from SoTL scholars, educational developers, and higher education scholars converged on a shared research agenda or agendas.

## **Keywords**

transdisciplinarity, spatial theory, Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, Scholarship of Educational Development, Higher Education Studies

## **Introduction**

For this special issue on transdisciplinarity and SoTL, each of the contributing authors (myself included), who had been identified by the editors as leading SoTL experts, were asked to reflect on our own positionality within the larger dialogue. As it happens, that same semester, I found myself a participant (not the leader) in three different collaborative projects, with three different groups of scholars from three different positions within academia. Ostensibly, all three projects shared a common focus of their research: SoTL. In practice, however, the groups were quite divergent. Not only did they ask different questions about the same (or similar) phenomenon, but they also reflected different orientations to how those questions should be answered and by/for whom. While some of these differences are likely due to the individuals involved in each project, I could not help but feel as if I was continually navigating a contested space, between and among broader approaches to studying the phenomenon that is SoTL.

To further clarify, all three of the aforementioned projects were focused on the systematic study of SoTL as the subject of research, not the practice or production of SoTL itself. In other words, we were not studying teaching and learning, the focus of SoTL, but SoTL as a movement, a

community, and/or a body of scholarship. Even with this relatively narrow shared focus, however, I noticed that the members of the respective groups rarely cited the same literature, referred to the work of the same scholars, or used mutually recognized models/theories/frameworks. Indeed, my attempts at cross-pollination among the groups were met by a range of emotions that spanned from open curiosity to outright contempt. While some of the latter could perhaps be due to inadequate diplomacy on my part, I still find it somewhat uncomfortable that a field that aspires to embody a spirit of transdisciplinarity, as the other contributions in this special issue reflect, the field itself is being studied in such divergent, arguably at times fractured, ways. With the essay, I seek to illuminate points of divergence and convergence within these scholarly spaces in which this research is conducted, as I have experienced them, with the larger aspiration of advocating for the fostering of a transdisciplinary space, not just within SoTL (to which the remainder of this special issue is dedicated), but about the phenomenon known as SoTL.

Such a thought exercise is not simply an act of navel-gazing, either for me personally or the SoTL movement writ large. It is well known that modern academia has struggled to break free of the disciplinarity that has largely defined its historical existence. This despite increasing exhortations to do so, largely in the context of addressing increasingly complex global challenges that cannot be resolved through the lens of a single disciplinary perspective (Harris et al., 2010; Pohl et al., 2017). It seems likely that liminal fields, such as SoTL, which have emerged largely outside of these conventional boundaries, are more likely to generate potential alternatives to how knowledge can be constructed in ways that are intended to transcend and, to some extent, transgress current systems and structures (Bennett et al., 2016; Bolf-Beliveau, 2013; Gilpin & Liston, 2009; hooks, 1994; Knupsky & Caballero, 2022). If we are to continue to flourish as both a field of practice AND as a line of scholarly inquiry, it is both fitting and perhaps vital, I would argue, that we attempt to apply a similar “transdisciplinary imagination” to how we study ourselves.

### **Spaces for the Study of SoTL**

The use of the term “scholarly space” in the preceding paragraph mirrors the use of this term in postmodern theory (Duarte, 2017; Foucault & Rabinow, 1982), especially as it has been applied to personal identity in both SoTL (Simmons et al., 2013) and the scholarship of educational development (Little & Green, 2012). In this usage, practitioners are invited to locate their own positionality, most often in contrast to historical academic disciplines. For example, both SoTL scholars and educational developers have been described as occupying a “third” or “liminal” space, between and among other potential loci of identity within higher education (Bennett et al., 2016; Gravett & Bernhagen, 2015; Manathunga, 2006; Tremonte, 2012).

My use of the term “scholarly space” here shifts the emphasis from identity to knowledge construction (Turnbull, 1996), suggesting that there are spheres of influence, in which the way we conduct research in higher education is delineated and prescribed, not just within academic disciplines, but also for those fields, such as SoTL, that function outside of those circles. This conceptualization is based on the belief that all academic knowledge is socially constructed by a given scholarly community and that the operations of that community occupy a form of discursive space that, regardless of its actual form, exerts a powerful influence over both people and ideas that develop within it. In the following section, I delineate the three divergent scholarly spaces within which I found myself interacting that fateful semester (see introduction), each of which present a distinctive historical and epistemological relationship to the study of SoTL.

### **Scholarly Space One: The SoTL Commons**

In its early years, the scholarly space occupied by SoTL was described as a teaching commons, in which instructors from across academia come together to share their previously isolated, even invisible, pedagogical practice (Huber & Hutchings, 2005, 2006). It also acted as a sort of scholarship commons, as the nascent movement consisted of a handful of scholars who were highly dispersed across multiple institutions. The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching looked to bring these isolated scholars together and channel their collective efforts towards broader change through their CASTL cluster program and, eventually, as the foundation's direct support retreated, the ISSOTL conference itself (Huber, 2010), which, as Bunnell and McGowan (2024) argue elsewhere in this special issue, serves as the gateway into the broader community.

Many of these “generation zero” SoTL scholars (Bunnell et al., 2024) were recognized experts in their own disciplinary domains, perspectives which they lent towards a multidisciplinary body of research that not only included the study of teaching and learning practice but also a line of inquiry that Nancy Chick and Gary Poole have referred to as “Meta-SoTL” (Chick & Poole, 2014). Among other functions, meta-SoTL scholarship has served to delineate SoTL from related practices, such as scholarly teaching or evidence-based practice, as well as to articulate a set of transcendent beliefs and values, perhaps even a nascent epistemology, that have served to shape the field's identity (Schön, 1995).

By way of example, two recent articles, both published in ISSOTL's flagship journal *Teaching and Learning Inquiry*, have problematized the conventional relationship between SoTL and disciplinary forms of inquiry, suggesting that scholars should move beyond borrowing methods from academic disciplines and develop lines of inquiry that are native to SoTL itself. Drawing on research in folklore, Halpern (2023) argues that SoTL should increase the range of stories that it tells beyond what they characterize as a persistent redemption narrative. Löfgreen (2023) uses Habermas' concept of knowledge-constitutive interests to illuminate shared interests for SoTL scholars that are distinct from disciplinary-based educational research. And, of course, this entire special issue of *Transformative Dialogues* arose from a panel discussion on transdisciplinarity at the 2023 ISSOTL conference.

### **Scholarly Space Two: Scholarship of Educational Development (SoEd)**

The SoTL movement took on a different form as it became embedded within institutions. In this context, SoTL serves as a kind of lever of change, through which instructors learn through sustained and systematic reflection on their practice, so that it may be constructively transformed (Felten & Chick, 2018). In many (but certainly not all) institutions, this pedagogical function is provided through centers for teaching and learning (CTLs), or similar units, by increasingly professionalized practitioners who refer to themselves as educational developers.

In this scholarly space, the research agenda has tended to focus on assessing the learning outcomes of programs and initiatives that support SoTL (Cruz et al., 2022). Published in practitioner-oriented journals such as *To Improve the Academy* (TIA) and the *International Journal of Academic Development* (IJAD), this body of scholarship (sometimes referred to as the scholarship of educational development, or SoEd) is often locally grounded and process- (rather than product-) oriented (Cruz et al., under review; Geertsema, 2016). By way of examples, in a recent study, Sipes

et al. (2020) examine how a partnership between an educational developer, a librarian, and a media specialist contributed to the strengthening of a sense of broader SoTL community among faculty at their institution. Ulrich et al. (2023) not only document the outcomes of a SoTL seminar for participating faculty, but they also invited seminar participants to participate as co-researchers in the project itself.

As perhaps befits a scholarly space occupied largely by practitioners, this body of scholarship encompasses artifacts outside of traditional, peer-reviewed journal articles. For example, a group of educational developers from multiple institutions based in the U.S. state of Virginia have published a number of scholarly artifacts about their SoTL collaborations, including not just journal articles (Lukes et al., 2023), but also a series of heuristics to guide practice for others. Similarly, the Professional and Organizational Development (POD) Network, the leading professional organization for educational development in the United States, disseminates periodic guides, as well as a regular position paper series that may include topics related to support for SoTL.

### **Scholarly Space Three: (The Study of) Higher Education**

As the SoTL movement grew, it became increasingly evident that its next phase would need to integrate the ideals of its early years into the reality not just of the teaching practice of individual faculty, but also of institutional cultures. Boyer's *Scholarship Reconsidered* (1990), for example, was followed first by *Scholarship Assessed* (Glassick et al., 1997) and then by *The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Reconsidered* (Hutchings et al., 2011), the latter of which focused specifically on the institutionalization of SoTL. Framed this way, SoTL became a subject of interest for scholars in the established field of higher education studies, a subdivision within educational research, who have largely focused on organizational change related to SoTL, especially through centralized levers such as tenure and promotion policies (e.g., Gansemer-Topf et al., 2022). In this space, SoTL often serves less as the object of study in and of itself but rather as a tracer of larger challenges faced by universities of all types, including teaching transformation, the adoption of emergent forms of scholarship, and faculty workloads.

A widely cited report from the Higher Education Commission in the United Kingdom (Fanghanel et al., 2016), for example, merged support for SoTL with organizational theory, suggesting that teaching transformation will require change management at multiple levels of an institution and even higher education systems. Others have sought to strengthen the causal ties between SoTL and teaching transformation, such as Gansemer-Topf et al.'s (2023) recent study in which the researchers examined the complex relationship between formal support for SoTL and the culture of teaching at research institutions identified as having high-quality teaching. Numerous studies, too, have identified institutional and organizational barriers to SoTL adoption, including, but not limited to, troublesome relationships to disciplinary ways of knowing (Cornejo Happel & Song, 2020; Cruz et al., 2024; Manarin & Abrahamson, 2016).

### **Visualizing Space(s)**

I had briefly considered providing a Venn diagram of the three scholarly spaces described above, with the middle part of the diagram representing transdisciplinarity space. There are multiple issues with this conceptualization. First, such as diagram has the potential to reify boundaries that

are loose, permeable, adaptive, and dynamic. Secondly, it should be acknowledged that these spaces are defined to some extent by the communities that inhabit them, but these are not mutually exclusive communities—it is easily possible to belong to more than one scholarly space and/or to regularly traverse these spaces, as I found (and continue to find) myself doing quite regularly.

Nor is SoTL positioned similarly within the communities that regulate these spaces. There are educational developers, for example, who support SoTL but do not study it. There are mentors who support SoTL but are not affiliated with centers for teaching and learning. There are higher education researchers who have never heard of SoTL. Last, and perhaps most importantly, the center of a Venn diagram is the place where the three constituent circles overlap. As the opening article of this special issue clarifies (Cruz et al., 2024), overlapping perspectives could be described as cross-, multi-, perhaps even inter- disciplinary, but trans-disciplinarity only occurs when “new spaces are created in which [previous] ways of knowing are not abandoned or let go, rather, they were (arguably) never present in the first place (Chettiparamb, 2007).

### **Moving from Territories to Transdisciplinary Spaces**

When the SoTL movement first began, in many ways it comprised a single scholarly space, albeit one that was widely distributed and somewhat loosely coupled with other academic spaces and places. As the movement has grown, that space has not only gotten bigger, but it has also become more distinct. Indeed, postmodern theorists posit that there is a critical turning point from which discursive spaces transition into territories, or space which is owned by a particular group or community who have expended their labor to create and grow it (Raffestin, 2012).

For this reason, territories can provide important sites of belonging and identity; but they can also foster territorialization, or the solidification of dividing lines between spaces (Brown et al., 2005; Henkin et al., 2010). In the popular parlance of higher education (the sector, not the research field), these territories are often referred to (colloquially) as silos, whether between functional units (e.g., educational development and assessment [Flaherty & Cruz, in press]; student and academic affairs [Savoca et al., 2020]), professional roles (e.g., staff and faculty [Trust et al., 2017]), or academic disciplines/super-disciplines (e.g., STEM, humanities).

In the semester in which I navigated these three projects, one from each of the scholarly spaces described above, I experienced what felt like territorialization, to different degrees and in different ways, but to similar effects, regarding the study of SoTL (to reiterate, throughout this essay, I am not referring to SoTL work itself, but to the SoTL phenomenon as the subject of research). As mentioned in the introduction, I found that the members of the respective groups rarely cited the same literature, recognized work by the same scholars, or used mutually recognized models/theories/frameworks/methods. In each case, the work was organized differently, ranging from tight hierarchies to more open collaboration. Even the writing styles varied considerably, and, at times, I felt almost like a split personality, as I was writing about the same or similar phenomenon, but in very different ways.

There are some glimmers, however, of a growing (or perhaps resurgence) of convergent spaces, where the circles of my now-discarded Venn diagram have started to overlap, a crucial first step towards transdisciplinarity. I have shared a few of my own glimmers below, but please note that this list is intended to be suggestive, not exhaustive.

## **Advancing Equity**

Leading scholars within the contemporary SoTL movement have re-invigorated its critical lens, positioning SoTL as the voice of advocacy not only for the value of teaching and learning practice but also for epistemic justice within and across those practices (e.g., Chick, 2023). On one hand, this critical perspective is aimed at many of the prevalent norms in the current environment of neoliberal academia. In other words, it serves as a critique of higher education practice, but the focus on equity and the elimination of systematic biases within and across institutions gives the movement common ground with current directions in both higher education research and educational development practice.

The advancement of equity in SoTL includes broader representation from institutions (and scholars) outside the Global North, which has led to growing recognition that teaching, learning, and scholarship are sensitive to differences in context (Blair, 2014; Chng & Looker, 2013; Looker, 2018) and, by extension, critiques of the reality of SoTL's transdisciplinary aspirations (Hewson & Easton, 2022; Potter & Raffoul, 2023).

It seems to me that these emerging perspectives make for a potentially uneasy alignment with higher education studies, which, at least in the United States, are often nationally focused and social science-oriented. That said, they do share common ground with the integration of theories and frameworks used in critical studies, as well as the shared experience of external political scrutiny for their use. Implicit in the latter sentence is the recognition that an increasing number of U.S. institutions and, by extension, scholars and practitioners are constrained in their ability to pursue these topics by their respective state and local governments.

## **Lever(s) of Change**

In the field of educational development, leading scholars have argued that centers for teaching and learning need to “come in from the margins” and embrace their role as potential agents of institutional transformation (Beach et al., 2016; Schroeder, 2012; Wright, 2023). Rather than viewing their work primarily as the provision of isolated programs and services, this perspective positions educational developers to think across multiple levels of their respective institutions in order to effect change, including the integration of SoTL (Frake-Mistak et al., 2023). In other words, educational developers may need to learn to think on a scale that is familiar to higher education scholars; but higher education scholars may need to recognize that educational developers bring new kinds of levers to the table.

For example, Lukes et al. (2023) utilize this convergent approach in a multi-institutional study of SoTL programs. The authors find that communities of practice not only serve to transform teaching and learning practice, but also to foster a culture of continuous improvement that may extend to other aspects of academic work. Both educational developers (Myatt et al., 2018) and SoTL scholars (Frake-Mistak et al., 2023) have posited models that embed support for SoTL across multiple levels of an institution, from the micro (individual) to the macro (institution). In their study focused on VITAL (visiting, instructors, temporary, adjunct, and lecturers) faculty, higher education scholars Culver et al. (2023) interview CTL directors to underscore the significance of inclusive SoTL programming as a vehicle for developing and retaining this growing sector of the academic workforce.

## **Wicked Problems**

Leading voices in SoTL have increasingly recognized the “messiness” of teaching and learning in higher education (Schrum & Mårtensson, 2023). It is perhaps ironic that the more we study these activities through SoTL practice, through an increasingly wider array of lenses, the more we find ourselves moving not towards clear solutions, but rather more deeply embracing the depth, complexity, and ambiguity of these central constructs. From this basis, I ask that the reader accept the premise, most recently articulated by Randy Bass, that the challenge of student learning fits the definition of a so-called wicked, or super-complex, problem (2020). If so, then we can also expect that conventional problem-solving approaches, which are often embedded in academic disciplines, will not be sufficient to navigate this scholarly space effectively.

Rather, wicked challenges are sufficiently complex, by definition, that they overrun any conventional boundaries between knowledge or models of knowledge construction, suggesting that establishing ways forward would need to be done collaboratively, with shifting groups of participants who exhibit multiple epistemologies, or ways of looking at the world, coming together to construct new tools and perspectives for navigating these messy spaces. In this sense, scholars come together not under a big tent or at a family table, but rather as inhabitants of a shared, but largely unexplored and unfamiliar, place. Advancing the study of SoTL as a wicked phenomenon, then, requires the cultivation of a distinctive set of scholarly skills and dispositions, including intellectual humility, open collaboration, but perhaps most importantly, “a professional capacity for imagination” (Bass, 2020, p. 26).

As readers of this essay, you may have already exercised what Beyes & Holt (2020) refer to as topographical imagination, which focuses on understanding the work of organizations (or communities) in terms of performative spaces. Those who study such spaces, they argue, engage in a form of “space-writing” in which a scholar (or group of scholars) “gathers, surveys, maps, experiences and reimagines” the activities that occur within that space (p. 2). This form of scholarship shifts the emphasis from reaching a certain conclusion to ontologies of wayfinding, even outright wandering. In other words, it seems possible that the transdisciplinary study of SoTL could be conceived of not as a destination, but as an open and ongoing journey that we take in the company of others.

## **Further Considerations**

As the collective entries in this special issue attest, transdisciplinarity has long been one of the defining principles of SoTL work. When applied to educational development spaces, transdisciplinarity is evident in the design of programs such as multidisciplinary communities of practices, institutes, and fellowship programs. The same concept is also evident in the body of published research in SoTL, which incorporates a wide range of disciplinary and interdisciplinary methods and perspectives (often referred to as the “big tent”). It is less evident, however, in research on or about the SoTL phenomenon, a disconnect at the root of my recent experiences.

From the big tent foundations that are a rich part of SoTL’s story, this essay posits the desirability of creating a transdisciplinary space focused on the study of SoTL and what it might look like if the perspectives and approaches from SoTL scholars, educational developers, and higher education

scholars converged on a shared research agenda or agendas. In order for this to happen, however, I believe there are several open questions that would need to be considered.

### **Locus of Expertise**

The experience of working across all three of these spaces has profoundly humbled me. Until a year ago, I had considered myself highly experienced in two of the three spaces articulated above (SoTL and educational development), which are the primary foci of my current position as a research faculty member (and editor of this journal). I am, however, a relative newcomer to the third (higher education) which, at times, felt like starting over with a subject to which I have devoted most of my professional life. The feeling of being an impostor has been noted as a prevalent dynamic for SoTL practitioners (Kensington-Miller, 2022), but not necessarily for those who study SoTL itself. Transdisciplinarity approaches are likely to further complicate this stance.

As I see it, this begs the question not just of who we might call an expert but where the locus of expertise should lie. Would we expect participants in a nascent transdisciplinary agenda to have expertise across all three constituent domains? Or would a transdisciplinary body of expertise also emerge from these shared spaces, not unlike the relationship SoTL itself has historically held *vis-à-vis* academic disciplines? Rather than resting in a single individual, could expertise be shared through collaborative practice? Even if expertise could be suspended or redistributed this way, at least in my experience, the practice of scholarly co-creation itself is not recognized or valued equally across all three of these scholarly spaces. For the study of a complex phenomenon such as SoTL, the challenge does not lie just in what is studied and how it is studied, but also by the norms and practices of knowledge production itself.

### **Identities**

What does the fostering of a transdisciplinary space mean for the identities of the various domains (and the people who practice them)? As has already been acknowledged, there are already “plural personalities” in these spaces (Chick, 2013, p. 21), as many SoTL scholars are also educational developers and/or higher education scholars, and vice versa, who frequently traverse these scholarly spaces. That said, looking back to the movement’s early years, SoTL scholars spent considerable time and mental effort teasing out the distinctions between SoTL and educational research. Part of this distinction centered on SoTL as an integral part of classroom practice.

As SoTL has started reaching outside the classroom, however, this distinction starts to blur. In a recent commentary, higher education scholars Canning and Masika (2022) argued that the distinction is sufficiently blurry that it is no longer defensible. From their perspective, the notion of SoTL should be retired and the work of its practitioners brought back under the umbrella of higher education research. Similar arguments have been made for subsuming SoED under the broader umbrella of *either* SoTL or higher education (Clegg, 2012). With the abandonment of my Venn diagram, I have come to believe that it is possible for each domain to maintain separate identities while simultaneously navigating a shared transdisciplinary space, but this state of affairs adds layers of complexity and ambiguity that may prove challenging to navigate, especially for newcomers into this/these respective space(s).



Perhaps it could be argued that scholars from the three domains discussed in this essay are particularly well-suited to navigate these “messy” liminal spaces. Neither SoTL, nor educational development (Kek & Hammer, 2015) nor even higher education studies (Tight, 2020) are commonly characterized as formal academic disciplines, even amongst themselves. While the reasons for this are varied, it does mean that they share a similar positionality relative to the dominance of disciplines and disciplinary ways of knowing within academia. Indeed, scholars and practitioners in all three domains routinely work within and across other disciplines: arguably more so than most other fields of study. From my perspective, it does not seem like an implausible leap of imagination to move from cross-disciplinary practice to transdisciplinary research.

### **Audience**

The absence of disciplinary structure is not all these spaces have in common. At least in the United States, the higher education sector has fallen considerably in the eyes of public opinion, with persistent questions about its viability, relevance, and social value. While this state of affairs is unfortunate, it seems to have spurred interest in extending the audience for SoTL to include the broader community in which higher education is embedded (Chick & Friberg, 2023). Our scholarly spaces, you could say, are potentially transforming into public spheres (to borrow language from Habermas). This interest in the broader context may be old news for higher education scholars, but it presents a bigger leap, perhaps, for those whose primary orientations are more local.

Seen from this perspective, I agree with Tight (2020) that the wider public is likely unconcerned with nuanced philosophical differences between closely related academic fields of study or practice, such as those between SoTL, educational development, and (the study of) higher education. Rather, I hold out for the possibility that a new audience for SoTL may serve as a catalyst for increasing collaboration, and potentially new forms of communication, both within and across the scholarly spaces articulated in this essay, that will not only enrich the study of SoTL, but also expand our collective capacity to advocate for the value of advanced teaching and learning. To embark on this journey, those of us who regularly navigate these scholarly spaces (myself included) will need to suspend our prior judgements, open up our imaginations, and have the courage to take small steps, maybe even giant leaps, into this transdisciplinary *terra incognita*.

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