

SoTL Difference:

The Value of Incorporating SoTL into Librarian Professional Development

Peter Felten, Margy MacMillan, and Joan Ruelle

This essay is the product of a collaboration between three authors who bring diverse understandings of SoTL, librarianship, and professional development. Writing this has been a form of professional development, encouraging the authors to think more deeply about discipline-based practices and how they connect to student learning, increasing understanding of each other's disciplines, and transforming that joint reflection into work that may impact teaching.

Introduction

The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) is by definition a form of professional development. In one of the first articles published on SoTL, Shulman¹ emphasized a “pragmatic” rationale for this form of inquiry: “By engaging in purposive reflection, documentation, assessment and analysis of teaching and learning, and doing so in a more public and accessible manner, we not only support the improvement of our own teaching” but we also contribute to a community of scholarly teachers. Put another way, SoTL always aims both to enhance individual practice and to contribute to the broader “teaching commons.”²

The purposes of SoTL are clear, even though a canonical definition of SoTL does not exist.³ That's not entirely surprising since SoTL is an applied form of scholarship that tends to take on the distinct “disciplinary styles” of its practitioners and has been adapted to a diverse set of “domains” around the world.⁴ A historian doing SoTL at a US community college likely will—and probably should—ask different questions and use different research methodologies than a psychologist or a chemist—or a librarian—at a South African

research university. In an effort to make room in the “big tent” of SoTL for this variation, in 2011, three scholars at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching crafted an expansive frame for this emerging field:

The scholarship of teaching and learning encompasses a broad set of practices that engage teachers in looking closely and critically at student learning for the purpose of improving their own courses and programs. It is perhaps best understood as an approach that marries scholarly inquiry to any of the intellectual tasks that comprise the work of teaching.⁵

Echoing Shulman, this definition reinforces the connection between SoTL and professional development. This link now routinely appears in the literature. Educational developers around the world have critically analyzed the alignment between their field and SoTL.⁶ And a recent major study by educational researchers took as a foundational premise that “faculty development, understood in the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) sense, offers teaching faculty opportunities to learn new approaches, technologies, and more.”⁷ In short, SoTL is not a well-defined “thing” but its fundamental purpose is the improvement of teaching and learning; SoTL, thus, is at its core an approach to professional development for all those who teach in higher education, regardless of the setting.

Not all professional development, however, is SoTL; instead, SoTL enacts a distinctly scholarly approach to professional development. As such, SoTL-informed professional development reflects the essential criteria for any scholarly activity:⁸

1. clear goals—the activity has explicit and clear purposes;
2. adequate preparation—the activity draws on relevant scholarship and expertise;
3. appropriate methods—the activity is conducted in ways that align its goals and context, and that reflect good practice in the field;
4. significant results—the activity makes (or aims to make) a meaningful contribution to an area of study or practice;
5. effective presentation—the purposes, methods, and results of the activity are shared with appropriate audiences; and
6. reflective critique—those involved in the activity assess their experiences and outcomes to inform future action.

Scholarly professional development should embody these criteria, but they are not a simple recipe for individual action or strategic programming. Instead, these sketch the outlines of what scholarly professional development might be, leaving plenty of room for variation to reflect the local contexts and the particular needs of individuals and groups involved in this work.

Even within this diversity of practices and contexts, a growing body of evidence suggests that SoTL contributes to improved teaching and learning—that SoTL is an efficacious approach to professional development. Uncovering and documenting this connection has

been vexing because it requires establishing a causal chain between SoTL, teaching practices, and student learning. Leading scholars have vigorously debated whether and how SoTL can be proven to yield enhanced student learning, as some see a compelling case⁹ and others are more cautious.¹⁰ Significantly, a recent longitudinal mixed-methods study at Carleton College and Washington State University provides rich and compelling evidence that engaging in SoTL-framed professional development contributes to significantly enhanced learning for undergraduates.¹¹ In short, research demonstrates that SoTL leads to positive changes in teaching behaviors and that these changes likely contribute to deepened student learning. This marks SoTL as an evidence-based approach to professional development for everyone who teaches in academic settings.

Finding a Way into SoTL

If SoTL sounds familiar to librarians, it should. As Cara Bradley noted in 2009, “The SoTL movement slightly reframes, but in large part reaffirms and validates, the type of research that many librarians already do.”¹² A parallel statement could easily be made about SoTL reaffirming and validating but also reframing the kinds of professional development librarians already do. While methods of teaching and research are discussed in library conference sessions, countless articles, and an increasing number of webinars, MOOCs and other online learning opportunities that librarians count as professional development, SoTL adds layers of depth and breadth. SoTL provides opportunities to deepen understanding, practice, and contributions to higher education through prompting reflection, opening up new questions, and requiring librarians to explain themselves beyond the narrow confines of library literature. SoTL encourages librarians to broaden their horizons, their networks, and their concepts of teaching, learning, and research—and in so doing, to widen their sphere of influence.

Engaging in SoTL also leads inevitably to professional development for librarians. Whether reading or hearing about SoTL research, collecting materials to support it, or conducting it as a solo or collaborative activity, SoTL requires learning—exploring new methodologies, new literatures, and making new connections within and beyond the library, the institution, and existing personal networks. And while the most obvious connections between SoTL and librarianship may arise from information literacy work, the broader understanding of learners and learning that SoTL encourages can encompass all aspects of library operations from facilities design to policies, usability to staff training, and work in partnership with other campus units. Following Hutchings, Huber, and Ciccone,¹³ SoTL encompasses the broad set of practices that engage librarians in any of the intellectual tasks that comprise the work of librarians in supporting learning.

Opportunities for librarians to engage SoTL as professional development can arise from multiple entry points such as existing interpersonal relationships, liaison roles with academic departments, formal and informal communities of practice, and reading the literature. Just as there is no single right way to do SoTL as a librarian, there also is no need to take extensive training before jumping in, nor is there only one way to begin engaging

in SoTL. As a first step, however, it is useful to find out who is doing what with SoTL on campus. Librarians can look to their institution's teaching center or at faculty development opportunities around innovative pedagogy, higher education programs, and schools of education; in fact, most of the case studies in this section involved the campus center for teaching and learning as a resource or as a site for participation in SoTL. Librarians can leave the safe confines of the library, attend presentations about SoTL on campus, even (and especially) if they are the only librarian to do so. Not only will they learn more about SoTL but colleagues who did not expect their presence may gain a deeper understanding of the ways that librarians teach and the stake they have in student learning. Librarians can determine who is doing SoTL on campus, then engage these colleagues in conversation about their teaching just as liaisons do about research; at a minimum, they will appreciate the interest in their work, and these connections may develop into opportunities for future collaboration.

SoTL can be a solo pursuit, and often starts out that way as with any exploration of new domains. However, SoTL also benefits from collaboration, whether through communities of practice within the library where SoTL can provide a lens to study practices and innovations, such as the ACRL *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education*, or through conversations on Twitter with colleagues in faraway places who have similar interests. SoTL can provide a common language for these discussions and can also offer some epistemological distance from previous research or contentious positions, moving consideration beyond the library and into a broader arena of efforts to improve teaching and learning. Reading and discussing SoTL literature in order to apply it to library contexts exposes participants in such groups to different perspectives on issues that impact learning, potentially leading to less defensive discussions. There are several examples in this section and in the literature of library-based communities of practice that effectively applied a SoTL lens to the ACRL *Framework*, moving past debates within the profession to wider considerations of learning. For instance, DeFrain, Delserone, Lorang, Riehle, and Anaya provide a rich example of this in their case study. In their library-based community of practice, they developed a shared understanding of key learning bottlenecks, which led to collaborative SoTL research projects, the results of which fed back into the group's discussions and enriched understanding across the community. Other case studies in this section detail additional approaches to and benefits from using the Community of Practice theory and model. In some, like Fyn and Shinaberger's, Kirker's, and Laverty and Saleh's, the library participants become the learners studied in a SoTL project, a rewarding area for further research.

The most obvious benefit of engaging with SoTL as professional development is participation in wider communities of practice beyond the library. It quickly becomes apparent that librarians are not the only members of the academy who feel underprepared by their formal education for the teaching that is a regular part of their work (see the case studies by Durham, Hess, and Fyn and Shinaberger as examples). Nor are they the only ones who want to engage more deeply in scholarly teaching, in bringing theory to bear on practice. Participating in SoTL discussions, workshops, or research as a learner alongside

others in the institution allows librarians to see and be seen as equally committed partners in advancing student learning. In their case study, Weeks and Johnson highlight this benefit both to the librarians, who learn more about disciplinary approaches to teaching by participating in these communities, and to the institutional colleagues who gain insights into library work and the strengths librarians can bring. This, in turn, can foster more integrated working relationships through which the library may gain a higher profile. Teaching faculty who learn about library teaching through collaborative partnerships and participation in communities of practice may be far better positioned to speak to the teaching impact of libraries than librarians themselves. In an environment where decision-makers may question the continuing relevance of libraries, developing meaningful connections across the institution and contributing more visibly to local and international understandings of student learning isn't just a benefit, it may be a requirement for survival.

The library also gains from knowledge brought back from these wider discussions or readings. Roxå, Mårtensson, and Alveteg¹⁴ describe this as cluster-to-cluster communication, critical for enhancing teaching cultures on campus. While they acknowledge the usefulness of “brokers”—peripheral participants who serve as conduits between clusters of professionals—they highlight the need for “practitioners with the interest and the capacity to do so from the centre of one cluster to the centre of another.” Librarians involved in SoTL communities serve as bridges to the center of librarian communities in institutions, associations, or interest groups to strengthen mutual understanding. They contribute not just to the professional development of individual librarians but to the development of the profession itself. SoTL offers a rich network of connections across the academy and affirms teaching as a scholarly endeavor. The case study by Hess demonstrates how transformative this kind of role can be for both the library and broader campus supports for teaching. Seeing librarians active within SoTL reframes the profession's authentic scholarship as a contribution not just to libraries but to student learning—a fundamental purpose of higher education—in a way that librarians rarely recognize their own work.

Exploring the literature of SOTL through reading and collection development also provides opportunities to reframe professional development in promising ways. The case study by Cobolet, Grolimund, Hardebolle, Isaac, Panes, and Salamin alludes to the value of engaging with the wide array of literature about teaching that exists beyond library publications. Becoming familiar with SoTL, like any new liaison area, requires understanding how and where it is disseminated and accessed. Librarians' understanding of international publishing patterns and other aspects of scholarly communication can support SoTL work on campus by highlighting ways into the work for disciplinary specialists, illuminating gaps in the literature that suggest opportunities for future research and identifying potential venues for publication. Weeks and Johnson describe a SoTL project around rebuilding a course using open access resources in their case study, another area where librarians have much to contribute. SoTL research is widely dispersed through disciplinary and SoTL-based publications as well as on institutional websites and other online “gray literature” sites, making it a pleasantly challenging field to collect. Many new SoTL scholars (and, indeed, many experienced ones) are often less aware of the SoTL literature than that of

their home disciplines, so librarians have a lot to offer in developing and promoting strong collections that support work on understanding learning within and across the disciplines. Through becoming members of SoTL communities, librarians can inform and strengthen SoTL work by deepening the relationship between research and the literature, developing greater familiarity with how other faculty conduct research inside and outside their home disciplines. In Durham's case study, she notes the range of ways into SoTL afforded by the literature, webinars, and a variety of formal and informal learning opportunities. Similarly, Cobolet et al. recount how a role supporting a journal group became a venue for much deeper library participation in campus SoTL initiatives.

The reliance on cross-disciplinary conversations is one of the critical differences between SoTL as professional development and most library scholarship. While some SoTL work, like information literacy (IL) research, is conceived of and disseminated for disciplinary insiders, much of it is developed to be communicated in the what Huber and Morreale¹⁵ described as a "trading zone," with a focus on what will be useful for educators in multiple contexts. SoTL becomes a sort of common second language for many of its practitioners, a tool for exploring and understanding underlying similarities in teaching and learning concepts separate from the confusion of different disciplinary terms. This communication also demands a greater explanation, both what Huber and Hutchings¹⁶ would call "thick description of context" and greater attention to explaining the rationale behind different ways of teaching and understandings of learning. All of this can make SoTL literature more accessible to readers new to the field. In writing up the results of SoTL, the requirement for thick descriptions has the added value of requiring librarians to articulate their own underlying assumptions and test them with a non-expert audience. Thinking through and decoding teaching motivations and processes, the rationale for the decisions made in teaching and how those decisions affect learning, is useful professional development in its own right.

Of course, reading the SoTL literature may also lead to further professional development as librarians integrate findings from research in non-library teaching into their own library practice. Doing so requires at the very least a deeper consideration of other teaching environments and may entail learning new teaching skills, developing alternative assessment methods, and integrating new technologies. The results of such changes may also spark SoTL investigations, but engaging in SoTL does not necessarily mean carrying out original research. Professional development rewards accrue from the time librarians start noticing the generative conversations SoTL provokes.

If a librarian does decide to take on a SoTL inquiry, professional development opportunities arise from asking new kinds of questions, exploring new ways of finding and analyzing evidence, and disseminating work to audiences beyond librarians. SoTL welcomes research that uses a wide variety of methodologies from close reading to statistical analysis and examines teaching and learning in a wide range of settings, including libraries. Librarians who present at SoTL conferences report feeling very much at home, and their sessions and posters attract attention from those who teach across the academy.¹⁷ Librarians in many contexts are conducting SoTL investigations either on their own or in

partnership with faculty outside of the library, and several of the case studies in this section provide evidence of the benefits of this work, both in terms of contributing to knowledge and improving learning and also in terms of developing collaborative relationships across institutions.

Reframing SoTL as Library Professional Development

Peter Felten, one of the authors of this essay, has developed “5 Principles of Good Practice in SoTL” that may help distinguish SoTL from other approaches to teaching, learning, and professional development. SoTL,¹⁸ he suggests, has five essential characteristics:

- Inquiry focused on student learning
- Grounded in context
- Methodologically sound
- Conducted in partnership with students
- Appropriately public

Each of these characteristics carries with it opportunities for librarian professional development. Considering a focus on student learning brings requirements for understanding forms of evidence and deeper insights into what learning is, how it looks, and how all the attendant factors beyond what the teacher is doing may affect it. To be grounded in context requires the researcher to understand more deeply the environment in which they teach and the learners with whom they work, uncovering the factors that make learning in this situation unique and those transferable to or from the settings of other studies. To do work that is methodologically sound may require deeper engagement with familiar methods, or an exploration of new methods, and a clear understanding of how they align with research questions.¹⁹ To truly work in partnership with students may provide some of the greatest opportunities for professional development and engage some aspects of critical practice as researchers negotiate power dynamics and ethics in developing questions, methods, and dissemination that considers the students as those to practice research *with* rather than *on*.²⁰ Finally, making work appropriately public, as Durham notes in her case study, may stretch skills in new directions and engage librarians with unfamiliar discourses in disciplinary conferences, student-facing blogs and reports to audiences beyond librarianship. In any mode, librarians must consider what they need to decode for non-librarian audiences, a highly productive form of reflection. Below are three examples of what library SoTL projects could look like and the kinds of professional development they might lead to.

- A liaison librarian who has a longstanding partnership with a faculty member senses that their comfortable groove has become a rut. After discussing their ideas at a SoTL community of practice meeting and gaining several ideas from peers, they investigate the transfer of learning from the workshop to the assignment by asking students to complete a research log, reflecting on specific prompts as they complete their major research assignment. The first prompt asks students to describe their

approach to finding information for their everyday activities, to assist the researchers in understanding more about this particular group of students. The final reflection prompt asks students to describe a research project they would commission from the librarian or faculty member about how students use information. The reflections aim to illuminate several bottlenecks in learning that will inform teaching in subsequent iterations of the course and could be the subject of future studies. The researchers schedule follow-up focus groups led by a senior student, asking what students recalled and used from the workshop, and what, if anything, they transferred to work in other classes. The researchers also analyze the students' coursework using grounded theory and close reading to see what markers they could establish that linked the processes outlined in the research logs in the final products. The librarian, the faculty member, and the student research partner present their findings informally to the student participants over a voluntary coffee and doughnuts meeting, at a workshop during the library faculty professional development day, and at a SoTL conference. For this presentation, they meticulously write up the assignments and activities in the class as well and develop a demographic profile of the students to ground the study in context; in doing so, using data from the study, they discovered opportunities to improve the flow of the course through better scaffolding of the activities.

- The librarian develops greater familiarity with IRB protocols, qualitative methods, designing effective prompts for reflection, research partnerships, writing for publication in SoTL journals, and using social media for wider dissemination, including hosting a Twitter chat.
- A library dean is seeking greater collaboration with other campus academic units to support student success, particularly the writing center, a math tutoring lab, and career services, all of which are now located in a new building with the library. Her key questions focus on what differences students perceive between these supports, what they expect from them in terms of impact on learning, and what they see as the costs and benefits to learning associated with asking for help from these personnel; for instance, is there any stigma attached to asking for help with writing or math? She develops a collaborative study involving personnel from the library and the other areas. Groups of students in each year of study are surveyed electronically about their awareness and use of each campus service to get a large-scale view of issues and sentiment. The survey includes two free response questions for each support area: Who do you think benefits from the service? How does the service impact learning? Data from the survey is supplemented by having trained students interview a representative sample of students to identify patterns in perceptions, barriers, and motivations. Results are disseminated through infographics at each service

point, in meetings with every level of university administration, during workshops with faculty and staff, in new student orientation materials, and in presentations at national conferences. Results also are used to inform marketing efforts aimed to influence student perceptions of both academic help-seeking behaviors and the services of each academic support unit. All of the research partners enhance their skills in survey development, statistical analysis, ethical research, interviewing, and dissemination—and a stronger community is created among the various units and people who work in the new building.

- A librarian wonders why students have trouble with generating synonyms to use in a search. He reads SoTL work on vocabulary building, tries something new in class, documents how students employ the new approaches he has taught, and tells his colleagues about the results. In this simple case, the librarian gains familiarity with SoTL literature, experiments with a new teaching method, and better understands student search behaviors. He also serves as something of a role model for his peers who may now develop their own SoTL inquiries, and his new knowledge contributes to improved teaching across the library.

Conclusion

In the early publication on SoTL introduced at the beginning of this chapter, Shulman²¹ asked a fundamental question: *Why* are we doing SoTL at all? He reminded his readers that they already were plenty busy and already should be engaged in professional development. Academic librarians are familiar with calls to do more with less, to better demonstrate the value librarians contribute to institutions, to respond to existential threats raised by claims that libraries are no longer necessary, to constantly stay current through engaging in multiple forms of library-focused professional development, and to continue to be engaged scholars and contributors to the profession. So why should librarians make the extra effort to be active in SoTL?

Shulman argued—and the authors of this chapter agree—that SoTL *deepens* individual efforts and *connects* professional development to a broader teaching commons. SoTL improves teaching on a day-to-day basis, whether it be for-credit classes, one-shot instruction sessions, ongoing collaborations with teaching faculty or the one-to-one teaching in research consultations. SoTL also deepens what professional development means for librarians. In librarianship, professional development is often understood as development of the individual professional (through participation in webinars, trainings, and professional societies). Through collaborations, communities of practice, and the literature, the common language of SoTL integrates library-based teaching more firmly into the wider discussions in higher education, building stronger communities among librarians while simultaneously raising librarians' profile as teachers and scholars even as it deepens their practice.

It can be difficult sometimes for librarians to justify the time, or, in some cases, funding, for professional development that does not carry an explicit library connection. If it is necessary to make the case to oneself or to administrators, SoTL provides a pathway to explicitly connect library teaching to student learning in a way that may be both understood and valued by faculty colleagues and administration across the institution. That pathway serves the development of both the individual professional and the profession as a whole. It embeds librarians' work within scholarly networks and communities that connect individual efforts to the long-term aspirations of libraries and higher education to transform students through better understanding of how they learn.

ENDNOTES

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