“A SoTL Mindset: Paying Attention to What We Don’t (Yet) Know”

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My understanding of the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) has been shaped largely by the places where I’ve lived and worked. In three decades of observing SoTL in action, I have participated in and facilitated workshops, listened to and delivered talks, and engaged in numerous conversations and consultations with colleagues across a range of disciplines, career stages, identities, institution types, and locations. Most of these experiences have been within the United States and Canada, so since SoTL is a global field, I’ve tried to complement these experiences beyond my home contexts. I’ve read voraciously, reviewed submissions for journals, conferences, and publishers, and analyzed hundreds of peer reviews for a major international SoTL journal and conference.

Yet my experiences with the International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (ISSOTL)—serving in various capacities on its Board of Directors and committees since 2004, co-founding and co-editing its journal for ten years, attending its annual conferences, and participating as an active member—have reminded me time and again that, because of my social, professional, and geographical position, my perspective is and will always be limited, despite my efforts to develop a broader understanding of SoTL understanding.

An example of this trying was inspired by Sarah Bunnell, who—in her capacity as ISSOTL President in 2021–22—invited Board members to form a reading group to study SoTL publications from around the world. Each of us read and shared articles from a different world region, and I chose South America.[1] Since then, I’ve expanded my reading to keep up with *SoTL in the South,* the journal about SoTL in the global south that launched in September 2017, and now look forward to doing the same with *SoTL Africa*. Through this part of my reading practice, I hope to engage seriously with specific articles and the particular and varied contexts they describe, and to better understand what SoTL looks like in these contexts. I recognize that insights based solely on published scholarship within one or two journals will remain incomplete, but I also believe that the only way to grow as a scholar and colleague is to try to name the gaps in my understanding and begin to close them—however imperfectly.

In their 2024 article, Prozesky and Ferreira helped me name this approach. Drawing on Mellor (2022) and Santos (2014), they describe “epistemic responsibility” as a stance that strives “striv[es] to remain critically reflexive about our privilege . . . within the colonial university as placing on us an ethical duty to keep moving” by “educat[ing] ourselves about non-dominant epistemologies and repertoires, not with the aim of ‘explaining’ and so recolonising them, but rather discussing them alongside dominant and disciplinary knowledges as ‘part of an ecology of knowledges’” (p. 72). Their framing resonates deeply with me. It affirms that learning from contexts outside my own is more than an intellectual project: it’s an ethical one. And so, I keep moving. In this invited essay in the inaugural issue of *SoTL Africa*, I’ll describe a very small part of this effort to educate myself within an “ecology of knowledges.”

It’s also helpful for me to be explicit here about my theoretical orientation to diversity and difference. I’ve long been inspired by McLaren’s 1995 framework for explaining engagement with difference. He identifies four frames: conservative (which promotes assimilation to a dominant norm), liberal (which claims equality but ignores underlying hierarchies of power and privilege), left-liberal (which

emphasizes static, essential group boundaries), and critical (which explores the complex interplay of history, culture, power, and ideology). Aligned with the critical perspective, I work to take seriously the role of identity, context, and experience (Chick 2013).

Five Key Moves of Thinking, Doing, and Being in SoTL Spaces

Across many of my different experiences, including reading widely, I've observed five moves that manifest—either implicitly or explicitly—in a range of contexts: contextualizing, embracing complexity, pedagogical humility, multidisciplinary thinking, and collegiality (Chick 2023; Chick, Felten, & Mårtensson, 2025). Individually, each is important and not surprising. Collectively, they can become an integrative mindset that guides intentional *thinking*, *doing*, and *being* in SoTL. (See Figure 1.)

Figure 1. The Five Key Moves of a SoTL Mindset

I started thinking of them in this way while reflecting on the two most enduring metaphors that shape how we understand the field of SoTL as both diverse and accessible: the "big tent" (Huber and Hutchings, 2005, p. 4) and the "trading zone" (Huber and Morreale, 2002, p. 73). In these spaces, we see that SoTL requires more than research skills alone. It calls for an orientation that helps us navigate difference with care, make sense of the unfamiliar without oversimplifying it, and conceive of and conduct inquiry that is both situated and generous.

Below, I'll briefly explain what I mean by each move, and then I'll share how they helped me think about what I was reading in *SoTL in the South* within my broader understanding of the field of SoTL.

Contextualizing

SoTL is never generic, and context isn't a backdrop: it is the terrain on which SoTL unfolds. Every project exists within a particular set of conditions—disciplinary, institutional, geographic, demographic, and historical. This means we name those conditions and take them seriously as part of our inquiry, a move that grounds us in the specific and resists the pull toward universal claims.

This move is the enactment of what I've learned from Looker (2011, 2018), Chng and Looker (2013), Blair (2013), and Chng, Leibowitz, and Mårtensson (2020), among others.

Pedagogical Humility

At the heart of SoTL is a willingness to admit that we don't know everything about teaching and learning, particularly in our own practice. We acknowledge that our teaching—no matter how thoughtful—doesn't automatically lead to learning, and that our experience and expertise don't always give us accurate insights into what students know, feel, or need. In SoTL, we ask questions not because we are certain, but because we are curious, open to being surprised, and aware of the limitations of our understanding. Pedagogical humility is a deeply epistemological and inquiry-driven disposition for authentic questioning, being surprised by evidence, and changing course accordingly.

This move is the enactment of what I've learned from Skorczewski (2000), Meyer and Land (2005), Fallon (2006), Poole (2018), and Gauthier (2025), to name a few.

Embracing Complexity

Teaching and learning are not simple inputs and outputs. They are layered processes shaped by cognition, emotion, experience, identity, power, history, and more. SoTL asks us to honor this complexity by resisting tidy explanations or quick fixes and exploring the messy, multifaceted nature of what happens in and out of the classroom. This move gives us permission to say, "It's complicated," and to keep asking questions. It's why SoTL often leads to patterns rather than prescriptions and to imperfect yet meaningful findings that contribute to understanding.

This move is the enactment of what I've learned from Pace and Middendorf (2004), Johnsen, Pacht, van Slyck, and Tsao (2009), Poole (2013), Manarin, Adams, Fendler, Marsh, Pohl, Porath, and Thomas (2021), among others.

Multidisciplinary Thinking

SoTL typically grows from the disciplinary expertise of the individual practitioner, but it also thrives in conversation across fields. This openness involves drawing on the insights of our own disciplines while reaching outward to learn from others. Since disciplinary thinking is often how we orient ourselves to making meaning, SoTL's multidisciplinary thinking can also be disorienting, but it's one of the field's greatest strengths. This move is why we actively seek participation and welcome colleagues from all disciplines—to ask questions, explore issues and experiences, and practice SoTL in ways that complement our own.

This move is the enactment of what we've learned from Huber and Morreale (2002), Poole (2013), Simmons et al (2013), and many, many others.

Collegiality

Finally, SoTL is not a solitary pursuit. Even single-authored projects involve, at the very least, students and ultimately an audience. In these moments and more, we realize that SoTL is relational, so it's grounded in collegiality. This move isn't about being nice or polite or avoiding disagreement: it's recognizing the diversity of the field as a strength, rather than an obstacle. This recognition guides us to lead with generosity before criticality, humility before certainty, and listening before speaking. We

This move is the enactment of what we've learned from Phipps and Barnett (2007), ISSOTL's conference pedagogy (2017), Yahlnaaw (2019), Potter and Raffoul (2023), Felten and Geertsema (2023), and more.

These moves are broad enough to take shape in varied ways, so rather than using them as standards and universals, I think of them (individually and together) as a lens to understanding and navigating such a diverse field. Used wisely, this mindset can illuminate rather than erase this diversity as we see *if* and *how* the moves are made by different scholars and in different contexts.[2]

This use is what I'd like to illustrate below, guided by the question *What do these moves look like in contexts that are not my own?* I know I'll misstep, but I share my analysis to model that epistemic responsibility of cross-contextual learning that's grounded in listening, shaped by humility, and committed to honoring the richness of what others are doing—not just where I am, but around the world.

Contextualizing

In "Choosing to Learn Outside the Classroom: Rural South African Students' Motivation For and Benefits of Participating in Voluntary International Virtual Exchanges," Breshears and du Plessis (2024) offer a powerful example of contextualizing. In their study of an international virtual exchange program, context is central to their inquiry, not simply the background or setting. The authors

repeatedly point out that their specific context addresses a gap in the literature: studies of these programs have typically focused on exchanges that are part of a course and in developed Western countries. In contrast, their program is voluntary, and the study is located in the specific social and educational realities of rural South African students at the University of the Free State's Qwaqwa campus. Breshears and du Plessis share the results of a focus group interview with 16 students who, like their campus peers, "do not have the means to study abroad" (p. 19), "do not get many opportunities to interact with foreigners" (p. 24), and for whom "English is a third or fourth language" (p. 29). The authors also point out that, although their exchange is with an American university, "it is usually the Western partners' perspectives that are recorded in scholarship" (p. 28), but they focus exclusively on the Qwaqwa students, which begins "to give voice to African students by exploring the experiences of rural South African students" (p. 21).

Multidisciplinary Thinking

Bhutta, Chauhan, Ali, Gul, Cassum, and Khamis's (2019) "Developing a Rubric to Assess Critical Thinking in a Multidisciplinary Context in Higher Education" illustrates multidisciplinary thinking not just in theme but also in method and collaboration. In developing a rubric for assessing critical thinking, faculty from education, nursing, and medicine worked together, recognizing that critical thinking was a valued attribute and challenge across their diverse disciplines. This partnership—reaching across both professional boundaries and national ones, with a Canadian policy research group—enabled them to identify five components of critical thinking that could be meaningfully applied whether a student was critiquing educational interventions, analyzing medical cases, or evaluating nursing practices. Their process was iterative and collective: the authors drew on rubric formats from different fields, adapted them for common use, and field-tested the result with students from several disciplines.

What stands out in this approach is their refusal to settle for discipline-specific definitions or measures of critical thinking. By creating a tool that speaks across multiple fields, they invite us (like their students) to consider how skills like critical thinking are at once locally situated and broadly applicable. In this way, their work illustrates that multidisciplinary thinking within SoTL is not a simple additive process. Instead, it produces new frameworks for teaching and evaluating learning that are flexible and robust, highlighting the generative possibilities that emerge when disciplinary conversations open onto shared concerns.

Embracing Complexity

Prozesky and Ferreira's (2024) "collaborative, multivocal autoethnography" described in "Projections on (Re)designing Pedagogical Pathways Toward a Decolonial Praxis" models embracing complexity. They recount the process of revising and decolonializing a literacy theories course in 2018, 2021, and 2023 based on "in-the-moment decisions we make in the flow of interactions with students, taking stock of the tensions and stumbling blocks we encounter" (p. 68). Their approach to course redesign leans into the specific students in the class, "as the configuration of bodies, identities, languages, knowledges, dispositions, affects, and materialities of learning mode has changed year by year" (p. 66)—a design principle that "encourage[s] emergence" (83). The agility and responsiveness of these author-teachers honor the complexity of teaching and learning by embracing the intersectional identities of their students and themselves, treating moments of uncertainty in the classroom as sources of insight, and resisting the finality of a course plan and the linearity of course redesign.

Collegiality

In "Emerging response-abilities: a reflection on the 2019 SOTL in the South conference," Cook (2020) demonstrates collegiality in her analysis of the 2019 SoTL in the South Conference. She foregrounds human connection, shared values, and a commitment to growth within scholarly community. In one session, she recalls a moment of feeling "awkwardly emotional, suddenly very aware of being a human among other humans" and, later, "a greater awareness of the living things around me" (p. 75, 76). She celebrates finding

a much-needed community of practice – a group of passionate educators, curriculum theorists and academic developers, many of whom were deeply conscious of the ways in which coloniality could influence work at an 'African university', as well as of the many other contradictions of education in 'Southern' contexts. (p. 72)

She takes great care in naming and summarizing the speakers and presenters who resonated with her, and writes a touching "Acknowledgements" that frames her essay as "a little goodbye to Brenda [Leibowitz]" after her death: "I *loved* Brenda's influence on my life" (p. 82).

She also demonstrates that collegiality is more than professional courtesy or kindness: it also brings a relational ethics that leads her to critique some presenters for ignoring the conference's context and theme grounded in power, positionality, and the uneven terrain of higher education in the global South. In contrast to these "docile" sessions (p. 77), Cook looks for what Ng and Walsh call "an ethos of response-ability," or a shared ethical commitment to social justice and mutual learning (2019, p. 81). She imagines her fellow "Southern SOTLers enter[ing] together, with dignity and respect for one another, into the practice as a kind of decolonial unlearning and relearning" (p. 77).

Pedagogical Humility

I had a difficult time pinpointing clear illustration of pedagogical humility. Many articles in *SoTL in the South* take the form of principled commitments to widespread transformation (e.g., offering affirmative proposals, theoretical models, or policy critiques that reflect the urgency and conviction of their educational contexts) more often than introspective inquiries about what we don't yet know about student learning. Also, pedagogical humility may be more common in the earlier stages of doing SoTL. It may, for instance, be the inspiration for developing inquiries to learn what's really happening in a class, or later when we take a closer look and are surprised by what we find. In both of these moments, we may realize that our assumptions about our teaching and our students' learning have been wrong. But this recognition may not make its way into the public academic work of publications and presentations that trend toward confident representations of answers to questions, solutions to problems, and successes rather than failures. Indeed, SoTL is rife with "progress narrative[s] full of obstacles overcome, lessons learned, the triumph of a problem solved, and the teacher-scholar as the hero" and "redemption stories" that follow "a cycle of linear progress and constant improvement" (Chick, Cruz, Friberg, & Steiner, 2021, p. 9; Halpern, 2023, p. 5). The implicit expectation of certainty in our public voices leaves little room for expressing humility.

However, Samuel's "No Student Left Behind: 'Pedagogies of Comfort' or 'Pedagogies of Disruption'?" (2022) reflects on a time when nearly everyone experienced a little pedagogical humility: the shift to emergency remote teaching during the pandemic. Samuel's descriptions of coordinating postgraduate programmes and supervising doctoral students during this time offer glimpses of this uncertainty. He admits, "My own competences" for developing asynchronous online material "needed to be refined" (p. 131), and when he struggles to get his students to interact with each other, himself, and his content, he confesses that "My strategies for interrupting my presentation modes with numerous calls for commentary or critique sometimes collapsed dismally" (p. 131, 132). As he

reflects on students' "learned passivity" and retreat into the "comfort zone" of "front-led pedagogies" (p. 128, 121, 124), he also recognizes that for these students—who were also teaching their own classes—"the workload was simply overwhelming" (p. 135). In the end, he balances his critique with a humble confession: "A strategic self-reflection includes not just a deep critical engagement with the problematic habits and routines of others but equally how we personally sustain current hegemonic inequities and social injustices (sometimes unknowingly)" (p. 136).

Insights about the Ongoing Work

These examples reveal a few important insights about this SoTL mindset in practice. First, they demonstrate that the five moves are not abstract principles but lived practices that take on specific meanings within particular contexts. Collegiality at a SoTL conference in South Africa looks different from collegiality in the United States: the former embeds an expectation for "speak[ing] back to dominant economic, social, philosophical and pedagogical frames of reference" (Cook, 2020, p. 77), and the latter embeds an expectation for being about SoTL, but both share a fundamental commitment to mutual learning and effecting change in higher education.

Second, these examples show how one's context doesn't simply "adjust" SoTL; it sharpens its lens. By centering rural South African students rarely featured in exchange program research, Breshears and du Plessis show that context can expand the very questions we think to ask. Their study demonstrates that paying close attention to contextual realities can uncover dynamics that remain invisible when our inquiries default to the familiar and the known.

This variety shows that the SoTL mindset isn't prescriptive; it's generative, with different emphases emerging from the roles of identity, context, and experience. That plurality strengthens—not fragments—the field. When Breshears and du Plessis shift the lens toward rural South African students, or when Prozesky and Ferreira rethink literacy education through decolonial practice, they show that context not only shapes inquiry but expands its very possibilities.

These scholars demonstrate that adopting (or adapting) a SoTL mindset is not about importing a model from one region to another. It means rooting the work in the specific realities of context while remaining connected to a wider community and its commitments to improving higher education. Many articles in *SoTL in the South* reveal scholars engaging with the pressing and place-based concerns of their institutions—challenges shaped by historical, political, and socioeconomic forces that are not always acknowledged in US-based SoTL. Of course, our classrooms here are also shaped by politics, histories, and inequities, but we rarely acknowledge this fact. Too often, we act as though our classrooms are neutral laboratories, detached from the world. The work in *SoTL in the South* reminds me that this detachment is itself a fiction that doesn't serve us, our students, or our systems of higher education well.

In the end, what these readings confirm for me is that SoTL is, at its core, a practice of paying attention—paying attention to the contexts that shape teaching and learning, to the questions that emerge from those contexts, and to the limits of our own perspectives. The five moves I've described can help us cultivate this attention, but they only matter when they are lived out in particular places, with particular people. For me, then, the task is not to arrive at a definitive model of SoTL, but to keep noticing where I stand, where others stand, and what becomes visible when we listen across those differences.

NOTES

1. In another paper, we're writing about what we learned from our readings and conversations, and from our presentation of what we learned at the ISSOTL23 conference.

2. In fact, the reading group led by Sarah Bunnell confirmed what others have argued for years about the relative narrowness of contextualizing in the United States (Blair, 2013; Looker 2018): the contexts for American SoTL projects are typically described at the scale of the classroom or the institution and most often with just the facts of demography and perhaps geography. Many of the articles we read from South America and Africa, on the other hand, are contextualized at the scale of nation, continent, and even hemisphere, and almost always within the geopolitical realities of higher education.

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