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EDITORS' INTRODUCTION
From Sound to Substance

Overheard while waiting to board a flight: "We'll board group 3 first, right after we board groups 1 and 2."

The most disconcerting thing about this moment wasn't its egregious abuse of the number line. It was, rather, that people waiting to board the plane didn't bat an eye. We could speculate on the reasons for this: perhaps people know the order and so don't listen to the announcement. Perhaps we've reached the point where we don't expect announcements to make sense anymore. Or maybe the announcement just *sounded* right, especially since it was coming from someone with a microphone and a modicum of authority.

This third possibility—that things can sound right when they are not—is troubling. This is because it is easier to make things sound right than to actually make them right, especially in academia where we have such advanced quality "microphones" and more than a modicum of authority. It is easier to say things like "We employed an inductive approach to our qualitative analysis, identifying common categories and subjecting them to cross-thematic comparisons" than it is to actually conduct proper qualitative analysis. In fact, we made up that phrase just now. We could have added considerable credibility to it had we also cited a reference that, somewhere in its pages, used the term "inductive approach."

As readers, we might consume phrases like this in the same way that those airline passengers consumed the announcement. We might know how qualitative analyses are conducted, and so skim over these descriptions, or we might just like the sound of them and move on.

When all was said and done, the passengers got on the plane in an orderly fashion and winged away to their destination. No harm done. Similarly, the hypothetical article that employed those qualitative methods might have done a very reasonable job of analysing the data, and the conclusions may well be worthy of consideration.

But then again, maybe not.

We have language in SoTL that sounds good, and so there is a temptation to use it just for that reason. Have you ever heard the claim that "We adopted a student-centered approach to program redesign," and then wondered just what that really meant? Perhaps you didn't hear anything in the description of that redesign that you would call student centered. Perhaps there was no mention of students at all. It happens.

As editors of *Teaching & Learning Inquiry*, we of course have an obligation to go beyond the sound of things and pay close attention to the substance. Our reviewers take on the same responsibility. It is much harder than just standing in line, ignoring nonsensical announcements, waiting for our group to be called so we can board that plane. But harder or not, it is what we do.

This obligation that we accept in academia—to go beyond sound to substance—has never been more pressing. We now live in a world in which we hear things like "You may have evidence, but you

have no proof," and where people with whom we disagree might call us "radical," or moreover, "radical something-ists."

Never in our lives has it been more important to drill down to substance, to not be lulled by sound alone. Here is yet another way that SoTL scholars can show leadership—pushing for precise language and clear meaning, even in a field with its share of abstraction and disagreement. In the end, it isn't disagreement that will be our undoing—far from it. Rather, it will be complacency.

We owe a debt of gratitude, therefore, to our reviewers, guest editors, and authors who do the hard work to keep complacency at bay. Let's think of them as we read through this issue. You never know, you might be reading volume 5.1 while you are waiting to board a plane.

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