



2024

How to Get Started with SoTL: Reflections from a Novice SoTL Researcher

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DOI: 10.61403/2689-6443.1319

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Recommended Citation

Schmedding-Bartley, J. L. (2024). How to Get Started with SoTL: Reflections from a Novice SoTL Researcher. *Teaching and Learning in Communication Sciences & Disorders*, 8(2). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.61403/2689-6443.1319>

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How to Get Started with SoTL: Reflections from a Novice SoTL Researcher

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to provide a reflection on successfully engaging in the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) after overcoming common barriers to engagement in SoTL. The author identifies barriers commonly experienced by scholars interested in engaging in SoTL. The author identified a variety of frameworks in the literature that were reported to be helpful in assisting novice SoTL scholars in overcoming barriers related to research question formation. An example is shared to demonstrate how the complementary frameworks can be used to develop answerable research questions.

Keywords

scholarship of teaching and learning, research questions, barriers

Cover Page Footnote

This project was supported by the SoTL Fellows program, an initiative of Teaching and Learning in Communication Sciences and Disorders: <http://tlcsdjournal.com/> and supported in part by resources from the University of Pittsburgh. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Janine L. Schmedding-Bartley, Department of Communication Sciences and Disorders, University of Kentucky, 120L C.T. Wethington Building, 900 South Limestone, Lexington, KY 40536-0200, United States. Email: jlba284@uky.edu

Shortly after completing my Ph.D., I found a passion for teaching others about the field of communication sciences and disorders (CSD) and encouraging new talent to become enamored with the field. I was passionate about ensuring that students not only took away knowledge from my classes, but they could apply the knowledge and explain their rationale. I considered myself a good teacher and my student evaluations reflected that notion. I was also a good teacher by the description provided in the continuum of educator professional development (Ginsberg et al., 2012; Visconti & Ginsberg, 2024). Their continuum emphasizes reflection as an essential tool used by good teachers. As a reflective teacher, I continuously reflected on my students' engagement and knowledge retention, frequently prompting attempts to improve my teaching.

Eventually, I became curious about the evidence-base behind training in CSD, which led me to others talking about teaching in CSD. At conferences, I was drawn to other teachers and took copious notes on teaching strategies that they implemented and evaluated. I frequently implemented new teaching methods that I heard from others or created myself to improve student engagement or knowledge retention. I had shifted toward the "scholarly teacher" portion of the continuum of educator professional development (Ginsberg et al., 2012; Visconti & Ginsberg, 2024). I was "taking the same scholarly approach to teaching" (Ginsberg et al., 2012, p. 10) as I would if I were working with a client by allowing the literature and data to guide my teaching.

As I shifted further along the continuum of educator professional development, I conducted more literature searches to understand the evidence-base in CSD training, and eventually found that literature specific to CSD training was sparse. This recognition ignited further curiosity to understand why we train speech-language pathologists (SLPs) the way that we do which pushed me toward the farthest end of the continuum of educator professional development to conducting scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL; Ginsberg et al., 2012; Visconti & Ginsberg, 2024). Despite this passion, I quickly realized I was not prepared to conduct scholarly inquiries in SoTL and became paralyzed every time I thought about conducting a SoTL project. This paper serves as a reflection of my several-year journey into SoTL and steps that finally unlocked my ability to conduct a SoTL research project. I hope to elucidate why the entry into SoTL was so difficult by sharing barriers that others and I have experienced, and to let readers know they are not alone if they feel stuck. Then, I will walk the reader through a systematic approach to help scholars get started with early SoTL projects.

Barriers and Mistakes

My experience. Even after co-authoring a manuscript that fell under the realm of SoTL, attending several conference presentations about SoTL, and reading about evidence-based teaching, I couldn't quite organize my thoughts to plan my own SoTL research inquiries. At the time, I didn't quite understand why, but in retrospect it is clear I faced several barriers and rookie mistakes. First, it's important to acknowledge that I was trained to conduct well-designed research studies and teach using high-quality pedagogies; however, that training did not include the tools essential for conducting well-designed SoTL inquiries. Most of my training and experience in research methods was focused on quantitative methods with an emphasis on group comparison design. When initially trying to design SoTL projects, my natural inclination was to gather quantitative data and to compare groups of students. I struggled to define the control group(s) and select measures to compare the groups. When I couldn't define my control group, brainstorming and planning SoTL

projects would halt. Even though I was trained with a strong emphasis on quality teaching, received teaching mentorship, and understood that teaching was an important part of my role as a faculty member, increasing the evidence base for training SLPs was never discussed.

My difficulty with research design was amplified when I tried to identify research questions. I was excited to study the impact of a teaching strategy I was already implementing, problem-based learning. From the beginning, specific and answerable research questions evaded me because I wanted to evaluate the entirety of my pedagogical approach but didn't know what my outcome was. With a very broad notion of what I wanted to investigate, I found it difficult to move forward and match research methods to my inquiry.

The third barrier I encountered was finding and understanding literature relevant to SoTL inquiry. Despite having little research training in SoTL, I believed I had been well-trained to read and understand scientific literature. During several of my false starts into SoTL projects, I went diving into the literature. I began by browsing journals relevant to CSD and looked for manuscripts reporting on SoTL in CSD. To my surprise, the literature within the familiar CSD journals was sparse. Indeed, this fact was acknowledged by Friberg, Hoepner, and Sauerwein (2023) who noted that only 45 SoTL articles were published in CSD journals prior to 2017 and that the number of articles has doubled in the years after the establishment of the journal *Teaching and Learning in Communication Sciences and Disorders*. With little literature in the CSD world, I knew I needed to begin searching in other journals, but that was when I became overwhelmed because I had no idea where to search.

The final barrier I encountered in my initial attempts at SoTL inquiry was time. My workload has consistently been heavily influenced by teaching and administrative work. Initiating work in a new area of research requires time for reading, learning, analyzing, networking, and writing. For me, dedicating time to read literature and write research protocols regularly fell to the backburner as my teaching and administrative duties took priority.

Review of the literature. After dedicating time to SoTL and committing to writing this manuscript, I learned that the barriers I faced were often cited regarding novice SoTL investigators. Dewar and Perkins (2021) found that many novice SoTL scholars are passionate and innovative teachers who had tried innovative teaching strategies such as “flipped classrooms” and inquiry-based learning. Dewar and colleagues (Dewar et al., 2018; Dewar & Perkins, 2021) noted that interest in SoTL work frequently evolved from these faculty wanting to investigate something new they've tried in the classroom. Despite their passion, many of these novice scholars encountered barriers to engaging in SoTL. A review of literature from a variety of disciplines outlines some common barriers expressed by novice SoTL scholars. Kim and colleagues (2021) analyzed the interview transcripts of novice SoTL scholars across disciplines and roles within an institution and identified that common barriers fell along three dominant themes (1) unfamiliarity with the SoTL research process, (2) unfamiliarity with the SoTL literature, and (3) competing priorities.

Many individuals who desire to conduct SoTL inquiry were trained in a specific discipline using disciplinary research methods. During their formal training many academics never gained knowledge about teaching or conducting systematic inquiries of teaching and learning, thus a major barrier to entering the SoTL world is the lack of knowledge about the SoTL research process

(Kim et al., 2021) or SoTL research methods that differ from the scholar's own discipline (Miller-Young et al., 2018). Dewar and Perkins (2021) highlighted this exact struggle and noted that novice SoTL scholars may struggle with two particular details, the impossibility of obtaining a control group and inability to claim generalizability to other teaching and learning contexts. Furthermore, since inquiries evolve from innovative work in the classroom, scholars tend to approach SoTL with questions that are too large, too broad, or ill-defined. (Dewar et al., 2018; Dewar & Perkins, 2021).

Smith (2001) noted that while novice SoTL scholars may be committed to improving student learning, many are not aware of the evidence base behind the teaching pedagogies they implement in the classroom. Despite their commitment, novice SoTL scholars have noted unfamiliarity with SoTL literature as a major barrier to conducting systematic investigations of teaching (Kim et al., 2021). Many scholars are trained to conduct literature searches within their own disciplines, within familiar databases, and can efficiently search the relevant literature. In contrast, Huber and Hutchings (2005) describe SoTL as a “big tent” (p. 4) that encompasses numerous disciplines and heuristics including educational psychology, higher education, health care education, and many more. Unfortunately, as MacMillan (2018) describes in reference to searching the SoTL literature, “there is no single database that brings it all together, no established thesaurus of consistent terms” (p. 25). This lack of a central location makes a cohesive and exhaustive search of the SoTL literature a daunting task for the novice SoTL researcher. Not only is the SoTL literature search non-linear, the vocabulary and theories used within the literature maybe unknown to the novice SoTL scholar.

Finally, time constraints and task prioritization are frequently recorded in the literature as barriers to conducting SoTL (e.g., Huber & Hutchings, 2006; Kim et al., 2021; Schwartz & Haynie, 2013). Literature cites time constraints due to heavy teaching and/or administrative loads with minimal contract time dedicated to research in general (Boshier, 2009; Kim et al., 2021) and disciplinary research receiving higher value than SoTL work in personnel decisions reinforcing the minimization of time allocated to SoTL inquiry (Huber & Hutchings, 2006, Marquis et al., 2017).

Making a Commitment to Overcoming Barriers

These barriers made me feel ill-equipped to independently conduct SoTL research, so I took several steps to overcome them. First, I sought out two formal opportunities to learn more about SoTL. I created a faculty learning community within my college, joined the SoTL Fellows program hosted by the journal *Teaching and Learning in Communication Sciences and Disorders*, and began a year dedicated to overcoming my fear of SoTL projects. I am grateful that my institution acknowledged the opportunity for professional development and allowed me to adjust my workload to have dedicated time for these formal engagements. Over that year, I simultaneously learned about SoTL and conducted my first SoTL project.

Both the faculty learning community and SoTL Fellows program provided me with numerous opportunities to learn about the research methods more commonly used in SoTL research including qualitative methods and analyses. These communities exposed me to SoTL literature and helped me understand that I was not alone in being overwhelmed by the vast disciplines that wrote about SoTL. These communities surrounded me with colleagues interested in SoTL, both novice and experienced, providing me with a support network. As I reflect on that year, I notice that my biggest

challenge was writing specific and answerable research questions and that my growth in writing questions would be the catalyst for continued SoTL inquiry. The remainder of this paper is for the reader who also struggles to write SoTL research questions. There are several models in the literature that can be employed to support the novice SoTL scholar move from very broad and ill-defined research goals to well-defined and answerable research questions.

Writing SoTL Research Questions

Identifying your starting point. Entering the SoTL research space may seem like a significant leap into an unknown world, but systematically identifying a starting point can help the scholar identify what prior knowledge and skills will assist them on their journey. Robin Mueller (2018) presents a model to help the novice SoTL researcher foster a sense of self-efficacy and articulate a motivating purpose for conducting SoTL. Novice scholars can follow Mueller's roadmap to articulate the goals of their SoTL inquiry by starting with the researcher's current knowledge. Mueller (2018) poses the following series of reflective prompts to the researcher to assist them in identifying their starting point.

1. Describe the typical purposes of research in your home discipline.
2. Identify your strengths as a researcher and/or the aspects of research that you do well and enjoy.
3. Describe your knowledge of research methodology and/or what methods you know how to use effectively.
4. Describe your most memorable experiences with teaching and learning.
5. Provide a detailed account of the context for the SoTL research, including the class, departmental, institutional, and national dynamics.

Felton (2013) also explained the importance of defining the context of SoTL research by explaining that quality SoTL must be interpreted within the scholarly and local context of the investigation. Thus, scholars need to provide sufficient details about the local context such as course size, course level, college and institutional support, and disciplinary practices to allow a robust interpretation of the findings of the inquiry.

Identifying a teaching problem. After identifying a starting point, the scholar can begin to brainstorm research questions. A review of the literature reveals several frameworks that can be used in succession from brainstorming to identifying specific answerable questions (Dewar et al., 2018; Dewar & Perkins, 2021; Hutchings, 2000; Mueller, 2018). These steps can help the novice SoTL researcher move from ideas that are too broad and ill-defined to questions that are manageable and well-defined.

One commonly recommended strategy for brainstorming research questions is to start by identifying a "teaching problem" (Ahmari Tehran et al., 2022; Bass, 1999; Ciccone, 2018). Dewar and colleagues (2018) suggest that teaching problems "present themselves as difficulties or frustrations we encounter in our teaching" (p. 22). For example, students not completing the assigned reading or students having difficulty applying concepts to clinical cases. However, as an instructor who frequently modifies teaching strategies after gauging student engagement and understanding "on the fly" in the classroom, I had a hard time identifying my teaching problems.

After discussing this problem with my mentor (C. Visconti, personal communication, November 10, 2022) she recommended I try journaling or taking brief notes after class periods when I made modifications or noticed something that didn't go the way I expected. She recommended that these notes could be consulted later to identify the teaching problem(s) to investigate. Even though it was hard to identify teaching problems at first, journaling has uncovered numerous teaching problems and potential solutions that could be investigated in the future. Whether the scholar intuitively recognizes teaching problems or uses techniques like journaling, identifying the teaching problem is essential to generating a research question.

Literature search. Once a SoTL researcher has identified a teaching problem, it is necessary to start a review of literature to learn how other scholars have attempted to understand or solve similar problems. Even though novice SoTL researchers identify having limited knowledge of SoTL literature as a barrier to conducting a SoTL study, it is widely emphasized that the literature review can be beneficial to both the researcher and the reader (Axtell & Turner, 2015; MacMillan, 2018; Miller-Young & Yeo, 2015; Wagstrom, 2015). Numerous scholars have attested to the value of the literature review in saving time in identifying potential measurements and protocols (MacMillan, 2018), and informing and refining research questions and designs (Axtell & Turner, 2015; MacMillan, 2018; Miller-Young & Yeo, 2015; Wagstrom, 2015). Further, it is common that readers may come to SoTL literature with a range of perspectives and background knowledge, so experts recommend framing the literature review with an assumption that the reader has minimal knowledge of the SoTL theory, frameworks, and methods employed in the investigation (MacMillan, 2018). The SoTL scholar should view the literature review as essential and conduct one early in the project. While the process for conducting a thorough search of the literature is beyond the scope of this paper, the reader is directed to the work of MacMillan (2018) and Dewar and colleagues (2018) for further discussion. While SoTL in CSD is in its relative infancy, other health care and higher education disciplines have a rich history of SoTL research. Therefore, the novice CSD SoTL researcher is encouraged to peruse the literature across a variety of disciplines (e.g., allied health, nursing, education) to find solutions that make sense in their educational context.

Identifying the purpose and writing specific questions. After using Mueller's (2018) model to identify a starting place, the teaching problem, and review the literature, the next step is to elaborate on the topic of the SoTL project to develop an outline for a more focused research agenda. According to Mueller there are three steps for elaborating the topic. First, the scholar describes the topic in a simple phrase or a few sentences. Second, the scholar should add specifiers: verbs, nouns, adjectives, or adverbs that provide context. Third, the scholar should reframe the topic description as a claim making sure to include the appropriate specifiers. An example of this process is included in the following section and in Table 1.

After elaborating on the topic and specifying a claim, Mueller suggests the researcher generate a list of 10 to 20 questions related to the topic and/or claim. Many SoTL texts reference Hutchings' (2000) taxonomy of SoTL questions as a place to start for writing research questions. Hutchings outlined four kinds of SoTL questions: (a) *What is?*, (b) *What works?*, (c) *Visions of the possible*, and (d) *Developing new conceptual frameworks*. *What works* questions are often what bring scholars to SoTL and novice scholars are encouraged to consider both *What works* and *What is* questions (Dewar & Perkins, 2021).

While Hutchings' (2000) taxonomy can be very helpful, some scholars may need to conduct more reflection and brainstorming before creating questions. Dewar and colleagues (2018) provide a brainstorming framework that expands upon Hutchings' taxonomy and recommend that scholars create both *What works?* and *What is?* questions by asking the following questions (Dewar et al., 2018).

1. What is my teaching problem or question?
2. What knowledge would help me address this problem or question?
3. What would I like to know about this problem or why it occurs?
4. Am I doing something to address the problem and would like to show that it is working?
5. Is there something I would like students to do differently?
6. Why do students behave in ways that lead to the problem?
7. What is it I want to accomplish in researching this problem?
8. What are *What works?* and *What is?* questions that arise from my teaching problem? (pp. 26-27)

After following the recommendations and frameworks of Mueller (2018), Hutchings (2000), and Dewar and colleagues (2018), scholars will have 10 – 20 specific and answerable questions to select from to drive their SoTL inquiry.

Example: Impact of Problem-Based Learning on Clinical Reasoning

The following section will demonstrate use of Dewar and colleagues (2018), Hutchings (2000), and Mueller's (2018) models for developing questions using my first SoTL project as an example.

Identifying a starting point. I believe Mueller's (2018) grounding questions explain why my entry into SoTL was so difficult, and if I had answered the grounding questions, they would have minimized the number of SoTL false starts I experienced. For me, exploring the world of SoTL conjured up emotions of inadequacy and imposter syndrome, and made me question my motivations for conducting SoTL research. It even made me question my knowledge of research in general. I did not originally take time to understand what background knowledge and expertise I brought to my SoTL inquiry. However, taking time to answer Mueller's first three questions about knowledge of my disciplinary research methods and my strengths, grounded me and provided a sense of self-efficacy. Answering the fourth question about personal teaching and learning moments, helped me recall motivations for teaching and ignited positive emotions toward teaching. Finally, Mueller's fifth question, helped me fully understand the context of my SoTL work. Taking time to fully describe the context of my teaching and my students' learning assisted me with understanding the other variables that may impact the teaching and learning and thus could impact results of a SoTL inquiry.

Identifying a teaching problem. I was teaching a graduate-level articulation and phonology disorders course to second-semester graduate speech-language pathology (SLP) students. I was using a lecture-based format with activities planned in each class meeting to provide practice with the content. While the students were able to apply their knowledge to narrow question sets, they had difficulty applying their knowledge to cases that required them to employ the entire clinical

process from assessment to treatment planning to treatment provision. My teaching problem was regarding the students' difficulty translating specific theoretical knowledge to applied clinical settings.

Literature search. Prior to viewing my class from a SoTL lens, I viewed it through the lens of a passionate and intuitive teacher who wanted to improve the students' skills in applying their knowledge in applied clinical settings. I stumbled upon problem-based learning through a workshop and was instantly intrigued. After a general literature review over a six-month period, I began implementing problem-based learning in the classroom. As I began my formal entry into SoTL, that initial literature search was a launching point for more formal review of literature in SoTL. While I initially tried to remain within my comfort zone by searching only within CSD journals, the references cited by CSD authors lead me to journals in teaching and learning in numerous disciplines. I found the medical and nursing education journals to be particularly useful because their scholarship was heavily focused on application from classroom to clinic.

Identifying the topic. After identifying my teaching problem that students were not translating their knowledge to applied settings and selecting problem-based learning as a possible solution, I needed to further elaborate my topic toward identifying a research question. I used Mueller's brainstorming framework to contextualize the teaching, state the teaching problem, elaborate a topic, and state a claim (See Table 1 for an example of the initial brainstorming process).

Writing Specific Questions. After defining my topic and stating a claim, it was time to generate potential research questions. I used Dewar and colleagues' (2018) probing questions schematic and Hutchings' (2000) question taxonomy to generate potential research questions (see Table 2 for examples of question generation for both frameworks). Following the recommendations for novice scholars from Dewar and colleagues, I generated questions in the '*What Works*' and the '*What Is*' categories.

Table 1

Example of initial brainstorming process

Brainstorming Step	Example Content Generation
Context Description	Mid-sized graduate-level class Second-semester graduate students Southern United States Students concurrently enrolled in a clinical class Mid-sized department with a small academic clinical staff Large research-intensive institution
Teaching Problem	Students learn content for exam but don't apply content in clinic Students resist group-based work and learning
Initial Topic Descriptor	Using problem-based learning to teach clinical content
Specifiers	Clinical reasoning Second-semester graduate students Critical thinking Clinical application Team-based learning Whole-class facilitated problem-based learning
Topic as a Claim	Using problem-based learning to teach clinical phonology topics enables deep learning and development of clinical reasoning, clinical application, and teamwork skills.

Table 2

Question Generation Example

Question Classification		Example Question
Dewar et al. (2018)	Hutchings (2000)	
Am I doing something to address the problem and would like to show that it is working?	What works?	1. Does problem-based learning result in students learning knowledge and skills related to phonological disorders?
	What is?	2. What are students' perceptions of problem-based learning teams facilitated by whole-class discussion?
	What is?	3. Does problem-based learning impact student perception of team-based learning?
Why do students behave in ways that lead to the problem?	What works?	4. Does intentional development of problem-based learning teams improve student perceptions of team-based learning?
	What is?	5. What knowledge or resources do students use to make plans for clients in the academic clinic?
What is it that I want to accomplish in researching this problem?	What works?	6. Does problem-based learning result in students applying knowledge and skills related to phonological disorders to clients in the academic clinic?
Is there something I would like students to do differently?	What works?	7. Does participation in problem-based learning impact student clinical reasoning skills?
	What works?	8. Does participation in problem-based learning impact student critical thinking skills?

Study Design. When I began brainstorming my first SoTL inquiry, I was interested in examining the impact of problem-based learning. Ultimately, I selected question seven from Table 2 as my first research question: *Does participation in problem-based learning impact student clinical reasoning skills?* I designed a study to investigate whether students' clinical reasoning skills during the planning of a speech-sound evaluation changed from the beginning of the semester to the end of the semester. Two-thirds of the course was implemented using a problem-based learning approach that provided students with opportunities to apply course content to six complex clinical cases. Students used the think-aloud method to plan a speech-sound evaluation at the beginning of the semester and at the end of the semester. The qualitative data collected in the think-alouds was analyzed to determine whether there were changes in clinical reasoning skills across the semester.

Conclusion

In a discipline with a broad scope of practice that graduates masters-level generalists, instructors and clinical supervisors alike grapple with the balance between the breadth and depth and how to ensure that future clinicians demonstrate both knowledge and skills. SoTL will likely help us identify a good balance between breadth and depth and identify mechanisms to authentically evaluate student clinical knowledge and skills. It is essential that more CSD scholars and CSD instructors venture into the unknown of SoTL and contribute to the development of shared knowledge of teaching in CSD. Several frameworks have been presented in the literature to assist SoTL scholars in developing systematic investigations of teaching and learning. Taken together the frameworks of Mueller (2018), Hutchings (2000), and Dewar and colleagues (2018) can be used as complementary frameworks to assist the novice scholar to develop research questions that are specific and well-defined. It is my hope that SoTL-curious scholars may read this reflection and find their starting point.

Author Disclosure

Financial. The author received an honorarium for participation in the *Teaching and Learning in Communication Sciences and Disorders* SoTL Fellows program. The author is employed at a large public institution in the United States.

Nonfinancial. None to disclose.

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