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# SoTL: the party that no one really wants to go to

## Why does the scholarship of teaching and learning remain a hard sell to faculty?

By KATHLEEN BORTOLIN | NOV 29 2018

I sometimes imagine the scholarship of teaching and learning, or SoTL, as a party. And if it were a party, it'd be a good one: a little bit quirky and on the fringes (yes, still), held in a warehouse somewhere down by the docks. Most need an invitation and good directions to get there, but once they find it they're rewarded, and so are their guests.

[Ernest Boyer](#) is there, just over by the turntables, surveying the room, fist-pumping to the music. Also in attendance are a whole lot of faculty developers – at a guess, the ratio of faculty developers to actual SoTL practitioners is five to one, or maybe even 10 to one. It's an awkward ratio, and I've often wondered about this disproportionate number of faculty developers sweating it out to encourage faculty members to take up SoTL. Why exactly are we working this hard to drum up interest in this cool hipster party? Does it not speak for itself yet? And, if not, how much longer will it take?

Despite the continued support of conferences and journals devoted to the discipline, SoTL still “lurks at the periphery of university life and discourse,” according to the University of British Columbia's Roger Boshier, [writing in 2009](#). More recently, Janice Miller-Young at the University of Alberta and colleagues Michelle Yeo and Karen Manarin at Mount Royal University find that there are [a number of challenges](#) to engaging in SoTL, and that faculty developers must identify and understand these challenges if they are to support this work.

### The challenges

This is where I am, trying to figure out what these challenges are. Drs. Miller-Young, Yeo and Manarin, like myself, are situated at a teaching-focused university and have identified discomfort with subjectivity, interdisciplinarity and a shifting sense of identity as some of the challenges.

Understanding these challenges is helpful for faculty developers like me aiming to support this work; however, their study is contextualized within an established SoTL program. Their faculty have arrived at the party. My challenge is how to get faculty there in the first place.

I'm at the party, quietly tucked away at the back, observing. I'm here as a faculty developer, but also as a SoTL practitioner. I once investigated the impact of redesigning an undergraduate course on human diversity that was comprised predominantly of white, middle-class 20-somethings. What would happen if we left the confines of the classroom and partnered with the local community? Driven by inquiry and reflection, I wanted to investigate and write about my process, about what happened.

But that's another article that you can read [somewhere else](#). The point is that the whole experience had an impact on me, and when I landed a job as an educational developer I wanted to seek out something similar.

I've worked at the teaching and learning centre at a teaching-focused university for five years now, and interest in SoTL has been sluggish. That's not to say it isn't being done here – it is, by a relatively small group of faculty members engaged in this type of research. Those party-goers don't need our help; they got to the party by themselves – or perhaps they're throwing their own parties. But beyond that small group of people, few are knocking on our SoTL door. Why not?

Is it because we're a teaching university, and support and incentive for researching anything, let alone one's teaching, is still vague and unclear to most? And yet a teaching university seems like *the* place to take this up. When SoTL fails to take off at research universities, we can fall back on the old argument that “this sort of research isn't really valued in departments.” It's a dumb argument, but it gets traction. But at a teaching university?

I suppose we then fall back on the argument that “research is ambiguously defined here and not entirely funded and I'm not sure I want to do damage to my sanity by doing this on the side.” This is a good argument. I support it.

## Researching our teaching

But herein lies a great counter-intuitive state of affairs, and it's troublesome for teaching-focused universities. We teach, that's our focus. Research? Well, sort of, but not really. Research our teaching? Interesting.

Shouldn't we, the scholarly teachers, be investigating our teaching practice and then contributing to the literature on postsecondary teaching? But, on the other hand, we're way too busy and underfunded for that. So be careful there, that's not what we do. And yet, it *is* what we do. So yeah, do it. But then again, don't.

Faculty at my institution, and I imagine at other teaching-focused universities, are intensely committed to teaching. It's one of our many strengths. But faculty are also marking, and connecting with students, and going to meetings and sitting on committees, and living lives beyond the academy. It's hard to know if they are interested in the party and just don't know how to get there, or are they staying in tonight, resting, because they are spread thin enough already and just need a night on the couch?

Momentum is growing in the literature regarding mental-health issues in higher education and we are being cautioned more and more to slow down. Does SoTL, like the hunt for that elusive backdoor party, just ramp it up even more for faculty teetering on that precarious line between productivity and madness?

How then do we encourage faculty, especially at teaching-focused universities, to take up SoTL and come dance alongside us? How long do we keep at it, handing out flyers and enthusiastically spreading the good news about a movement that was supposed to start in 1990? What is the secret incentive that I'm missing here? What can teaching-focused institutions and their administrations do to support their faculty and, ultimately, get them to the party – and home – safely?

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