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# Pragmatism in practice: Bricolage as a methodological framework for SoTL

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## Abstract

I begin this paper by discussing some of the issues that scholars<sup>1</sup> face when they begin to make the transition from discipline-based research to the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL). I take seriously the fear that many feel when attempting to move into what they perceive to be unfamiliar territory and I encourage readers to face their own fears as a first step towards resolving them. I suggest that, although many scholars are intimidated by the thought of SoTL because they believe that it is totally alien to them, in fact they have gained skills and experience elsewhere that are transferrable into SoTL: the terminology might be unfamiliar, but the practices need not be. In order to explain this, I introduce the concept of bricolage (which, as I understand it, involves taking existing resources and repurposing them) and show how this practice can be used to develop a methodological approach to SoTL. In so doing I describe a methodology for SoTL that can be adopted and adapted by any scholar, whatever their disciplinary background, and that helps scholars to make the transition from disciplinary research to scholarship of teaching and learning. I end by giving a set of recommendations for those wanting to use bricolage for themselves, and a call for others to join me in the practice of bricolage.

## Keywords

scholarship, SoTL, bricolage

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<sup>1</sup> I am using 'scholar' here as shorthand for anyone who engages in SoTL, whether they are academic, professional services, or independent scholar.

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## Introduction

This paper is the result of several years of discussion, deliberation, and personal reflection. I have often found myself talking with colleagues from many different disciplines about the difficulties that they perceive when they make the move from subject-specific research to the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL). A recurring theme of these conversations is the lack of confidence that academics feel when moving into a Learning, Teaching and Scholarship focussed (LTS) role. In this paper I want to take seriously this unease about how to get started with SoTL and suggest some strategies for overcoming it that I have found helpful. I am not talking here about providing a structure, framework, or checklist for SoTL – I am talking about an attitude to approaching SoTL – and of some tactics which I have found from my own experience can help build confidence. I begin by setting out the main challenges as I see them.

## The challenges of SoTL

A major challenge for people trying to find their feet with SoTL is the fact that there is a lack of understanding across the higher education (HE) sector about what SoTL is (Canning & Masika, 2022; Fanghanel et al., 2016a). I think that we can separate this into two, related, issues. First, SoTL is often used as a synonym for other scholarly activities. In particular, it gets confused with just being about good practice in teaching, or good teaching (Boshier, 2009). Second, there is no authoritative definition of SoTL that is accepted, but a ‘proliferation’ of definitions are used across the sector (Fanghanel et al., 2016a, p. 4).

Indeed, some authors think that the ‘creeping broadening’ of the definition and scope of SoTL means that the term is functionally useless (Canning & Masika, 2022, p. 1091). They advocate consigning the term ‘SoTL’ to the ‘ash heap of educational history’ and suggest that instead we just start to refer to separate activities such as ‘research’ or ‘sharing practice and/or experience’ (ibid, p. 1094-1095). Cleaver et al. (2016, p. 7) makes a similar point about the definition of “scholarship”, preferring instead to refer to “educational enquiry”. However, as SoTL is an established term across HE and is now often embedded in institutional promotion criteria (see, for example, University of Glasgow, n.d.) I would suggest that the terms are here to stay.

Another issue is that of the status of SoTL. Boshier (2009) writes that it can be difficult for advocates of SoTL to persuade colleagues that it is a serious subject as worthy of consideration as academic research. This is not surprising considering the confusion I noted above (see, in particular, Fanghanel 2016b). In addition, there is a tendency to see SoTL as inferior to research, and that can take various forms: a) it can be seen as of less value to an institution because there are fewer sources of funding, and smaller grants, (which are mainly internal); b) because research is often seen as superior to teaching, disciplinary research can be assumed to be of higher quality than SoTL; c) related to point (b), LTS contracts are often seen as being inferior to R&T (see Canning & Masika, 2022, for a discussion of some of these issues).

Connected to all of this ambiguity is another issue: the journey to SoTL is not a clearly articulated pathway in the way that other academic tracks are. When we consider the ‘traditional’ researcher journey, we notice how much time an individual has to develop in each role – the journey from beginning as an undergraduate, through to taught postgraduate student, then to postgraduate research student, often then to post doc, and

then into an academic (research and teaching) role, takes many years. I don't want to imply that this journey is easy, or always as clear cut as this but it is well mapped out and familiar to others.

Now, by contrast, consider the trajectory to SoTL. The journey will usually begin as above – through undergraduate, to taught postgraduate student to postgraduate research student, often then to post doc. But, at some point, the journey breaks. When an academic makes the transition to an LTS track (at whatever stage in their career), it seems as if they are stepping off a well-trodden path and walking off into uncharted territory. Suddenly nothing feels familiar – all the familiar channels of support seem to be gone. It would not matter so much that the old structure was no longer available if there were a new one instead, but it can seem that there is no help or support available. The scholar feels alone and lost. This is exacerbated when, as often happens, other colleagues assume that SoTL itself is uncomplicated. There are two challenges for the scholar here: first there is the lack of a clear path noted above and second there is the expectation that scholars will be able to immediately begin SoTL projects without needing any help, and without recognition that this is in some ways an entirely new discipline. While disciplinary knowledge may have taken years to develop, academics are often expected to reach similar levels in a new discipline (SoTL) in far less time with little support (see Tierney, 2017, for a discussion of this). In addition, there is also the requirement to continue with their personal development in their first discipline, which can cause unmanageable workloads.

## What is SoTL

Before I continue, it will be helpful if I indicate what I mean by SoTL. As I noted above, there is still no single agreed definition to insert here. However, there are helpful suggestions in the literature which can help to overcome the issues I noted above. The first step is to make a distinction between being scholarly (doing scholarship) and SoTL. By being scholarly I mean something like Richlin's discussion of scholarly teachers as those who consult the literature, select and apply appropriate information to guide the teaching-learning experience, conduct systematic observations, analyse the outcomes, and obtain peer evaluation of their classroom performance (Richlin, 2001). The emphasis here is on being a good teacher, in the sense that Boshier (2009) identifies above. Examples of this type of scholarly practice would be activities such as course development and course redesign (Martin, 2007).

Being a scholarly teacher is an important part of SoTL, but I believe that SoTL goes beyond this. We might describe it as "the intellectual work that faculty members do when they use their disciplinary knowledge to investigate a question about their students' learning (and their teaching), gather evidence in a systematic way, submit their findings to peer review, and make them public for others to build upon" (Dewar et al., 2018, p. 7). Here, as we see, SoTL goes beyond having a scholarly attitude to learning and teaching, it goes beyond undertaking evidence-based practice - it also includes conducting educational research, submitting the results for peer review and making them public by disseminating them. When set out like this, we can see that SoTL is not just lightweight research, it is a discipline in its own right. And this can lead to concerns around how to undertake SoTL projects, in particular with knowing what is appropriate as a methodology and related methods to frame a SoTL project and evaluate it. As those making the move

from research to SoTL are not trained in educational research methods, they do not know what is and is not permissible.

## Methodologies for SoTL

Before I introduce my suggestions for a methodological approach, there is one further explanation I should give. It is common for education students to be taught that they should set out their ontological and epistemological positions. Broadly speaking, they are taught that there are two schools of thought – the positivist/realist and the constructivist/interpretivist (Cleaver et al., 2016; Silverman, 2005). The former, they are told, correspond to quantitative methods of data analysis and collection, the latter to qualitative methods. These are not sophisticated philosophical positions, and most people will have a more nuanced view. Indeed, many students want to use a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, and so use a ‘mixed methods’ approach (for example, using a combination of surveys and interviews). Of course, the above distinctions will be more familiar to scholars from some disciplinary backgrounds than to others. For example, social scientists who are already familiar with both qualitative and quantitative methods might find it easier to appreciate the relevance of both schools of thought than scholars with a background in hard sciences. There is also a realisation in the literature that one does not need to commit to any single ontological or epistemological paradigm in order to undertake rigorous research or scholarship – the scholar can select the approach that is most appropriate to a specific context. This latter approach is sometimes described as pragmatism, but that term has a specific meaning in philosophy, meaning that education students and scholars doing an internet search for pragmatism can find themselves tumbling down a rabbit hole of confusion. This is one reason that I prefer to use a different term.

## Bricolage as a methodological approach

The term that I suggest for this pragmatic approach is bricolage. Bricolage is derived from the French verb ‘bricoler’, which translates as “to tinker”, or “improvise” (Baldick, 2008, n.p.). Levi-Strauss (1966) first introduces the term in order to make a contrast between two types of problem solving. He compares the bricoleur, who makes do with the materials that they already have and puts them together to make something new, with the engineer, who creates new systems from scratch. In the creative arts, bricolage is the creation of a work from a diverse range of things that happen to be available, or a work constructed using mixed media. It is these senses of bricoleurs working with things that they already have to hand that I want to use here. This is what I mean by taking a pragmatic approach to SoTL – to begin with methodologies and methods that are familiar to the scholar and to give careful consideration of how to use these in the context of a SoTL project. The use of bricolage as a term to describe a methodological approach is already established in the educational literature, as this passage illustrates:

The qualitative-researcher-as-bricoleur or a maker of quilts uses the aesthetic and material tools of his or her craft, deploying whatever strategies, methods, or empirical materials are at hand (Becker, 1998, p. 2) ... The choice of which interpretive practices to employ is not necessarily set in advance. The “choice of research practices depends upon the questions that are asked, and the questions depend on their context” (Nelson et al., 1992, p. 2), what is available in the context, and

what the researcher can do in that setting. (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005, p. 4).

As Denzin and Lincoln (2005) write, it is open to the scholar to use which ever methods they choose for their SoTL projects, as long as they justify their approach and ensure that it is appropriate in their context. This justification is vital, of course, as is an appreciation that different methods can constrain the types of research question that can be answered. Denzin and Lincoln suggest that bricolage can be used for any qualitative research project; I further suggest that it can also be extended to apply to any SoTL project whether qualitative or quantitative. I think that there are two different ways of looking at SoTL. One way is to view it as being a body of knowledge and set of practices that are exclusive to SoTL. If this is your understanding, then you are likely to view SoTL projects as beyond the reach of the novice. However, if you see it as an extension of the sorts of practices that you already use in your discipline, then you are more likely to see it as something you can engage in and understand that the practices of SoTL are not limited to those who are already recognised as 'excellent' educators. Of course, in reality both views are true and, in particular, there will be a body of SoTL literature to consume. However, from the point of view of getting started with SoTL, it is helpful to realise that it is perfectly acceptable to begin by using familiar methods. In fact, it can be argued that it is not only acceptable, it is recommended.

## Bricolage in practice

In this paper so far, I have been talking about SoTL as if it is one discrete body of knowledge with a single set of acceptable practices. However, we might ask ourselves if that is actually true. If, as I've suggested, SoTL also includes knowledge about how learning and teaching is practiced in different subjects, then it is at least possible that there will be differences in the methods which are appropriate to apply in different disciplines. We accept this to be the case with regard to learning, teaching and assessment, so should we go further and suggest that there can also be different methodologies for different disciplines? I think that we should, and I am not alone in saying this. For example, Martin (2007) writes that because SoTL requires knowledge of a specific discipline, as well as knowledge of teaching and learning, it might well look different in various disciplines. We also find similar advice from the Institute of Academic Development at Edinburgh University. On their web pages they suggest that:

In reality, many people practice SoTL uniquely and reflective of their discipline. For some people, this might look like using data-driven observation techniques to enhance their use of active learning in the classroom (e.g., how often did I ask my students questions during my lecture?). For others, this might be researching how to work with students as partners in their curriculum development and sharing their findings at a national higher education conference.

Likewise Cleaver et al. (2016) emphasise the importance of disciplinary "perspectives and procedures" to inform approaches to SoTL (p. 20) and suggest that scholars who are new to SoTL begin by using methods from their own "existing disciplinary research, scholarship and higher-order thinking skills" in order to begin engaging with SoTL, while scholars with more experience still use them as a starting point for further projects (ibid, p. 115).

Of course, merely saying that the scholar is allowed to use whichever methodologies and methods they think are appropriate will not resolve all the issues outlined above. However, gaining further recognition across the sector about the relevance of subject-specific SoTL practices would be an important move. According to this picture, a scholar who is new to SoTL is not necessarily a complete novice as they might have thought they were, because they have already gained many relevant methodological skills during their researcher journey. Looked at in this way, the journey to SoTL scholar can be seen to be just as much a continuation as the journey to researcher. What is needed is some scaffolding so that scholars can gain confidence in transferring their existing skills into the new domain, consolidating their skills and adding to them. In the next section I set out some suggestions for getting started.

## Suggestions

### Start with what is familiar

Begin with using methods that are already familiar to you from your previous research. If your background is in quantitative research and you are comfortable with using data-driven methods, then design your SoTL projects to allow you to play to your strengths. If your background is more text-based or interpretative, think about how you can harness these skills and use textual analysis as one of your methods. However, as noted above, the methods chosen can constrain (or even, to some extent, dictate) what can be asked and answered, so scholars will need to ensure that the research questions they construct are answerable by the chosen methods.

### Justify your approach

Reflect on why you are using each method and how it is appropriate to your research design. Be explicit in your writing about how you made your choices and which designs are (and are not) open for you to use with particular approaches. This can help to overcome criticisms from those who assume that you are using what is familiar because of a lack of critical reflection.

### Make use of what is available

One of the biggest lessons of bricolage is to make use of what is already available, rather than starting from scratch. Before you set out to design a SoTL project, consider what is already being produced by you, your students, and your colleagues that you might be able to repurpose. For example, is there already an end of course evaluation process that you could use? (Of course, you would obtain ethical approval for this.) Have you produced materials as part of your course (re)design? Maybe you have an assessment rubric that you would like to get feedback on. You could set this up as a SoTL evaluation project, either by getting your students to give feedback on how they used them or by designing a project for colleagues across the sector to help you to evaluate them. All of these can be done by using straightforward research methods such as surveys, interviews, and focus groups.

### Have confidence in yourself

One thing that I would emphasise, and that I hope I have made clear throughout this paper, is my belief that SoTL is not (and should not be) limited to an elite group of 'excellent' practitioners. Rather, I believe that any educator who is interested in reflecting on, and improving, their own teaching practices can make a contribution.

## Find collaborators

The key to successful SoTL, in my opinion, is finding the right collaborators. In SoTL, there is not the pressure to produce single author outputs (or to publish in high-star journals); the emphasis is on producing and evaluating high-quality learning and teaching designs that will be of value to the HE community. Do the teaching team have reflective practices at the end of the course? If so, are they interested in a collaborative reflective SoTL project? Are other colleagues in your school/college/other institution already undertaking similar evaluations? Collaborative initiatives can be of help in several ways:

- It is easier to stay focussed and motivated if there are others to keep you accountable.
- Others are likely to have a different perspective than you and provide insights that would not otherwise have occurred to you.
- Others are likely to have different methodological skills and strengths, meaning that a variety of methods can be used in one project.
- As you collaborate, you can teach each other different methods, so that collaborative SoTL is also a powerful type of continuing professional development.
- SoTL projects that are conducted across different cohorts can result in larger datasets (if that is important) or lead to richer analyses (if that is relevant).
- Even if you do not collaborate on writing, you can use your peer network to get early feedback about the particular methods that you are using.

When I was beginning my educational research, I was lucky to have more experienced mentors who were willing to collaborate with me. As my network grew, I found others with different skills to collaborate with. This not only allowed us to produce papers with mixed methodologies, but it helped me to extend my repertoire of methods as I learnt from others. For example, thanks to several projects I have been able to learn the basics of social network analysis. Now I try to pay this forward by my continued collaborative practices.

## Conclusion

Earlier I suggested that the transition from subject-based research to SoTL could be seen as a journey. I think that I have sketched out some tactics to help to smooth that transition. However, I do not wish to leave readers with the impression that this will be easy.

I am sympathetic to those writers, such as Tierney et al. (2020), who suggest that SoTL is also a journey in itself – it is something that you can decide to become and decide that you can work towards, not something that one can immediately be. I do not think that these two views are incompatible – my view addresses the lived reality of most academics of teaching and scholarship contracts because it gives practical suggestions which can be implemented by those with heavy workloads. We can, and we should, continue to make arguments about the need for time and space to develop as SoTL, but at the same we can still undertake meaningful SoTL. Bricolage comes from a practical tradition – it calls for people to act, rather than talking about what should be done. I therefore end this paper with a call to action to all budding SoTL scholars to take the first steps into SoTL and to share their early results with others. In some ways, because SoTL is a relatively new discipline, field, or area, it is open to those of us who are practicing SoTL to decide which

methods and methodologies are appropriate and to justify those methods as a community of scholars.

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