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## A Personal Reflection on the 2008 ISSOTL Conference

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## A Personal Reflection on the 2008 ISSOTL Conference

### **Abstract**

**Excerpt:** The 5th International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (ISSOTL) Conference was held in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada in October 2008. The theme of the conference was "Celebrating Connections: Learning, Teaching, Scholarship". The conference offered a myriad of opportunities for learning, growing and making connections with four days of keynote speakers, concurrent sessions and poster presentations.

### **Keywords**

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## **A Personal Reflection on the 2008 ISSOTL Conference**

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The 5<sup>th</sup> International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (ISSOTL) Conference was held in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada in October 2008. The theme of the conference was "Celebrating Connections: Learning, Teaching, Scholarship". The conference offered a myriad of opportunities for learning, growing and making connections with four days of keynote speakers, concurrent sessions and poster presentations.

I think that a conference experience is always a personal one, even when you attend a convention with thousands of other participants. Obviously, perceptions and understanding are shaped by experience, so I need to confess that I am relatively new to SoTL research. My background and training are as a molecular microbiologist. I pursued scholarly teaching for several years before undertaking my first SoTL research project in 2004. Although SoTL work is now a permanent part of my research program, I still have much to learn so I found the ISSOTL conference very engaging.

The 2008 ISSOTL Conference provided me with the opportunity to further explore two topics: the definition of SoTL and the development of SoTL into a discipline. In many ways these topics are inextricably connected. How do you move SoTL forward as a discipline on par with other areas if it cannot be clearly defined? Below, I discuss some of the viewpoints, data and conclusions that were put forward in the conference sessions that I personally attended; and how they contributed to my current thinking. In most cases I have not cited individual presenters because much of the discussion is based on multiple presentations.

What is SoTL? This innocuous question has been posed to me on numerous occasions by science colleagues that are trying to understand what I do when I'm not doing "real" research. For me, SoTL is a discipline that attempts to explain how and why students learn. We can use the results of SoTL research to inform our teaching practices, with high-impact SoTL research addressing large principles that are applicable across content area disciplines. This definition works for me because it is something that I can understand as a scientist; it explains SoTL as a parallel field of research – different but equal.

I attended numerous sessions at the ISSOTL conference where this same topic was up for debate. Much of the discussion focused on the perceived need for the definition of SoTL to be inclusive. The argument was that SoTL needed to be sufficiently broad to include professional development activities and scholarly teaching, in addition to what I defined above as SoTL research. I heard many individuals make this plea for inclusiveness, with the idea that the elitist status of other disciplines was undesirable. In my opinion, limited participation in disciplinary research occurs because individuals generally require training and background to conduct rigorous, high-quality research. Peer-reviewed products in these disciplines form the basis for further research and discussion. Without a similar, directed SoTL approach, the discipline may become muddled. I participated in some

sessions at ISSOTL that included presentations on both professional development activities and SoTL research. I would argue against this type of inclusiveness - it will confuse the SoTL field and make it more difficult to overcome the perception of a lack of rigor. I do not think that SoTL societies need to divorce themselves from professional development activities, which play a major role in fostering scholarly teaching and SoTL research, but separate sessions should be devoted to this content.

I know that my understanding of a scholarly definition is at its core biased by my own content area discipline. There was discussion at the ISSOTL meeting suggesting that we should not allow our definition of SoTL to be influenced by other disciplines. Instead, SoTL should be free to define the discipline in anyway, even if it essentially challenges the current discipline paradigm. In theory, the idea is very appealing because it speaks to academic freedom. However, the reality is that SoTL needs to be valued and respected by individuals that participate in other disciplines; and by administrative structures that are accustomed to the values of those disciplines. A new paradigm will be much harder to market than a variation on the standard theme.

There was also discussion at the ISSOTL conference on whether scholarly teaching should be considered a part of the SoTL discipline. Clearly, scholarly teaching is critical to the SoTL discipline; this is where discoveries are put into practice. Since I spent much of my career working on bacterial pathogens, I will use an analogy from this field. Researchers often expend a great deal of effort identifying an antimicrobial agent (i.e. basic discovery, clinical trials) before it is made available to physicians for patient use. In a similar way, SoTL researchers may spend many years trying to determine how students learn most productively in a particular environment (e.g. online) before it is put into general practice by scholarly teachers. In both scenarios, all participants are professionals; but the physicians would not consider themselves discipline area researchers and the same should be true of scholarly teachers. In the end, all university faculty members should be involved in scholarly teaching as a part of their educational function; but this does not constitute scholarly research. Thus, while scholarly teaching is a critical component of SoTL dissemination, it does not in itself constitute SoTL discipline research.

When I was first introduced to SoTL, I did not immediately grasp the importance of defining SoTL. However, as SoTL became an important part of my research program, the need became more obvious. In my opinion, the need for a definition speaks directly to the need for recognition of SoTL as a discipline. Although there has been some progress on this front, discussions at the ISSOTL meeting made it clear that there is a long way to go. Research presented in one session assessed administrators' attitudes toward SoTL (E. Van Melle and L. Flynn, E4), with survey results indicating that administrators generally valued SoTL. However, when questioned further, it became clear that the administrators did not have a clear understanding of what constituted SoTL work or how they would measure the effectiveness of a SoTL researcher. One reason for generally positive attitudes among administrators toward SoTL may be the increasing pressures on institutions for accreditation and learning outcome assessments; these are areas where SoTL researchers can lend their expertise. SoTL should continue to emphasize its value in emerging needs areas (e.g. distant learning) as a productive way to institutionalize the discipline. At the same time, it is important to note that administrators do not clearly understand what constitutes SoTL work or how to judge the productivity of a SoTL researcher. This speaks directly to the definition of SoTL and the need for rigor in the field. If faculty members from other disciplines view SoTL as a rigorous discipline, then the administration will value it as they

do other disciplines (e.g. publications, meeting presentations, grants). Administrators participating in the ISSOTL sessions made it clear that they want to appropriately value SoTL contributions and some institutions are moving to develop reward structures, but they need discipline-specific guidelines and faculty buy-in. An inability within the SoTL field to clearly define itself in a manner consistent with other disciplines and to present research with the same degree of rigor, will prevent formation of a clear reward structure. Some at the meeting argued that this should not be a motivating factor (and they have a point); but the reality is that faculty have to account for their time and productivity. If SoTL cannot establish itself as a discipline that warrants equal reward, then many motivated, high-ability researchers will stay away.

The need for rigor cannot be over emphasized, especially for researchers working in the hard sciences. Faculty members in these areas are not familiar with qualitative data, and generally distrust the validity of results based on “soft” data. When I conducted my first SoTL study and collected qualitative data in collaboration with an experienced learning outcomes evaluator, she was exasperated by my insistence that the qualitative data somehow be reduced to a form of quantitative information. I found it difficult to process the richness of the qualitative data in a meaningful way. I also wanted to avoid the perception that conclusions were less than rigorous because they were based on qualitative data. I now have a better understanding of and appreciation for qualitative SoTL data, but this was the result of several SoTL research projects. For scientists that do not engage in SoTL research, the perception often remains. Therefore, rigor within the peer-reviewed SoTL outlets is critical for recognition of SoTL research by faculty members in other disciplines.

In conclusion, I found the 2008 ISSOTL conference to be an engaging, informative experience. There were numerous presentations/discussions on the definition and status of SoTL, highlighting challenges facing the field. These on-going discussions and studies will help delineate and institutionalize the field, which are critical steps for the development of clear administrative reward structures and the productive involvement of faculty from diverse content-area disciplines. Rigor and focus will bring recognition to SoTL as an established discipline and enrich the field by attracting diverse, talented researchers.