

# The transformative potential of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning: evaluating its status as a threshold concept

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**Keywords:** *Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), threshold concepts, positionality, identity, communities of practice.*

## Introduction

Thresholds are the places where we can learn, where we can change our mind, where we can step into new identities (Meyer and Land, 2003).

The transformative potential of education is encapsulated through the lens of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL). Emerging as a pivotal area of inquiry in Higher Education (HE), SoTL systematically investigates teaching and learning to enhance educational practices (Huxham *et al.*, 2015). Central to this discourse is the idea of threshold concepts, defined by Meyer and Land (2003) as transformative ideas that fundamentally alter a learner's perception of a subject. This opinion piece critically examines whether SoTL qualifies as a threshold concept by exploring its defining characteristics and considering the implications of positionality, context, and inquiry within SoTL work. Furthermore, it engages with the SoTL grand challenges (Scharff *et al.*, 2023), particularly that of identification with SoTL, to deepen understanding of its transformative potential.

Threshold concepts are transformative, serving as gateways to deeper understanding within a discipline (Meyer and Land, 2006). They often induce a state of liminality, where learners confront confusion and uncertainty – integral components of the learning

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process (Eady *et al.*, 2021). In the context of SoTL, engaging with its principles and methodologies can significantly challenge educators' assumptions regarding teaching effectiveness and student learning (Felten, 2013).

Threshold concepts possess five main characteristics: they are transformative, irreversible, integrative, bounded, and frequently troublesome (Meyer and Land, 2006). These attributes suggest that SoTL could function as a threshold concept. However, a debate emerges: do the complexities inherent in SoTL experiences and grand challenges make it a threshold concept that educators must navigate for meaningful pedagogical transformation (Scharff *et al.*, 2023)?

Proponents of the notion that SoTL is a threshold concept argue that engagement leads to substantial shifts in teaching practices and professional identity (Huber *et al.*, 2005; Simmons *et al.*, 2021). Through systematic investigations into learning, educators attain a nuanced understanding of their instructional methods, aligning with the transformative nature of threshold concepts. For instance, the adoption of evidence-based practices through SoTL compels educators to reassess their assumptions, resulting in significant changes in instructional strategies (Fanghanel, 2013). Research indicates that faculties that are engaged in SoTL report increased confidence in their teaching abilities and a heightened willingness to experiment with innovative pedagogical approaches (Felten, 2013).

The inquiry process intrinsic to SoTL fosters a cyclical relationship between action and reflection, crucial for grasping threshold concepts (Hubball *et al.*, 2013). This cycle could promote deeper learning and cultivate a culture of continuous improvement within educational institutions. Through SoTL, educators can transcend surface-level understandings, achieving a more integrated comprehension of their practice and experiencing the transformative nature characteristic of a threshold concept (Bernstein, 2013).

Conversely, some scholars (Chick, 2014; Bass, 2020) contend that SoTL may not fully meet the criteria of a threshold concept. Critics argue that the diverse range of inquiries and methodologies within SoTL complicates the identification of a singular, transformative idea. The variability in understanding and practising SoTL across different contexts may dilute its status as a threshold concept (Chick, 2014; Bass, 2020; Cook-Sather *et al.*, 2021).

The diversity inherent in SoTL practices suggests that educators may undergo varying degrees of transformation and recognise distinct processes (Gansemer-Topf *et al.*, 2022). For instance, the ways in which faculties in research-intensive institutions engage with SoTL may differ from their counterparts in teaching-focused colleges, raising questions about the universality required for defining SoTL as a threshold concept.

Moreover, threshold concepts should, ideally, be applicable across diverse contexts and disciplines (Meyer and Land, 2006). If SoTL is subject to varying interpretations and applications, its classification as a threshold concept becomes problematic (Knewstubb and Bond, 2009). While SoTL can inspire transformative change, it may not consistently function as a threshold concept for all educators.

Positionality emerges as a critical factor in this debate. Each educator's background, experiences, and values shape their understanding of teaching and learning, significantly influencing their engagement with SoTL. This positionality introduces subjectivity into the inquiry process as educators bring unique perspectives to their teaching practices (McKinney, 2006; Brookfield, 2017).

Recognising positionality is vital as it underscores the subjective nature of SoTL inquiries. Educators' identities – shaped by professional experiences, disciplinary backgrounds, and cultural contexts – affect how they interpret and engage with SoTL. For example, an educator primarily identifying as a researcher may approach SoTL differently from one who prioritises teaching (Simmons *et al.*, 2013).

Seen as the interplay between understanding and misunderstanding, SoTL complicates the argument for its classification as a threshold concept (Perkins, 2006; Manarin and Abrahamson, 2016). If SoTL is interpreted variably across contexts and experiences, the consensus required for it to be defined as a threshold concept is questioned. Consequently, the challenge of positionality raises critical considerations about how educators identify with SoTL and the implications for their teaching practices.

Context (Felten, 2013) significantly shapes the evaluation of SoTL as a threshold concept. Institutional culture, disciplinary norms, and educational practices influence the perception and implementation of SoTL. For instance, educators in research-intensive institutions

may confront different challenges and opportunities compared with those in teaching-focused environments. This variability raises questions about the consistency of transformative experiences associated with SoTL. Furthermore, institutional support is crucial in facilitating or hindering SoTL initiatives. Without recognition or resources for SoTL, educators may struggle to engage meaningfully with its principles, limiting the potential for transformation and suggesting that context profoundly affects whether SoTL functions as a threshold concept (Bernstein, 2013).

Cultural differences among educators and students further complicate the SoTL landscape. Educators from diverse backgrounds may adopt distinct approaches to teaching and learning that can influence their engagement with SoTL (Simmons *et al.*, 2021). This variability accentuates the need to consider context when assessing SoTL's potential as a threshold concept.

Establishing communities of practice is essential for promoting SoTL within HE institutions (Simmons *et al.*, 2013; Miller-Young *et al.*, 2018). Such communities foster collaboration among educators, enabling the sharing of insights, best practices, and challenges related to teaching and learning. Bernstein (2013) posits that SoTL practitioners can become invaluable assets to their institutions, acting as bridges between diverse knowledge bases and cultural perspectives. By engaging in collective SoTL inquiries, educators can leverage their unique identities to create richer, more inclusive educational environments. However, the formation of these communities is fraught with challenges. Identity significantly shapes participation within these groups (Miller-Young *et al.*, 2018). Identity is a multifaceted perception influenced by experiences, demographic characteristics, and social contexts. This complexity can lead to feelings of inclusion or exclusion. For instance, educators and students from under-represented backgrounds may feel marginalised in predominantly homogeneous communities, limiting their contributions and undermining the potential benefits of collaborative inquiry.

The challenge of identity in teaching and learning is particularly pertinent within communities of practice. Each member brings a unique identity to the dialogue, influencing how they interpret and respond to information. An educator's sense of efficacy can be shaped by student perceptions, which are often influenced by the identities of both parties. Understanding identity in the context of SoTL enhances engagement and impacts collective outcomes in educational practices.

Promoting awareness of identity dynamics within these communities can yield transformative experiences that enhance teaching and learning. By addressing identity-based assumptions and biases, educators can create more inclusive environments that foster open dialogue and diverse perspectives (Simmons *et al.*, 2013). Moreover, as communities of practice become more attuned to identity complexities, they can develop targeted strategies to ensure equitable participation, amplifying the benefits of SoTL.

Integrating diverse identities within communities of practice enriches SoTL, leading to a culture of inquiry responsive to the varied needs of students and educators alike (Scharff *et al.*, 2023). This collaborative approach not only strengthens the SoTL framework but also positions institutions as leaders in cultivating inclusive and effective teaching practices.

### **Examining SoTL principles**

A closer examination of SoTL principles, as articulated by Felten (2013), reveals further dimensions to this debate. Felten identifies five principles: inquiry into learning, grounded in context, robust methods, partnerships, and public sharing. These principles reflect the complexity of SoTL and indicate that its application may vary widely among educators.

The principle of inquiry into learning aligns closely with the transformative nature of threshold concepts, highlighting the significance of reflective practice in enhancing teaching effectiveness. Engaging in inquiry allows for a critical assessment of teaching strategies and their impact on student learning, mirroring the transformative experiences described in threshold concepts.

The principle of being grounded in context underscores SoTL's situational nature. Educators must consider their environments when implementing SoTL practices as these contexts significantly influence outcomes. The necessity for robust methods ensures that SoTL inquiries are credible and meaningful; however, variability in methodologies across contexts may affect the universality of transformative experiences.

Partnerships (Healey *et al.*, 2019), another key principle, foster collaboration among educators and students, enriching the SoTL process. Sharing insights and practices through collaborative

inquiry can create a collective understanding of teaching and learning, potentially resulting in transformative experiences for all involved. Nevertheless, if partnerships are limited or unevenly distributed, the potential for transformation may not be realised equitably.

Finally, the principle of public sharing foregrounds the importance of disseminating SoTL findings to a broader audience (Bernstein, 2013; Felten, 2013). By sharing insights and best practices, educators contribute to the discourse on teaching and learning, potentially influencing their peers' perceptions and practices. This sharing can amplify SoTL's transformative nature; however, disparities in access to platforms for sharing may hinder its recognition as a threshold concept.

## **Conclusion**

The debate over whether SoTL qualifies as a threshold concept reveals a complex interplay between transformative potential, contextual variability, and identity influence. While engaging with SoTL can lead to significant shifts in teaching practices and educator identities, the diverse interpretations and applications of SoTL challenge the universality required for its classification as a threshold concept. Positionality and context underscore the multifaceted nature of identity in teaching and learning, emphasising the need for inclusive practices within communities of practice.

The future of SoTL in HE necessitates a rigorous engagement with its complexities and an emphasis on collaborative methodologies that enhance its transformative potential. This evolution demands a critical examination of both the challenges and benefits of SoTL, establishing it as a vital mechanism for pedagogical innovation. As the landscape of SoTL continues to shift, the pressing question arises: what new pathways will emerge in this dynamic environment? The exploration of these pathways will not only redefine the role of SoTL but will also reshape the broader educational experience, prompting a reimagining of how teaching and learning can fully empower all educators and learners. The implications of recognising SoTL as a threshold concept warrant careful consideration as they hold the potential to drive profound changes in educational practices and institutional cultures.

## **Acknowledgements**

The Editorial Board would like to thank Dr. Warren Kidd for his collegiate generosity in supporting the reviewing of this piece.

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