

# Review of The Grounded Instruction Librarian: Participating in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

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Librarianship is an applied field, yet teaching librarians want our practice to be informed by theory reflective, and responsive to our students' learning or lack thereof. The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) provides a framework for teaching librarians to learn and apply theory, develop professionally, and improve student learning—all the while increasing the credibility of the field as a whole. *The Grounded Instruction Librarian: Participating in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, published by the Association of College and Research Libraries, provides both an entry point for novice SoTL researchers as well as inspiration for those who have more experience.

For those new to SoTL, the introductory essay briefly explains the framework, its key tenets, and benefits. In making the case for SoTL in the academic library, the editors describe the power of SoTL to both legitimize the field of academic librarianship as an academic discipline by grounding it in sound theory and to develop the teaching librarian by offering opportunities to learn, collaborate with other teaching faculty, apply theory, and perform research, all with the goal of increasing student learning. The main content is organized in four parts, each section beginning with a grounding essay followed by case studies. Some case studies are traditional with clear application of a theory to a specific learning context while others are better seen as thought experiments in pursuing questions and lines of inquiry for the field of information literacy.

The first section examines the idea of signature pedagogies and pedagogical content in relation to information literacy. In the foundational essay, Lauren Hays defines these concepts. Signature pedagogies are ways of cultivating the ways of thinking and behaviors that are implicit within a profession or academic discipline; pedagogical content is knowledge of which pedagogical strategies complement the content within a discipline. Both signature pedagogies and pedagogical

content are newer concepts in relationship to information literacy where the application is distinct from other disciplines in that librarians are not teaching the field of librarianship to students in the way that anthropologists are teaching anthropology. Along the same lines, information literacy is not a skill or mindset unique to one academic discipline. While the sharing of content, strategy, and teaching to the disciplines has been happening for years, through the theory-based SoTL, teaching librarians can better explore, report on, and utilize the research of others. Section one is the shortest, which serves to demonstrate that while SoTL has a strong foothold within academic librarianship, “There is still much for the profession to explore in terms of signature pedagogies” (xv). Case studies in this section are less application-based and instead provide questions for the teaching librarian to explore to help develop signature pedagogies and pedagogical content through the SoTL framework, whether through research questions to investigate, exercises within a one-shot, or the mapping of a discipline.

Section two dives into SoTL theory, beginning with Nancy L. Chick’s introductory essay that contends with the critique that SoTL is “undertheorized” (p.55). Chick agrees that the field needs to be based on sound theory. On the one hand, she argues that theory does have a footing in the application of SoTL to librarianship, but she also challenges librarians to develop a deeper understanding of pedagogical theories, thoughtfully apply them, and explain them well. No single theory is promoted over any other so long as a theory is student-centered, and subsequent case studies delve into many different theories, such as critical information theory, specifications grading, constructivist and social-constructivist theories of learning, and the teaching-learning environment. Case studies apply one of the theories to a specific learning context, such as Seale’s case study that delves into the Decoding the Disciplines framework, which identifies bottlenecks students face when learning a new discipline, and

then uses critical information theory to help take the mystery out of the library by showing its “constructedness” (81).

Next, section three examine SoTL as research. Grounding the chapter and inspiring the reader, Emma Coonan turns the anxiety-producing “inside/outside/in-between” nature of academic librarianship on its head by demonstrating how it poises us well to conduct SoTL research, improve teaching and communities, and raise our status in the academy. SoTL “offers teaching librarians not only the tools and insights required to conduct formal inquiry into their practice, but also the means to confront deeper questions about themselves and their identities and about the roles and responsibilities these roles bring” (128). Coonan observes that the liminal space of librarians parallels the SoTL framework that is both within and among academic disciplines and grounded in theory but deeply cross-boundary, suggesting that “no one is better equipped for working beyond boundaries, in-between disciplines, than librarians” (p.130). This section is the longest of the four, and the case studies follow a more traditional format. They are full of applicable models that examine everything from a credit-bearing graduate course, collaborations with faculty, one-shots, and reflective practices.

The final section uses the lens of SoTL for professional development. By undertaking theory-driven, appropriate research, reflecting on the results, and communicating those results to a practitioner community, SoTL functions as a means for professional development. Even better is when these actions take place within a community of practice that is continually reflecting and refining ideas together, a practice several of the case studies in this section illustrate. Peter Felton, Margy MacMillan, and Joan Ruelle’s introductory essay defines the essential traits of SoTL as professional development, including that it be: “inquiry-focused learning, grounded in context, methodologically sound, conducted in partnership with students, and appropriately public,” (251) and subsequent case studies

illustrate these principles in examples that underscore the point that “SoTL always aims to both enhance individual practice and to contribute to the broader” community of teachers (245).

When approaching the book, a thorough understanding of SoTL is not necessary, and indeed, the book will demonstrate how to begin to apply the SoTL framework to various aspects of teaching and learning within the library. Yet, the book does assume some knowledge of SoTL seminal texts and principles; for instance, O’Brien’s compass is mentioned numerous times throughout, and some readers may wish to familiarize themselves with these texts to better understand the discussion though this is not essential. While readers will likely select the case studies that most appeal based on their institution, focus areas, and research interests, the foundational essays should not be ignored as each illuminates a different facet of SoTL. The book will also appeal to those more familiar with SoTL through the engaging case studies and the many questions posed throughout that could offer direction for future research.

While the book will no doubt inspire readers in their own teaching and research, there are some limitations. While the foundational essays present different aspects of SoTL, including theory, research, professional development, and pedagogical content/signature theories, these boundaries become rather fuzzy among the case studies. To the point, isn’t the comparison of two theoretical approaches to a course a form of SoTL research in addition to theory? It becomes less clear why the distinctions are there. In addition, there is some overlap in the case studies; for example, two chapters on communities of practice present the same grounded theories, and the applications look similar. This is a risk with any anthology; however, more careful editing can have helped those overlaps seem less redundant.

Other limitations are acknowledged by the writers themselves. To be clear, SoTL requires time and effort, as any thoughtful, theory-based approach to teaching will. Numerous writers comment on the amount of time required to carry out their research. In the final section, Felten, MacMillan, and Ruelle liken engaging with SoTL as learning a new subject area, suggesting: “Becoming familiar with SoTL, like any new liaison area, requires understanding how and where it is disseminated and accessed” (249). This is both reassuring—we understand the process of learning a new academic discipline—and a little discouraging—we understand the time required to this well, and many simply do not have that time in the face of pressing demands. In addition, as many writers acknowledge, SoTL research often requires collaboration with classroom faculty, which is not always possible. For example, even if teaching more multi-session formats were feasible, ultimately, we must rely on willing teaching faculty for the opportunity. Along the same lines, while a few chapters focus on one-shot sessions, such as the useful chapter on mapping IL skills of first-year business students, the majority of instruction examples steer away from the types of classes or online environments in which many of us spend most of our time. This makes sense; any signature pedagogy is likely not going to be fully realized in sixty minutes; however, it would be more helpful for those new to the field to see case studies that could be applied more easily. However, readers can take cues from the book and work to develop communities of practice in which to interrogate the local context using the SoTL framework to improve student learning.

Ultimately, what does set this book apart from other information-literacy case studies or cookbooks stems from the ideas implicit within the SoTL framework. From a sound theoretical perspective, writers explain *why* they approach a context using a particular methodology or framework and how they applied those ideas; there is thoughtful reflection, and then, in many of case studies, the

changes that result and the effects of those changes. The case studies go much deeper than a simple lesson plan or narrative. Incidentally, at the very least, readers are likely to reflect on the ideas in the book and find some ideas to infuse their teaching. At best—readers will gain a new framework and theoretical lens that will continually shape their teaching, careers, institutions, and the field of academic librarianship moving forward.