

**SoTL Scholar:** Marian Karch Stordahl  
**Date:** 13 May 2024  
**Topics of interest:** Formative assessment, single-point rubric  
**Themes/Keywords:** *SoTL, context, educational goals, evidence-based teaching, formative assessment, higher education, qualitative research, writing development*

### **Reflection:**

For some years, the need for deeper thought and personal reflection on the mission and purpose of formal education has become grist for the political mill. As educators, we grapple with thorny decisions on the wrestling mats of assessment and of equity.

I teach English academic writing to graduate and undergraduate international students. Our learners invariably arrive with diverse language experience and fluency. Heterogeneity of experience and learning styles among any student sample suggests that one size (read *assessment approach*) may not fit all: Some learners prefer to work with a partner, some in teams; many learners like to plan ahead, others to wait until the day before an assignment is due to submit work. Internal factors such as previous language experience, rate of language acquisition, personal interest in the subject, and individual comfort in the classroom setting may further affect performance (that is, the grade).

The process of language acquisition unfolds on the learner's own timetable. Many students find *time* to be a scarce resource, perhaps making a learner willing to accept a grade of "good enough" and to forgo the added pressure of revision. I believe that the use of the single-point rubric, with its pointed focus on specific features of writing, may benefit students with varied learning styles, fairly, in a developmentally heterogeneous group of learners.

### **Tentative Definition for SoTL:**

No universally accepted definition of SoTL appears to exist. On the basis of the findings of my admittedly limited review of literature (see References below), I offer the following definition for the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL):

“SoTL is a pragmatic approach to classroom instruction that is evidence-based [i.e., based on evidence of learning], interdisciplinary, and aimed toward clearly stated, visible learning objectives (Vanderbilt University Center for Teaching, 2013).”

### **Grand Principles of SoTL**

Of the five grand principles of SoTL, the following three stand as most relevant to my inquiry into assessment by single-point rubric. Because they are closely related to

**Related Grand Principle #2** *Understand and improve ways to encourage student engagement*

Language acquisition is believed by some to be a slow-building, spontaneous process catalyzed by exposure to meaningful input in a target language [that is, exposure to a linguistic code]. Batstone (1996) observes that “conscious attention to input” (p. 273), or *noticing*, focuses a learner on explicit language to be learned. In the array of stimuli present in the natural environment, not every stimulus can be selected for notice by a learner: By helping learners notice details of language to be learned, we help them sort those carrying immediate value from those extraneous.

Improving learner engagement may be achieved by introducing items of interest (of *meaning*) to learners, capturing **attention** as an essential first step in longer-term memory and retention. We may think of noticing (Thornbury, 1997) as *catching attention*. Imagine challenges in trying to teach or learn an idea that is no more than a random atom in the bubbling froth of stimuli available in any environmental setting. Such a challenge can understandably be overwhelming for students.

**Related Grand Principle #3** *Understand and improve the complex process of learning (“Learning is a holistic experience involving [multiple cognitive and social] processes.”*

We can read GP3 as a truism: Few practitioners would dispute it. Because everyone – every learner – is different from all others in idiosyncratic ways, and if we hope to improve learning in a heterogeneous community, then educators should remain adaptable to input noticed as well as to remain creative instructors. A teaching technique or method that may work for one student may fail to help another in gaining an understanding of a language concept to be learned. Instructor imagination in designing learning plans is helpful. (No one ever said that teaching is easy and told the truth.)

**Related Grand Principle #5** *Understand and improve postsecondary teaching and learning*

The challenge here is incentivizing interdisciplinarity among practitioners in diverse fields of inquiry. To be of interest in STEM, business, and other academies, SoTL should offer generalizability for all disciplines. If nothing else, inviting SoTL to classroom practice would likely present rich opportunity for research on the utility or futility of promoting interdisciplinarity in universities.

### **Questions for reflection:**

Questions suggested here for reflection are followed by answers from an actual learner (Learner Suggestions List, page 3). The student responses strike me as reasonable and I invoke them below.

Q 1. What do teachers need to know about learners to design inclusive assessments in ESL?

**SoTL Scholar's Comment 1:** All the teacher has to do is to ask each learner about his / her situation and background, hoping to understand responses and to accommodate learners on the basis of the educator's own limited knowledge. We might not know everything about teaching and learning, but we can perhaps catch wisdom from students.

Q 2. What aspects of ESL students' current situations need to be considered when redesigning both in-person and online assessments?

**SoTL Scholar's Comment 2:** My suggestion is, "Tread lightly when assuming anything about a learner." We can watch and listen carefully, but mistakes will happen.

Q 3. How can modifications to course deliverables in ESL or your area be centered on equity and accessibility?

**SoTL Scholar's Comment 3:** Each student is different from all others. The tripwire is the teacher's own human tendency to exert control.

Q 4. How can teachers partner with learners in redesigning assignments/assessments?

**SoTL Scholar's Comment 4:** Teachers can't know important relevant aspects of students' lives without asking the students themselves and then remaining open to evidence.

Q 5. How can modifications to course deliverables be centered on equity and accessibility?

**SoTL Scholar's Comment 5:** Modifications will surely depend on course content, objectives, availability of materials, and institutional indulgence. We can modify by trial and error and by exchanging information with stakeholders.

Q 6. How can teachers partner with learners in redesigning assessments?

**SoTL Scholar's Comment 6:** Incentivize learner partnership by discerning variables that motivate student learners. Might incentives be grades? Reasonable time provided to complete tasks? Time OFF academic tasks? Personal attention? Food, in some cases? Opportunity for social interaction? Students are motivated as individuals, by different rewards.

Q 7. What goals need to be communicated with learners in this discussion?

***SoTL Scholar's Comment 7:*** Whatever learning goals the teacher may have in mind must be linked in a visible, comprehensible manner to the learners' individual (and perhaps to their collective) interests. We are moving back to Square One, where we as educators try to plumb the backgrounds and tastes of our client learners.

### References

Batstone, R. (1996). Key Concepts in ELT: Noticing. *ELT Journal* 50(3), 273.

International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning. (n.d.). *ISSOTL Blog*.

<https://issotl.com/issotl-blog/>

Scharff, L., Capocchiano, H., Chick, N., Eady, M., Friberg, J., Gregory, D., Loy, K., & Maurer, T.

(November 2023). Grand Challenges for SoTL #2. *International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*. <https://issotl.com/grand-challenges-for-sotl/gc-sotl-2/>

Scharff, L., Capocchiano, H., Chick, N., Eady, M., Friberg, J., Gregory, D., Loy, K., & Maurer, T.

(November 2023). Grand Challenges for SoTL #3. *International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*. <https://issotl.com/grand-challenges-for-sotl/gc-sotl-3/>

Scharff, L., Capocchiano, H., Chick, N., Eady, M., Friberg, J., Gregory, D., Loy, K., & Maurer, T.

(November 2023). Grand Challenges for SoTL #5. *International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, <https://issotl.com/grand-challenges-for-sotl/gc-sotl-5/>

Thornbury, S. (1997). Reformulation and reconstruction: tasks that promote 'noticing'. *ELT Journal* 51(4), 326-334.