

# Tips for SoTL Newbies

by the KSU CETL SoTL Scholars, 2019-2022

*The following tips were compiled from faculty participating in the SoTL Scholars program at KSU CETL. To collect these tips we followed an informal crowdsourcing process where the Scholars added their own tips, and if desired, their names and departments.*

## **Tips on Beginning a SoTL Project:**

- As with all research, carve out time. SoTL is not "easier" than other research projects just because it is centered on a class you are delivering. You still need to schedule and carve out the time necessary to get the steps accomplished. Further, it is best to get IRB approval well before the semester where you want to gather data begins. *(Amanda Wolfe, Psychological Science)*
- Start reading SoTL research early - this will help you get a better idea of research methodology if you are unfamiliar with SoTL. Further, it helps validate your own research and allow you to advocate for the discipline *(Amanda Wolfe, Psychological Science)*
- As with all research, working with an accountability group (like this one, but also working with other colleagues) helps you maintain benchmarks and keep the energy going. Also, talk about your research with others, because that is a great way to maintain your excitement for the project and get new ideas/spins. *(Amanda Wolfe, Psychological Science)*
- Use the deadlines of the [SoTL Scholars] course as checkpoints for progress.
- Allocating time to the project (time management as others have mentioned).
- Start refining the scope and objectives of the project from the outset (and be honest with yourself about the time/energy/resources required.) The better defined they are, the better able you will be to identify appropriate methods to gather the data you need to address the objectives.
- Keep your consent form as brief as possible (under the obvious constraints) to encourage responses.
- Involve students in the entire process. They have great ideas and are more likely to "buy in" if they're part of it. *(Teresa Neal, Psychological Science)*
- Plan to use students who are in classes that you have some control over. *(Peter St Pierre, Health and Physical Education)*
- Don't be surprised if your "expected" data do not match your actual data. *(Peter St Pierre, Health and Physical Education)*
- It's easy to think big at the start of this process, but your first SoTL experience should be limited in scope. This will help in every step along the way: defining a question, designing an evaluation tool, recruiting students, data analysis, and more. *(Peter St Pierre, Health and Physical Education)*

- Don't be fooled into thinking SoTL research is "easier" than discipline-specific research. You can't just slap an assessment onto the end of the semester and call it SoTL research (or at least not strong SoTL research). You have to be just as intentional and detail-oriented as with your other research. (*Katherine White, Psychological Science*)
- Start small, especially if SoTL research involves methods that are new to you. Avoid being overly ambitious with your first project - you don't have to answer all your teaching questions in a single project. Pick just one or two and approach it as a first step on a long journey, knowing that you can investigate additional questions down the line. (*Katherine White, Psychological Science*)
- Attend an introductory overview about SoTL. Then have a discussion with an expert (Hillary) to discuss their teaching, research interests, and potential connection to their program of research. Obtain a few core sources to read and learn about SoTL.
- Don't be afraid to reach out to colleagues in other disciplines for help with the process. They may be able to provide you with a different perspective, different ideas or new techniques to analyze your data. (*Brian Olovson, Foreign Languages*)
- Take advantage of any opportunities offered by CETL to learn about conducting SoTL research. Learning about SoTL research in this type of environment has been invaluable.
- Be willing to start small and gradually modify scope as you go along. You may find what you anticipated would work well in the beginning may not work as well in practice. (*Craig Chin, Electrical Engineering*)
- I think one of the most important aspects of planning a SoTL project is the timeline. A timeline helps to lay out a clear plan of all the activities involved in getting to the final product. A timeline can help clarify critical dependencies (like on class schedules or IRB approvals). Also, we get so busy with all the activities of academic life, that it becomes easy to ignore the SoTL project. A good timeline can be helpful to keeping yourself on track and moving forward. Even better if you can swap timelines with a colleague and help keep each other accountable.
- This isn't as much a tip as an acknowledgement of what I need to be better at: organization. SoTL projects invariably have a lot of moving parts. Whether it is pre-tests and post-test among multiple experimental and control groups, specific scaffolded lesson plans carried out over several weeks, or the circular world of data collection and data analysis, it is hard to organize everything that has to be done. Throw in that you are usually working with students who have lot going on outside of your class (not to mention a pandemic) and it turns out you have to be incredibly flexible and organized. I don't actually think there is one right way to organize, but it is imperative to develop a system that works for you on a specific project. Different projects may require different organizational strategies.
- As for a real tip, if students are your participant group, let them into the process as much as you possibly can without it impacting the results. I think you get better buy-in and effort from them and your research can often be a great learning tool (I find this to be particularly true with my research courses).

- Be willing to think smaller. I found myself wanting to go to "big" on research study and data collection ideas. A study doesn't have to be big or expansive to be effective or informative.

### **Tips on Research Design:**

- Have a Plan B for the possibility that you are unable to get enough participants. Consider writing the IRB to cover several semesters/years, or consider the possibility of pivoting your study to a case study/multiple case study.
- Meet with Hillary when you hit a roadblock. We were able to work through a long list of questions and concerns fairly quickly and I left the meeting with clarity and confidence. (*Shane Peterson, Foreign Languages*)
- Christine Ziegler in the IRB office is really nice. Don't be intimidated if you're new to the process. Don't hesitate to reach out. (She prefers to answer questions via phone.) No matter how careful you are, you will have IRB revisions. So just submit it early. (*Shane Peterson, Foreign Languages*)
- While it might have been more work, it is more beneficial to have a more equivalent group. In the future, I will consider a new teaching method in one section of a course while using a different method for another section for a more equal comparison. (*Teresa Neal, Psychological Science*)
- Make sure you spend enough planning time to think about the design of your study before the actual implementation. Many times I wish I could go back to revise a few things that I have put in place and can't be changed. The worst case scenario is you have to wait another semester to conduct a redesigned research. Don't be afraid to talk to experts like Hilary and a few others in CETL to get help on your research design. (*Duanping Hong, Accounting*)
- TIME: Plan for more time than you think you will need to research methods, and review the literature.
- Plan: Consider ahead of time who your participants will be and how you will "encourage" their participation. My participants are students enrolled in two online courses. One I teach and one I do not. I had very low participation from either section initially. It improved slightly when I created the forms in Doc U Sign. Since I do not teach one of the courses, I cannot provide incentives for participation in that course, and therefore, cannot do so with either group. I recommend working with a group from only your own class sections, particularly if the communication is restricted to online formats. I have also had an extremely low response rate to the questionnaire which is also online. I have sent reminder emails and resent the link several times. This has altered my timeline significantly. Next semester I plan to replicate this study but include only participants from the sections I teach. That way I can provide incentives and see if that improves participation.

- When coming up with a project (and thinking about the research question and its methods), consider early on how you might measure both direct (e.g. evaluation of work produced) and indirect (e.g. surveying attitudes or asking students to reflect) evidence of student learning. One or the other might be more important for your question, but it's worth thinking about how gathering different types of evidence can help you understand the different types of data you get. (*Chris Palmer, English*)
- I would recommend engaging in dialogue with a few people who fit into your target population (participants) to get their thoughts and ideas, so that you can incorporate these into your research plan and so that you avoid missing anything major related to your topic. A thorough literature review will help with this, but if your research question/area hasn't been researched extensively this can help you cover things that might not have crossed your mind, or others who are in the faculty role. With that said, the feedback from this group has been wonderful. Informal feedback from just a small group of people who would fit into your participant group is also really helpful.

### **Tips on the Literature Review:**

- Try to start the literature review process early. What you read from prior studies will guide you on refining your research question and designing your study. What you don't want to do is spend time and effort designing and implementing a study only to find that a published paper has done something very similar (your study could still get published because of the unique setting of each study, but it will be less valuable). You might want to get started by reading books/review article on general higher ed to gather terms that SoTL researchers use in writing their papers. I learned quite a few SoTL terms that are related to my research interests by participating in a faculty learning community and reading the assigned book. (*Duanping Hong, Accounting*)
- Review the literature as far in advance of your project as you can. Try to identify not only what questions to ask, but also what questions have also been answered in the literature. I think it is helpful to put all of this information in a chart. Then, identify what makes your study unique or how it would contribute to the larger body of SoTL literature in your subject area. As you collect and analyze your data, you may develop new, related questions based on your observations. You can use your chart I mentioned earlier to easily see if some of these questions or observations might be worth pursuing further. (*Brian Olovson, Foreign Languages*)
- Be willing to read SoTL studies both inside and outside your field, at different stages of the project, to get ideas about methods and context for your own study and findings. (It also helps you discover possible journals to target for submission.) (*Chris Palmer, English*)
- Complete a literature review both within your discipline and outside your discipline. This will build an awareness of what current practice is and spur ideas for new innovations/investigations. (*Craig Chin, Electrical Engineering*)

- Because SoTL work may take you into areas of research for which you are less familiar, be willing to cast a wide net in terms of literature searching and reaching out for assistance from colleagues. (*Jennifer Willard, Psychological Science*).

### **Tips on Data Collection Methods:**

- It is important to develop a strong rapport before inviting students (*Kei, Instructional Design*).
- It is critical to select a data collection method that requires the least amount of students' labors to get enough participants (*Kei, Instructional Design*).
- Data collection will take more time than you expect. Set a weekly time for yourself to check in on your timeline and plan what you need to do the following week(s). (*Shane Peterson, Foreign Languages*)
- If collecting data in which you are constructing vignettes, designing new questionnaires, or providing novel stimuli to students, be sure to engage in pilot testing of the materials. Build this part of the research process into your time (i.e., budget some additional time for redesign of materials). Although it slows things down in the beginning, it can save a lot of time and heartache in the long run (*Jennifer Willard, Psychological Science*).
- I would say to plan your data collection *EARLY*! The earlier, the better in that fall semester. I'm struggling with recruitment, just like others and I think the earlier you plan your data collection, the better. As the semester rolls on, students get disengaged and check out. In the early part of the semester, they are more excited, more likely to participate, and less stressed overall.

### **Tips on Data Analysis Methods:**

- Look for statistical support (if you need it—and you probably will) over the summer. It will take time to find a collaborator in another discipline. (*Shane Peterson, Foreign Languages*)
- Think about how to involve students in the research to save time, even if it's an unpaid résumé-builder. If it's unpaid, make sure you're not asking for a major time-commitment. Or look for a way to integrate data analysis or other research activities into an upper-level course. (*Shane Peterson, Foreign Languages*)
- Recruit undergraduate honors students to assist you in the data analysis processes. Many have to complete research projects as part of their graduation requirements, so as an exchange for helping you analyze the data, you also either involve them in your project directly or let them use some of your data for their own (similar) project. Advertise the opportunity in the courses that majors in your department usually take. You can also advertise such opportunities on the KSU Office of Undergraduate Research website. (*Brian Olovson, Foreign Languages*)

### Tips on SoTL as it Relates to P&T:

- I heard that some departments do not count SoTL for P&T, so make sure to check with your department and school on how your work will be evaluated (*Kei, Instructional Design*).
- I am a Lecturer, and as such I am measured by my success in the classroom (in terms of promotion). In fact, the Faculty Handbook states Lecturers should take a "scholarly approach" to teaching. I can see no better way to achieve promotion status than to incorporate SoTL into reflective teaching practices. Obviously one doesn't need to publish in order to be a successful Lecturer, but SoTL and scholarly teaching go hand-in-hand. I would suggest to a Lecturer starting out to focus on 1 aspect of each course taught, and work towards a SoTL project. That person may find this challenging starting out, but if they look at the current body of SoTL research early in his/her career, it can lead to a clear-cut direction and a progressive and scholarly story that frames their career and sets them up for success. I would also suggest to that researcher to constantly be on the look-out for SoTL funding opportunities internal to his/her institution, but also within his/her field of expertise. And don't be afraid to start! (*Marcia Hesser, Biology*)
- Work to connect SoTL work to areas you are passionate about in teaching as well as that connect to your scholarship work for promotion and tenure.
- If untenured, make sure to discuss this project with senior colleagues in your department as well as your chair to ensure that it will "count" towards promotion and that your project timeline complements your other professional goals for teaching, research, and/or service. They (and CETL) can also offer advice about how best to narrate your SoTL work in ARDs and P&T narratives. (*Chris Palmer, English*)