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# Constructive Friction? Charting the Relation Between Educational Research and the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

## ABSTRACT

While educational research and the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) are overlapping fields, over time there has appeared considerable friction between the two. There are claims that educational research has been tainted by SoTL's emergence and that those engaged in SoTL lack adequate training. They maintain that those engaged in SoTL would benefit from a better understanding of educational research theories and methods. Some engaged in SoTL perceive educational research as too distanced from practice. What underpins these perceived differences between the two fields? How might this friction be explained? The study described in this article explored empirical, interview-based viewpoints from new and experienced educational researchers and SoTL scholars, respectively. Participants were purposefully drawn from attendees at two European conferences specializing in educational research and SoTL. The data was examined using thematic analysis and focused mainly on the perceived differences between these communities. The central themes that emerged where differences occurred are community membership and governance, scope and purpose of inquiry, and intended recipients of inquiry results. Some differences include what and who determines the value of the contribution to the field and why it is valuable. This article provides an empirically based understanding of the relative attributes of both communities. We hope that it leads to future discussions about further developing fruitful and constructive interrelationships.

## KEYWORDS

educational research, scholarship of teaching and learning, attributes, differences

## BACKGROUND

*[I]n 30, 40 or 50 years' time, the scholarship of teaching and research will be little more than a historical footnote, scarcely remembered by anyone.*

—Malcolm Tight (2018, p. 73)

Macfarlane (2011, p. 128) declares that the field of Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) “has resulted in work which is low in quality, lacks theorisation and often fails to draw on, or even

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acknowledge, a substantial existing body of relevant literature on teaching in higher education.” Kanuka (2011, p. 2) argues that SoTL is encroaching on what are considered established practices in educational research and that “many education academics are concerned that SoTL is eroding the scholarship in their field of study.” She advises those in SoTL with a disciplinary background other than that of educational research to “take the time to learn about education research traditions, the extensive corpus of literature in teaching and learning in higher education that exists—not the least of which are theories of learning—and conduct scholarship on teaching and learning in an informed manner, ensuring the scholarship stays in the scholarship of teaching and learning” (Kanuka, 2011, p. 9). Boshier (2009, p. 13) goes as far as to claim that “much discourse concerning SoTL is anti-intellectual and located in a narrow neoliberalism” and doubts whether SoTL is a worthwhile use of time and resources. These criticisms of the field and practice of SoTL are levied in strikingly harsh words, often phrased by distinguished senior members of the research community. The intensity itself is notable, as is the nature of arguments put forward.

As academic communities, both educational research and SoTL exist within the larger field of higher education research, where they construct knowledge and make contributions. Miller-Young and Yeo (2015) argue that defining SoTL as a field independent of education has created unnecessary tensions as there are more similarities than differences. Clegg (2012, p. 671) describes SoTL as an “adjoining area” inhabited by various communities of practice where educational research can be seen as one, SoTL another, academic development<sup>1</sup> a third. She emphasizes that the relationships between the various communities are either in the making or under reconstruction. Some people may have identities in several of these communities and cross the borders between them. The field of SoTL speaks with many voices, and these voices have not agreed upon how to coordinate what is being said. The situation can be perceived as harmful for the field itself because it becomes unclear to people outside what value they should attach to the claims made. On the other hand, the situation can be perceived as beneficial. With its inclusivity and developmental agenda, SoTL has changed considerably over the past decades: “SoTL’s richness is not in the model originally devised by Boyer, but in what it has become” (Fanghanel, Pritchard, Potter, & Wisker, 2016, p. 15). In both fields, it is important to explore the goals of the intended outcomes of their labors. While both communities would lay claim to contributing to the development of student learning, perhaps it is in the vision of its achievement that may be in question. Entwistle (2019), a long-standing educational researcher, reflects upon the value of educational research. He asks, “Are the main goals focused on reaching evidence-based findings within the academic field, or do they also include influencing educational practice?” (p. 1). He goes on to question whether the more accepted general practices of educational researchers in seeking theory that adds to a corpus of knowledge is sufficient. Should they not also be concerned about the applicability of their findings in practice so that universities can improve the quality of student learning? He further argues that the differences in aims between research that generates theory and research that develops practice can be considered as distinctions between *explanatory theories*, which remain within the theoretical domain, and *action theories* that are often simpler but suggest ways of putting the ideas into practice (Smith, 1998; Perkins, 2003). Researchers may believe that conclusions based on their explanatory theories will provide useful guidelines for improving educational practice.

Although theories can help us understand the complexity of student learning, they are not always easy to put into practice. Price (2019), on the other hand, argues that although educational

research has generated considerable theoretical knowledge, practitioners find it difficult to apply it to practice. She argues that in order to make findings publishable, they need to be generalizable. This has the effect of stripping away the context of the naturalistic settings in which the research was originally conducted. Hence, practitioners who wish to apply such theories to advance the quality of teaching and learning have to reverse engineer these findings into their own context in order to make them applicable. Price, Casanova, and Orwell (2017) found that *reverse engineering* research into practice—that is, by articulating research theories in practical terms—enabled practitioners to engage in a major institutional change in relation to the quality of students’ experiences with educational technology. Without this step, it would have been more difficult to take advantage of current findings and use them to develop new processes and strategies that affect practice. Although theoretical educational research provides explanations for the complexity of student learning, it is still far removed from becoming *action theories* with direct implications (Entwistle, 2019, p. 2). In order for theory to become actionable, he argues, the language needs to be accessible to practitioners, and he argues for concepts to be *generative* and *pedagogically fertile* (Entwistle, 2000), enabling teachers and students to develop creative solutions to teaching and learning. It may be that the rise of the SoTL community is a direct response to what its members might consider a deficit in the educational research field: its inability as a field to pragmatically have an impact on practice.

It is usual in adjoining academic areas, where there are boundaries between communities, that friction and criticism occur, often colored by the premises of the community formulating them. The result is a debate characterized by an “us-and-them” perspective predominantly driven by commentators representing central values (in contrast to bridging values) in each community. Therefore, it is important to listen to voices from both sides cautiously. What can be gained from hearing voices from both communities? How do they reflect on their own community in relation to the other community in interview situations more focusing on critical inquiry than positioning?

The authors of this article have engaged in both educational research and SoTL, and hence we were curious to explore the relations between the fields further and the tensions that exist. In the interest of exploring these tensions and the aspirations of each field, we decided to examine the issue from a data-driven perspective. The literature cited above is largely conceptual, and the findings from our study therefore offer some empirically based understandings of the two fields. We explored how academics who have chosen to go to one particular conference within the larger field of higher education conceive of education research and SoTL, and what they think characterizes the nature of either field. In doing so, our goal was to provide some empirically grounded insight into conceptions of both fields and related approaches to engaging in either field. The question guiding our inquiry was the following: ***How do academics identifying themselves with either educational research or SoTL describe these two communities and what they do?*** Our research aimed to identify patterns in the conceptualization of the fields of SoTL and educational research and practice associated with them.

Our study, in contrast to those described in much previous literature, empirically explored various descriptions of the aims and practices of the fields of educational research and SoTL formulated by members in each community. Although our data points to some similarities and overlapping characteristics between the two communities, our aim in this article is to deepen and provide nuance for the somewhat simplified debate in the literature.

## METHOD

To address our question about how academics who identify themselves with either of these describe the two communities and what they do, we interviewed 19 academics: five experienced and four novices in educational research, and five experienced and five novices in SoTL. Each individual was interviewed during or in relation to each field's conferences, such as those of the European Association for Research on Learning and Instruction or the European Conference on the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning.

In conducting an interview-based study, we sought to focus on beliefs about what constitutes these fields as practices. Using purposive sampling (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011), participants were selected to provide a spread across discipline, gender, and experience. Samples for each group were drawn from attendees at the 2015 meetings of the European Association for Research on Learning and Instruction and the European Conference on the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning. These conferences were deemed to attract attendees who would identify themselves in each of these communities. The choice of two European conferences was deliberate, as the authors were participating in both conferences within the time frame of our data collection. The organizers of the conferences were asked to provide a list of the prospective attendees. From this, a representative sample was drawn giving a spread across the criteria. Experts were defined as those who had had recognizable identities in each of the respected communities and had produced notable outputs in the last five years. Novices were those who were new to the communities with less than two years of experience in the community and with little to no recognizable outputs. In total, 19 interviews were conducted, involving 12 women and 7 men.

The field of educational research is heterogeneous and includes many sub-fields. The participants belonging to the educational research group in this study work mainly in the area of educational psychology.

**Table 1. Research design**

COMMUNITY	NUMBER OF EXPERIENCED RESPONDENTS	NUMBER OF NOVICE RESPONDENTS
Educational research	5 (EdRe)	4 (EdRn)
SoTL	5 (SoTLe)	5 (SoTLn)

Key: *EdR* indicates participants who self-identify as an educational researcher; *SoTL* indicates participants who self-identify as engaged in Scholarship of Teaching and Learning. An *e* indicates an experienced member, and *n* is a novice member of the field.

### Interview protocol

The participants were invited by email to participate in a 30-minute interview while at the conferences, or where this was not possible, they were interviewed later by Skype. Prior to the interview, the interviewees received a consent form to sign, indicating that the data collected would be ethically and responsibly managed and that all their contributions and details about their home institution would be anonymized. The interview focused on three central themes: the first two were about establishing their conceptions (beliefs) about SoTL and educational research, respectively. The final theme was about their perceived identity in relation to the community that they identify with. Two of the authors conducted a majority of the interviews, and the following is the list of questions that guided the interviews:

1. How would you describe yourself (identity) in relation to this community (SoTL or educational research)?
2. What is good educational research? How would you describe/recognize it? What are the components?
3. What is good scholarship of teaching and learning? How would you describe/recognize it? What are the components?
4. You came to this conference. What motivated you to do that?
5. Have you also engaged in the “the other”? If you have been to an education research/ SoTL conference, what motivated you to do that?
6. What are your intentions when you engage in education research/scholarship of teaching and learning?
7. What do you see as the difference between education research and scholarship of teaching and learning?

### Analysis

The interviews were digitally recorded and later transcribed by an independent transcriber. The four researchers independently analyzed the data using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This process involved each researcher reading the transcripts and identifying the themes they found in the data. The four researchers then exchanged analyses and met for discussion. From that, overarching themes were identified, and each researcher then analyzed the data again, independently, to determine whether the themes formed an overarching framework that could usefully categorize the data. These themes were found to be robust in framing the findings in the study.

### RESULTS

During the thematic analysis, we looked for statements that captured crucial aspects in respondents’ description of good or valuable research and in defining their identity with regard to their academic work. Interestingly, when novice members of educational research were asked about SoTL, they all answered that they had never heard of it. Although there were considerable overlaps and commonalities between the two communities and perceived practices, our focus here is on the foremost themes that *distinguish* the two communities. The data is not used to distinguish between participants; rather it is used to distinguish between variations in the positions and illustrate the poles of the dimensions. The approach to eliciting variation in perspectives is similar to the phenomenographic method adopted by Trigwell, Prosser, and Taylor (1994), stemming from the original phenomenographic method developed by Marton (1981).

Phenomenography is a qualitative method used in educational research that investigates phenomena as experienced by people (Marton, 1986; Marton & Booth, 1997; Marton, Dall’Alba, & Beaty, 1993). It sits within an interpretivist paradigm, meaning that the experience of a phenomenon is subjective as people experience phenomena in different ways (Åkerlind, 2003; 2005). This distinction is important as the experience of the phenomena can explain the variation in people’s reactions to the phenomena (Åkerlind, 2018). More recent research points to the benefits of using the related research approach of interpretive phenomenology in a broad range of inquiries focused on teaching and learning (Webb & Welsh, 2019). We argue, similarly, that the phenomenographic lens offers valuable insights

into a study of this nature that examines differences in perspectives between those in the field of SoTL and those in educational research.

Using this method, we identified four themes that both described and distinguished the communities. We labeled these *membership*, *purpose*, *scope*, and *beneficiaries*. The statements below, from the transcripts of the interviews, are grouped under the four central themes. Reference to the respondent is given in parenthesis (see Table 1 key to abbreviations).

### **Membership**

This theme is characterized by the notion of belonging: who belongs to each community, who participates in activities and practices of that community, and who is in and who is out, according to our respondents. Educational researchers had a strong sense of who did *not* belong in their community and the exclusivity with which they considered their membership: “[Those in SoTL] cannot be considered as education researchers” (EdRe1).

The following statement also reflected the rules and norms with which being a member of a particular community required:

*[Educational research] means that you have to be well informed by the existing literature. So that the researcher is not simply pursuing a personal hobbyhorse. . . they need to be able to locate what they're doing within the existing literature . . . they need to choose, appropriate research methods, methods that . . . rest upon the understanding of the literature. (EdRe2)*

The membership theme further reflects expected responsibilities and expectations in order to be a member:

*People have . . . kind of backgrounds in education and read before they do the research [of] something in the field, and they prepare for it and, you know methodologically they're prepared to do this kind of research. This is something that in my opinion concerns educational research. (SoTLn5)*

There is an inclusive element to the SoTL community in terms of feeling part of it, as explained by one of the participants: “I can learn a lot from this community. Eh, somebody who, eh, can be inspired with different ideas . . . I feel a part of this community” (SoTLn5). For others the field can be diverse and diffuse: “The field seems very diffuse, very diverse” (EdRe2, speaking about SoTL). Another said,

*There are people doing stuff on all the different subject areas . . . And, the question is whether they're generic or discipline specific. And there are people doing surveys, and there are people doing case studies and, you know, there, there's still a big . . . variation. (SoTLn3, speaking about SoTL)*

This theme reflects the concept of membership and who can belong to the community or not. The responsibilities and expectation that comes with the membership is mentioned, together with the rules and norms at play.

### Purpose

This theme reflects what respondents have identified as the main purpose of their educational research or scholarship of teaching and learning. It encompasses the ultimate goal of the practice they are pursuing.

The “othering” aspect of the following statement illustrates what one community interprets the other community as aspiring to: “[Educational research] is sort of a more qualitative, a little bit less, you know, outcomes based, approach in terms of quantifying what they do” (SoTLn4). An educational researcher in this response indicates that the focus of their labor is to contribute to knowledge. There is no mention of the advancement of the student learning experience per se: “My main intention is to, contribute to, to knowledge growth. And knowledge advancement, and theory advancement. And, spread that knowledge on as broad a scale as possible” (EdRe4). Another educational researcher confirms this position: “I just want to understand things better. I want to see how things, how, what explains something and what, what is the effect of something, so there is a researcher dimension” (EdRe1).

In contrast, the following respondents illustrate how those in SoTL are concerned with improving their own teaching within their own context and observing the impact upon their students:

*It will inform my practice. It will inform my own teaching . . . the beauty of my understanding of SoTL anyway is that you don't need to divide it out by, discipline . . . while they did this and this happened with the students, and the students responded this way, what happens if I flip that around and use it in my context. (SoTLn4)*

*[M]ore of the SoTL literature would be aiming to enhance the quality of student learning, or the quality of teaching that's taking place to deliver that . . . There's a more explicit agenda of quality enhancement. (SoTLe5)*

*I think many people in the field of scholarship of teaching and learning would claim that their work had a direct application. Whether they're actually, warranted in making that claim. (EdRe2)*

There can thus be different primary purposes of engaging in scholarly work: one to add to the body of research and to reach a deeper theoretical understanding, and another to improve the practice of teaching and learning in a more practical sense.

### Scope

This theme reflects the reach or the extent to which participants perceive their activities and sphere of influence to extend. Both of these responses reflect a perception that investigations need to be done outside the scope of their own teaching:

*There needs to be the kind of idea that I explore something which I distance myself from. (EdRe1)*

*It also needs to be done by somebody who doesn't have any connection to the actual teaching of that material or the course. (SoTLn4)*

For this respondent, the scope extends to larger sample groups and a form of pre- and post-testing often characteristic of large-scale educational research investigations: “You know . . . maybe larger sample groups, eh, before and after type stuff, I think” (SoTLn4). The focus of this participant is localized and concerned with the need to develop teaching skills and personal pedagogical knowledge:

*[Those teachers that do research as scholarship] they want to, eh, improve their skills and the pedagogical knowledge, so they, use eh, different methods, and they do research on learning and, learning process and teaching process. For their own learning let's say. (SoTLn5)*

There are those who consider it dangerous to examine students within a localized scope because of the inherent conflicts between being teacher and researcher. This respondent's observation reflects that distance from the students and their context: “[SoTL] actually researching their own students. And that's very, very dangerous, because of course they have a dual relationship, as a researcher and as a teacher” (EdRe2). Others see the benefit in localized investigations as they have targeted and seek immediate impact on the teachers and the staff at a point of need: “Good SoTL research is helpful to me and my students” (SoTLn2).

The scope of the labors of either community encompasses both micro activities and impact at a localized level and more macro activities, invoking context independence.

### **Beneficiaries**

This theme encompasses participants' views about who will benefit primarily from the work of the field. This respondent's observation reflects a distancing and apathy in relation to having any impact in a timely fashion. The more global term *education* is used, as opposed to a reference to *students*: “I think that in educational research you should not rush too quickly to the practical improvement of education” (EdRe4). The beneficiaries of educational research, in this respondent's perception, are the members of the educational research field itself: “[Educational research] I see as, eh, something that is more contributing to the kind of a general knowledge” (SoTLe4). Comparatively, this respondent perceives the benefit of SoTL to be its application to teaching and learning and in driving changes in practice: “In scholarship of teaching and learning, it's much more focused on the application . . . It should drive practice” (SoTLe4).

This theme is characterized by perceptions in relation to the beneficiaries. These encompass developing the field as the beneficiaries themselves, as in the case of the educational researchers, and in the case of those in SoTL, develop the application of their findings to improving teaching and learning practices.

### **Dimensions within the themes**

In the second stage of the analysis, we found that the overarching themes had dimensions within them. That is, each theme could be characterized by varying dimensions. Membership could be more or less homogenous or diverse, the purpose of doing research could have a primary focus on advancement of the knowledge field or a primary focus on improving practice, the scope could be macro or micro, and the presumed beneficiaries could be different groups of professionals (Table 2).



**Table 2. Identified themes and dimensions in the fields of educational research and SoTL**

THEME	DIMENSIONS	
Membership	<p><i>Homogeneity</i> Typically, members have a shared set of practices and perspectives and converge on a set of understood set of principles or norms. Furthermore, this dimension includes extensive periods of socialization for new members.</p>	<p><i>Diversity</i> Members are varied and in terms of their disciplinary background, roles, and responsibilities. The diversity is embraced. Furthermore, this dimension does not include a period of socialization for new members.</p>
Purpose	<p><i>Teaching and learning research</i> The primary focus is the advancement of the educational research agenda.</p>	<p><i>Teaching and learning practice</i> The primary focus is the advancement of teaching and learning practice.</p>
Scope	<p><i>Macro</i> Investigations are typically beyond a specific situation. Participants are sampled to avoid bias so that any claims made have appeal to a wider, more general audience. Objectivity is seen as a requirement.</p>	<p><i>Micro</i> Investigations are typically within a specific situation, where the participants are known to the investigator/teacher. Subjectivity is an advantage to understanding practice with a limited and specific context.</p>
Beneficiaries	<p><i>Educational researchers</i> The main beneficiaries are the researchers who are concerned with the direct advancement of knowledge within their field. Immediate application is not the primary focus.</p>	<p><i>Students and university teachers</i> The main beneficiaries are the students. The primary concern is the direct advancement of practices that can improve the quality of the student learning experience. Immediate application is the central primary focus.</p>

In this stage of the analysis, we found that the respondents’ descriptions of the fields differed, as illustrated in Table 2, with those about educational research generally falling closer to the left column while descriptions of SoTL falling generally closer to the right column. This pattern of difference, however, is not as clear-cut as the table suggests.

First, we found that *membership* of the education research community tends to be perceived as exclusive, that is, members of the community share a defined set of values and practices. Furthermore, membership is based on a longer period of socialization during which new members are expected to internalize not only norms but also exemplary research. The membership of the SoTL community, on the other hand, is mainly conceptualized as more inclusive, meaning that its members represent a diversity of disciplinary backgrounds, bringing to the field a range of research methods that are applied and embraced.

Second, the *purpose* of educational research was described as primarily to add to the shared knowledge base. This is done through an emphasis on previous research and methodological rigor. It is important to identify a gap in the literature and to offer a sound contribution aimed at filling this gap. Respondents also described a secondary purpose: to enhance student learning. The main purpose of SoTL, as described by respondents, is to improve teaching and student learning. The use of research and

the use of previous research and methods were described more like tools to achieve the primary purpose of enhancement.

Third, in terms of *scope*, educational research aims for the generalizable: claims that can be applied on wider contexts than those being studied. In this pursuit, rigor, objectivity, and knowledge about previous research are essential. SoTL is described as dealing with specific contexts and aiming to enhance learning. The generalizable is not absent but is described as a bonus rather than a primary aim.

Finally, the *beneficiaries* to the activities can be derived from the overall pattern. Results from educational research are presented to and valued primarily by other researchers. Improvement of practice is not a neglected aim, but it is described as secondary. In the practice of SoTL, results are valued if they improve student learning, either generally or in specific contexts. While presented to others, references to theory and previous research appears less important.

It became clear to us, especially among experienced respondents, that they described aspects of practice in both educational research and SoTL, even though these descriptions followed the general pattern (Table 2). These respondents, especially after being asked to elaborate, described positive but different aspects of both communities. The polarized and somewhat harsh picture that emerges in the literature did not appear in the interviews. It is also notable that even though the experienced respondents identify themselves with either field—educational research or SoTL—they frequently attend and present at both types of conferences. Thus, the thematic analysis reveals differences between the fields in terms of *how* respondents describe the two communities. The second stage of the analysis, when we placed their descriptions within the five dimensions, the difference became even more distinct. However, and especially among experienced members, the differences are not ones that could be described as polarizing and conflictual but rather as variations along a continuum.

## DISCUSSION

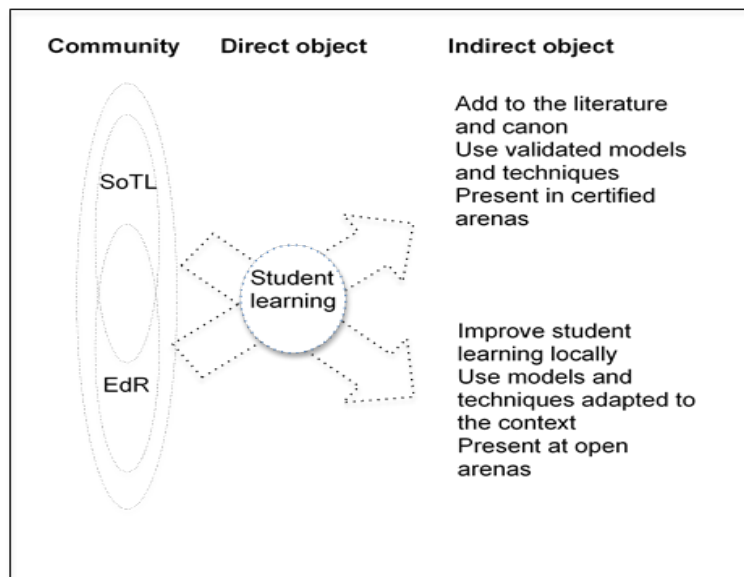
In analyzing the data, we found some themes that appear central to distinguishing patterns within and between the two communities. What we find significant is that although the two communities share similar dimensions, as noted above, what distinguishes them is the degree to which they exercise them. We argue that this relates to underlying aspirations of each community. In the SoTL community, the main aspiration is to change practice with immediate effect on student learning and teaching practice. The goal of the investigations is the development of the students and teaching practice and inspiring colleagues to improve their teaching. Claims about knowledge are made, but these claims are not the prime objective; rather, they are motives for change and are therefore secondary. Regarding education research, it would indeed be unfair to say that other researchers are the only beneficiaries of educational research. However, the education research community's aspirations appear to be more about confirming and augmenting the field's collective knowledge base, whereas the immediacy of the impact and the effect on practice is somewhat secondary or implicit.

Within a shared focus on student learning, the two fields differ in an important respect. From phenomenographic research (Marton & Booth, 1997), we learn that when seeing something—that is, a direct object—it is a composite of perceiving something (the *what* aspect) and viewing this something in a certain way (the *how* aspect). These two are linked: if I look at something in a different way (variation of the *how* aspect), I will see new things. Conversely, if I perceive new things (the *what* aspect), it can influence the way I look at them (the *how* aspect). A third aspect concerns the *indirect*

object: the way I interpret the situation will influence the meaning I attribute to what I see: “This is relevant because . . .” Therefore, seeing new things, for example perceiving new aspects to use in reflective processes, is linked to changes in the *what* aspect, the *how* aspect, or the indirect object.

In the light of the above, and of the descriptions offered by respondents in this study, it is fair to say that the two fields differ in relation to the indirect object for their attention (Figure 1). Both may focus on the same direct object—student learning in specific contexts—but, arguably, they perceive different things as meaningful because of a variation in the indirect object. Such a variation would result not only in variation in *what* is perceived but also in *how* the perception takes place—that is, in what methods and perspectives are considered relevant. According to our respondents, educational research seeks to add to a collective body of knowledge in ways that are valid in the community as a whole. This entails following established norms and rules for how investigations should be carried out. Furthermore, it entails skills in conducting the investigation and reporting it in relation to previous findings. Someone who identifies as a member of the SoTL community, on the other hand, even if focusing on the same situation, will perceive different things—not only about the specific situation but also about what is required regarding research skills and knowledge of previous research. The differences that we found between the two communities, therefore, relate to a variation in the indirect object.

**Figure 1. An illustration of the partly overlapping yet different practices of SoTL and educational research and their direct and indirect objects**



Variations of focus on the indirect object are comparable with Entwistle’s (2019) distinction between explanatory theories and action theories. Hence, educational researchers may be focusing on explanatory theories where the indirect object is to add to the literature and to validate models in certified areas. Comparatively, those engaged in SoTL may be focusing on action theories, where the indirect object is the improvement of student learning where models and techniques are used in context at a local level.

In light of the tensions between the practices of the fields of educational research and SoTL that we mention at the outset, particularly the somewhat harsh criticisms, perhaps the debate should not be

about whether SoTL and research is uninteresting or harmful and educational research is distanced from practice. Instead, since language is important, it would seem more productive to continue a discussion on the relationship between the two fields and to develop an empirically based terminology for describing this relationship. It is easy to allow oneself to describe the other side through the strengths of one's own community and thereby diminish the strengths of the other, as is evident in some of the literature. We suggest that the debate focus on exploring the possibilities and limitations for inquiry guided by one or the other indirect object and the explanatory or action theories. The potential conflict inherent in Clegg's (2012) description of the fields as adjoining, a competition about which community will have the right to describe insights and possibilities in the field of higher education, can thus be avoided if a clarification is made regarding the strengths of the two. Grant (2018, p. 37) suggests a metaphor of one big "living and diverse" field concerned with teaching and learning, where education research and SoTL are neighboring communities in the same landscape. Along similar lines of thinking, we hope that this article inspires further explorations of the differences and commonalities between the two fields that lead to an understanding of the relative merits of explanatory and action theories in the collective pursuit to improve student learning.

To conclude, our congregated data do not show much evidence of the sometimes harsh criticism found in the literature. There are perceived differences within the two communities about "the others," as discussed above, but the differences are expressed with greater nuance than in previous literature. Perhaps that is a sign of the maturing and development (Fanghanel et al., 2016) of the field of SoTL. Furthermore, several of the senior members interviewed move more or less seamlessly between the fields of educational research and SoTL. In fact, senior members do not necessarily label themselves as exclusively "educational researchers" or "SoTL scholars." Instead, they choose conferences based on their explicit intentions. Attending a SoTL or educational research meeting does not mean that they are committing to one field (or identity) or the other. It means that they get access to the specific intellectual tools that have been developed in either community.

Our study opens the door to a deeper understanding of the relative attributes of each community and their approaches that can serve to advance and further develop fruitful interrelationships. Our findings offer empirically based explanations of the differences between the communities and the degree to which they may approach improving student learning. These in turn, if made explicit and nuanced, could contribute to a constructive rather than destructive friction between the two fields.

## LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

We see our study as providing the basis for further research into the perceived differences between the fields of educational research and SoTL. In common with many qualitative studies, the findings are drawn from a small number of participants. However, the interviews conducted were in depth and the analysis provides an empirical basis for understanding the relative attributes of either community, particularly in absence of any other currently present in the literature. Our study could be criticized for its focus on the differences between the two communities rather than on the commonalities. However, our goal was to determine the variation in perspectives rather than identification of what commonly binds the participants themselves. We anticipate that future research

can build on this study to further explore the degree to which the perspectives we have identified are held and the relative commonalities between the two communities.

A variation in the indirect object may at first glance appear small and perhaps even insignificant. However, after some time, when many members have made their contributions to a community, internal structures appear that form traditions—recurrent habits and tacit knowledge—that over time can make the two communities distinct in relation to each other. It would be fruitful to pursue this thought in future research, exploring whether the suggested variation in the indirect object really is capable of creating two distinct traditions.

Furthermore, this research has focused on descriptions with the aim of clarifying differences. In our experience, tensions continue to exist. Therefore, it would be fruitful in the future to further empirically explore the common ground (Figure 1). How do people who belong to both traditions describe this common ground? How do they choose which conference to attend? Knowing this would shed more light on the potential in combining the two communities. Indeed, it would offer firsthand experiences of the potential in drawing from the practice of both educational research and scholarship of teaching and learning.

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## NOTES

1. We use the term *academic development* as equivalent to *educational development* and *faculty development*.

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