Mick Healey, HEALEY HE CONSULTANTS, mhealey@glos.ac.uk
Ruth L. Healey, UNIVERSITY OF CHESTER, r.healey@chester.ac.uk

Reviewing the Literature on Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL): An Academic Literacies Perspective
Part 2

ABSTRACT

There are few sources that critically evaluate the ways of reviewing the literature on scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL). We use an academic literacies perspective as a lens with which to explore the ways that literature reviews may be undertaken. While reviewing the literature is often presented as a scientific, objective process, the reality is much messier, nuanced, and iterative. It is a complex, context-dependent procedure. We provide a practical, critical guide to undertaking SoTL literature reviews.

We distinguish between embedded reviews that present a review contextualising the research that follows, as in most SoTL articles; and freestanding reviews that synthesise research on specific topics. We discuss the nature of embedded reviews, and evaluate systematic and narrative review approaches to undertaking freestanding reviews. We contend that the claims of the superiority of systematic reviews are unjustified. It is important that contextually-sensitive judgements and interpretation of texts associated with narrative reviews are seen as central to the reviewing process, and as a strength rather than a weakness.

This article complements a separate one, where we apply an academic literacies lens to reviewing the literature on searching the SoTL literature. Together, they present a narrative review of searching and reviewing the SoTL literature undertaken systematically. We call for studies investigating the lived experiences of SoTL scholars. We illustrate this argument with an auto-ethnographic account of the often-serendipitous nature of our hunt for sources in preparing this review and the way our thinking and writing evolved during the writing of the two articles.

KEYWORDS

SoTL literature reviews, academic literacies, embedded versus freestanding reviews, narrative versus systematic reviews, lived experience of undertaking literature searches and reviews

INTRODUCTION

In the last decade we have witnessed a rapid growth in the volume of literature on the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL). Despite a drop in 2021 in the number of hits on Google Scholar for all items including "scholarship of teaching" OR SoTL (possibly due to the impact of COVID), the number of hits overall more than doubled between 2011–2020 (124%) (Figure 1). Data such as these leads to the argument that "it may be time to spend more effort on synthesising and disseminating what we have already learnt, rather than, or before, undertaking fresh research" (Tight 2018a, 607).

Figure 1. Hits on Google Scholar for SoTL, 2011–21
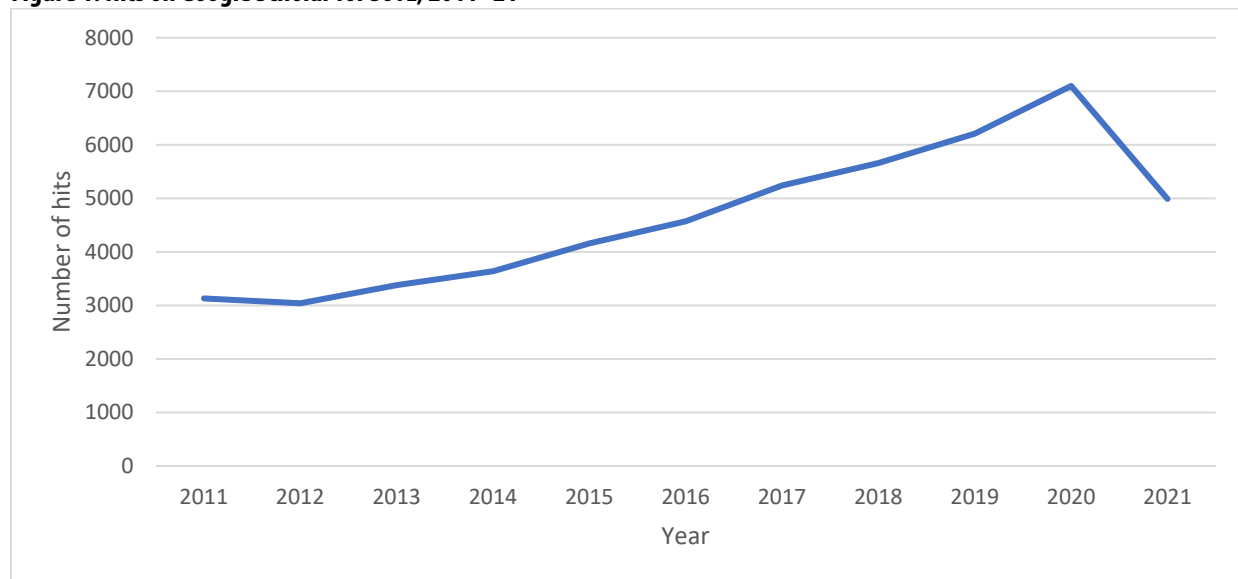
Source: Google Scholar—All items including "Scholarship of Teaching" OR SoTL

Fink (2020, 6) succinctly defines a literature review as a "systematic, explicit, and reproducible method for identifying, evaluating, and synthesising the existing body of completed and recorded work produced by researchers, scholars, and practitioners." Reviewing the SoTL literature is influenced by the nature of the conversation to which you want to contribute (Healey, Matthews, and Cook-Sather 2019; 2020). The search for literature is closely related to the review process, as the type and purpose of the review affects what literature is searched and how. We discuss the nature of the SoTL literature search process in a complementary article (Healey, M. and Healey, R. L. 2023). In the current article we focus primarily on the different approaches to synthesising the literature.

There is an extensive literature about reviewing academic literature; some are general, others are specific to particular disciplines or approaches (e.g., Bell and Waters 2018; Gough, Oliver, and Thomas 2017; Hart 2018; Healey, R. L. and Healey, M. 2023; Jesson, Matheson, and Lacey 2011; Torraco 2016). However, there are few critical evaluations of how to go about synthesising what we already know about the literature on SoTL (Chick 2016; Daniel and Harland 2018; MacMillan 2018; Minocha 2021).

The similarities and differences between SoTL and higher education research have been the subject of much debate (e.g., Case 2015; Larsson et al. 2017). Geertsema (2016) suggests that a key distinction lies in the purposes of the scholarly inquiry being conducted. In SoTL, the prime purpose is to improve teaching and learning for the group of students being studied; in educational research, the fundamental goal is generalizable knowledge. Tight (2021), in his synthesis of higher education research reviews, includes SoTL as just one aspect of research into teaching and learning, which, unfortunately, he dismisses in less than a page. For the purposes of this paper, we are pragmatic and accept that those who use the term SoTL are practising it, but we recognize that others may be practising SoTL without using the term. SoTL is inherently an interdisciplinary field. However, "SoTL discourse typically refers to education as being empirical, social science research" (Miller-Young and Yeo 2015, 39).

The founding co-editors of *Teaching & Learning Inquiry* observe that one of the most common reasons reviewers recommend revisions or rejection is "the need for a stronger grounding in relevant

research on teaching and learning—an effective SoTL lit review" (Chick 2016). Most discipline-based scholars do not receive training in reviewing educational literature. Experienced faculty "see knowledge in social and conversational terms" (Fister 2015, 92), but students and faculty new to SoTL may feel marginalised by such conversations and need support to build their confidence to participate. Many who come to SoTL are unfamiliar with how to synthesise the literature, as well as sometimes grappling with new methods and genres (Chick et al. 2014). Hence, critically reviewing the literature is an important way of developing their identities as SoTL scholars (Healey, Matthews, and Cook-Sather 2019; 2020).

We distinguish between embedded reviews that present a review contextualising the research that follows, as in most SoTL research articles, and freestanding reviews that synthesise research on specific topics. We go on to make a distinction between narrative and systematic freestanding reviews (Byrne 2016). Whereas the former involves telling a structured story based on themes identified from reading the literature, the latter is a method of undertaking a review that follows a set of clearly defined stages, beginning with a narrowly delimited research question or hypothesis. We contend that some of the claims of the superiority of systematic reviews are unjustified. They have different purposes, and both are needed to explore the rapidly evolving literature on SoTL.

Our aim in writing this paper is to provide a practical but critical guide that demystifies the process of writing a SoTL literature review. As already noted, we analyse how to go about searching the literature in a separate article where we undertake a critical review of what has been written about searching the literature on SoTL (Healey, M. and Healey, R. L. 2023). We adopt an academic literacies perspective to frame the discussion in both papers. Our argument is that searching and reviewing the literature is part of the socially constructed process of producing and understanding knowledge that is linked to the identities and values of SoTL scholars (Lea 2017). At the end of this paper, we illustrate our argument about the importance of adopting an academic literacies framework to both searching and reviewing the literature with an auto-ethnographic account of the often-serendipitous nature of our hunt for sources and the way our thinking and writing evolved during the writing of the two articles.

Undertaking literature searches and reviews can be challenging and dispiriting, especially when you appear to be drowning in a huge volume of literature. However, recognising that there may be several different ways to achieve your goals, and being realistic as to what is possible given the resources you have, can help ameliorate these concerns. Moreover, exploring topics that fascinate you is a voyage of discovery. They can give you an enormous amount of pleasure and satisfaction as you learn about new ideas and explore a variety of ways to communicate your fresh understandings.

> You can "meet new friends" who share your thinking, push your understanding, give you inspiration, or even make you angry . . . In SoTL land, the literature review joy is discovering how to be, and become, a teacher, learner, librarian, . . . and connecting you to a community of practice (Matthews, personal communication, 9 March 2022).

ACADEMIC LITERACIES PERSPECTIVE ON SOTL LITERATURE REVIEWS

We adopt an academic literacies perspective in this article, as we discuss more fully in our paper on searching the literature (Healey, M. and Healey, R. L. 2023). We have extended the view that academic reading, writing, and meaning-making are socially constructed processes, to include searching and reviewing SoTL literature (Weller 2011). We have also extended this perspective from supporting

students to supporting students and academic and professional staff. This review should be of interest to both experienced and new SoTL scholars.

Academic identity is a core feature of the academic literacy literature (e.g., Coleman and Morris 2021; Lea and Stierer 2009; 2011). The concept of identity helps to understand the different ways that academics see the process of undertaking a literature review. Some view it in rather mechanical terms, a process of rigorously following a carefully defined protocol. Only by adopting this method can bias be minimised and reliable evidence be constructed to guide policy and practice (e.g., Gough, Oliver, and Thomas 2013). Others argue, as we do, that reviewing the literature can never be an entirely "objective" process, however systematic you attempt to be. Proponents of this view see contextually sensitive judgements and interpretation of texts as central to the reviewing process and as a strength rather than a weakness (Hammersley 2001; Maclure 2005). This is particularly important in the social sciences, which SoTL studies draw on extensively, where it is common to acknowledge the subjectivity of the researcher. The perspectives we hold influence our identities as academics and SoTL scholars.

Using an academic literacies perspective to inform our understanding of literature reviews emphasises that meaning-making is nuanced and contextualised, related to our identities and values, and constrained by academic hierarchies. Montuori (2005) suggests viewing the literature review as a process of creative inquiry that:

> challenges the (largely implicit) epistemological assumption that it is actually possible to present a list of relevant authors and ideas without in some way leaving the reviewer's imprint on that project. It views the literature review as a construction and a creation that emerges out of the dialogue between the reviewer and the field (375).

Similarly, Imel (2011) argues that:

> A quality literature review should not just reflect or replicate previous research and writing on the topic under review, but should lead to new productive work . . . and represent knowledge construction on the part of the writer (146–47).

The process of undertaking a literature review is fundamentally an intellectual endeavour. Hart (2018) describes this as developing a "research imagination":

> something that is part of the research apprenticeship. . . . The research imagination is about: having a broad view on a topic; being open to ideas regardless of how or where they originated; scrutinizing ideas, methods and arguments regardless of who proposed them; playing with different ideas in order to see if links can be made; following ideas to see where they might lead; and it is about being scholarly in your work (19–20).

Reviewing the literature is, consciously or unconsciously, a political process in deciding what you keep in and leave out of scholarly conversations (Cook-Sather, personal communication, 2 March 2022). This argument reinforces the value of adopting an academic literacies perspective when synthesising SoTL literature.

A FRAMEWORK FOR REVIEWING THE SOTL LITERATURE

According to the literature, any SoTL project should begin with a literature review as this will develop your knowledge of the topic and relevant conceptual frameworks, help clarify your research question(s), and enhance your project design and research methods. It will also help position your research in the academic conversation; clarify the need for, and contribution of the project; identify the findings from related research; and help you build on, rather than repeat, previous work (Dewar and Bennett 2015; Minocha 2021; Rowland and Myatt 2014; Taylor Institute for Teaching and Learning n.d.). However, these are not neutral processes, all are influenced by the social context in which you are situated.

Figure 2 presents a simplified framework of the main literature review processes and provides a structure for later discussion. The diagram should help you visualise the context and some of the stages of undertaking different kinds of literature reviews. It may give the impression of an ordered linear process, but the reality is much messier, especially with narrative reviews. It is essentially a circular process that you may go round several times (see also Juntunen and Lehenkari 2021). As you become more familiar with the topic, you may amend the research question, inclusion criteria, and the themes you discuss.
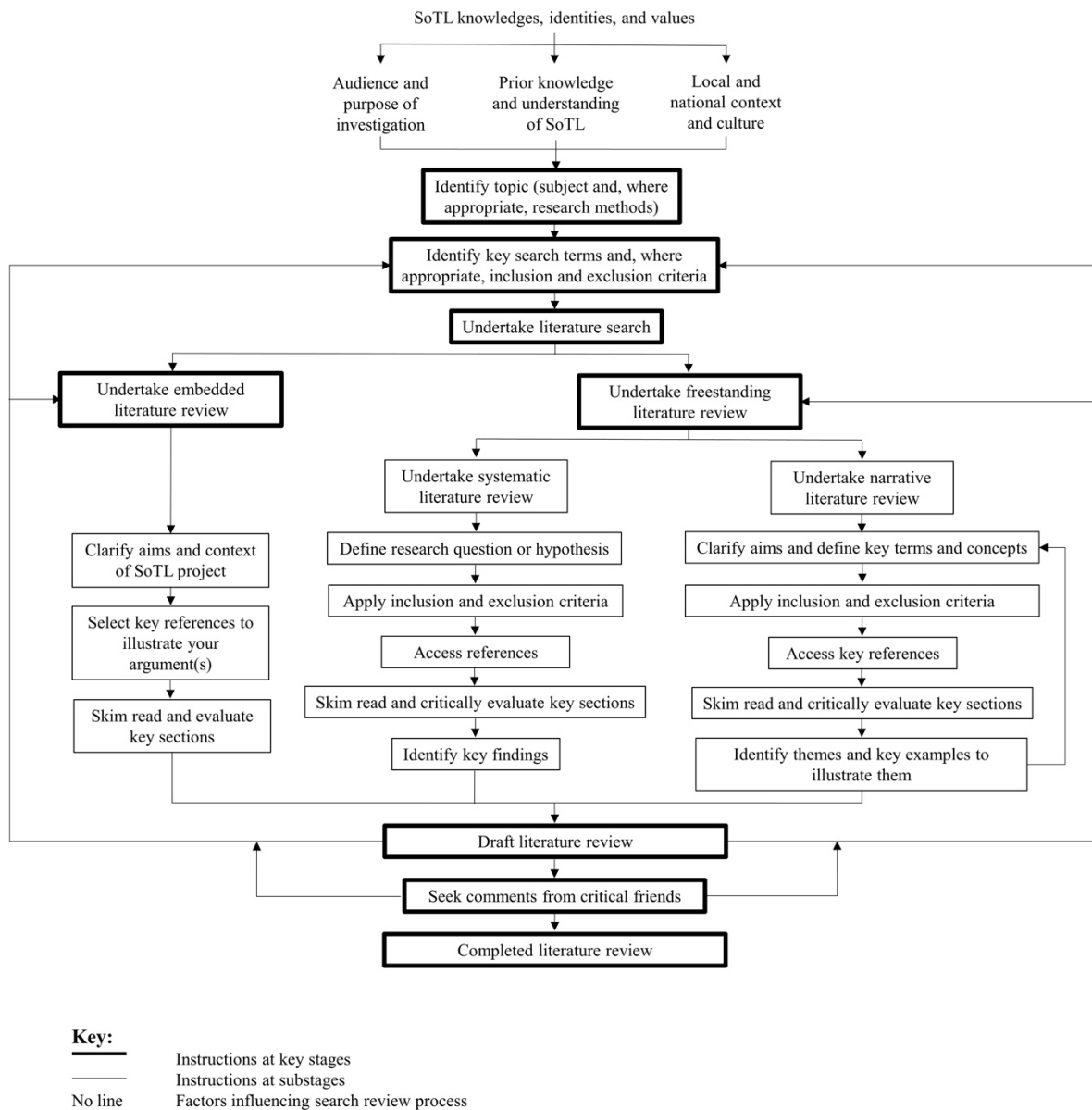
NATURE OF LITERATURE REVIEWS

Literature reviews may be viewed as both a process, and a product or outcome. Whereas the former refers to "the process during which scholars identify, analyze, assess, and synthesize earlier research"; the latter implies "an overview, synthesis and a critical assessment of previous research" (Boell and Cecez-Kecmanovic 2014, 258).

The outcome of a literature review may be embedded as part of a larger study, such as a research article or dissertation, with a section often entitled "literature review," or it can be freestanding as a separately published piece (Healey, Matthews, and Cook-Sather 2020). The first is a review *for* research, while the latter is a review *of* research (Maxwell 2006). A review for research "is largely forward-looking, setting the scene and justification for the research you are presenting in the following sections." A review of literature "is largely backward-looking, summarising the key features of what we know already about a topic" (Healey, R. L. and Healey, M. 2023). This article is a freestanding review in which the literature on reviewing the literature is integrated throughout the piece.

Although there is an overlap between embedded and freestanding reviews, writing the two types differ significantly in terms of what is involved, what is possible, and the skills and experience needed to undertake them. Embedded literature reviews are the most common type of review. They provide the evidence for the rationale and context for undertaking SoTL projects, and hence are undertaken by those new to SoTL and experienced SoTL practitioners. Freestanding reviews provide thorough critical syntheses of the existing literature and are mostly undertaken by experienced SoTL practitioners. Whereas thoroughness is a key indicator of the quality of a freestanding review, relevance is "the most essential characteristic" of the embedded literature review (Maxwell 2006, 28). Whatever kind of review you undertake, we advise that you seek comments from critical friends (Healey, Matthews, and Cook-Sather 2020; Figure 2).

Figure 2. SoTL literature review framework

SoTL knowledges, identities, and values

Audience and purpose of investigation — Prior knowledge and understanding of SoTL — Local and national context and culture

Identify topic (subject and, where appropriate, research methods)

Identify key search terms and, where appropriate, inclusion and exclusion criteria

Undertake literature search

Undertake embedded literature review — Undertake freestanding literature review

Undertake systematic literature review — Undertake narrative literature review

Clarify aims and context of SoTL project — Define research question or hypothesis — Clarify aims and define key terms and concepts

Select key references to illustrate your argument(s) — Apply inclusion and exclusion criteria — Apply inclusion and exclusion criteria

Skim read and evaluate key sections — Access references — Access key references

Skim read and critically evaluate key sections — Skim read and critically evaluate key sections

Identify key findings — Identify themes and key examples to illustrate them

Draft literature review

Seek comments from critical friends

Completed literature review

Key:
Instructions at key stages
Instructions at substages
No line   Factors influencing search review process

For details of the literature search process see Healey, M. and Healey, R. L. (2023) Figure 1.

Writing an embedded literature review

Embedded reviews published in journals are generally considerably shorter than freestanding reviews. Many authors have a section entitled "literature review" in their SoTL research articles. Commonly these amount to between 500 and 1,500 words. Given these space constraints, authors need to be selective about the literature cited and the depth of coverage given to specific references. Embedded reviews in SoTL reports and dissertations often include a literature review chapter, and are often considerably longer than in journal articles. Some of these may resemble the freestanding reviews

discussed below in terms of approach, depth, and thoroughness, while still focussing on setting the scene for the research reported on in later sections of the report or dissertation.

The great majority of embedded reviews share features with the narrative reviews discussed in the next section, but in the case of journal articles, in a cut-down version. The resources and space needed for systematic reviews are not justified in embedded reviews. Most embedded literature reviews include, firstly, clarifying the aims of the review and the context of the SoTL project, followed by a search for key references to illustrate your argument(s) (Healey, M. and Healey, R. L. 2023), and a critique and synthesis of the key literature (Figure 2).

"The quality and success of scholarly work depends in large measure on the quality of the literature review process" (Boell and Cecez-Kecmanovic 2014, 257). Yet many reviews resemble "thinly disguised annotated bibliographies" (Hart 2018, 2) "along the lines of A said, B said" (Healey, Matthews, and Cook-Sather 2020, 142). The literature review is "all about thinking – and writing. And thinking and writing are not two distinct things" (Thomson 2018a).

MacMillan (2018) observes, from reading many SoTL studies, that:

> It sometimes appears as though the literature review has been an afterthought, based on a cursory search to find papers that support the claims of a given study without much deep analysis of the quality of that prior work (25).

To overcome these problems, Wilson (2022) suggests that researchers should "ditch the term literature review and turn their attention to the dynamic relationship between their own ideas and existing work." A sound review has a clear focus and a structure in which the relevant literature is critiqued and synthesised by combining, explaining, interpreting, and evaluating findings and ideas from the literature to back up your arguments (Figure 2).

Embedded literature reviews connect the "why" of the paper with the aim of the SoTL inquiry. It has a direction, and does not just describe what the authors did and found (Matthews, personal communication, 9 March 2022). Authors sometimes justify the need for their review as filling a gap in the literature. This is a deficit view. It is better to justify the review based on its significance in addressing a problem you or others have identified or in understanding an issue better. Many gaps are not significant (Thomson 2019).

Macmillan (2018) concludes her chapter on the SoTL literature review with the statement:

> A SoTL literature review that is useful to researchers, readers, and the discipline connects diverse disciplines, past and present, theory and practice. It brings together individual points of light from prior work into constellations that take on a meaning greater than the sum of their parts (30).

This can be quite challenging, particularly for scholars new to SoTL who are unfamiliar with the literature. The guidance in the accompanying article on searching the literature may provide a helpful place to start (Healey, M. and Healey, R. L. 2023). Seeking the advice of critical friends who are experienced SoTL scholars may also be useful. If new-to-SoTL scholars lack the confidence to undertake the kind of literature review needed for a research article, they may consider writing in different genres that are less embedded in the literature, such as case studies, reflective essays, opinion pieces, or blogs,

while they develop their familiarity with the SoTL literature (Healey, Matthews, and Cook-Sather 2020). There are many guides for graduate students undertaking the more extensive literature reviews associated with masters and doctoral theses. Both Kamler and Thomson (2014) and Walter and Stouck (2020) emphasise, in line with this article, the importance of developing a scholarly identity in writing the literature review chapter. The latter also explicitly uses an academic literacies framework.

Writing a freestanding literature review

Most freestanding reviews are empirical and ask questions such as "what works?" or "what was the impact?," but there are also conceptual reviews that are concerned with different questions such as "how was this teaching practice designed?" and "what was the thinking underlying the design of this practice?" (Amundsen and Wilson 2012; Kennedy 2007). This section combines elements of both with a conceptual framework, and a realistic, though critical, discussion of the choices involved in undertaking a freestanding review of the literature.

Nature of narrative and systematic reviews

There are several different types of freestanding literature reviews (Paré et al. 2015; Tight 2021), but two main types dominate the literature: a) narrative, traditional, or scholastic reviews; and b) systematic or interventionist reviews (Hart 2018; Jesson, Matheson, and Lacey 2011; Juntunen and Lehenkari 2021) (Figure 2).

Narrative reviews provide noncomprehensive syntheses of previously published information, often designed to provide a map of a field of research (Green, Johnson, and Adams 2006; Sukhera 2022a). Although the name suggests that they tell a story based on themes identified through reading the literature, this is not always the case. They are common in books and reports as well as journal articles and theses. They are the most common form of review in the social sciences and humanities (Juntunen and Lehenkari 2021). For example, a recent study from the humanities reviewed playful approaches to learning (Jensen et al. 2021).

Systematic reviews are "a review of existing research using explicit, accountable rigorous research methods" (Gough, Oliver, and Thomas 2017, 2). They follow a series of well-defined stages, beginning with a clearly delimited (narrow) question or hypothesis. They attempt to identify all the literature within the criteria the authors define for inclusion, and adopt explicit methods selected with a view to minimise bias (Gough, Oliver, and Thomas 2013; see figure 2). A team of researchers are usually needed to undertake a full systematic review; hence, they are mainly restricted to freestanding reviews. The extensive resources required for systematic reviews are rarely justified for embedded reviews. The time taken to conduct a systematic review may lead to pressure to restrict the number of references closely read (Maclure 2005).

The majority of SoTL reviews fall into the narrative category, including ones we have contributed to or written ourselves (e.g., Fanghanel et al. 2015; Healey, Flint and Harrington 2014; Healey and Healey 2019; Healey, Lannin, et al. 2013; Healey, Matthews, and Cook-Sather 2020; Healey, Bass, et. al. 2013). They can provide "an assessment of a state of knowledge in a problem domain and identification of weaknesses and needs for further research" (Boell and Cecez-Kecmanovic 2015, 163). Well told narrative reviews can be engaging and enlightening. However, too often the authors do not say how they searched the literature, focused on particular themes, or selected sources to illustrate them. This should be transparent and part of the methodology (Sukhera 2022a).

Systematic reviews characterise literature reviews in medicine and health sciences, and it can be difficult to find outlets for narrative reviews in these disciplines, which though broader in scope, have been criticised for lacking synthesis and rigour (Byrne 2016). A recent systematic review of STEM education scholarship examined 798 articles published in 36 journals between 2000 and 2018 (Li et al. 2020). With some exceptions, systematic reviews are less common in the SoTL field (e.g., Leijon et al. 2021; Mercer-Mapstone et al. 2017; Pleschová and McAlpine 2015; Reedy and Guerrero Farías 2019). However, as the evidence-based movement expands within the social policy field, systematic reviews are growing in popularity in educational research too (Gough and Thomas 2016).

Two recent systematic reviews of the SoTL field take diverse approaches. Whereas Booth and Woollacott (2018) focused on the diversity of the nature of SoTL practices; Tight (2018b) concentrated on literature that treated SoTL as an idea and/or a movement. It is not surprising that the topics covered, and their conclusions, varied widely; but as Hart (1998) reminds us: "All reviews, irrespective of the topic, are written from a particular perspective or standpoint of the reviewer" (25).

There are several variants on systematic reviews, including scoping and rapid review studies. These adopt a structured, but less exhaustive approach to systematic reviews. Scoping studies tend to deal with broader topics in an exploratory way before possibly following up with more detailed systematic reviews (Munn et al. 2018). A recent example of a scoping review in SoTL studied students as partners in assessment (Ní Bheoláin, Lowney, and O'Riordan 2020). Their main advantage over full systematic reviews is that they are quicker to undertake. One of the purposes of scoping reviews is to set the scene for a future research agenda (Jesson, Matheson, and Lacey 2011). This is well illustrated by the scoping review protocol for SoTL developed by Chick, Nowell, and Lenart (2019).

Strengths and weaknesses of narrative and systematic reviews

The advantages and disadvantages of narrative and systematic reviews have stimulated heated debates between the two camps, leading to bold assertions on each side. Proponents of systematic reviews see them as being "objective," whereas narrative reviews are "subjective" (Cooper 1998). Halpern (2013), in the preface to the EPPI (Evidence for Policy and Practice Information Coordinating Centre) *Guide to Systematic Reviews for Informing Policy Decisions,* states that:

> It now seems extraordinary that only a few decades ago it was acceptable practice to review research by ad hoc literature reviews or panels of experts. Summaries of research were not done in a systematic way and all sorts of biases crept in: reviewers did not attempt to identify all the relevant research, check that it was reliable, or write up their results in an accountable manner. But over the last forty years, we have a more rigorous systematic approach [that] has been refined to review what is known and not known . . . (4).

Underpinning these views is the argument that narrative reviews are unsystematic and "include only research selected by the authors, which introduces bias and, therefore, frequently lags behind and contradicts the available evidence" (Jahan et al. 2016, 1).

In contrast, Boell and Cecez-Kecmanovic (2015, 161) question claims that systematic reviews provide "a 'standardized method' for literature reviews that is replicable, transparent, objective, unbiased and rigorous, and thus superior to other approaches for conducting literature reviews." A decade earlier

Maclure (2005), based on a close reading of 30 systematic education reviews undertaken by the EPPI Centre at the University of London, argued that the approach:

> degrades the status of reading and writing as scholarly activities, tends to result in reviews with limited capacity to inform policy or practice, and constitutes a threat to quality and critique in scholarship and research. The claims that are made for the transparency, accountability and trustworthiness of systematic review do not therefore, it is argued, stand up to scrutiny (393).

For more detail of Maclure's critique, please see her article. She argues that these systematic reviews suffer from the assumption that:

> evidence can be extracted intact from the texts in which it is embedded, and "synthesized" in a form that is impervious to ambiguities of context, readers' interpretations or writers' arguments (i.e., bias). Most significantly of all, systematic review systematically degrades the central acts of reviewing: namely, reading and writing, and the unreliable intellectual acts that these support, such as interpretation, argument and analysis. By replacing reading and writing with an alternate lexicon of scanning, screening, mapping, data-extraction and synthesis, systematic review tries to transform reading and writing into accountable acts (394).

Most systematic reviews focus on empirical, evidence-based practice, and prioritise quantitative studies, particularly those using randomised controlled trials, and exclude many of the qualitative studies that may feature in narrative reviews and are common in SoTL studies. Although qualitative studies are included in some systematic reviews (Mercer-Mapstone et al. 2017), it is questionable in many SoTL areas, whether there are yet sufficient quantitative studies undertaken to justify systematic reviews that attempt to measure the impact of educational initiatives on student outcomes.

Even where there are sufficient studies to review, systematic reviews may not be the most appropriate approach. They may appear to be more rigorous than narrative reviews, but their narrower focus can restrict the range of sources used, the topics addressed, the methods seen as acceptable, and limit the imagination and creativity of the authors (Hart 2018; Kennedy 2007; Montuori 2005). Systematic reviews are often claimed to be unbiased (Jesson, Matheson, and Lacey 2011). Moreover, the PRISMA Statement for Reporting Literature Searches in Systematic Reviews recommends that searches include selective sources, such as conference proceedings and general browsing (Rethlefsen et al. 2021, item 4). However, most systematic reviews are limited to published, peer reviewed, academic journal articles found in specified electronic databases that characterise literature searches using comprehensive tools and ignore the biases in the selection of journals in the databases index, and in the references that authors choose to cite. These reservations are well summarised by Boell and Cecez-Kecmanovic (2015). They argue that when systematic review guidelines are "adopted for general literature review they endorse an impoverished notion of literature review by degrading them to repeatable literature searches and selection processes" (170). They point out that whereas systematic reviews stress the process of literature identification and selection, narrative reviews emphasise how reading enables academics to enhance their understanding of the subject area and hence improve their searches.

It is important to remember that: "It is possible to work systematically in your literature review, but that does not mean it is a systematic review" (Jesson, Matheson, and Lacey 2011, 9). There are also some useful guides on making narrative reviews more systematic (Booth, Sutton, and Papaioannou 2016; Sukhera 2022b). Ferrari (2015) suggests that narrative reviews may be enhanced "by borrowing from systematic review methodologies that are aimed at reducing bias in the selection of articles for review and employing an effective bibliographic research strategy" (230). Indeed, we see the current article, together with the accompanying article on searching the literature (Healey, M. and Healey, R. L. 2023), as providing a systematic narrative review of searching and reviewing the SoTL literature in which we are explicit about our aims, literature sources, inclusion and exclusion criteria, and outcomes.

Narrative and systematic reviews: Competing or complementary?
Despite the often-heated debates about the pros and cons of narrative and systematic reviews, they are essentially complementary rather than competing approaches.

> Conventional systematic reviews address narrowly focused questions; their key contribution is summarising data. Narrative reviews provide interpretation and critique; their key contribution is deepening understanding (Greenhalgh, Thorne, and Malterud 2018, 2).

High-quality versions of both are needed for a full understanding of the development and contribution of SoTL. Indeed, Hart (2018, 118) suggests that systematic (interventionist) reviews should be preceded by narrative (scholastic) reviews, so that the researchers have a clear understanding of the topic and its associated concepts to contextualise the narrower in-depth analysis associated with a systematic review.

Reviews using a systematic methodology have a valuable contribution to make to answering specific questions, such as "what works?," or "how is one variable related to another?," and testing tightly defined hypotheses (Boell and Cecez-Kecmanovic 2015), but they need to recognise the limitations of the databases that most of them rely upon. Narrative reviews are best at answering broader overview questions, such as "what is the state of our knowledge?," "what is happening in this context?," or "what are the strengths and weaknesses?," but they need to be undertaken rigorously and transparently. There is no single best way to undertake a literature review.

Planning your freestanding literature review
Selection is critical in writing a review. "A review is not exhaustive; it is situated, partial, perspectival" (Lather 1999, 3). A key stage in the review process is the selection of which literature, from the sometimes several hundreds or thousands of items found in the literature search, to focus on in the review. This is where the clarity of the review's aim and the inclusion and exclusion criteria, if used, play a critical role. These may need to be revisited to give a practical number of items, depending on the time and resources available, emphasising again the sometimes disordered nature of the literature review processes.

In a systematic review the reduction procedure should be transparent. For example, in a review of *Enhancing Access, Retention, Attainment and Progression in Higher Education,* the reviewers identified over 10,000 initial hits, which they reduced in three stages to just over 400 items (4%) (Webb, Wyness, and

Cotton 2017). It is less common in narrative reviews to be as specific about the numbers of items identified, or the number of items included or excluded. More qualitative justifications are given as to how they choose examples to illustrate a wider range of literature. This approach puts a premium on the expertise of the reviewer to make a choice, based on the depth of their reading, about which literature best illustrates the aims, themes, and arguments in their review, rather than emphasising the objective, repeatable methodology, associated with systematic reviews.

There are several stages involved in undertaking a freestanding literature review. A summary of some of the stages involved in undertaking freestanding SoTL literature reviews are presented in Figure 2. For systematic reviews, there are well developed protocols (e.g., Gough, Oliver, and Thomas 2013). They start by defining the research question or hypothesis, then undertake an exhaustive literature search and apply the inclusion and exclusion criteria to check which studies are relevant and which should be discarded. They then code and map the nature of the research field, and critically appraise the relevance and quality of the studies, before synthesising the evidence regarding the research question. Stages have also been identified to guide narrative reviews (e.g., Green, Johnson, and Adams 2006; Sukhera 2022b; Torraco 2016). However, there is a greater variety of approaches to undertaking narrative reviews, reflecting the importance of context and imagination and the flexible and iterative nature of the process (Hart 2018; Juntunen and Lehenkari 2021). One possible set of stages is illustrated in Figure 2. It begins by clarifying the aims of the review, defining key terms and concepts, and identifying the initial themes for the review. A search for references related to these themes is then undertaken, and the inclusion and exclusion criteria, if specified, are applied. This is followed by a critical evaluation and synthesis of the relevant literature, leading to a reflection on the initial themes and selection of key examples to illustrate them. The process of reflection often leads to a clarification and development of the initial themes, the addition of extra themes, and a further iteration of the above stages. It is essentially a circular process that you may go round several times (Healey, M. and Healey, R. L. 2023); again, emphasising the socially constructed nature of the process. A set of common questions that may help guide the SoTL scholar undertaking a narrative review are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Guiding questions for planning, revising, and refining a narrative literature review
1. What is the focus and aim of your review? Who is your audience?
2. Why is there a need for your review? Why is it significant?
3. What is the context of the topic or issue? What perspective do you take? What framework do you use to synthesise the literature?
4. How did you locate and select sources for inclusion in the review?
5. How is your review structured?
6. What are the main findings in the literature on this topic?
7. What are the main strengths and limitations of this literature?
8. What conclusions do you draw from the review? What do you argue needs to be done as an outcome of the review?

Source: Based on: Healey, Matthews, and Cook-Sather (2020, 148–51)

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FURTHER DEVELOPMENT OF AN ACADEMIC LITERACIES PERSPECTIVE

Many of the guides on searching and reviewing literature, and the accounts authors give in their publications about how they went about these processes, give the impression that they are objective and

scientific processes. As Hart (2018) notes: "the serendipitous, often chaotic, fragmented and contingent nature of most research . . . is not described in the formal account" (3). Similarly, Montuori (2005) states that: "The traditional elimination of the inquirer from the process of inquiry in favor of objectivity, laws, and rationality has led to a somewhat sanitized view of science and inquiry" (387).

To extend the academic literacies perspective further, there is a need to investigate how SoTL scholars go about searching and reviewing the literature. It would be revealing to study the lived experiences of SoTL researchers, how these vary between novice and experienced students and faculty, how their understandings contrast with those they have in their home disciplines, and how they are affected by their identities and contexts. A similar suggestion, to ask SoTL authors about their reading, writing, and citation strategies, was made by Cappello and Miller-Young (2020). Coleman and Morris (2021) provide a fascinating account of how they, as two South African academics, understood and discursively constructed their identities through writing about SoTL using an academic literacies framework; while Thomson (2018b) gives a brief account of her experience of undertaking a rapid evidence review. Some fascinating quotes about the messy, iterative, and cumulative process that bachelor students experienced in undertaking business research theses, may be found in the article by Juntunen and Lehenkari (2021). Our story about preparing and writing this article, and the one on searching the SoTL literature (Healey, M. and Healey, R. L. 2023), is told in Box 2.

Box 2. The story of the origins, literature searches, and writing of this review

We think it important to begin by acknowledging our own identities, as these influenced how we searched, selected, and interpreted the literature as constructive and creative processes. We are two related (father and daughter), white, British academics. Our geography training means that we value interdisciplinary approaches. We have extensive previous experience of undertaking SoTL projects and narrative literature reviews, and have written about the processes of undertaking literature searches and reviews. We have searched the literature widely, but not exhaustively, in preparing these articles. Given our lack of linguistic abilities, we have restricted our search to English-language publications.

At first the paper was conceived largely as a "how to" article, albeit recognising the importance of context, and that there is no one right way of searching for literature or reviewing it. However, as we started planning the article, we realised that we could use ideas from the literature on academic literacies as a framework and push the boundaries of what counts as valid forms of academic literacy. As we continued to search and read the relevant literature, we found several other references that discussed the social construction of knowledge in terms of literature search and review, a theme emphasised in the literature on academic literacies, though most of the pieces we found did not link explicitly to academic literacy.

We kept notes on the complexity and messiness of our literature search and review processes. We found that our SoTL literature search and review processes were closely related and continued throughout the three months we were preparing the article for submission, as our understanding developed, and we integrated ideas from the general literature on search and review with the SoTL specific literature. Following comments from the reviewers that we were attempting to do too much in a single article, we agreed with the editors of *Teaching & Learning Inquiry*, to resubmit two stand-alone but related articles, one on searching the SoTL literature and the other on reviewing the SoTL literature.

Our previous experience of SoTL, and undertaking literature searches and narrative reviews, is reflected in the combined reference list of the two articles, where we had prior knowledge of 31% of the 127 items. However, we extended our knowledge and understanding significantly as we uncovered other references on the lack of objectivity in searching and reviewing the literature, pursued ideas about academic and SoTL identities, and explored the importance of contexts, countries, and cultures in influencing what we searched for and reviewed, and how we went about these key academic processes. Selective literature sources were interwoven with those we found by using comprehensive tools. The former were more important sources, accounting for 46% of our references, as we followed up citations, browsed journals, searched grey literature, used our networks, followed social media links, and benefited from several serendipitous finds. Comprehensive tools accounted for only 23% of the references we cite.

A specific example of serendipity occurred towards the end of drafting this article when we saw a call from Advance HE (UK) to tender for a literature review on student engagement through partnership focusing on demonstrable impacts on student outcomes. As we explored previous literature reviews undertaken for Advance HE with this focus, all of which adopted a systematic review methodology, we came across several other relevant references that informed our understanding of topics covered in this review. As it was, we decided not to put in a tender, in part because the focus of the proposed review, on quantifiable impacts, severely limited the literature that we were interested in exploring.

Unlike some researchers, who note that they undertook their literature search on a particular date, we kept returning to the databases, search engines, reference lists, and other sources, as our ideas evolved, and we received feedback from critical friends and reviewers. The key words we used for searching the literature were not restricted to SoTL literature search and review; as we also explored literature on academic literacies, academic identities, academic writing, discipline-based educational research, citation practices, and bias in database searches, as well as general references on searching and reviewing academic literature. Our writing and our literature search were integrally linked as we clarified our thinking and kept revisiting our search, illustrating again the continuous and messy nature of many literature searches and reviews.

A common theme from the comments we received from several of our critical friends was the need to enhance the links between the sections about following an academic literacies perspective with those on how to undertake a literature search and review sections of the paper. We responded by clarifying the different ways that the search and review processes could be undertaken and how they varied based on the purpose. We elaborated on the social and political nature of literature search and review, and how they are influenced by the values and identities of scholars, and the academic hierarchies in which they operate, including expanding on the limitations of systematic reviews.

We also explored further the desirability of including a more diverse set of voices (Healey, M. and Healey, R. L. 2023). Following the recommendation of Mott and Cockayne (2017) to practise "conscientious engagement" in selecting references to cite, to give greater weight to under-represented voices, we undertook a citation count of the literature we cited in the first draft of the paper, to identify the country in which the 175 authors were based. From the institution to which the authors were affiliated, 82% were based in the UK (33%), US (27%), Australia (11%), and Canada (10%), the four most represented countries in the SoTL literature, and 18% were based in nine other countries. We were already aware of the desirability to diversify the background of the voices we cited and had moved in this direction, but this exercise focussed our minds, and we added or substituted a few further articles written

from authors based beyond these four countries, where they made similar arguments or illustrated similar practices. We also added some relevant references written or co-written by Indigenous authors. The final two papers, including taking on board comments from critical friends and reviewers, cite 274 authors from 17 different countries.

CONCLUSION

Our intention in writing this article was to build on our complementary article on searching the SoTL literature (Healey, M. and Healey, R. L. 2023) by applying the same academic literacies framework, but this time to the process of reviewing the SoTL literature. Our argument in both papers is that searching and reviewing the literature is a socially constructed process. We wanted to provide a readable and practical, but critical guide to the process of synthesising the literature that clarifies some of the confusions and unjustified claims in the review literature. We distinguished between reviews that are embedded in wider SoTL projects, and reviews that are freestanding critiques of bodies of literature. We went on to discuss the nature and strengths and weaknesses of narrative and systematic freestanding reviews and challenge the view that systematic reviews are necessarily superior to narrative reviews by being more objective. Though critical of systematic reviews, we recognise that for the most part, narrative and systematic reviews have different purposes, and both are needed to obtain a full understanding of the SoTL literature. We contend that narrative reviews are likely to continue to dominate the SoTL literature, especially while most SoTL studies use qualitative or mixed methods. It is important that contextually-sensitive judgements and interpretation of texts, associated with narrative reviews, are seen as central to the reviewing process, and as a strength rather than a weakness. However, we feel that many narrative reviews could be strengthened by being undertaken more systematically. To develop the academic literacies perspective on searching and reviewing the literature, we call for more studies that examine the rich and varied lived experiences of SoTL scholars and how they go about searching and reviewing the literature.

It is important to begin a SoTL project with a literature search and review, but also to keep returning to it. As Daniel and Harland (2018, 96) argue: "A literature review should be done first and last and at every stage in between."

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Mick Healey is director of Healey HE Consultants and emeritus professor at University of Gloucestershire (UK).

Ruth L. Healey is professor of teaching and learning in higher education at University of Chester (UK) and director of Healey HE Consultants.

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