



SoTL in Process

Facilitating a Public SoTL Writing Group: For the Public or with the Public?

ABSTRACT

The concept of public SoTL, aimed to extend the field's influence beyond academia, challenged writing group facilitators to redefine their expectations and actions as traditional approaches fell short, prompting a reevaluation. This essay chronicles the journey of the facilitators in the inaugural ICWG-Public SoTL cohort, exploring what it means to facilitate a project with influence beyond academia. The facilitators of this public SoTL writing group encountered numerous challenges, including redefining their roles and expectations, engaging with public audiences, and applying critical pedagogy frameworks. This reflective essay shares their facilitation story and the importance of understanding public SoTL's purpose, audience, and products, which led to a framework for future ICWG-Public SoTL facilitators. Their public SoTL facilitation framework with a critical lens emphasizes the need for a collaborative, iterative approach that prioritizes the needs of the public over traditional academic outputs, ultimately advocating for a more inclusive and impactful form of scholarship.

KEYWORDS

public SoTL, writing group facilitation, critical pedagogy

INTRODUCTION

Spoiler alert: traditional writing group frameworks do not prepare scholars to facilitate the production of public-facing products involving advocacy and community outreach (Huber and Robinson 2016). We discovered this truth in our public facing SoTL group, where traditional writing group frameworks, in which facilitators develop a thesis, define tasks, or distribute timelines, were tangential to the core work of the group (Simmons and Singh 2019). In this essay, we first identify a framework to support public SoTL writing group facilitation and then reflect on our story as facilitators, highlighting the experiences that informed this framework. Specifically, our framework tilts SoTL toward more public-facing products and forms of communication that center community-based advocacy in order to reach a broader public audience outside academic courses and programs.

Framework for public SoTL writing group facilitation

Our framework, based on our experience facilitating a public SoTL writing group, may be informative to anyone who is also interested in incorporating a critical lens when facilitating this work (Table 1). This framework integrates both what we came to understand about public SoTL and the practicality of facilitating a public SoTL writing group. Additionally, we learned public SoTL is not a linear process; therefore, this framework should not be implemented as a step-by-step approach. When the public is the driver, the process must be concurrent, iterative, and flexible. Projects evolve

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when the audience is truly first, even before the pedagogy. A defined linear process undermines putting an audience first because it predetermines a response and solution. We also learned that if the audience is prioritized, then it is essential to employ critical pedagogy.

The framework for facilitating public SoTL with a critical lens (Table 1) identifies strategies for facilitating a public SoTL writing group using the tenets of critical pedagogy. Each strategy includes clarifying descriptors.

Table 1. Framework for facilitating public SoTL with a critical lens

Strategy	Clarification
Frame and define public SoTL and public scholarship with the group and reach consensus	Define your position on public SoTL and develop a shared understanding of public scholarship; clarify where the group wants to be on the continuum of public engagement (Bridger and Alter 2010).
Reframe the facilitation of public SoTL with a critical pedagogy lens	Content is relevant to a lived experience of a public; knowledge production is shared (learner has expertise); assumptions are questions; problem-posing is centered (Freire 2000; Mahon, Heikkinen, and Huttunen 2019).
Identify a public	Be specific about the audience you hope to work with and serve. Identify the interests of the public and clarify how the group can serve those interests (Chick 2022; Huber and Robinson 2016).
Pose a problem that the public SoTL work will address	This speaks to relevancy and tenets of critical pedagogy and is not a predetermined solution. Work with the public to identify a problem (Cavanagh, Vanstone, and Ritz 2019; Freire 2000).
Define the resource and/or project	Let the public and context inform the project design (Hooks 1994; Kincheloe 2008).
Reframe the group's SoTL skills to apply to the needs or the problems posed by the public	Consider how SoTL skills might look and feel differently outside academia and in the community. Define these skills with a community focus: interviewing, facilitation, needs assessment (Martin 2005; Reyes and Gerstl-Pepin 2015).
Include the public in decision-making as the project is drafted	Design a project with the public, not for the public. Build consensus and share decision-making with the public. This is an iterative process. Have public "sign off" at the end of the project (Giroux 2017).

Our public SoTL writing group facilitation story

Shifting expectations: what are we doing when we do public SoTL?

In her 2019 closing ISSOTL keynote address "Public SoTL as Public Scholarship," Nancy Chick challenged the audience to consider how SoTL might go public and expand its influence beyond academia. In 2022, ISSOTL launched an inaugural [ICWG-Public project](#), charging cohorts to create public projects to extend SoTL "toward advocacy, its audiences toward a broader public, its products toward more public forms of communication, and its influence beyond courses and academic programs" (International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning [ISSOTL] n.d.). We eagerly engaged in this opportunity to go beyond the traditional reach of SoTL, bringing the field into the public realm.

Initially, we intended our public SoTL to be a literature review on a current social issue but soon realized that discipline experts are already writing about this topic in many spaces, and the audience for a literature review is not public enough. As facilitators, we recognized the need to adjust our understanding and expectations when creating a product intended for a public, not an academic audience. We quickly learned that we needed to deploy a different set of skills if the focus was not disseminating our knowledge—something we do all the time in academia and SoTL—but rather engaging with the lived experience and knowledge of the public audience we hoped to reach (Table 1, strategy F). It was this realization that problematized our initial understanding of public SoTL. We repeatedly asked ourselves: What do we want to accomplish with a public SoTL project that makes it truly public, and how do we do it in a way that meets the needs of the public and uses our skills?

As facilitators, we needed to better understand public SoTL and our role in it (Giroux 2017). This was essential to the integrity of our work. Just as Behari-Leak (2022) and Chick (2022) recognize, we too had to explore public SoTL's purpose, audience, and products to provide structure and direction for the group's work. More importantly, and in accord with Behari-Leak (2022), we wanted to make a relevant contribution to a public conversation on a social issue. This led to a shift in our expectations of the work and facilitation of a public SoTL writing group. Our focus moved away from SoTL inside the academy ("[Definitions Of The Scholarship Of Teaching And Learning \(SoTL\)](#)") to focus on public SoTL beyond the academy. Our writing group struggled to identify a public with whom we could work alongside, not in the abstract but in the contextual sense. To concretize this as public scholars in SoTL, we had to redefine our roles, stance, and approach. This strategy played an integral role in our framework (Table 1, strategy A).

Employing a critical stance using a critical pedagogy approach

As SoTL practitioners, identifying a pedagogy to use in a public SoTL project was important. We chose critical pedagogy, as it was relevant to our public SoTL project and provided a frame for creating a public-facing product (Table 1, strategy B). Critical pedagogy, as informed by the educator and theorist Paulo Freire, provided inspiration and a framework for the critical pedagogical approach and stance we employed in our public SoTL work (Freire 2000; Mahon, Heikkinen, and Huttunen 2019; Martin 2005). Freire's dialogic model, in which learning and teaching are collaborative and raise awareness of social relations, challenges traditional definitions of expert (Bridger and Alter 2010; Shor et al. 2017). We attempted to exercise a critical educational praxis (Mahon, Heikkinen, and Huttunen 2019; Ultsch, Baier, and Signorini 2022), in order to engage the community, ask critical questions, and create conditions for positive change in a particular social context. We began our critical educational praxis of public SoTL by engaging with an identified public, listening and learning from them, and collaboratively creating content to address the community's self-identified problem in a mutually beneficial and impactful way (Bridger and Alter 2010).

Minding the gap

In our framework for facilitating public SoTL with a critical lens, a critical educational praxis necessitates SoTL practitioners reevaluate and reformulate what they mean by "public," especially in their role as experts within the SoTL ecosystem (Mahon, Heikkinen, and Huttunen 2019). Collaborating with the public is messier and less defined, with uncertain outcomes. To apply a critical lens and therefore a critical praxis of dialogue, we must define the public we aim to serve, what challenges this public wants to address, and the stakeholders who decide what content is created. Essentially, Freire (2000) calls this approach a "problem-posing" pedagogy in which we bring the public (learner in the broadest sense) into the work of knowledge creation. After several months, we

realized that to implement a critical praxis in our public SoTL work, we needed to meet these three necessary conditions before creating a public-facing product. Strategies C and D (Table 1) reflect how we met these conditions and bridged this gap.

Writing with, not for the public: avoiding the banking model

As facilitators, we had anticipated a linear path to our work: identify a topic, find the literature, determine the publication, and write something informative and beneficial for public consumption. However, our public SoTL work, at least in the beginning, felt dubious. We struggled with some of the same questions raised by Behari-Leak (2022): were we certain about relevance and contribution to the public good? At times, we felt our writing group task was compulsory to meet the external expectations of our ISSOTL charge, and not in service to the public good. Avoiding the banking model of pedagogy is not easy when faced with artificial time constraints and external expectations for outcomes.

From a Freirean framework, this irrelevancy is dehumanizing (Freire 2000); it fails to connect the project to learners' lived experiences and the broader social context. It oppresses learners—our public—by perpetuating a passive banking model of pedagogy in which knowledge is deposited without active participation from learners (Freire 2000). We were acutely aware that a compulsory public SoTL task, especially given the nature of our topic—inequity in education—would undermine our ability to critically analyze the world around us and diminish our contribution to the public good (Behari-Leak 2022; Biesta 2017). As facilitators, we could have adopted this banking model role easily, but chose not to.

Refusing a banking model resulted in a lot of time spent clarifying our shared expectations. We knew we wanted to engage the community, but didn't know the best way to do this. We needed to find a partner with a critical need that also aligned with our interests, leverage our teaching and learning expertise, and address a relevant problem for the public. Not until we identified an actual place, an actual group, and an actual need—and aligned all three criteria—did the project go from abstract and hypothetical to context-rich and locally informed. This strategy is captured in strategies D and E (Table 1).

The challenge of reconciling the applications of SoTL in higher education with a public audience meant that as facilitators, we continuously refocused the group on teaching and learning as a SoTL priority. We also had to critically question how we would involve the community partners as drivers of the project. We had to write with the public and not for the public. Incorporating the public in decision-making is an iterative process, and this is reflected in strategy G (Table 1).

Recognizing public SoTL's time commitment

As our perception of public SoTL evolved, the critical framework we adopted required time parameters that none of us were in a position to adhere to given workload and job constraints. To be authentically public, it had to be driven by a public audience, not just created for one (Behari-Leak 2022). This meant we had to work on the public's time frame and schedule demands, not our own. This shift altered our approach to both facilitation and project development, and it strained the resources of the group as this project occurred externally to our regular work obligations.

We successfully connected with a local parent activist group from a small city in the Northeast United States. After hearing their stories about navigating hostile school board meetings and how misinformation and disinformation divided their community, we offered this public a critical information literacy training resource to address their problem of disinformation, leveraging our SoTL expertise. Although we identified a resource we could create, we had to determine what was

achievable in our remaining time commitment versus what was optimal given the needs of the community.

By the time we had found a partner and decided on a project, we were already more than halfway through our commitment to facilitate a one-year writing group. Strategy G (Table 1) includes collaborative decision making about the timing of the project, such as design, implementation, and meeting schedule. This public SoTL work, grounded in criticality and driven by public participation, was a much larger and longer undertaking than we initially intended. Other job commitments, deadlines, and priorities started to take center stage. While the implications for this are beyond the scope of this article, they warrant deeper conversation about how to effectively conduct public SoTL given existing workloads.

CONCLUSION

We recognize that public SoTL, as conceived by Chick (2022), is evolving. Engaging with the public in “doing public SoTL” took us out of our SoTL comfort zone and forced us to interrogate a false binary of the knower and the known (Shelton and Dodd 2021). In writing this reflective essay, we aim to share the lessons we learned as facilitators, offer a framework for how future public SoTL facilitators might initiate this work, and highlight issues to consider when bringing a group together. While the intentions of expanding SoTL into the public arena are good, it is not enough to put the word public in front of a field, shift the audience, and then proceed as usual. We hope this framework provides additional guidance to facilitators of public SoTL writing groups that, in turn, lead to more public-facing products and forms of communication that center community-based advocacy for a broader public audience outside academic courses and programs.

We propose that SoTL practitioners need new ways of knowing if they want to transcend the limits of the field and discipline, which have mostly been confined within the walls of the modern higher education institution (Yapa 2006). Although not the aim of this essay, a need exists for future articles that offer guidance on processes related to undertaking public SoTL, such as conducting focus groups or interviews and identifying community stakeholder needs or problems. Our public SoTL story illustrates our attempt to meet the challenge of going beyond the walls of the university by employing the tenets of critical pedagogy, in which educators engage and collaborate with a particular public to facilitate a co-created response to a problem identified as a priority by the community participants. These recommendations could guide future public SoTL writing group facilitators to effectively identify and navigate this challenge.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

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DISCLOSURE

The researchers used Generative AI software (Copilot Visual Creator) to create the related image.

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