

# Before you start with SoTL

A pause to reflect before you begin



## 1. Why start with SoTL

In your teaching, there are moments that make you stop and think:

- students respond differently than you expected;
- something in your course does not work as well as you hoped, and you want to understand why;
- you want to try something new in your teaching and explore what effect that change might have.

These moments are often where the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) begins.

Starting with SoTL is not only about fixing a problem. It is also about exploring questions, testing ideas, and better understanding what happens when you make changes in your teaching. Over time, this helps you make more deliberate choices and strengthen your practice.

Many educators find that working with SoTL helps them teach with more confidence and focus. They gain clearer insight into what works in their context, what does not, and why. That understanding supports better decisions, both small and large.

This document is meant as a short pause before you begin. It helps you step back, clarify what you want to explore, and avoid some common beginner mistakes. From there, you can decide how – and how far – you want to take your SoTL work.

## 2. Why SoTL is worth your time



### What it can give you

- clearer insight into what works – and why
- understanding the effects of small changes
- better-informed teaching choices
- greater confidence in your teaching decisions
- more meaningful conversations with colleagues
- connection to the wider (international) SoTL community



### What it does require

- time and attention alongside regular teaching
- a willingness to pause and reflect
- accepting that not every question has a clear or immediate answer

**SoTL does not have to become a large project.  
It can start small and still be worthwhile.**

## 3. What SoTL is – and what it is not

SoTL is a systematic, evidence-informed way of looking more closely at your own teaching and your students' learning.

Its aim is to understand and improve learning in your course, your discipline, and your context.

SoTL builds on curiosity and reflection, and becomes scholarly through deliberate inquiry and sharing insights with others.

SoTL is not about conducting large-scale educational research, developing a full research design from the start, or aiming for publication.

It often starts small, closely connected to your everyday teaching practice.

*For a fuller introduction to what SoTL is, see the SoTL Quick Guide.*

**SoTL starts with your students, in your context, in your discipline.**

## 4. Five common misconceptions about starting SoTL project

01

**⚠️ “I am a disciplinary researcher, not an educational researcher.”**

This concern is common, especially when you are unfamiliar with educational research methods.

**✅ A more helpful way to think about this**

SoTL is not about becoming an educational researcher. It is about looking carefully at student learning in your own teaching and discipline.

Many SoTL projects build on research approaches you already know. Sometimes, your teaching and learning question invites methods beyond your own field – and working with others can then be both supportive and enriching.

02

**⚠️ “SoTL only matters if it leads to a publication.”**

Public sharing is an important principle of SoTL, but not every project must end in a journal article.

**✅ A more helpful way to think about this**

Sharing insights can take many forms, such as conversations with colleagues, workshops, internal reports, blogs, or conference contributions.

Publication can be valuable, but it is not required for SoTL to be meaningful.

03

**⚠️ “I need ethical approval immediately”**

Preparing an application for an ethics review committee can feel like an early barrier.

**✅ A more helpful way to think about this**

Ethical awareness is always important, but formal approval is not always required at the very start.

It becomes essential when you plan to collect student data for publication or wider use, while early SoTL work often focuses on clarifying questions and context.

04

⚠️ **“I need complex data to do this properly.”**

This assumption often leads to unnecessary complexity and hesitation.

✅ **A more helpful way to think about this**

SoTL does not require complex or unfamiliar data by default.

What matters most is that the type of evidence fits your question and context. Many projects start with accessible, meaningful data drawn from everyday teaching practice.

05

⚠️ **“SoTL is something I do on top of my teaching”**

When your workload is already high, SoTL can easily feel like yet another task.

✅ **A more helpful way to think about this**

SoTL focuses on questions that already arise in your teaching.

Rather than adding work, it helps you make more deliberate choices – leading to changes that are more sustainable, more likely to work, and that can save time in the long run.



## 5. Five common beginner pitfalls

### **Starting too big**

It is tempting to look at an entire course or programme at once, especially when you want to improve student learning in a meaningful way.

*What helps:*

Start with one activity, one assignment, or one specific teaching moment.

### **Trying to answer too many questions at once**

Curiosity is a strength, but many questions at the same time can make it hard to decide where to begin.

*What helps:*

Focus on one central question for now. Other questions can wait and often become clearer later.

### **Focusing on methods before purpose**

Thinking about tools or instruments before clarifying your aim can lead to confusion or overcomplication.

*What helps:*

Start with why you want to explore this aspect of your teaching, then let methods and data follow.

### **Working on your own for too long**

When SoTL remains an individual effort, it can start to feel heavy or isolating.

*What helps:*

Talk early with colleagues, educational developers, or students to share ideas and perspectives.

### **Waiting for the 'right moment'**

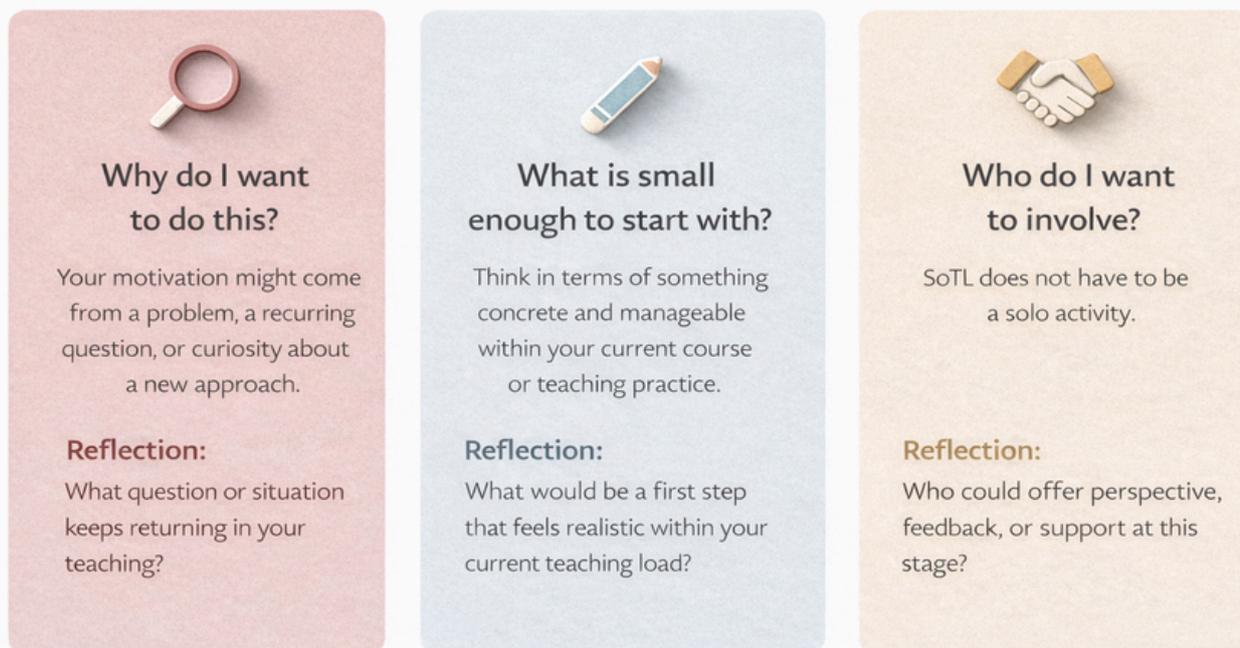
Busy schedules can make it tempting to postpone starting until there is more time or certainty.

*What helps:*

Accept that SoTL is iterative. Starting small and imperfectly is often the most realistic way forward.

## 6. Three choices to make before you begin

Before moving on, it helps to make three conscious choices. These do not need final answers — they help you start with intention.



**Why do I want to do this?**

Your motivation might come from a problem, a recurring question, or curiosity about a new approach.

**Reflection:**

What question or situation keeps returning in your teaching?

**What is small enough to start with?**

Think in terms of something concrete and manageable within your current course or teaching practice.

**Reflection:**

What would be a first step that feels realistic within your current teaching load?

**Who do I want to involve?**

SoTL does not have to be a solo activity.

**Reflection:**

Who could offer perspective, feedback, or support at this stage?

## 7. Moving from reflection to structure

As you spend more time reflecting on your teaching, your thinking often begins to shift in small but noticeable ways. You may find that:

- your questions become more focused;
- you want to collect evidence in a more deliberate way;
- you are curious about how your observations relate to existing literature;
- you start to think about sharing your insights beyond your own course.

At this point, having some structure can be helpful. The Utrecht Roadmap for SoTL offers guidance without prescribing a fixed order. It supports you in organising your thinking, making deliberate choices, and moving back and forth between steps as your inquiry develops.

Rather than a checklist to follow, the roadmap works best as a framework for thinking and decision-making.

You can find the [Utrecht Roadmap for SoTL](#) on the Utrecht University website.

## 8. Connect with the SoTL community

SoTL is more fun and rewarding when you connect with others.

- Join the international EuroSoTL or ISSOTL Conference – a great place to learn from peers and share your first steps. See more at: [www.eurosotl.org](http://www.eurosotl.org) and [issotl.com](http://issotl.com)
- Explore the EuroSoTL Special Interest Groups (SIGs), such as the Learning to Do SoTL SIG, which is designed especially for newcomers.
- Stay connected via the EuroSoTL [LinkedIn group](#) and other online communities to keep inspired and up to date.

*SoTL works best when you just give it a try – no barriers, just curiosity and action. The best SoTL project is the one you actually start, so why not today?*

### And don't forget...

You don't have to do this alone. Through Irma Meijerman Consultancy & Training, you can find support, webinars, and workshops to help you take your SoTL further. Keep an eye out for news and upcoming webinar series – or feel free to contact me directly if you'd like to continue your SoTL journey together.



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