

## Connections in a Liminal Space

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### ABSTRACT

This reflective paper is both a partial response to Dr. Julie Rattray's opening keynote presentation, *Travels in a Liminal Space: The Need for Guardians and Guides in SoTL*, at the 2023 symposium, and an account of my journey to connection and revitalization through the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL). After burning out mid-career, I found myself struggling with my identity, not only as an academic but also outside of work. I was at a crossroads heading into the last decade or so of my career. In this reflection, I will explore SoTL identity, threshold concepts, and liminal spaces from my perspective as an instructor and educational developer in the college and polytechnic sector.

*Keywords:* liminal space, identity, threshold concept, transformation, connection

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## CONNECTIONS IN A LIMINAL SPACE

My scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) journey began in the spring of 2022 when I met Dr. Melanie Hamilton after burning out mid-career, resigning from my tenured faculty position, and pursuing my passion for educational development at another institution. As Hamilton and Simmons (2021) suggest, “Encouraging MCF [mid-career faculty] to engage in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) is one way to reinvigorate their careers and passion for teaching and learning” (p. 59). The concept of “finding my people” is well known within the SoTL community, and I felt immediate connection and like-mindedness with colleagues such as Dr. Hamilton and numerous other attendees at the 2022 and 2023 Symposiums for Scholarship of Teaching and Learning.

I am only now beginning to fully appreciate the impact of this connectedness on my SoTL identity and the liminal space in which I find myself. This reflective paper is, in part, a response to Dr. Julie Rattray’s opening keynote presentation, *Travels in a liminal space: The need for guardians and guides in SoTL*, at the 2023 symposium. It is also about finding connection and revitalization through the exploration of SoTL identity, threshold concepts, and liminal spaces, from my perspective as an educational developer in the college and polytechnic sector and student in the SoTL graduate certificate program at the University of Saskatchewan.

## SOTL IDENTITY

When I was a tenured faculty member, my whole identity was so wrapped up in my work that I lost myself somewhere along the way. This led to giving up my academic identity as an accounting faculty member, pursuing my passion for educational development and SoTL, and entering a liminal space. Simmons et al. (2013) describe “how navigating among conflicting identities can lead us into a troublesome but deeply reflective liminal space, prompting profound realizations and the reconstruction of our academic identities” (p. 10). They also suggest unsettledness and discomfort are inherent to the development of one’s identity as a SoTL scholar.

I continue to struggle with my identity as I resist the perils of academic life and redefine myself in what are now precarious roles. McDermott et al. (2020) acknowledge that “with the intensification of academic life, felt time pressures, individualized, competitive, and accountability cultures in the academy, we are not surprised to see a ballooning of feelings of burnout and stress” (p. 4). The struggle to reconcile one’s academic identity in SoTL with the comforts of one’s disciplinary home can be troublesome, but transformation becomes the reward for continuing to wrestle with that identity (Simmons et al., 2013). At the same time, I feel liberated by being in this liminal space where the interconnectedness of my engagement in SoTL and the exploration of my academic identity have proved generative. I believe Danielson’s (2012) exploration of SoTL’s special promise and SoTL “as generative, heuristic methodology; as faculty development; and as transformative community builder” (p. 1) can help shift this systemic issue in our

post-secondary institutions in the same way in which engagement in SoTL has been restorative for me.

I agree wholeheartedly that “the SoTL identity is the place where we can make peace with our academic identity. There is something in this; the idea of a kinder, gentler ethos in the SoTL world” (A. Webb, personal communication, March 20, 2024). This also supports Chick’s (2014) message to “be gentle with each other, knowing that we all struggle with who we are and what we do when we step across that threshold” (p. 10). This I believe is the power of connection within the SoTL community. It is key to supporting the fluidity of SoTL identity and advancing SoTL in the college and polytechnic sector.

## **LIMINALITY AND LIMINAL SPACE**

Liminality is described as a state of many things: betweenness, transformation, suspension, unsettledness (Meyer & Land, 2005). This concept originated from the anthropological study of tribal rituals and rites of passage where assumptions, relationships, and conventional practices cease to exist (Hawkins & Edwards, 2015). Rattray’s (2023) presentation was my first introduction to threshold concepts in SoTL and liminal space, and while I was intrigued by their message about the need for guides, tutelaries, and guardians in SoTL (Rattray, 2023), I did not really grasp the concepts or terminology at the time. Rattray (2023) framed her talk around Campbell’s (2008) hero’s journey. As I took a deeper dive into the literature on liminality, particularly Rattray’s (2016) work on affective dimensions and Hawkins and Edwards’ (2015) focus on the anthropological literature, I was finally able to connect my learning and journey to Rattray’s (2023) keynote storytelling. SoTL literature about chameleon and chimera metaphors and monstrous theory (Bennett et al., 2015; Kensington-Miller et al., 2015) also began to make more sense.

### ***Stages of the Liminal Space Journey***

There are three acts in the hero’s journey: departure, initiation, and return (Campbell, 2008), and Hawkins and Edwards (2015) outlined Van Gennep’s (1960) three phases of a liminal ritual experience: separation, limen or threshold, and reincorporation. As I struggled with burnout and tried to find myself outside of my academic identity, I had to completely detach from my instructor role and physically remove myself from my department, business school, and institution. The first stage of separation occurs when one symbolically and often physically detaches from a previous role in the social structure and all the social ties and conventions connected with that structure (Hawkins & Edwards, 2015). I equate my resignation to a departure, leaving the known and crossing a threshold into the unknown. In the act of doing so, I lost and disconnected from my disciplinary identity. I eventually reconnected to my discipline of accounting through Hawkins and Edwards’ (2015) work and realized that despite not being an accounting researcher, accounting is still my discipline and “SoTL has troubled our identities

but has simultaneously led us to new understandings of ourselves” (Simmons et al., 2013, p. 10). A deeper understanding of my transformation and the generative process came when I realized that I was not travelling away from and giving up one academic culture or identity (accounting) for another (SoTL) but instead have been gravitating towards a more natural fitting academic culture or identity, better suited to who I am now. It is important to determine what that might mean for who I have become instead of focusing on how I was initially trained (Kelly et al., 2012).

My departure came as a last resort and in desperation when I could no longer deny my state of burnout. Some faculty or learners might enter the liminal space willingly or eagerly in the hopes of finding transformation while others stop at the entrance or threshold unable or unwilling to part with their existing understandings or identities (Rattray, 2016). In O’Brien (2008) they considered the SoTL landscape and how Rice’s (2006) work “evokes an image of SoTL as a path of mindful practice, the purpose of which is to encounter the unknown and to deliberate over what we discover. Taking this path is undeniably invigorating but requires some preparation” (p. 2). Newfound guides and mentors in the SoTL community supported me throughout the initial challenges and temptations to give up when imposter syndrome and liminal monsters of doubt (Bennett et al., 2015; Hawkins & Edwards, 2015; Kensington-Miller et al., 2015) knocked at the door.

In the limen or threshold transition state (initiation in the hero’s journey), I pursued my interest in educational development by taking a role in another post-secondary institution. In this stage, as the ritual subject, I passed through a cultural realm (Hawkins & Edwards, 2015) in which I no longer held the characteristics or attributes of the last state when I became separated from my long-held status as a faculty member. My new role was a non-faculty position with significantly different attributes and expectations that were challenging to embrace. I later returned to a similar role under a term-certain contract in my former institution and regained faculty status but without the security of tenure.

The third phase, reincorporation or return, still eludes me. Reincorporation is achieved when, through an often-ceremonious transition, the ritual subject “regains a stable, usually higher status identity with clearly defined roles and obligations in relation to others and is once again expected to behave in line with culturally defined norms and ethical frameworks” (Hawkins & Edwards, 2015, p. 26). Stable, clearly defined roles that align with my identity transformation are elusive, and I often find myself challenging culturally defined norms in my advocacy for recognition of faculty burnout and support for SoTL as an alternative to applied research.

As I continue to heal from burnout and find revitalization through my SoTL studies and research, I am content to remain in the second stage, a liminal space “where well-being is fostered, and that well-being is something that doesn’t always look like positivity and happiness; that there’s a more nuanced, complex perception of what well-being is that involves some of this discomfort” (Center for Engaged Learning at Elon University, 2019). As I prioritize my well-being, and still occasionally consider leaving academia completely, my new SoTL identity,

seeking out “my people,” and the connectedness that comes within the SoTL community sustain me in this liminal space.

## **BOUNDARY CROSSING AND SOTL ADVOCACY**

The SoTL threshold concepts of boundary crossing and brokering (Kensington-Miller et al, 2021) provide further explanation for how I navigate this liminal space to advocate for SoTL in my role as an educational developer. My exposure to these concepts created an image of wrapping a big bow around all my identity work that has happened in the liminal space. Armed with a deeper understanding of my SoTL identity, threshold concepts, and liminal spaces, I am inspired to advocate for transdisciplinary SoTL and boundary crossings from industry to academia, and between SoTL and applied research.

I believe the idea of co-inquiry and co-creation can be extended in support of increased transdisciplinary SoTL and boundary crossings from industry to academia, particularly as a path forward for colleges and polytechnics. Land et al. (2014) referred to Cousin’s (2008) view that

the search for threshold concepts has the potential to open up discussions and co-inquiry among subject experts, students and educational researchers, creating ... a “pursuit of shared understandings of difficulties and shared ways of mastering them” and an approach “which becomes neither student-centred nor teacher-centred but something more active, dynamic and in-between” (p. 215).

Felten and Geertsema (2023) suggest we “do SoTL with what Kasturi Behari-Leak calls a ‘situational ethos’ that integrates curiosity and passions of academics with the goals of students and the needs of the world” (p. 1095). In a discussion with a colleague from another polytechnic, we pondered what opportunities might exist to pair applied research questions with SoTL projects and use an outward-looking lens from an institution to investigate problems outside of our own walls and academia in general. We could then look inward to see how to prepare our faculty and students to work on the problems being solved through applied research. This type of collaboration could result in more passion-driven SoTL projects in our polytechnic sector (J. Nichols, personal communication, January 12, 2024). Cruz and Grodziak (2021) suggest attention to our shared humanity and the need to share our individual experiences and stories as a way forward for SoTL and a collective opportunity for the SoTL community to also look inward, reflect on potential biases and marginalities, and prepare to take on more public roles. As an educational developer, I envision increased collaboration with faculty in pursuit of these kinds of opportunities.

In Kensington-Miller et al. (2015), the authors discussed Handal’s (2008) idea that educational developers take on the role of a critical friend in the academy who provides a professional identity based on the same values and offers collegial support and constructive feedback working in partnership with faculty as they engage in SoTL projects. It is by being a critical friend and sharing my journey as

a novice researcher and aspiring SoTL scholar that I hope to grow connectedness through SoTL across the college and polytechnic sector and continue to advocate for a more fluid SoTL identity where we can all embrace discomfort and pursue transformation in the liminal spaces we find on our academic journeys.

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