



# A Case Study on the Value of Humanities-Based Analysis, Modes of Presentation, and Study Designs for SoTL: Close Reading Students' Pre-Surveys on Gender-Inclusive Language

## ABSTRACT

Close reading has long been heralded as a humanities-specific methodology with significant potential for SoTL. This essay fills a gap in SoTL literature with a full case study demonstrating what, exactly, close reading shows us about our data that social science-based quantitative and qualitative analyses may not. Close reading-based analysis of first-year writing students' pre-surveys on gender-inclusive language entails attention to the interrelated form and content of students' self-reflections. This analysis reveals nuances and complexities that, if overlooked, would result in inadvertent misrepresentation of the data. This case study responds not only to calls for humanities-specific SoTL methodologies but also to related calls for greater legitimization of diverse forms for SoTL dissemination, some of which originate in the humanities. It is therefore cast as a reflective essay based on its author's scholarly personal narrative (SPN) as a new, humanities-based SoTL researcher. Finally, this case study demonstrates the value of flexible, deliberately unscientific study designs that are responsive to emergent conditions but foreign to SoTL's dominant social science paradigm. As guides to instruction, pre-surveys are necessary complements to pre-quizzes: learning what students think they know about a concept or skill, their attitudes towards it, and their contexts of prior learning about it—not just their knowledge of it, which is all pre-quizzes can tell us—is an important precursor to effective instruction. But maximizing pre-surveys' potential to guide instruction requires flexible study designs so we can change our pedagogy, including our study's "intervention," if necessary, on the fly.

## KEYWORDS

humanities, close reading, gender-inclusive language, pre-surveys, flexible study designs

... a what and a what and a what.

Now try How and Why.

—*Ending of Margaret Atwood's short story "Happy Endings"*

## INTRODUCTION: CALLS FOR HUMANITIES-BASED METHODOLOGIES AND FORMS OF DISSEMINATION IN SOTL

One refrain in recent SoTL publications that reflect on the state of the field is concern about social science domination over SoTL methodologies and writing styles, which may be a barrier to

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participation by researchers from other fields (Bass and Linkon 2008; Bloch-Schulman et al. 2016; Bloch-Schulman and Linkon 2016; Chick 2013; Chick 2014; Little, Donnelly-Sallee, and Michael 2021; Potter and Raffoul 2023; Potter and Wuetherick 2015). Chick, for example, notes that “[w]hile many well-known SOTL leaders come from humanities backgrounds . . . , the on-the-ground work largely marginalizes the practices of their disciplines” (2013, 15). Potter and Wuetherick (2015) concur, noting that many humanists feel they have to “adopt a different identity—with foreign assumptions, foreign standards, foreign methodologies—to be considered ‘legitimate’ SoTL scholars” (4). Ultimately this means fashioning themselves as social scientists, seeing as SoTL:

relies upon methods of inquiry from the social sciences, presents arguments and results using social science conventions, uses social science norms to judge scholarship, includes primarily those who conform to social science norms in its conversations, recruits editors and reviewers primarily from the social sciences, makes contributions that would not be out of place in either content or presentation in any social science setting, draws primarily from social science literature, and relies primarily on the concepts, ideas, assumptions, theories, principles, and conceptual frameworks of the social sciences. (Potter and Wuetherick 2015, 4)

A complementary refrain in publications reflecting on the state of the field is insistence on the value of humanities-based inquiries, methodologies, and writing styles for SoTL (Bass and Linkon 2008; Bloch-Schulman and Linkon 2016; Chick 2009; Chick 2013; Gurung 2014; Hovland 2021; Little, Donnelly-Sallee, and Michael 2021; Manarin 2018; Potter and Raffoul 2023; Potter and Wuetherick 2015). For example, close reading—which Chick describes as “careful, rigorous, close, and distant analysis [of] . . . student texts” (2013, 23)—is championed as a humanities-specific approach (Bass and Linkon 2008; Hovland 2021). Manarin (2018) notes that close reading, as a methodology, entails close attention to *how* something is said in student work, not only to *what* is said, since attention to both of those elements is essential for a full understanding of our “data.” As Salvatori points out, “[t]he most salient characteristic of the scholarship of teaching . . . is unprecedented attentiveness to students’ work, their cultural capital, and their learning” (2002, 298). But while Bass and Linkon concur and note that student writing constitutes “evidence of student thinking and learning,” they point out that it is rarely included in close reading-based SoTL, which typically close reads teaching practice, not student work (2008, 254–57).

In other words, articles championing close reading as a methodology, student work as evidence of learning, and close reading of student work as a valuable, humanities-specific contribution to SoTL are often theoretical, visionary, and/or revisionist in nature. We are still missing full case studies that demonstrate how close reading, as a methodology, functions in the examination of student work (i.e., SoTL “data”). In other words, we are still missing a compelling demonstration of how close reading renders data in a different light, or what, exactly, close reading shows us about our data that social science-based quantitative and qualitative analyses might not reveal.<sup>1</sup>

I aim to fill that gap by offering a case study featuring close reading-based analysis of my first-year writing students’ pre-surveys about their use of gender-inclusive language. I offer my case study in a form that responds to a related call by humanities-based SoTL scholars: that we expand the range of genres and forms for the presentation of SoTL research. With a disciplinary background in narrative theory, I am particularly attuned to the call for greater sharing of SoTL stories, a call powerfully voiced by Manarin in her keynote address at the 2016 ISSOTL conference. Manarin observes that stories have the potential to capture “elements of teaching and learning [which typically] get left out because they

are too hard to represent in our dominant genres” (2017, 164). She begins to fill the gap in our knowledge of SoTL researchers’ stories by including narrative elements in her own work. Sheffield (2020), too, reflects on the need for SoTL stories in her poem “Awakening (to *All* of Our SoTL Stories)” and accompanying essay. Manarin, Sheffield, and Sword (2019a) craft forms of dissemination that enact, rather than simply present, their questions, analyses, findings, and reflections. Most literature scholars stress the interrelation of form and content—so interrelated, in fact, that it is paradoxical or even nonsensical to refer to form and content as separable, even terminologically.

Responding to calls for humanities-based methodologies and forms of dissemination, I offer my close reading-based case study as a reflective essay based on my scholarly personal narrative (SPN) as a new, humanities-based SoTL researcher. Rooted in the work of Dewey (1933, 1938) and Schön (1983), reflection has a long history in education theory and SoTL. Reflection is recognized as “an essential component of learning” (Cook-Sather, Abbot, and Felten 2019, 14). Reflective writing captures “the complexity of learning” and is considered “an accessible form of writing for both new and experienced SoTL authors” (Cook-Sather, Abbot, and Felten 2019, 14). There is, however, a significant disparity between the wide acceptance of reflection as “a valuable tool in teaching and learning” and as a valuable and accessible form of writing, on the one hand, and the “less privileged” status of reflective writing in SoTL, on the other hand (Healey, Matthews, and Cook-Sather 2020; Ng and Carney 2017, 135). Cook-Sather, Abbot, and Felten (2019) call for greater legitimation of “critical reflection as a form of scholarly writing about teaching and learning” and argue that “all SoTL writing [should be] more explicitly reflective” (2019, 23).

Like reflective writing, the SPN has struggled to find wide acceptance in SoTL, but Brookfield defends the genre’s scholarly importance: moving “back and forth between individual narrative exposition and theoretical commentary,” the SPN makes “frequent use of research and theoretical literature to illuminate the particularities of the narrative, to amplify and critique, and to offer multiple interpretations, many of which are not embedded in the writer’s own telling of the story” (2013, 127). The SPN also makes a “continuous attempt to theorize generalizable elements of particular events, contradictions, and actions. The particular events in a narrative may be unique to the individual but they often contain universal elements” (2013, 127). Drawing on the foundational work of Nash (2002, 2004) and Nash and Bradley (2011), Ng and Carney note that two of the SPN’s chief affordances are its “holistic approach to exploring the complexities of teaching and learning” and its capacity to capture “untidy educational processes and interactions” (2017, 134).

In my reflective essay based on my SPN as a new, humanities-based SoTL researcher, I reflect on what, exactly, might be left out when social science methodologies and modes of presentation are the sole means of analyzing student work and disseminating that analysis.

### ATHENA’S STORY: A HUMANITIES SCHOLAR’S SOTL JOURNEY

My own SoTL story begins with someone else’s story, one I read early in my SoTL journey. In their work on SoTL through the lenses of the arts and humanities, Potter and Wuetherick (2015) tell the story of Athena, a fictionalized version of “the experiences of many scholars from the arts and humanities who have found themselves unwelcome in the SoTL community” (1). Potter and Wuetherick’s introduction of Athena resonated powerfully with me because her career trajectory was, point for point, identical to mine, as was her introduction to SoTL. Having attended a SoTL symposium, in which the presenters celebrated SoTL’s inclusivity and interdisciplinarity, Athena “was inspired to consider dipping her toes into the waters of SoTL” and “justifiably . . . believed she had a lot to contribute” (1). But what came next sent chills down my spine: if my profile was identical to Athena’s in every way, up to this point, would my next seven years look like hers?

Seven years later, Athena has given up. Her experience in SoTL has left her disillusioned. It turned out that the world of SoTL did not want a literary scholar. Most of her articles were rejected, reviewers commented that her work did not seem to have a methodology, was formatted incorrectly, was atheoretical, and lacked rigour. . . .

At one point, still hoping to contribute, she led a large multi-institutional project that involved student surveys and “well-validated” research instruments that “measured” student attitudes toward learning. The results were published, but the experience left her feeling inauthentic. This was the closest she had come to being accepted in SoTL, but that acceptance had come at the price of abandoning the scholarly identity she had spent years cultivating – the education, experiences, the nuance and complexity of her understanding. The study made her feel like a fraud and an amateur. It was poor scholarship because she’d had to transform herself from an expert humanist to an amateur social scientist. (Potter and Wuetherick 2015, 1)

### TRYING TO SUCCEED WHERE ATHENA FAILED: LAUNCHING A SOTL STUDY ON GENDER-INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE IN FIRST-YEAR WRITING COURSES

Keeping in mind this cautionary tale about the “expert humanist” who transformed herself into “an amateur social scientist,” I committed to a humanities-based SoTL inquiry: a study of first-year writing students’ learning about the singular “they” and gender-inclusive language. I worked with three 35-student sections of my Canadian public undergraduate institution’s required first-year writing course in the 2018–2019 academic year. While my study was approved by my university’s Research Ethics Board, it differed from many social science-style SoTL studies because I did not have a defined research question or data analysis plan at the outset, and I did not seek consent from students upfront. The student work I collected—two in-class writing assignments, three essays, an annotated bibliography, six grammar quizzes, six grammar pre-quizzes, and a cumulative grammar quiz—was entirely course-related. Asking students to do only course-related work made me feel more ethically grounded as a professor and more confident that, because they did not know anything about my study, they would write without being impacted by the knowledge that their work was (potentially) being studied. On the last day of classes, after they had submitted their final essays, another faculty member invited them to participate in my study. I did not see the signed consent forms until after I submitted students’ final grades.

While I was still teaching my courses in winter 2019, I learned that the themes of the ISSOTL 2019 conference were diversity and inclusion, themes at the heart of my project. Despite the relatively short gap between the end of my data collection (May) and the conference itself (October), and despite the daunting amount of data I was collecting, I decided to submit a proposal to present a paper. My commitment to adopting a humanities-based methodology for analyzing the student work emerging from my humanities-based inquiry and study design simply evaporated. Over the course of that year, I noticed that every presenter and participant in my institution’s SoTL faculty learning community adopted qualitative and/or quantitative methodologies for their study. Researchers from disciplines outside the social sciences referred nonchalantly to their coding of data, and when I consulted colleagues about how I might start analyzing my mountain of student work, I was breezily advised, “code the pre-surveys,” as if coding were something I should already know how to do, something requiring no training or expertise.

So, I crafted an ISSOTL 2019 conference proposal that promised interesting findings through quantitative and qualitative analysis of the pre-surveys: “a rich, thick description of students’ self-assessments on gender-inclusive language in terms of use, prior knowledge and its contexts, and

attitudes before their learning took place,” to quote my abstract. I was equal parts delighted and terrified when I learned that it had been accepted, especially as I suspected that it was accepted partially because I had successfully parroted the language of the dominant social science SoTL paradigm.

My pre-survey was cast as an in-class reflective writing assignment, featuring questions about other subjects in addition to gender-inclusive language. The portion related to gender-inclusive language featured what I learned to refer to as Likert-scale and open-ended questions about students' use of such language (frequency and context), where (if anywhere) they had been told, read, or heard that the singular “they” is grammatically incorrect, and where (if anywhere) they had been told, read, or heard that the singular “they” is grammatically acceptable.

As appealing as all of this may have been to the conference's adjudicating committee, analyzing the pre-surveys and crafting a presentation made me feel like a complete fraud. I had never used words like “data,” “quantitative,” “qualitative,” “methodology,” “pre-surveys,” “Likert-scale,” “frequency,” “findings,” and so on to describe my disciplinary research. Having received my conference acceptance, I wondered if I could undertake analysis that would be regarded as legitimate and rigorous in the SoTL community, which seemed so dominated by the social sciences. Could I deliver my presentation without betraying my acute impostor syndrome? Summer and early fall 2019 featured extensive confrontation with these questions, along with a lot of self-teaching of basic coding. In the end, I created a presentation offering descriptive statistics related to frequency to analyze the pre-survey's non-numerical Likert scale questions and inductive thematic analysis of students' responses to the open-ended questions.

#### FOLLOWING ATHENA'S FOOTSTEPS BY FAKING IT AS A SOCIAL SCIENTIST . . . AND THEN RECLAIMING MY DISCIPLINARY METHODOLOGY: A CLOSE READING-BASED ANALYSIS OF STUDENTS' PRE-SURVEYS ON GENDER-INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE

At ISSOTL 2019, I gave my presentation (Copland 2019), displaying, with a mixture of pride and anxiety, the graphs I had laboured over. In her packed session on “Writing SoTL Without Borders” the following day, Helen Sword (2019b) began with a shout-out to my presentation (!), saying that she was impressed by my marshaling of social science methodologies and dissemination styles, but wondered whether I *had* to do it that way. Couldn't I, she wondered, use my disciplinary methodologies and writing styles? I felt a surge of inspiration that I had not felt when doing basic quantitative and qualitative analysis of my data and writing my presentation. After the session, I shared with Sword some of the findings I had cut from my presentation in favour of the findings I assumed SoTL researchers would deem most interesting and rigorous.

In truth, the findings I had cut were, for me, the most fascinating, because they arose only through the combination of my disciplinary expertise in the subject matter and my disciplinary methodology of close reading. The latter involved attention to the form as well as the content of a text—or, more accurately, awareness of the inseparability of the form and content of a text. Through my expertise in the English language and through close reading, I made discoveries about the pre-survey responses that highlighted the limitations of the social science methodologies I had been relying on. These limitations were not inherent in the methodologies themselves but emerged because I was wielding them: an amateur, wielding them in their most basic forms. And yet, a social scientist wielding them more expertly would lack my subject-matter expertise related to the English language and gender-inclusive language, specifically. After I presented my work at my institution the month before ISSOTL 2019, I mentioned in the Q&A session some of the findings I deemed fascinating but unattainable by my coding and thematic analysis. A social science colleague in attendance

expressed delighted surprise, admitting that he was not familiar enough with the English language (its grammar, history, and usage) to notice any of what I had noticed, even though he had far more experience in (and teaches) a range of social science research methods.

In the pre-survey, for example, one of my students wrote about his tendency not to use gender-inclusive language, except in certain circumstances:

When speaking to or about people I know, or even animals that I know are male or female, I tend to use he/she, his/her. When the name of someone is something like “Steve” I tend to assume they are male, and use male specific pronouns. I only use non gender specific pronouns for individuals whose names could be male or female, or for groups/positions.

Attention to this student’s response from a form-attentive holistic approach revealed a significant gap between what he said he does and what he was actually doing in the response itself. In the second sentence, he says he uses “male specific pronouns” (i.e., “he/his”) for someone whose name “is something like ‘Steve,’” but he refers to Steve with the gender-inclusive or non-gender-specific pronoun, “they.” If I were counting his response for quantitative findings or coding it for qualitative findings, how would I do that? Attending solely to what he said and putting him in the category of someone who uses gender-inclusive or non-gender-specific pronouns infrequently would fail to capture his use of them, in the very response I was assessing, in a way that contradicts his claim about how he uses such language. Relying solely on the content of his self-reporting completely overlooks its paradoxical status as a self-contradicting statement.

This student’s response was not an isolated incident, either. Another student who responded “occasionally” to the question, “on the whole, do you use gender-inclusive language?”, used the singular “they” four times in four sentences, three times in gender-inclusive ways:

I occasionally use gender-inclusive language when I know what word to use to describe a group of people without assuming their preferred [sic] pronoun [sic]. At times, I do refer to [an] individual’s pronoun depending on their physical looks. Sometimes when I’m out to eat, I refer to the server as a waitress even though they are a male figure, this is probably due to the fact that no one ever corrects me. I’m not sure what pronoun to use when I meet a person for the first time, because I’m not sure about their preference so I make my assumption based on the gender I see.

- In the first sentence, “their,” the possessive form of the pronoun “they,” is used to agree with the singular collective noun “group.”
- In the second sentence, “their” is used in a gender-inclusive way to refer to the singular “individual.” The student says she uses gender-specific pronouns for such individuals based on how they appear to her, so one would expect her to use a construction like “his or her.”
- In the third sentence, “they” is used in a gender-inclusive way to refer to the “server”: the student says that the server is “a male figure,” so one would expect her to use “he.”
- In the fourth sentence, “their” is used in a gender-inclusive way to refer to the singular “person.” The student again says that she uses gender-specific pronouns for such individuals based on how they appear to her, so one would expect her to use a construction like “his or her.”

Surely, this student's report that she uses gender-inclusive language "occasionally" should be taken with a grain of salt: a close reading-based holistic analysis of her response belies a much more frequent use of such language.

Similarly, another student, responding to the question about whether her use of gender-inclusive language varies based on context, reported that she is less likely to use gender-neutral pronouns in conversations with friends but then goes on to use such pronouns in the sentence making that statement:

I believe that I am less likely to use gender neutral pronouns such as "they" during a conversation with friends simply because typically if we are referring to another individual we are aware of their preferred pronoun.

The student says that the individual to whom she and her friends are referring has a pronoun that does not require them to use "they," meaning that she and her friends are likely using "he" or "she" to refer to this person, and yet she uses the singular, gender-inclusive "they" rather than "he or she."

Self-contradictory statements did not pertain only to more frequent use of gender-inclusive language than was acknowledged. A student who reported using gender-inclusive language "often," in part because of an incident involving using the wrong pronoun and inadvertently misgendering a colleague, in fact used the wrong pronoun again in the anecdote itself:

Before I used gender inclusive language frequently I was working with an individual that I had be[en] using the pronoun "he" for and they finally expressed to me that their pronoun is "she" and explained to me that it can be incredibly offensive.

The student knows that the colleague's pronoun is "she," so the end of the sentence should have been rendered as follows: "*she* finally expressed to me that *her* pronoun is 'she' and explained to me that it can be incredibly offensive."

Just to make it clear that not every response was self-contradictory or messy, here is an example of a student who reports using gender-inclusive language "all of the time" and then does so in the open-ended question that follows:

I use language whenever I am uncertain of a person's gender pronouns, or when *they* use they/them as *their* pronouns. I feel it allows for a safer environment where one does not have to worry about how *they* appear to come across do [sic] to *their* apperance [sic]. It also helps to avoid misgendering someone who does not present *themselves* in a stereotyped manner. [my italics throughout]

Here, the student uses the singular, gender-inclusive "they" to refer to "a person," "one," and "someone," and there are no instances of gender-exclusionary language use in the response—or, indeed, in the entire survey.

Some of the discrepancies I noted between what students were saying about their use of the singular "they" and gender-inclusive language, on the one hand, and how they were saying it, on the other hand, were probably rooted in a lack of knowledge that an indefinite pronoun (e.g., "everyone," "someone," "everybody," etc.) is grammatically singular. Therefore, according to grammar purists with a prescriptive (rather than descriptive) approach to language use, an indefinite pronoun must be accompanied by what were long considered the only singular pronouns: "his or her" or "his/her."

(Needless to say, this prescriptive approach ignores a long history of use of the singular “they” in English and is patently gender-exclusive because it does not capture all possible pronouns.) I cannot claim that students used “they” to agree with indefinite pronouns like “one” and “someone” in order to be gender-inclusive, because many students probably do not know that indefinite pronouns are singular. Yet, their use of “they” is *effectively* gender-inclusive, whether intentional or unintentional, as in the following response:

I feel it allows for a safer environment where *one* does not have to worry about how *they* appear to come across do [sic] to *their* apperance [sic]. It also helps to avoid misgendering *someone* who does not present *themselves* in a stereotyped manner. [my italics throughout]

The following response perhaps best captures the use of “they” to accompany indefinite pronouns that are, likely unbeknownst to the student, considered singular. This student reported using gender-inclusive language “rarely” but, in fact, uses it twice while making that claim:

I think when we grew up, non-gender inclusive language was just the norm. In everyday speaking, gender inclusive language is not a priority, so *everyone* just falls back to what *they* grew up with and what *they* are use [sic] to. Examples of this is [sic] “policeman” as a kid, or the phrase “hey guys,” or all of mankind. [my italics throughout]

If the student grew up in an environment with widespread use of non-gender-inclusive language, which this student continues to use today, one would expect this sentence to be rendered “so everyone just falls back to what he or she grew up with and what he or she is used to.”

As the aforementioned examples indicate, however, there were many other cases in which students wrote about their infrequent use of the singular “they” and gender-inclusive language, using, in some cases extensively, the singular “they” and gender-inclusive language that was completely unrelated to conventions for indefinite pronouns. Students’ use of the singular “they” to refer to “a person,” “another individual,” and “an individual” in the quotations offered above are cases in point.

## THE VALUE OF CLOSE READING-BASED ANALYSIS

My initial, straightforward thematic analysis of what students said they were doing in terms of their use of gender-inclusive language did not account for the findings my close reading subsequently revealed: findings about what students were actually doing in their use of gender-inclusive language in the pre-survey itself. Presenting work on the basis of my initial analysis would mean misrepresenting the inextricability of the form and content of students’ responses and the contradictions, complexity, nuance, and messiness that thereby emerge.<sup>2</sup> Manarin (2017) frames as a question my realization that close reading revealed the challenges of analyzing students’ responses via my rudimentary grasp of coding and thematic analysis: “If I code and recode, collapsing codes into themes, systematically seeking a macro narrative, what do I lose? What learning is silenced as I try to fit a dominant genre framework?” (169–70). As Bass and Linkon (2008) point out, and as my analysis demonstrates, close reading uncovers how a text’s various subtexts enrich, subvert, and complicate its overall meaning.

Obviously, a more complex coding system and thematic analysis could capture some of these finer points: codes like “used the singular they for X *but* said,” “used the singular they for X *and* said,” “used the singular they for Y *but* said,” and “used the singular they for Y *and* said.” But such a system



would ultimately flatten out subtlety, remove nuance, and arguably require such a wide range of classifications that it would become effectively useless if the overall goal is to determine meaningful trends. And it would be unconscionably hubristic of me to assume that I could independently master complex social science methodologies that others have honed over years of education and research. Ultimately, only someone with subject-matter expertise would notice what I had about my students' work, and I only recognized it by returning to my own disciplinary methodology. The limitations of social science methodologies for humanities-based inquiries are not limitations of the methods themselves but limitations of the people wielding them: either social scientists unfamiliar with the subject matter or humanists unfamiliar with the methods.

My findings lend credence to Bass and Linkon's claim that close reading involves more than a "primary emphasis on the text itself" because "the examination of text occurs within and gains significance only when it is embedded in inquiry, engages with theory, and generates an argument that is useful to other readers" (2008, 247). When they re-apply this conception of close reading from literary argumentation to SoTL ostensibly performing close reading, they find it mostly rooted in inquiry, informed by theory, and robust in argument, but inattentive to students' work, as the text or work being "read" is teaching practice. By centering student work, my own approach fills a glaring gap in SoTL and champions close reading as a methodology: by treating student work as my text through the lens of my inquiry into their self-assessments on gender-inclusive language and by (eventually) rooting this study in my discipline's theoretical and methodological commitment to the interrelationship between linguistic form and content, I was able to produce conclusions applicable not only to studies on gender-inclusive language or to humanities-specific inquiries, but also to any SoTL approach requiring attention to the interrelation between what is said and how it is said: in other words, to any project in which written or verbal texts are taken as data, particularly those in which students are invited to reflect and self-report. I would not have arrived at this realization if I had not stopped "act[ing] the amateur, forging ahead with unfamiliar but widely accepted methods" and instead started drawing on my own "relevant and valuable disciplinary skills and expertise" (Chick 2013, 22).

## THE VALUE OF FLEXIBLE SOTL STUDY DESIGNS

I did not undertake formal close reading-based analysis of my students' pre-surveys during the semester, because I had not yet received signed consent forms. But simply reading and assigning completion grades to these in-class assignments made me realize that I needed to change my approach to teaching the course's grammar module on pronoun agreement, reference, and case, which contained material on gender-inclusive language. During my reading about SoTL study designs the months before I launched my study, I realized that, for better or worse, quizzes, tests, or grades feature prominently as "indicators or proxies of student growth" (Bloch-Schulman et al. 2016, 109). Consequently, when I designed my study, I decided to continue my practice of offering ungraded diagnostic pre-quizzes before each of my course's grammar modules for two reasons. The pre-quizzes gave me a sense of what students already knew, so I could see what I needed to teach them, and enabled me to measure students' learning or growth, following instruction. In the middle of my study, while reading my students' pre-surveys, I realized that pre-quizzes alone do not tell us anything about students' perceptions of what they know, attitudes towards what they know, and contexts of previous learning. They do not tell us anything that might help us figure out *how* we might teach a particular concept or skill to these particular students (as opposed to other students in other contexts). Pre-surveys are necessary complements to pre-quizzes.

At the same time, I realized that because many SoTL study designs are fully set in advance and require consent to be given up front, there is no way to make changes to how we teach (often called “the intervention”) in response to the particularities and peculiarities we discover (through pre-surveys or otherwise) along the way about the students we are teaching. Instead, we make changes for the next group of learners, next semester or next year. Data may even be kept from the instructor-researcher until after the semester is over, so there is no way to learn systematically and in situ about the particularities and peculiarities of these learners, let alone modify the teaching to meet their specific needs.

I realized that the pre-survey, when legitimately integrated into the course as an assignment related to the course material, has immense value. Learning what students think they know, their attitudes towards a concept or skill, and their contexts of prior learning of a concept or skill—not just their knowledge of the concept or skill—is an important precursor, not only to instruction, but also to formal, systematic assessment of the efficacy of teaching practices and student learning. Furthermore, from the perspective of the branch of SoTL research I came to know as the understanding complexity-style SoTL, as opposed to the what works-style branch of SoTL, the pre-survey is also an end in itself. As Regehr observes:

[r]eorienting education research from its alignment with the imperative of proof to one with an imperative of understanding, and from the imperative of simplicity to an imperative of representing complexity well may enable a shift in research focus away from a problematic search for proofs of simple generalisable solutions to our collective problems, towards the generation of rich understandings of the complex environments in which our collective problems are uniquely embedded. (2010, 31)

Taking into account what I learned from the pre-surveys, I realized that if my teaching about gender-inclusive language was going to respond to and build on students’ prior learning, I would have to make major adjustments to the module I had planned to offer when I designed my SoTL study. Specifically, I would need to address students’ confusion about an individual person’s pronoun “they” and the use of “they” as a singular, gender-inclusive pronoun to encompass all possible people—and to show connections between these two issues. Students often conflated the use of the singular “they” in contexts relating to all possible people (e.g., “The average MacEwan University student wants *their* final grades as soon as possible after *their* exams have ended”) with the use of the singular “they” to refer to a person whose pronoun is “they” (e.g., “Jaz is coming tonight. *They* are bringing pizza.”). In addition to highlighting changes in the course textbook (Hacker and Sommers 2018) relative to the previous version (Hacker and Sommers 2016) and relying on my own expertise in English language and usage, I would need to offer authoritative sources of the kind that students had already heard from in their previous exposure to gender-inclusive language, because these sources clearly had a profound impact on their understanding and attitudes: social media and peers. So I found a YouTube video made by a linguist (Scott 2013), and I read aloud (anonymized) quotations from their classmates’ pre-surveys.

This mid-study period of informal analysis and reflection constituted a detour, one that made me grateful for my deliberately unscientific study design: making everything course-related so I could read it along the way, soliciting consent at the end of the semester, and giving myself flexibility to change everything on the fly in order to create the best possible conditions for student learning.

## AN END, BUT HOPEFULLY NOT ATHENA'S END

Many humanities-based SoTL researchers have called for an approach that reanimates SoTL with students' voices (Salvatori 2002, 298). My students' voices, however, presented nuance, complexity, and even messiness that confounded my initial, pattern-seeking analysis. Using my own expertise and approaches as a form-attentive, language-attentive literary scholar to attend closely to each student's voice convinced me that even with different questions or a different study design, I would still face "data" that frustrated or complicated pattern-seeking approaches. Language has inherent layers, complexities, and contradictions—as do the students who wield it. While I cannot make—and do not wish to make—the claim that we humanists are better equipped to analyze language-based data because of our disciplinary and methodological investment in textual analysis, close reading, and the interrelationship between form and content, I hope I have demonstrated that our disciplinary methodologies and writing styles have something to contribute, revealing nuances in survey responses that might have otherwise gone unnoticed, either by someone lacking expertise in language itself or by someone with linguistic expertise who was wielding unfamiliar social science methodologies. No one—neither humanities-based SoTL scholars, social sciences-based SoTL scholars, nor our current and future students—is served by SoTL studies predicated on a mismatch between the researcher's subject-matter expertise and methodology.

The approach I was initially taking to my research was one that treated students in the aggregate, as much SoTL research does (Easton and Hewson 2012, 77). We know that students have different backgrounds, degrees of preparedness, attitudes towards learning and the subject matter at hand, and so on, so why do we talk about student learning in general or about students in the aggregate? As Salvatori notes, SoTL entails asking and addressing context-specific, "simple but consequential questions like, what does it mean for me to teach *this* text with *this* approach to *this* population of students at *this* time in *this* classroom?" (2002, 298). Students' voices are, fundamentally, a collection of individual students' voices, just as students' learning is, fundamentally, a collection of individual students' learning. My pre-survey and flexible study design were valuable because they enabled me to change my "intervention," to offer students many different ways of and sources for learning about the singular "they" because I learned that they had many different conceptions of, attitudes towards, and prior uses (including frequency and contexts) of gender-inclusive language. In teaching a class, I needed to reach each student in the class individually.

I do not want my story to end as Athena's did. I am writing this reflective essay to share my close reading-based analysis and my scholarly personal narrative (SPN) as a new humanities-based SoTL researcher to demonstrate what close reading of student work looks like, how it requires subject-matter expertise, and how it alters findings determined by an amateur's basic qualitative and quantitative analysis. The absence of close reading can result, at best, in a partial picture of the data and, at worst, in a picture that inadvertently misrepresents the data. I am also writing my essay in a format that captures the unusual—from the point of view of the social sciences—recursive process by which humanities scholars typically engage in questioning, collecting, analyzing, reflecting, and disseminating. For many of us, there is no linear process from question through analysis and findings to reflection (Bass and Linkon 2008, 248). We are typically asking questions, modifying approaches, and reflecting on our undertakings throughout. It may seem messy, confusing, and unscientific, but we work with messy, confusing, and unscientific "data" (texts) all the time, and student writing is most certainly messy, confusing, and unscientific, too.

At the heart of my SoTL project and my instruction of gender-inclusive language in a first-year writing course is a belief in the importance of inclusive, reflective, context-dependent language use. Opting for a flexible study design, a close reading-based methodology for analysis, and a reflective

essay based on my SPN for dissemination was a series of choices that align with this core belief and its attendant values. These choices for study, analysis, and dissemination encompass all seven kinds of introspection that Poole and Chick (2022) identify in SoTL: reflection on teaching, reflection on student thinking, practitioner identity exploration, practitioner contextualization, field definition, assessment of the state of the field, and scrutiny of SoTL as a community.

Returning to my epigraph, I see that my SoTL journey has taught me that by focusing on the what and the what and the what (of students' pre-surveys about gender-inclusive language—and of students' work and self-reflection in general), we miss the richer, more complex, and more nuanced picture of the how and the why.

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## NOTES

1. Chick, Hassel, and Haynie (2009) close read students' writing, but their purpose is discipline-specific, whereas mine aims for broader relevance to SoTL; they study how students engage with complexity in literary texts and recommend best practices for teaching students to appreciate, rather than shut down in the face of, language's multivalence. Furthermore, what they find in student writing (generally: ignorance of, resistance to, and attempted resolutions of complexity) is the opposite of what I find in student writing (a great deal of complexity). Hovland (2021) close reads students' reading reflections, but her style of close reading, rooted in anthropology, differs from mine.
2. Lest I give the impression that my ISSOTL 2019 presentation, based on my initial quantitative and qualitative analysis, misrepresented my data, I should note that I deliberately focused it on subjects unaffected by the contradictions and messiness of students' responses about their use of gender-inclusive language: the extent and sources of students' exposure to claims about the grammatical acceptability or unacceptability of the singular “they,” themes emerging from the pre-surveys as a whole, and the value of pre-surveys and flexible SoTL study designs.

## ETHICS

Research was approved through the MacEwan University Research Ethics Board.

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