

(More) Neutral, Context-Sensitive Language for SoTL Inquiry

The terms below (initially ideated with ChatGPT 5.2) allow SoTL scholars to study meaningful differences in learning by focusing on conditions, structures, and outcomes—rather than relying on identity-based or politicized language.

Analytic Purpose	Neutral Term/Phrase	How It Can Be Used in SoTL
Describing difference	Variation	Highlights non-uniform learning experiences
	Heterogeneity	Emphasizes diversity of experience without identity labels
	Differential experiences	Focuses on how learning unfolds differently
	Uneven distribution	Useful for outcomes, resources, or participation
	Contextual differences	Grounds variation in local conditions
	Population-level variation	Allows aggregate analysis without demographic naming
	Non-uniform experiences	Accessible phrasing for participants new to SoTL
Conditions and context	Structural conditions	Directs attention to systems, not students
	Institutional context	Names the role of place and policy
	Learning conditions	Keeps focus on instructional environments
	Environmental factors	Broad framing for external influences
	Programmatic structures	Useful at meso-level inquiry
	System-level influences	Supports macro- or meso-level studies
	Administrative classifications	Names how institutions sort students
Participation and engagement	Participation patterns	Common, analyzable SoTL construct
	Engagement profiles	Highlights different ways students show up
	Modes of involvement	Useful for modality and activity design
	Visibility in learning spaces	Names presence without identity claims
	Patterns of interaction	Useful for classroom-based data
	Access to instructional processes	Focuses on design, not entitlement
Outcomes and effects	Outcome differences	Neutral way to discuss gaps
	Differential impact	Connects design to consequences
	Uneven outcomes	Descriptive, not evaluative
	Completion patterns	Useful for persistence and retention work
	Persistence trajectories	Emphasizes movement over time

Chick, Nancy L., and Jennifer C. Friberg-Fort. 2026. "Studying and Supporting Understudied Students When Words Are Dangerous." Workshop presented at the SoTL Commons Conference, Savannah, GA, February 2026.

Analytic Purpose	Neutral Term/Phrase	How It Can Be Used in SoTL
Support and navigation	Use of support structures	Focuses on behavior, not deficit
	Resource utilization	Works well with institutional data
	Help-seeking behaviors	Common SoTL variable
	System navigation strategies	Highlights hidden curriculum
	Informal knowledge networks	Captures peer and social learning
Positioning without labeling	Students less well served by existing structures	Shifts responsibility to systems
	Students positioned outside dominant pathways	Useful for pathway analysis
	Students encountering institutional friction	Strong metaphor for barriers
	Students with fewer prior exposures to academic norms	Avoids deficit framing
	Students experiencing compounded demands	Captures complexity without labels