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Building Capacity for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) Using International Collaborative Writing Groups

Elizabeth Marquis
McMaster University, beth.marquis@mcmaster.ca

MIck Healey
Healey HE Consultants & University of Gloucestershire, mhealey@glos.ac.uk

Michelle Vine
University of Waterloo, michelle.vine@oahpp.ca

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Abstract

Objective: To understand participants' perceptions of the impact of an innovative International Collaborative Writing Group (ICWG) initiative on their individual and collective SoTL capacity.

Methods: A mixed method research design included participant surveys (phases 1 and 3), and focus groups and interviews (phase 2). Data from all three phases of research have been triangulated in order to facilitate an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences.

Findings: Findings reveal four key themes: mentoring and leadership, the creation of community, diversity of perspectives, and experiential learning and professional skill development.

Discussion and Implications: Through the opportunities presented in relation to the four themes, the initiative appears to have helped facilitate the development of SoTL capacity and SoTL scholar identity. Research focusing on the impact of such initiatives on student learning is needed.

Keywords

scholarship of teaching and learning [SoTL]; SoTL capacity building; collaborative writing groups; international collaborations

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Introduction

With the growth of the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) movement since the early 1990s, much attention has been paid to developing effective strategies for engaging and supporting scholars interested in pursuing teaching and learning inquiry. Recognizing that SoTL can be a novel and unfamiliar pursuit for many academics, several introductory texts and resources for new SoTL practitioners have been developed in recent years (e.g., Bishop-Clark & Dietz-Uhler, 2012; Cousin, 2008; McKinney, 2007), as have workshops, institutes and other professional development initiatives focused on teaching and learning inquiry (e.g., Gale, 2009; Ginns, Kitay, & Prosser, 2008; Waterman et al., 2010), and theoretical models of the process of developing SoTL scholars (e.g., Gayle, Randall, Langley, & Preiss, 2013; Weston & McAlpine, 2001). Building on this growing body of work, this article examines the extent to which a novel SoTL program – an international collaborative writing group initiative attached to the 2012 International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (ISSoTL) Conference – contributed to the development of SoTL capacity for both new and experienced academics. In so doing, it aims both to assess the impact of this particular approach, and to contribute to understanding further the characteristics and features of effective SoTL development programs more broadly.

Existing scholarship emphasizes that the process of developing the scholarship of teaching and learning on college and university campuses can be a complex and challenging task. Despite considerable gains in the recognition afforded to SoTL in recent years (Hutchings, Huber, & Ciccone, 2011), many authors note the existence in many academic contexts of hierarchies that continue to position SoTL as less valuable than traditional disciplinary research (Chalmers, 2011; Elton, 2008; Walker, Baepler, & Cohen, 2008). One upshot of this concern is that engaging in SoTL work can be seen as a tenuous or risky proposition for many scholars, especially early-career academics

who are still establishing their careers. Taking time to develop capacity as a SoTL researcher may be difficult to justify in a context that feels dismissive of such work, while the comparative lack of recognition for SoTL in many departments and disciplines can leave those who do choose to engage in teaching and learning inquiry feeling isolated within their immediate surroundings (Mårtensson, Roxå, & Olsson, 2011; Mighty, 2013). Development efforts, then, need to find ways to mitigate such feelings of isolation, while simultaneously working to address the undervaluing of SoTL wherever possible.

The sense of isolation that SoTL scholars have been said to experience also underlines the necessity of considering carefully faculty identities, attitudes and emotions when attempting to foster and develop the scholarship of teaching and learning (Haigh, 2012; Mårtensson et al., 2011). Recent work in a variety of fields emphasizes the vital roles played by motivation (Edgar & Geare, 2013; Evans, 2012), feelings of scholarly self-efficacy (Bieschke, 2006; Hemmings, 2012) and perceptions of a research identity (Murray & Cunningham, 2011) in fostering researcher development, particularly when scholars are new to an area or type of inquiry. Arguably, such identity related issues are especially pronounced in relation to the scholarship of teaching and learning, given its unique (and often marginal) position within university cultures and its status as a second or additional scholarly focus for many practicing academics.

Along these lines, several authors have noted that developing an identity as a scholar of teaching and learning, or creating a "fusion identity" (Galloway & Jones, 2012) that integrates SoTL with a disciplinary identity, can be an extremely daunting, and sometimes threatening, task (Kelly, Nesbit, & Oliver, 2012; Simmons et al., 2013). Discipline-related epistemological differences between SoTL and the "home" discipline can interfere with the willingness to engage in teaching and learning inquiry (Haigh, Gossman, & Jiao, 2011), for example, as can a perceived lack of awareness of the teaching and learning literature or of methodologies commonly employed in SoTL work (Hubball, Clarke, & Poole, 2010; Tremonte, 2011). Importantly, such uncertainties can lead scholars new to SoTL to experience compelling feelings of "novice-stry" (Tremonte,

2011), which – left unchecked – may be sufficient to dissuade them from engaging with this unfamiliar form of scholarship. Attention to issues of scholarly identity ought thus to figure significantly in the success of SoTL development activities.

In response to these (and other) challenges, a number of strategies for building SoTL capacity have been developed and assessed in recent years. Rightly, many of these approaches focus on attempting to change the campus and disciplinary cultures in which SoTL is practiced, and thus on addressing the undervaluing and comparative marginality that still plagues SoTL in many contexts (e.g., Ginsberg & Bernstein, 2011; Schroeder, 2007). At the same time, a wide variety of work also demonstrates the potential value of organized professional development activities that provide education and support for individual SoTL scholars. Approaches of this sort described in the literature include workshops and courses devoted to SoTL (Ginns et al., 2008; Mårtensson et al., 2011; McConnell, 2012), opportunities to participate in faculty learning communities or communities of practice (Cox, 2007; Dunwoody, Westcott, Drews, & Hosler, 2012; Maurer, Sturges, Shankar, Allen, & Akbarova, 2010; Michael, 2012), and the establishment of onsite conferences and symposia devoted to teaching and learning inquiry (Cohn, 2010; Ginsberg & Bernstein, 2011; MacKenzie & Mann, 2009).

Given the uncertainties that many people experience when moving into the realm of teaching and learning-related inquiry, as well as the potential isolation of these scholars within their disciplines and departments, professional development opportunities, like those described above, can provide a much needed means of acquiring support, advice, and a sense of community. To this end, it follows that many of the most successful types of professional development for SoTL include specific attention to cohort or community building (Smentkowski, Conway, & Starrett, 2009; Waterman et al., 2010; Hubball et al., 2010), to mentorship (Michael, 2012; Richlin & Cox, 2004; Weaver, Robbie, Kokonis, & Miceli, 2013), and/or to providing resources and personnel to support scholars working with unfamiliar methodologies. Many programs also initiate collaboration between experienced SoTL practitioners and those

new to the field (Gale, 2009; Hubball et al., 2010; Svinicki, 2012). Such design features can constitute powerful support to those interested in SoTL work. Building on these considerations, some authors also point out the importance of engaging students in professional development connected to SoTL (Austin & McDaniels, 2006; Kreber, 2001; McGrath, 2012), noting the way in which early exposure to such opportunities can contribute to the development of academic identities that include SoTL from the outset.

The international collaborative writing groups (ICWG) initiative described in the present study sought to build on several of these findings, bringing together diverse groups of scholars – including students – and creating a context in which mentorship, community-building and experiential learning could take place. By giving participants the opportunity to develop and potentially to publish a collaborative SoTL article, it also aimed to create a development opportunity connected to a tangible outcome with some academic currency, which thus might constitute a doubly worthwhile investment of academics' scarce time.

Research context

The ICWG initiative was introduced in 2012 in conjunction with the International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (ISSoTL) conference held in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada. These writing groups, modeled on the International Network for Learning and Teaching (INLT) Geography (http://www.ucd.ie/inlt/) writing groups that have operated for more than ten years (Hay, Foote, & Healey, 2000; Healey, Pawson, & Solem, 2010; Healey, 2006), allowed diverse, international groups of scholars to come together and co-author reflective pieces about a teaching and learning topic of shared interest.

ICWG participants were recruited via an open call for applications, which was posted on the ISSoTL conference website, and circulated through various higher education international listserves. A total of sixty-nine people were selected to participate in the initiative, including eleven students. Participants were drawn from 14 countries worldwide (Australia,

Belgium, Canada, England, Hungary, Ireland, New Zealand, Norway, Scotland, Singapore, Sweden, South Africa, Trinidad and Tobago, USA), and reported a range of higher education experience (from currently completing a first undergraduate degree to having worked in HE for more than 25 years).

These participants were clustered into nine writing groups, each chaired by an invited group leader and numbering seven or eight people in total. Broad teaching and learning topics (e.g., 'SoTL in an age of accountability', 'students as change agents through SoTL', 'the scholarship of academic leadership') were chosen in collaboration with group leaders before the call for participation was circulated, and applicants were asked to indicate the topics on which they would like to work. Groups were configured based on these stated interests, and arranged so that as far as possible each one contained a wide international coverage, a mixture of junior and senior faculty and staff as well as at least one student, and a range of disciplines. Group leaders were chosen based on our personal knowledge of their potential to be good leaders in this particular collaborative context, and likewise represented a range of countries, disciplines and degrees of SoTL experience.

Prior to the ISSoTL conference (Summer/Fall 2012), groups worked at a distance to begin to narrow in on a specific focus within their topic area, and to prepare a 2000 word outline of their potential article for discussion. These outlines were shared amongst the full group of ICWG participants online (using McMaster's Learning Management System), and each person was required to post feedback on at least two outlines prior to the onsite meeting. Group members then met in Hamilton at the conference hotel for two days preceding the start of the main ISSoTL conference during which they spent time preparing their draft paper within their group, and in discussion with participants of other groups. There were also some team-building and social activities as part of the workshop.

Following the workshop the groups had two months to complete their papers and submit the manuscripts to *Teaching and Learning Inquiry*, the new ISSoTL journal, for peer-review and consideration for inclusion in a special issue featuring articles from the ICWG (Healey & Marquis, 2013). Groups

developed their own tasks and timelines given that manuscript development would take place at a distance, and that different methodologies and approaches had been selected based on the topic being explored. One group chose to collect data from participants at members' home institutions, while others undertook narrative analyses of group members' experiences, conducted systematic literature reviews, and/or worked on development of new conceptual SoTL models. While group members divided work in different ways, many groups utilized a central repository to help facilitate the division of labour. In some cases, the repository was home to to-do lists, work assignments and relevant literature. Some group members volunteered for tasks that they felt capable to undertake based on previous experience, and other groups assigned participants to specific sections of the research and writing processes.

Ultimately, eight papers were submitted to the journal in time to be considered for inclusion in the special issue; the ninth was submitted for consideration in a later issue. All eight of the first set of manuscripts moved successfully through *Teaching and Learning Inquiry*'s peer review and revision process, and appear in Volume 1, Issue 2 of the journal, which was published in September 2013 (Healey & Marquis, 2013)

Both quantitative and qualitative data were gathered to assess the efficacy of the ICWGs vis-à-vis participant experiences. In relation to the present discussion, data were gathered related to the following research questions: How did the ICWG experience impact the participants (including group members, group leaders, and the initiative facilitators)? What was the perceived impact of the initiative on participants' individual and collective SoTL capacity?

Research methods
Following ethics clearance from the McMaster University Research Ethics Board, a mixed-method research design was employed, including pre- (phase 1) and post- (phase 3) participant surveys, and focus groups and interviews (phase 2). In *phase 1*, all participants, including the initiative facilitators, (n=71) were asked to describe both their initial experiences of taking part in the ICWG and their anticipated overall

experiences, including how these experiences might impact them as SoTL scholars. Open-ended and Likert-style responses were included in the online survey (see Appendix A), which was distributed to participants approximately 6 weeks in advance of the face-to-face writing groups. Fifty participants (70% of the total) completed this survey. These participants included members of all nine writing groups as well as members of the initiative facilitating team.

Phase 2 took place directly following the face-to-face component of the writing group experience, and included ICWG participants, group leaders, and facilitators. Respondents were invited to participate by way of a question at the end of the phase 1 survey, which asked them to contact a project assistant by email if they were interested in taking part. Twenty-eight participants, from across the nine writing groups and the facilitation team, expressed an interest in taking part in this phase of the research, and were booked into interviews or focus groups. With the exception of one telephone interview, focus groups (n=5 groups; n=26 participants) and interviews (n=2; n=2 participants) were held in person in private meeting rooms at the conference hotel, and were conducted by either one or two doctoral students. Focus groups ranged in size from between eight and two participants. (FG#1=8; FG#2=2; FG#3=5; FG#4=7; FG#5=4). An interview guide was informed by previous research findings (phase 1; see Appendix B), the current research objectives, and relevant literature. Key topics were related to the benefits and challenges of the face-to-face ICWG experience, anticipated challenges facing the final stage, and practical questions related to group collaboration (e.g., communication, division of work).

Focus groups and interviews were audio-recorded (with written permission) for verbatim transcription. They lasted between 25 and 70 minutes in length. Analyses of a random sub-sample of transcripts (n=3) contributed to the development of a coding template (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Verbatim transcripts were entered into a qualitative analysis software package (NVivo 8.0) for subsequent thematic analysis. During data analysis, passages of text were selected to support and shape individual codes listed in the coding template (Miles &

Huberman, 1994). During a constant comparative exercise, key themes emerged inductively from the interview transcripts, and deductively from the research objectives.

In *phase 3*, all participants (n=71) were invited to participate in a post-survey, which was conducted immediately following manuscript submission and before the outcomes were known (Spring 2013; see Appendix C). Forty participants chose to complete the survey, for a response rate of fifty-six percent. All nine writing groups, as well as the initiative facilitation team, were again represented in the response pool. As in Phase 1, basic descriptive statistics were computed for likert-style questions, and constant comparative analysis was used to highlight key themes emerging from open-ended questions. Qualitative findings from open-ended questions asked in Phase 1 and Phase 3 are presented in this manuscript.

Working from an epistemological perspective that relies on the subjective evidence and experiences of research participants, the researchers spent time in "the field" (at the larger ISSoTL conference) to better grasp the context for understanding (Creswell, 2013). With this context in mind, individual quotations were drawn from focus group interviews to inform knowledge creation and subsequent thematic interpretation. A social constructionist interpretive framework was used as a lens through which to examine the complexity of varied and multiple viewpoints (Creswell, 2013). Thus, participants' voices directly informed and shaped research findings.

Data from all three phases of research have been triangulated in order to facilitate an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences as these relate to SoTL capacity building (Farmer et al., 2006). In doing so, two types of triangulation were utilized: a range of methods – qualitative focus groups and interviews, and open-ended responses from a pre-and post-survey; and, numerous data sources represented through these data collection methods (e.g., ICWG participants, ICWG group leaders, and ICWG initiative facilitators). Triangulating research methods provided an opportunity to bring together complementary findings and perspectives across different periods in time, resulting in a comprehensive

understanding of the experiences of those participating in ICWGs, and of the extent to which ICWGs impact SoTL capacity (Farmer et al., 2006). In addition to triangulation, qualitative data were collected and analyzed in a systematic and rigorous way. The research findings are applicable and transferrable to other similar contexts, and if the inquiry were replicated with the same participants in the same context, findings are likely to be consistent.

Results

Results are organized according to four key themes: mentoring and leadership; creation of community; diversity of groups and exposure to multiple points of view; and experiential learning and professional skill development. These themes are presented in order of their relative prominence in the data.

Mentoring and leadership

In the hope of creating the context for meaningful mentorship opportunities for both leaders and group members, initiative facilitators assigned participants to ICWGs such that each group contained individuals with differing amounts of SoTL experience. Findings suggest that participants viewed the opportunities for mentoring and leadership that resulted from this strategy as integral components of the writing group experience. Early in the initiative, for example, one participant noted that the potential for mentorship and support within the group experience was a central component of their motivation to participate in the ICWG:

> [I look forward to] the opportunity to work with persons who are much more "seasoned " in this line of work than myself. In my home institution I do not have such a network (though we are in the process of making links across faculties) and as such I welcome the experience to be part of this group. Given my slowness to publication on my own, I appreciate the fact that we will be producing a journal article that could be published. Publishing in the SoTL domain is completely new to me so I welcome this opportunity very much (Phase 1).

Such sentiments were echoed throughout the ICWG process, as participant responses continually indicated that early career academics valued the opportunity to be mentored by more experienced SoTL scholars, and particularly to receive support in moving through the process of writing and publishing in SoTL:

> [I] benefitted greatly from being able to interact with professors who have a common interest in improving their teaching practice. It was very beneficial for me, as someone still at the beginning of my career, to be exposed to the SoTL field and get introduced to writing and publishing in this field (Phase 3).

> Benefits included (a) receiving mentorship through the writing and publishing process; (b) networking, connecting, and exchanging ideas with people who have shared interests; (c) being able to strengthen my CV (this is important for me as a graduate student and aspiring academic); and, (d) being exposed to new ideas and literature that I might not have encountered otherwise" (Phase 3).

In addition to recounting the extent to which mentors encountered through the ICWG experiences provided helpful advice and support for newer SoTL scholars, participant comments suggested that mentorship opportunities had the potential to result in valued development for more experienced academics as well. For example, one participant noted that the ICWGs were providing them with an opportunity to:

> Meet new people with similar interests, expand my networks, and assist younger academics to accomplish something they care about. It's also an interesting and novel experience. I've done a lot of collaborative writing with one or two other people but never with so large a group or with people I didn't know at all. I was (am) curious to know whether I can provide the leadership to make this work. It's a new challenge (Phase 1).

While mentoring and leadership were highly valued in and of themselves, they were also understood by participants to be essential to the groups' abilities to realize the goal of producing a publishable paper. Group size (8 or 9 people per group) and communication amongst group members, who were often separated by considerable geographical distances, were mentioned as factors that made the process of writing together inherently challenging. Effective leadership was seen as necessary to navigating these challenges. For example, one respondent indicated,

> The main challenges were the attempts at communicating and collaborating prior to the ISSoTL meeting. Though we had a good leader that organized things so that we did make great progress prior to the October meeting (Phase 3).

Another participant agreed, noting:

> I think we navigated the normal team challenges as the facilitator had some experience in that area. Otherwise, some may have felt that their own "pet" lens on the topic wasn't centre focus - but in the end, everyone seemed to have a positive experience (Phase 3).

In contrast, when effective leadership was perceived to be lacking, the experience was framed in much less positive terms:

> A major shortcoming is/was also effective leadership, but I acknowledge that it is quite difficult to lead such a diverse group of people towards completing a common writing project. I feel like I have missed the boat and am on very uncertain ground with the topic we are working on now (Phase 3).

Bringing these ideas together, one of the ICWG facilitators noted that the "biggest challenge was to engage so many people and [to get] them to deliver on time. The group leaders took most of

this responsibility and we supported them by providing a clear framework of expectations" (Phase 3). Effective leadership was thus not only seen to provide a helpful means of familiarizing oneself with SoTL writing and coming to feel more grounded in the field, but also to allow for effective navigation of the challenges of the collaborative writing process, allowing participants the added developmental benefit of seeing an internationally authored, collaborative SoTL article through to publication.

Creation of community

There was a high level of agreement among participants that the collaborative nature of the writing groups provided a sense of community. This sense of belonging was linked closely with the perception that group members felt that their voices, and thus their contributions, were being heard. These perceptions were shared among student participants, where the group environment acted as a safe platform from which they could contribute to the larger group objectives:

> I am a student outside of this realm normally, so I was very happy to be welcomed very warmly amongst my group members, and to have my voice be comfortably heard. There was no judgment involved and everyone seemed very encouraging to get me to speak, and so I was very impressed with my group members in that respect, and very thankful that I had that opportunity and experience (Phase 2).

> I think back to what you had mentioned at the beginning, that sense of belonging. It wasn't something that I had expected; I expected to feel a part of the group but not to the extent that actually happened, which was very nice. There is one other thing; I think it is more the idea of capacity building maybe because I am wearing my student hat. I really felt as though I had a voice, my voice could really be appreciated in that there is something to offer (Phase 2).

As these quotations suggest, the opportunity to have one's voice heard and to feel a part of a community of scholars might contribute to the development of a SoTL identity. One student participant pointed toward this development even more clearly, describing one of the central benefits of the ICWG as follows: "realizing how much I, as a PhD candidate/sessional lecturer, really can contribute even when working with such an experienced group of researchers" (Phase 3).

Such feelings of inclusion and community were not restricted to student participants. Numerous individuals noted the valuable opportunities the initiative provided to network with others with similar interests, and the friendships that developed out of the initiative. Moreover, many suggested that the community that developed out of ICWGs contributed to the formation of what were expected to be longer-term research partnerships. Fully 82% of participants responding to a survey question about whether or not they expected to collaborate further with their group members (n=28, of 34) indicated that they did expect such ongoing collaboration in the future. For example, one participant reported: "I enjoyed getting to know and working with my group members. I had met one person before, but had never worked with her. I have begun what I hope will be a longer-term collaboration with one group member" (Phase 3). Indeed, many participants noted that additional collaborative work with their group members had already begun.

In addition to contributing to the development of SoTL identities, and stimulating collaborative research relationships that extended beyond the initiative itself, the sense of community described by ICWG participants was also believed to be an important part of realizing the goal of completing a collaborative SoTL paper. As one participant put it:

> The social bonding that can only happen in-person really helped us understand the perspective each writer was coming from. It also helped us build trusting relationships and friendships that eased minor tensions when they came about in the collaborative writing process. I felt a more solid feeling of being part of the writing group once we met

and worked in-person. That had to do with the roles we defined for ourselves and each other and the bonding that took place (Phase 3).

Much like mentorship, then, the creation of a community of scholars was perceived to contribute not only to developing participants' sense of themselves as connected members of the SoTL world, but also to helping them achieve the goal of collaborative authoring and publication.

Diversity of perspectives and experiences
Many participants noted the diversity of scholars participating in the ICWG initiative, pointing out in particular the wide range of countries and disciplines from which participating scholars were drawn. This diversity was valued highly by the majority of participants, particularly insofar as it was believed to help to facilitate reciprocal learning opportunities. Prior to the face-to-face writing experience, for instance, one participant indicated that, "The greatest benefit is to be discussing the topic from such different perspectives, both the international aspect of the participants in the group as well as the variation in disciplines and areas of interest" (Phase 1). Another respondent agreed, suggesting that the initiative's benefits included:

> Gaining an international perspective on a common topic; the ability to get feedback from a broad set of collaborators with different perspectives; the potential for follow-on research on our collaborative writing topic; a more complete (fuller) elaboration of a particular SoTL topic than possible from a single writer or a single country perspective (Phase 1).

In a related vein, one survey respondent noted the way in which the diversity of the ICWG participants could contribute to greater understanding of SoTL as a field, suggesting that the initiative provided an opportunity for "learning about similarities and differences in SoTL practices in other institutions around the world (gleaning an international perspective)" (Phase 1).

By the time of the Phase 3 survey, consensus still existed that there was great value attached to the multi-national and interdisciplinary group process. According to participants, including a range of diverse perspectives meant that the output of the ICWGs was culturally rich, and not specific to any one discipline. One respondent suggested the initiative provided a "useful exchange of ideas across national and disciplinary barriers", for instance, while another described the way in which this diversity contributed to their own growth as a SoTL scholar:

> For me hearing international pedagogical and scholarly perspectives was wholly new and greatly enlightened my understanding. Our particular writing group also included graduate and undergraduate student participants, which helped to amplify additional views (Phase 3).

In spite of the perceived benefits of group diversity, participants also noted the ways in which the range of countries and disciplines represented in each ICWG could lead to practical challenges:

> While it is nice to work with people from different contexts, it is also a major challenge to keep collaboration going across continents and oceans. Our backgrounds are so mixed, that it is quite a challenge to just get onto the same page (this was even a challenge when we had the two days together before ISSoTL 2012) (Phase 3).

For some participants, these challenges were seen as particularly compelling during the periods of the initiative that required groups to work with one another at a distance. In such cases, technological glitches, maintaining group processes, and fitting in the work of the ICWG amongst other commitments could prove difficult to navigate:

> The initial phases of sharing early writing, literature and establishing procedures for collaboration were quite daunting and technology did not always work as expected. Sharing responsibility for the different stages of the writing

process and getting things done was not always easy as schedules differed greatly (Phase 3).

Finally, participants also noted the importance of balancing the multiplicity of perspectives brought to the topic by diverse participants with the development of a unified and coherent voice for the paper as a whole. As one respondent explained:

Splitting authorship nine ways is not exactly easy ... While we worried about establishing a consistent voice, diffusing responsibility among the group was actually quite effective - largely because the group foresaw the challenges and dealt with them appropriately (e.g., by dividing the article in ways that facilitated team writing). Multiple perspectives are also a plus (Phase 3).

As this quotation indicates, while the diversity of scholars brought together in the ICWG initiative was largely perceived as an important aspect of the initiative's capacity to foster SoTL development, it can also create practical challenges in terms of producing a collaborative manuscript. These challenges need to be considered and embraced if the additional developmental opportunity of writing a collaborative SoTL article is to be realized.

Experiential learning and professional skill development
Like mentorship, community-building and national and disciplinary diversity, the opportunities that the ICWG afforded for experiential learning of professional skills were also positioned by participants as contributing to building their individual and collective SoTL capacity. For example, an early activity, which involved providing electronic feedback on other writing groups' proposal outlines, was described by one respondent as a useful means of developing and calibrating one's ability to engage in scholarly review and feedback:

This process of critiquing other groups' proposals and then posting the critique online means you read other people's comments. The process of critiquing is similar to being

asked to review a journal article, however you don't ever get to read what other reviewers think so you cannot benchmark your comments against others. The current process is therefore interesting (Phase 1).

Likewise, several participants noted the way in which the experience taught them to engage more effectively in collaborative writing, while many (largely, but not exclusively, group leaders) also noted the opportunities the initiative provided to develop leadership and facilitation skills. A participant who was not a group leader, for instance, wrote:

> I learned a lot from watching [the group leader] manage such a large and diverse team - I think keeping everyone organized and on task was challenging, but she handled it well and I tried to take mental notes about how she did that (Phase 3).

Bringing several of these points together, one respondent noted:

> The professional learning that the ICWGs allowed should not be under-estimated. Within my own group, I have observed a growth in SoTL efficacy, a better understanding of SoTL, and an expanded SoTL knowledge base (mainly resulting from each member analysing 20 papers). For me, I got to stretch my project management muscles and flex my facilitation and communication muscles. My writing skills … have improved to an extent that surprises even me (Phase 3).

Similarly, another respondent wrote, "I know that I have developed some academic skills much more quickly and fully because of the group" (Phase 3). By situating professional development in the context of a complex, concrete task (writing a collaborative paper), then, the ICWG initiative appears to have provided opportunities that participants believe enhanced not only their knowledge and understanding of SoTL, but also their abilities to practice it.

Discussion

To the best of our knowledge, this study constitutes the first published piece of research investigating the experiences of a large and diverse group of academics and students from many different countries working collaboratively within a formalized program to produce SoTL articles. Supported opportunities for international collaboration of this sort have been called for directly in recent SoTL literature (MacKenzie & Meyers, 2012), and this work thus constitutes an important part of responding to that call. In addition to reporting the benefits and challenges of this innovative initiative, the results of the present study also reveal four key themes of relevance to SoTL capacity building more broadly.

First, mentorship and leadership were valued components of the writing groups, particularly given that group members did not know each other beforehand, and given the large group sizes. Experienced SoTL participants (including, but not limited to group leaders) were inclined and encouraged to mentor younger, early-career academics, and these mentorship experiences were perceived to be mutually beneficial. At the same time, some younger academics also served as group leaders, and were thereby given a valuable opportunity to grow their mentorship abilities. Second, the creation of a community of scholars contributed to a sense of belonging, which – in turn – appeared to help encourage the development of participants' SoTL identities. Networking and idea-exchange opportunities were valued highly by ICWG members, and the close relationships that grew out of the initiative helped to form what were expected to be longer-term scholarly partnerships. In this way, socialization and bonding helped to foster increased immersion within the SoTL community and further commitment to collaborative SoTL work. Third, diversity within groups in terms of nationality, disciplinary identification and amount of SoTL experience helped to strengthen participants' perspectives surrounding SoTL, the writing process, and final manuscript preparation. Finally, the opportunities the initiative provided to engage in concrete tasks connected to working collaboratively and publishing a SoTL paper were seen to be instrumental in helping participants develop a range of relevant scholarly skills.

In many respects, these findings corroborate and extend existing scholarship about effective strategies for building SoTL capacity. Mentorship and/or collaboration with experienced partners (Hubball et al., 2010; Michael, 2012; Svinicki, 2012), and the creation of community (Haigh et al., 2011; McConnell, 2012; Mighty, 2013), have repeatedly been positioned as important in developing SoTL scholars. ICWG participants likewise named these features as key elements of the ICWG experience, and their comments suggested that the availability of these elements through the ICWG enhanced their personal SoTL capacity. Issues connected to leadership were likewise positioned as central factors preventing or supporting successful development and group performance, thereby further underlining the potential centrality of *effective* leaders and mentors within professional development contexts that take a collaborative focus. Given the themes reported in this study, effective leaders in this context are likely those who are able to provide and encourage considerate mentorship, to create a collegial environment that contributes to the development of community, to engage the full group in experiential components of the work, and to shepherd discussion in a manner that helps participants learn from their diverse perspectives while simultaneously charting a clear way forward and keeping the group on task. By highlighting these factors, the present research also contributes to the literature on effective SoTL leadership.

The benefits of experiential learning, while not highlighted as explicitly within the SoTL development literature, nonetheless do figure within a number of professional development opportunities that take a project-based approach (Cohn, 2010; Gale, 2009; Waterman et al., 2010). These were also positioned explicitly as central elements of the ICWG experience contributing to SoTL capacity development. At the same time, while the diversity of the groups generated some challenges, the data also suggest that this diversity enhanced SoTL capacity, providing further support for calls for interdisciplinarity (Huber & Hutchings, 2005; McKinney, 2013; Poole, 2013) and internationalization (Higgs, 2009; MacKenzie & Meyers, 2012) in SoTL by suggesting that such features can contribute not only to

the growth of the field but also to the individual capacity and understanding of its practitioners.

A potential explanation for why these factors, as provided in the ICWG, contribute to developing (perceived) capacity can be found in the modified version of Gardner's (2008) model of researcher development described by Murray & Cunningham (2011). This model outlines three kinds of development involved in becoming a researcher – programmatic development, relational development, and personal development – and suggests the importance of moving through phases of increasing complexity and independence within each of these realms. Programmatic development entails completing various elements of the research process – in this case, contributing to the development of the topic, participating in the onsite workshop and in the process of researching and writing the article, and finally submitting a completed article for review and publication. Relational development involves engaging in increasingly extended scholarly discussions about the work – here, conversing with others members of one's group, participating in exchange with other ICWG participants and facilitators, and finally opening oneself up to broader critical discussion and feedback by submitting the paper for peer review and publication. Finally, personal development is characterized by shifts in researcher identity, in this case characterized by a movement from understanding oneself solely as a disciplinary scholar towards developing an identity in which SoTL is understood as an important component of one's scholarly work.

Applying this model to the present findings, it could be argued that the project-focused, experiential elements of the ICWG helped participants to move through the stages of programmatic development. As a result of participating in the ICWG, sixty-one people now have at least one collaborative, international SoTL publication to their credit (and eight more have at least one such article submitted for consideration). At the same time, these experiential features, alongside opportunities for mentorship, the formation of a community of scholars, and the diversity of the groups arguably contributed not only to participants' ability to move through these programmatic phases, but also to helping them move through

the stages of relational and personal development. The diverse and nurturing communities created through the ICWG may well have been useful precisely because they provided opportunities to engage in increasingly extended forms of relational development; they provided participants with chances to test and air their views with increasingly broad audiences (ultimately culminating in the submission of the work produced for review and publication beyond the immediate community), while simultaneously providing them with useful support in this process. Likewise, for some participants, these factors appear to have contributed to an increased sense of confidence in their abilities as SoTL researchers, as well as a sense of becoming a member of the larger SoTL community, thus suggesting some initial development in the personal realm as well.

This potential to contribute to personal development may be especially important, given the challenges of developing researcher identities in general (Åkerlind, 2008; Murray & Cunningham, 2011) and SoTL identities in particular (e.g., Gayle et al., 2013; Kelly et al., 2012; Tremonte, 2011). As noted above, many people experience a number of challenges in coming to understand themselves as SoTL practitioners. Frequent comments in the current data about being "new to the field" suggest that this might be a felt concern (potentially ongoing) for a number of ICWG participants. However, it is also noteworthy that many of the present participants positioned the themes emphasized in this study (mentorship, community, experiential learning) as elements that helped them (continue to) navigate this challenge. In this respect, the present data suggest that initiatives like the ICWG, through their provision of the features described in the themes, may provide a useful means of helping scholars to develop their SoTL identities. Of course, this process is not sweeping or assured, and it cannot be claimed that any one experience will have a complete and enduring transformational effect on identity formation. As described eloquently in one of the papers to come out of the initiative, for many people, the process of developing a SoTL identity is "troublesome in one way or another, giving rise to conflicts, discomfort, risk-taking, and transformative and integrative experiences" (Simmons et al., 2013, p. 16).

Initiatives like the ICWG, however, appear to have the potential to create the kinds of transformative experiences noted by this group of ICWG participants.

Limitations and future research

There are, of course, limitations to this research, and to the potential of the ICWG as a capacity-building tool. For instance, these data suggest that good leadership and mentorship within the ICWG context is not assured, and that diversity itself can lead to practical challenges. Therefore, the success of such initiatives is not guaranteed. An essential consideration, then, is the selection of group leaders. Inviting seasoned and/or especially promising mentors to fill these roles, as we endeavored to do in this case, is key. Likewise, the initiative time frame and structure allowed for the groups to conduct only limited empirical work (if they engaged in empirical study at all); therefore, the kinds of SoTL that can be experienced via the initiative are somewhat limited, and full/complete capacity building across a range of SoTL activities cannot be claimed.

Another limitation is related to the fact that the present study relied on self-report data as opposed to a more "objective" measure of increased SoTL capacity. Despite this limitation, the success of the ICWG articles submitted for publication (8 of 8 submitted thus far have been accepted) means that the initiative seems to have generated relatively high-quality work. Given that the sample includes a group of self-selecting and potentially highly engaged participants, it is also the case that results may not be generalizable. However, we can expect that they may be transferrable to other similar groups of engaged and interested SoTL scholars.

Insofar as SoTL work is ultimately focused on enhancing student learning, the extent to which participation in the ICWG translates into improved student learning is an interesting question for future research. Likewise, the initial insights about the importance of effective SoTL leadership raised in this study deserve further research and exploration. Finally, the ways in which an initiative of this sort might fit into and might contribute to more "institutionally-focused" development activities, which attempt to address more directly the marginalization and

undervaluing of SoTL described in the introduction to this article, should also be considered. Several institutions and professional groups have expressed interest in modifying the process described in this article for running their own group writing activities, whether about SoTL or subject-based topics. It will be important to research the participants' experiences of these versions of the ICWG model as well, so that we can build our understanding of the ways in which groups build knowledge through collaborative writing.

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Appendix A: Phase 1 Survey Questions

1. Please indicate your age:
   - 25 years or less
   - 26-30 years
   - 31-40 years
   - 41-50 years
   - 51-60 years
   - more than 60 years

2. What is your gender?
   - Female
   - Male
   - Other

3. Please provide your job title(s):

4. How many years (if any) have you worked in higher education?

5. In what country do you currently live and work?

6. Approximately how many SoTL articles have you published in the last 5 years?

7. How many ISSoTL meetings have you attended (not including the 2012 conference)?

8. Please provide a ranking for each of the following questions (1 being lowest and 5 being highest)
   - How valued is SoTL within your job?
   - How valued is SoTL at your institution?
   - How valued is SoTL in your discipline?
   - How much do you value SoTL?

9. What collaborative writing group are you in?
   - Embedding SOTL into institutional cultures
   - SOTL in an age of accountability

- Academic identity of SOTL practitioners
- Students as change agents through SOTL
- Scholarship of academic leadership
- Inquiry-based learning: Disciplinary practices and institutional embedding
- Teaching and learning about ethics: Disciplinary practices and institutional embedding
- The student experience of their degree level program
- Scholarship of educational/faculty/academic development
- Not in a group (initiative facilitator)

10. How much time do you anticipate this experience (from early April 2012 through submission of the manuscript to the journal) will take in addition to the 20 hours that you will spend in the face to face session at Hamilton?
- less than 25 hours
- 26-50 hours
- 51-75 hours
- 76-100 hours
- more than 100 hours

11. What benefits do you see from participating in the collaborative writing groups?

12. What challenges do you anticipate encountering throughout the collaborative writing groups experience?

13. Please rank how satisfied you are with the collaborative writing groups experience thus far (1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest)

14. Have you participated in international collaborations relating to SOTL before?
- Yes
- No

15a (If 'yes' to 14). Why have you participated in international collaborations relating to SoTL before?

15b (If 'no' to 14). Why have you not participated in international collaborations relating to SoTL before?

16. Have you participated in professional development activities related to writing or collaborative writing experiences before?

17a. (if 'yes' to 16). Why have you participated in professional development activities related to writing or collaborative writing experiences before?

17b. (if 'no' to 16). Why have you not participated in professional development activities related to writing or collaborative writing experiences before?

18. Would you be interested in taking part in an interview or a focus group to further discuss your collaborative writing groups experiences? Interviews/focus groups will be about 45 minutes in length and will be held during the ISSOTL conference in October 2012 at one of the conference venues (Hamilton Convention Centre or Sheraton Hamilton Hotel).

Appendix B: Focus Group/Interview Guide

1. What were the benefits of the face-to-face experience?

2. What were the challenges of the face-to-face experience?

3. What challenges do you anticipate facing with the final stage (i.e., the paper write-up)?

4. What would you like to keep in the face-to-face experience for future events?

5. What would you remove from the face-to-face experience for future events?

6. On a scale of 1 to 5 (with 1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest) what was your overall satisfaction with the experience? Why would you give this ranking?

7. Can you tell us a little about how your group has approached your collective work thus far? For example, how have you divided work? What means have you used to communicate and discuss ideas?

8. Have there been any unexpected outcomes of engaging in the process thus far? If so, what were these?

9. What else would you like to share about your experience thus far that we have missed?

Appendix C: Phase 3 Survey Questions

1. What were the benefits of the total Collaborative Writing Groups experience for you and/or your group?

2. What were the challenges/shortcomings of the total collaborative writing groups experience for you and/or your group?

3. What would you remove from the initiative for future events?

4. What would you keep or add to the initiative for future events?

5. Please rank how satisfied you are with the total collaborative writing groups experience (1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest)

6. Have any collaborative outcomes (beyond the submitted paper) arisen from your participation in the project? If so, what were these collaborative outcomes?

7. Do you expect to collaborate further with members of your group?

8. How, if at all, will being involved with the initiative inform your future work?