International Collaboration in SoTL: Current Status and Future Direction

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Abstract
In this essay we consider the current status, and future directions, of international collaboration between colleagues doing Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) work. We start by offering a working definition of collaboration. Then we address the increasingly collaborative nature of work in many academic spheres, and describe models of Higher Education collaboration that we can use to frame our thinking about international SoTL collaboration. Next we explicate some of the initiatives we have instigated, and research we have undertaken, to explore and facilitate international collaboration in SoTL. We finish by identifying a set of challenges that confront international SoTL collaborators and offer suggestions for addressing those challenges.

Keywords
SoTL, International SoTL collaboration, Collaboration, Email communication, Faculty work, Models of collaboration

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International Collaboration in SoTL: Current Status and Future Direction

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Abstract
In this essay we consider the current status, and future directions, of international collaboration between colleagues doing Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) work. We start by offering a working definition of collaboration. Then we address the increasingly collaborative nature of work in many academic spheres, and describe models of Higher Education collaboration that we can use to frame our thinking about international SoTL collaboration. Next we explicate some of the initiatives we have instigated, and research we have undertaken, to explore and facilitate international collaboration in SoTL. We finish by identifying a set of challenges that confront international SoTL collaborators and offer suggestions for addressing those challenges.

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Defining Collaboration
There is little agreement among scholars regarding definitions of collaboration. However, we think that recent theorizing of collaboration as a discursive process, where conversation is at the center of the collaborative endeavor, may be ideally suited to the SoTL domain. Hardy, Lawrence and Grant (2005) define collaboration as a two-stage interactive process. The first stage involves conversations between participants through a range of discursive processes including face-to-face meetings, email, memos, letters and so on that occur over time. The second stage involves transforming these conversations into “innovative and synergistic action” (p. 59). Likewise, Keyton, Ford, and Smith (2008) offer a definition of collaboration grounded in communicative practice. Although they are primarily interested in inter-organizational collaboration, their ideas can be adapted to various contexts. They suggest that collaboration is a “set of communicative processes in which individuals ... engage when working interdependently to address problems outside the spheres of individuals or organizations working in isolation” (p. 381). Together these two definitions convey what we think SoTL collaborative work involves—communicative processes between individuals working interdependently that result, over time, in a variety of outcomes from meaningful conversations about learning and teaching, to collaborative course developments and the sharing of resources, through to acting as critical friends, engaging in shared research projects, and co-authorship.

Collaboration in the Academy
It is clear that Higher Education (HE) is increasingly collaborative. We are encouraged
to take interdisciplinary approaches to our teaching, we are involved with service and outreach programs that include many stakeholders, and we engage our students in collaborative learning opportunities (Kezar, 2005). Collaboration in the research sphere is also increasingly common. Funding bodies often require evidence of collaboration amongst HE institutions, or partnerships between universities and governmental bodies and/or non-governmental organizations, as a research-funding requirement (Lee & Bozeman, 2005). In many disciplines collaborative research and multiple authored research articles are the norm (Morrison, Dobbie & McDonald, 2003). Even collaborative research in the arts, which is still relatively undervalued, is more common these days (Williams, Stevenson, Nicholas, Watkinson & Rowlands, 2009).

Some recent models of collaborative processes in higher education are enlightening here. Walsh and Kahn’s (2009) model of collaboration includes five parts: context, social vehicles, professional dialogues, engagement, and practice. In terms of their model, the context (i.e., your discipline, department, university, etc) may impact how often, how much, and with whom you collaborate. Social vehicles offer colleagues an opportunity to meet and begin discussing collaborative partnerships. Continued professional dialogues deepen our understanding about others and often lead to increased enthusiasm, engagement, and commitment for collaborating on issues of shared practice.

Kezar (2005) proposed a model of collaboration in HE that requires commitment building and sustenance, as well as effective relationship development (among other factors). Central to her model of collaborative relationship building is communication that allows people with common interests or priorities to discover shared objectives and thereby deepen the relationship. Many collaborations in the research sphere begin with dialogue at academic conferences or through third party introductions. Sustained interaction allows collaborators to build commitment by learning about each others’ values, establishing shared priorities, and building trusting partnerships.

These definitions and models are built on the assumption that collaboration among participants with different skills and knowledge will result in synergistic outcomes and there is some evidence that a greater number of publications are produced in collaborative teams (Floyd, Schroeder & Finn 1994). However, collaboration is not without its challenges. Disputes related to work habits, differences in commitment to a project, and disagreements over intellectual property are common (Fox & Faver, 1982). There are also challenges related to the geographical locations of collaborators and the additional time that collaborative work can demand (Fox & Faver, 1984). Past research has shown that many collaborations fail to generate any collective action or innovation whatsoever (Lawrence, Hardy, & Phillips, 2002). So it is important for researchers entering into collaborative endeavors to engage in these opportunities with their eyes wide open, recognizing the unique challenges that characterize these partnerships and the practices that lead to effective outcomes.

**Collaboration and SoTL**

Richard Gale concluded from his examination of the outcomes of the Carnegie Academy’s Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Leadership Program that “collaborative and collective inquiry can be more effective and have greater impact on student learning and the advancement of knowledge than investigations accomplished by individual faculty” (Gale, 2007, p. 39). This finding suggests that collaborative work in the SoTL domain overall can be beneficial and result in important outcomes.

Although SoTL is becoming more recognised internationally, Brawley, Kelly, and Timmins (2009) pointed out that when the International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching
and Learning (ISSOTL) was founded in 2004, SoTL was a predominantly US concept. Similarly, Kathleen McKinney (2006, p. 43) reminds us that “there may be cross-national differences in the meaning of SoTL” that may make international collaboration more difficult. More recently, there have been further calls for SoTL to bridge international boundaries and foster international collaborations (i.e., a type of “SoTL Without Borders” approach). The ISSOTL website states that ISSOTL was organized to: “facilitate the collaboration of scholars in different countries and the flow of new findings and applications across national boundaries” (amongst other goals). Moreover, Higgs (2009, p.5) argues that “international collaboration is crucial to enhance and sustain our SoTL endeavours.” The International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (this issue) identifies “the problems and benefits of international collaboration in doing SoTL” as a suitable topic for submitted essays and most recently, at the 2011 ISSOTL conference in Milwaukee, there were repeated calls for SoTL to move beyond a focus on local practices towards a more inclusive international community.

One example of a disciplinary initiative that is a potential model for fostering international collaboration in SoTL is the International Network for Learning and Teaching Geography in Higher Education (INLT). This network as described by Healey (2006) is a program where geographers from across the world work together both virtually and later face-to-face to write articles related to different aspects of learning and teaching in the discipline. Unfortunately this type of initiative, which is both innovative and productive, appears to be more of an exception than a rule across most disciplines.

Nailing Our Colors to the Mast

In terms of our own thinking, we firmly believe that collaboration both at the local, and even more importantly at the international level, should be central to the SoTL movement. We are now at a point in our maturity as a field where we can turn our attentions from inward to outward and systematically seek to build an international community of collaborative scholars. We believe that the SoTL community will benefit from increased international collaborative scholarly work and so we have sought to do some work in this area over the past few years.

We both have a background in faculty or academic development and much of our work in this sphere (on both of our campuses) is done collaboratively (i.e., between individuals/teams of faculty, working with individuals/teams of developers). Jane has a history in biological research – a famously collaborative field where multiple authored articles are the norm and many research laboratories from different parts of the world collaborate on a single research project. Renee has a background in communication – in particular group communication – and she spends much of her research time working in collaborative investigative teams to study how groups communicate. It is therefore perhaps not surprising that we believe collaboration is good and that, when collaboration works, it is good for those who collaborate, for the quality of the output, and for the processes that bring about that end point. It is these shared beliefs that have framed our SoTL work over the past few years as we support, and systematically examine, collaborative groups of faculty/academics in their explorations into teaching and student learning.

Our first experience working collaboratively across international borders had a rather serendipitous start. With colleagues, Jane had built a website to support SoTL efforts at the University of Glasgow (www.gla.ac.uk/departments/sotl/). In looking around for relevant links to her website, she came across a similar website built by Renee and her support staff for University of Wisconsin System SoTL scholars (www.sotl.uwm.edu). In an email exchange, Jane and Renee agreed that they would link to each other’s
websites. That short exchange prompted a collaboration that has resulted in presentations and now this essay. Our first presentation together was at the 2009 ISSOTL conference where we compared our experiences and lessons learned developing web resources for SoTL scholars in our respective countries. Delivering this presentation gave us the opportunity to meet and discuss our understanding of SoTL as well as the benefits we had experienced in undertaking a collaborative SoTL venture. We discussed how our experience could also hold for others engaged in SoTL who might find collaboration with colleagues from another institution, or another country, both stimulating and similarly productive. So we started to explore whether collaboration could be engineered and nurtured amongst international participants with similar beliefs in SoTL collaborative practices.

Our work on this question has taken two directions. The results of both of these strands of research have been presented at past SoTL conferences and are currently being prepared for publication, so only a brief overview is offered here.

First, we addressed a "what is” question (Hutchings, 2000) seeking to better understand the current landscape of international SoTL collaborative work. We surveyed SoTL scholars via the ISSOTL and Improving Student Learning (ISL) ‘listservs’ to inquire about their experiences in international collaboration. We received 68 responses and of those responses, 43% were currently involved in international collaborations, 28% were not currently engaged but had been previously, and a further 28% had not had any international collaborators. Respondents more often reported discussing teaching and learning topics or sharing SoTL resources rather than conversations about producing a collaborative paper or presentation. The majority of respondents had met their collaborator at a conference although some also mentioned being introduced by a colleague. Almost all respondents believed their collaboration/s were valuable and many stated that their collaboration/s would probably continue. There was a clear sense that those who hadn’t engaged in an international collaboration would be keen to do so but they often reported that they didn’t know how to make contacts.

Second, we asked a “what works” question (Hutchings, 2000) and explored whether we could actively facilitate and foster international SoTL collaborative relationships between colleagues from our two different national contexts (the US and the UK). We hoped to uncover whether our active facilitation of these relationships might grow and sustain them. The SoTL partners project was a year-long undertaking where we introduced 15 pairs of colleagues from our two home institutions to each other, and encouraged them to converse (mainly by email) about their understanding of SoTL and their interests in this area. Partners were paired based on their relative experience in the area and their disciplinary backgrounds (as much as was possible) and were prompted by us at regular intervals throughout the year via email to address questions about SoTL, student learning, and current SoTL research projects, among other relevant topics. Towards the end of the year, participants were asked to evaluate the process. The evaluation data indicated that 43% of the partnerships were still active by the end of the year. Respondents indicated that mainly they discussed their own SoTL projects, encouraged each other in their individual work, and shared SoTL resources. However, there was little evidence of collaborative projects as an outcome of the process.

Our qualitative analysis of the texts of the email communication between partners suggests that the most successful and sustained relationships happened where colleagues reciprocally communicated about personal life details and came to share a deep understanding of each other’s circumstances and contexts (reinforcing the definitions and models of collaborative practice identified at the outset of this essay). Further, the most effective relationships negotiated what we’ve termed “the rules of engagement” which involved discussing the purpose of the collaborative experience, the extent and direction of their conversations, the importance of inviting their partner’s
views and opinions, and pledging commitment to the other person. Still not all of the 15 partnerships built meaningful relationships. Many of the partners indicated there were serious barriers that restrained, and constrained, their ability to develop a sustained collaborative international SoTL partnership.

**Challenges and Lessons Learned**

Our own experiences with international collaboration, as well as the feedback we have received through our online survey, suggest several challenges (and subsequent lessons learned) associated with developing and sustaining international collaborative relationships. The most commonly reported barrier from the participants was lack of time. Still, this constraint is not unique to building international SoTL relationships; it permeates every aspect of academics’ lives. As one colleague suggested to us, “People will find time to do that which is most imperative or important to them.” But we did come away from this project with a clearer understanding of the amount of time that is required to build sustainable international collaborative relationships (especially when the communication is primarily at a distance). In those partners that shared a discipline, the relational work was less time-consuming as there was more immediate common ground. However, while some of the most sustained pairings were from the same discipline, others were not. We believe that partnerships involving complete strangers from different disciplines, and communicating at a distance, can be built and sustained. However, the process is likely to take longer than a year if truly collaborative SoTL projects are the desired outcome. We have come to believe that the first year is probably best devoted to relationship building, exploration of ideas and similarities, and planning. The second year could be used to flesh out the project, and to collect data in the respective classrooms. The third year would be devoted to analysis and presentation (and possibly publication) of the project. This suggests a long timeline for international collaborative projects, especially if distance is a constraining factor (as it is likely to be in international collaborations). Undertaking such an endeavour requires an enormous amount of commitment and patience on the part of both partners.

A second significant challenge in fostering collaborative SoTL involves finding a common objective or goal that all partners in the collaboration are interested in pursuing. Because the SoTL movement is interdisciplinary in nature, ideas about which questions to explore can differ widely across scholars. We found this to be the case in the work we did on the SoTL partners project. In the teams where members were closer in disciplinary outlook, it was easier for them to communicate, discuss possible SoTL questions, and talk about future SoTL collaborative projects. What we discovered is that when SoTL collaborations are both international and interdisciplinary, it is vitally important to carefully lay out the rules of engagement as we indicate above. Both partners need to agree, and understand, the goal to be achieved, and outcome desired, before the actual project is undertaken. This discussion often takes much communication and time, and partners must be both patient and vigilant in working through this challenge.

A third challenge may lie with the way current SoTL practices have developed. One reason that international SoTL work may be slow to flourish is because much SoTL work remains grounded in local classroom practices with scholars rarely looking outside their own institutions. Certainly this type of research is vitally important to increased understanding of teaching and learning, and we would not suggest an either/or enterprise where either local practices or international inquiry are privileged. Instead we would like to see a framework that includes local research (in local classrooms) alongside international collaborative SoTL work (that reaches beyond local classrooms to include international dimensions). Finally the individualistic thrust of promotion and tenure criteria do not always reward collaborative work despite many institutions espousing values that include collaboration.
Finally, other common constraints voiced by the participants in our studies included: differences in time zones, constraints associated with distance communication, differences in norms about the quantity of communication needed, and cultural differences, though this latter point was also the stimulus of some rich conversations. Clearly international SoTL collaboration is not an easy task, however neither is doing non-international collaborative SoTL work an easy task. Indeed, all SoTL work can suffer from contextual constraints. Still many of us forge ahead because we believe it imperative that we do so. Perhaps it is time to take the same attitude about international collaborative SoTL projects.

Potential Future Directions

So what does the future hold? If we are to foster international SoTL collaboration, we believe the SoTL community must do a better job of transforming its beliefs about international collaboration into normative practice. That is, we must not only profess the centrality of international SoTL partnerships, but we must also do them. We must walk the talk (to employ an overused phrase)! We suggest a few ways that might be accomplished.

Recognised bodies that promote and support SoTL work such as the ISSOTL conference (and other SoTL conferences) and SoTL journals could go beyond their stated aims of promoting global perspectives of SoTL through ensuring, and making a public declaration that, a proportion of all of the papers they accept or publish demonstrate international collaborative efforts. Similarly, SoTL journals could devote one (or more) issues a year to papers co-authored by international colleagues. Such initiatives, we believe, would encourage scholars to maximise the potential of existing international contacts and promote the formation of new partnerships.

Organisations like ISSOTL could lead by example by establishing satellite conferences, or pre-conference days, promoting the model used by geographers of the INLT network (described above) where those interested in international collaboration could come together to discuss, think, and write collaboratively. We also suggest that SoTL conference organisers consider instituting and supporting special interest groups specifically for those excited about making international contacts and subsequently developing international collaborative SoTL projects.

And finally, institutions must play their role. Academic and faculty developers currently often act as brokers and matchmakers in their own institutions or nationally, making links between individuals or teams with common interests. This role could be extended through faculty developer networks with developers providing the introductions and support, perhaps through the provision of virtual online venues for discussion and collaboration amongst interested SoTL scholars on their respective campuses.

Conclusion

Our limited work in this domain provides evidence that SoTL scholars do desire opportunities to collaborate with colleagues from across the globe. Yet we are also keenly aware of the constraints on that process, and the fact that relationship building takes effort, skill, patience, and sustained communicative investment. Whilst international collaboration in SoTL may indeed be considered a “good thing,” it is not necessarily the case that we are transforming that “good thing” into normative practice. If the SoTL community wants to foster international collaboration, it must take steps to promote, support and publicly value it.
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