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Exploring the Feasibility of International Collaboration and Relationship Building through a Virtual Partnership Scheme

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Abstract

International collaboration is an under-studied component of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL). This study sheds light on the process of international collaboration by illustrating an exploratory approach to the process of forming and maintaining collaborative partnerships. Participants in this study were put into pairs (each one comprised of one individual from the University of Glasgow and another from the University of Wisconsin System) and asked to participate in email correspondence over the course of one year. The text of participants' emails was pooled and analyzed through a general inductive approach using NVivo software. The study, though small in nature, helps to illustrate and further understand international collaborative relationships. We offer suggestions for future international collaborations and discuss the implications of emphasizing such partnerships within SoTL.

Keywords

collaboration, scholarship, SoTL, electronic communication, partnerships

Introduction

The concept of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) was first introduced to a wide audience through Boyer's seminal work in 1990 and has been further defined over the intervening 20 years. SoTL has been described as both a process and the outputs of that process, as a concept, a movement, a cult (Brawley, Mills, Kelly, & Timmins, 2009) and a "paradigmatic change in higher education" (Atkinson, 2001, p. 1218). SoTL is gaining acceptance and further recognition in many institutions across the globe; however, it is not universally understood and valued. As Brawley et al. (2009) point out, when the ISSoTL was founded in 2004, SoTL was a predominantly US concept. According to McKinney (2006) cross-national differences in the meaning of SoTL may exist. The adoption of SoTL as a recognized type of faculty activity has allowed it to be used as a way of recognizing and rewarding good teaching, particularly in the US; evidence for this recognition elsewhere in the world is more limited. Despite many works in the public domain under the SoTL banner, and increasing numbers of work exploring what SoTL is and how it might be best measured, assessed and supported, there are still a number of themes that are under-explored: how does SoTL *happen* and how is it understood in different parts of the world? More specifically, what impact does collaboration have on SoTL work, and how can collaboration be encouraged and supported? Previous efforts to explore collaborations in learning and teaching are few and far between, but Rich, Robinson and Bednarz (2000) suggest networks for interaction should and can be extended internationally, enriching research processes and experiences.

This paper explores these aspects of SoTL through an exploratory inductive textual analysis of email exchanges between pairs of colleagues (one each from a US institution and a UK institution) intentionally partnered, through a year-long project aimed at fostering collaboration around SoTL. In addition to the qualitative analysis of the emails, we investigated participants' views about the partnering project itself and their beliefs about the benefits of and barriers to collaborating in this manner through an evaluation survey. We utilize Kezar's (2005)

phases of collaboration commitment to describe the results of our research. The study thus offers a description of how these particular participants experienced international collaboration, and serves as an example of how academics might engage with SoTL in different international settings. Although the study is exploratory in nature, it does provide a snapshot into the characteristics one might expect to both benefit and detract from the potential of international pairing. The article begins with a brief review of the literature on collaboration in Higher Education (HE) before moving on to describe the SoTL partners project and our analyses; we end by discussing the potential implications of our findings.

Review of Literature

Walsh and Kahn (2010) state that collaboration can happen among individuals, groups, or institutions, and involves two or more parties working together toward a common goal. Collaboration has the potential to result in synergy, in the whole being greater than the sum of its parts, by bringing together diverse groups of people with different expertise, knowledge and skills. Studies of collaboration in organizations describe collaborative processes as interactive, where individuals develop shared norms, structures and rules (Kezar, 2005). In addition, Kezar (2005) describes how collaboration occurs in three primary stages: building commitment, commitment, and sustaining commitment. Many spheres within HE are becoming increasingly collaborative. Once overwhelmingly supportive of individual scholarship and achievement, academia is recognizing the potential impact of interdisciplinary, collaborative efforts on many different areas of academic practice.

Perhaps the most notable role collaboration plays in HE is within disciplinary research. Within many disciplines, collaborative research and multiple authored research articles have been the norm for decades (Morrison, Dobbie, & McDonald, 2003). Increasingly, funding for research often requires evidence of collaboration either between HE institutions or partnerships between universities and governmental bodies and/or non-governmental organizations (Lee & Bozeman, 2005), and scholars have claimed that collaborative research results in more

publications (Floyd, Schroeder, & Finn, 1994). Harada (2001) reported that individuals who work in collaborative efforts value the access to different viewpoints and areas of expertise and that these lead to enriching discussions. Meanwhile, according to Lattuca (2005), working with colleagues provides an opportunity for scholars to be introduced to new methods of inquiry, enhancing their understanding and conceptualization of different phenomena. For SoTL scholars, pairing with colleagues may be particularly pertinent as the relationship provides an opportunity to exchange ideas and resources. While collaboration is valued in some disciplines, in others collaborative authorship may challenge accepted orthodoxy over the value of monographs (Williams, Stevenson, Nicholas, Watkinson, & Rowlands, 2009). Thus, the impact and necessity of collaboration varies across disciplines, making it difficult to determine how successful collaborations happen and what they look like.

Walsh and Kahn's (2009) model of the development of collaboration in HE is grounded on social vehicles, or opportunities for colleagues to meet and get to know one another. Similarly, Kezar's (2005) model for building collaboration starts with building commitment, arguing that this is dependent on the relationship aspect of the collaborative process. Building and sustaining commitment requires a certain level of trust and respect, either in the process or the person with whom one is collaborating (Kezar, 2005). At the local level, such relationships often form spontaneously, for example over coffee in the departmental staff room or through 'corridor conversations' (Kraut & Egido, 1990). Small scale, classroom-based SoTL research may simply reflect the interests of individual scholars, but it is also likely that such scholars have fewer opportunities for networking beyond their department or institution than those engaged in better-funder disciplinary research. Our belief is that many SoTL scholars are working in isolation within departments and/or institutions. As a result, opportunities for networking with international colleagues likely are not common. The current research seeks to determine whether such networking opportunities can occur virtually, using Kezar's (2005) model of commitment as a guideline for understanding the collaborative process.

The growing use of technology has made it easier to form and implement collaborative relationships and projects in all fields, including learning and teaching. Most, although not all, online collaborations take place asynchronously; in the case of international collaborations, asynchronous communication may need to occur because of time differences (Higgitt, Donert, Healy, Klein, Solem & Vajoczki, 2008). Technology can support the exchange of ideas across boundaries like time. Our aim in this study was to explore whether collaboration in the SoTL arena can be fostered between colleagues in the US and UK using electronic media, and what the nature of that collaboration might be. To investigate this we set up a scheme whereby individual academics in our two home institutions were paired with a colleague in the other institution. We believed that the opportunity to engage in conversations around teaching and learning with a colleague from a different international context would be attractive and would encourage participation. Our rationale for setting up pairs of colleagues rather than any other grouping was pragmatic. We believed that the analysis of one-to-one email conversations would be less complex than investigating larger groups. The research questions guiding this study were:

> *What are the features of the email communications between engineered pairings of faculty interested in SoTL? Can Kezar's phases of commitment be sustained in email collaborations between engineered partnerships of faculty interested in SoTL?*

Methods

Implementing the SoTL Partner Scheme
In December 2009, 20 individuals from the University of Glasgow and 20 from the University of Wisconsin System selected from the authors' professional networks were invited by email to participate in the project. If interested in participating, they were asked to complete a short online questionnaire. The questionnaire was developed and designed using the online survey tool Survey Monkey (www.surveymonkey.com).

Participants were asked to: self-assess their experience in SoTL from novice to experienced, state a preference for being partnered with someone with similar, more or less experience, state their disciplinary area and whether they preferred to be matched with someone from their own disciplinary area, and note any current areas of SoTL interest. Thirty one responses were received, although subsequently another individual dropped out of the study. Using the responses to the initial survey, 15 pairs were formed comprising one academic from each of the two institutions.

Once matched, partners were introduced to each other via email in February 2010 and were encouraged to correspond. Throughout the year long project, the researchers collaborated to create email prompts that were sent to all 30 participants every four to six weeks with the aim of stimulating discussion. These prompts contained one or more questions to encourage participants to share their views about a particular topic related to learning and teaching and/or SoTL. It was our hope that having the opportunity to informally discuss different aspects of SoTL with colleagues across the globe might energize the participants and inspire new ideas, collaborative or otherwise. Some examples of the prompts:

> *What is one SoTL (research into teaching and learning) article or conference presentation that you have seen that really had an impact on your thinking about teaching and learning? Share the article (if available) with each other or summarize it. Has this article encouraged you to make changes in your practice? If so, what changes?*

> *Looking back over this year, what do you see as your greatest accomplishment(s) in terms of your teaching and your students' learning, and/or your SoTL research work? What is a 'teaching and learning and/or SoTL research goal' that you hope to accomplish/develop for the upcoming year? Could your partner help you reach that goal?*

Data Sources

Participants were asked to carbon copy their conversations to a dummy email account to allow the researchers to gather documentary evidence of the conversations. At the end of the project, participants were invited to complete an end-of-project evaluation delivered via Survey Monkey. This consisted of both closed and open text questions and was aimed at uncovering the frequency and nature of communication experienced in partnerships, perceived benefits of and barriers to being partnered, and whether participants would consider being involved in similar projects in the future. Finally, participants were asked to proffer advice about how such a scheme might be improved.

Data Analysis

The text of participants' emails was pooled and analyzed using a general inductive approach, as outlined by Thomas (2005), using NVivo software. Responses in surveys and emails were read, re-read and themes that emerged were coded with illustrative names. An iterative process was used to group themes into a finite number of distinct categories. The categories and the themes that emerged are described in detail below supported by quotes from participants' email discussions. We then returned to the emails of the four longest and most sustained email conversations to attempt to establish features of those discussions that contributed to the depth and quality of these communications. Features of the email conversations are highlighted below, followed by the outcomes of the end-of-project evaluation.

Results

Email Correspondence

Ninety-eight emails were copied to the dummy email address throughout the year long project; clearly, more emails may have been sent throughout the course of the project but some participants may have chosen not to copy in the dummy address to some or all of their emails. One pair did not copy any correspondence to the dummy address and for one pair we only

received one email. The majority of the pairs (10) sent between two and eight emails before the correspondence stopped. Three of the pairs sent the majority of the 98 emails (35, 27, and 13 emails), and their discussions lasted for the entire year of the project. We focus on the more sustained conversations in order to draw conclusions about what might have occurred differently in comparison to those pairs who were not so successful. In this case, all of the email conversations, though some more successful than others, are important to analyze in order to determine what is missing in one while present in another.

Once pairs were introduced, it was up to them to determine how they wanted to proceed in developing their correspondence; they could choose whether or not to be led by the regular prompt message sent. The first emails exchanged between pairs contained content related to family, work and personal interests as directed in the introduction email. Also very prevalent in early emails were descriptions of job-related duties and responsibilities. As email correspondence continued, participants discussed the prompts, SoTL interests, and various aspects of their academic and personal lives. Over time 11 of the 15 pairs discontinued their correspondence. The study lasted one year, with a final email sent to all participants in January 2011 indicating that the project was over but that they could continue with their partnerships if they wished to do so. The content of the emails was analyzed using the inductive approach described above.

Several themes emerged and are grouped into three main categories entitled: *laying the foundations*, *building a working relationship* and *taking things forward*. First, we consider each of these categories in turn, describing the themes of which each category is comprised, and supplemented with illustrative quotes. We then go on to consider the relationship between the categories and how they represent one example of a developmental process that is essential for sustained relationships and collaboration.

Laying the foundations. The laying the foundations category is comprised of four themes termed: social niceties, sharing personal information, warmth and empathy and the rules of engagement. The *social niceties* theme comprises examples

of the usual pleasantries of formal and informal letter/email correspondence, but also includes the many apologies for delay in responding to emails: "sorry I haven't been in touch. Exams have just taken off, lots of marking, invigilating and stressed out students."

Our introductory email underlined the necessity of *sharing personal information* and all of the early emails did include information about family and home lives; some correspondents also attached photographs with those early messages. We include in this theme the sharing of local detail including discussion of local weather conditions: "hope your weather has got better since last time you e-mailed, we seem to have got the snow now."

For some correspondents references to the personal sphere of their lives did not extend beyond these early emails but for others it did, and the level of detail and depth was increased along with the *warmth and empathy* expressed in communications including various forms of positive regard for the other: "Thanks so much for the wonderful email! I think we are going to get along splendidly!" Several correspondents also revealed personal details about home and family life and elements of humor (particularly self-deprecating humor): "I am having an Easter break at the moment and desperately trying to spend some quality time with my teenagers, though they are having none of it."

The final theme in the laying the foundations category is the *rules of engagement.* Some partners demonstrated a genuine interest in the other and invited their partners to engage in meaningful conversation by asking insightful and exploratory questions. Participant questions entailed a range of matters from family concerns and vacations to details of the other's classroom teaching to questions about study design and the theoretical approaches adopted in research: "Do you mean that you are working within a 'critical education research' paradigm? Can you explain more about your approach?" There was also evidence that partners were being directive in terms of the scope, direction and shape of their conversations: "Since I haven't heard from you in a while, I'll try to get the ball going again..." and "I am not sure how regularly you would like to

correspond; do you have a time span in mind?" Also within the rules of engagement theme, there was evidence of partners making pledges of commitment to both the project and the partnership: "Speak soon, and I'll definitely be a better communicator now the students aren't here!" and "Both projects are on-going but you may be interested to see the results of their findings. ... I would be quite happy to forward our findings once they have been formalised."

The four basic themes of the laying the foundations category demonstrate the ways in which partnerships and collaborations are often established. The laying the foundations category illustrates the first stage of Kezar's (2005) model of building commitment, during which time participants were polite, shared personal information, communicated some aspects of warmth and friendliness, and tried to demonstrate some level of commitment to the partnership. Although instructed to share personal information, participants were not explicitly directed to approach communicating with their partners in any particular way; yet these four basic themes were very common and consistent in the emails between the pairs that demonstrated sustained correspondence where tone was very relational in nature.

Building a working relationship. The second category that emerged was building a working relationship, which is comprised of two main themes. The first is identified as *drivers of the relationship* and the second the *process of sharing* itself. The drivers of the relationship include demonstrating curiosity about each other's contexts both institutional and national as well as being curious about others' beliefs about teaching, student learning, their discipline and SoTL and being willing to articulate those beliefs:

> "Just curious--how much does teaching itself count for promotion/tenure at your institution? [My institution] is a pretty big research based institution and I still very much get the feeling that some people (though not all) see educational research as 'pretend'"

Aside from the curiosity of the partners driving the conversations, the modes and process of sharing were also key to building the relationship. There was much evidence that the opportunity to 'talk to a relative stranger' encouraged participants to reflect on their practice and experiences which, in turn, led them to reveal much about themselves as practitioners and scholars: "A few years ago in a lab the lab leader dashed out in a flurry of fridge slamming, paper-gathering fury muttering '*** students!!!' He was on his way to give a lecture.... I vowed never to be like that" and their concerns about academic practice: "Do I dare tell students they only have to read it superficially and depend on my class presentations to give them what they really need in class presentations?"

This frank unveiling of personal views led to the identification of shared interests and common beliefs from which the relationship could develop and move forward. An example of this is illustrated in this exchange between partners who shared a science background:

> P1: One of the reasons I have not tried an educational research project before is the issue of having controls. If one teaching method is better I don't want to use it with only half the students.

> P2: This is exactly what I mean, there are too many variables and of course, by offering only part of the class something, you may be disadvantaging one or other of the groups which is just not acceptable.

Elsewhere in the conversations, partners identified similarities and commonalities in their teaching practice and the SoTL projects in which they were currently engaged. Kezar's (2005) commitment phase of the collaboration model is illustrated by the building a working relationship category. During this phase, individuals continued to exchange personal messages and began to exchange task-related messages, which helped some to move forward with more of a direction and goal for the partnership.

Taking things forward. The final category revealed in our analysis is called taking things forward and consists of two themes: *proffered support* and the *search for concrete goals.* The forms of support that participants offered their partners varied from simple encouraging words to the sharing of resources (e.g., references to articles and the outcomes of workshops attended). Some participants proffered more direct support, to read each other's manuscripts and journal reviews or making direct suggestions to enhance their partner's SoTL work: "Having another set of eyes look at the book proposal would certainly be good! So if you are up for it, we would greatly appreciate your input."

The second theme in this category is termed the *search for concrete goals*. A number of partners took their conversations further by identifying and discussing possible future collaborative ventures. It was clear from many comments that participants who had built meaningful relationships wished to move forward in some collaborative way.

> I still have a bunch of other projects to finish up this summer, but would think that 2011 would be a good time to get involved in this area again. So if we wanted to try to do a project together, that would be the timeline..."

> I notice that it is "International Year of Chemistry" in 2011 and was wondering – assuming that we are still in touch during 2011 if there is anything that we could set up -: "link spatulas across the Atlantic" so to speak!

Only a select few partnerships participated in the taking things forward phase, which fits under Kezar's (2005) sustaining commitment phase. Within this theme it was clear there was some confusion about the purpose of the SoTL partners project: "what exactly we are meant to do? Are we meant to chat about issues that arise in the classroom every now and then? Or is the ultimate goal to really carry out a collaboration?" Clearly some participants would have preferred clearer guidance on what possible outcomes could result from their conversations. We reflect on this issue in the discussion below.

Factors for Success

Clearly, not all of the participants in our study demonstrated aspects of the three categories described above. The best evidence of the process of relationship building from laying the foundations through to taking things forward can be seen in the four pairs who sustained email communication throughout the year. From the beginning of their communications four pairs successfully *laid the foundations* of their relationships, demonstrating real warmth and empathy for their partner. They revealed personal life details and an understanding of the other's circumstances. These personal elements of the conversation continued throughout the year. They also went on to discuss and negotiate the purpose of their conversations and "the rules of engagement" of it. There was evidence that at times they were being directive about the extent and direction of their communications, often inviting their partner's views and opinions and also pledging commitment to the other person. The participants in the sustained relationships all showed evidence of the second theme, that they were moving forward to *build a working relationship*. The partners demonstrated genuine curiosity about the other's context both institutional and national, and about their beliefs about students, learning and SoTL. This sharing of experiences related to teaching and SoTL allowed these partners to identify common ground and take their conversations forward. The final theme and the final phase of the relationship building that we were exploring in this study is termed taking things forward. Here partners were giving of their support – advice, encouragement, offers to act as critical friends; they were also beginning to explore, or more accurately, look for common and concrete goals with which they could move their relationships forward.

For all four pairs who continued to communicate the longest, conversations were largely focused on scholarship. For example, one pair exchanged several emails discussing the differences and similarities between students in their classes. The pair even shared assignments and discussed how a particular assignment might work for the other partner's course.

Other pairs spent time talking about different types of resources, such as workshops and articles recommended by one partner for the other. For example, one participant wrote, "you might be interested in a workshop I attended yesterday which was part of the annual UWO Provost's Summit on Teaching and Learning." Two of the pairs also spent time discussing the process of getting articles published: "I was/am particularly interested about the feedback that you received regarding your paper – were you disappointed about the feedback that you received regarding your paper?" and "Do you feel that you have many changes to make before resubmitting? Were the reviewers' comments all along similar lines?" Only one of these pairs moved on to discuss a collaborative venture, suggesting that they work on developing a project in which their students could communicate across international boundaries. However, all four offered professional advice or assistance to their partners: "Please let me know if you would like me to look over a proposal or questionnaire" and "I would be happy to have a wee look at your paper (and the reviewers' comments, too?)."

Evaluation Survey
At the end of the year, the study participants were invited to complete an end-of-project survey, where they were asked to reflect on their experiences and offer suggestions for improvement. Of the 30 study participants, 19 completed the survey. The participants were asked to rank the following options in terms of how frequently these aspects of their work were discussed in their conversations: generate creative SoTL ideas, share SoTL resources, discuss your own SoTL projects, encourage each other to move forward with your SoTL work, act as a critical friend, discuss a possible joint SoTL project, and talk about a current joint project you are working on together.

The highest ranking item was the discussion of their *own SoTL projects*; 70% of respondents said they often or sometimes discussed this aspect. The next most frequently cited items were *sharing resources* and *offering encouragement*. Only 25% of respondents indicated that they often or sometimes discussed the possibility of a joint project and only a single respondent indicated that there was a joint project in progress.

We also asked respondents to evaluate which of the following outcomes had been achieved: learning about SoTL, learning about education in partner's country, SoTL idea generation, creativity, collaboration, developing a relationship, developing a SoTL research partner, critical evaluation of SoTL projects, learning about new SoTL resources, and better understanding of SoTL. Fifty percent of respondents indicated that to a great or to some extent they had *developed a relationship*, 44% indicated that they had learned more about *education in their partner's country* and 39% *learned about SoTL*. The other outcomes were cited less frequently. Notably, only three respondents indicated that they agreed, to some extent, that collaboration itself had been an outcome.

When asked to describe their partnership, responses ranged from positive to negative. Positive descriptions stated that partnerships were friendly, encouraging, informative, stimulating, and very interesting. Participants also stated that the partner might be a good contact for future reference, the partnership was satisfying with the potential to become stronger or to develop into a rewarding relationship, and very worthwhile. Participants also provided feedback indicating some negative components of their partnerships, including the partnership failed, was non-existent and discouraging, never really got started, and was disappointing. One participant indicated that it was a good program, but just did not personally work for him/her.

When asked whether they would participate in a similar project in the future given the opportunity, approximately 67% of respondents indicated they would definitely or probably participate. The remaining 33% were unsure; not one respondent stated that they would definitely or probably not participate in such projects in future. Similarly, when asked whether they would recommend such a project to a colleague, 61% responded that they would definitely or probably make a recommendation, although two respondents (11%) stated that they would probably not recommend such an opportunity to a colleague.

Finally, participants were asked to identify the challenges of their partnership. The challenges listed by participants

included lack of time/time management, lack of commitment, other pressures from "day jobs", not receiving responses from the partner, and not understanding what the goal of the partnership was.

Discussion

As indicated above we are not able to state the exact number of emails exchanged in the project as this was dependent on participants choosing to copy in a dummy email address; however, it is clear that not all of the partners engaged in a sustained email exchange. The results varied from there being no exchange of emails (one participant reported in the survey that they did not receive a reply to an initial email they sent to their partner, which matches our data) through to four pairs who sustained their email discussion throughout the year of the project. Clearly not all participants in the study demonstrated features of all three categories that emerged from our analysis. In terms of *laying the foundations, s*ome did not get beyond the 'social niceties' to more authentic warmth and sharing of personal information through to discussing the rules of engagement. However, the four most sustained relationships did show evidence of moving to the next category in the process, building a working relationship, which was evidenced by them demonstrating curiosity about the other's institutional context, teaching and SoTL activities and by sharing some of their own experiences. Some of the other pairings stopped at this stage and the conversations stalled. The best evidence of the third category, *taking things forward,* comes from the discussions of the four pairs who maintained and sustained their email discussions (although other pairings occasionally demonstrated elements of this category).

What seems to have been critical in the development of the more sustained relationships was the recognition of shared beliefs and interests so that partners could move forward. Therefore, we believe that *laying the foundations* of the relationship is crucial. According to Kezar's (2005) model, this particular phase of building commitment requires the development of shared values and norms. Without properly

developing these common ties, participants were unable to succeed in the long run. It may be that some of our participants were less comfortable with relationship building through an electronic medium or perhaps some of the pairings simply had little in common in terms of disciplinary areas or SoTL interests for the initial conversations to gather momentum. We encourage potential collaborators to spend time sharing personal interests and background in order to build a strong foundation.

Since the second category, *building a working relationship*, allowed partners to find out more about each other's teaching, research and beliefs it allowed them to identify areas of interest in common, where these existed. In Kezar's (2005) model, this phase would be considered commitment, during which time individuals involved in the collaboration make it a priority and solidify their relationship. Clearly, no matter how effective participants were at *laying the foundations* and *building a working relationship* not all pairs of scholars are going to uncover common interests and give priority to the project, and will therefore be unable to *take things forward*, which would fall under the sustaining commitment phase (Kezar, 2005). Individuals who were unable to establish common values, and commit and give priority to the partnership were not able to sustain the collaboration. Thus, while it is important for individuals who wish to collaborate to lay the foundations, it is also useful to explore commonalities and shared interests in teaching and research.

The first research question in this study was: What are the features of the email communications between engineered pairings of faculty interested in SoTL? We addressed this through a qualitative thematic analysis of email transcripts and we identified three categories of themes: laying the foundations, building a working relationship and taking things forward. The first two categories identified in the current research align well with the first two phases of Kezar's (2005) model: building commitment and commitment. Given the scope of this study, we have not fully explored Kezar's third phase: sustaining commitment. However, we believe when considering a personal collaborative relationship even before one can build commitment it is essential to work out whether it is worth

committing to the other person. With this particular sample of participants, insufficient commonality in this stage made it unlikely that effort was invested into building the relationship. Kanter (1994) discussed the link between trust and informal relationships, stating that the early stages of relationships mimic a courtship. The courtship is often characterized by informality and is based instead on chemistry or compatibility. Individuals often navigate these early stages of a relationship by exchanging social messages. As messages are exchanged, individuals may become more enthusiastic about the relationship, further heightening feelings of trust. Cogburn and Levison (2003) extend this idea, claiming that early, action-based trust can be one of the most important components of collaborative learning, specifically cross-nationally. Certainly there is evidence of such social messages being exchanged within the *laying the foundations* category, which indicates the results of this study may be useful in understanding other international collaborations.

Our second research question was: Can Kezar's phases of commitment be sustained in email collaborations between engineered partnerships of faculty interested in SoTL? Clearly, while two thirds of the pairings ceased communication before the end of the year long project, a further third maintained the conversations and talked widely and deeply about teaching and SoTL. While none of them, thus far, have gone on to engage in a recognizable collaborative project we would argue that the potential for such collaborations exists as a result of their email conversations, as they did indeed transition through the first two phases of Kezar's (2005) model of collaboration commitment. Although there was no conclusive evidence to suggest that degree of experience with SoTL significantly influenced the partnerships, it would be useful to consider this aspect in future research.

In our evaluation survey we also asked what benefits there were in participating in the project. Participants indicated there were several important components that made the study work for them. One important strategy to keep the relationships on track and in check was the monthly prompts that were distributed via email to the participants. One respondent

indicated that these prompts were effectively worded and timely, suggesting that this type of project does need some type of structure to continue urging the relationships forward. The degree of structure and control should be carefully considered; a respondent indicated that the coordination of the project was not intrusive or prescriptive, suggesting participants felt like they could communicate with their partner in whatever way they saw fit.

We also aimed to discover through our evaluation survey how projects such as this could be improved. Responses to the question asking participants to identify the challenges they experienced in relation to the projects overwhelmingly relate to issues of time and workload. Simply, it was difficult to find the time to commit to this additional demand on their already busy schedules, particularly when the potential rewards were unclear. The issue of time was also prevalent in the email conversations. Participants often apologized for the delay in responding to emails and talked about how busy their schedules were. Not only did pairs experience guilt over not having enough time to devote to the partnership, but time also likely influenced the progression through the various collaboration building phases. The next most frequent response to this question relates to the lack of clarity and direction for their conversations and this we discuss in the next section.

Lessons Learned

As we reflect on the project it is clear that some elements of the study could have been implemented differently and better. A more clearly defined end goal of a culminating SoTL project may have helped to urge the participants toward that goal. The researchers could have also provided more guidance throughout the entirety of the project, urging participants to consider how to take the partnerships to the next level. One participant indicated on the end-of-project survey that a more prescriptive approach at the beginning of the project may have helped to more clearly articulate attainable goals for the pairs. In addition, McGinn, Shields, Manley-Casimir, Grundy and Fenton (2005) state that creating principles may help collaborators to feel more open and

trusting. Truly, the goal of this exploratory research was to determine whether international partnerships could, in fact, be fostered and explored from a distance. Although we are pleased that the study was carried through to its completion, we suggest carefully defining more tangible goals in exploratory research efforts.

For participants, maintaining the partnerships may also have been easier if the use of additional resources was encouraged. For example, one participant mentioned that they did not even consider using Skype, while another pair suggested in an email that they should use it but never did. Encouraging the use of other resources may have motivated pairs to communicate through different mediums. Perhaps a richer medium may have assisted in the fostering of relationships by allowing individuals to exchange verbal, synchronous messages as opposed to the asynchronous interaction. One post-project response indicated it may have been useful to have the initial meeting take place face to face, at a retreat or conference, while another specifically said the partnerships should have begun with a video conference.

In truth, many of these additional mediums of communication were not explored or suggested simply because the study was exploratory, a test to see how, if loosely structured, relationships are formed and maintained across cultures and distances. Had we considered how many of the partnerships would, in fact, quickly dissipate, we may have taken a more proactive approach to introducing social media contact (e.g., via Facebook or Twitter) or encouraging the use of other mediums (e.g., Skype or instant messaging). Both were mentioned as options in the initial email sent to introduce the partners, but that was the extent to which other media was mentioned by the researchers. It also would have been difficult to track the correspondence of the pairs, and this being an exploratory study, that was ultimately our goal. Taking a hands-off, exploratory approach to see what would happen with the pairs was part of our strategy but also meant that the goals of the study in general lacked conviction. In short, even we were not sure what we would find, and instead opted to examine the process and results instead of predict the outcome. So often, the

idea of international collaboration is encouraged, but there are few examples of such research actually occurring; the current research, while not generalizable to all international collaborations, serves as a step toward understanding the nature of collaborative SoTL work across physical distance.

Moving forward, it is important for researchers to form more explicit goals and expectations, and in turn provide a certain semblance of structure and direction, for the study and its participants. Such clarity can provide participants with an opportunity to become more invested in the project and his or her role in it, and understand the potential rewards of successfully maintaining the collaborative relationships. Very little research focuses on collaborative development. The current research attempts to provide a snapshot of what loosely governed collaborative attempts might look like, and the results, though specific to this particular sample and data set, emphasize the need to provide structure, particularly in engineered partnerships.

The email data suggest that, although this process is not without flaws, it is a process that nonetheless *can* work. The partnering *did* foster relationships for a few of the pairs. The experience provided many of the study participants with a glimpse into what international partnerships may look like. In addition, the project encouraged personal reflection and provided an opportunity to compare educational practice and norms, and served as an opportunity to talk about teaching in a safe way. How successful this project was depends on how one measures success; if success can be seen in the opportunity for the exchange of ideas, broadening of horizons and self-reflection, then this study was successful in providing participants with a space and the means to do so.

In addition to considering goals and objectives, this study demonstrates that projects may or may not blossom overnight. Some, if not most, take time, dedication and multiple efforts in order to be properly implemented. And, when participating in collaborative work, it is important to remember that time is one of the biggest obstacles to overcome; time constraints often limit interactions and progress. This study is a direct reflection of the way time can become a mediating factor of the end result.

Conclusions and Future Implications

The positives and negatives of this study have not shaken our belief that virtual pairings can be supported to become meaningful collaborations. In fact, virtual collaborations may become increasingly valid. Our findings suggest that there is a desire for opportunities to collaborate with international colleagues, yet there is little evidence of it actually happening. Our belief, that if we introduced people and lightly facilitated the relationship building process then meaningful relationships would form via email (and potentially other electronic communication) that could potentially lead to fruitful collaborations, was justified - but not in all cases, and on a small scale. In the case of the internationally paired faculty in this research, meaningful collaborations grew when participants laid the foundations of the relationship effectively before moving to building a working relationship. Though such results are not generalizable across samples, the results of this study do suggest that foundations should be laid early and effectively, and this is not terribly surprising. If anything, this study underscores its significance, as that was a crucial component of the success of our engineered pairings. With this knowledge we could set clearer goals and advice, and include structure to encourage relationship building. We could also consider more carefully how potential collaborators are partnered perhaps by using a more detailed survey of participants' interests and beliefs; forming groups rather than pairs might also contribute to the sustainability of conversations. Without clear goals and drivers, relationships can and will flounder. In terms of encouraging participants to work towards taking things forward, we believe that some concrete targets or extrinsic motivators are important, perhaps offering to consider collaborative pieces for publication through special issues of a journal or at an actual or virtual conference.

   As one of the first attempts to explore practitioners' views and experiences of SoTL from an international perspective, the study takes forward the debate about what SoTL means on the ground. Secondly, it opens up an exploration of the role that collaboration, and specifically international collaboration, might

play in the SoTL arena. Lastly, we have also shown that meaningful relationships focused on SoTL can be initiated through a simple partnering scheme and maintained, in some cases, simply via email communication. We believe that our study sheds light on the formation of meaningful professional relationships. Though the results of this study are specific to the sample and context, we believe that it provides useful tools researchers who wish to foster international collaboration might consider.

This research should be replicated, taking into account things learned from this first attempt. Collaborative efforts can be difficult for a variety of reasons. Bohen and Stiles (1998) state that academics are often not trained to work together, and departments are still working toward celebrating and recognizing the collaborative efforts of participants in addition to individual work. For this reason, some academics may still hesitate to participate in collaborative efforts like the one illustrated in this study. Kezar (2005) posits that some individuals need evidence for the necessity and benefits of collaborative efforts. While some are simply motivated by the inherent value in collaboration, others may be looking for more tangible benefits. Connolly, Jones and Jones (2007) support this idea and suggest helping participants to see the project as some form of career development will invite more commitment. More clearly articulating the goals and potential rewards for collaborators in this project may have provided more motivation to maintain the relationships over the course of the year.

International collaboration, while often difficult to manage because of the time, effort and money needed for success, holds a wealth of untapped potential for advancing many areas of scholarship, including teaching and learning. Though this particular research was fairly loosely structured, it was our hope that providing participants with partnerships would be a great place for collaboration to start, and that the relationships might develop fairly organically. The results demonstrate that further inquiry into the possibilities and expectations of international collaboration is necessary. We consider the SoTL project a success in that several of the partners experienced a collaborative relationship, offering support and resources and

exchanging ideas and knowledge from colleagues across the globe; such exchange is an integral component of SoTL. To borrow from Connolly, Jones and Jones (2007) "this was a pilot, a learning journey for all concerned, a part of the collaboration was about developing a practicable route forward for future developments" (p. 164). This project was just that, a learning journey in which part of the desired objective was to learn whether or not it would even work.

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