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Establishing and Sustaining SoTL: The Role of Brokering and Strategic Leadership

ABSTRACT

Although the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) has continued to evolve as a field, building and sustaining SoTL within educational institutions remains challenging. Through interviews with 18 SoTL scholars, we sought to examine the question, “How do individuals and institutions sustain SoTL?” Our findings highlighted the important roles of brokering and strategic leadership. Using the landscape of practice as our theoretical framework, we identified the many ways that SoTL scholars influence and are influenced by these roles. SoTL practices are undeniably vulnerable to fluctuating institutional agendas and discourses, changes in leadership, funding opportunities, formal rewards, and overt recognition of SoTL, including scholars’ positions and titles. We found institutional actions may be critical in launching SoTL, supporting it at different times, or establishing academic positions for SoTL scholars who are able to promote the field. However, institutional support waxed and waned across institutions, with a few exceptions, which meant that the SoTL brokers working across the landscape of practice sustained SoTL over time through their strategic leadership. Despite varying contexts, our participants were in it for the long haul, brokering their connections to withstand the vagaries of institutional support. Thus, building SoTL is a long-term effort that requires resilience and a certain degree of institutional support, but more importantly, sustained, bottom-up support for faculty development, collaboration, and commitment across the landscape of practice.

KEYWORDS

strategic leadership, landscape of practice, brokering, sustaining

INTRODUCTION

Establishing and building the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) within higher educational institutions remains challenging for SoTL scholars. As a field, SoTL has evolved significantly over the past three decades, suggesting an increasing respect and acceptance within the academy. Narratives of the experiences of individual SoTL scholars, however, suggest a more nuanced view. Webb et al. (2024) argue that choosing SoTL as a research focus is challenging because the silos and demands of the academy often conflict, leading some scholars to inhabit and navigate what Manarin and Abrahamson (2016, 1) term “troublesome spaces.” Frake-Mistak et al. (2020) and Kim et al. (2020) also found that engaging in SoTL is viewed as less rigorous and important than more

traditional disciplinary research. Yet, despite this lack of respect, SoTL scholars have used strategies to survive and thrive in the academy. In their self-study, Webb et al. (2024) found that resilience and an unwavering commitment to SoTL enabled the researchers to progress and advance SoTL despite the hurdles posed by entrenched silos and institutional demands. Kensington-Miller et al. (2021; 2024) highlight the importance of boundary crossing for individual SoTL success. Scholarship investigating experiences of individual SoTL scholars highlight brokering and leadership as critical aspects required for SoTL success. Yet, much of this research has been confined to small and relatively homogenous groups of scholars. Our study addresses these previous limitations by expanding the voices of 18 diverse SoTL scholars. Guided by the theoretical framework of the landscapes of practice (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner 2015) and past research, we delve into the critical role that brokering and strategic leadership play in building and sustaining SoTL.

Considering the challenges inherent in conducting SoTL, brokering across a complex landscape of practice is necessary, an area we were keen to delve deeper into in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of persisting issues. The aim of our article is to capture the journeys of other individuals across different countries and institutions, and respond to the question: How do individuals and institutions build and sustain SoTL? Specifically, we focus on brokering and strategic leadership. By broadening the scope of previous research (for example Fitzgerald et al. 2023; Godbold, Matthews, and Gannaway 2023; Kensington-Miller et al. 2021; Tight 2018; Webb et al. 2024; Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner 2015), we uncover insights into the nuances present across different contexts to foster and maintain SoTL. We hope our findings can shed light on the collective experiences of SoTL scholars and how they achieve success despite structural barriers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Contemporary conversations within SoTL provide some insights into three key areas of how SoTL is being fostered: individually, in local contexts, and in interdisciplinary conversations across a landscape of practice. Our review works through these areas, beginning with the development of SoTL and its impact at the local level. It then addresses the challenges of building SoTL in a sustainable manner. Finally, our last section focuses on the necessity of institutional commitments for SoTL to sustain itself over time and across contexts.

Broad and evolving definitions of SoTL

In the first 20 years of SoTL, the aim of the field was to improve both teaching and learning through systematic inquiry into teaching practices and student learning by gathering “theoretical and empirical evidence of pedagogical subject knowledge, and teaching approaches, relating to how students learn” (Fitzgerald et al. 2023, 153). For higher education, SoTL had a significant impact in several key areas: improved pedagogical practice, curriculum design, and assessment of learning.

With the increasing recognition and development of SoTL, “there has been a proliferation of definitions and assumptions about this work, resulting in confusion about boundaries between research and SoTL” (Godbold, Matthews, and Gannaway 2023, 2). Potter and Kustra (2011) define SoTL as “the systematic study of teaching and learning, using established or validated criteria of scholarship, to understand how teaching (beliefs, behaviors, attitudes, and values) can maximize learning and develop a more accurate understanding of learning, resulting in products that are publicly shared for critique and use by an appropriate community” (2). Geertsema (2016) argues that SoTL can be positioned both as cross-disciplinary research and a support framework for academic development with a focus on individual growth and community building. Schrum and Mårtensson (2023) choose the term “messy” to describe the complexity of SoTL’s development. They explain that

SoTL can navigate diverse contexts, include practitioners from all disciplines, work across disciplinary silos, as well as handle inter-disciplinary misunderstandings. As SoTL evolves from a research-based activity to a practice that intentionally embeds values around reflective practice, individual growth, and community, it looks indeed messy; particularly when the gaze comes from conventional academic structures, SoTL values and beliefs about academia disrupt the status quo.

Faculty development is critical for promoting SoTL, for example providing professional development programmes to equip educators in how to engage in scholarly teaching practices (Jawitz and Perez 2015). Creating communities of practice enable educators to exchange ideas and develop SoTL practice, as this provides “groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis” (Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder 2002, 4). Tierney et al. (2020) describe how forming “communities of practice both within and outside of departments and institutions provides valuable support for SoTL, and to academics already undertaking or interested in starting out in SoTL” (49). They explain that sometimes, an external community of practice can provide support for developing SoTL that might not be available within a locality. While the developmental benefits of SoTL, including critical reflections on teaching, are clear, these practices need to be promoted and supported.

Overcoming challenges in building and sustaining SoTL

A significant amount of research demonstrates the challenges faced by “grassroots” SoTL. Faculty often face heavy workloads, with research-intensive institutions prioritizing disciplinary over teaching-focused research, making it challenging to engage in SoTL activities. Geertsema (2016) warns that we need to be careful when encouraging faculty to engage in SoTL research if it is understood or measured only in terms of publication outputs in peer-reviewed journals using predetermined research protocols, methods, and conventions: “It cannot but create unrealistic demands on faculty already immersed in their discipline, already short on time” (127). Tight (2018) believes that most research done at the micro level remains small-scale, short-term, and local in orientation, seldom delivering much impact beyond the immediate context, but other researchers point out that local knowledge and dissemination potentially has more impact than formal dissemination (Ashwin and Trigwell 2004). Recently, Gansemer-Topf et al. (2023) confirmed this finding after examining 78 research institutions across the US identified for “best teaching.” They echoed Bernstein (2013) that “the impact of SoTL on a teacher’s practice is the more powerful” (4).

Other ways of encouraging SoTL engagement despite the challenges include providing “protected time and space to engage in SoTL projects” (Frake-Mistak et al. 2020, 72) and prolonged development programs that leverage a sense of community among peers with cohort-based initiatives (ibid). Ongoing and just-in-time guidance to navigate aspects of SoTL research that are unfamiliar to the new scholar, for example by providing support with research methodologies (Kim et al. 2020), and writing groups embedded in structured initiatives, hold promise in nurturing a sense of competence and belonging in SoTL (Maheux-Pelletier, Marsch, and Frake-Mistak 2019). As cited above, scholars have published research on diverse ways to overcome the challenges of building and sustaining SoTL. This article contributes to that work through the emphasis on brokering and strategic leadership.

Institutional commitment to SoTL

Institutional leadership that prioritizes teaching and learning and articulates a clear vision for SoTL is critical—as is allocating resources to support it. Tensions between structured strategic initiatives and the complex, context-dependent nature of SoTL research can occur, but Godbold,

Matthews, and Gannaway (2023) believe a nuanced approach will help balance these challenges and overcome tensions. They advocate that institutional support be combined with faculty-driven innovation and a commitment to rigorous research practices.

Simmons (2016) suggests that institutions align their strategic initiatives along 4Ms - micro-meso-macro-mega so impact can be analysed at different levels. Similarly, Fitzgerald et al. (2023) use the 4Ms to measure the impact of SoTL on the university, internally and externally and with a series of decreasing concentric circles from macro to meso and micro, in order to analyse where SoTL projects are having an increased impact on the success of the university. They measure impact with metrics such as student goals; employability and career progression are improved; students learning experiences; and equality, diversity and inclusion.

Recent scholarship (Kensington-Miller et al. 2021; 2024), highlights the critical role SoTL brokers play at the disciplinary boundaries in higher education and how they are “constantly challenged with how to make the practices of one disciplinary community of practice (CoP) relevant to another” (2024, 1555). We argue that SoTL brokers interact within, through, and across the micro-meso-macro-mega levels in a non-linear fashion, influencing their significant networks at and beyond the institution (Kensington-Miller et al. 2021). We drew from Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015) who assert that brokers serve as connectors within the landscape of practice, bridging communities in order to foster collaboration and pool resources to meet specific needs.

Although many scholars recognise SoTL as worthy scholarship in their context, there is concern about the lack of high-level leadership to champion it, considered critical for success. Simmons (2016) explains that “senior organisational leaders are key to catalysing and supporting change, especially around ‘cultural norms, structures and processes’ that support academics in their SoTL work” (98). She argues that focusing on large-scale projects that align with institutional goals, as well as financial support at the faculty level, is critical for maximum impact on student learning. An example of this is the Open University in the UK which has a university-wide approach to SoTL. Scholarship projects are assessed for impact against 12 different criteria determined by their scholarship centre (Fitzgerald et al. 2023), which provides funding and support for successful applications, facilitates collaborations, organises SoTL events (e.g., conferences, workshops and writing retreats) and networking opportunities, and supports dissemination. This approach links to policy and has been highly successful, with 128 SoTL projects supported over the 2018/2019 period. Another example is the University of British Columbia in Canada (Webb and Tierney 2019) with its focus on educational leaders engaging in SoTL leadership in order to strategically impact the quality of teaching, learning, and curriculum in faculty and institutional contexts. Traditional recognition and reward (tenure and promotion policies) of faculty engagement in SoTL can incentivize participation. Additionally, creating awards and honours for SoTL excellence can further institutional commitment (Felten et al. 2016).

The impact of SoTL in higher education is, however, highly contested, as what counts as impact can be measured or assessed in many ways, such as, but not limited to, “research impact; teaching impact; the impact of student registrations, completions and retention; the impact of government policies and funder regimes” (Fitzgerald et al. 2023, 152). These indicators or metrics of institutional performance are commonly required for funding decisions as well as benchmarking the quality of teaching. In this way, institutions can enhance their “international standing and reputation, with the benefits those bring (e.g., recruitment of the best students and staff; desirability for collaborations etc.)” (Fitzgerald et al. 2023, 152). This presents challenges to strategic initiatives involving SoTL which follow a structured and top-down approach, as they are designed to address specific goals and objectives set by the institution. While the impact of these initiatives can yield

positive results, the institution can face challenges when implementing SoTL-focused changes due to the complex and context-dependent nature of teaching and learning.

In our study, we look at how strategic leadership contributes to building and sustaining SoTL. Next, we explore the landscape of practice as a theoretical framework to address this inquiry.

Landscapes of practice

Theoretical insights about communities and landscapes of practice (Wenger 1998; Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner 2015), albeit broad in scope, can help locate practices across a wide range of roles and positions within institutional and international contexts. Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner suggest a landscape of practice constitutes a “complex system of communities of practice and the boundaries between them” (2015, 13). They describe a successful landscape of practice as requiring individual competence within this community as well as engagement with and the legitimization from it. In turn, this engagement changes both the individual and the community. Because we were focused on brokering and strategic leadership, both of which require engagement at the individual and community level, the landscape of practice framework effectively guided our analysis of the data.

In their framework, Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner describe the processes by which individuals within communities of practice become part of the landscape of practice and eventually broker across various boundaries within that landscape. They characterize the landscape as diverse, flat, and political.

Landscape of practice is diverse

Across the landscape, diverse sets of communities exist with their own boundaries. These boundaries can be problematic, limiting entrance or acceptance into a community, yet provide opportunities for new learning.

Landscape of practice is political

Power imbalance contributes to the political nature of practice. When a boundary is crossed and a new community engages with a more powerful or established community, negotiations between the two must occur.

Landscape of practice is flat

Although, there may be power differentials within the landscape, no single practice dominates or subsumes all practices. Being flat suggests each community has its own practice which coexists with others. Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner argue that to move across this landscape brokering is not enough but requires strategic leadership, and they describe such leadership as systems conveners.

Systems conveners

Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015) suggest that a broker connects communities of practice within the landscape, while a “systems convener” takes a macro view of the landscape and works toward institutional change. The brokering role, which focuses on “enabling collaboration among individuals” is different from “systems conveners,” who are more concerned with creating “lasting change across social and institutional systems” (99–100). This entails a complex set of skills, dispositions, and practices beyond the scope of this research but suggests that for long-term change to occur, the brokering role is just one aspect of “reconfiguring partnerships in the landscape” and changes in practice at a systems level (107).

However, the role of the systems convener suggests that it might be an important element in sustaining SoTL within institutions of higher education from a different angle than has previously been discussed in the micro, meso, and macro SoTL scholarship. According to Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015), the systems convener is focused on reconfiguring the landscape of practice to address power imbalances. But, in doing this, it is “counter-productive for their endeavor if they merely reproduce traditional power structures in their efforts to leverage them” (103). Therefore, the challenge for SoTL systems conveners is to develop alternative structures of power that promote “engagement and partnership” (106). One important aspect of this effort is that systems conveners are part of the landscape they want to reconfigure, not powerful stakeholders at the meso level who are charged with maintaining the status quo. According to Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner, “they are not puppeteers, they are travellers” (111).

According to Pyrko, Dofler, and Eden (2019) the enduring theoretical work on landscapes of practice has not penetrated management and organization scholarship. This is true as well in the SoTL literature. They suggest that the landscape of practice concept pushes scholars to reconsider the levels at which organizational learning takes place. Pyrko, Dofler, and Eden consider how managers can provide a “suitable organizational environment” (483) for situated learning across landscapes of practice, recognizing that such learning communities cannot be established by management. Our article attempts to analyze how supporting a suitable environment for SoTL involves recognizing the agency of SoTL practitioners within the landscape of practice.

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of the study was to understand how practitioners can build and sustain SoTL.

Positionality

Our collaboration comprises six diverse women scholars in SoTL from various disciplines, institutions, countries, academic levels, and roles. United by our broad interest in boundary crossing, we initially came together in 2019 through the International Collaborative Writing Group, a flagship programme of the International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (ISSOTL). Since then, we have continued our research in this compelling area of SoTL, leveraging our perspectives and expertise.

Methods

Using previous findings from Kensington-Miller et al. (2021) as a lens, and aligned with this purpose, we adopted a bricolage, multi-methods approach to data collection and iterative and interpretive analysis (Kincheloe 2001; 2005; Pinar 2001; Webb and Welsh 2019). At our weekly meeting, we agreed on a dual coding strategy: *ex ante* and *in vivo* codes. *Ex ante* codes were developed before we conducted interviews and were based on a close reading of our previous work in the field. To begin analysis, we thematically analyzed our four published papers in line with the inquiry (Gansemer-Topf, et al. 2021; Kensington-Miller, et al. 2021; 2024; Webb et al. 2024) in order to identify key themes from our previous research and establish a code book for semantic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) of the interviews. The interview protocol, reflecting these themes, included questions regarding the definition and nature of SoTL, and the institutional support of SoTL where participants are employed (see Appendix).

The ISSOTL 22 conference provided a perfect opportunity to seek input from a diverse group of individuals with SoTL expertise and interest. Following the conference, we conducted interviews with 18 SoTL scholars from a range of institutions, positions, and countries. The diversity of

participants' roles and disciplines is similar to the demographics reported in a comparable SoTL study (Newton, Miller-Young, and Sanago 2019).

Table 1. Participant information

Gender		Role		Country		Discipline	
Male	3	SoTL coordinator	3	Canada	4	Social science / humanities	6
Female	15	Director, CTL	6	USA	11	STEM	5
		Professors (tenured)	9	UK	1	Education	6
				The Netherlands	1	Student affairs	1
				Australia	1		

Analysis

During this coding process, we inductively added the *in vivo* codes to capture new patterns in the transcripts or to combine the initial codes. The rationale for this mixed coding practice was to minimize reifying our biases or the subjects' biases in the coding structure and to welcome unanticipated findings. Our project aimed to discover themes embedded throughout the qualitative data (Rubin and Rubin 1995). This led us to map our findings against the three characteristics of the landscape: diverse, political, and flat.

Following the creation of a code book, latent thematic analyses offered an accessible and theoretically flexible approach to analysing the qualitative data (Boyatzis 1998; Braun and Clarke 2006; Fereday and Muir-Cochrane 2006). Interacting with the data involved thematic coding through the iterative and cyclical nature of interpretive phenomenological inquiry; holistic, selective, and detailed analysis (van Manen 1997).

First, each interview was recorded and transcribed. All interview recordings were listened to by the researchers, and notes were made consistent with the holistic approach for the key themes and summarized with key words and phrases. Meaningful and relevant exchanges between the interviewer and interviewee were identified for detailed analysis. Then, the recordings were listened to again, and following along with a hard copy of the transcript, the researchers highlighted key units of meaning and significant statements for detailed analysis. A list of significant statements and quotations from each participant was compiled. Two members of the research team completed this process independently.

Next, key words, significant statements, and experiences across participants were grouped. These groupings were given titles and we developed a description of each theme, although the descriptions continued to evolve following additional interviews. Finally, the summaries were discussed by the whole research team to ensure that all relevant experiences were included in the description of a theme.

FINDINGS

Our thematic analysis on the two codes of broker and strategic leadership reveals key insights, illustrated with direct quotes that exemplify the responses we received. Using the theoretical framework by Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015), we present these examples across the landscape of practice to demonstrate how individuals articulate their roles and practices within this dynamic environment that is diverse, political, and flat.

Broker

A broker, as defined by Kensington-Miller et al. (2021), is an individual who crosses boundaries between communities of practice and facilitates boundary crossing for others. As Kubiak et al. (in Wenger-Trayner et al. 2015) illustrates: “spiders spinning a web of individuals from different organisations or gathering together resources in order to address a specific need” (88). Within the SoTL landscape of practice, we found compelling examples of how our participants brokered boundary crossings.

Landscape of practice is diverse

The landscape of practice in SoTL is inherently diverse and dynamic. As a multidisciplinary body of work, SoTL defies conventional academic structures. It is championed by individuals who are comfortable and skilled at navigating and negotiating viable spaces across epistemological, hierarchical, and institutional boundaries, not only for themselves but also for others:

I get to have my fingers in a bunch of different pots and have a seat at a bunch of different tables at the system level, you know. And I think oh, my gosh! The SoTL methodology should be applied in this space.

Within our data set, we encountered colleagues who brokered across a variety of SoTL landscapes. These were academics who had traversed many trenches within SoTL and recognised how these silos mirror existing institutional and disciplinary boundaries. They observe that such divisions persist, not only within institutional walls, but also within the broader SoTL community:

[T]here’s the SoTL people like Teaching and Learning Inquiry and those journals. Then there’s educational developers . . . and then there’s higher ed researchers and we are not talking to each other.

This fragmentation within the academic community underscores that while SoTL thrives in different academic spheres, it is not always a cohesive space. Effective brokering values this diversity and simultaneously works at deconstructing barriers and crossing boundaries to foster collaboration across the diverse landscape of practice.

Landscape of practice is political

The landscape of practice in SoTL is undeniably political, where the legitimacy of SoTL practice hinges on the advocacy efforts of faculty members who wield sufficient status:

I’m a tenured full Professor and I also have a lot of, you know, unearned demographic privilege. It’s easier for me to take risks . . . If I don’t get recognized, I don’t get

recognized as long as I get to keep my job and do the work I do . . . I am still trying to move the needle on this.

In navigating the political terrain, brokers create and nurture small yet significant networks among those who value and prioritise teaching and learning: “There’s going to be naysayers. There’s going to be challenges but find the people who are the champions and get them to spread.”

Our data underscores the pivotal role of brokers who advocate for resources and support. This advocacy extends to securing financial resources, such as hiring SoTL experts within teaching and learning centres: “I came to the director and I said, okay, one thing I want is a SoTL person on our staff who can help faculty with it.” Brokers also champion the integration of SoTL scholars within departments: “In our [discipline] program we now have two people who are SoTL researchers. They recognise the importance of funding for conference participation and pushing to get stipends for people to do this work.”

Brokers endeavour to influence governance within and across academic programs, albeit with varying degrees of success. For example, one participant was able to advocate for SoTL to be recognized in tenure and promotion documents at the departmental level but not beyond:

The reason that language appears in our promotion and tenure guidelines is because I wrote it. I wasn’t even on the committee. But when they sent it out, you know, I said please drop this language in. It was universally approved. And once it’s gone beyond our unit I tried very hard to get that into our college governing documents and failed.

Challenges persist, as exemplified by the resistance encountered when attempting to establish graduate degrees in SoTL, within certain departments:

I was training a PhD student in SoTL and the other departments had a vote for whether they think students should be able to. Someone in their department wanted to take on a master’s student on a SoTL project. And they voted, no, you don’t get degrees in SoTL.

These excerpts highlight that the efforts to obtain institutional recognition are long-winded and underscore the importance for brokers to be effective communicators, negotiators, and advocates to persuade stakeholders of the value and relevance of SoTL in academic contexts. In particular, those holding political capital, e.g., tenured professors, acknowledge that they can be change agents by helping redefine what counts as good scholarship in tenure and promotion criteria.

Landscape of practice is flat

The landscape of practice in SoTL is unmistakably flat, characterised by brokers who, despite facing isolation, are driven by a deep-seated commitment to support their peers through non-hierarchical relationships:

I know the challenges I went through by being a teaching-focus person in a very misunderstood role . . . for the last 14 years. I . . . have been a mentor or someone to sort of help, sort of guide the next people who came behind me.

Their resilience often leads to institutional recognition and change as institutions begin to acknowledge and develop programs that cater to the needs of SoTL practitioners:

We've been charting our own path for 10 years pretty much under the radar. And I think the university is now recognizing that as well and creating programs that would have been helpful or will be helpful to our new colleagues coming in.

Despite facing challenges, brokers perceive their engagement in SoTL relationships as mutually beneficial (e.g., "I get to work with the rock star faculty across our system"), even if reciprocity is not always equal: "I call it the ride along. . . . I have a whole bunch of what appears to be incredibly disparate papers, which are all fairly low-level SoTL studies." While what they get from it is not always tangible, they understand that their engagement is beneficial to many at the institution:

I'd like to think I'm a champion of SoTL. All the conversations that I get to engage with faculty or administrators on campus, I really hope that either through my enthusiasm and passion for the work or by evidence that can be shared, that it moves folks on campus, regardless of where they're at in their institution, to engage in this space.

Their initiatives extend beyond individual pursuits, encompassing strategies such as hosting teaching and learning showcases and fostering faculty learning communities: "instead of just one-off workshops, we'll do learning communities that last the whole semester." This concerted effort creates a vibrant community of support and sharing, likened to a "little village of people" that continues to grow and thrive.

In essence, our participants understood their pivotal role as brokers in advancing SoTL in order to "move the needle on this," both by creating meaningful opportunities for engagement with SoTL and by advocating for essential resources and supportive governance structures and academic programs. However, amidst their endeavours, what constitutes SoTL has not yet been settled. The definition of SoTL remains fluid, prompting ongoing discourse:

We're still struggling to define what's within the boundaries. You know the big tent analogy? It's more like a campground. And I think that that's a wonderful conversation within the field that we haven't quite fully defined.

Strategic leadership

As indicated earlier, participants in our study were deeply immersed in SoTL pursuits, underscoring their individual endeavours and proactive engagement as SoTL scholars, often without assigned leadership positions. But strategic leadership in SoTL can occur when a "systems convenor" is able to operate across the landscape of practice, permeating through the diverse, political, and flat dimensions. Delving deeper, we sought insights into how other institutional efforts and contextual factors further shaped their SoTL journey. Notably, participants emphasised the pivotal role that institutional support, particularly at the senior administrative levels, could have in shaping the overarching SoTL culture.

Landscape of practice is diverse

The multifaceted landscape of SoTL encompassed diverse experiences and perspectives among participants, with contrasting views regarding institutional support for SoTL. Some articulate a lack of recognition and support and unacknowledged efforts and minimal backing ("I don't know that

my institution directly supports SoTL. I think that when it comes to some financial support for research.”). Others extol successful institutionalization of SoTL within their academic realms:

. . . as an institution, we view SoTL and higher education, research as distinct things which can overlap . . . It’s just a separate thing and that is sometimes quite complicated to explain what SoTL is, and to get people engaged in it, but it also enables me to link, SoTL to educational innovation.

Navigating this landscape demands strategic leadership that recognises and addresses the unique needs and challenges confronting stakeholders engaged in SoTL. Leaders must foster inclusivity, equity, and cultural responsiveness to create and sustain pathways that address the diverse contexts and priorities pervading the academic landscape.

Landscape of practice is political

In the political landscape of academia, strategic leadership requires navigating institutional structures, policies, and prevailing priorities that exert considerable influence on the recognition and support of SoTL. Our participants shed light on the stark reality of institutional apathy towards SoTL and how its significance pales in comparison to traditional disciplinary research.

Many participants noted the absence of institutional support for SoTL. They lamented the lack of funding and recognition, recognising how this dissuades potential people from engaging in SoTL:

They know I have this percentage of time that I’m doing this [SoTL], but it’s not recognized. It could go in “other activities.” You know that “other activities” can be anything. So, it’s not recognized that it is something that some professors do. I think that’s one of the things I have to change. My university certainly, probably, does not recognise [SoTL]. If I was a young professor starting an early career, I would not do this because it wouldn’t count for promotion. It would count as extra hours for, like “other activities”, it wouldn’t be my research. It would not be considered service, I think, and it wouldn’t be considered research.

Yet amidst the prevailing scepticism about institutional support, a solitary beacon emerges. One participant stands as a testament to institutional success in championing SoTL: “This scholarship of teaching and learning has been quite successful at our institution in terms of institutionalizing the attention to SoTL.” They described how engaging in SoTL and scholarly teaching is respected and as a result of that respect, others were now engaging:

I’m also noticing that it means people may engage with the field out of a sense of others’ expectations that they would, right? That there is a connection between people who have engaged in the work and opportunities for advancement.

In the political landscape, strategic leaders in SoTL emerge as advocates for change, pushing for the integration of SoTL practices into the fabric of institutional policies and priorities. They tirelessly lobby for resource allocation, creating incentives and recognition of SoTL in promotion and tenure criteria, both of which elevate SoTL as an authentic scholarly pursuit and a legitimate scholarly activity. Although there were a few exceptions, most participants expressed a notable lack of

confidence in their institution's ability to sustain SoTL initiatives effectively. Rather, they envisioned and hoped for a future marked by advanced levels of SoTL development and substantial impact.

Landscape of practice is flat

In the vast expanse of the flat landscape of SoTL, strategic leadership should take centre stage in fostering collaboration, knowledge sharing, and innovation across disciplinary boundaries and institutional levels, but this was not universally experienced amongst our participants. They discussed pathways for advancing SoTL by forging connections with broader institutional priorities, notably educational innovation. One participant articulated how connecting SoTL to other important priorities was a strategy for promoting SoTL at the institution:

We view SoTL and higher education research, which overlaps. It is sometimes quite complicated to explain what SoTL is and to get people engaged in it, but it enables me to link SoTL to educational innovation and we have a lot of innovation going on.

This strategic linking of SoTL to institutional priorities or research that faculty are familiar with has the potential to gather support and momentum with academics. Strategic leaders leverage existing networks, resources, and platforms to create interdisciplinary collaborations and communities of practice that support SoTL endeavours.

DISCUSSION

SoTL as a field has evolved, but challenges remain with how individuals and institutions build and sustain SoTL, specifically, with a focus on achieving success despite structural barriers. When reflecting on the corpus data, we drew upon our previous work with the landscapes of practice (Kensington-Miller et al. 2021; 2024; Webb et al. 2024; Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner 2015), as an organizing structure. In response to our research question—How do individuals and institutions build and sustain SoTL?—our analysis confirmed that building a SoTL culture is not a linear process but a complex interplay of diverse, political, and flat dimensions across the landscape of practice. The journey to foster a robust SoTL culture is convoluted, as it weaves its way through structured institutional initiatives and disciplinary norms. Our findings support the Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner framework, suggesting it is a useful approach to understanding how brokering and strategic leadership contribute to SoTL's expansion and sustainability.

The diverse landscape of SoTL encapsulates many experiences and perspectives, showcasing both the struggles and triumphs of individuals and institutions fostering SoTL initiatives. From the passion of dedicated SoTL scholars to the meso level challenges of departmental scepticism, the landscape is fraught with hurdles and opportunities alike. In this complex terrain, skilled brokers emerge as indispensable facilitators, bridging this gap by cultivating collaborative networks. Additionally, once individuals attain tenure, those at the micro level must advocate for their vision of SoTL in their faculty, leveraging tools such as handbooks, departmental policies, and more.

At the institutional level, support from senior leadership was seen as “surface level” revealing shallow commitment with only select individuals in positions of power championing SoTL. The challenge, however, is that their influence at the lower levels is constrained, relying on gradual osmosis of SoTL over time. This highlights the slow and uncertain process of integrating SoTL into institutional culture, identifying the need for sustained advocacy and strategic leadership. In the academic context, the absence of a formal process to record and recognise SoTL at the faculty level poses a significant obstacle. This lack of institutional integration results in SoTL primarily occurring

only at the micro or meso/faculty level, particularly when SoTL is relegated to centres for teaching and learning rather than embedded within the culture of an academic department or faculty. This disparity underscores a fundamental misalignment between institutional priorities and faculty practices, with disciplinary research taking precedence over pedagogical scholarship.

Centres for teaching and learning (CTLs) are indispensable hubs of expertise in SoTL, bridging disciplinary boundaries and fostering interdisciplinary collaboration. Although CTLs primarily operate at the faculty level, their influence and impact extend across the landscape to macro levels in institutions with strong support structures. Despite sporadic support from provosts and other institutional leaders for SoTL, the focus remains largely confined to CTLs. CTLs stand alongside departments having skilled brokers in SoTL who play a pivotal role in facilitating faculty navigation through diverse boundaries.

In this political landscape, strategic leadership is key to navigate the labyrinth of institutional structures and priorities. Our participants lamented the lack of institutional (macro level) recognition and support for SoTL, where efforts are not sustainable or scalable and are often consigned to the sidelines, in favor of prioritizing traditional disciplinary research. Department and faculty (micro and meso) level colleagues did not understand SoTL and did not validate it as legitimate scholarship. As a result, this has led to a mere symbolic push for SoTL, rather than a structural integration, exacerbating the major disconnect between those working at the micro level and their institution.

For our participants, strategic leadership emerged as another substantive theme alongside the theme of brokers—either in terms of their leadership, their institution’s leadership, or indeed the lack of leadership. They lamented that the lack of cohesive leadership resulted in misalignment between their institution’s mission and with the actual support for research around teaching. This disconnect amplifies the urgent need for strategic leadership to bridge the gap between the institutional strategic plans and expectations, and what faculties agree to do, ensuring equitable recognition and support for SoTL as well as disciplinary research. Yet, amidst the political quagmire, champions of SoTL advocate tirelessly for change, leveraging their positions of influence to carve out spaces for scholarly teaching and learning.

CONCLUSION

Returning to our question, “How do individuals and institutions build and sustain SoTL?,” our data and previous research reiterates the value and importance of both brokers and strategic leaders. Both are strategic positions where scholars can bridge the micro/meso and macro supports for SoTL. Much like us, our participants are agents, navigating through the barriers and challenges, even amidst changing institutional landscapes and leadership changes. We generalise across international contexts, recognising the need for a nuanced understanding of context. In doing so, it is important to explain the caveats that distinguish country contexts from structural contexts.

Academics who have navigated this terrain recognise that they need to broker space for others, facilitating long-lasting changes and fostering a culture for SoTL research (Kensington-Miller et al. 2021). In this way, strategic leadership that champions SoTL can affect transformative change across the academic landscape and cultivate evidence-based teaching and learning practices. Such leaders possess a visionary outlook with a pragmatic approach, recognising the untapped potential of SoTL across the traditional boundaries and silos. They have enough legitimacy to open or create spaces for fresh conversations and collaborations transcending diverse boundaries, often bringing together unlikely people. Despite their pivotal role, many of our participants were mostly brokers and strategic leaders committed to sustaining SoTL in institutional contexts in which their involvement often goes unrecognised because organizational leadership is unaware of their contributions. We

stopped short of using the term “systems conveners” to describe the strategic leaders in this study (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner 2015) because this would require further research and analysis. However, through attempts to dismantle hierarchical barriers, flatten the landscape, and promote a culture of inclusivity and collaboration, these strategic leaders paved the way for broader adoption and uptake of SoTL practices, both within individual institutions and across the broader academic landscape. Further research would be necessary to consider how the theoretical construct of “systems conveners” might be applicable to those who serve as brokers and strategic leaders of SoTL and how, in that role, they sustain SoTL within institutions of higher education. As mentioned in the literature review, the challenge for potential “systems conveners” in SoTL is to develop alternative structures of power that promote “engagement and partnership” (106). As part of the landscape they want to reconfigure, “systems conveners” are not joining the hierarchical status quo but contributing to a flat, rather than hierarchical, landscape of practice.

In general, our findings build on and contribute to past research (for example Fitzgerald et al. 2023; Godbold, Matthews, and Gannaway 2023; Kensington-Miller et al. 2021; 2024; Tight 2018; Webb et al. 2024; Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner 2015) in that there is a persistent disconnect regarding the support of SoTL between emergent and assigned leadership, perpetuating a cycle of neglect towards SoTL despite its potential for enhancing teaching and learning. While there are stories of those who have transcended to the top with instances of financial support, SoTL remains a marginalised field globally, lacking the profound theoretical grounding required to sway research-focused colleagues. While our participants hail from five countries, the majority are based in the US and Canada, their experiences aligning closely with our own work. We recognise that achieving global representation, it is crucial to extend our research to include more voices from the UK, Europe, Latin America, and Australasia.

Continuing the conversations around contextual and institutional barriers are imperative, guiding recommendations for colleagues who move up into leadership positions where they can champion the legitimization of SoTL. Strategic leaders can bridge the gap between rhetoric and reality as they foster a culture that values evidence-based teaching and learning practices, propelling SoTL into the forefront and sustaining it alongside disciplinary research.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank all the academics who attended ISSOTL22 and were willing to be interviewed following the conference. Their time and insightful comments provided the rich data for this article.

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NOTES

The quotes included in this paper are purposefully not attributed to an individual in order to protect the anonymity of the interviewee.

ETHICS

Ethics was approved through York University's ethical review process. Geneviève Maheux-Pelletier was the director, Teaching Commons, York University at the time of attending the conference and data collection.

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APPENDIX

Questions for data collection during interview:

- What is your job title?
- What is the name of your institution?
- What is your home/main discipline?
- From your vantage point, what is SoTL?
- How has your thinking about SoTL evolved?
- At your institution, who values SoTL?
- How does your institution support SoTL?
- What impact does this have on you as an academic?
- How have you changed?
- Where do you think you/institution are headed?



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