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Navigating the Challenges and Benefits of the International Collaborative Writing Groups: A Leadership Perspective

ABSTRACT

The International Collaborative Writing Groups (ICWGs) offer a valuable platform for fostering collaboration, supporting SoTL project completion, and prioritizing inclusivity within the ISSOTL community. While the ICWGs provide numerous benefits, their success depends on effective leadership and a clear understanding of the groups' goals. This article examines the experiences of the 2023 ICWG-Academic cohort, which focused on the theme "Context Matters." By applying conceptualization of a landscape of practice, we explore the diversity, political nature, and flatness of the ICWGs. Our analysis highlights the challenges and opportunities associated with the program, including the need for clearer guidelines, stronger leadership support, and greater emphasis on fostering interconnected communities of practice. We offer these recommendations with the aim to improve the ICWGs' design and operation, ensuring their continued effectiveness and sustainability within the ISSOTL landscape.

KEYWORDS

leadership, landscape of practice, community of practice

INTRODUCTION

The International Collaborative Writing Groups (ICWGs), a cornerstone of the International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (ISSOTL), have emerged as a powerful platform for fostering international collaboration, supporting the completion of scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) projects, and prioritising inclusivity. Established in 2011, these groups have become a signature initiative of ISSOTL, aligning directly with the organisation's mission of promoting SoTL research and dissemination.

The ICWGs offer a multifaceted range of benefits for participants, including capacity building, enhanced communication and dissemination, and an expanded knowledge base. However, a unique challenge arises within the program: the reinvention of processes, practices, and experiences by each new co-leadership team. While this reimagining fosters innovation, it can also be daunting for new leaders. This dynamic tension between continuity and innovation presents a valuable opportunity for ongoing program improvement.

Since 2019, ISSOTL ICWGs have rotated between ICWG-Academic, ICWG-Public, and ICWG-Emergent. Each of the tracks offers a different focus and type of output. ICWG-Academic groups focus on academic writing for the SoTL community in order to produce scholarly articles, while ICWG-Public

focuses on writing for audiences beyond the educational community or works of public scholarship informed by SoTL. As the name suggests, ICWG-Emergent years are intentionally left open for emergent opportunities.

To delve deeper into the dynamics and challenges of the ICWG-Academic, this article examines the 2023 cohort, which focused on the theme “Context Matters.” As co-leads of this cohort, we draw upon our experiences, through scholarly personal narrative (Ng and Carney 2017), to provide insights into the program’s functioning and its impact on the SoTL community. We employ Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015) and Pyrko, Dörfler, and Eden (2019) conceptualisation of a landscape of practice (LoP) to illustrate how different communities of practice (CoPs) interact within SoTL more broadly. This framework allows us to examine the diversity, political nature, and flatness of the ICWGs, providing a comprehensive understanding of the processes and power dynamics at play. By exploring the experiences of the 2023 cohort and applying the LoP framework, we aim to contribute to ongoing discussions about the effectiveness and sustainability of the ICWGs. Our analysis and reflections offer insights for future co-leadership teams, participants, and ISSOTL.

CONTEXT

The [International Collaborative Writing Groups \(ICWGs\)](#) are a signature initiative of ISSOTL. This leading program is distinguished by its ability to foster international collaboration, facilitate the completion of SoTL projects, and prioritize inclusivity. Anchored within ISSOTL’s Advocacy and Publications Committees, the ICWGs directly align with the society’s mission of promoting SoTL by attracting international scholars and nurturing their contributions through publications in *Teaching & Learning Inquiry (TLI)*.

The ICWGs offer many benefits for participants. These include:

- Building capacity through mentorship, leadership development, and fostering COPs;
- Enhancing scholarly communication and dissemination as well as exploring alternative knowledge dissemination avenues beyond traditional means;
- Expanding the knowledge base through a deeper understanding of SoTL literature and diverse approaches.

The ICWGs’ status as ISSOTL’s flagship initiative is further reinforced by their alignment with the society’s 2019 strategic plan, which prioritizes internationalization, diversity, and inclusivity (ISSOTL 2019). The program brings together faculty, students, and developers from diverse institutions, fostering a flat, collaborative structure that facilitates international networking and capacity-building in SoTL leadership and knowledge. This focus helps advance SoTL by encouraging participants to explore alternative approaches, to integrate discovery with learning, and to challenge existing perspectives.

However, the true value of the ICWGs lies beyond mere strategic alignment—it thrives on the power of collaboration, which is essential for navigating the complexities of SoTL’s diverse landscapes and CoPs. Through a structured platform for exchanging ideas across geographical and institutional boundaries, the ICWGs nurture a dynamic SoTL community. Participants from diverse SoTL backgrounds engage in mutual learning and support, promoting a sense of shared purpose and community (Healey and Matthews 2017; Huijser, Seeley, and Wittig McPhee 2024; Marquis, Mårtensson, and Healey 2017; Scharff, Divan, and Motley 2021; Tierney, Aidulis, Park, and Clark 2020). This collaborative space embodies the core tenets of CoPs, where individuals with a common interest come together to share knowledge, develop new practices, and address common challenges. Recently, SoTL Canada and EuroSoTL have begun their own collaborative writing groups, which

respond to unique challenges and calls to action (Simmons and Poole 2016; Webb 2019; Webb and Welsh 2021).

As recent co-leaders, we drew upon the invaluable experiences of leadership and prior participation in the ICWGs. We acknowledged past challenges, such as ensuring equitable knowledge sharing within groups, and adopted a leadership approach that helps develop continuous growth in participant responsibility, active listening to diverse perspectives, and the recognition of the importance of individual and institutional contexts. By blending pragmatism and dedication, we ensure the ICWGs continue to provide participants with an unforgettable, collaborative experience, empowering them to navigate the diverse landscapes of SoTL and to contribute meaningfully to the advancement of the field.

For the 2023 ICWGs, we aligned our focus with the ISSOTL 2023 conference theme, “Context Matters.” Drawing on our past experience as group leads and participants, as well as guidance from the ISSOTL Publications Committee and the 2022 ICWG co-leads, we planned to support and facilitate these groups. For consistency, we will continue to refer to ourselves as the ICWG co-leads (co-leads), the six group leaders as facilitators, and the group members as participants (see Figure 1 for further explanation of the relationships).

As the three co-leads of the 2023 ICWG-Academic cohort, we oversaw the entire process from the selection of group facilitators and participants to the final step of each group publishing in *Teaching & Learning Inquiry*. We selected the six group facilitators based on their proposed themes ([see ISSOTL Call for Facilitators here](#)), and their alignment with “Context Matters” as well as how they would guide a group to develop and complete their specific project. We received 13 proposals in the call for group facilitators; based on past practices and our ability to support the groups at a distance, we decided to select six facilitators. The [call for participants \(see full call here\)](#) attracted 62 applications. We selected applicants for the different groups based on several criteria, including their top two topic choices, geographic location, institutional role(s), and years of SoTL experience. We aimed to create diverse and balanced groups relative to these criteria. After some discussion, we selected 36 participants. We turned down experienced scholars with social capital who we felt would be able to create and manage their own groups.

Two of the co-leads brought prior experience as group facilitators, and all of us had been ICWG participants. Leveraging those experiences, we aimed to provide facilitators with guidance and mentorship around the planning and facilitation of their meetings while respecting their autonomy. We had selected facilitators based on their experience as leaders and chose not to interfere in the specific plans each group had for the three days. We formed our expectation of how the groups would collaborate together, both in person and before and after the conference, based on our experiences rather than any additional, external directives.

Prior to meeting in-person, we facilitated two Zoom meetings with the facilitators and created an online padlet space for them to connect with each other and learn more about the topics and themes that each group would explore. While many facilitators attended the Zoom meetings, some were absent. Although facilitators posted information about their proposals on the padlet, they engaged sparingly, with ongoing engagement on the platform.

The six writing groups included participants from across 10 countries and many time zones, making synchronous meetings difficult. Recognising this challenge, we placed emphasis on the opportunity that being together afforded. In planning the face-to-face meetings in Utrecht prior to the formal ISSOTL 2023 program, we attempted to balance focused guidance on the logistics of working together and submitting to *Teaching & Learning Inquiry* with the autonomy group facilitators needed

to develop their community as a writing group. To support this, we facilitated three-days of structured engagement, blending plenary sessions with time for group meetings.

We also organized a comprehensive welcome pack with information on the logistics of travel to the Netherlands, a list of local restaurants, and a detailed schedule of the two and a half days, including available spaces and lunchtime activities. Each day included time for focused group work and for the whole group to come together, including a social dinner on the first night. We themed our activities so they reflected the phases of groups working together—designing their collaboration, writing up their investigation, and publishing in *TLI*—and built around the concept of the whole ICWG group as a “critical friend.”

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

We drew upon Wenger-Trayner et al.’s (2015) conceptualization of a LoP to illustrate how different CoPs (Wenger 1998) interact rather than operate in isolation (Pyrko et al. 2019). Wenger-Trayner et al. (2015) define a landscape of practice as a “complex system of communities of practice and the boundaries between them” (13). They argue that a successful LoP requires individual competence within this community as well as active engagement and legitimization by it. This reciprocal engagement transforms both the individual and the community.

The landscape of practice is dynamic and constantly evolving, reflecting the complex and messy reality of interlinked CoPs. This perspective of situated learning “places emphasis on agency, negotiated practices, and changing relationships in local settings” (Pyrko et al. 2019, 495). In this way, we position SoTL as a LoP, which Wenger-Trayner et al.(2015) characterize as diverse, flat, and political in order to provide a comprehensive understanding of processes and power dynamics across boundaries. To understand these features, we applied their framework to our specific context, examining how we navigate and interpret the landscape’s characteristics with our lived experiences of leading the ICWG groups.

Landscape of practice is diverse

Living within a landscape involves crossing boundaries where diverse sets of communities exist:

An effective landscape of practice such as SoTL requires recognition, encounter, and crossing of these boundaries that may be based on disciplines (e.g., sciences with arts), epistemological differences (e.g., positivist with constructionist), positional differences (faculty with staff), and level of expertise. (Kensington-Miller, Webb, Gansemer-Topf, Lewis, Luu, Maheux-Pelletier, Hofmann 2021, 367)

As our different CoPs lacked a shared history, these boundaries could be “places of potential misunderstanding and confusion” yet they “hold potential for unexpected learning” (Wenger-Trayner et al. 2015, 17).

Landscape of practice is political

Power dynamics are inevitable and inherent within CoPs and across the landscape: “There will be competing voices and competing claims to knowledge, including voices that are silenced by the claim to knowledge of others” (Wenger-Trayner et al. 2015, 16). Power imbalance will intrinsically shape the political nature of practice, and although community implies harmony and agreement, conflict and power struggles often exist too (Kensington-Miller et al. 2021). Competence in one

community does not necessarily translate to competence in another or within the larger LoP (Wenger-Trayner et al. 2015).

Landscape of practice is flat

When the landscape of practice is flat then “no single practice dominates or subsumes all other practices. Being flat suggests that each community has its own practice and these practices co-exist” (Kensington-Miller et al. 2021, 368). When boundary crossing occurs, multiple voices are brought together, creating opportunities for learning and new knowledge as well as generating new insights and even identities (Wenger-Trayner et al. 2015).

Boundary crossers, brokers, and systems convenors

Intragroup identity is a dynamic process (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger-Trayner et al. 2015). At its most simple form, multimembership involves people who are members of two or more communities and can share their learning across the boundaries. While this can mean challenging and complex identities for the boundary crosser, it often enriches the knowledge in each community. As brokers, group members negotiate the exchange of knowledge across the boundaries and connect CoPs with a landscape (Wenger-Trayner et al. 2015). The brokering role, focused on “enabling collaboration among individuals” is different from systems convenors, who are more concerned with creating “lasting change across social and institutional systems” (99–100). A systems convenor takes a macro view of the landscape and works toward broader, often strategic, change. By working to flatten the landscape of practice and promoting collaboration, systems convenors pave the way for widespread change across the broader academic landscape.

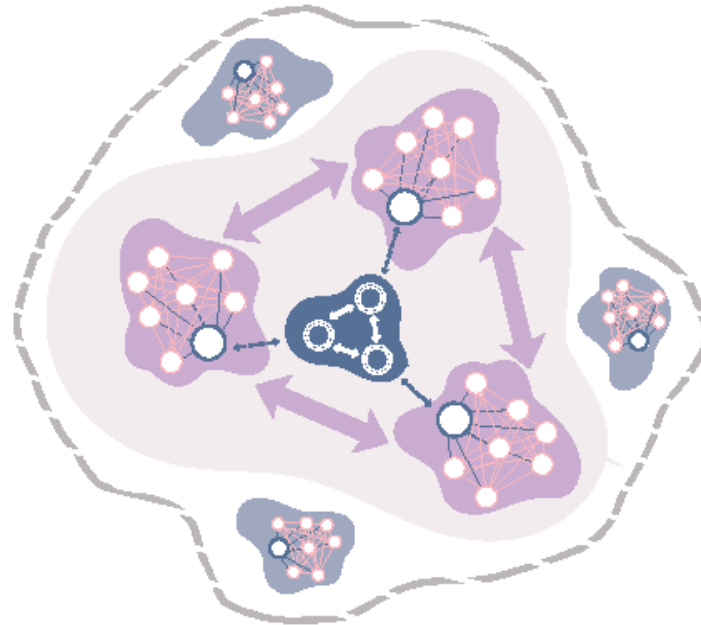
The figure below (Figure 1) shows how landscapes of practice connected the CoPs in the initial design of the ICWGs.

METHODOLOGY

With this reflection, we aimed to deepen our understanding of what is and what could be (Hutchings and Shulman 1999) for the 2023 and future ICWGs. We use scholarly personal narratives (SPN) (Brookfield 2013; Ng et al. 2017), a nascent SoTL practice, to gather data through reflective practice from our experience as co-leads of the 2023 ICWGs. Pioneered by Robert Nash, SPN serves as a powerful tool for bridging the gap between academic knowledge and real-world experiences. He highlights how SPN allows scholars to share personal stories that connect academic theory with lived experiences. Nash and Bradley (2011) provide a practical guide, which we followed, for writing SPN manuscripts, offering step-by-step advice on how to effectively blend personal experience with scholarly analysis. Nash’s approach (2015) offers a compelling argument for using personal storytelling to enhance scholarly communication, encouraging a deeper connection between the academy and the broader community while promoting more inclusive and accessible academic practices.

Figure 1. Interconnected CoPs within the ISSOTL ICWG LoP

Adapted from Pyrko et al. 2019 p. 490.



Legend	
	Group participant
	Group facilitator
	Cohort Leader
	Participants working within CoP
	Facilitator working within CoP
	Cohort leader working with facilitator
	CoPs working together
	Boundary of CoP
	Boundary of Co-leaders CoP
	Boundary of CoPs and Co-leaders
	Boundary of Landscape of Practice

SPN in SoTL combines storytelling and self-disclosure that draws on academic and non-academic experiences (Ng et al. 2017, 40) in order to create an accessible narrative that can communicate to a diverse audience; telling a story rich with insight (Brookfield 2013, 127). Brookfield (2013) argues for the value of SPNs in SoTL, highlighting how personal stories can explore teaching practices and enhance reflective learning. He suggests that SPNs offer an intimate, introspective perspective that allows educators to connect more meaningfully. Ng et al. (2017) argue that SPNs offer

a valuable means for educators to reflect on and share their teaching experiences. They highlight and model how SPNs foster deeper understanding, enhance critical self-reflection, and contribute to the broader academic conversation about effective pedagogy.

Drawing on Ellis and Bochner (2000), our SPNs highlight the value of blending personal narrative with cultural analysis, positioning the researcher as both the subject and the observer. The cited authors emphasize the importance of reflexivity, arguing that it allows researchers to deeply examine their personal experiences while contributing to broader social and cultural understandings. Our narratives are highly personal and contextual, yet can connect with the common experiences of being co-leads. Our work mirrors other small-scale reflective qualitative studies of diverse academics (see, for example, Mathieson 2019), where the size of the sample is less important than the richness of the data collected (Creswell 2021).

We also draw on the work of Kubiak, Fenton-O’Creevy, Appleby, Kempster, Reed, Solvason, and Thorpe (2015) to help us describe and analyse the characteristics of our roles as brokers at different levels (Simmons 2016). SPN allows us to explore the complexities of brokering within SoTL and to recognise “particular events in a narrative may be unique to the individual but they often contain universal elements” (Brookfield 2013, 127). In presenting the evidence from our SPNs, we aim to highlight the common experiences we have encountered as SoTL brokers and leaders, while also being cognizant of contextual differences. We draw our SPNs, complemented by participant feedback from the ICWGs in order to integrate our experiences. We explore the tensions between what we thought is/was going to be and what is/was (SPNs and feedback) in order to offer recommendations for future iterations of the ICWGs.

Data collection and analysis

The corpus data consisted of the materials created for the ICWG facilitators and participants (e.g., a padlet site, welcome package for delegates traveling to ISSOTL23), participant feedback after the two and a half in-person days in Utrecht, our individual SPN responses to four questions (included in Appendix A), and notes and recordings from our meetings following ISSOTL23.

During the planning of the ICWGs, we met six times between January and August 2023 to write the call for leaders and participants, review the applications, meet the group leaders, and develop the schedule for the in-person days. The notes from these meetings became part of the textual data. In the month following the two and a half days at ISSOTL23, we wrote our SPNs, responding to four questions. In December 2023, we read each other’s SPNs and met on Zoom to share our writing. Following this meeting, we identified critical reflections worthy of further investigation, so we refined our SPN writing.

In analysing the data, we began with an individual thematic analysis of our SPN responses, focusing on the responsibilities and decisions we made in setting up and facilitating the ICWGs. Following the development of themes from the SPNs, we incorporated the thematic analysis of the text materials and participant feedback. Then, we met on Zoom six more times to explore the developing findings.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

As ISSOTL’s flagship program, the ICWGs do not sit under the purview of a specific committee; instead a different committee facilitates them each year, depending on the chosen theme. As a result, we had to create the entire experience based on our goals, beliefs, and vision for the ICWGs.

The ICWG group members—facilitators and participants—focused on developing and creating an article for *Teaching & Learning Inquiry*. As co-leads, however, our SPN highlighted our unified

approach and direction for creating leadership opportunities in SoTL. As the three of us had each experienced a serendipitous entry into SoTL, we recognised the importance of offering purposeful and directed guidance in our support for others in order to help them avoid the fumbblings we had encountered early in our own journeys. We were intentionally strategic about looking for networking opportunities that not only contributed to SoTL, but were also recognized and valued by our home institutions.

Throughout our co-leads meetings, we frequently revisited our decisions made in designing and organizing the ICWGs. Was the model effective? What could we have changed? What was within our power to modify the program? However, a recurring gap emerged in our discussions about the absence of an overarching goal for ISSOTL regarding the ICWGs. While the ICWGs aligned with the ISSOTL strategic plan—such as capacity building in SoTL (knowledge of SoTL and leadership in SoTL), international networking (a flat structure with groups built to connect students, faculty, and educational developers from across the institutions), and supporting SoTL and impact in the field—the lack of consistent goals across iterations raises concerns. As different ISSOTL groups (for e.g., Advocacy, Outreach) support a new iteration of the ICWGs each year, the mission and purpose of the ICWGs often shift, resulting in a fragmented vision.

This lack of clarity leads to significant oversights. For example, as ISSOTL’s flagship program, it is important that the ICWGs run smoothly, but there has been insufficient consideration of how they run year to year. To ensure consistency, coherence, and alignment with the society’s strategic goals, ISSOTL must clarify its goals and expectations for the ICWGs in each iteration.

By adopting a critical self-reflective focus in analysing our SPNs, we noted that each ICWG functions as a CoP, characterized by shared learning, mutual engagement, and a collective goal of advancing SoTL. However, each group operated independently, somewhat insular from the larger cohort. One participant’s feedback noted this in their feedback: “Whilst we worked together in a common space, each of the groups appeared to function within their own community of practice.” As co-leads, we had selected the group facilitators based on their applications, trusting that they possessed the necessary skills, ability, knowledge, and time to lead effectively. We aimed to connect the six CoPs and develop a broader LoP based on the personal experiences of two of the authors (as previous ICWG group facilitators in other iterations), where a flat, interconnected LoP was the goal. In reality, we encountered a far messier situation than expected (see Figure 1). During our co-leads meetings, we talked at length about the theoretical value of CoPs and LoPs within the ICWG program. Ultimately, we determined that philosophically we are SoTL scholars with a LoP focus and speculated whether the experience would have been different had we been explicit about creating a LoP from the start (Co-Lead Meeting #2). We now believe that more time and attention should be allocated to the selection of group facilitators, perhaps including interviews and more direct facilitation by one or all of the co-leads to establish two-way connections early in the process.

In reviewing the data provided by the ICWG participants (padlet and participant feedback), we noted a distinct tension between requests for more guidance, oversight, and uniformity in the group activities and the desire for the group facilitators to have more autonomy in directing their own work in their ICWG. One of the facilitators, for example, noted, “we all have experience in writing academic papers so there was no need to spend time explaining how to prepare manuscripts for publication, this could have been led by each group leader with their group.” In contrast, a group member who was new to SoTL remarked that the session on preparing manuscripts for SoTL publication was “invaluable in laying clear expectations for developing the manuscript appropriately.”

This prompted a number of conversations during our meetings around defining the precise role of the ICWG co-leads. Do we “lead” or “facilitate” the leadership of others? We concluded that the

group facilitators are key to creating and strengthening the connections within the LoP—the facilitators are the brokers and the group members negotiate the exchange of knowledge and connect the CoP, not the co-leads (Wenger-Trayner et al. 2015). Perhaps, if we had been more clear in defining their role as brokers, as opposed to administrative leaders, they would have better understood the importance of two-way connection between the co-leads and the groups.

We did not see it as our responsibility to intervene in the groups; instead we strived to empower the facilitators to direct their groups without interference, believing it was not our role to intervene in how they led and their processes. As ICWG co-leads, we should have been prepared to support both the people and the process. The facilitators require guidance in navigating their research design and development, and our role is more akin to systems convenors (Wenger-Trayner et al. 2015), taking a macro view of the whole landscape and intervening or forging connections as needed.

The international aspect of the ICWGs is an important strength of the program, yet also a significant challenge. While more frequent meetings might have supported the creation and connection of the LoP, time zone differences, academic workloads, and personal responsibilities and commitments often hindered the group's ability to meet virtually. This made it difficult to fully realise the potential of an inter-connected, international LoP.

While we had aspired to create a larger LoP with groups inter-connecting through the use of the padlet, enabling each group to learn more about each other's work, this was not fully realised. Neither our SPN data or the participant feedback supported the idea that a strong LoP with interconnecting groups had emerged. Although we had scheduled activities as a larger group during the face-to-face time with a desire to build cohesion (e.g., whole group talks on publishing with TLI, critical friend reviews, and meals) as well as individual work times as smaller groups (e.g., breakout rooms), the planned collaborative and cooperative activities were not successful in creating and fostering the desired LoP. On each day, we had scheduled meetings to sit down with the group facilitators, but these also failed to materialize; groups wanted to spend time socializing and bonding within their own groups over forming broader connections across the LoP. One participant's feedback echoed this; they claimed that the ICWG experience is more than simply developing the article, it is about developing friendships and networks to support future work. The critical friend activity, for example, resulted in a lack of substantive engagement with other groups' projects and surface-level feedback.

WHAT IS THE WAY FORWARD FOR THE ICWGS?

The ICWGs are valuable and integral for capacity building, advancing scholarship, and developing and fostering international networks within ISSOTL. However, to sustain and enhance their impact, structural changes and deeper integration is needed. For a flagship program, the ICWGs require more formal alignment with ISSOTL's strategic plan and activities. As ISSOTL has recently passed the halfway point in the [2019 Strategic Plan](#), there is time to build a new strategic vision for the ICWGS. Currently, too much of the program's success hinges on assumptions about the co-leads' roles, as well as the support of the conference host institutions. While the ICWGs benefit from the involvement of enthusiastic and engaged leads, there is insufficient guidance on how to lead effectively within this unique structure. Understanding and designing an interconnected CoP or LoP could be one way forward.

With the recent adoption of the three-iteration cycle, there is a valuable opportunity to establish a more structured mentorship system where experienced co-leads can mentor newcomers. This would provide continuity and reduce the burden on each new cohort of co-leads, reinventing the

process. Our research supports the need for a stronger mandate from ISSOTL for the ICWG co-leads to ensure group facilitators participate in the creation of an LoP. The facilitator must be prepared to commit the time not only to their groups but also with the co-leads and the other groups in the LoP in order to foster two-way leadership. Additionally, the facilitators and participants must recognize that being part of an ICWG entails a significant commitment. The challenges of coordinating across different time zones and varying group designs needs to be addressed more strategically to facilitate better synchronous activity. Additionally, it may be useful to consider regional groups rather than global ones. If desire cannot supersede the logistics, then better design must.

To fully achieve the ICWGs potential, there needs to be clear initiative, accountability, and formal support from ISSOTL. Currently, these elements are assumed rather than strategically embedded within the program—creating communities by happenstance rather than strategy. Drawing from our lived experience and critical self-reflection, we propose recommendations to improve the ICWG’s design and operation for next steps. In light of the [Grand Challenges](#) for SoTL, especially the connection with the complex identities and practices of SoTL, now is the time to build on the successes while addressing the gaps in leadership, support, and strategic alignment.

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APPENDIX

Scholarly personal narrative prompt questions

- What is your history with collaborative writing groups?
- Why did you want to lead the ICWGs? What do you bring?
- What do you get out of it?
- Reflect on the result / three in-person days / lessons learned.
 - Was there any change in thinking?



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