



*Casey E. Wright, UNIVERSITY OF IOWA, casey-wright@uiowa.edu*  
*Lori C. Adams-Phillips, UNIVERSITY OF IOWA, lori-adams@uiowa.edu*  
*Adam E. Brummett, UNIVERSITY OF IOWA, adam-brummett@uiowa.edu*  
*Kelly Danaher, UNIVERSITY OF IOWA, kelly-danaher@uiowa.edu*  
*Cynthia M. Farthing, UNIVERSITY OF IOWA, cynthia-farthing@uiowa.edu*  
*Elizabeth Kleiman, UNIVERSITY OF IOWA, elizabeth-kleiman@uiowa.edu*  
*Alexandra Nica, UNIVERSITY OF IOWA, alexandra-nica@uiowa.edu*  
*Jennifer J. Sterling, UNIVERSITY OF IOWA, jennifer-sterling@uiowa.edu*  
*Sara Nasrollahian Mojarad, UNIVERSITY OF IOWA, sara-nasrollahian@uiowa.edu*  
*Eva Latterner, UNIVERSITY OF IOWA, eva-latterner@uiowa.edu*  
*Anna L. Bostwick Flaming, UNIVERSITY OF IOWA, anna-flaming@uiowa.edu*

# Strengthening SoTL Ecosystems: A University of Iowa ISSOTL24 Cohort's Reflection and Impact

## ABSTRACT

Seven teaching-focused faculty members, in community with three Center for Teaching & Learning (CTL) colleagues and a postdoctoral researcher, explored the impacts of engaging in a scholarly teaching conference cohort at the ISSOTL24 conference. Their experiences as a cohort and as developing SoTL scholars illustrate the impacts of faculty development within SoTL. Their cohort experiences also reflect how university teaching and learning ecosystems further the development of teaching-focused faculty. Faculty members' experiences in the ISSOTL ecosystem deepened their understanding of SoTL and impacted their scholarly identities, and they returned to the University of Iowa with new evidence-based teaching practices and the agency to share those practices with the university. The faculty reflect on the pedagogical and organizational expertise of the CTL behind the program and how it helped promote faculty members' development and connections, as well as their expanded sense of belonging to a scholarly teaching community. This article shares these insights, establishing such conference cohorts as formative experiences that drive change in higher education.

## KEYWORDS

educational development and SoTL, educational development programs, centers for teaching and learning, teaching-focused faculty

## INTRODUCTION

Faculty conference cohorts present unique professional development opportunities that improve teaching and learning in higher education. While our faculty conference cohort program at the University of Iowa is in its infancy, we have already experienced the transformative effects of the first cohort, which attended the International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (ISSOTL) conference in October 2024.

We are a group of seven teaching-focused faculty, a postdoctoral scholar, and three Center for Teaching & Learning (CTL) professionals. The faculty reflections on the ISSOTL24 conference

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experience show how cohort professional development opportunities are investments in teaching-focused faculty and university teaching and learning ecosystems, particularly at high-research activity universities. These experiences have implications for university leaders concerned with retaining and investing in teaching-focused faculty members, educational developers leveraging SoTL for institutional change, and faculty interested in SoTL on-ramps. In the paper, we share the value of interaction with ISSOTL via an ISSOTL conference.

We envision our university and ISSOTL as dynamic ecosystems. Ecosystems are complex, ever-changing communities with complex interdependent parts, including structures, individuals, and resources. Our conceptualization of ecosystems aligns with educational development as organizational change (Schroeder 2023). Ecosystems represent a confluence of two organizational change models (Kezar 2018): evolutionary and socio-cognitive. Evolutionary change models recognize changes in one part of an organization that can impact other parts of the organization, often in unintended ways. Socio-cognitive models reflect change at the individual level and acknowledge agency and identity development situated within available institutional resources (Trowler and Cooper 2002). Ecosystems thus represent an effective metaphor, offering possibilities and openings for further changes.

The University of Iowa's teaching and learning ecosystem comprises of instructors (including graduate students), students, support staff, CTL colleagues, administrators, and the collegiate and university resources supporting instructors' growth in their departmental contexts. Cohort faculty are on the instructional track, meaning their three- to five-year renewable contracts stipulate their primary duties are teaching and, in part, service. In the fall 2022 term, non-tenure-track faculty comprised 39.3% of the instructional workforce and taught 52.9% of undergraduate student credit hours at the University of Iowa (Academic Affairs Committee 2023). In the 2024–2025 academic year, the cohort of seven faculty instructed courses with a total enrollment of over 4,300 (overall undergraduate enrollment was 22,738 students that year). Before the conference, faculty had accumulated diverse experiences as learners and teachers within the university ecosystem and had taught 5-19 years (median 14 per member) as instructors (Table 1). Faculty brought varied previous SoTL experiences to their engagement with the ISSOTL ecosystem at ISSOTL24.

The ISSOTL ecosystem includes stakeholders dedicated to inquiry into student learning and venues for supporting the collaboration of these stakeholders (conferences, journals, special interest groups, etc.). The cohort's time in the ISSOTL ecosystem provided space for developing scholarly teaching identities, learning together, and forming or deepening connections with university colleagues as well as colleagues from across the globe. After ISSOTL, we rejoined our university ecosystem with refined understanding of SoTL, new identities, strengthened networks, and agency to engage our campus stakeholders in teaching and learning innovation. The collected individual faculty experiences and perspectives provide insight into how SoTL is developing as a valued practice within our university ecosystem.

Table 1. Faculty backgrounds before ISSOTL24

Faculty	Discipline	Years teaching	Prior SoTL engagements
Lori	Biology	14	Campus SoTL FLC member Worked on a SoTL project Attended and presented at a national teaching and learning conference
Adam	Chemistry	5	Worked on a SoTL project Attended and presented at national and international teaching and learning conferences Member of an organization like ISSOTL
Kelly	Psychology	13	Campus SoTL FLC member Attended and presented a poster at a campus SoTL institute Attended and presented at a virtual SoTL conference Worked on a SoTL project Attended and presented at a national teaching and learning conference
Cindy	Mathematics	19	Campus SoTL FLC member Worked on a SoTL project Attended and presented at national and international teaching and learning conferences Member of an organization like ISSOTL
Liza	Computer sciences	14	Attended and/or presented a poster at a campus-wide SoTL institute Worked on a SoTL project Attended and presented at a national teaching and learning conference Member of an organization like ISSOTL
Alexandra	Economics	10	Campus SoTL FLC member and co-chair Attended and presented a poster at a campus SoTL institute Attended and presented at a virtual SoTL conference Worked on a SoTL project Attended and presented at a national teaching and learning conference Member of an organization like ISSOTL
Jen	American studies	11	Worked on a SoTL project Attended a national teaching and learning conference

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experiences and perspectives provide insight into how SoTL is developing as a valued practice within our university ecosystem.

## BACKGROUND

### **ISSOTL's role in creating inviting spaces for SoTL scholars**

SoTL emerged from a movement to create a teaching commons, where “communities of educators committed to pedagogical inquiry and innovation come together to exchange ideas about teaching and learning and use them to meet the challenges of educating students” (Huber and Hutchings 2005, 26). Since then, the SoTL community has cultivated a dialogical context for embracing diverse disciplinary perspectives and methodologies to inquire into teaching and learning (Cruz, Santucci Leoni, and Nasrollahian Mojarad 2024). SoTL relationships are characterized by giving, vulnerability, trust, and development, or what McGowan, Woolmer, and Santucci Leoni (2024) term relational hospitality.

ISSOTL is a community for SoTL scholars to gather and discuss their scholarly work and perspectives on teaching and learning. The society's mission statement outlines its philosophy of hospitality by fostering a collaborative, cross-disciplinary environment, encouraging new lines of inquiry, integrating scholarship with public engagement, and recognizing SoTL. ISSOTL offers an invitation to “collaborate rather than compete; to perform curiosity rather than perfection; to be included rather than excluded; to form collegial connections across transdisciplinary spaces” (Bunnell and McGowan 2024, 47). Thus, the ISSOTL conference was an ideal venue to welcome the first faculty cohort in our conference cohort program.

### **Teaching scholars cohort model**

At the University of Iowa, the faculty cohort model developed from two converging insights: 1) While instructional track faculty teach the majority of undergraduate courses and are vital to student success, they do not receive uniform professional development resources; and 2) The institutional transformation of teaching practices and cultures benefits from community-based models, fostering silo-crossing and group learning. These insights are borne out in research: First, faculty development improves instruction and student achievement (Wright, Horii, Felten, Sorcinelli, and Kaplan 2018). Second, professional development cohorts structured around shared roles provide peer mentorship, identity formation, and individual learning (Culver, Kezar, and Koren 2023), and faculty learning communities as well as communities of practice can be engines of organizational learning that drive institutional change (Cox and McDonald 2017; Wenger 1998).

The cohort model, a new component of our institution's robust array of teaching development opportunities, offers structured ways for instructional faculty to engage with evidence-based teaching practices and provides funding to attend a teaching-focused conference. Before the conference, an education developer convenes the cohort as a learning community; participants engage in peer mentoring and group learning. The educational developer also accompanies participants to the conference, where they support communal sense-making and the development of professional networks beyond the home campus and help participants extend and consolidate their learning. The ISSOTL24 conference was a natural fit for the inaugural cohort as many University of Iowa faculty who engage in SoTL are instructional track, and several regularly participate in our SoTL faculty learning community (FLC). This model is intended to develop faculty as confident teaching experts who can then impact the university ecosystem through sharing their learning in their departments and beyond.

## METHODS

We reconvened two weeks after the conference for a planned debrief, further motivated by the encouragement we received at ISSOTL to share our story. Casey, a postdoctoral scholar tasked by the University of Iowa Provost Office with the exploration of campus change initiatives, also attended the conference and led this paper's organization. At the debrief, we discussed authorship and shared salient experiences from the conference. Faculty expressed enthusiasm for writing short reflections about their experiences. We developed plans for a co-meta reflection, or "reflection involving two or more people seeking to develop the thought and practice of all participants by moving from descriptive to analytical levels of reflection" (Thorpe and Garside 2017, 111). Using the debrief transcript, Casey created a prompt for the seven faculty to help structure their reflections. Faculty wrote about their scholarly teaching and their involvement in teaching and learning professional development programs before the conference, their experiences at the conference, and their experiences returning to campus. Using thematic analysis (Creswell and Poth 2023), all co-authors reviewed the faculty reflections, noted, and defined three to four themes present across reflections and quotations representative of those themes. Casey then reconvened with the authors to develop a consensus on overarching themes via a Zoom brainstorm. During the session, all co-authors sorted cards with team-developed themes into groups of similar themes. Through dialogue during this session, we identified five overarching themes. Faculty co-wrote descriptions of these themes during co-writing sessions, which other faculty authors revised during additional co-writing sessions. CTL colleagues shared the rationale for the scholarly teaching cohort. Given that the collaboration was between individuals from the same university— or a group of insiders—we dealt with insider bias through leveraging different viewpoints in our collaboration (Trowler 2011). Our differing appointments and unit affiliations in the University of Iowa ecosystem and varied experiences in the ISSOTL ecosystem strengthened our perspective.

## THEMES FROM FACULTY REFLECTIONS

We converged on five themes from the faculty reflections: (1) deepening our understanding of SoTL, (2) impact on scholarly identity, (3) returning with new ideas and agency, (4) expanded sense of community and belonging, and (5) CTL resources and expertise promote connections.

### **Deepening our understanding of SoTL**

ISSOTL24 increased faculty understanding of SoTL as a field, the types of SoTL research, and the questions driving the field. Some faculty were exploring the field after a recent introduction, while others were applying SoTL practices and contributing to the field. Before attending the conference, some cohort members worked with the CTL to develop and evaluate discrete class activities and interventions, often without conceiving these activities as SoTL or themselves as SoTL practitioners. Others participated in the SoTL FLC, where they collaboratively explored SoTL approaches, applications, and projects. For example, Lori reflected, "Through the SoTL FLC, I learned from my colleagues about terms like 'disciplinary-based education research' and how my prior identity as a bench-trained scientist intersected with the scholarship of teaching and learning." Regardless of their starting points, faculty reflected a deeper understanding of SoTL after the conference. This was even true of Cindy and Adam, both presenters at the conference. Adam reflected, "I now consider much of the work I do for curriculum reform, in-class modifications (including learning assistants), interventions, etc., to be a type of 'daily SoTL.'" In a pre-conference workshop, Cindy valued co-learning with SoTL novices: "Many [attendees] were trying to fully grasp what SoTL is and how to translate our work in other disciplines and the classroom into a research project. In this workshop, I

heard about three types of SoTL questions: What works? What is? What is possible? This helped me understand SoTL research at a different level.” ISSOTL24 participation helped faculty refine their SoTL definitions and develop as SoTL scholars.

### **Impact on scholarly identity**

The faculty cohort members explored disciplinary identities (e.g., as a scientist) and role-based identities (e.g., instructor/educator) with emerging identities as scholars or scholarly teachers. Before the conference, many faculty navigated their disciplines with unclear professional identities and uncertainty in their roles as teacher-scholars. While instructional faculty are scholars trained in their disciplines and often have established disciplinary networks, they are less connected to other faculty prioritizing scholarly teaching approaches. Sometimes siloed within their respective departments, instructional faculty must seek opportunities to develop expertise and networks as educators. Cohort members established and reinforced connections with each other at the ISSOTL conference, exposing a shared identity as SoTL scholars. Kelly reflected, “Instructional track faculty are not only scholars in their respective disciplines but also in the field of teaching and learning. ISSOTL provided a space for me to acknowledge and grow those identities.” Upon return from the ISSOTL conference, faculty had a clarified professional identity. Adam shared, “The identity shift of thinking of myself not just as an educator, but as a scholar, has been lasting and impactful, and has encouraged me to reflect on my own practices more deeply.” This identity shift contributed to increased confidence in pursuing scholarly ideas and carrying out individual and collaborative SoTL projects.

### **Returning with new ideas and agency**

The conference provided opportunities to learn new strategies, tools, vocabularies, and resources to advocate for evidence-based approaches that strengthen teaching and learning in our classrooms, departments, and university. For example, faculty learned strategies to incorporate AI into their teaching and about frameworks for theorizing learning. Before the conference, faculty were using evidence-based practices in their classrooms. Some faculty shared those projects in the SoTL FLC. For some, pedagogical isolation siloed their instructional practices in small pockets of innovation and caused stagnation. As part of the cohort, camaraderie developed from shared values and passion for teaching, which prompted a sense of enthusiasm that faculty brought back to campus. This newfound confidence and knowledge inspired faculty to advocate for and implement new practices in their classrooms and beyond. Moreover, faculty felt empowered to emphasize the importance of bringing scholarly teaching practices into their classrooms and to shape campus dialogue about pedagogical practices. Alexandra shared, “After ISSOTL, I had to share my SoTL excitement with colleagues in my department and College, as well as with our upper College administration. I emphasized the importance of our scholarly work on teaching and learning in this amazing global context, and I have been excited to receive a lot of positive interest and feedback.” Faculty members can now be SoTL champions and advocates in their departments, colleges, and institutions.

### **Expanded sense of community and belonging**

ISSOTL offered instructional faculty an opportunity to (re)connect with their University of Iowa colleagues and with scholars from other institutions who share a passion for teaching. Before the conference, many faculty navigated their teaching faculty roles with an uncertain sense of community; some felt disconnected from their departments and the university as a whole. Interacting

with colleagues at mealtimes and between sessions at ISSOTL supported a sense of community and belonging. Alexandra reflected, “Many of my Iowa colleagues were participating as well, which has greatly strengthened our SoTL community and created exciting opportunities for our continued future collaboration on campus.” Faculty also renewed and strengthened valuable connections with the experts in the CTL and gained exposure to the broader professional (SoTL) ecosystem. Faculty returned with an expanded sense of the teaching and learning community, a sense of belonging to a SoTL community, empowerment to share insights with colleagues and administrators, and a desire to contribute to a more supportive teaching culture; as evidenced by faculty use of terms like “home” (Adam), “my people” (Jennifer), and “a great fit for me” (Cindy).

### **CTL resources and expertise promote connections**

The CTL is at the center of resources shaping the scholarly teaching experiences of our faculty cohort. Many faculty cohort members collaborated with the center in course reform initiatives and learned about SoTL through the CTL. Liza shared: “In my second year, I became involved with [an introductory course project], where I met Sara, who introduced me to SoTL. When I shared my class attendance issue with her, she suggested I explore it as a potential SoTL project. Last year, I formalized the project and obtained IRB approval for my first SoTL.” CTL colleagues served as thought partners and organized faculty learning communities, supporting faculty SoTL journeys. The center marshaled financial support through a campus strategic fund for faculty participation in the ISSOTL conference and structured the cohort experience. Jennifer reflected on how the conference cohort exemplified a shift toward validating teaching and learning on campus: “One important takeaway from the ISSOTL24 conference that took place before I even stepped foot in French Lick was that our institution was taking support for teaching and learning—and thus teaching-focused faculty—seriously.” Individually and communally, cohort faculty members now feel empowered to leverage campus resources to promote SoTL and enact change.

### **CONCLUSION**

The faculty cohort engagement at ISSOTL24 dynamically changed the University of Iowa’s SoTL ecosystem. Relational hospitality prevalent in the ISSOTL community provided faculty with developmental support (Bunnell et al. 2024), expanding their sense of community and belonging within the international ISSOTL network and within the University of Iowa’s network of scholarly teachers, thereby supporting future interdisciplinary collaborations. Deepening their understanding of SoTL offered faculty space to develop their scholarly identities, and it supported them in advocating for evidence-based practices with departmental and collegiate colleagues and leaders. Cohort faculty have found and deepened connections within the emerging SoTL scholars’ network on campus, developed more confidence in scholarly teaching perspectives, and connected with CTL SoTL experts.

The conference cohort helped teaching-focused faculty grow as scholarly teachers through SoTL (Culver et al. 2023; Huber et al. 2005). Culver and colleagues (2023) outline institutional impediments to SoTL engagement, including policies that exclude research from instructional faculty job expectations, departmental isolation of teaching-focused faculty, and limited opportunities for SoTL collaborations. The ISSOTL faculty cohort experience provided opportunities to ameliorate isolation norms and to develop interdisciplinary collaborations. Still, faculty face time constraints in doing SoTL alongside their jobs (Simmons, Scharff, Eady, and Gregory 2021). Time to engage in SoTL is critical for teaching excellence to emerge from what faculty identified as “the shuffle” (Lori) or “the grind” (Cindy), as well as to avoid “burnout” (Lori) and gain “inertia” (Jennifer).

The financial resources for attending ISSOTL and for educational developers to cultivate faculty conference experiences allowed faculty to experience ISSOTL's relational hospitality, creating the potential for transdisciplinary SoTL (Cruz 2024). In turn, the cohort represents an institutional investment in faculty's capacity to lead organizational change for teaching and learning (Bernstein 2013). Engaging the cohort in this manuscript project represented an additional investment in the University of Iowa teaching and learning ecosystem by elevating structured time for intentional reflection on teaching practice, reinforcing faculty scholarly identity via the creation of a scholarly contribution to the SoTL literature, supporting faculty agency to continue to share their journeys, and encouraging the implementation of teaching practices learned at the conference. Cultivating teaching-focused faculty as SoTL practitioners in our university ecosystem encourages continued and expanded SoTL engagement. Further resources are needed for future conference cohorts to develop interdepartmental collaborations and to support the development of SoTL as an institutional pathway for developing faculty change leaders.

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#### AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

*Casey E. Wright (United States) is a postdoctoral research scholar in the Office of the Executive Vice President and Provost and the Department of Chemistry at the University of Iowa. Her work focuses on higher education teaching and learning organizational change.*

*Lori C. Adams-Phillips (United States) is professor of instruction in the Department of Biology and director of the Iowa Sciences Academy at the University of Iowa.*

*Adam E. Brummett (United States) is an associate professor of instruction in the Department of Chemistry at the University of Iowa.*

*Kelly Danaher (United States) is an associate professor of instruction in the Department of Psychological and Brain Sciences at the University of Iowa.*

*Cynthia M. Farthing (United States) is an associate professor of instruction and director of Undergraduate Studies in the Department of Mathematics at the University of Iowa).*

*Elizabeth Kleiman (United States) is a professor of Instruction and director of undergraduate studies in the Department of Computer Science at the University of Iowa.*

*Alexandra Nica (United States) is a professor of instruction and Director of undergraduate studies in the Department of Economics at the University of Iowa.*

*Jennifer J. Sterling (United States) is an associate professor of instruction and director of undergraduate studies in the Department of American Studies at the University of Iowa.*

*Sara Nasrollahian Mojarad (United States) is an associate director at the Center for Teaching at the University of Iowa.*

*Eva Latterner (United States) is an assistant director at the Center for Teaching at the University of Iowa.*

*Anna L. Bostwick Flaming (United States) is assistant provost for teaching and learning and director of the Center for Teaching at the University of Iowa.*

## DISCLOSURES

The authors report no conflicts of interest.

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