



SoTL in Process

Imagining an ISSOTL Leadership Pipeline

ABSTRACT

Drawing on organizational development research, this “SoTL in Process” essay imagines a leadership pipeline for the International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (ISSOTL). A leadership pipeline is a conceptual metaphor that describes an approach to developing future leaders. This essay argues that by developing an ISSOTL leadership pipeline, the Society can foster the growth of the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) broadly through strategic leadership transitions across different roles within the organization. Ultimately, this essay invites ISSOTL members to imagine a leadership pipeline that may ensure the future growth of SoTL.

KEYWORDS

SoTL growth, leadership development, organizational development, leadership pipeline

IMAGINE WITH ME?

In this essay, I describe, through text and a visual, a leadership pipeline for the International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (ISSOTL). I borrow the phrase “leadership pipeline” from organizational development research. The term is a conceptual metaphor that describes a systematic approach to developing future leaders. Such a pipeline is integral to the sustainability of any organization (Charan, Drotter, Noel, and Jonasen 2024), including our not-for-profit Society.

Implementing a leadership pipeline responds to SoTL’s Grand Challenges. [According to the ISSOTL website](#), Grand Challenges are “complex, global problems that have no simple solution across all contexts and that require inputs from diverse areas of expertise to provide solutions for given contexts at specific points in time” (Scharff et al. 2023). Starting in 2018, scholars worked to define five Grand Challenges that can guide the future direction of SoTL and, by extension, ISSOTL. Grand Challenge #5 states:

SoTL practitioners study postsecondary teaching and learning to better understand and improve *the practice, use, and growth of SoTL*. SoTL practitioners explore, share, and translate the knowledge generated by its diverse research approaches in order to improve teaching, learning, and higher education more broadly. (emphasis in original)

I focus on the phrase italicized in the original text: “the practice, use, and growth of SoTL.” Specifically, this essay concentrates on one noun in that phrase: growth.

We grow SoTL by intentionally and strategically placing structures within ISSOTL that connect members to one another. We grow SoTL by articulating various roles in the Society (including the values, vision, and work of these roles) and building a culture where current leaders mentor future

ones. To be direct: we grow SoTL through developing a leadership pipeline of future leaders within ISSOTL.

Previous SoTL scholars showcase four leadership levels: micro, meso, macro, and mega (Berthiaume, Weston, Matsushita, Tovar, and Timmermans 2008; Simmons 2009). Often termed the 4M framework, micro-meso-macro-mega goes from small to large. Micro, for example, is focused on individual and/or classroom level leadership; mega is focused on international level leadership. I focus on the mega level. ISSOTL's infrastructure, journal, conference, Interest Groups (IGs), Grand Challenges, International Collaborative Writing Groups (ICWGs)—all the unique features of ISSOTL—are part of SoTL's professionalization at the mega level. These features contribute to field-building for sustainability, support SoTL scholars around the world, and circulate SoTL knowledge. These are key for growing SoTL and responding to Grand Challenge #5.

Much SoTL scholarship is past-focused in that scholars reflect on findings from studies they conducted in the past. My imaginings are future-focused. I deploy what the fourth century BCE philosopher Aristotle (2007) termed deliberative rhetoric. According to Aristotle, deliberative rhetoric moves people toward a future action by communicating to the people that such a measure is good. Fast forward thousands of years. Jump from Greece to the United States. Hutchings (2000) defines elements of SoTL scholarship, with one being visions of the possible. In this essay, I suggest a vision of the possible, a way to foster the growth of SoTL, a future action that does good to our Society and ourselves.

In relaying this vision, I sketch how SoTL scholars have engaged with conversations on leadership and how we might push those conversations from the topic more broadly to leadership development specifically. I provide a visual figure, developed by a colleague, for how we might imagine a leadership pipeline within ISSOTL (see Figure 1). This figure helps us visualize a leadership pipeline that includes five leadership roles in ISSOTL as well as the values, vision, and work within each role. Leaders develop future leaders by mentoring future leaders through various roles in the leadership pipeline. I conclude with notes of caution and an invitation for readers to refine with me an ISSOTL leadership pipeline.

One final note: While I focus specifically on the organizational structures of ISSOTL, organizational developers who work on the leadership pipeline continually point out the malleability and adaptability of this model. Scholars invested in other SoTL organizations can adapt this model to their unique organizational structures.

WHAT ARE SOME WAYS SOTL SCHOLARS WRITE ABOUT LEADERSHIP?

Broadly, SoTL scholarship on leadership details how local institutions implement programs that develop future leaders (e.g., Creanor 2014; Din, Alharbi, MacInnis, Mardjetko, Archer-Kuhn, Jamniczky, and Jacobsen 2022; Mårtensson and Roxå 2016; Miller-Young et al. 2017; Simmons and Taylor 2019). This work carries a wealth of frameworks for conceptualizing leadership and programs leading to successful local leadership development that may be adaptable within a range of levels and contexts. For example, at the ISSOTL 2024 conference, members of an ICWG took up the 4M framework during their workshop. Hamilton, Sipes, Johnson, Miller, Strampel, and Lane (2024) led a workshop titled “Navigating SoTL Leadership: Insights from an Academic International Collaborative Writing Group.” The workshop facilitators helped audience members identify the level at which they enacted leadership within their unique contexts.

This is one example of the important work SoTL scholars have produced to invite us to reflect on programs that build leadership capacity and on what effective SoTL leadership looks like within our unique cultures.

I suggest we add three elements to these current conversations: 1. how SoTL organizations strategically develop future SoTL leaders; 2. how people move across leadership roles during their career; and 3. what larger structures are (or should be) in place to facilitate how people move across leadership roles.

In sum, I wonder about leadership development. I reflect on how leaders develop future leaders and on how leaders developing leaders may be an integral part of the growth of ISSOTL. The long-term health of ISSOTL ultimately hinges on raising up future leaders. Like any organization, our Society would fade away without the next generation. We need a leadership pipeline.

In the next section, I turn to how organizational development scholars describe a leadership pipeline. I offer a leadership pipeline as a conceptual metaphor for leaders developing leaders at the mega level.

HOW MIGHT ISSOTL DEVELOP A LEADERSHIP PIPELINE?

In *The Leadership Pipeline: Developing Leaders in the Digital Age*, Charan et al. (2024) detail what they call The Leadership Pipeline model. Based on interviews with over 1,500 executive business leaders, they developed this model for leaders developing leaders in 2010. Since then, they have refined it through three editions of their book and ongoing workshops. They argue that this model is “universally applicable” (20). Charan et al. describe five guiding principles behind this leadership pipeline:

- Leadership work must be clearly defined and differentiated by layer/role.
- The effectiveness of leaders is complex and must be understood in at least three dimensions: required skills, how time is applied, and the appropriate work values.
- When leaders change organization layer/role, a significant transition is required.
- For sustained business success, a pipeline of leaders that is full and flowing is a fundamental requirement.
- It is the collective effectiveness of all leaders that determines an organization’s success, not the brilliance of a few (20–21).

Broadly, these principles express that leadership roles need to be defined and that the health of an organization relies on people constantly moving through them. Charan and coauthors point to the following roles: leading self, leading others, leading leaders, leading a function, leading a business, and leading an enterprise. Connecting one role to another role is what they call a “passage” or transition. For example, one moves from leading self to leading others. Each role carries with it unique skills, time commitments, and values. A person, ideally, transitions from one role to the next through supportive mentorship. Leaders, then, help usher future leaders into new roles.

Inspired by this flexible and adaptable model, I offer five roles for ISSOTL. Instead of focusing on the skills, time commitments, and values of each role, as Charan and coauthors do, I focus on the values, vision, and work of each role. I replaced Charan and coauthors’ focus on skills and time commitment with a focus on vision and work.

Here are the roles I envision for ISSOTL. Can you imagine with me how ISSOTL might better define these five roles and develop leaders within each role and for each role? Can you help me imagine new or different roles than the ones I have here? I represent an ISSOTL pipeline first in an outline form and then through a visual created by a colleague.

- **Lead self.** At this level, an ISSOTL member would hold the values of learning and reflection and lead
 - Through vision by
 - Developing knowledge and practice of SoTL and ISSOTL

- Through work by
 - Participating in ISSOTL’s annual conference
 - Reading and submitting to *Teaching & Learning Inquiry (TLI)*
 - Participating in International Collaborative Writing Groups (ICWGs) or Interest Groups (IGs)
- **Lead members.** At this level, an ISSOTL member would hold the values of generosity and growth and lead
 - Through vision by
 - Working with other ISSOTL members to build knowledge and practice of SoTL and ISSOTL
 - Encouraging colleagues to join ISSOTL
 - Through work by
 - Facilitating a panel or workshop for ISSOTL’s annual conference
 - Offering a webinar for ISSOTL members
 - Joining an ISSOTL committee
 - Writing posts for the ISSOTL blog
 - Submitting to *TLI*
 - Reviewing for *TLI* and the annual conference
- **Lead a committee.** At this level, an ISSOTL member would hold the values of service and organization and lead
 - Through vision by
 - Working within ISSOTL’s committee infrastructure to grow knowledge and practice of SoTL and ISSOTL
 - Enacting elements of the ISSOTL strategic plan
 - Nurturing future committee leaders from within the committee
 - Providing situational leadership
 - Recommending strategies to improve systems and processes
 - Through work by
 - Forming or chairing an IG
 - Facilitating an ICWG (facilitate one group)
 - Co-chairing a standing committee
 - Proposing a special section to *TLI*
 - Facilitating meetings of ~10 members
- **Lead a region.** At this level, an ISSOTL member would hold the values of advocacy and community and lead
 - Through vision by
 - Working with colleagues within one’s region to grow knowledge and practice of SoTL and ISSOTL
 - Shaping strategic plans and initiatives to foster growth within the region
 - Nurturing future regional leaders from committees, IGs, and ICWGs
 - Through work by
 - Serving as a regional vice president
 - Co-leading an ICWG cohort (coordinate multiple groups)
 - Serve as associate editor of *TLI*
 - Facilitating meetings of region’s ISSOTL members

- **Lead the Society.** At this level, an ISSOTL member would hold the values of vision and stewardship and lead
 - Through vision by
 - Working with ISSOTL officers, committees, and other infrastructural elements to grow knowledge and practice of SoTL and ISSOTL
 - Providing visionary global leadership
 - Shaping the culture of the Society
 - Nurturing future Society leaders from committees, IGs, and ICWGs
 - Refining and enacting ISSOTL strategic plan
 - Through work by
 - Serving as ISSOTL president
 - Serving as co-editor of *TLI*
 - Hosting an annual conference
 - Facilitating Society-wide meetings

Figure 1. An ISSOTL Leadership Pipeline that details five roles within the Society and the values, vision, and work accompanying these five roles



Graphic credit: Nancy Chick

The steps from lead self to lead the Society capture a transformation from participating to shaping. The language of steps and pipeline may suggest hierarchy, but that is not the intent. Each role in the leadership pipeline includes a step toward increased engagement with the organization of ISSOTL and the discipline of SoTL. These are steps toward increased engagement with and shaping of the Society.

The above map connects with ISSOTL's organizational structures. We have opportunities for members to grow in their individual knowledge of SoTL through *TLI* and our annual conference, to

lead by organizing a panel, workshop, an ICWG, or IG. As they move through the roles, they can then lead regions and one of our four standing committees [detailed in our bylaws](#). The presidential team offers opportunities for members to lead the Society.

To implement a leadership pipeline, a next step would be shaping a culture by which ISSOTL members, in these various roles, commit themselves to raising future leaders.

WHAT DOES A PIPELINE LOOK LIKE IN ACTION?

I offer a personal reflection to illustrate the pipeline in action. This is my story, and it isn't the only one. I offer it simply as an example of what this pipeline looks like through the professional narrative of one member of our Society.

I connected with SoTL as a first-year faculty member. I was new to SoTL. I joined a year-long SoTL cohort run by my local center for teaching and met Nancy Chick when my university brought her to campus to help run a SoTL workshop. I led myself first by reading SoTL scholarship—from articles to guides on conducting SoTL research. I co-authored my first SoTL article and placed it in *TLI* with generous reviewer support from Jessie Moore. This publication moved me from leading self to leading members. I attended my first SoTL conference where I again met Nancy who remembered me and suggested I connect with ISSOTL. I followed Nancy's suggestion, joined ISSOTL, and became a member of the Convenings Committee where Sarah Bunnell, as co-chair of the committee, helped me learn about the annual conference. Sarah encouraged me to co-chair Convenings, which I did alongside Andrea Dodo-Balu. Andrea helped me learn how to lead a committee. Michelle Eady encouraged me to run for president, and I eventually found myself as a president-elect under Melanie Hamilton who helped me learn about visionary global leadership. Conversations with former ISSOTL president Dan Bernstein taught me the history of our Society. My focus now is on developing future leaders. My story is not unique. It's through the generous mentoring of others that we grow and sustain our Society.

WHAT CHALLENGES MIGHT WE ENCOUNTER?

Developing a leadership pipeline is exciting, forward-thinking work for the Society to undertake. But challenges await.

An organization's strength can become an organization's weakness. Our strength is that we are an international, voluntary, not-for-profit organization composed of scholars with varied disciplinary backgrounds. We are scholars who undertake the work of the Society largely across video platforms and time zones. This diversity is simultaneously an advantage to the richness of our work and a disadvantage to the efficiency of the work.

As an international society, we move across time zones and cultures; we move across various cultural-specific decision-making processes and various cultural-specific epistemologies. How does leadership development happen in a global context where the nuances of cultural differences can clash in leadership work?

As a voluntary, not-for-profit society, we undertake work on behalf of the Society because of the collective spirit of the members and their dedication to our organization. Unlike for-profit companies that may award financial incentives for mentoring and leadership development, we do not. Within this context, how do we shape and sustain a culture that values leadership development?

As some of us come to SoTL work via different disciplines, we have an interdisciplinary discipline. How does leadership development happen within an organization with members of various disciplinary backgrounds?

I don't give answers here. I write these questions in the spirit of building these next steps with others.

In the inaugural issue of *TLI*, Mighty (2013), thinking back on her established academic career in SoTL, writes, "On reflection, this brings me to what is perhaps the most important lesson that I have learned in relation to SoTL—the critical role of leadership" (113).

Leadership is critical. Leadership focuses on the future. The future well-being of ISSOTL is tied to our dedication for building a leadership pipeline. Let's define these roles; let's define the values, vision, and work of these roles; let's raise future leaders.

Can you imagine the possibilities for growing SoTL if we dedicate ourselves to this work?

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