SoTL AFRICA

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Introduction

Hassan Wahab

It is my distinct pleasure to welcome you to this special issue of SoTL Africa, the first and only journal of its kind that is focused solely on Africa!

The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) is a pedagogical approach that contends that scholarly inquiry into teaching practices and student learning is essential for academic excellence (Boyer, 1990). SoTL seeks to generate scholarly insights into how students learn best, develop effective teaching strategies, and encourage educators to adopt a reflective, objective, and pragmatic approach to teaching and learning. A SoTL journal rooted in the African context will play an important role by providing a platform for sharing research, strategies, and insights specifically relevant to African educators and students. As Abrahamson argues in this volume, there are no dedicated institutional structures and policies to support SoTL and its growth in Africa, even as Universities across the continent are recognizing the need to move beyond traditional lecture-based teaching models and adopt more interactive, evidence-based pedagogical approaches.

In the Singular Teaching approach, which has dominated traditional classrooms, the teachers' work is private. Instruction is characterized by a predominantly teacher-centered pedagogy in which the instructor controls the learning process, and students occupy a largely passive role. It emphasizes the structured delivery of content, leaving limited room for student autonomy, critical thinking, or independent inquiry. The pedagogical relationship is hierarchical, positioning the teacher as the active subject and the student as the passive recipient of knowledge. Consequently, opportunities for dialogue, interaction, and collaborative knowledge construction are minimal, reinforcing a vertical rather than an egalitarian learning environment (Serin, 2018; Hu, 2024). In this case, there is little or no evidence gathering of effective teaching. SoTL addresses this teacher-centered approach by promoting a more student-centered, reflective, and participatory teaching paradigm. Instead of viewing teaching as simply delivering content, SoTL encourages educators to systematically investigate how their teaching practices impact student learning. This involves engaging students as active participants, fostering collaborative learning environments, and continuously assessing and refining teaching strategies based on evidence. Africa's diversity and complexities bring to the fore a unique set of educational challenges, cultural nuances, and resource considerations. The development and growth of SoTL on the continent will foster locally-informed teaching practices, encourage collaboration among African scholars, and promote the publication of studies that reflect African perspectives and experiences. SoTL Africa will help improve teaching and learning outcomes within the region, ensuring that educational innovations are culturally appropriate and effectively tailored to African contexts.

The goal of *SoTL Africa* is to create a vibrant platform where scholars, practitioners, and students can share insights, challenge existing paradigms, and contribute to the broader academic community's understanding of effective pedagogy across disciplines. This special issue features a handpicked selection of papers presented at the first SoTL Africa Conference, held at Ashesi University in September 2025. The papers reflect the journal's commitment to excellence, diversity, and relevance. We are proud to highlight contributions from both distinguished experts and emerging voices, underscoring our dedication to inclusivity and collaboration. Earle Abrahamson's essay offers an essential point of departure for understanding both the promise and the pressing challenges of advancing SoTL across the continent. By weaving together the themes of culture, community, and

co-creation, Abrahamson provides an irresistible vision for a distinctly African SoTL landscape—one that is deeply attentive to local epistemologies, power structures, and institutional realities. His analysis highlights not only the structural barriers that continue to impede pedagogical scholarship but also the tremendous opportunities emerging through regional networks, technological innovation, and collaborative capacity-building initiatives. In doing so, the essay sets a powerful tone for this issue's broader reflections on how African universities can cultivate a resilient, inclusive, and sustainable SoTL ecosystem. It reminds us that meaningful educational transformation requires not only new strategies but a renewed commitment to the shared values and collective energy that define the African higher education community. Nancy L. Chick offers a compelling reflection on what she calls a "SoTL mindset," an orientation rooted in epistemic responsibility, pedagogical humility, and deep attentiveness to the contexts that shape teaching and learning. She illustrates how meaningful inquiry requires acknowledging the limits of our own perspectives while actively learning from diverse educational realities—especially those outside dominant academic centers, such as those on the African continent. Through five interrelated moves—contextualizing, embracing complexity, engaging multidisciplinary thinking, practicing pedagogical humility, and fostering collegiality—she presents a framework for navigating SoTL as an ethical, reflective, and relational practice. Her essay invites readers to consider SoTL not as a fixed method but as an ongoing commitment to noticing, questioning, and learning across difference, making it a fitting contribution to this special issue of *SoTL Africa*.

In their paper, "Revitalizing Institutional Identity Post-COVID: A Pan-African SoTL Study Grounded in Kotter's Change Model and African Ontologies," Owusu-Ansah, Abrahamson, Annoh, and Owusu present a compelling Pan-African model for post-COVID institutional renewal by integrating Kotter's eight-step change framework with African philosophies of *Sankofa*[1] and *Sunsum*.[2] Through a five-week participatory intervention grounded in storytelling and student partnership, they show how cultural revitalization can be accelerated when indigenous knowledge systems and structured organizational change processes work in tandem. The initiative re-energized students' sense of identity, dramatically improved class attendance, and restored core institutional values of Scholarship, Leadership, and Citizenship. By highlighting care-driven practices, collaborative inquiry, and experiential learning, the authors offer a culturally responsive SoTL approach that is relevant across diverse African higher education contexts. This article provides a timely and innovative blueprint for addressing grand challenges in institutional culture and student engagement.

In "Cultivating Curiosity and Community: Teaching and Learning SoTL," Schrum, Fleming, Grunder, Harris, Knight, Kreitzer, Lemmons, and McKenna offer a rich and compelling exploration of how a thoughtfully designed SoTL course can become a transformative space for educators and emerging scholars. Through inquiry-driven learning, flexible assessment, and intentional community-building, the course invited students from diverse disciplines and professional backgrounds to discover SoTL not merely as a research approach, but as an intellectual home—one that values curiosity, humility, collaboration, and the shared commitment to improving student learning. The reflections featured in this article reveal how SoTL empowers practitioners at every career stage to ask better questions, rethink their teaching, embrace feedback, and situate their work within a wider community of scholars. Their contribution to this volume powerfully demonstrates that teaching SoTL is itself an act of cultivating the very dispositions the field seeks to advance, making this article a fitting and inspiring addition to the issue's broader conversation about reimagining teaching and learning.

SoTL Africa aims to be a catalyst for scholarly exchange, to encourage critical thinking, and to foster connections within and across disciplines. The articles in this volume demonstrate that. We invite you to engage with the content, participate in lively discourse, contribute manuscripts for publication consideration, and join us in shaping the journal's future direction. We look forward to building an impactful and dynamic community with you.

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NOTES

1. A central philosophy that emphasizes learning from the past to shape a better future.

2. It symbolizes the invisible energy that drives reflective action, reinforcing the intention to restore a culture to its authentic state.

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Addressing the Grand Challenges of SoTL: Pathways to Sustainable Educational Development in Africa through Culture, Community, and Co-Creation

Earle Abrahamson

The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) has emerged as a critical framework for enhancing pedagogical practices and advancing higher education globally. In Africa, where educational systems grapple with socio-economic and infrastructural challenges, embedding SoTL within sustainable development objectives is imperative. This essay explores strategies for fostering and institutionalizing SoTL in African higher education, employing Hutchings' (2000) framework to interrogate key questions: "What is SoTL in Africa?", "What works in promoting SoTL?", "What could be done to enhance SoTL?", and "What new theories can support the development of SoTL?" By aligning these questions with the five Grand Challenges for SoTL identified by Scharff et al. (2023), this essay examines pathways for institutional support, faculty development, and policy advocacy. Through the interconnected lenses of culture, community, and co-creation, it argues for a contextually relevant and globally informed SoTL ecosystem that fosters sustainable educational reform across the continent.

Keywords: SoTL, Sustainable, Afrocentric, Identity

Introduction

Understanding SoTL in the African Context

SoTL in Africa exists within a dynamic and evolving educational landscape. While growing awareness underscores its potential, systemic barriers such as inadequate institutional support, limited research funding, and faculty workload constraints hinder widespread engagement (Brew and Ginns, 2008). SoTL is often integrated within broader teaching and learning reforms rather than established as an independent field. National policies in countries such as South Africa and Kenya acknowledge the importance of pedagogical scholarship (Council on Higher Education, 2016), yet fragmented implementation limits its transformative potential. To strengthen SoTL in Africa, universities must develop coherent frameworks that align national educational goals with global standards while remaining attuned to local realities.

One of the primary challenges facing SoTL in Africa is the lack of dedicated institutional structures and policies to support its growth. In many universities, SoTL is not formally recognized within promotion and tenure processes, leading to a lack of motivation among faculty to engage in pedagogical research (Scott, 2009). Academics are often assessed based on traditional disciplinary research outputs, with limited incentives to prioritize teaching and learning scholarship. Without clear institutional policies that reward SoTL contributions, faculty members may struggle to justify

investing time in pedagogical research, particularly given existing workload pressures. Additionally, the absence of dedicated SoTL centres or research units in many African institutions limits opportunities for faculty development, mentorship, and sustained engagement with SoTL practices (Chaka et al., 2022).

Funding constraints further exacerbate these challenges. Research funding in Africa is typically allocated to scientific and technological fields, leaving limited resources for pedagogical scholarship. Many SoTL initiatives rely on external grants or institutional teaching and learning centers, which often have limited capacity to support large-scale SoTL projects. Without sustainable funding mechanisms, scholars face difficulties in conducting empirical research, attending international conferences, or publishing their findings in reputable journals. The high cost of academic publishing, particularly in international journals with high-impact factors, further limits African scholars' ability to contribute to global SoTL conversations (Chaka et al., 2022). Open-access publishing provides some relief, but financial constraints remain a significant barrier to knowledge dissemination.

Despite these challenges, there are significant opportunities to advance SoTL in Africa. The increasing emphasis on higher education quality and student-centered learning provides a strong foundation for SoTL growth. Universities across the continent are recognizing the need to move beyond traditional lecture-based teaching models and adopt more interactive, evidence-based pedagogical approaches. This shift aligns with the core principles of SoTL, which emphasize inquiry-driven teaching, reflective practice, and continuous improvement in student learning outcomes. By integrating SoTL into institutional teaching and learning strategies, universities can enhance the quality of education while fostering a culture of scholarly engagement with pedagogy.

International collaborations and networks also present valuable opportunities for African SoTL scholars. Collaborative research initiatives, faculty exchanges, and global writing groups provide platforms for African academics to engage with international SoTL communities, share best practices, and contribute African perspectives to global educational discourses (Matthews et al., 2017). Writing groups, in particular, offer crucial support for emerging scholars by facilitating mentorship, peer review, and joint authorship opportunities. These collaborations not only enhance research output but also help build a sustainable SoTL community in Africa, ensuring that scholars have access to the resources and networks necessary for long-term engagement.

Technology also plays a pivotal role in advancing SoTL on the continent. The increasing availability of digital tools, online learning platforms, and open-access resources enables faculty to engage with SoTL research, collaborate with peers, and disseminate findings more effectively. Virtual conferences and webinars provide opportunities for African scholars to participate in global SoTL discussions without the financial burden of travel. Moreover, digital platforms support the documentation and sharing of innovative teaching practices, allowing educators to contribute to SoTL even in resource-constrained environments. Leveraging technology can help bridge gaps in access to research materials, professional development, and scholarly networks.

Furthermore, aligning SoTL with broader educational priorities such as equity, inclusion, and sustainability can enhance its impact in African higher education (Scharff et al., 2023). Many African universities are actively working to decolonize curricula, incorporate indigenous knowledge systems, and address issues of access and equity in higher education. SoTL provides a valuable framework for examining these issues through an evidence-based lens, ensuring that teaching innovations are informed by research and contextualized within local realities. By positioning SoTL as a tool for educational transformation, African scholars can contribute to more inclusive, responsive, and socially relevant pedagogical practices.

While SoTL in Africa faces significant challenges—including limited institutional recognition, funding constraints, and faculty workload pressures—there are numerous opportunities to strengthen its presence. By developing supportive institutional frameworks, fostering international collaborations,

leveraging technology, and aligning SoTL with broader educational goals, African universities can create a sustainable and impactful SoTL movement. A strategic and collaborative approach to SoTL development will ensure that African scholars are not only active contributors to global pedagogical research but also leaders in shaping educational practices that reflect the continent's diverse and dynamic realities.

The Influence of Colonial Legacies and the Need for Afrocentric SoTL Identities

A major challenge in developing SoTL in Africa is the enduring influence of colonial educational structures, which continue to shape curricula and knowledge production. Decolonizing the curriculum requires integrating African epistemologies while critically interrogating dominant knowledge paradigms. Boyer's (1990) "scholarship of integration" underscores the importance of contextualizing knowledge, advocating for a synthesis of indigenous perspectives with global discourse. However, African scholars often navigate an academic landscape that privileges Eurocentric frameworks, raising questions about how African universities can engage with international scholarship without perpetuating intellectual dependency. Building Afrocentric SoTL identities necessitates not only revising curricula but also fostering a scholarly culture that legitimizes and prioritizes African ways of knowing. This effort must include establishing locally rooted research methodologies, strengthening dissemination platforms, and challenging structural barriers within Western publishing and funding systems.

Promoting and Sustaining SoTL through Institutional and Regional Networks

Ensuring the sustainability of SoTL development requires fostering robust scholarly networks within Africa. While international collaborations offer valuable insights, over-reliance on external expertise risks reinforcing intellectual dependency. Boyer's (1990) "scholarship of discovery" highlights the necessity of African scholars shaping SoTL discourse through regional collaborations and institutional support structures. Investing in mentorship, intra-African partnerships, and open-access platforms is essential to cultivating self-sustaining academic networks. However, to safeguard these initiatives from shifting international funding priorities, policies and frameworks must be designed to reinforce long-term sustainability. Strengthening these networks will provide African scholars with the means to produce and disseminate knowledge that is both globally engaged and locally relevant.

Effective Strategies for Advancing SoTL in Africa

Several strategies have proven effective in fostering SoTL engagement within African higher education institutions. Faculty development remains a cornerstone, with structured training, mentorship, and incentives driving meaningful participation (Tamrat and Teferra, 2020; Zeleza, 2009). For instance, the University of Cape Town's SoTL fellowships provide faculty with resources to conduct pedagogical research (Leibowitz, 2017). Institutional support is equally critical—integrating SoTL into policies and allocating dedicated research funding ensure its sustainability. Additionally, fostering collaborative networks, such as those facilitated by the African Network for Internationalisation of Education (ANIE), promotes knowledge exchange and shared best practices. Embedding culturally responsive pedagogies that incorporate African epistemologies and linguistic diversity enhances both the relevance and inclusivity of SoTL (Zeleza, 2009). These strategies highlight the importance of a multi-pronged approach that balances institutional, national, and regional efforts.

Scaling SoTL: Forward-Thinking Interventions for the Future

To further scale SoTL across Africa, forward-thinking interventions are necessary. Developing national and regional SoTL frameworks can formalize its place within higher education structures. Leveraging technology—through digital learning platforms, open-access resources, and virtual SoTL communities—can help overcome infrastructural limitations and expand engagement. Enhancing research and publication opportunities is another critical step; establishing African-led SoTL journals and conferences can bolster scholarly contributions and ensure visibility within global academia. Moreover, strengthening community engagement will allow universities to position themselves as active partners in addressing local societal challenges through community-based SoTL projects. These interventions will not only enhance SoTL but also contribute to the broader goal of sustainable educational development (Scott, 2009; Liebowitz, 2017).

New Theoretical Approaches to SoTL in Africa

The future of SoTL in Africa depends on the development of theoretical frameworks that align with the continent's educational realities. Emerging perspectives include Afrocentric pedagogy, which prioritizes indigenous knowledge systems, storytelling, and community-based learning (Chaka et al., 2022). Decolonial SoTL challenges Eurocentric models and advocates for curricula that reflect African intellectual traditions. Sustainability-oriented SoTL aligns pedagogical scholarship with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), ensuring long-term educational impact. Equity-focused SoTL seeks to address disparities related to gender, disability, and socio-economic backgrounds in higher education (Tamrat and Teferra, 2020).

A crucial element in shaping a sustainable and contextually relevant SoTL future in Africa is the development of international collaborative writing groups. These groups create inclusive scholarly communities that empower emerging African scholars by fostering mentorship, shared learning, and the co-construction of knowledge. Collaborative writing groups, particularly those that connect African scholars with global SoTL networks, provide essential support in navigating academic writing, refining research focus, and amplifying African perspectives on teaching and learning. Matthews et al., (2017) emphasizes the value of collaborative writing in deepening scholarly engagement and sustaining research communities, making these initiatives vital for Africa's SoTL ecosystem.

By cultivating structured international writing collaborations, African scholars gain access to diverse methodological approaches, constructive feedback, and opportunities for joint publications (Matthews et al., 2017). These partnerships not only enhance scholarly output but also reinforce the communal values embedded in African knowledge traditions. A robust, interconnected network of SoTL scholars across Africa—and beyond—ensures that emerging researchers are supported in producing high-quality, impactful work. Ultimately, fostering these writing communities strengthens the foundation for a thriving and sustainable African SoTL movement, driven by collaboration, inclusion, and a commitment to locally relevant scholarship.

Conclusion

The advancement of sustainable SoTL practices in Africa is both a challenge and a necessity for educational progress. By engaging with Hutchings' (2000) framework, this essay has examined key provocations that should be addressed to ensure SoTL meaningfully contributes to the continent's higher education landscape. Moving forward, collaboration among African scholars, institutional leaders, and global SoTL networks will be essential in crafting solutions that are both context-specific and globally relevant.

Culture, community, and co-creation must serve as the foundational principles of SoTL in Africa, ensuring its sustainability and effectiveness. Through intentional efforts to embed SoTL within African higher education, the continent can cultivate an ecosystem that fosters innovation, enhances pedagogical practices, and ultimately drives educational transformation. I conclude with the empowering words from the Hill we Climb by Amanda Gorman (2021) who wrote:

And yes we are far from polished
far from pristine
but that doesn't mean we are
striving to form a union that is perfect
We are striving to forge a union with purpose

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Revitalizing Institutional Identity Post-COVID: A Pan-African SoTL Study Grounded in Kotter's Change Model and African Ontologies

Angela Owusu-Ansah, Earle Abrahamson, William Annoh, Verissa Owusu

ABSTRACT: This study examines how the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) can address complex institutional challenges beyond classroom practice by revitalizing a disrupted university culture in a Pan-African context. Guided by Hutchings' (2000) future-oriented question of "What could be?", we applied Kotter's eight-step change model within a narrative participatory inquiry design that positioned students as partners in co-creating knowledge. The intervention integrated African philosophies of Sankofa (reflection for action) and Sunsum (interconnectedness), alongside storytelling as a traditional pedagogical tool, to foster cultural renewal. Felten's (2013) pillars of good SoTL and Hamilton and McCollum's (2024) emphasis on epistemological and ontological depth informed the approach, ensuring cultural responsiveness and collaborative engagement. A five-week catalytic intervention provided students with a lived experience of the original institutional culture, resulting in increased academic motivation, enhanced campus engagement, and a strengthened sense of identity. The process achieved short-term wins and accelerated change compared to the Concerns-Based Adoption Model (CBAM), reaching integration a year earlier than expected. Findings underscore the importance of care-driven practices, student partnerships, and indigenous knowledge systems in sustaining transformation. The study offers a model for addressing grand challenges in higher education and calls for future research on culturally grounded change frameworks, longitudinal sustainability, and the role of storytelling in SoTL.

KEYWORDS: Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, Kotter's Change Model, African Epistemologies, Institutional Culture, Student Partnership

Introduction

The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) invites educators to systematically investigate teaching and learning with the goal of improving practice and contributing to scholarly discourse. Hutchings (2000) frames SoTL through four guiding questions, including the future-oriented "What could be?", which challenges scholars to envision possibilities beyond current realities. Felten (2013) emphasizes that good SoTL is grounded in clear goals, appropriate methods, evidence of student learning, and is deeply contextual, collaborative, and public. More recently, Hamilton and McCollum (2024) argue that great SoTL extends beyond methodology to interrogate epistemological and ontological positions, shaping how knowledge and being are understood within educational contexts.

This study responds to Hutchings' (2000) call for future-focused inquiry by exploring whether a disrupted Pan-African university culture, fractured by COVID-19, could be revitalized. We viewed this challenge as a SoTL grand problem, complex, context-specific, and requiring innovative, collaborative solutions with potential transferability. Post-pandemic observations revealed a campus

marked by isolation, diminished student engagement, and weakened institutional identity, particularly among cohorts who had never experienced pre-COVID campus life. Against this backdrop, the study aimed to reimagine and rebuild a vibrant culture grounded in scholarship, leadership, and citizenship, while exploring how students perceive university culture as a foundation for future learning and campus life.

Institutional Values and Cultural Foundations

The university's institutional culture is built on three core values: **Scholarship**, **Leadership**, and **Citizenship**. These values were co-created by the university community during its formative years over two decades ago and continue to define its identity and collective purpose.

- **Scholarship** reflects a commitment to deep expertise, curiosity, and innovation. It involves asking questions that broaden understanding, embracing new ideas, connecting with peers in relevant fields, and sharing knowledge proactively.
- **Leadership** emphasizes enabling others to succeed, communicating effectively, taking initiative, and setting ambitious yet achievable goals. It calls for leveraging the talents and experiences of others and going beyond expectations to create a meaningful impact.
- **Citizenship** represents social and environmental responsibility, ethical behavior, and awareness of the long-term implications of decisions. It includes fostering community, leaving a positive legacy, and promoting well-being, all while enjoying the process of learning and growth.

This shared framework of values forms the foundation of the university's identity. The present study seeks to revitalize this identity in the aftermath of COVID-19 disruptions.

The Research Problem And SoTL Context

The challenge addressed in this study is complex and multifaceted, aligning with what Rittel and Webber (1973) and Bass (2020) describe as a "wicked problem." Such problems lack straightforward solutions and require innovative, collaborative approaches. Within SoTL, these challenges are recognized as critical to advancing learning in the 21st century.

Two of the five SoTL grand challenges underpin this work:

1. **Fostering Critical and Creative Thinking**
   Grand Challenge 1 highlights the need for learners and educators to think critically and creatively when addressing complex phenomena. Revitalizing a campus culture that most students have never experienced demands imaginative approaches and the synthesis of diverse ideas to envision new possibilities.
2. **Engaging Learners in Their Learning Process**
   Grand Challenge 2 emphasizes the importance of learner engagement. Students are motivated by different factors, and these motivations evolve over time. The intervention, therefore, incorporated multiple pathways for engagement, representation of information, and opportunities for action and expression (Hüvös, 2023).

Creating a supportive learning environment was essential. Students were expected not only to design a renewed culture but also to adopt and sustain it. This required institutional systems—encompassing faculty, staff, alumni, and resources—that value and reinforce the learning process. Such environments encourage risk-taking, build self-efficacy, and promote ownership of learning. They also

require educators to navigate complex social and psychological dynamics, including identity-related interactions.

Conceptual Framework

The concept of revitalization at the Pan-African higher education institution was grounded in its institutional identity, the integration of selected Ghanaian and African values, and established theories of change and revitalization. Two Ghanaian philosophical principles, Sankofa and Sunsum, informed the cultural dimension of the framework, while Wallace's revitalization theory, the Concerns-Based Adoption Model (CBAM), and Kotter's theory of change provided the theoretical structure.

In Ghanaian tradition, revitalization is understood as a reflection translated into action. Sankofa, a central philosophy, emphasizes learning from the past to shape a better future. It advocates returning to retrieve lost knowledge and wisdom to inform present and future development (n.d.; Amano Boateng & Maier, 2025). This principle aligns with the study's aim to revisit and reapply the institution's original values and identity as a foundation for cultural renewal.

Wallace (1956) extends this idea by conceptualizing revitalization as "a deliberate, organized, conscious effort by members of a society to construct a more satisfying culture." This notion of conscious effort resonates with the Ghanaian concept of Sunsum, which refers to spiritual essence, purity, and integrity. In this study, Sunsum symbolizes the invisible energy that drives reflective action, reinforcing the intention to restore the culture to its authentic state.

Wallace also identifies triggers for revitalization, noting that high societal stress, such as an epidemic, can catalyze cultural reconstruction. The COVID-19 pandemic, therefore, served as a significant stimulus for recovery. Wallace argues that individuals hold mental images of society and its culture, which influence their actions to reduce stress or transform society. This suggests that students and staff would be willing participants in the proposed change.

Change is the underlying process that enables revitalization. It involves both systematic procedures and shifts in individual mindsets, which are critical for sustaining transformation. The Concerns-Based Adoption Model (CBAM) offers a developmental approach to implementing change in educational settings (Hall et al., 2015). CBAM emphasizes understanding and supporting individuals throughout the adoption of innovations. It recognizes that successful implementation requires more than resources and training; it also depends on addressing the human element, including individual attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. The model's three diagnostic dimensions provide tools for assessing concerns and usage, enabling the development of tailored interventions to support success (Hord, 2006).

Kotter's theory of change complements this approach by outlining eight steps for effective transformation. These steps begin with establishing urgency and forming a guiding coalition, followed by creating and communicating a vision that delivers both short-term results and long-term sustainability. Kotter's framework informed the structure of the intervention and guided the process of cultural revitalization.

This study examines how engaging students who have returned to their Pan-African University after the COVID-19 pandemic in a structured initiative can serve as a catalyst for restoring and reimagining the institution's original culture. It examines whether active participation in this process can ignite a sense of ownership, strengthen institutional identity, and create a renewed cultural foundation that reflects both historical values and future aspirations.

The post-COVID disruption of institutional culture at a Pan-African University significantly affected students' sense of identity, and attendance in class was notably low. None of the students who resumed studies on campus after the pandemic had fully experienced the pre-COVID culture, making restoration challenging. Most students were unable to articulate or embody the university's identity.

Research Design

This study employed a narrative participatory inquiry case study design (Sonday et al., 2020), focusing on a single Pan-African university. The approach engaged a wide range of stakeholders in sharing narratives about institutional identity, including its past, present, and envisioned future. These narratives were elicited through student-led questions exploring the hearsay of pre-COVID culture, current experiences, and aspirations for cultural revitalization.

Narrative participatory inquiry was selected because it positions participants, particularly students, as co-creators of knowledge rather than passive subjects. This aligns with Felten's (2013) principle that good SoTL is collaborative and grounded in partnership with students. By inviting students to lead dialogue and reflection, the design foregrounded their agency and acknowledged their lived experiences as legitimate sources of knowledge. This participatory stance reflects an epistemological commitment to valuing diverse ways of knowing and an ontological recognition of students as active contributors to institutional transformation. Hamilton and McCollum (2024) argue that great SoTL interrogates systems of knowledge and being. In this study, the design incorporates African philosophical constructs and relational ontologies, situating revitalization within a Pan-African context that values communal identity and collective responsibility.

The design was further structured around Kotter's eight-step theory of change, which provided a systematic framework for guiding the revitalization process. Each step was embedded within the participatory approach and connected to the principles of student partnership and African knowledge systems:

1. Establishing a Sense of Urgency
   The disruption caused by COVID created a natural sense of urgency. This was amplified through student-led discussions that highlighted the loss of institutional culture and its impact on identity and engagement.
2. Forming a Powerful Guiding Coalition
   Students, faculty, staff, and alumni were brought together as a collaborative coalition. This group represented diverse voices and perspectives, reinforcing the principle of partnership and shared ownership.
3. Creating a Vision for Change
   Through narrative inquiry, participants co-constructed a vision for revitalizing the institutional culture. This vision drew on historical values of scholarship, leadership, and citizenship while integrating African philosophies such as Sankofa and Sunsum.
4. Communicating the Vision
   The vision was communicated through participatory forums, reflective prompts, and campus-wide dialogues. These activities ensured transparency and inclusivity, fostering trust and commitment.
5. Empowering Broad-Based Action
   Students were empowered to take initiative by designing and implementing cultural activities that reflected the shared vision. This step operationalized Felten's emphasis on student partnership as a driver of meaningful change.
6. Generating Short-Term Wins
   Early successes, such as increased student engagement in cultural events and improved attendance, were celebrated to build momentum and demonstrate progress.
7. Consolidating Gains and Producing More Change
   Feedback loops were established to refine strategies and sustain engagement. This iterative process enabled the coalition to adapt and expand its initiatives in response to emerging needs.

8. Anchoring New Approaches in the Culture
   The final step focused on embedding revitalized practices into institutional systems and traditions, ensuring long-term sustainability and alignment with the university's identity.

By integrating Kotter's structured change process with participatory inquiry, the design created a dynamic framework that honored African epistemologies and ontologies while applying globally recognized principles of organizational change. This approach not only addressed the immediate challenge of cultural disruption but also provided a model for collaborative transformation in higher education contexts.

Procedure (The Catalytic Revitalization Activities)

In five weeks, the university engaged over 60% of its 1100 students in intensive and targeted activities that operationalized the conceptual framework and the institutional identity (scholarship, citizenship, and leadership traits), a culture they had only heard about but not experienced in fidelity. The activities took the form of conversations, structured focus groups, storytelling, reflections, problem-solving exercises, and practical actions. Each catalytic activity gave students opportunities to show, do, or reflect on the "possibilities" of reversing the disrupted campus culture. The students were also encouraged to construct and plan short- and long-term actions and habits to sustain and revitalize a culture of their desires.

Catalytic Activities

In storytelling, some alumni volunteered to tell their university stories in panel format, fireside chat style, and structured group conversations. They used the opportunity to answer student questions about the university culture prior to COVID. The participating volunteer alumni were very passionate about their alma mater and provided many vivid examples of their institutional lived experiences to the current students. Approximately 300 students engaged with the alumni.
Additionally, a panel comprising a cross-section of students, alumni, and staff discussed the evolution of the university's culture through their unique lenses and experiences, providing the necessary context and history for understanding the present and planning for the future. In attendance were 30 students, alumni, and staff whose interactions contributed to the storytelling.

The storytelling activities included watching movies as a group and reflecting on them independently through writing. For example, the movie "Lean on Me" is a true story about the outcome of a highly prestigious high school's deterioration due to student apathy and its subsequent revitalization through intentionality and hard work. Over 600 students watched the movie with some administrators in an open courtyard and wrote reflections afterwards. The students immediately saw the parallels between us in our current state and the movie's theme.

In addition to storytelling, there were co-creating problem-solving activities, where faculty, teaching assistants (faculty interns), resident assistants, and staff each met at least once in small groups of 10–15 to discuss the problem and to respond to the following major prompts and other follow-up reciprocal questions_

- "What have you heard about our university's culture pre-COVID?"
- "What do you imagine as our most ideal campus culture?"
- "What can you do or we do to get us to our culture pre-COVID or better?"

The students narrated what they had heard and used stories to share their ideal university experiences, both past and future, that they envisioned for the university to return to its pre-COVID culture. They were also encouraged to suggest what they could do to get us to revert. As many as 900 of the 1300 students engaged in authentic, confidential dialogue. Approximately 600 students participated in in-class discussions with faculty, alumni, and faculty interns on the academic and personal factors that contribute to the collective culture. A total of 321 and 250 students participated respectively in the on-campus and off-campus "Hack-your-hall" (a hackathon concerning culture on student life, campus safety, relationships, etc.). Each group had a notetaker, and the data collected was collated and coded for thematic patterns and understandings.

Another focus was interconnectedness through many activity forms. Sometimes it involved holding an ice-cream social where students earned an ice cream cone only when they introduced themselves to each other in person and then successfully introduced their new acquaintance to another at the social. Many students only knew each other virtually, and these activities provided them with a reason to speak to one another and get to know each other in person. About 400 students participated.

Another interconnectedness activity involved having students learn about the services each university office offered. The activity required students to "travel across the University," where students were given an "airplane ticket" with a specific staff member at a departmental office as a destination, e.g., the HR Director's Office. On arrival at the office, the student asked questions to understand the HR Director's role and how her responsibilities impact the student. Approximately 100 students took part in this activity. The top three travellers were awarded prizes.

Interconnectedness with the university's goals and values was fostered through a scavenger hunt across the university. The activity served three purposes: students had to ask for directions from university staff and fellow students on how to get to various buildings and rooms, they gained knowledge of the campus layout, and they reinforced their awareness of the university's values. About 70 students participated in this activity.

Several other stakeholders also organized university identity–building activities. The university's Students' Council led activities such as outdoor picnics and games to support the institutional identity theme. About 200 students participated. The Office of Student & Community Affairs (OSCA), in addition to organizing and serving on panels, also provided opportunities for students to express themselves through art, music, and poetry, depicting cultural change. Approximately 30 students participated in this creative activity. OSCA recruited faculty and staff as hostel volunteer patrons to ensure the sustainability of the changes.

Instruments

Multiple instruments were employed to collect data and assess the impact of the revitalization initiative during the five-week catalyst period, as well as its projected long-term influence on institutional identity. Data collection included interviews, focus groups, and both structured and unstructured conversations, supported by note-taking and audio recording.

In alignment with Ghanaian traditions of knowledge transfer, surveys were not used. Instead, storytelling served as the primary method, incorporating alumni narratives, student accounts of the original culture, films, and group discussions. Storytelling is a cornerstone of African culture, used to transmit history, values, and social norms while fostering community. In this study, it was central to shaping and reinforcing institutional identity.

Observation was another key component. Custom-designed observation forms, which combined checklists and rating scales, provided a structured way to record behavioral patterns and changes, such as engagement outside the classroom and physical attendance, as indicators of motivation. Photos and video recordings supplemented these observations, while detailed field notes offered narrative accounts for later analysis.

Attendance records were analyzed to measure participation directly and academic engagement indirectly. Additionally, students' written reflections captured emerging thoughts and responses to the revitalization activities.

Ensuring Analytical Rigor

To ensure trustworthiness, multiple strategies were applied. Coding and analysis were conducted collaboratively by a team of researchers who met regularly to discuss interpretations, resolve discrepancies, and maintain consistency. This approach incorporated diverse theoretical perspectives.

Findings were validated through iterative comparison across interviews (Chui et al., 2014) and other data sources. Preliminary results, including key themes, representative quotes, and theoretical interpretations, were shared for feedback to confirm plausibility and identify missing perspectives or alternative explanations.

Results

The catalytic short-term activities resulted in two major outcomes: changes in students' behavior choices in the short term and the initiation of long—term mindset changes. The behavioral changes were observable during and after the catalytic activity period, and the emerging mindset shifts were evident in student reflections.

Short-term Behavior Changes

The most pronounced behavior change was in students' attendance at classes. There was a weekly check on class attendance, and absences dropped from 12% to 2%. With the increase in attendance, the campus social life improved, as seen in the photos below.

Long—term mindset changes initiated



Week 1 and 2




Week 5 and 6

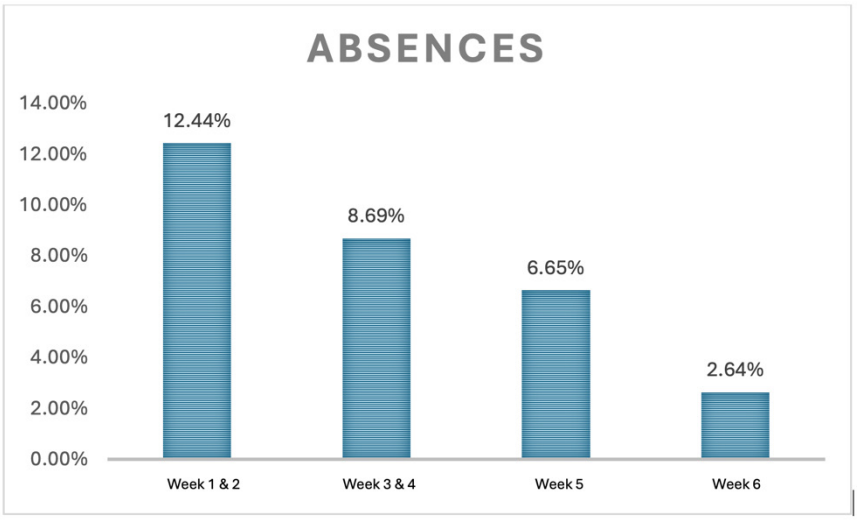

Figure 1. Trend of Absences over the Catalytic Period

The study had two primary research themes. The first were predetermined research themes based on the tenets of the original culture. Those themes were leveraged due to the integral role the desired institutional change played in the design of the interventions, and they were:

- Embracing fresh thinking (Scholarship)
- Asking questions that broaden the conversation (Scholarship)
- Reflecting for action (Sankofa)
- Being socially and environmentally conscious (Citizenship)
- Having fun (Citizenship)
- Connecting with others (Citizenship)
- Developing interconnectedness (Sunsum)
- Engaging talents, experiences, and capabilities of others (Leadership)
- Communicating effectively (Leadership)
- Setting ambitious yet attainable goals (Leadership)

The second type of themes in the research study were not predetermined, but rather emerged from coding the students' focus groups and interview transcripts. Out of the approximately 200 student-written reflections and conversation transcripts, the following additional major themes emerged as areas of focus in revitalizing the campus culture.

- Desirable and worth sustaining
- Needed to strengthen the university Ecosystem
- Introspecting and responsibilities
- The power of caring

Note: Introspecting and responsibilities could be conflated with "reflection and action" (Sankofa) of the conceptual framework. "Connecting with others" (an institutional citizenship trait) and developing interconnectedness (Sunsum) of the conceptual framework could also be conflated.

To illustrate each theme, student quotes and excerpts from students' writings have been provided.

Embracing Fresh Thinking (Scholarship)s

During the short-term catalytic period, the students demonstrated their openness to engaging in fresh thinking in their reflections, short conversations, and structured focus groups.

One student said, "[I don't see] Discipline as punishment [anymore. I understand now, and I know it's for my good."

Some students now believed that through sacrifice, determination, and hard work, one could turn a bad situation around. Others, after being introduced to the values, were convinced that they would need to cultivate the three values—citizenship, leadership, and scholarship—to help them succeed in their university life and post-university, because ethics and leadership didn't matter only at university.

Asking questions that broaden the conversation (Scholarship)

Some of the questions the students asked that made us realize they were thinking beyond the five weeks of activity, and extended the conversation, included:

"What are the measures we can use to guide and rate the change I have made, to see if it is working or not [and I wonder] if the impact will be for the long run?"

"Would you recommend Joe Clark's leadership style, and which community would this type of leadership style work best?"

"Would you say Joe Clark was a role model? Why or why not?"

Reflecting for Action connected with Introspecting and Responsibilities

When students were asked after a series of conversations, events, debates, and visualizations what they felt they could do to help the institution revive itself, they had the following to say (See Table 1). The bolded items have been made into posters and displayed in the classroom as daily reminders of their promises.

Table 1.
Sample of Students Quotes as a Resource for Classroom Posters

Poster Quotes Made	Poster Quotes to be Made
It begins with me.	Personal discipline.
I stay true to who I am, because The University is me.	Cultivate in me more ethical and social behavior.
	Do for others what you want others to do for you.
Be a friend.	Make the first move.
Be friendly.	Be kind to someone you do not know.
Expand your friend circle.	Respect boundaries.
Simply say "Hi"	Respect our values, religions, tribes,nationalities, and each other
Respect time.	
Consider other's views.	Build open mindedness.
Serve when the opportunity arises.	Agree to disagree
	Immerse ourselves in all we do.

"Lean on Me" is a great movie. First, it made me think about the discipline our university had before the COVID pandemic. The number of AJC [judiciary] cases before was [less] than the cases we have now. In comparing this to *Lean on Me*, the discipline wasn't in the school for quite some time. I believe that everything is a process, and it takes time to achieve one's goals. I believe there will be a change as time goes on, and the discipline that was once there will return. The movie has helped me

reflect. I believe I can be disciplined; I will be able to accept correction. As a final-year student, I am going to participate in my NSS [National Service]. If my boss is hard on me, I won't take it personally because I believe it will help me be more disciplined."

"The part that [resonated with me the most about the movie *Lean on Me* was when] Mr. Clark accepted his weaknesses as a leader when he was told by his vice principal that he should learn how to appreciate others too, and not only attribute all successes achieved with Eastside High to himself. This resonated with me because, as leaders, it can sometimes be challenging to acknowledge our shortcomings, especially when they are pointed out by the people we lead. Hence, I plan on harnessing this lesson learned from Mr. Clark in my leadership journey in the university and beyond to help me be an effective leader who always strives to create a diverse and inclusive environment where everyone feels like their opinions matter."

Having fun (Citizenship)

Fun was intentionally integrated into many aspects of the intervention. The most popular fun activity was watching a movie with 600 peers, outdoors in the evening, while enjoying free popcorn, pizza, and ice cream. The following are some of the things students said about the different activities or programs of the catalytic period:

"It was a great movie that did not only help release stress but also taught me lessons for future occurrences."

"We should have more of these kinds of hangouts. It is indeed a refreshing time for all of us. Thank you!"

"I look forward to more insightful movie nights with power-packed benefits for the whole community. Thank you."

"Just wanted to say that we really enjoyed it [all] and are grateful."

"The program was fun, and I would like it to be organized more often."

Connecting with others (Citizenship) & Developing Interconnectedness (Sunsum)

During this period, students were often grouped together, and out of these clusters, unstructured conversations emerged among community members, fostering new friendships and acquaintances across disciplines, year groups, and the broader community.

The chosen student quote talks about the value they now place on connecting well with others:

"This was a powerful reminder that no matter how great our ideas and motives are, we need to work well with others to make it happen. I am very passionate about changing things, but sometimes we can get so focused on that mission and think we are the only ones that [. . .] can make this change. But this is not true; if change is to be long-term and effective, I need to work with other people and believe in how they can also make this mission or goal a reality."

All the processes in the initiative would promote student interconnectedness, a trait of "Sunsum" that is considered important in revitalizing culture, fostering a holistic community, and society (n.d.; Amano Boateng & Maier, 2025).

Engaging talents, experiences, and capabilities of others (Leadership)

Some students represented the revitalization of the institution through their diverse talents in poetry and art. See below the poem "COVID-19 Wrapper" written by a student of the class of 2025:

"All we hear are stories of the energy and vibrance of this hill and how it resulted in a positive transformation of the students and faculty. And the truth is, we, as first-year students, long for this

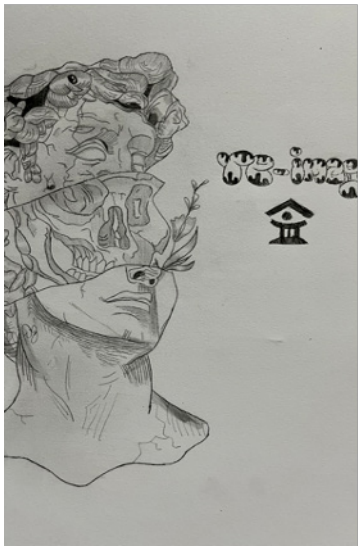

Figure 1. Student Depiction of Culture Revitalization

experience, and we see some of this energy seeping out from the post-COVID wrapping that restricts us as fiercely. But I am sure it is just a matter of time. I am sure no wrapper can ever contain the [university] energy."

Another student, through his artistic talent, expressed the reimagination and recreation of a desirable university culture. He depicted it as a head and face, gradually engulfing and covering the undesirable skeletal version of the current university culture. See figure 1.

Some student quotes on the value of various talents include:

"There is a lot of potential in everyone. I will have to work very hard to be my best in my life at [this university]."

"In our school environment, we are surrounded by so many people: students, teachers, cleaners, and security guards, among others. All of these individuals are part of our school and play a crucial role in fostering our culture, and must be considered and treated as such. This is what has impacted me most, and what I will carry in my life in [the university]."

Communicating effectively (Leadership)

Throughout the intervention, students, staff, alumni, and faculty had to communicate their messages clearly and honestly to be understood and appreciated by each other. Through a combination of active listening, empathy, and clarity, as well as verbal and nonverbal cues, in various opportunities, the students communicated their lived and preferred experiences.

Appreciating the Desirableness of the University (Desirable and worth sustaining)

According to a student, "This university culture should never fade, it's such a unique experience to be part of this community ❤️"

The students noted several aspects of the university that they admired, appreciated, and hoped could be sustained, as part of the revitalization. First was the environment; they felt that the university environment provided students with opportunities for self-discovery, self-growth, and healthy competition. All these were desirable traits because they motivated students to strive for greater achievement. They heightened students' standards and expectations of themselves, things like the university Honor code, which put you on the trajectory for a better self.

Students also valued the quality of the rigorous education they received, specifically, the student- and learner-centered teaching. Maintaining the relevance of the curriculum to work ethic and the workforce, they felt, was necessary for revitalization. The network experiences both local and global, as well as academic and professional, support systems, with caring faculty/staff, all of which are characteristics of the university that should be sustained.

Overall, the friendly and hospitable "my brother's keeper" attitude of students on campus was also a trait that students wanted to maintain. Finally, the intentionality with which the university approached almost all its tasks, including its culture, was to remain, if we were to achieve cultural revitalization.

Strengthening the Academic Ecosystem

The students offered advice to the faculty on scholarship expectations for a revitalized culture. Students were prepared to respond in certain ways to faculty actions aimed at revitalizing the institutional culture. Some of the imperfections and insufficiencies of the institution's citizenship that needed to be corrected during revitalization were identified by the students. The students proposed ways to strengthen the university's ecosystem:

"I would also like to suggest that students' opinions and issues at departmental levels be sorted out. I have observed that, due to COVID-19, students have withdrawn from social engagements and are primarily focused on achieving good grades, as many are struggling academically. Hence, students need to be listened to, supported, and encouraged. Each department could seek the opinions of students and find out 'what isn't' working, and I believe by this, the romanticized stress which has become normal among students will cease to exist."

Students requested more faculty involvement. They requested more Faculty-Student interactions at the departmental or university-wide level, possibly through increased opportunities for listening and communication. They also requested that faculty provide more intentional teaching of the expected culture and expectations, and asked that faculty model university expectations by adhering to university policies and exemplifying an ethical and entrepreneurial lifestyle. Faculty should consider "process" as equally important as the product and inspire students, checking for learning, not just grades or GPA.

The Power of Caring

One recurring comment from the students was the impact of the university's demonstration of care and concern on their willingness to reflect and speak up about the kind of culture the university should have and cultivate. Some student quotes include:

> "Thanks a lot for the effort you are putting into bringing back the university culture. The seamless organization and subtle impact were very evident to me. I loved the university I came to meet, and it's quite unfortunate that a lot has changed over the past few years. As I leave the university soon, I pray that things improve, and I hope the university spirit is reawakened. God bless you."

> One student vowed:

> "While at the university, or anywhere I am given the opportunity to lead, I'll be more loving to everyone around me."

> And another simply stated:

> #WeNeedToRebuildOurCommunity'sCultureAfterTheCOVID

Being Socially and Environmentally Conscious

Some students' awareness of the Pan-African foundation of the university was heightened during the conversations. They discussed intercultural understanding and relationships, as well as building cultural responsiveness among themselves. Some spoke of being more intentional, moving forward, to make international friends. Introverted students and international students wanted to feel less isolated and more integrated.

Setting Ambitious yet Attainable Goals (Leadership)

Many students, in their reflections, committed to life-changing goals, such as being firm in making decisions, never giving up in their efforts to achieve their goals, and paying attention to people, whether superiors or subordinates.

The Change Process

All these changes lead up to Kotter's steps 7 and 8, which are the final stages of attaining organizational change.

One student said, "As [activities, fun, pizza, etc.] can not be given all the time, and students may go back to withdrawing. I think we need to come up with ways to create a lasting change, a change that is from the heart and mind. That way, when all this is over, the change will live on. Thank you once again."

After the 5-week short-term catalytic intervention, some long-term changes emerged in the subsequent three years:

The policy on class attendance has been modified and is actively implemented. Students "**Will fail the course**" has replaced "May fail the course," if they are absent the equivalent of three weeks of a course in a semester, with no plausible reason, or "will be deemed no longer enrolled at the university" if the student makes no contact with any administrative staff.

The practice of a **weekly check-in** on all student attendance has become a permanent feature of the university. The Academic Affairs Projects Officer phones every student who missed class to offer "care". The student is asked how the office can assist in getting the student back in class.

Additionally, each semester, the week after mid-semester, students who are on the trajectory of failing a class due to absences receive an email with detailed information on the number of absences they have accumulated to date. This often curbs the behavior. Currently, weekly absences range from 3% to 6%.

The practice of creating posters featuring students' quotes to display in the classrooms has become a tradition. Currently, the posters are rotated regularly every quarter of the year around the classrooms, bulletin boards, and other areas on campus. The posters are also used to teach other characteristics beyond the student quotes. See Appendix 2.

Another tradition is the university's monthly "Academic Breaks" where the entire community—students, faculty, staff, administrators—come together for 20 minutes over light snacks, speaking to each other, meeting new community members, seeing people you had not seen in a while, rekindling each other's existence as members of the community.

On a regular basis, aspects of the "Pre-COVID values and culture" are displayed on bulletin boards, at orientations, in class, and elsewhere, with the content rotated and replaced to keep the concept dynamic, present, and sustained. See Appendix 3.

Discussion

We sought to understand what happens when students returning to a Pan-African university after the COVID-19 pandemic are engaged in a multi-year initiative designed to revitalize the original pre-COVID campus culture. This question was critical because when the campus reopened in January 2022, students continued to display behaviors of isolation. Most had little or no experience of the vibrant culture that previously defined the institution. The emerging culture was inconsistent with the university's mission, and academic motivation, engagement, and performance were steadily declining.

To address this challenge, we implemented an intervention grounded in African philosophies of reflection and action (Sankofa) and interconnectedness (Sunsum), storytelling as a traditional

Ghanaian pedagogical tool, Kotter's eight-step change model, and Wallace's revitalization theory. This structured approach ensured that cultural renewal was intentional rather than left to chance. The intervention successfully triggered revitalization and accelerated the restoration of what we describe as the "pure" institutional culture.

Our design reflects Felten's (2013) pillars of good SoTL, particularly the emphasis on student partnership, context, and public sharing of results. Students were positioned as co-creators of knowledge, leading dialogue and shaping the vision for change. This participatory stance aligns with Hamilton and McCollum's (2024) argument that great SoTL interrogates epistemological and ontological foundations. By valuing African knowledge systems and relational ontologies, we recognized students not only as learners but as agents of cultural transformation. This approach challenged dominant Western paradigms of change and affirmed the legitimacy of indigenous philosophies in the realm of higher education reform.

A key outcome was the achievement of short-term wins, which Kotter identifies as essential for sustaining momentum. Following the five-week intensive intervention, students showed increased engagement on campus, higher class attendance, and renewed participation in cultural activities. These changes reflected core institutional values: embracing fresh thinking and asking questions that broaden conversations (Scholarship), being socially and environmentally conscious, and connecting with others (Citizenship), as well as engaging talents, communicating effectively, and setting ambitious goals (Leadership). This collective mindset signaled the re-emergence of the original institutional identity.

Beyond restoring the pre-COVID culture, new student aspirations emerged. These included appreciation for the university's aesthetics and opportunities, a more balanced academic and social ecosystem between faculty and students, and recognition of the community's care and commitment. As one student noted, "It is not the activities alone that have made us change but the fact that you cared enough to do all that for us." This finding underscores the relational dimension of change and the importance of trust and belonging in cultural revitalization-elements central to SoTL's concern with learning environments and student engagement.

Another significant outcome was the accelerated timeline of cultural restoration compared to expectations based on the Concerns-Based Adoption Model (CBAM). While CBAM suggests that full implementation and fidelity often occur after four cycles or approximately four years, the desired level of cultural integration was achieved in the third year (Table 2 below). This acceleration may be attributed to the participatory design, student partnerships, and the structured application of Kotter's change process, which created urgency, built coalitions, and anchored new practices in institutional systems.

Table 2.
Levels of use

Level Characteristic Behavior	Approximate Timeline
Stage VI: Renewal. Seeks more effective alternatives to the established use of the innovation.	Year 5 onwards
Stage V: Integration. Makes deliberate efforts to coordinate with others in using the innovation.	Year 4
Stage IVB: Refinement. Assesses impact and makes changes to increase it.	Year 3
Stage IVA: Routine. Has established a pattern of use and is making few, if any, changes.	Year 3
Stage III: Mechanical. Is poorly coordinated, making changes to better organize use of the innovation.	Year 2
Stage II: Preparation. Prepares to use the innovation.	Year 1
Stage I: Orientation. Seeks information about the innovation.	Year 1
Stage 0: Nonuse. Takes no action with respect to the innovation.	Year 1

These findings demonstrate that intentional, culturally responsive strategies can successfully restore and enhance institutional identity in post-crisis contexts. They also emphasize the importance of integrating African philosophies with global change theories and SoTL principles to foster sustainable transformation in higher education. By combining Kotter's systematic approach with Felten's pillars and Hamilton and McCollum's call for epistemological and ontological depth, this study presents a model for addressing complex challenges in ways that respect local knowledge while contributing to the global discourse in SoTL.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the SoTL can extend beyond classroom-focused inquiries to address complex institutional challenges. Hutchings (2000) reminds us that SoTL is guided by questions that not only examine what works but also envision possibilities—"What could be?" This study embraced that future-oriented question by exploring whether a disrupted university culture could be revitalized and what new forms of identity and engagement might emerge in the process.

By applying Kotter's eight-step change model within a participatory design framework grounded in African philosophies of Sankofa and Sunsum, we successfully catalyzed cultural renewal in a Pan-African context. The five-week intervention provided students with a lived experience of the original culture, enabling them to move beyond imagination to active engagement. This approach aligns with Bandura's Social Learning Theory, Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle, and Dewey's principles of experiential learning, all of which emphasize learning through experience, reflection, and social interaction.

The outcomes affirm Felten's (2013) pillars of good SoTL—clear goals, appropriate methods, evidence of learning, and partnership with students—and resonate with Hamilton and McCollum's (2024) call for epistemological and ontological depth. By valuing African knowledge systems and relational ontologies, this study highlights the importance of cultural responsiveness in higher education transformation. The accelerated timeline of change compared to the Concerns-Based Adoption Model (CBAM) suggests that intentional design, student partnership, and care-driven practices can expedite institutional renewal.

Care emerged as a central theme. Students emphasized that the most powerful catalyst was not the activities themselves but the sense of being valued and supported. This finding reinforces African communal values such as Ujamaa and collectivism, which prioritize group well-being and interconnectedness. It also underscores the human element in change processes—successful implementation depends on relationships, trust, and sustained engagement.

Looking forward, this study opens possibilities for future research that extend Hutchings' vision of "What could be?" Comparative studies could examine how culturally grounded change frameworks operate across diverse African higher education contexts. Longitudinal research is necessary to evaluate the sustainability of revitalized cultures and the impact of student partnerships on maintaining momentum. Further inquiry into storytelling as a pedagogical and cultural tool within SoTL could deepen understanding of its impact on engagement and identity formation. Finally, research should explore how integrating global change theories with indigenous philosophies can inform models of institutional transformation that are both contextually relevant and globally significant.

By combining Kotter's systematic approach with Felten's (2013) pillars, Hamilton and McCollum's (2024) emphasis on epistemology and ontology, and Hutchings' (2000) call to imagine what is possible, this study offers a framework for addressing grand challenges in higher education. It demonstrates that revitalizing institutional culture is not only achievable but can be accelerated through intentional, participatory, and culturally responsive strategies that honor local knowledge while contributing to global SoTL discourse.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: The changes in the attendance policy

The policy on class attendance has been modified and is actively implemented. The bolded sections of the policy below reflect the changes. "Will fail the course" has replaced "May fail the course", and "will be deemed no longer enrolled at the university" has been added.

If a student misses the equivalent of more than three weeks of classes over the course of a semester, the student **will fail the course**. If the absence was due to a documented illness or other emergency, the instructor may assign an Incomplete (I) grade and allow the course to be completed upon the student's return to the school.

If the student misses more than three successive weeks of classes over the course of a semester, and does not make any contact with the instructor, finance, registry or OSCA, or any other administrative member of [the university] during that period, the student **will be deemed no longer enrolled at [the university].** The returning student would have to provide documentation of illness or another emergency and may have to reapply to continue studies for the subsequent semester. **Readmission will be determined on a case-by-case basis.**

Appendix 2: Students Quotes and Others Displayed in Classrooms

The practice of creating posters featuring students' quotes to display in the classrooms has become a tradition.

Appendix 3: Bulletin Boards with "Pre-COVID values and culture"

"A SoTL Mindset: Paying Attention to What We Don't (Yet) Know"

Nancy L. Chick

My understanding of the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) has been shaped largely by the places where I've lived and worked. In three decades of observing SoTL in action, I have participated in and facilitated workshops, listened to and delivered talks, and engaged in numerous conversations and consultations with colleagues across a range of disciplines, career stages, identities, institution types, and locations. Most of these experiences have been within the United States and Canada, so since SoTL is a global field, I've tried to complement these experiences beyond my home contexts. I've read voraciously, reviewed submissions for journals, conferences, and publishers, and analyzed hundreds of peer reviews for a major international SoTL journal and conference.

Yet my experiences with the International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (ISSOTL)—serving in various capacities on its Board of Directors and committees since 2004, co-founding and co-editing its journal for ten years, attending its annual conferences, and participating as an active member—have reminded me time and again that, because of my social, professional, and geographical position, my perspective is and will always be limited, despite my efforts to develop a broader understanding of SoTL understanding.

An example of this trying was inspired by Sarah Bunnell, who—in her capacity as ISSOTL President in 2021–22—invited Board members to form a reading group to study SoTL publications from around the world. Each of us read and shared articles from a different world region, and I chose South America.[1] Since then, I've expanded my reading to keep up with *SoTL in the South,* the journal about SoTL in the global south that launched in September 2017, and now look forward to doing the same with *SoTL Africa*. Through this part of my reading practice, I hope to engage seriously with specific articles and the particular and varied contexts they describe, and to better understand what SoTL looks like in these contexts. I recognize that insights based solely on published scholarship within one or two journals will remain incomplete, but I also believe that the only way to grow as a scholar and colleague is to try to name the gaps in my understanding and begin to close them—however imperfectly.

In their 2024 article, Prozesky and Ferreira helped me name this approach. Drawing on Mellor (2022) and Santos (2014), they describe "epistemic responsibility" as a stance that strives "striv[es] to remain critically reflexive about our privilege . . . within the colonial university as placing on us an ethical duty to keep moving" by "educat[ing] ourselves about non-dominant epistemologies and repertoires, not with the aim of 'explaining' and so recolonising them, but rather discussing them alongside dominant and disciplinary knowledges as 'part of an ecology of knowledges'" (p. 72). Their framing resonates deeply with me. It affirms that learning from contexts outside my own is more than an intellectual project: it's an ethical one. And so, I keep moving. In this special issue of *SoTL Africa*, I'll describe a very small part of this effort to educate myself within an "ecology of knowledges."

It's also helpful for me to be explicit here about my theoretical orientation to diversity and difference. I've long been inspired by McLaren's 1995 framework for explaining engagement with difference. He identifies four frames: conservative (which promotes assimilation to a dominant norm), liberal (which claims equality but ignores underlying hierarchies of power and privilege), left-liberal (which

emphasizes static, essential group boundaries), and critical (which explores the complex interplay of history, culture, power, and ideology). Aligned with the critical perspective, I work to take seriously the role of identity, context, and experience (Chick 2013).

Five Key Moves of Thinking, Doing, and Being in SoTL Spaces

Across many of my different experiences, including reading widely, I've observed five moves that manifest—either implicitly or explicitly—in a range of contexts: contextualizing, embracing complexity, pedagogical humility, multidisciplinary thinking, and collegiality (Chick 2023; Chick, Felten, & Mårtensson, 2025). Individually, each is important and not surprising. Collectively, they can become an integrative mindset that guides intentional *thinking*, *doing*, and *being* in SoTL. (See Figure 1.)

Figure 1. The Five Key Moves of a SoTL Mindset

I started thinking of them in this way while reflecting on the two most enduring metaphors that shape how we understand the field of SoTL as both diverse and accessible: the "big tent" (Huber and Hutchings, 2005, p. 4) and the "trading zone" (Huber and Morreale, 2002, p. 73). In these spaces, we see that SoTL requires more than research skills alone. It calls for an orientation that helps us navigate difference with care, make sense of the unfamiliar without oversimplifying it, and conceive of and conduct inquiry that is both situated and generous.

Below, I'll briefly explain what I mean by each move, and then I'll share how they helped me think about what I was reading in *SoTL in the South* within my broader understanding of the field of SoTL.

Contextualizing

SoTL is never generic, and context isn't a backdrop: it is the terrain on which SoTL unfolds. Every project exists within a particular set of conditions—disciplinary, institutional, geographic, demographic, and historical. This means we name those conditions and take them seriously as part of our inquiry, a move that grounds us in the specific and resists the pull toward universal claims.

This move is the enactment of what I've learned from Looker (2011, 2018), Chng and Looker (2013), Blair (2013), and Chng, Leibowitz, and Mårtensson (2020), among others.

Pedagogical Humility

At the heart of SoTL is a willingness to admit that we don't know everything about teaching and learning, particularly in our own practice. We acknowledge that our teaching—no matter how thoughtful—doesn't automatically lead to learning, and that our experience and expertise don't always give us accurate insights into what students know, feel, or need. In SoTL, we ask questions not because we are certain, but because we are curious, open to being surprised, and aware of the limitations of our understanding. Pedagogical humility is a deeply epistemological and inquiry-driven disposition for authentic questioning, being surprised by evidence, and changing course accordingly.

This move is the enactment of what I've learned from Skorczewski (2000), Meyer and Land (2005), Fallon (2006), Poole (2018), and Gauthier (2025), to name a few.

Embracing Complexity

Teaching and learning are not simple inputs and outputs. They are layered processes shaped by cognition, emotion, experience, identity, power, history, and more. SoTL asks us to honor this complexity by resisting tidy explanations or quick fixes and exploring the messy, multifaceted nature of what happens in and out of the classroom. This move gives us permission to say, "It's complicated," and to keep asking questions. It's why SoTL often leads to patterns rather than prescriptions and to imperfect yet meaningful findings that contribute to understanding.

This move is the enactment of what I've learned from Pace and Middendorf (2004), Johnsen, Pacht, van Slyck, and Tsao (2009), Poole (2013), Manarin, Adams, Fendler, Marsh, Pohl, Porath, and Thomas (2021), among others.

Multidisciplinary Thinking

SoTL typically grows from the disciplinary expertise of the individual practitioner, but it also thrives in conversation across fields. This openness involves drawing on the insights of our own disciplines while reaching outward to learn from others. Since disciplinary thinking is often how we orient ourselves to making meaning, SoTL's multidisciplinary thinking can also be disorienting, but it's one of the field's greatest strengths. This move is why we actively seek participation and welcome colleagues from all disciplines—to ask questions, explore issues and experiences, and practice SoTL in ways that complement our own.

This move is the enactment of what we've learned from Huber and Morreale (2002), Poole (2013), Simmons et al (2013), and many, many others.

Collegiality

Finally, SoTL is not a solitary pursuit. Even single-authored projects involve, at the very least, students and ultimately an audience. In these moments and more, we realize that SoTL is relational, so it's grounded in collegiality. This move isn't about being nice or polite or avoiding disagreement: it's recognizing the diversity of the field as a strength, rather than an obstacle. This recognition guides us to lead with generosity before criticality, humility before certainty, and listening before speaking. We

This move is the enactment of what we've learned from Phipps and Barnett (2007), ISSOTL's conference pedagogy (2017), Yahlnaaw (2019), Potter and Raffoul (2023), Felten and Geertsema (2023), and more.

These moves are broad enough to take shape in varied ways, so rather than using them as standards and universals, I think of them (individually and together) as a lens to understanding and navigating such a diverse field. Used wisely, this mindset can illuminate rather than erase this diversity as we see *if* and *how* the moves are made by different scholars and in different contexts.[2]

This use is what I'd like to illustrate below, guided by the question *What do these moves look like in contexts that are not my own?* I know I'll misstep, but I share my analysis to model that epistemic responsibility of cross-contextual learning that's grounded in listening, shaped by humility, and committed to honoring the richness of what others are doing—not just where I am, but around the world.

Contextualizing

In "Choosing to Learn Outside the Classroom: Rural South African Students' Motivation For and Benefits of Participating in Voluntary International Virtual Exchanges," Breshears and du Plessis (2024) offer a powerful example of contextualizing. In their study of an international virtual exchange program, context is central to their inquiry, not simply the background or setting. The authors

repeatedly point out that their specific context addresses a gap in the literature: studies of these programs have typically focused on exchanges that are part of a course and in developed Western countries. In contrast, their program is voluntary, and the study is located in the specific social and educational realities of rural South African students at the University of the Free State's Qwaqwa campus. Breshears and du Plessis share the results of a focus group interview with 16 students who, like their campus peers, "do not have the means to study abroad" (p. 19), "do not get many opportunities to interact with foreigners" (p. 24), and for whom "English is a third or fourth language" (p. 29). The authors also point out that, although their exchange is with an American university, "it is usually the Western partners' perspectives that are recorded in scholarship" (p. 28), but they focus exclusively on the Qwaqwa students, which begins "to give voice to African students by exploring the experiences of rural South African students" (p. 21).

Multidisciplinary Thinking

Bhutta, Chauhan, Ali, Gul, Cassum, and Khamis's (2019) "Developing a Rubric to Assess Critical Thinking in a Multidisciplinary Context in Higher Education" illustrates multidisciplinary thinking not just in theme but also in method and collaboration. In developing a rubric for assessing critical thinking, faculty from education, nursing, and medicine worked together, recognizing that critical thinking was a valued attribute and challenge across their diverse disciplines. This partnership—reaching across both professional boundaries and national ones, with a Canadian policy research group—enabled them to identify five components of critical thinking that could be meaningfully applied whether a student was critiquing educational interventions, analyzing medical cases, or evaluating nursing practices. Their process was iterative and collective: the authors drew on rubric formats from different fields, adapted them for common use, and field-tested the result with students from several disciplines.

What stands out in this approach is their refusal to settle for discipline-specific definitions or measures of critical thinking. By creating a tool that speaks across multiple fields, they invite us (like their students) to consider how skills like critical thinking are at once locally situated and broadly applicable. In this way, their work illustrates that multidisciplinary thinking within SoTL is not a simple additive process. Instead, it produces new frameworks for teaching and evaluating learning that are flexible and robust, highlighting the generative possibilities that emerge when disciplinary conversations open onto shared concerns.

Embracing Complexity

Prozesky and Ferreira's (2024) "collaborative, multivocal autoethnography" described in "Projections on (Re)designing Pedagogical Pathways Toward a Decolonial Praxis" models embracing complexity. They recount the process of revising and decolonializing a literacy theories course in 2018, 2021, and 2023 based on "in-the-moment decisions we make in the flow of interactions with students, taking stock of the tensions and stumbling blocks we encounter" (p. 68). Their approach to course redesign leans into the specific students in the class, "as the configuration of bodies, identities, languages, knowledges, dispositions, affects, and materialities of learning mode has changed year by year" (p. 66)—a design principle that "encourage[s] emergence" (83). The agility and responsiveness of these author-teachers honor the complexity of teaching and learning by embracing the intersectional identities of their students and themselves, treating moments of uncertainty in the classroom as sources of insight, and resisting the finality of a course plan and the linearity of course redesign.

Collegiality

In "Emerging response-abilities: a reflection on the 2019 SOTL in the South conference," Cook (2020) demonstrates collegiality in her analysis of the 2019 SoTL in the South Conference. She foregrounds human connection, shared values, and a commitment to growth within scholarly community. In one session, she recalls a moment of feeling "awkwardly emotional, suddenly very aware of being a human among other humans" and, later, "a greater awareness of the living things around me" (p. 75, 76). She celebrates finding

> a much-needed community of practice – a group of passionate educators, curriculum theorists and academic developers, many of whom were deeply conscious of the ways in which coloniality could influence work at an 'African university', as well as of the many other contradictions of education in 'Southern' contexts. (p. 72)

She takes great care in naming and summarizing the speakers and presenters who resonated with her, and writes a touching "Acknowledgements" that frames her essay as "a little goodbye to Brenda [Leibowitz]" after her death: "I *loved* Brenda's influence on my life" (p. 82).

She also demonstrates that collegiality is more than professional courtesy or kindness: it also brings a relational ethics that leads her to critique some presenters for ignoring the conference's context and theme grounded in power, positionality, and the uneven terrain of higher education in the global South. In contrast to these "docile" sessions (p. 77), Cook looks for what Ng and Walsh call "an ethos of response-ability," or a shared ethical commitment to social justice and mutual learning (2019, p. 81). She imagines her fellow "Southern SOTLers enter[ing] together, with dignity and respect for one another, into the practice as a kind of decolonial unlearning and relearning" (p. 77).

Pedagogical Humility

I had a difficult time pinpointing clear illustration of pedagogical humility. Many articles in *SoTL in the South* take the form of principled commitments to widespread transformation (e.g., offering affirmative proposals, theoretical models, or policy critiques that reflect the urgency and conviction of their educational contexts) more often than introspective inquiries about what we don't yet know about student learning. Also, pedagogical humility may be more common in the earlier stages of doing SoTL. It may, for instance, be the inspiration for developing inquiries to learn what's really happening in a class, or later when we take a closer look and are surprised by what we find. In both of these moments, we may realize that our assumptions about our teaching and our students' learning have been wrong. But this recognition may not make its way into the public academic work of publications and presentations that trend toward confident representations of answers to questions, solutions to problems, and successes rather than failures. Indeed, SoTL is rife with "progress narrative[s] full of obstacles overcome, lessons learned, the triumph of a problem solved, and the teacher-scholar as the hero" and "redemption stories" that follow "a cycle of linear progress and constant improvement" (Chick, Cruz, Friberg, & Steiner, 2021, p. 9; Halpern, 2023, p. 5). The implicit expectation of certainty in our public voices leaves little room for expressing humility.

However, Samuel's "No Student Left Behind: 'Pedagogies of Comfort' or 'Pedagogies of Disruption'?" (2022) reflects on a time when nearly everyone experienced a little pedagogical humility: the shift to emergency remote teaching during the pandemic. Samuel's descriptions of coordinating postgraduate programmes and supervising doctoral students during this time offer glimpses of this uncertainty. He admits, "My own competences" for developing asynchronous online material "needed to be refined" (p. 131), and when he struggles to get his students to interact with each other, himself, and his content, he confesses that "My strategies for interrupting my presentation modes with numerous calls for commentary or critique sometimes collapsed dismally" (p. 131, 132). As he

reflects on students' "learned passivity" and retreat into the "comfort zone" of "front-led pedagogies" (p. 128, 121, 124), he also recognizes that for these students—who were also teaching their own classes—"the workload was simply overwhelming" (p. 135). In the end, he balances his critique with a humble confession: "A strategic self-reflection includes not just a deep critical engagement with the problematic habits and routines of others but equally how we personally sustain current hegemonic inequities and social injustices (sometimes unknowingly)" (p. 136).

Insights about the Ongoing Work

These examples reveal a few important insights about this SoTL mindset in practice. First, they demonstrate that the five moves are not abstract principles but lived practices that take on specific meanings within particular contexts. Collegiality at a SoTL conference in South Africa looks different from collegiality in the United States: the former embeds an expectation for "speak[ing] back to dominant economic, social, philosophical and pedagogical frames of reference" (Cook, 2020, p. 77), and the latter embeds an expectation for being about SoTL, but both share a fundamental commitment to mutual learning and effecting change in higher education.

Second, these examples show how one's context doesn't simply "adjust" SoTL; it sharpens its lens. By centering rural South African students rarely featured in exchange program research, Breshears and du Plessis show that context can expand the very questions we think to ask. Their study demonstrates that paying close attention to contextual realities can uncover dynamics that remain invisible when our inquiries default to the familiar and the known.

This variety shows that the SoTL mindset isn't prescriptive; it's generative, with different emphases emerging from the roles of identity, context, and experience. That plurality strengthens—not fragments—the field. When Breshears and du Plessis shift the lens toward rural South African students, or when Prozesky and Ferreira rethink literacy education through decolonial practice, they show that context not only shapes inquiry but expands its very possibilities.

These scholars demonstrate that adopting (or adapting) a SoTL mindset is not about importing a model from one region to another. It means rooting the work in the specific realities of context while remaining connected to a wider community and its commitments to improving higher education. Many articles in *SoTL in the South* reveal scholars engaging with the pressing and place-based concerns of their institutions—challenges shaped by historical, political, and socioeconomic forces that are not always acknowledged in US-based SoTL. Of course, our classrooms here are also shaped by politics, histories, and inequities, but we rarely acknowledge this fact. Too often, we act as though our classrooms are neutral laboratories, detached from the world. The work in *SoTL in the South* reminds me that this detachment is itself a fiction that doesn't serve us, our students, or our systems of higher education well.

In the end, what these readings confirm for me is that SoTL is, at its core, a practice of paying attention—paying attention to the contexts that shape teaching and learning, to the questions that emerge from those contexts, and to the limits of our own perspectives. The five moves I've described can help us cultivate this attention, but they only matter when they are lived out in particular places, with particular people. For me, then, the task is not to arrive at a definitive model of SoTL, but to keep noticing where I stand, where others stand, and what becomes visible when we listen across those differences.

NOTES

1. In another paper, we're writing about what we learned from our readings and conversations, and from our presentation of what we learned at the ISSOTL23 conference.

2. In fact, the reading group led by Sarah Bunnell confirmed what others have argued for years about the relative narrowness of contextualizing in the United States (Blair, 2013; Looker 2018): the contexts for American SoTL projects are typically described at the scale of the classroom or the institution and most often with just the facts of demography and perhaps geography. Many of the articles we read from South America and Africa, on the other hand, are contextualized at the scale of nation, continent, and even hemisphere, and almost always within the geopolitical realities of higher education.

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Cultivating Curiosity and Community: Teaching and Learning SoTL

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Introduction

In 1995, Barr and Tagg described an important movement in higher education:

> the paradigm that has governed our colleges is this: A college is an institution that exists to *provide instruction*. Subtly but profoundly we are shifting to a new paradigm: A college is an institution that exists to *produce learning*. This shift changes everything. It is both needed and wanted. (p. 12, emphasis added)

Barr and Tagg described a transition from a focus on teaching to one on learning. This meant paying attention to students as active participants in the classroom—learners with agency, interests, and histories—rather than as recipients of content. It is an acknowledgement that something complex happens between what a teacher does and what a student learns and it is this in-between that SoTL seeks to understand. Thirty years later, despite significant progress, this shift is still in process. Teaching SoTL courses is one way to encourage this momentum.

In fall 2024, Schrum taught a graduate-level SoTL class at [redacted], an access-oriented, research-intensive institution in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States serving a majority-minority population of over 40,000 students. This online course met synchronously for eight weeks and asynchronously for six. In fall 2024, Schrum redesigned the class to accommodate both novice and advanced students, meaning some who had experience with SoTL and others who were encountering it for the first time. Schrum's goals in teaching the class including introducing basic concepts and seminal works, expanding SoTL capacity, and helping students develop practical research skills. The course incorporated inquiry-based learning (Feldt & Petersen, 2021; Sleeter et al., 2020) and authentic learning (Herrington, 2015; Pallant et al., 2022; Schrum et al., 2021) as well as a flexible assessment approach allowing students to select assignments from a list of options or suggest their own assignment formats.

There are some things Schrum will change in the future, but as a whole the course provided a positive learning opportunity for the instructor and, based on class feedback, for the students. In this article, seven students share their experiences in the SoTL course. These students come from a range of disciplinary and professional backgrounds, including academic libraries, higher education administration, online learning, student affairs, public health, and forensics, as well varied levels of experience with SoTL. This is a fairly accurate representation of the field as a whole as scholars come from all disciplines, discover SoTL at different points in their careers, represent a wide range of teaching backgrounds and contexts, and rely on a variety of methodological approaches.

About the Course

The overarching course goals included exploring the study and advancement of teaching and learning in post-secondary education; current literature on SoTL; diverse theories, methodologies, and

conceptual frameworks; and practical applications of research into teaching and learning in higher education (see Appendix A). Specific topics included the history of SoTL, SoTL across disciplines and perspectives, methodological pluralism, emerging technologies, and current issues and debates. The course established a shared definition of SoTL, the systematic study of teaching and learning in higher education with the goal of improving student learning. SoTL research should also be methodologically sound, conducted in partnership with students, situated in context, peer reviewed, and public (Felten, 2013; Miller-Young & Chick, 2024). Equally important, SoTL may examine disciplinary or interdisciplinary perspectives as well as collaborative projects across institutions, nations, and continents while contributing "something novel" to the larger "body of knowledge" (Cruz et al., 2024; Miller-Young, 2024, p. 228).

One central learning goal was for students to gain hands-on experience designing or piloting a SoTL project relevant to their disciplinary interests and professional goals. This inquiry-based approach allowed students to frame their SoTL proposals or pilot studies through their own scholarly interests, expand knowledge of existing literature relevant to their work, and practice designing or carrying out a pilot study. Research topics included student experiences of ungrading, pedagogical change during an institutional learning management system (LMS) transition, the impact of co-curricular engagement on student learning, student response to a teaching innovation, and first-generation student self-efficacy.

The culminating assessment was carefully scaffolded to build capacity and skills throughout the semester. Students completing a pilot project submitted a proposal, two project updates, and a final reflection. They met individually with Schrum in week 3 to discuss the project and presented their findings to the class in week 14. Students new to SoTL submitted a topic, drafts of their annotated bibliography, curriculum vitae, and research proposal, and a final version. They also met individually with Schrum in week 5 to discuss the project and presented their work to the class in week 14.

The remaining course assignments followed a "choose your own adventure" model, similar to contract grading (Blum & Kohn, 2020; DasBender et al., 2023), and students could earn up to 100 points. The research proposal was worth 40 points and the pilot study 70 points. In addition, students completed one SoTL conference reflection, one weekly response, and one SoTL engagement activity. SoTL engagement options included teaching a SoTL activity during class, drafting a SoTL conference proposal, or reviewing an article for a SoTL journal. Students could select any combination of these assignments to earn the remaining points. Participation was expected but not graded, including preparation for class and engaging with all activities synchronously and asynchronously. As a scholar committed to open-access content, Schrum selected Open Educational Resources (OERs) and materials available to students through the institutional library. Many of these resources are freely available to anyone worldwide (see Appendix A).

Several aspects of the course design and implementation worked well. As discussed throughout this article, students formed a strong community, learned from each other, and supported each other's work. They engaged in individual inquiry, expanded knowledge of relevant literature, and strengthened SoTL research skills. There was a sense of shared respect and students listened to advice from classmates, sometimes rethinking research designs or investigating new questions.

There were also challenges. It was more difficult than anticipated to meet the needs of novice as well as advanced SoTL scholars. In some ways, this is a realistic scenario. SoTL spaces, such as conferences or workshops, attract teachers and scholars at all stages by design and necessity. Instructors come to SoTL from many places, at various stages in their careers, and with different questions and interests. Some are new to academia, SoTL research, or thinking critically and carefully about their own teaching while some have many years of experience. When teaching the course in the future, Schrum plans to build in more scaffolding and structure for those newer to SoTL while still allowing for independent work. In the future, for example, Schrum will include asynchronous weeks for

advanced students while requiring more synchronous class meetings for novice learners as well as more formal mentoring opportunities between advanced and novice learners.

Fleming: A Truly Eye-Opening Experience

I am a global health epidemiologist and faculty member in the [public health college]. My research centers on adolescent health, specifically bullying and mental health, and on maternal and child health, with a focus on health care access. As an instructor, I am passionate about teaching and learning because my work involves training the next generation of public health professionals. Despite years of teaching experience, I enrolled in this course to formally learn SoTL strategies. During the semester, I developed a research project for my health statistics course. My goals were to explore current research on best teaching practices for statistics courses and, through qualitative research methods, gain a deeper understanding of students' experiences in the course.

Looking back, this graduate-level SoTL course was a truly eye-opening experience. I was amazed by the depth, variety, and innovative approaches to research within this field. This SoTL course introduced research methodologies, offered valuable insights into education-focused research, and inspired me to pursue new pathways for learning from my students with the aim of improving my teaching and their classroom experience.

Student interactions within the course were key to creating a dynamic and engaging learning experience. The class structure fostered an incredibly supportive and collaborative environment where both beginners and advanced students were welcome and could learn from each other, allowing for open discussions about individual projects in a manner that embraced feedback and encouraged growth. Engaging with course material and observing and learning from my peers highlighted the diverse approaches and complexities inherent in SoTL research, all united by the common goal of enhancing student learning and engagement in the classroom. Schrum made this classroom experience unique and incredibly rewarding!

This course has provided me with invaluable access to a rich and vibrant SoTL community. As an experienced educator, I felt that, through this course, I stumbled upon a hidden world of like-minded individuals who are passionate about improving education and enriching student experiences in the classroom. This SoTL community has been welcoming and open to new ideas, which reflects a strong dedication to research and fostering innovative teaching practices across various disciplines. As I move forward in my SoTL journey, I aspire to expand research on public health education, identifying areas for curriculum improvement while maintaining a student-centered approach to training and education. Through this SoTL-focused class, my instructor, and my classmates, I have found a new connection to the world of education research, creating a treasure trove of endless possibilities.

Grunder: Embodying SoTL: An Experience of Class and Community

My introduction to SoTL preceded my enrollment in Schrum's class. I was invited to lunch by a group of fellow doctoral students already engaged in the SoTL universe. I thought it was just a casual lunch, but my hosts said, "Hey, we do this thing called SoTL and we think you might be interested in it." These students invited me into fellowship in a way that I now see actualized a small model of the wider SoTL community—diverse, interesting, student-focused, and welcoming. SoTL origin stories abound, but I actually became a part of the SoTL community before I even knew what SoTL was.

Lunch provided the invitation, but Schrum's SoTL class proved to be the training ground. Early in the semester, I taped an index card above my desk with my quick summary of SoTL goals: 1) enhance instructor teaching practices; and 2) enhance student learning experiences. Our class included students (and auditing faculty!) who kept those two goals in mind while working across diverse academic fields. I learned from classmates who were asking fascinating and insightful questions, such as a health

sciences faculty member who was auditing the class to build out a framework for understanding student success in a required statistics class; a university administrator in charge of online learning investigating how faculty learn and adapt to a new online learning platform; and a doctoral student serving as the director of a first-generation program exploring how students in the second year of the program were building on the experiences in their first year.

Throughout the semester, I learned how to ask better questions in an environment where I could safely offer initial ideas and ask for help. I discovered that SoTL could work in any area of student learning, including co-curricular and extra-curricular spaces, where my scholarly and professional interests lie. We read "classics" of SoTL, including Peter Felten (2013) and Nancy Chick (2018), and were encouraged to identify articles SoTL in our fields. I focused on SoTL in student affairs (Braxton et. al., 2024; Gansamer-Topf et al., 2024a; Gansemer-Topf et al., 2024b), an emerging area.

In many ways, though, I learned the most about SoTL by watching Schrum "SoTL" the class itself. Schrum operationalized the SoTL throughout the class. The class structure encouraged students to prioritize their areas of research across assignments, reflecting the diversity of the SoTL community. Even with the variety of student research topics, my "index-card goals" remained the driving force throughout the semester. We were provided opportunities to demonstrate our learning and engagement. We received near-immediate feedback, both from our peers and from Schrum, and we collectively became co-teachers and co-learners. Schrum continually modified her co-operative teaching style to maximize student learning while empowering student engagement, including shifting gears if student learning seemed to have stalled.

For example, the class was designed as a "choose your own adventure"—we had a variety of assessments and assignment styles to choose from with flexible submission dates. We could write essays, for example, or facilitate class presentations. As students, we were empowered to pick and choose assignments that worked best for us and our research. This flexibility, however, proved to be a bit overwhelming for some students (like me!) who have learned to rely upon the structure of the syllabus to organize their work. Schrum listened to the feedback and implemented a mechanism for students to create the needed structure and schedule to stay on task. I could see Schrum learning about how we were learning and watched her make adjustments to maximize the experience. The class was not just about SoTL, it embodied it.

My experience in this class was transformative. I am learning how to ask and answer questions that do not fit into pre-defined methods of inquiry. These questions are messy and their answers can be even messier. Often my questions leave me with more questions. But through SoTL, I have found a community willing to help me refine my questions and employ a variety of methods to answer them, all directed towards enhancing teaching and learning. I am learning from scholars in fields whose questions and methods are foreign to my own but who share the same two goals that I still have taped over my desk.

From my first moment as a SoTL scholar, I felt valued and welcomed—even as a student. Through SoTL, I have seen senior scholars embrace their identity as students, interested in learning how students learn and how to improve their own teaching. On the flip side, SoTL has helped me see myself as not just a student, but as a scholar whose questions and search for answers also contribute to those two goals.

Harris: Finding SoTL at a Pivotal Moment

As a higher education young professional, I had indirect experiences with SoTL. My foundational experiences in teaching and learning began as an undergraduate teaching assistant in an education department. Later, I worked as a program assistant at my institution's teaching and learning center to help launch a training program for other undergraduate teaching assistants. While student development and student learning were threads throughout these experiences, it was not an aspect my

faculty mentors explicitly discussed. My first time thinking actively about student learning began in the SoTL course.

I enrolled in the 2024 SoTL course at a pivotal moment in my development as a practitioner and a scholar and my PhD journey. I recently transitioned to a new position where I had the exciting opportunity to launch an academic support program for first-generation students at a small private college. This included developing a sequence of courses designed to build a strong support network and create a sense of community to enhance student experience. I entered the SoTL course with hopes that it would help me develop a framework as I designed my own courses. In retrospect, the SoTL course provided exactly the community that I needed.

One critical aspect of the course was "SoTL Engagement." This assignment focused on engaging in SoTL in different ways. I was able to learn about my classmates' interests and how SoTL showed up within their disciplinary and practical spaces throughout higher education. While I thought the sciences and humanities evaluated student learning differently, there is often overlap in how SoTL scholars approach their work. At the same time, there is not one true measure of student learning. In addition, each measure does not have to be grand or all-encompassing.

As I began work on my final project (a research proposal), I thought I needed to address the big questions. What I learned through the process is that it is just as valuable to think about student learning around a specific assignment. As scholars and practitioners, we do not always have to evaluate student learning as a transformational, life-altering event. The little moments in the classroom—such as a student overcoming a fear of sharing their ideas or an "aha" moment when they finally understand a difficult concept—are often the most transformational.

As I think about SoTL now, I am reminded of a key lesson from my undergraduate mentor: teaching can occur in many different settings. Teaching and learning are not limited to the classroom. Our students are learning in a variety of ways as they move throughout their college journies. My scholar-practitioner identity lies both in the classroom and in student affairs and SoTL is a framework that I can use within both spaces. As I think about program development in my new role, I have begun to utilize SoTL to cultivate and understand student learning both inside and outside the classroom.

SoTL is a framework that is easily adaptable across disciplines within higher education. Throughout this journey, I have discovered that SoTL is not just about research; it is about cultivating a deeper understanding of the learning process and becoming a more intentional educator for my students.

Knight: SoTL is Empowering

Taking a course on SoTL was truly an impactful experience. As an educator for over a decade, I was convinced by the end of the course that everyone teaching in higher education should be exposed to SoTL early in their career. It can provide needed support for educators in both their personal and professional develpment. While not all educators will engage formally with SoTL research, simply becoming aware of it may encourage them to reflect more critically on their teaching practices, potentially improving student outcomes.

In academia, educators sometimes hesitate to question what is happening in their classrooms. This may be for many reasons, but it can be due to their discomfort with receiving criticism. As a professor, I have personally experienced this discomfort. However, embracing feedback is important for professional development. In this course, I learned that SoTL is an effective approach for receiving valuable feedback through systematic evaluations of our teaching. It can also encourage a reflective mindset leading to better student learning experiences. Additionally, SoTL can help educators better align their course intentions with students' experiences.

While academic culture can pressure educators to be perfect, engaging in SoTL as a practice emphasizes that making space for failure can lead to positive outcomes (Chick et al., 2023). This course empowered me as an educator and provided the foundation to engage more deeply in SoTL

research. Three components of this course worked particularly well for me: the hybrid format, the choice of project depending on proficiency level, and the meaningful feedback.

The course was offered online and met synchronously every other week. Coming at the end of my PhD coursework, this was an ideal format. In many courses I have taken previously, the large number of readings and assignments sometimes felt so overwhelming that it often became challenging to truly engage deeply with the topics we were covering. In this course, however, having time for independent exploration meant one reading often led me to explore others without feeling constrained. I was able to get into the weeds with topics that intrigued me and that truly deepened my learning.

The option to choose between a novice and advanced course pathway was another highlight. My classmates who selected the novice pathway completed a SoTL research proposal, while those following the advanced pathway conducted a research project. As a more experienced doctoral student with some SoTL background, selecting the advanced pathway enhanced my experience by allowing me to immediately apply what I was learning and to conduct practical SoTL research in the course I was teaching while attending the SoTL course.

For my research project, I evaluated student perceptions of a new assignment I designed for my graduate forensic science course. Initially, it felt daunting to conceptualize and implement a study from beginning to end within a semester, but after several discussions with Schrum, I was able to adjust the study design to focus on one small component of what could become a larger project in the future. Additionally, having opportunities to workshop this study in class and share my progress with classmates was instrumental. By completing this study, I not only learned a lot about conducting SoTL research, I also gathered important data from my students that will help me to improve my courses in the future. I will continue this research in future semesters.

The type of feedback I received from classmates and Schrum as I worked on my study was one of the most meaningful components of this course for me. Schrum's feedback was timely, substantive, and frequent. In addition to written feedback, the professor was available before and after class, as well as during weeks without scheduled class sessions. The consistent and scaffolded feedback improved my skills as a SoTL researcher by creating a safe space to remain in dialogue about my approach and my learning process. Overall, my experience in this course greatly enhanced my understanding of SoTL from a practical perspective and helped me grow as an educator and a researcher. I am encouraged to continue engaging in SoTL research beyond this course and to share my work with my colleagues in the hopes that they may also begin exploring SoTL.

Kreitzer: Beyond the Classroom—A Practitioner's Reflection on SoTL

When I first encountered SoTL, I was skeptical to say the least. As someone immersed in faculty development and online learning, SoTL seemed distant from my work. Its emphasis on student learning and classroom pedagogies felt misaligned with my interests and priorities. I am not a teacher and my professional experiences have always been rooted in instructional design and online program development—not actually being the *sage* myself. Yet, as I delved deeper into SoTL, my skepticism gave way to curiosity, and eventually, to an appreciation of its value. SoTL is not just about effective teaching. The idea of "*going meta,* in which faculty frame and systematically investigate questions related to student learning" was a concept I could certainly get behind (Hutchings & Shulman, 1999, p. 13, emphasis added). The more I read, the more I saw threads of relevance to my work expanding access to quality online learning. SoTL provided a lens to better explore the unique organizational systems and contexts that shape learning environments (Bass, 2020; Grant, 2018).

Faculty are at the heart of the higher education system, and their professional growth directly influences the quality of student learning (Kim et al., 2021; Martin et al., 2020; McKenney et al., 2015; Wekerle et al., 2022). This realization was a turning point. SoTL offered me a way to frame faculty

development as an essential component of a broader, evidence-based effort to improve online education—a connection I had not fully appreciated before.

One of the most compelling insights I gained along the way is how SoTL situates faculty needs, motivations, and challenges within institutional contexts (Felten, 2013; Webb, 2020). SoTL studies illuminate the barriers faculty face in adopting new technologies, navigating institutional expectations, and transforming their teaching practices (Gansemer-Topf et al., 2024a; Webb, 2020). I began to see how my work exploring faculty development interventions could benefit from the intentionality that SoTL brings to these challenges.

SoTL research emphasizes the importance of identity development among faculty, a perspective that resonated with me as I considered how online teaching often requires faculty to reimagine their roles (Curti & Mena, 2020; Dexter, 2023; Martin et al., 2020). This perspective shifted my thinking, helping me see where SoTL and faculty development can intersect in rapidly changing contexts. Effective faculty development is not about one-size-fits-all programs (Belt & Lowenthal, 2020). In order to engage and motivate faculty, programs must meet them where they are, offering practical tools and strategies while fostering a culture of inquiry (Frankel et al., 2020; Philipsen et al., 2019).

Perhaps the most surprising realization was that SoTL did not just provide me with a framework for considering faculty development programs—it offered me a research pathway that felt both relevant and purposeful. While I have always been committed to improving outcomes in online learning, I had not fully considered how SoTL could guide my scholarly work as a PhD student. By examining how faculty experience professional development opportunities, how they navigate challenges in online teaching, and how their growth influences student outcomes, I found a way to connect my goals for supporting faculty as they navigate the transition to online learning.

In hindsight, my initial skepticism of SoTL was not a rejection of its principles but a misunderstanding of its scope. SoTL is not just about students—it is about the entire ecosystem of teaching and learning in higher education. It is about creating spaces for faculty to thrive, for innovation to flourish, and for institutions to support educators in meaningful ways. Now, as I continue my PhD journey, I carry this newfound appreciation for SoTL with me to help inform my work and guide my future contributions to the field.

Lemmons: A New Approach and New Questions to Consider

As an academic librarian, my focus has always been on teaching, primarily working with undergraduate students to develop their skills as researchers. Throughout my career, I have relied on instinct and experience to refine my teaching approach, rather than formal coursework or research, but over time I began to seek out those more formal opportunities. I was looking for a teaching-focused community that could help me to further improve my approach in the classroom.

Then I was introduced to SoTL. In an introductory course completed during my graduate certificate, as well as this advanced course while pursuing my PhD, I found the community I sought. During my coursework, I found a group of people who were all interested in student learning across the curriculum, each coming from different backgrounds and representing varied professional interests. By building connections with faculty developers, course instructors, and student affairs professionals, I learned more about my own classroom and the university as a whole.

Situating my research within SoTL has also given me a novel approach and new questions to consider. My research centers librarians' experiences learning how to teach, as well as what techniques and approaches helped them along their teaching journey. Without being exposed to SoTL literature, I never would have thought to incorporate articles about other types of faculty learning to teach, as I had not realized that these two types of faculty are so similar. Further, this exposure has expanded the audience for my research. I thought, at first, that only those interested in libraries

would be interested in my work. Broadening my audience to include other scholars has enabled me to find new connections and engage in wider academic conversations.

Taking courses in SoTL has also enabled me to experience the encouragement and support of the international SoTL community. As a librarian and a PhD student, I was unsure whether SoTL was "for me." As I started learning about the field, I expected it to exclusively focus on those who teach their own courses. However, the encouragement of faculty in these courses, including Schrum, helped me locate my own work within the SoTL community as a whole. I was encouraged by my instructors to disseminate my work through SoTL conferences, such as SoTL Commons and ISSOTL, and I was delighted and surprised to find a welcoming, inclusive, and friendly community. I now participate in multiple research projects with scholars I met at these conferences. I did not expect this as a relative newcomer to the field, but have learned that it is the "SoTL way" to welcome those new to the field and encourage everyone to participate.

Encountering SoTL has fundamentally reshaped my scholarly and professional endeavors. Moving forward, I will contribute to this field by exploring the intersections of library instruction and broader teaching practices, fostering interdisciplinary collaboration and mentoring new educators in their teaching journeys.

McKenna: Opening Doors

When I began my doctoral program in education, I was not aware of the cohesive area of study known as SoTL. Even as my research interests solidified around students' experiences with various forms of assessment and grading in their classes, it was only gradually through coursework and in conversation with other doctoral students about their research that I started to hear the acronym more and more. It was a slow, dawning comprehension for me that I had been engaging in SoTL activities without even knowing it.

My relationship with SoTL took a giant step forward when Schrum invited me to participate in a class she was teaching on the subject, and it was through this class that I connected with a vibrant community of SoTL scholars. While SoTL for me was difficult to see at first, once seen, it is now difficult to miss. It has become a way of framing my overall approach to research. By incorporating Felton's (2013, p. 121) "principles of good practice in SoTL," we do not study students as distant observers. We engage with students to co-create knowledge about their learning experiences. We use robust research methods and contextualize the learning environments. And we share our findings within the academic community to the broadest extent possible.

The class community of emerging SoTL scholars was a welcoming and supportive place to explore research ideas and to receive feedback on methods, interview questions, and overall approaches. It also led to an expanded community as invariably someone would talk about a research topic and someone else would know a faculty member who was engaged in something similar or who might be open to a discussion about it. These references and introductions rippled across the institution in a kind of positive feedback loop.

I especially appreciated this support as I conducted a pilot study in preparation for research that will support my dissertation. I interviewed four undergraduate students about their experience in classes using contract grading. The sections I recruited from were taught by instructors I knew through their association with SoTL. I tested the interview questions with my SoTL classmates and received feedback for revisions that ultimately improved the research. When there were setbacks, my classmates were there to commiserate and offer alternative approaches. And they were there to celebrate my work and interrogate my findings.

Part of the joy of engaging in SoTL work is getting to know and working with a community of scholars. To a person, each faculty member I have spoken to about my research has been friendly and receptive and has provided constructive feedback or offered support. They were equally eager and

excited to share what they were working on, and to invite participation or to discuss ideas. The focus on students and the care this community exhibits for their learning and their well-being is remarkable.

The class on SoTL exposed me to many varied examples representing the breadth of inquiry covered by this topic. It expanded my vocabulary and gave me the words to better describe and contextualize my own research. That, in turn, has opened doors to partnerships and opportunities for collaboration with others conducting SoTL work. Studying SoTL itself was an important step for me in my development as a researcher and one that has opened many doors for the future.

Conclusion

As American writer and anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston wrote in 1942, "Research is formalized curiosity. It is poking and prying with a purpose" (p. 127). This statement captures the essence of SoTL. For Schrum, it was questions about that initially brought her to SoTL. What were her students learning? How did it shape their thinking? What skills and habits of mind did they take away from each class or semester? How did they apply what they learned in their future academic and professional endeavors? This experience is far from uncommon.

SoTL has the potential to improve student learning and the practice of teaching. Schrum found her intellectual and professional home in SoTL many years ago. As the student reflections shared here suggest, there are many paths to SoTL and it can have value for instructors, scholars, and practitioners across institutions of higher education. Schrum designed this SoTL class with the goal of facilitating formalized curiosity around teaching and learning. The student voices suggest that a SoTL class can accomplish these goals and more.

One of the strengths of SoTL is that people embrace it with a sense of openness and humility. They may be experts in their own disciplinary spaces, but there are many things they do not yet know about student learning or SoTL research. If you have the opportunity to design, teach, or register for a course on SoTL, embrace it. Be transparent about what you know and do not know, about your own path to SoTL and your future plans. SoTL as a community welcomes anyone interested in studying and improving student learning. Teaching or taking a course on SoTL creates new opportunities to expand that community—and your own knowledge—along the way.

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