

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

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*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

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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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