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## SoTL Research Fellows: Collaborative Pathfinding through Uncertain Terrain

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# SoTL Research Fellows: Collaborative Pathfinding through Uncertain Terrain

## **Abstract**

From 2014-2016, Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) Research Fellows at a mid-sized Canadian research-intensive, medical-doctoral university undertook to study their own formation as scholars of teaching and learning, as well as benefits and challenges of their cross-appointment to our central teaching and learning institute from their home academic departments. Findings from surveys and focus groups identified themes such as identity, community, access, transfer, and structural elements (each with benefits and challenges to practice). Our autoethnographic work confirms assertions in the literature about the uneasy relation between SoTL and traditional scholarship, while also bearing out the need for departmental support, and for key interventions along the path from novice to practitioner identity. Some discussion of the ambassador or translator role that can flow from such arrangements is included.

De 2014 à 2016, les chercheurs en Avancement des connaissances en enseignement et en apprentissage (ACEA) d'une université canadienne médicale-doctorale de taille moyenne ayant un coefficient de recherche élevé ont entrepris une étude portant sur leur propre formation en tant que chercheurs érudits en matière d'enseignement et d'apprentissage, ainsi que sur les avantages et les défis de leur nomination conjointe à notre institut central d'enseignement et d'apprentissage tout en enseignant dans leur propre département universitaire. Les résultats des sondages et des groupes de discussion ont permis d'identifier certains thèmes tels que l'identité, la communauté, l'accès, le transfert, ainsi que des éléments structuraux (chacun présentant des avantages et des défis concernant la pratique). Notre travail autoethnographique confirme les assertions présentes dans la documentation existante concernant la relation difficile qui existe entre l'ACEA et la recherche traditionnelle, tout en tenant compte de la nécessité du soutien départemental ainsi que pour les interventions clés sur la voie qui consiste à passer de l'identité de novice à celle de praticien. L'article contient également des discussions sur le rôle d'ambassadeur ou de traducteur qui peut découler de tels arrangements.

## **Keywords**

SoTL support, institutional embedding, scholar identity

The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) is increasingly understood as a fundamental part of enhancing teaching and learning in higher education, serving as a powerful form of professional development for faculty, and fostering and disseminating the growth of evidence-informed practices that make a difference for student learning (Hutchings, Huber, & Ciccone, 2011). For faculty members in traditional academic disciplines, however, shifting part of their focus to SoTL can present several challenges, including confusion about the field (Boshier, 2009), feelings of isolation or a lack of departmental support (Mighty, 2013), and difficulties forming new identities as SoTL scholars (Kelly, Nesbit, & Oliver, 2012; Simmons et al., 2013). To overcome such barriers, educational developers and others have developed a range of strategies intended to support SoTL scholars and facilitate the growth of communities of teaching and learning inquiry. For example, authors have developed courses and workshops intended to help grow SoTL capacity (Mårtensson, Roxå, & Olsson, 2011), established mentored granting and research programs (Hubball, Clarke, & Poole, 2010), and piloted and refined collaborative writing groups (Marquis, Healey, & Vine, 2014) or SoTL learning communities (Cox, 2003).

Many of these initiatives have at their core a desire not only to support individual SoTL scholars but also to embed teaching and learning inquiry within institutional contexts more broadly (Marquis, 2015; Williams et al., 2013). Contemporary SoTL support has sought to contribute to more thorough integration and uptake of SoTL by emphasizing alignment with institutional and disciplinary priorities, for example (Poole, Taylor, & Thompson, 2007; Schroeder, 2007), or advocating for high-level support and recognition of teaching and learning inquiry (Ginsberg & Bernstein, 2011; McConnell, 2012). In the Canadian context, a recent special issue of *New Directions for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education* (Simmons, 2016) documents several efforts designed to support and assess the embedding of SoTL within institutions across the country. Reflecting on these initiatives in her summary article, Simmons notes how they emphasize the variety of processes in place for supporting individual SoTL scholars within Canadian universities, as well as the growing number of initiatives in place at the macro, or institutional, level. What's missing, she argues, is more sustained attention to departmental level support as well as further attention to strategies for developing community amongst individual teaching and learning scholars.

What follows is the description and analysis of one attempt to develop the kind of community for which Simmons calls: a Research Fellows initiative designed to support individual SoTL scholars while simultaneously building community amongst them and encouraging the integration of their work in departments with the activities of a central teaching and learning institute. We present here the results of research this Fellows group undertook as part of its formation and ongoing work, including some lessons learned that have helped reshape the program.

The Research Fellows Program was established in 2014 by McMaster University's central teaching and learning institute as one of several efforts to expand our SoTL support. This new scheme saw the establishment of a cohort of cross-appointed Fellows who are responsible for teaching, research and service in their home departments, and for conducting SoTL research of their own design in our teaching and learning unit. In order to provide support for the Fellows, a visiting scholar with expertise in educational development, SoTL, and identity formation was invited to facilitate the Fellows Program in its inaugural year. The program evolved to be supported locally by an Associate Director (Research) and a Research Coordinator, both of whom have educational development experience.

To assess the efficacy of this new program, the participants engaged in a group autoethnography to systematically study the processes and structures that were beneficial in their

transition to SoTL scholars, and to identify ways in which the program could be enhanced for future cohorts. This article shares findings and discusses the potential value of such a program for participants, institutions, and SoTL as a field. The processes we followed and the research tools we generated are, we hope, adaptable across institutions and for various purposes.

### **History of the Unit and the Program**

McMaster University has a history of pedagogical innovation and support for teaching and learning scholarship, defining itself as a “research-focused student-centered” university. In line with this high-level emphasis on scholarly, evidence-informed approaches to teaching and learning, a decision was made in 2013 to transform the university’s central teaching and learning unit into an institute that supports and conducts teaching and learning scholarship as a more extensive part of its mandate. The MacPherson Institute (initially known as MIETL) thus collaborates with the teaching community to develop, support, and investigate teaching and learning practices. Conducting and developing SoTL is a defining element of the institute’s identity, and the Research Fellows program has been one early initiative by which these goals are being realized.

By summer 2014, a full complement of seven Fellows had been appointed, one of whom also serves as Associate Director (Research) for the institute. Each Fellow split time between MacPherson and a home Department in one of the Faculties. Their provenance included Engineering, Health Sciences, Science, and Humanities, and two also have responsibilities to the interdisciplinary Arts & Science program. The proportion of time and kinds of expectations for each Fellow varied according to the contract. In most cases, Fellows were appointed for a three-year term (though some have taken up new positions at McMaster or elsewhere before reaching the three year mark). Some had a pre-existing program of SoTL research, while for others, the concepts and skills were entirely new.

In summer 2014, MacPherson recruited a visiting scholar from an established teaching centre to assist the new Research Fellows in forming as a team, setting goals, identifying needs, and planning the frequency and structure of meetings. Over the course of twenty weeks, the facilitator was present on campus a full or half day weekly; many of these hours were specifically devoted to Fellows support, while others were focused on institute retreats, strategic planning consultation, and the preparation of workshops for staff and faculty at the Fellows’ or the Director’s request. This visiting scholar worked closely with the Associate Director-Fellow and the local Research Coordinator to organize, run, and support the Fellows’ group.

Fellows met approximately once a month as a full group, with meetings facilitated by the visiting scholar and/or the Associate Director-Fellow. Following a modified learning community model (Cox, 2003), these meetings were intended to build a sense of community amongst the group while simultaneously growing capacity and supporting the development of the SoTL projects on which Fellows worked. Meetings typically involved participants sharing updates and exchanging feedback on their work, and—in some cases—discussing and debating seminal SoTL publications. Early in the process, some time was also spent engaging in reflective writing, though this process was discontinued following feedback from participants.

Since 2014, when the full complement of Fellows coalesced, program participants have individually or collaboratively authored 37 teaching and learning publications (with 16 more submitted or in press) and 64 SoTL conference presentations. Work based on our autoethnographic study has been presented several times, and the home department of three of the Fellows invited

MacPherson to offer a course design workshop for all their faculty based on one run by the visiting scholar in 2014. At the time of writing, no new Research Fellows have joined the team, three Fellows have moved on, and the Institute is considering how best to proceed, partly in light of the benefits and challenges we have found through the present study. For further detail about the timeframe of this work, see Table 1.

Table 1  
*MacPherson Institute Research Fellows Timeline*

Term	Event
Summer 2013	Fellows established with Science, Humanities, Arts & Science
Summer 2014	Visiting Scholar begins, Fellows established with Engineering, Health Sciences, Science; One existing Fellow becomes Associate Director (Research)
Fall 2014	Visiting Scholar continues; teaching developer joins. Development of ethics application for research project
Winter 2015	Phase I of data collection
Summer 2015	One of three Engineering Fellows takes position at another university Presentation at STLHE (Phase I data)
Fall 2015	Presentation at ISSOTL (Phase I data)
Winter 2016	Presentation at EDC (role of Educational Developers) Phase II of data collection
Summer 2016	Presentation at STLHE (Phase II data). 1 Science Fellow takes position at another university; Other Science Fellow becomes Associate Director (Educational Scholarship)
Fall 2016	Research project finishes Health Sciences Fellow takes another position Presentation at ICED (role of Educational Developers) Publication proposal drafted Plan to shift from Fellows contracts to Fellows awards begins

### **Researching Ourselves**

One initial question for the group was whether studying our own activity would be useful to participants—might we all learn something about SoTL research questions, methodologies, and data gathering/interpretation by studying ourselves? The group agreed that this would be helpful and we proceeded to design a study and apply for ethics approval.

Our exploratory approach relied on some key tenets of collaborative autoethnography—a method used to investigate the experiences of groups in a range of higher education and academic development contexts (e.g., Chang, Longman, & Franco, 2014; Sanders, Parsons, Mwavita, &

Thomas, 2015). Working as a team, we developed and approved a set of reflective prompts and ranking questions to guide our data collection (see the [Appendix](#)), as well as a process and timeline for this work. Following ethics clearance at both McMaster University and the University of Waterloo, data collection proceeded in two main phases. In February-March 2015, participants completed responses to six open-ended reflective questions and four Likert-style ranking questions designed to assess their perceptions and experiences of the Fellows program and of their own development as SoTL scholars. Each researcher-participant responded to these questions independently in one to three instalments, and sent the resulting data to the visiting scholar by email for anonymization. Concurrently, in February 2015, we held a focus group involving five of the seven Fellows and facilitated by the visiting scholar. In this session, we engaged in open-ended reflective discussion of four further reflective prompts focusing on participants' perceptions of the benefits and challenges of participating in the initiative and their experiences of being a Research Fellow.

These two data collection methods were repeated for the second phase of the project in Winter 2016. In February-March, all participant-researchers completed the same individual reflective prompts and scale questions as they had in Phase I, this time at once and using an online survey tool in order to simplify the data collection process. Likewise, in March 2016, the visiting scholar led a second focus group in which all participant-researchers engaged in discussion of the existing focus group prompts.

Following each phase of data collection, and in part to help Fellows new to these methods practice them, we worked collaboratively to analyse the qualitative data via a form of iterative analysis based on constant comparison (Merriam, 2009). We began (in Spring 2015) by working in sub-groups to open code sections of the first focus group transcript. For each section, three or four participant-researchers first worked through the data individually, noting and highlighting key points that resonated with our research questions. Subsequently, members of these sub-groups compared their initial coding, talking through areas of discrepancy and working to organize the preliminary codes into larger thematic structures. We then compared the code trees that resulted from this process for different sections of the transcript and combined or collapsed sections as appropriate. Finally, once we had come to consensus about the code tree for the focus group, we turned to the individually completed reflective prompts, considering whether the data they provided fit the existing structure and adding new points as necessary. Members of the team then went back through the focus group transcript and individual responses to highlight representative quotations and confirm that the code tree was consistent with the data.

For Phase II (Spring 2016), we followed a similar process. Groups of two participant-researchers individually coded sections of the focus group transcript, noting points of interest and considering how these related to the code tree from Phase I. We then compared our coding within these sub-groups and across the team as a whole, discussing and coming to consensus on any points of discrepancy. Individual researchers subsequently took the lead on coding responses to one of the individual prompt questions, raising points of uncertainty with the group as necessary. One team member also completed basic descriptive statistics for the Phase I and Phase II ranking questions, and these were compared with the qualitative findings.

Because one of the original Research Fellows had left the university to begin a new post in Fall 2015, that person did not participate in Phase II of the data collection or analysis.

## Results

Our collaborative analysis pointed to five main themes emerging from the data across the two phases of the research: identity, community, access, transfer, and structural-institutional features bearing on participants' experiences. Within each of these thematic areas, participants reported challenges and benefits attached to participating in the Fellows initiative, and also offered suggestions for how the process might be enhanced. We describe each of these themes below, attending to some of the key ways in which they were taken up within the two phases, and thus giving some sense of how participants' experiences developed over time.

### Identity

One central issue emerging from the data was the extent to which becoming a Research Fellow affected participants' sense of their own scholarly and professional identities. On one hand, this is not surprising, given that some of our prompts focused on questions of identity explicitly. Nevertheless, identity-related factors were also raised in response to other questions throughout the data, highlighting their significant place in participants' thinking and experiences.

Most commonly, comments about identity connected to participants' developing sense of themselves as SoTL scholars and their relative confidence with conducting teaching and learning research. In the first phase of the project, most participants articulated a degree of uncertainty about their status as SoTL scholars, pointing out their unfamiliarity with the field and--in some cases--its felt differences from their disciplinary training. In the focus group, for instance, one suggested they were "afraid [of] not having the language, the vocabulary of the SoTL," while another described struggling with "accepting the fact that you can write research based on perception, and so on, and student feelings." Such struggles often aligned with disciplinary paradigms relatively farther from the social sciences.

Reflecting what Tremonte (2011) calls feelings of "novice-stry," one participant felt early on that "compared to my subject matter expertise, there is no way I can identify as a SoTL scholar" being so "very new to this field." Another implicitly compared original subject matter expertise to scholarly identity, stating, "I am lacking all the background to refer to, associate with, and sometimes comprehend SoTL material that falls into my hands. I also do not know the seminal people and/or theories in the field." This participant was concerned that incorporating best practices and noticing effects does not make one a scholar in SoTL, and also had "seen SoTL work that is of very low quality."

Acknowledging that others may identify them as a SoTL scholar, one participant remained reluctant to self-identify that way, in part again because of disciplinary training:

My Humanities training often feels at odds with the Social Sciences methodologies that are still frequently positioned as central to SoTL work, with the result that I sometimes feel more like a Humanities scholar doing SoTL work than a SoTL scholar per se.

Another expressed similar thoughts about the Natural Sciences, suggesting that "it can still be difficult for me to formulate questions and attack problems using SoTL methodologies.... I am still working through how to think the way I think is necessary for SoTL."

A year later, however, participants' comments pointed toward preliminary shifts in their thinking about their status as SoTL scholars. Many reported feeling somewhat more confident in

their knowledge and understanding of SoTL work, for example, as in the case of one focus group participant who noted, “I initially thought that half of the language was Greek. Now I feel that I am really Greek.” Others reported beginning to develop a SoTL identity—being “on the path” — through conducting teaching and learning research projects in which “interests are being honed, and I am starting to get a clearer sense of what is possible and what are some of the common pitfalls.” Engaging in the field also contributes to identity through “more SoTL publications and presentations, more collaborations with SoTL scholars locally and beyond, more connections to and roles within SoTL bodies and organizations.” This same participant has begun to bridge an initially identified methodological gap by planning to engage “more fully in SoTL projects that deploy the techniques of my discipline.” Participants also reported being approached more often by others who see them as experts, and suggested that the explicit inclusion of SoTL in the Fellow role encouraged them to prioritize the readings and conversations needed to move beyond a novice identity.

Responses to the ranking questions give context for how slowly these broad trends actually move. Participants’ ranking of their confidence doing SoTL work did not change substantially across the two phases, with most participants describing themselves as “somewhat confident” in both cases, but one more participant identifying as “not at all confident” in Phase II (Figure 1). Similarly, participants’ self-reported level of experience with SoTL shifted only slightly, with one more participant identifying as “intermediate” in Phase II, but one fewer identifying as expert (Figure 2). To some extent, the lack of change here may be explained by the broadness of each of the points on the ranking scale (i.e., participants may still identify as “somewhat confident” even if they have become more confident than they initially were). Nevertheless, these ranking responses reiterate that the changes described in the qualitative data might be moderate at best.

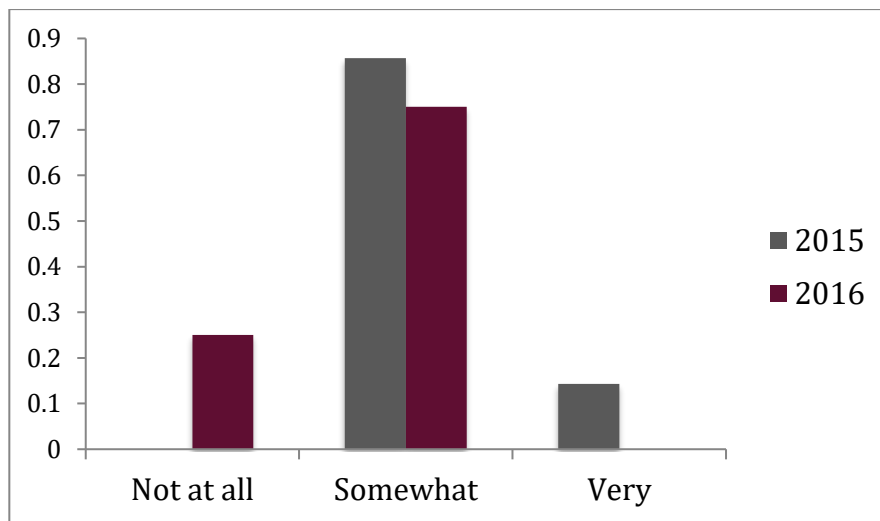


Figure 1. Self-reported SoTL confidence (% response)



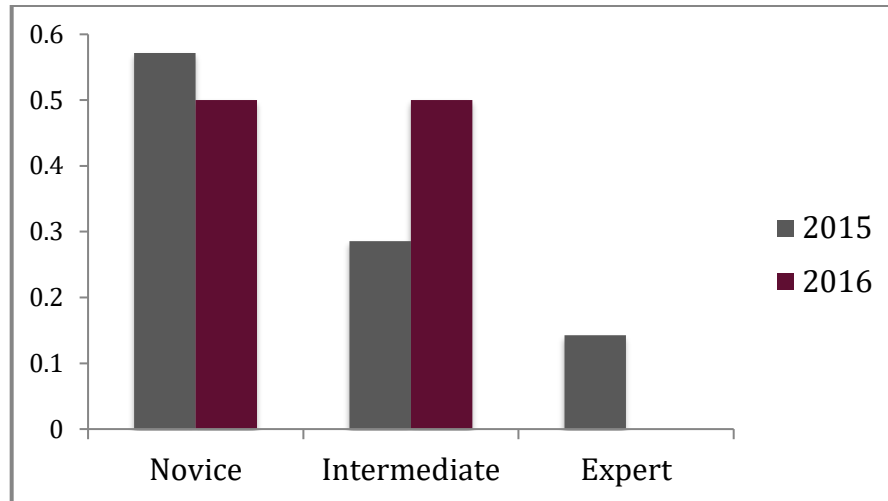


Figure 2. Self-reported SoTL background (% response)

Insofar as Fellow positions created time and explicit expectations to conduct SoTL work, as well as exposure to other SoTL research and scholars, they may have contributed to occasioning these slight shifts in participant identity. At the same time, however, participants also made comments indicating the Fellow role was not without its identity costs. Some suggested that being appointed across multiple units left them feeling somewhat disconnected from *any* academic home. As one person said in the Phase I focus group, for example, “...on some level, whichever place I’m in, I feel as though I’m other.” Furthermore, a small subset of participants expressed a degree of uncertainty about whether the shift to becoming a SoTL scholar was entirely welcome. One cast this in terms of detracting from a disciplinary identity to some extent, noting, “I have had to put some of my disciplinary research on hold, which I find difficult, personally”. While initiatives such as the Research Fellows program might help individuals navigate some of the identity issues commonly discussed in the SoTL development literature, then, they might simultaneously raise new concerns that are worthy of further exploration.

## Community

A second major theme connected to the extent to which participants felt part of a *community* while participating in the Research Fellows program, and the ways in which they understood such community to interface with their broader experiences as scholars in atypical academic roles. Though reluctant to identify as SoTL scholars in the first phase of the project, participants were more likely to indicate that they felt part of the Research Fellows cohort, and that they valued the opportunity to develop connections with others in the group. For some, this sense of being part of a team also helped to counter the feeling that, as one participant put it, “SoTL work in a discipline can be rather isolating and individualistic”. Being with others who face “similar challenges” made meetings a “playground to discuss relevant SoTL papers or articles” and a space for “feedback or advice.” Even informally, the community allowed Fellows to value “the opportunity to talk through issues as they arise, or even simply to vent.”

In spite of this general sense of belonging, some participants nevertheless suggested early on (Phase I) that they had not yet experienced a strong sense of group identity, or integrated the other group members within what might be called their “significant networks” (Roxå & Mårtensson, 2009). Though the group was experienced as “friendly and engaging during our

meetings,” one participant had “little interaction” outside this structure. “Some likely feel much more connected to the group than others...” one noted, while another suggested there was not a “sense of a common goal, project, or identity.” Instead, participants were working on “independent projects (except this one), have somewhat different approaches and objectives, meet sporadically and have not been able to share a lot of our findings and results.”

A similar set of considerations emerged in the Phase II data. Participants continued to feel welcome within the group and to value the ways in which it created what one called “a safe circle in which to bounce off your frustration and successes.” Still, many noted not connecting much with the others beyond the monthly Fellows meetings, and several reported in the Phase II focus group that, on the whole, they felt less like a team than they had in the previous year. For some, this was logical and desirable as a result: they felt they needed less support from others as they gained experience and became more comfortable in their new role. Others, however, still expressed an interest in working more collaboratively.

The role of the present project surfaced interestingly in the Phase II focus group and survey. Several participants echoed the assertion that “having the opportunity to work with several other people on a single project, in that collaborative sense, is beneficial.” While acknowledging the same dynamic as the earlier phase identified, another participant agreed about the value of this work in helping to create a sense of community:

The existence of the group has been very helpful, as it is a safe place for discussion, listening and expressing your problems/challenges. Our monthly meetings are quite regular, but I find that the lack of common projects (between different Research Fellows) and interaction in-between those meetings dissolves the group to a collection of individuals working on individual projects! Things are quite different when we are working on our common project/presentation/publication when we all come together for a common goal.

One participant, however, noted, that the project also shifted meetings (particularly in the second year) towards more practical research goals, and away from broad discussion and exchange:

I do actually enjoy this research so I don't want to sound like I don't. But it does take away from us being a team and turns us into a research group. It's a little different than discussing the overall ideas or talking about our own work. We spend the majority of our time talking about this research project, I find. To me that changes the dynamic of our group quite a bit.

These limitations notwithstanding, responses to the scale questions offered some further support for the contention that participants experienced themselves as members of a community to some degree. In both phases, the majority of participants suggested they felt either adequately supported or very supported by the institute, the external facilitator, and the Fellows group as a whole (Figure 3). Indeed, in spite of comments indicating they felt less like a team by the time of the Phase II data collection, rankings of feeling supported by the Fellows group increased at this point, suggesting participants retained a sense of connection with and backing from the group even as they perceived their work as intersecting less. Only the rankings of feeling supported by the visiting scholar decreased relative to Phase I, which seems logical (and even desirable as an effect

of scaffolded learning), given that he only worked to facilitate the group’s activities in the program’s first year, thereafter moving solely into the role of research team member.

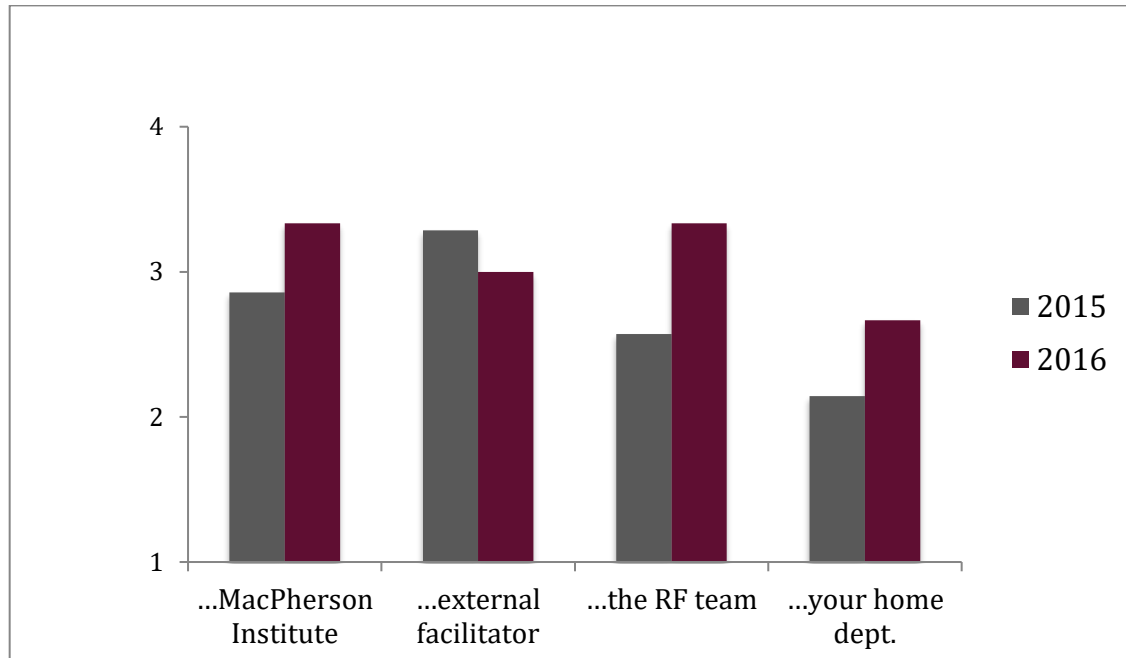


Figure 3. Mean self-reported sense of support 1=Unsupported, 4=Very Supported)

## Access

Across both phases of the research, participants commonly noted that a major benefit of being a Research Fellow was the fact this position granted them *access* to a range of human and material resources that might not otherwise be available to them. During Phase I, for example, they highlighted the value of newfound opportunities to connect with people, use spaces, and fund SoTL activity.

Their new “temporary home” became a space for “first-hand meeting with renowned SoTL traveling scholars, ...excellent advice on my own research and on topics related to ethics clearance” as well as putting them “in contact with many faculty members... who are involved in teaching and learning” both locally and “from other institutions.” Access to the unit’s Student Partners program was likewise described as helping “move research projects forward”. Similarly, access to office space and additional professional development funding to attend SoTL conferences was positioned as particularly beneficial:

research funding we have to go to conferences and present our work is really valuable. It’s hard to get funding for SoTL research and it gives us something else to work towards, in terms of motivation, in terms of being able to present the things we’re writing.

Interestingly, some participants also emphasized that the Fellow role granted them access to a greater amount of time to dedicate to SoTL work. While challenges were noted in determining exactly how to calculate the percentage of time they were expected to spend on SoTL, many

nonetheless highlighted that the fact of having this expectation spelled out in their contract necessarily made space for SoTL that was not otherwise there:

Before I became a Fellow, there was always some kind of expectation that I would somehow keep up with SoTL work, and there was no time for it. And now there is time.

I think, for me part of it is that it makes [SoTL] an expected and explicitly kind of articulated part of what your time is supposed to be spent on, right, as opposed to [...] this, amorphous floating expectation that it might happen.

Participants highlighted these same factors in the second phase of the data collection, again positioning access as a substantial benefit of the Fellow role. One suggested that their Fellow position helped them to navigate research challenges by providing opportunities for “advice on SoTL projects [...] and avenues to fund conference presentations,” for example, while another argued that “working with the student scholars has definitely been a plus.” Specified time to do SoTL work was also again mentioned, though less frequently than other access-related factors, and—in at least one case—with some sense that this time allocation may be a double-edged sword:

Having explicit expectations to produce SoTL work as a Fellow has helped me to prioritize the work to some degree, though it's also created more pressure and stress to get the work done! Overall, though, I'd say being a Fellow has been helpful on this score.

Such comments about stress and difficulty keeping up were amongst the only challenges reported in relation to the access theme.

While no ranking questions took up issues of access specifically, it seems likely that such perceived benefits might have contributed to the fact that the majority of participants reported feeling adequately supported or very supported by the institute during both phases of the research (Figure 3). Insofar as Fellows' growing confidence with SoTL was connected (by some) to opportunities to complete projects and develop their SoTL knowledge, such access is not only a superficial benefit. Instead, it might be seen as a fundamental part of developing and supporting the growth of SoTL scholars.

## **Transfer**

Throughout the research, participants made a range of comments indicating their awareness of the potential for Research Fellows to serve as a conduit or point of contact back to their home departments. Many said that the SoTL work they were conducting and the ideas and connections they were developing through their work at the institute would inform (or had already informed) their own teaching and/or educational activities in their departments more broadly. Likewise, some stated that the Fellow position allowed them to bring ideas and questions from their classrooms or programs to their work at the institute, shaping the SoTL work they did individually and/or institute priorities more broadly. Such “two-way flow” (as one person put it), or transfer, was a clear benefit of the roles in both phases of the study.

A sense of being an “ambassador” who can foster a sense of “closeness” between the institute and the home department was made concrete for some by bringing ideas back to departmental colleagues and committees. For example, some participants noted importing a course design

workshop for peers that began in the Institute (based on Saroyan & Amundsen, 2004), initiating SoTL co-publications with discipline colleagues, and implementing research in their classrooms. Some ideas from the disciplines would also find their way back to the Fellows' discussions at the institute:

it's not just the SoTL work that we do here going back to departments, but some ideas from departments [are] coming back and helping to ... shape some of the thinking that happens around what we do to support ... teaching and learning on campus.

Such comments suggest that Fellows experienced their positions in ways that align broadly with assertions about the potential for such roles to facilitate institutional embedding of SoTL, fostering connections between academic departments and the teaching and learning institute. While this was expressed in generally positive terms, a few comments nevertheless indicate that being a conduit was not always easy. A dynamic of "otherness" or feelings of undue pressure can result when "some people in home departments" disagree with institute priorities or wish to give feedback, and there is an ambassador in their midst. One example is the sense, expressed by one participant, of resisting being an "advocate of everything [MacPherson] does" yet still being seen as somewhat responsible by peers.

In addition to posing such challenges for individual Fellows, the potential of these boundary-spanning positions to facilitate transfer to and from departments was also seen by some participants as limited by an ongoing lack of recognition of SoTL work and methodologies in many departmental contexts: put bluntly in the Phase II focus group, "Some departments don't care." The ways in which such under-recognition impeded transfer was noted in both phases, but more commonly in Phase I:

I sometimes have the sense that while there *is* this kind of two-way communication that's happening... people [in departments] don't necessarily always care, particularly. It's more benign neglect than a kind of active resistance that you sometimes read about...

a really good challenge, is that if you're going to present the SoTL work we're doing back to the faculty..., which I did recently about [a project]... one of their first questions was 'Well, sure the students LIKE the course, but is it GOOD for them, have you got any evidence for THAT?'

Though comparatively rare, such comments underscore that the potential for such roles to facilitate transfer to departments is dependent to some extent on the relative receptiveness of the department in question. Whereas some Fellows reported interest in and support for their work from their departments, others described departmental contexts that made it less likely for transfer to occur meaningfully.

Answers to the ranking questions again corroborated these broad trends. In both phases, a clear majority of participants reported believing that their work as a Fellow was having at least some impact on their own teaching and their students' learning, and on teaching and learning in their departments (Figure 4). Nevertheless, rankings for these questions were not especially high, with only one participant (in each phase) willing to suggest their work as a Fellow was having a "very high impact" on their teaching, and none willing to select this ranking in terms of

departmental impact. Interestingly, however, average rankings on each of these questions increased from Phase I to Phase II, showing that participants became increasingly confident in their relative impact over time. While such data speak only to *perceived* transfer, they suggest, if cautiously, that a growing sense of capacity to enact change might be a significant aspect of Fellows' experience.

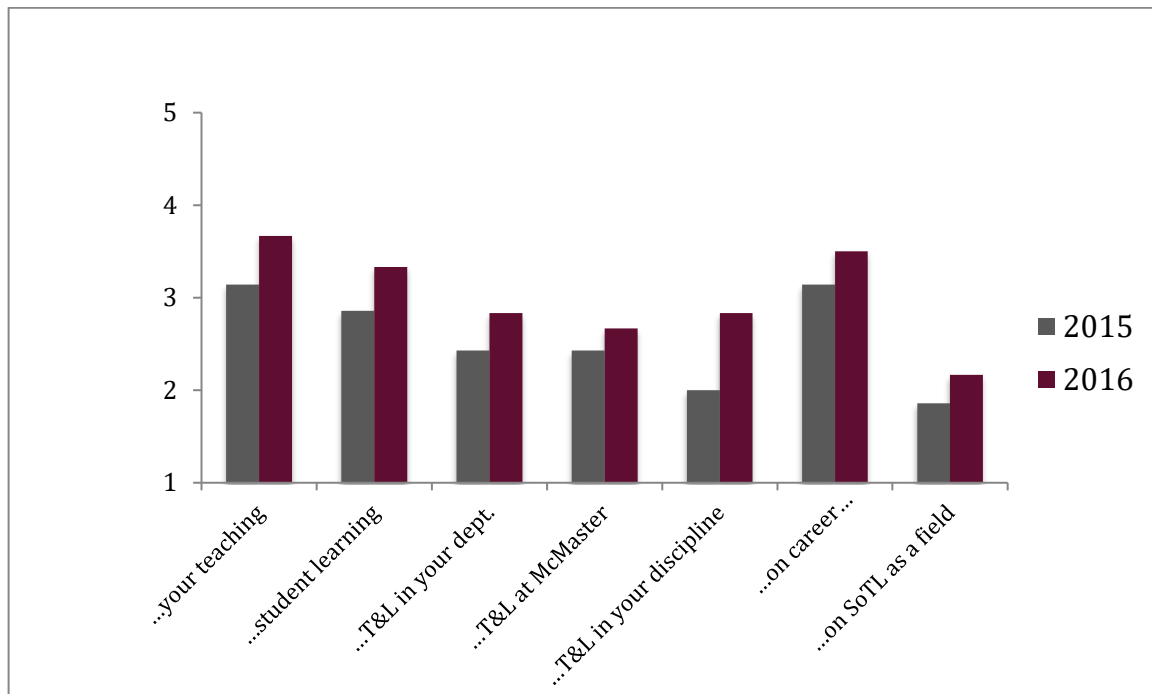


Figure 4. Mean self-report of impact 1=No impact, 5=Very high impact)

### Structural/Institutional Elements

A final theme that emerged from the data centred on structural and institutional factors that impinge on Fellows' experiences and shape their ways of operating in these new roles. This is one of the most significant challenges for the institutional organization of a program of the Research Fellows nature. During the first phase of data collection, for instance, many participants expressed a certain amount of confusion and uncertainty about the terms of the positions themselves. One, for instance, initially wrote about a "lack of clear deliverables associated with the role". Likewise, several focus group participants reported "vagueness" in determining how to translate abstract allocations of time into concrete actions: "So what's 90%? What's 40%? What's 25%? How do you count that?" Navigating multiple accountabilities, time, and space was a challenge:

I think on paper everybody remembers that you have responsibilities to different places, but in practice--and reasonably, I don't even fault people for this--it's very easy to forget, and to, kind of just, be picturing you as a member of whatever unit that person is thinking of you in. So while there is time on paper, sometimes there isn't [...] in practice.

For some, the flexibility of the positions was generally desirable, and they valued the chance to help shape these novel roles from the ground up. At the same time, some Phase I focus group comments were ambivalent about possible effects on the Fellows' personal career progress:

I really *like* the vagueness myself too. I like it in my day to day life. I *don't* like it when it's time to complete a record of activities or try to concretely explain what you've done to a panel that will be judging what you've done.

Participants raised pressing concerns, too, about evaluation across organizational boundaries. Existing tenure, promotion and career progress processes at the university were clearly not designed with such roles in mind, and annual evaluation or even tenure consideration took place within departments that might not value SoTL or time spent in the MacPherson roles:

The difficulty is your home faculty is doing your assessment, while they do ask for input from [MacPherson]. [...] Your CP/M [Career Progress and Merit points] come specifically out of the pool of your faculty. [...] So if you do great work in SoTL, for example, you're taking away points from your faculty that are not directly benefiting from your SoTL work. [...] Even if they are, those points are set, a fixed amount of points for your faculty and you take extra, somebody gets less.

Such concerns resonate clearly with the points about departmental neglect or lack of support for SoTL raised above. So too do they connect interestingly with the fact that fewer than half of participants reported feeling adequately supported in their SoTL work by their home departments on a Phase I ranking question. Clearly, then, many participants do not perceive their departments as actively supportive of their teaching and learning scholarship. Given that such work is written into Fellows' job requirements, common concerns about how it is valued by departments during career assessment become especially pronounced.

Participants returned to these structural factors during the Phase II data collection. Several still mentioned uncertainty about the nature of the roles or the process of allocating their time, for instance, as in the case of one focus group participant who cited "role expectations" as an ongoing challenge. Concerns about assessment were much more pronounced in Phase II than they had been previously, likely due to participants' greater experience with being assessed in these roles by this time. Some encountered committees with "no understanding about pedagogical [research]" that considered conferences, proceedings, roundtables, or a poster, to be "nothing." One participant wrote, "Some departments on campus don't count SoTL research as actual research and will lump it into teaching, causing a disincentive in pursuing SoTL as a viable research avenue." As participants elaborated on this theme in discussion, it became clear that with no norms and in such a small group, being an anomaly in a larger structure is a struggle:

What I think it comes down to is we have, there's so few of us, and if you go to a department with a very established methodology to how do you calculate the CP/M, [...] how do you really look at T[enure] and P[romotion]. I've had discussions with those committees and they're like, well, your research just isn't gonna count in the equation. It's very simple.

Interestingly, however, in spite of such pronounced concerns about evaluation within home departments, the average ranking of departmental support for SoTL went *up* slightly in Phase II, with more than half of participants now indicating they felt ‘adequately supported’ or ‘very supported’ by their departments (Figure 3). Such mixed results are perplexing, but perhaps point to perceived support outside evaluation processes. Possibly, increased familiarity with the positions over time contributed to reduced opposition. In addition, some participants expressing concerns about career progress focused more on the atypicality of the positions rather than perceived departmental resistance as such. One highlighted a comparative lack of mentorship for career progress connected to the novelty of the Fellows role, for example:

my issues in that respect have not been active resistance or criticism but rather no one able to give advice, really. Because nobody quite knows, you know? They’ve never encountered this before so they’re not quite sure what people should do [...] or where you should prioritize your time. [...] So people have been very helpful and supportive, but it’s just, it’s a little bit more murky, I guess.

Again in this case, the fact that the Fellow role does not conform to traditional academic positions and processes results in uncertainties and challenges for individual Fellows attempting to move through the academic ranks. While some participants also noted ways in which being a Fellow had *supported* their career progress (as in the case of one participant who suggested it helped them build up their CV in ways that would make them attractive for new positions), the commonality of such structural concerns about career progress and assessment suggest they were particularly salient to Fellows’ experiences. Indeed, current restructuring of our program relies heavily on such feedback.

## Discussion

Given these findings, the Fellows model described in this paper seems to have considerable potential for developing teaching and learning scholarship and embedding it effectively within institutional contexts. It has begun to facilitate further integration between the teaching and learning institute and departments on campus, as well as the transfer of course design and SoTL expertise back to home departments in some cases. Moreover, it seems to have a number of benefits for individual Fellows. Over the duration of our longitudinal study, participating Fellows perceived themselves to be growing personally and professionally, and expressed increasing confidence in their status as teaching and learning researchers. By virtue of taking up a Fellow position, some participants gained opportunities to publish in areas and in formats new to them; quantitative-oriented researchers, for example, added some qualitative practices to their skill sets and suggested they understood the field better as a result. The expectation to conduct SoTL work also led (or at least contributed) to participants producing a wide range of teaching and learning presentations and publications. As noted in the data, this considerable scholarly output itself served to support some participants’ sense of their developing SoTL identities. Participants likewise described feeling increasingly a part of a community of scholars on our campus and beyond. While these changes were slow and uneven, they are nonetheless worth emphasizing given the oft-discussed challenges connected to developing a SoTL identity and the value of communities and networks both for supporting individual researchers and embedding SoTL within institutional cultures (Mårtensson, Roxå, & Olsson, 2011).



These data, then, offer a range of useful evidence on which to base refinements of the program, as well as considerations for others engaged in or considering similar work. For our part, having learned from our experiences, we are shifting to a model of limited term Fellowships with the Institute. Rather than full contractual relationships with MacPherson, which create explicit expectations for Fellows to conduct SoTL work as part of their job requirements, we are transitioning to a model that would see cohorts of Fellows awarded grants to work on SoTL projects with the institute over a period of two years. This was a difficult decision to make, insofar as part of the initial rationale for the program was to afford explicit time, space, and recognition for SoTL within academic careers--a goal which participants in the present study suggested the Fellows program did achieve to some degree. However, the flip side of this expectation is that it means individual Fellows' career progress hinges on evaluation of their SoTL work within institutional structures and systems not yet fully able to accommodate this shift, even on a campus where there is relatively broad support of teaching, learning, and SoTL, including amongst high-level administrators. As such, the decision was made to shift the program model such that we might retain the benefits most clearly articulated in this study (development of community, shifts in identity, access to resources, and opportunities for transfer), while ensuring that individual Fellows are less likely to feel caught in the middle of a broader process of culture change around faculty assessment. Ideally, more Fellows can also be supported via briefer Fellowships than through long-term contracts, seeding SoTL capacity in more departments.

The present study, like the pilot of the initiative itself, thus offers an interesting, complex set of considerations for those looking to support and institutionalize SoTL on college and university campuses. While some scholarship suggests the value of naming teaching and learning inquiry within documents and policies about faculty assessment (e.g., McConnell, 2012), our experience reiterates that such positioning may not in itself be sufficient, and may indeed create *additional* challenges for individual SoTL scholars during times of transition and change. Admittedly, our Fellows program did not involve a large scale re-writing of the university's processes and procedures around career progress, tenure, and promotion. Fellows contracts did, though, explicitly name and recognize expectations for SoTL within their job requirements, which might be seen as a valuable first step in this direction. That individuals operating within traditional structures and systems are uncertain about how to interpret, apply, or value these expectations is perhaps unsurprising in retrospect, but does underscore the importance of working to develop understanding of and support for SoTL work at the departmental and faculty level, where evaluation policy is translated into practice.

With this in mind, we echo Simmons' (2016) call for more attention to SoTL initiatives targeted at the meso-level. As one participant in our survey put it, "we need to find ways to educate the T&P committees about teaching and learning". At MacPherson, we intend to continue working on initiatives aligned with this imperative, while simultaneously supporting the development of scholarly communities that themselves might contribute to institutionalizing and developing SoTL. Our Fellows project has been extremely beneficial in this regard, as we now have tools to rapidly socialize and support a cohort team as well as a process to interrogate our growth and outcomes as we go. Individual Fellows have likewise benefited from the process, despite the challenges described above. We hope these findings and experiences might also be helpful to those at other institutions contemplating a cross-appointment model. While such approaches have a number of demonstrable benefits, early attention should be paid to working closely with department chairs and directors who will be evaluating Fellows' output, and to establishing clear standards for assessment that are appropriate to the disciplinary context and understood and

endorsed by all involved. For us, the model described above provided clarity around how to integrate Research Fellows more effectively into our other programs for scholars of teaching and learning, while also providing clear evidence about how best to refine and target SoTL support efforts moving forward.

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