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Seven Guiding Principles for Building Fellowship in SoTL

Anita Acai

McMaster University, acaia@mcmaster.ca

Mandy Frake

York University, mfmistak@yorku.ca

Melanie Hamilton

University of Saskatchewan, melanie.hamilton@usask.ca

Patrick T. Maher

Nipissing University, ptmaher@nipissingu.ca

Roselynn Verwoord

University of British Columbia, roselynn.verwoord@ubc.ca

Cherie Woolmer

Mount Royal University, cwoolmer@mtroyal.ca

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Seven Guiding Principles for Building Fellowship in SoTL

Abstract

Considering the expansive context of the international Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) community, SoTL scholars may wish to reflect and identify what exists for building and nurturing fellowship, and how they may be enacted in practice to benefit others. In this reflective article, we draw on our experiences as International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (ISSOTL) Fellows to offer seven guiding principles for building fellowship. These principles include: (1) create space, (2) avoid and resist formal roles, (3) maintain confidentiality and build trust, (4) allow members to self-determine their level of engagement, (5) embrace a group process that is emergent and organic, (6) find congruence in values, and (7) acknowledge the evolutionary nature of the collective. When considered as a meaningful process of community building and engagement, these principles may be useful points of discussion, reflection, and as Felten (2013) states in relation to his Principles for Good Practices in SoTL, to “...articulate a vision of scholarship that enhances, perhaps even transforms, teaching and learning in higher education” (p. 121). Much like Felten, our objective was not to craft a detailed, step-by-step guide for fellowship. Instead, we have provided a series of reference points intended to help people clarify and demystify their own SoTL communities and networks, whether these communities are formal or informal in nature.

Compte tenu du vaste contexte de la communauté internationale pour l'avancement des connaissances en enseignement et en apprentissage (ACEA), les chercheurs en ACEA peuvent souhaiter réfléchir et identifier ce qui existe pour construire et nourrir la fraternité, et comment ceci peut être mis en pratique pour en faire bénéficier les autres. Dans cet article de réflexion, nous nous appuyons sur nos expériences en tant que membres de la Société internationale pour l'avancement des connaissances en enseignement et en apprentissage (ISSOTL) pour proposer sept principes directeurs pour développer la fraternité. Ces principes sont les suivants : (1) créer un espace, (2) éviter les rôles formels et y résister, (3) maintenir la confidentialité et établir la confiance, (4) permettre aux membres de déterminer eux-mêmes leur niveau d'engagement, (5) adopter un processus de groupe émergent et organique, (6) trouver une congruence dans les valeurs, et (7) reconnaître la nature évolutive du collectif. Quand on les considère comme un processus significatif de construction et d'engagement de la communauté, ces principes peuvent constituer des points de discussion et de réflexion utiles et, comme l'affirme Felten (2013) à propos de ses principes de bonnes pratiques en matière d'ACEA, « ... articuler une vision de la recherche qui améliore, voire transforme, l'enseignement et l'apprentissage dans l'enseignement supérieur » (p. 121). Tout comme Felten, notre objectif n'était pas de rédiger un guide détaillé, étape par étape, pour établir une fraternité. Au lieu de cela, nous avons fourni une série de points de référence destinés à aider les gens à clarifier et à démystifier leurs propres communautés et leurs propres réseaux d'ACEA, que ces communautés soient de nature formelle ou informelle.

Keywords

fellowship, community building, group process, relationships, guiding principles; fraternité, renforcement des communautés, processus de groupe, relations, principes directeurs

Imagine finding yourself named as part of a community of leaders in SoTL and wondering how to enact this new identity. This article offers a reflective account from six International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (ISSOTL) Fellows in Canada about our journey to build identity and community through fellowship. The outcome of this reflection are seven guiding principles for building fellowship.

The ISSOTL Fellows program recognizes international leaders in SoTL for their exemplary contributions to teaching and learning at the local, regional, national, and/or international levels (ISSOTL, n.d.). It welcomed its first nine recipients into the program in 2019. In 2020, an additional nine Fellows were selected. Coincidentally, in each year there were three Canadian SoTL scholars named. The 2020 cohort was named only weeks before the COVID-19 pandemic was declared, and thus, as we were hoping to see our international network grow, the world shut down.

The six of us chose to connect to celebrate our accomplishments as Canadian ISSOTL Fellows and to begin conversations about the roles we could take within the Fellows program while also recognizing that ISSOTL was experiencing considerable challenges because of the pandemic. As a group of SoTL scholars, we wondered how we could mentor, promote, and celebrate those who are engaging in SoTL from afar. Considering that we were located across multiple institutions, provinces, and time zones, we began meeting virtually, focusing our initial meetings on examining our role as ISSOTL Fellows in the Canadian context. Our group had some pre-existing linkages. Many were long time members of ISSOTL, and most of us were able to meet in Atlanta, Georgia at the 2019 ISSOTL Conference either as a named ISSOTL Fellow or as part of the International Collaborative Writing Group. There was also some overlap with our roles in the Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (STLHE). Thus, we were not strangers, but our newfound common identity as ISSOTL Fellows was not fully formed as we did not yet feel a sense of community or purpose within that program. As such, we entered a process whereby we could gradually but consistently get to know one another, build trust, and deepen our relationships as we embarked on the work that united us as SoTL scholars and scholars more generally. In our initial conversations, we found that we were united through a common passion for supporting student learning. We were also motivated to mentor others around us, both in SoTL and more broadly.

During our virtual collaborations and analysis of both literature and personal experiences, we progressed through a series of conversations and reflections before delving into our collective consciousness about what we were doing and the mutual benefits it was yielding professionally and personally. Our meetings consisted of sharing an open dialogue on topics ranging from thought-provoking SoTL articles to our educational journeys, to our pre-teen daughters experiencing the perils of middle school. These discussions and sharing of the heart contributed, in an overwhelming way, to our establishing a close-knit and trusting community.

After several virtual meetings that left us feeling connected, invigorated, and valued, our group began to wonder what key elements of our interactions as Canadian ISSOTL Fellows had left us feeling this way. Were there any key ‘pearls’ or take-aways that could be captured and shared with other members of the teaching and learning community? What, if any, guiding principles exist for building and nurturing fellowship among SoTL scholars, and how might these be enacted to benefit others? It felt natural, for a group of scholars to connect as frequently and as closely as ours, that our conversations became more purposeful as we sought out ways to engage in SoTL as Canadian ISSOTL Fellows. Our discussions seemed to align with Hutchings’ (2000) taxonomy of a SoTL question, which is ‘visions of the possible,’ and thus, as we lived, shared, and analyzed our professional and personal worlds, including through the global pandemic, these

conversations transformed into an intentional collaborative and ongoing writing process. Our thinking evolved as we worked to co-create two conference presentations (Frake-Mistak et al., 2021; Maher et al., 2022), ultimately prompting us to write this article.

Through our collaborative and dialogic process, we used a team-based approach to writing and analysis (Friberg et al., 2021; MacQueen et al., 2008; Saldaña, 2016; Vander Kloet et al., 2017) culminating in development of a set of principles and operationalizing them through our guiding questions. We adopted writing as a method of inquiry (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005), coupled with ongoing group dialogue resulting in a shared reflective account about our journey to build identity and community through fellowship. We present our initial questions here as a way of framing both our group process, as well as the thoughts and ideas that follow:

1. What did it mean to come together as a group of Canadian ISSOTL Fellows from multiple geographic and institutional contexts and from different roles?
2. How did concepts like communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) or significant networks (Roxå & Mårtensson, 2009) help us to better understand the meaning of fellowship?
3. How did our monthly meetings influence our daily practice, SoTL scholarship, and support work?

Our intention through this reflective article is to share a set of guiding principles that emerged from our experiences of coming together as a group of Canadian ISSOTL Fellows and forming an organic community with a view to contribute to SoTL scholarship.

Defining “Fellowship”

We use the term “fellowship” throughout this article to name both the ISSOTL Fellowship program that brought us together and the resulting process and outcome of our interactions. However, we feel that it is important to distinguish between holding the formal title of ISSOTL *Fellow* versus the process of enacting *fellowship*, the latter being ongoing, relational, and the basis of our experiential collaborative process. We recognize that some groups may find the term fellowship to be exclusionary. While the etymological origins of fellowship are seemingly neutral (the term stems from the Old English term *feolaga* meaning, “partner, one who shares with another”), we have learned through conversations with others that its use in academic contexts can be considered seen by some to reinforce pre-existing hierarchies pertaining to gender, race/ethnicity, ability, and more.

Fellowship is not a neutral process when it is enacted in an academic context—some groups may be excluded from or benefit less from fellowship than others. Moreover, the ways in which fellowships are structured and enacted are strong determinants of their outcomes, including with respect to equity, diversity, and inclusion. It is with this acknowledgement that we recognize that the term fellowship is not perfect in describing our collective process, but few terms likely are. We therefore wish to publicly name our intentions of using this term in the most inclusive way possible, as doing otherwise would be antithetical to the values that our group holds, and the lessons that we hope readers will take from this article.

Sensitizing Concepts

We were keen to draw upon existing literature to help us frame, examine, and make sense of our experience. In doing so, we each reflected on the characteristics of our collective, and identified three concepts that resonated with different dimensions of our experiences over the last two years. These are: Faculty Learning Communities (FLC), Communities of Practice (CoP), and Significant Networks.

Faculty Learning Communities (Cox, 2001) exist to bring people together to foster growth and innovation in pedagogical change. They usually focus on a theme or issue of mutual concern with the same people meeting frequently to examine the topic of interest and learn from one another. FLCs are usually clearly defined in terms of membership and focus and exist within a specified timeframe. Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of Communities of Practice (CoP) have similar characteristics to FLCs but focus primarily on activities that create a sense of community and leveraging the expertise that is held within that community. CoPs differ from FLCs in that they are usually more porous in terms of participation and the length of time that they exist. Within both FLCs and CoPs there is potential for different kinds of conversations that might not otherwise occur in more formal institutional settings. Roxå and Mårtensson (2009) offer a complementary perspective to FLCs and CoPs, noting the importance of informal conversations with trusted colleagues. They describe these as Significant Networks. These networks are usually characterized as being even more informal than FLCs and CoPs, with high levels of trust between members, who share intellectual intrigue, and engage in private, 'back-stage' conversations. It is noteworthy that these conversations are not 'backstage' because they are meant to be exclusionary, but because participants may feel deep ties to their teaching and therefore require a space where personal and vulnerable conversations can be had.

The following reflections will illustrate how dimensions of these three concepts were evident in our working together. Private, 'back-stage' conversations continue to be a key feature of our fellowship and they were foundational for us building trusting working relationships. We see ourselves as being akin to a CoP given the sense of community and shared interests that bring us together. We have also worked together to address focused topics, similar to an FLC.

These concepts led to a generative set of conversations and to perhaps our most striking insight: While useful to understand what our collective fellowship might be, it was more important to understand what we were *not*. We were not a committee, nor a working group, nor a task force. This realization helped define that our motivation to come together was not to 'do' fellowship in the sense of focusing on specific outputs or products, but to explore how we might *be and become* a fellowship. While we were, at times, brought closer together by certain scholarly activities of mutual interest, such as writing this article, our primary goal was to come together as a group of people who shared common interests pertaining to SoTL, as well as the formal recognition of being Canadian ISSOTL Fellows. This idea of 'being and becoming' (Zou & Felten, 2019) revealed the need for us to focus on relationships and values, both central to the practice of SoTL, which led us to become an important source of support for one another. What follows is the result of our collective reflections as a 'Canadian crew' of SoTL scholars.

Looking Back: Making Sense of Our Experience

Upon reflection, we identified several key elements from our experiences engaging with each other. First, we identified a shared, but previously unarticulated commitment to bring our full

selves to our meetings. This included the good, the bad, and everything in between, as we navigated exciting and challenging times in our personal and professional lives during the pandemic. Although individual group members did not express concerns, challenges, or tensions with the group process, we recognize that group development can at times be messy (Tuckman, 1965) and the extent to which people express their feelings and needs varies. Looking back, we recommend that groups consider articulating guidelines or rules of engagement to support group processes while also recognizing that group development is organic, and groups will determine what works best to balance individual and collective needs.

Second, we engaged in and experienced sense-making as individuals and as a Canadian-based collective, in relation to how we wanted to embody being ISSOTL Fellows. This sense-making was particularly important given the lack of opportunity to engage in-person with the larger ISSOTL Fellows community.

Third, we developed an identity as a national community of ISSOTL Fellows. Our physical separation due to being located across the country and in different time zones was bridged by our shared values and the relationships we were building with each other. Although several of us had existing relationships prior to becoming ISSOTL Fellows, our conversations supported development and enhancement of these relationships. Lastly, our engagement with each other supported exploration of points of connection and difference. Given our social locations, varying institutional roles (faculty, administrator, staff, graduate student), and varying interests in SoTL, we had ripe terrain to explore points of conversion and diversion.

Seven Guiding Principles for Building Fellowship

In this section, we aim to distill the characteristics that we identified from our team-based approach to collaborative writing and analysis into seven guiding principles for building fellowship in SoTL (see Figure 1). Although we have numbered these principles, the numbers are not meant to convey a particular order of importance. We hope that these guiding principles will serve as a catalyst for others in the SoTL community, including faculty, staff, and students, to identify and nurture existing connections in their own contexts, as well as to build new ones. While we do not see our principles as being exclusive to SoTL, the relational and values-driven nature of SoTL work (Felten, 2013; The Open University, n.d.) may make them easier to implement in this context.

Figure 1
Seven Guiding Principles for Building Fellowship



1. Create Space

Building and nurturing fellowships requires deliberate and accessible opportunities for connection to take place. In our case, our group set aside one hour per month during which we would connect via a virtual platform (i.e., Google Hangouts or Zoom). We prepared only a loose agenda for these meetings, allowing the content of our meetings to ebb and flow depending on group needs. At times, we were highly productive and energized to create outputs, while during others—and perhaps most often—what we needed and embraced was a space to share, connect, listen, and be listened to without an expectation to produce or perform. Our meetings were always flexible, such that members who were unable to attend in a particular week were supported by other group members and kept informed about group discussions via email. Group meetings were not recorded to respect members' privacy, given the often-sensitive nature of our discussions. In these ways, 'creating space' consisted not only of deliberately setting aside time in our schedules to connect, but also of establishing group norms that were flexible enough to meet individual members' needs without imposing additional demands that would make our participation less accessible.

2. Avoid and Resist Formal Roles

Because our group came together without any specific agenda or outcomes in mind, we joined as a community of fellows and not a committee of individuals. To define formal roles or create a hierarchy within our group felt incongruent to our sense of purpose and therefore would not have honoured our commitment of mutual support and collaboration. Consequently, our community of practice operated with flat and permissive structures that were mutually supportive of each other's needs, wants, capacities, and challenges. We took turns taking on necessary tasks, such as scheduling meetings. The fact that our group existed outside of an institutional structure was particularly refreshing because it allowed us to operate outside of the hierarchies typical to most institutions and self-define what we wanted to accomplish, as well as to be able offer one another an outside perspective on the issues we were individually facing at our institutions. Oftentimes, our conversations would lead us to uncover commonalities between our experiences at different institutions, which strengthened our bond and made us feel less isolated.

Our meetings typically began with open-ended dialogue concerning our work, day-to-day happenings at home, celebrations with family, or sharing of tragic stories in our lives that we were trying to navigate, before eventually and organically turning to whatever business of the day we may have had or projects we were working on. This level of organic cadence of our meetings and the organization and coordination of our work allowed each of us to use our strengths, as well as to share tasks among group members. For those who preferred a clear and notarized experience, they could take notes and share them with the group. For those who liked to talk and pose questions to propel our work forward, there was freedom to do so. And for those who needed to take a step back or vent because there was no capacity to continue for the time being, we worked together to ensure that they, and every member of the group felt supported and cared for, and that there were no consequences of having to step back. Avoiding formal roles within our group gave us the freedom and flexibility for creativity, a timeline that was mutually beneficial, and above all, a sense of belonging.

3. Maintain Confidentiality and Build Trust

Building and maintaining trust is a fundamental ingredient to the success of any group. As previously stated, each of us came to this group knowing each other through ongoing friendships, professional working relationships, and/or by name alone. Implicitly, there was already a high level of trust across the group, particularly between those who had close and personal relationships as well as those who had worked together in varying capacities prior to our being named ISSOTL Fellows. However, as is consistent with any new group being formed, there was a new group dynamic to navigate and a process of learning how to be together. Included in this process was learning to trust one another. This takes time, even in a group with some pre-existing connections like ours and even more so if there are no pre-existing connections between group members.

Although our group did not begin with any formal discussions about how we would *choose* to be together, or about how we would behave as a group, we began with open and casual conversation about SoTL in general, our work both as it did and did not relate to SoTL, where we had lived, who we live with, and other details about our professional and personal worlds. Over time, this process of sharing and listening deepened, reflecting an increase of mutual trust gained by getting to know one another on a more intimate level and better understanding the contexts from which we each come. Group members would often begin a thread of conversation by asking

that what was about to be shared be kept in confidence, then proceed to allow us into the incident or story (Kaiser, 2012; Travaglini, 2012). We showed honour and respect by listening to each other's private and profound experiences and by holding these stories in confidence. This helped continue the cycle of building trust and deepening our relationships. Over time, we developed a shared trust within our group that we would be treated with kindness and respect regardless of any differences in our backgrounds or perspectives. This, in turn, fostered a kind of honesty and authenticity in our interactions that was not always present in other spaces that we inhabited, thereby leading to feelings of being connected and valued. In our group, sharing our thoughts and opinions honestly was vulnerable yet simultaneously comfortable.

4. Allow Members to Self-Determine Their Level of Engagement

Creating a group environment that allows members to self-determine how, and how often, they wish to engage can be a powerful experience that ultimately leads them to interact more authentically with one another. People are not perfect, nor are they 'on' all the time. For us, the flexible monthly meetings that we previously described were not just about logistics such as flexibility around attendance, although that was a key component. To us, flexibility also meant giving ourselves permission to be our true selves around one another and to share our thoughts openly and honestly. We entered meetings without judgment or expectations and knew that if we were unable to attend in a particular week, or if we were less engaged due to other circumstances in our personal or professional lives, our colleagues would still be there to support us.

5. Embrace a Group Process That is Emergent and Organic

Most academic contexts are rife with structure and hierarchy. Thus, removing elements that can constrain the group process—if only for a short time—can be a generative experience. To this end, meetings of our group were emergent and organic. As noted earlier, there were no explicit ground rules; however, we did adhere to certain principles identified and deemed important during our conversations, such as ensuring the confidentiality of group conversations and being responsive to group members' different needs. Outside of this, we did our best to ensure that we were not constrained by a rigid group process or formal agenda. Although structure and predetermined goals can be important in ensuring that outcomes are met, they can simultaneously undermine the authenticity of a group's interactions and shift the focus away from processes to products. A key component of our success was allowing group members to articulate their needs at any given point in time and allowing those to then organically drive the direction in which the group would move. While at times this meant being productive and generating certain outputs because this was what we desired to do, at others, it meant taking the time to support one another or engage in blue-sky thinking that allowed us to envision where we might go together in the future. The emergent and organic nature of our group process further nurtured the self-determination and flexibility that we previously described as being key to our ability to build fellowship.

6. Find Congruence in Values

We came together as two cohorts of ISSOTL Fellows with a motivation to connect as Canadian SoTL scholars. We each had beliefs and ideas about what SoTL is, should be, and can be. We each brought assumptions of having shared values and understandings of doing, supporting, and engaging in SoTL. Many of our assumptions about one another were garnered because of our fellowship, and because we operated in overlapping professional spheres and therefore knew of each other even if we did not yet have existing personal connections. Our assumptions were also validated through discussions at our monthly meetings where we were able to discuss in depth our SoTL and other scholarly interests and work. Because of the emergent and organic group process that our group embraced so wholeheartedly, we found that there was a great deal more congruence in values with reference to our collective experiences as ISSOTL Fellows, the challenges we faced as a result of becoming fellows, our wants and needs from the fellowship program, and recognition of our work, thus underscoring our primary function as a source of support for one another as we navigated our personal and professional lives. Among our core values were authenticity, curiosity, empathy, ethical practice, humility, generosity, open-mindedness, relationality, and respect for others, the identification of which helped us to further build fellowship.

7. Acknowledge the Evolutionary Nature of the Collective

We have enacted what Leibowitz and Bozalek (2018) describe as a ‘slow scholarship approach’ through our process of coming together for monthly meetings, spending time listening and getting to know one another, and collaboration on projects. Slow scholarship promotes quality of relationships, thoughtfulness, open-ended inquiry, and community development. Using this approach in our group has enabled us to seek quality over quantity and emphasize what is meaningful for the sake of the process of fellowship and not a specific outcome. We did not meet with a specific outcome in mind; instead, our work has been emergent. In following the format as has been described earlier where we would begin each meeting with open dialogue and a checking in process of how each of us were doing. Sometimes, based entirely on the checking in process, we were unable and perhaps unwilling, to move beyond this point as there were issues that presented themselves and required attention and care. In other meetings, we would enjoy our time catching up and then quickly shift our focus onto our SoTL work together. This process was always evolutionary, and we prioritized the relationships we had and were building with each other over the work. We recognized that any work we were doing was over and above our for-pay labour and that if our work needed to wait due to a personal crisis or a conflict at home, then so be it. Typically, we were eager to collaborate on projects that we identified as exciting and necessary and therefore, the conversation would soon shift in focus from conversations about personal stories to that of the work at hand. Often there would be a transition by a group member reminding us of the task at hand; however, this was a welcome addition to our group process because it occurred organically and with sensitivity. We were able to balance being productive with a more flexible group process because our work was driven by passion and genuine interest, not a need or a desire to produce (while we are sensitive to the need to produce in other spheres that we inhabit, we did not want this to define our interactions in this group). The relationships and mutual trust that we had built with each other also allowed us to be particularly attuned to one another’s needs, allowing us to pivot away from our SoTL work when needed.

Looking Forward: Visions of the Possible

Through engaging in this reflective collaborative process, we shared energy, passion, and a desire to strengthen the Fellowship experience. Our fellowship was not without its challenges. For example, the production of specific outputs, which we chose to do in a flexible and accommodating way, and for some of us, were outside the scope of our professional roles, sometimes took longer than expected to organize and complete. However, most of our challenges stemmed from factors outside of our group process. At many points, we found our group to be a valuable source of camaraderie and support to help us navigate the challenges we may have been facing personally or professionally. The self-guiding questions and team-based approach to writing and analysis facilitated the conversations we felt were needed to make sense of our experiences during the early stage of our fellowship and to identify common goals for moving forward. We believe the enactment of the principles suggested in this article were foundational for us doing the work to move forward.

As we continued to forge a sense of group identity and connectedness as a small community of ISSOTL Fellows, it became clear that there were key elements of our relationship that compelled us to engage in the international SoTL community and work. We became increasingly motivated by a shared intellectual intrigue as we began to identify a place and space to continue to work together and contribute to our shared SoTL community. Doing this successfully required us to continue to support one another personally and professionally, and with a keen eye for potential cross-institutional projects.

A key element we developed was having agreement of ‘readiness’ in our relationships to engage in collaboration and mutual learning. Despite being a part of the same national SoTL community and being ISSOTL fellows providing some shared context and understanding, we recognized that there is a ripe landscape to continue in our learning and unlearning to make positive and meaningful contributions.

Conclusion

As we conclude this article, we offer these seven guiding principles based upon our own lived experience, overlaid with the constraints of the ISSOTL Fellowship during the global COVID-19 pandemic. They are not the magic solution for all groups to come together; instead, they are one example of how we feel we have been able to create a foundation and then flourish. Just as Felten (2013) created a series of *Principles for Good Practice in SoTL*, we have not sought to create a step-by-step roadmap for fellowship, but a series of reference points that may allow others to clarify and demystify their own SoTL communities and networks, whether they be formal or informal. Our principles are our lenses that allow us to establish an aspirational vision of what is possible.

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