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## Beyond the conference: Singing our SSONG

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## Beyond the conference: Singing our SSONG

### Abstract

The International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (ISSOTL) annual conference presents an exciting opportunity to meet with international colleagues from diverse backgrounds and situations to commune on our common interest in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL). As with every ISSOTL conference, the enthusiasm for SoTL was palpable in Los Angeles in 2016. Rich discussions took place, networks were formed, and promises to keep in touch were made. Unfortunately, previous conference experiences have taught us that these good intentions often fall short once the conference bubble has burst and the reality of daily life sets in once more. In an attempt to circumvent this phenomenon, we—seven colleagues from three different countries—embarked on a research project that enabled us to maintain the relationships and fruitful discussions we had initiated at ISSOTL16. We established Small, Significant Online Network Group, or SSONG, inspired by a conference workshop on small significant networks. As a group, we met regularly online using Adobe Connect® and engaged in significant conversations around SoTL that were private, trustful, and intellectually intriguing. This article reflects our experiences in establishing and maintaining the group. We discuss how the group was formed; its alignment with the concept of small, significant networks; and the benefits and challenges we encountered. Four key principles of the group that have emerged will also be discussed in detail, enabling readers to consider how they could adapt the concept for their own purposes.

### Keywords

ssong, conference:, our, singing, beyond

### Disciplines

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## Beyond the Conference: Singing Our SSONG

### ABSTRACT

The International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (ISSOTL) annual conference presents an exciting opportunity to meet with international colleagues from diverse backgrounds and situations to commune on our common interest in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL). As with every ISSOTL conference, the enthusiasm for SoTL was palpable in Los Angeles in 2016. Rich discussions took place, networks were formed, and promises to keep in touch were made. Unfortunately, previous conference experiences have taught us that these good intentions often fall short once the conference bubble has burst and the reality of daily life sets in once more. In an attempt to circumvent this phenomenon, we—seven colleagues from three different countries—embarked on a research project that enabled us to maintain the relationships and fruitful discussions we had initiated at ISSOTL16. We established Small, Significant Online Network Group, or SSONG, inspired by a conference workshop on small significant networks. As a group, we met regularly online using Adobe Connect® and engaged in significant conversations around SoTL that were private, trustful, and intellectually intriguing. This article reflects our experiences in establishing and maintaining the group. We discuss how the group was formed; its alignment with the concept of small, significant networks; and the benefits and challenges we encountered. Four key principles of the group that have emerged will also be discussed in detail, enabling readers to consider how they could adapt the concept for their own purposes.

### KEYWORDS

Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, small significant networks, community

### WARMING UP: BACKGROUND

An environment with like-minded individuals, such as the annual International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (ISSOTL) conference, provides the perfect conditions for spontaneous conversations with the people that we find ourselves sitting beside. Through these chats, we found friends and colleagues with abounding passion and shared enthusiasm for teaching and learning.

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The relationships built quickly as we met others and incorporated each new person into our conversations. Some of us had come to the conference alone (Ashley), some knew only the colleagues we were traveling with (Corinne, Jacinta, and James), and others were more connected to the broader ISSOTL community (Briony, Michelle, and Marian). Despite our varied backgrounds, research interests, career stages, and institutions (see Table 1), our conversations flourished and our friendships quickly grew. As we learned about one another and what we were presenting at the conference, we sought each other out at meal times and in the conference program. Our connections deepened as we explored the surrounding area first on a brief evening outing, then a full day of sightseeing after the conference. Throughout these activities, our conversations intensified as we discussed our work and our previous conference experiences. We were all well aware of the limited amount of time we had together, so we did not waste time in becoming fast friends.

**Table 1. Description of each group member**

| NAME     | BACKGROUND  | RESEARCH FOCUS  | TEACHING FOCUS   | CAREER STAGE            | INSTITUTION  |
|----------|---|---|--|-------------------------|--|
| Corinne  | Primary school teacher; teacher educator                          | Teacher education; school-university partnerships                           | Bachelor of primary education pedagogy subjects  | Early stage PhD student | University of Wollongong, Australia (research-intensive) |
| Michelle | Primary school teacher; teacher educator; education researcher    | Teacher education; creating great teachers                                  | Bachelor of primary education pedagogy subjects  | Mid-career academic     | University of Wollongong, Australia (research-intensive) |
| Marian   | Drama school founder and director                                 | SoTL; multiple intelligences theory; teaching for understanding             | Teaching and learning in higher education  | Late-career academic    | University College Cork, Ireland (research-intensive)    |
| Ashley   | Administrator/manager (finance, academia, healthcare, government) | Mindfulness; transformative learning; program planning and evaluation       | Research methods; program planning and evaluation  | Late-stage PhD student  | Tennessee Tech University, USA (research-intensive)      |
| Briony   | English as a second language teacher; academic support lecturer   | SoTL; technology enhanced learning; innovative teaching in higher education | Teaching and learning in higher education qualifications (certificate, diploma and master's) | Early career academic   | University College Cork, Ireland (research-intensive)    |

|         |  |                                   |   |                        |   |
|---------|--|-----------------------------------|---|------------------------|---|
| Jacinta | Post-primary teacher; materials designer | Second language teacher education | Professional master of education          | Late-stage PhD student | University College Cork, Ireland (research-intensive) |
| James   | Humanities and SoTL                      | SoTL                              | Teaching and learning in higher education | Late-stage PhD student | University College Cork, Ireland (research-intensive) |

During this time, we lamented how disappointing it can be to leave the excitement and energy of a conference and return to our isolated offices in the corners of our institutions. This can be particularly difficult for those involved in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) who feel unsupported and disconnected from their research-intensive colleagues (Mighty, 2013; Roxå & Mårtensson, 2009, 2012). In fact, this had been Michelle’s experience at two previous ISSOTL conferences, which made her particularly determined not to let it happen again. We searched for a way to continue to keep in touch, support one another, and keep sharing conversations regarding our work.

Based on various presentations and conversations that we had been involved with at the conference, we considered using online technology to connect with one another as a small significant network at a distance (Poole, Verwoord, & Iqbal, 2016; Roxå & Mårtensson, 2009, 2012; Verwoord & Poole, 2016). From this, we formed our Small Significant Online Network Group, or SSONG. While the experience can be viewed through a number of lenses, it is the framework of the small significant network that is central to this article. Informed by the work of Roxå and Mårtensson (2009, 2012), we see our group as significant because of the depth of the conversations encouraged in this small network. Most importantly for us, “there are no signs of boundaries surrounding them, neither organisational nor physical” (Roxå & Mårtensson, 2012, p. 556).

In this reflection, we offer a narrative of the process we undertook to form and maintain our group, and we consider how it enabled us to continue our SoTL-focused conversations well after returning home from the ISSOTL conference. Given the oft-felt isolation of practitioners of SoTL even after they have made connections with colleagues at a valuable conference, we find the opportunity to share this experience important (Mighty, 2013; Roxå & Mårtensson, 2009, 2012). This reflection is grounded in research literature and explains the approach we took, the benefits and challenges we experienced, and the principles we uncovered.

### CHOOSING WHAT TO SING: LITERATURE REVIEW

A range of theoretical frameworks can be used to direct and support collaborations between colleagues for a variety of reasons. Community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) is perhaps the most widely known and utilized of these, among others such as faculty learning communities (Cox, 2004) and small significant networks (Roxå & Mårtensson, 2009, 2012).

Lave and Wenger (1991) first introduced communities of practice. They sought to examine the ways groups of people who share similar passions, interests, and goals come together in order to deepen their knowledge and share information while increasing their personal and professional development (Lave & Wenger, 1991). There are three elements that are integral in order to have a community of practice: the domain (the topic), the community (the people), and the practice (the activity) (Lave &

Wenger, 1991). Communities of practice have been used to support new academics in networking with a group of people who share common concerns, problems, or passions (Cox, 2013); to reduce isolation (Herrington, Herrington, Kervin, & Ferry, 2006); and to foster dialogue about professional practice (Bitzer, 2010). A core component of a community of practice is that the community knowledge is far greater than individual knowledge alone—meaning participation in the community becomes active and inclusive rather than a group of separately working individuals (Johnson, 2001). There are some indications that online communities of practice exist, supporting the members to collaborate beyond geographical boundaries (Evans, Yeung, Markoulakis, & Guilcher, 2014; Johnson, 2001; Zhang & Watts, 2008).

Faculty learning communities similarly engage in discussions and support, utilizing a more structured system within an institution. Cox (2004) describes it as “a cross-disciplinary faculty and staff group . . . engaged in an active, collaborative, yearlong program with a curriculum about enhancing teaching and learning with frequent seminars and activities that provide learning, development, the scholarship of teaching, and community building” (p. 9). Faculty learning communities have led to positive impacts on faculty development within an institution, and on the attitudes held about teaching and learning (McMorrow, DeCleene Huber, & Wiley, 2017). Faculty learning communities can be topic-based, covering specific matters of teaching and learning such as designing assessments, or they can be cohort-based, looking at the teaching and learning needs of a particular group or faculty (Cox, 2004; McMorrow et al., 2017). Sherer, Shea, and Kristensen (2003) discuss the implications of the range of technological tools (such as chatrooms and webcasts) that can be utilized to expand faculty learning communities to an online platform. Since universities are places of busy tenure, using an online platform can often assist collaboration between institutional colleagues (Engin & Atkinson, 2015). Even with technology use, however, faculty learning communities typically do not extend beyond one institution (Cox, 2004).

Small significant networks, as described by Roxå and Mårtensson (2009, 2012), are limited groups of people with whom academics can hold private conversations surrounding the theoretical growth of teaching and learning. Small significant networks are seen as being useful for educators to grow professionally in the field of teaching and learning, as these conversations are informal ways of engaging in meaningful learning (Poole, Iqbal, & Verwoord, 2018). These networks and conversations are built upon the foundations of privacy, mutual trust, and intellectual interests surrounding teaching and learning (Poole et al., 2018; Roxå & Mårtensson, 2009). Patariaia, Falconer, Margaryan, Littlejohn, and Fincher (2014) also support this notion, discussing how these networks can provide work-related support and ultimately assist in enhancing teaching practices. Small significant networks support authentic conversations, which can be effective in workplace learning and finding solutions to problems (Thomson, 2015).

## THE METRONOME: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

For musicians and songsters alike, there are tools that are pertinent to the musical trade. Musicians need instruments, sheet music, and often a conductor to keep the orchestra on track. There are other tools that help musicians to learn and remain focused on their task, and perhaps none are as important as the metronome. By definition, the metronome is “a device that produces a regular beat at a desired speed to help musicians keep the correct rhythm” (Cambridge University Press, 2008, p. 597). It is a tool that produces a steady beat so that the musicians can play their musical rhythms accurately,

particularly during practice. In much the same way, we needed a tool that would help to guide the “rhythm” of this endeavor. For us, this was the theoretical framework of the small significant network (Roxå & Mårtensson, 2009, 2012).

Our curiosity about the notion of small significant networks was the initial springboard for exploring the possibility of sustaining our connections despite our geographical distance from one another. Roxå and Mårtensson underscore how solitary the practice of being a university teacher can be, with many of us operating within silos within our institutions, schools, faculties, countries, and so on. Williams, Verwood, Beery, Dalton, McKinnon, Strickland, Pace, and Poole (2013) likewise declare this isolation to be “one of the most challenging barriers facing SoTL champions” (p. 53). Conferences are one way to break out of these constraints and network beyond these limitations (McKinney, 2015; Huber & Robinson, 2016). Small significant networks are also underpinned by the ethos of a community of practice in facilitating the shared passion of individuals who are wanting to learn how to do something better, and do this by interacting regularly (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015a).

The term *networking* may be loathed by many academics, and establishing networks is often viewed as a purely strategic endeavor (Morrish, 2015; Van Waes, Van den Bossche, Moolenaar, Stes, & Van Petegem, 2015). However, *significant* networks are often serendipitously formed (Verwoord & Poole, 2016; Williams et al., 2013). Morrish (2015) argues, “[f]or many of us, [networks are] experienced as a series of happy accidents, fortuitous collisions of minds, and sometimes bodies, at conferences. Collaborations are driven as often by personal appeal as they are by pure intellectual attraction” (n.p.). This personal appeal and intellectual attraction was a key component in the formation of our group as it enabled further conversation and engagement outside of the formal conference space, alleviating our solitude and allowing connections through shared experiences (Van Waes et al., 2016; Williams et al., 2013).

For us, the initial “collision of minds” was through SoTL: genuine and passionate interest in the teaching and learning contexts of the others in the group, and openness to sharing current practice with others. As the purpose of SoTL is to better understand our teaching and learning through research, groups such as this are fundamental to skills and knowledge development (Trigwell, 2013; Williams et al., 2013). Roxå and Mårtensson (2012) argue that “university teachers rely on a limited number of individuals to test ideas or solve problems related to teaching and learning . . . teachers relate to a small network in the same way that researchers do” (p. 556). An enhanced commitment to teaching and learning can be fostered through engaging in these significant networks (Mårtensson, Roxå, & Olsson, 2011).

Framing teaching through a scholarly and investigative lens unearths many truths: Teaching is not simply a technique but an enactment of a deep disciplinary appreciation and understanding (Shulman, 1993). Connecting teaching to scholarship takes place through documentation, sharing of ideas, and peer review (Marcketti, van der Zanden, & Leptien, 2015). Through regular meetings, significant conversations, and reflection from multiple perspectives over an extended period, our group provided a space for us to develop this deeper understanding of SoTL. Despite the seemingly organic nature of small significant networks—and indeed our own—there are a number of key elements that are vital to the maintenance and meaning behind being part of such a network. Roxå and Mårtensson (2009) underscore how fundamental are private, trustful, and intellectually intriguing conversations in facilitating meaningful small significant networks.

*Private conversations*

Small significant networks function best when constructed as private spaces and kept separate from formal meetings. Private spaces create a sense of connection, openness, and trust, fostering communication that lives and thrives in vulnerable, creative, and daring environments. Formal meetings are generally stripped of this spaciousness and laden with norm-based expectations. Small significant networks offer a space to nurture private conversations and the trust and connection that bloom within them.

*Trustful conversations*

To be meaningful and safe for exploring ideas and testing out concepts, there must be a high degree of trust between the participating individuals. Trust comes from more than mere privacy. Presence, patience, praise, respect, compassion, kindness, and truthfulness all contribute to conversations where trust thrives (Mipham, 2017). Groups may find their own ways of communicating that encourage trust or they may draw from techniques such as nonviolent communication (Rosenberg, 2015), mindfulness (Mipham, 2017), and active listening (McNaughton & Vostal, 2010).

*Intellectually intriguing conversations.*

The conversations are not personal or centered on emotional support; they are not superficial, but intellectually engaging. This means that the group responds critically, thoughtfully, and creatively to understand the situation presented and offer possible solutions. The small significant network offers a protected environment to tackle challenging ideas and stimulate deep thought.

While small significant networks might seem to be significant only to those individuals who are directly involved, these settings provide venues for emergent leaders to champion SoTL through support of small networks by providing cross-border opportunities for wider collaboration and support for institutional change (Verwoerd & Poole, 2016).

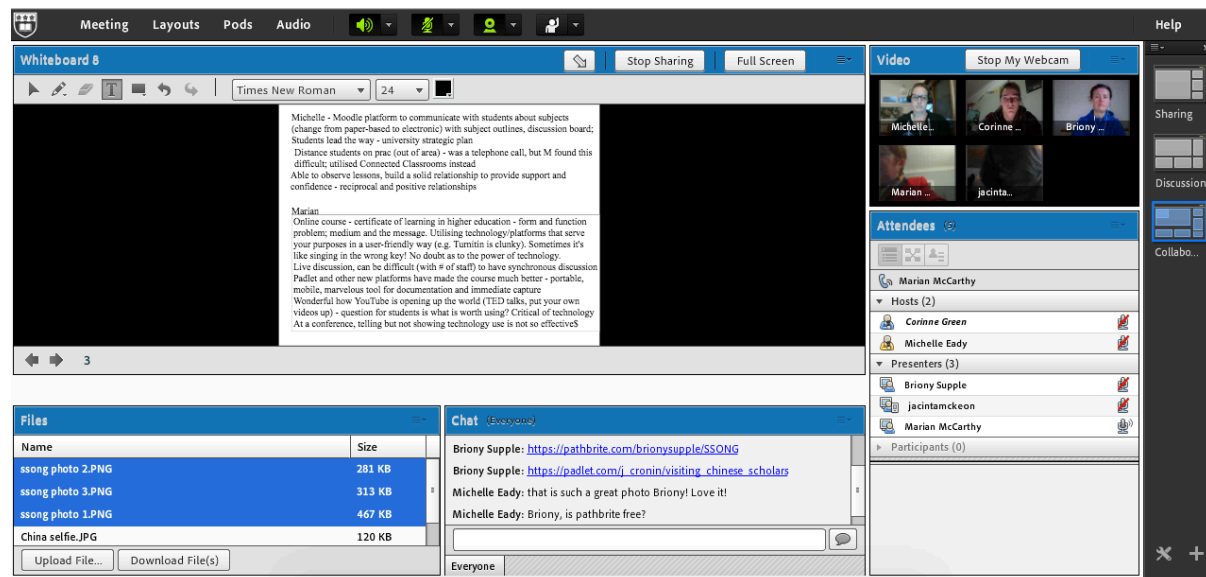
**SSONG REHEARSALS: METHOD**

Upon our return home to our respective institutions once the conference had ended, the logistics of the group began to unfold. For our purpose, we needed to find a way to continue to build our academic relationships and fulfil our desire to continue learning together despite the geographical distance between us. We created personalized reflective journals, complete with photos from our time at the conference, a motivational poem, and the details of our first online meeting, and we mailed them to all members. Along with the journals were some reflective prompts for us all to consider before our first conversation. These were focused on what we had gleaned from our time at the conference, documenting how our group had formed, and articulating our goals for the group.

Adobe Connect© was chosen as the platform for our online meetings (see Figure 1). This software provides videoconferencing with additional features suitable for our purpose (including video chat, text chat, and whiteboard displays). Adobe Connect© was chosen by convenience, as Michelle had both experience using the platform to teach at a distance and access to the platform via her institution. She took responsibility for setting up the “meeting room” prior to each session. There were some difficulties initially in becoming familiar with this particular piece of technology, but we were quickly able to support one another in our use of it and adapt it to suit our purposes.



Figure 1. Screenshot from a SSONG meeting, conducted via Adobe Connect©



The online meetings took place every six weeks and were preceded by an email from Corinne with a proposed meeting time (across three time zones) and reflective prompts for that meeting. The meeting time was chosen to present the least amount of convenience to all members: Thursday at 3pm for Ashley; Thursday at 9pm for Briony, Jacinta, James, and Marian; and Friday at 7am for Corinne and Michelle. The prompts included questions such as “What are the goals for this SSONG?”; “Why is it important to connect with others around SoTL?”; and “How is technology being used by students in your context (through a SoTL lens)?” These questions provided a focus for each meeting. This allowed us to capitalize on the value of the group and discuss our implementation of SoTL while maintaining flexibility to discuss other aspects of our experience as well (Marcketti et al., 2015; McMillan & Gordon, 2017).

Within the meetings, we would spend a few minutes catching up and reminding ourselves of how to use the program features (which we would invariably, though momentarily, forget) as each team member joined. Each team member was called on to share reflections and experiences. The conversation flowed freely, with people referring back to what others had said, and building our collective understanding of SoTL in our contexts and the value of our group. A short summary of the discussions was sent around after each session, reminding us of what we had covered and keeping those who had not been able to meet in the loop. This allowed a documentation of our discussions, as suggested by Felten (2013) and Trigwell (2013).

This process was iteratively developed over the course of the year. For example, following the first two meetings Corinne sent around a simple thank-you email for each person’s involvement. However, by the third meeting these emails included a summary of discussions and action items. This ensured everyone was on the same page and served as a reminder prior to the following meeting of our previous discussions and decisions. The email prior to our fifth meeting explicitly included pieces recalled from the fourth meeting summary email because, as Corinne wrote, “you may be like me and have forgotten what this was about.”

The focus of the reflection prompts also changed and developed over the course of the year. Initially, the reflections were related to the value of meeting together in this manner, and our general thoughts on SoTL. By our fourth meeting, we considered the opportunity to use the group for more than navel-gazing (which was appropriate and helpful in the beginning). Jacinta suggested that we capitalize on the transcultural, international, diverse makeup of the group to explore the cultural differences we bring to our scholarship on teaching and learning and our group's discussions. The reflection prompt for the fifth meeting, then, focused on sharing from our own contexts how technology is being used by and with students.

Below, we share our reflections on the value of the group, as captured in our reflective journals (both paper-based and technology-enhanced, using Padlet and Pathbrite) and videoconference conversations. Quotations from these sources illustrate and elaborate on the points raised.

## THE PERFORMANCE: DISCUSSION

As a small significant network, our group facilitated the principles set out by Roxå and Mårtensson (2009, 2012): conversations that are private, trustful, and intellectually intriguing.

### **Private conversations**

Roxå and Mårtensson (2009) emphasized the importance of privacy in conversations about teaching and learning. Within this context, privacy entails the following:

1. A conversation space that is conducive to communication that will not be heard by anyone other than those in the conversation.
2. Those in the conversation are purposeful about their inclusion and participation.

In other words, the people talking are intended partners in communication and uninvited participants are not included in the private conversation.

Such a feeling of privacy and, one might argue, security leads to a level of honesty and freedom in communication that might not be possible in larger professional or social settings. This does not mean, however, that private conversations are free from the influence of various social, professional, and political contexts (Roxå and Mårtensson, 2009). Rather, private conversations provide space to communicate free from outside expectation and observation. Privacy engenders a sense of connection that allows participants to communicate across varied contexts and at their intersections; without privacy, these spaces might be otherwise left vacant. Such vacancy may prevent the other principles (trust and intellectual engagement) from developing and thwart engaging conversation about teaching and learning.

Roxå and Mårtensson's (2009) discussion of private conversations focused primarily on what might be interpreted as the physical aspects of privacy. Our group did not occupy a physical location the majority of the time; our only in-person meetings occurred in conjunction with the ISSOTL annual conferences. Through the Adobe Connect® platform, we have connected across multiple continents and time zones over an 18-month timespan. Roxå and Mårtensson's (2009) principle of privacy is, however, just as applicable to online environments. In using the Adobe Connect® platform, we had a fundamental assumption of privacy as only our group's members had the link and password to join the session. Outside participants or observation were not possible. The conversations we shared were ours, and we were able to interact in a space where we could see and hear one another in a shared virtual

room. As Corinne reflected, the platform linked her to “a secure network of people that I want to hear from and share with.”

Members connected from a variety of locations (such as an office, home, or while on a work trip), and yet our shared understanding of the privacy of our conversations did not waver. The caveat, of course, is that a digital environment may not be fully secure. There is no reason to believe our conversations were monitored or observed without our knowledge or that any recordings we made would be accessed by others without permission. But we also enter the online space with the knowledge that such monitoring is possible. In such a virtual conversation space, the assumption of privacy is bolstered and strengthened by Roxå and Mårtensson’s (2009) second principle: trustful conversations.

### **Trustful conversations**

Conversations must have trust to facilitate connection and to enable deep inquiry. Roxå and Mårtensson (2009) found trust to be essential in small significant networks. These networks allow for discussions that may go beyond the status quo or contrary to organizational expectations, and they admit introduction of relevant personal information (Roxå and Mårtensson, 2009, 2012). Trust helps make this possible. We also assert that respect and compassion work in conjunction with trust to create a truly trustful conversation. Our group offered ongoing opportunities to build on the trust, respect, and compassion developed in our initial in-person meeting. Members felt, and continue to feel, able to voice questions, concerns, and frustrations in a supportive environment. Corinne shared that participation in the group “allows you to be open and honest about how you feel about things and not take things personally if someone questions your ideas, but to feel challenged and empowered for the next conversation you have with others.” This is a very important space for our diverse group to inhabit. Ashley noted that

*[e]ven though I am a Ph.D. student and not a faculty member, I am always welcomed in the conversation. I never feel uncomfortable asking what might feel like a silly or “newbie” question. Answers are thoughtful and other members are invested in helping me grow professionally. I know my contributions to our collaboration are valued. I trust our SSONG members as colleagues, mentors, and friends. That trust has helped me to grow as a student, collaborator, and person.*

The members have been consistently cooperative and supportive. There is no anxiety about those with whom we are connecting in our online space. In addition, genuine celebration of members’ successes, such as publications or awards, further promoted trust.

Our group is unique in that we are a mix of academics at various career stages: from students in PhD programs to established, esteemed faculty members on three different continents. Yet we all have a vested interest in teaching and learning. Our differing circumstances could have presented barriers to trustful conversation in two ways. First, the mix of diverse personal and professional cultures and varied understandings and experiences of teaching and learning might have been a point of conflict. Instead, these differences served as points of connection and deepening conversation. As Ashley reflected, participation in the group offers

*a variety of perspectives about SoTL and how it can be enacted and experienced. And not just perspectives from people in my own region or country. The diversity is so beneficial, especially since I feel like the new kid on the SoTL block.*

Trust, respect, and compassion facilitated that openness and development of increasingly trustful conversations. Differences in knowledge and research experience provided learning opportunities and points for reflection and deeper discussion.

Second, the combination of various experiences and points of career development might also have proven to be an obstacle to establishing and sustaining trustful conversations. These differences were not obstacles at all. Briony, Marian, and Michelle each expressed that they forgot the PhD students were students; they experienced everyone in the group as equal members. This dissolution of what is often a very clear boundary in academia has been profound in maintaining trustful conversation. We believe that dissolution of student and faculty member roles and expectations has made deeper trustful conversation possible for our group.

An additional element that added to the greater cultivation of trust and overall sustainability has been the fact that we all met in person at a conference. Corinne felt the first meeting at an ISSOTL conference was especially formative:

*Meeting in person initially was crucial to the level of trust that we shared, and the kinds of conversations we could be a part of. By starting the relationships in person, there was less chance that our meaning would be misconstrued through a lack of communication cues. Instead, we were invested in one another and could understand what was being said (or not said) with relative ease.*

There is no anxiety about who we are connecting within our online space. We recognize the names, faces, and voices we interact with through Adobe Connect®. With that foundational trust, we were able to communicate well and correctly interpret cues and meaning. We also know that we are in a private, trustful space that allows for exploration of intellectually intriguing and challenging concepts, particularly focused on teaching and learning. We became more trustful with each meeting: “Our trust for one another deepened over time, as we continued to listen to each other, act on one another's advice, and give each other no reason to suspect a betrayal of trust” (Corinne). This initial in-person connection may be an important factor for other groups wishing to create a small significant online network group. While it may not be a possibility for all such groups, occasional in-person connection—as a whole group or in various subgroups and pairs—may help to further develop an ongoing trustful conversation.

### **Intellectually intriguing conversations**

Intellectually intriguing conversations are the third principle for a small significant network, with these innovative and intriguing exchanges best developed and maintained when they occur in a private, trustful conversational space (Roxå and Mårtensson, 2009). As noted earlier, the conversational space—and by extension, the online conversational space—is engaging, critical, creative, thoughtful, open, and responsive. The foundation of privacy and trust support such communication.

Roxå and Mårtensson (2009) asserted that the “overall purpose of these significant conversations is to interpret teaching and learning realities” (p. 556). In our group’s online space, this occurred through not only discussions of SoTL’s theory and practice but also personal theories about

teaching and learning. The fluid, back-and-forth movement from formal to personal theory, practice, and experience shaped intellectually intriguing conversations. What might be most important about these engaging exchanges is that they remained intriguing, engaging, challenging, and critical without becoming exclusive or intimidating. This highlights, once again, the type of collaboration that emerges from a trustful, private conversational space. Creativity was not lost, and we all felt energized by our discussions. Ashley expressed that for a newcomer to SoTL and someone not yet well versed in its language, SoTL did not appear to be explicitly at the forefront of scholarly and research discussions in which she took part; thus, the group provided opportunities for exploration of SoTL as a new lens through which to view and experience the educational landscape:

*I love hearing about theories, whether formal or personal, and practices that are successful. I get to ask why, how, and what if. We can debate if they might work in another context. The same goes for unsuccessful experiences: what did [other members] learn from them and how have the missteps and hiccups shaped experience, theory, and practice going forward? How can I take this wealth of knowledge and grow? It's exciting stuff. I love the way my mind starts to whir when we come together and talk.*

Our group's varied membership also further supported intellectually intriguing conversation through its international perspectives, which brought a great deal of value and fostered curiosity about theory and practice. Through the group, we have been able to explore specific issues related to teaching and learning, such as technology use within tertiary level subjects, across a range of contexts. We have discussed these from an academic standpoint, considering the evidence base for our various practices, innovating upon them, and translating teaching and learning practices from one situation to another. All of these conversations have been intellectually intriguing and deeply connected to each member's professional activities. Intellectually intriguing conversations have been supported and deepened, rather than hampered, by the scope of members' professional and educational experiences. This might be surprising for some readers, but when intellectually intriguing conversations occur in conjunction with private, trustful conversations, differences that have potential for disruption become opportunities to connect and learn. Perhaps even more significant is that our group is free from intimidation or nervousness when tackling intellectually challenging ideas, as Michelle reflected:

*One of the members of SSONG is world renowned for her work in SoTL, and to be able to share a space with her on a regular basis and hear her take on things was like being able to sit next to an author when they were doing a reading of their latest novel.*

Such encounters were energizing for our members and for sustaining our group.

In these varied ways, our SSONG embodies Roxå and Mårtensson's (2009) three principles for small significant networks. James offered insight as to the great value of using Roxå and Mårtensson's (2009) principles, saying,

*I would paraphrase the sentiments of philosopher Hannah Arendt, who considered that thinking is not a solitary monologue, but is an anticipated dialogue with others. Although this project was using new technologies, its essence is "political" in a manner that Socrates would have acknowledged, namely,*

*creating a public life through meaningful conversations with others. Isn't this the essence of being an intellectual: through private conversations, trustful conversations, and intellectually intriguing conversations?*

While some translation and mediation was required to ensure private, trustful, intellectually intriguing conversations in an online context, each member agrees that such conversations were successfully facilitated throughout our time together.

### **Benefits of a SSONG**

All members found it to be a positive, motivating, and enjoyable professional experience. We found particular importance in the opportunities provided to keep the SoTL-focused conversations going well beyond the conference itself. This was directly related to the impetus for creating the group. As Michelle admitted, “[i]t was a real desire of mine to keep in touch with the people that we have met at the conference and to continue to grow and learn together as educators.”

More than just continuing conversations from the conference, we found that the enthusiasm of the collective group, which could be easily observed as we met online, “keeps us focused and thus better motivated” (Ashley). Seeing one another’s faces contributed greatly to this sense of energy—Michelle shared, “I understand the power that synchronous technology provides in that it allows people to connect virtually in live time as if they were in the same room together.” Along with the immediacy of these synchronous meetings, truly seeing each other allowed us to share the emotional side of our work, contributing to the support felt by all members and further developing trustful conversations.

The support we are able to provide for one another was a foundational goal for the group. We encouraged each other to continue to reflect on the conference and develop teaching and learning approaches aligned with our research on teaching and learning. This was crucial for Briony, for whom the group provides the space to “support and inspire one another . . . as we gather as like-minded individuals.” These ideas were able to develop over time as we engaged in significant conversations over the course of the year. For Jacinta, the SSONG gives the chance to deepen her thinking regarding “storytelling” within her teaching, with insights emerging through multiple sessions. Being able to reflect on her work with the group over a longer period of time has helped her appreciate the value of applying this concept to her work with different student groups and in the teaching of different subject disciplines.

The metaphors associated with the SSONG also developed over time, with Marian poetically sharing that “we are in the space together singing our song” as a way of living SoTL. For her, the whole was bigger than the sum of its parts as we rehearsed and sung as one voice in chorus. This resonated with Michelle, who found her tribe in ISSOTL, and saw the SSONG as a way to connect with that tribe. She stated, “this online community encouraged me to continue on my path. Although some academics would not consider this is a real research path, it has helped me to understand that it’s okay to . . . care about teaching, students, and best practices.” Ashley also feels the power of multiple colleagues across the world giving voice to SoTL: “It has helped me keep energized . . . it’s a cacophony of sounds, creating a choir . . . a powerful resource.”

The collective input from each member contributed to an online community of practice where our knowledge, emotions, and passions regarding teaching and learning, and SoTL, were shared (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). It provided the chance to consider the contexts of these understandings, and to share from our varied experiences. Those who were well versed in SoTL, those

who were brand new, and those in between all felt their perspectives and contributions were valued and appreciated, with legitimate (not peripheral) participation by all. Being able to “stumble along together” (Ashley) enabled us to find answers to questions in unexpected ways and places. As Ashley declared, “We can be braver together than alone. . . Plus encountering different practices, experiences, and perspectives from all over the world really provides such wonderful information and transformative experiences and relationships.”

### **Challenges of a SSONG**

We encountered some difficulties in this process, and while we feel that the benefits have far outweighed the challenges, it is important to be honest about the problems we faced. The technology presented some challenges, particularly for those who were not familiar with Adobe Connect®. However, those who were more competent swiftly stepped in to help anyone who was struggling, alleviating the impact of this issue.

For each of us, making the time to connect was a challenge at one time or another. On one level, the nature of time zones meant that some group members were staying up late (until 10pm) while others were waking up early (for a 6am meeting)—or sleeping in, as was the case at least once! On another level, our busy schedules made it complicated at times to give the appropriate priority to the reflective tasks that made our meeting times productive, even though we recognized that “having regular time set aside to focus on discussing SoTL helps me to recalibrate and realign what I’m doing” (Corinne). Shortly after we began our group, the commitment required was deemed too much by an additional person who had been an engaged member of the group at the ISSOTL conference. While we were sad to see him go, we understood his decision. Throughout the following year, there was a lot of grace given to those that needed it, especially those approaching the end of their PhD candidacy who needed to reduce their involvement in the group at certain points.

## **THE REVERBERATING SOUNDS: PRINCIPLES OF OUR SSONG**

Our experience has taught us that four elements are crucial in the development of a small, significant online network group: relationships, commitment, voice, and a consideration of logistics. These principles have emerged from our experience, and through reflection on the themes within the data. When we considered, both individually and through group discussion, what had been most important to the development and success of our SSONG, these four elements were clear.

### **Relationships**

The relationships that we developed at the ISSOTL conference were foundational to our conversations throughout the year. We made the effort to go beyond merely saying “Hi” to each other—we invested in one another with our time and energy. This built trust and understanding that facilitated a safe space for our conversations throughout the year. The development of mutual trust has been seen to be crucial to developing fruitful networks (Roxå and Mårtensson, 2009; Pyörälä, Hirsto, Toom, Myyry, & Lindblom-Ylänne, 2015; Rienties & Hosein, 2015). By building these trustful relationships both in person at the ISSOTL conference and online throughout the following year, the SSONG assuaged any sense that we are isolated SoTL practitioners (Van Waes et al., 2016; Williams et al., 2013). The relationships were also underpinned by a shared passion and interest in teaching and learning and a curiosity around the added value of a SoTL community to their individual and institutional contexts.

### **Commitment**

Primarily motivated by previous experiences of suggestions to continue working together that were typically forgotten after a conference, we made a promise to each other before the end of the ISSOTL conference that we would meet online at least once. In that first online meeting, we established common goals for the group that helped us to be “singing from the same hymn sheet” (Marian) and fostered our commitment to each other. A small significant network, much like a community of practice, is not a club of friends or a random conglomeration of individuals; it has an identity which is defined by a domain of shared interest—membership to which therefore implies a commitment (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015a).

This commitment was demonstrated not only by our continued presence in our online meetings, but also in the organic ways we incorporated each other’s voices when one or more of us could not make the meeting. When Briony knew she could not make it to one of the meetings, she shared a short video with her reflections. Similarly, Ashley would send an email that encapsulated her thoughts, while Marian used Pathbrite to record and share her reflections. Jacinta connected to the meeting from her niece’s birthday party, thanks to the wonders of technology and some help from her relatives. This level of interdependence within the group demonstrates the deep connections shared within this group and the desire of each member to connect and share (even if circumstances prevented this from happening conventionally) (Van Waes et al., 2016).

Our group was driven by knowledge sharing rather than being task driven (Wenger, 1998); it existed and was sustained because of the fundamental aspect of knowledge sharing. This in turn was only possible through a commitment to logging in and being present. The uses of alternative technology tools allowed everyone to provide input, even if they were not able to join us synchronously.

### **Voice**

It was crucial in our forming stages that we remained a small group, so that everyone genuinely felt that they had a voice. According to McMillan and Gordon (2017), “the most effective of these networks are small” (p. 784). Because of its small size, everyone in the group has a responsibility to contribute to the robust discussions and to listen to each other in the process. Drawing on Marian’s analogy, within our choir we each have our notes to sing, which must be sung, and must be heard. The collaborative nature of the group means that it succeeds when we work together, welcoming, sharing, and listening to the voices of all. This reflects the work of Van Waes, De Maeyer, Moolenaar, Van Petegem, and Van den Bossche (2018), which acknowledges the value of diversity within networks. Ashley summarized this element well: “My voice can literally and figuratively be heard . . . and I can hear those of everyone else.”

### **Logistics**

We have found that the practical aspects of sustaining our group require consideration as the group itself evolves, and that the technology tools employed can have an impact on the nature of the group. Using Adobe Connect© served our purposes well, although a different tool with which the members have more familiarity (such as Skype) might have further alleviated some of the difficulties we encountered. The spontaneous use of asynchronous tools, including emails, Pathbrite and Padlet, also enhanced our connections to one another. One aspect is clear: even though the group comes together as



one of shared expertise and has been egalitarian in all respects, the logistics of a small, significant online network group point to the need for clear leadership. It was important that one of the team took on the responsibility for emailing the group to propose a mutually convenient time to meet (across time zones), update the group on resources, provide links to materials we might have discussed, organize distribution of work for completing a task (this article!), and so on. Our group was hugely fortunate to have very strong and capable leaders (Corinne and Michelle) who were able to set up online meetings via their institution's Adobe Connect® platform and facilitate the elements of such a meeting. In any working group, this leadership element is vital (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015b).

Making regular contact has served to foster our relationships and maintain ongoing conversations; it is important to work with both continuity and within a “community rhythm” (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015b, n.p.). We aimed to meet every six weeks and ended up having six meetings across 12 months. The meetings lasted no longer than one hour—manageable to fit into our schedules. We documented our progress across the year in a variety of ways, including using our reflective journals and the regular reflective prompts, emailing a summary of each meeting, and collating our reflections as a group. This helped to generate a sense of achievement and accomplishment throughout the group, and enabled us to remember previous discussions (Felton, 2013; Trigwell, 2013).

#### FINAL NOTES: IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

For us, the SSONG has been a wonderful tool to sustain the interest and connections that come from the rich ISSOTL conference environment. We have benefited from the reciprocal nature of the group in many ways. Our international makeup has helped to familiarize us with SoTL practices other than our own and has enabled us to draw from a deep well of practical and theoretical knowledge we would otherwise not have (Blair, 2013; Van Waes et al., 2018). It has enabled us to learn about the differences and similarities in our approaches to SoTL, and has connected us as we learn from and with one another (Felton, 2013). Not only have we grown in our commitment to one another and the SSONG, but our commitment to teaching and learning has also been enhanced through the group and the innovative practices we have shared (Mårtensson, Roxå, & Olsson, 2011).

Our experience offers insight into a practical solution to the challenges faced after leaving a significant conference. It demonstrates how spaces for continuing SoTL-focused conversations between international colleagues can be created through online platforms. For those readers interested in connecting with international colleagues they may meet at a conference, we highly recommend establishing your own group. We encourage readers to embrace the opportunity for valuable conversations within a small significant network of diverse colleagues. We believe this is particularly possible within a SoTL context, where competitive attitudes and impact factor statuses surrender to collaborative attempts to work on meaningful projects. Furthermore, we suggest that readers consider how the principles we have identified—relationships, commitment, voice, and logistics—will affect their group.

There are a number of other applications for this highly adaptable and inclusive format (Van Waes et al., 2018). It can be used for professional support, as many of us who have limited support for SoTL in our areas have experienced. It has been a great touchstone to help us persevere, innovate, and keep our enthusiasm and motivation high when we encounter obstacles (McMillan & Gordon, 2017). Participating in the group has been encouraging and compassionate, giving us the confidence to take chances, try new pedagogical and scholarly practices, and apply these practices to new areas or groups.

The group can provide space to generate ideas and theory for possible research, and time to identify areas of interest while still mining the rich resource of SoTL as a whole (Williams et al., 2013). The varying scope of expertise in our membership has been valuable as well; going forward, we will continue to foster our group and learn from one another.

Other uses for SSONGs include conducting international SoTL projects, offering a professional development forum, coordinating a regional or national network for administrators to work on initiatives and share best practices, and supplementing to current online attendance for classes or professional development. These options offer a greater chance for personal and professional connection and support, and they provide fertile ground for innovative collaboration and problem solving.

#### ENCORE: GOING FORWARD WITH THE SSONG

Formed at ISSOTL16 in the United States and celebrated at ISSOTL17 in Canada, our SSONG has continued to collaborate and evolve through ISSOTL18 in Norway, and ISSOTL19 in the United States. Importantly, our SSONG has enabled us to build relationships through our research. We cherish the friendships that we have developed, and know that we have colleagues around the world that we could partner with whenever the opportunity arises. Additionally, the success of our SSONG has assured us that collaborations sparked by a conference can be sustained to fruition. We are looking forward to the significant conversations that we will engage in into the future and to meeting face to face once more in Perth!

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