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Building a Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Community of Practice to Reinforce Lasallian Values¹

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Introduction

The study of teaching and learning was foundational in Saint John Baptist de La Salle's formation of teachers for the Christian schools. As Susan R. Hines points out, De La Salle was an "educator of educators,"¹⁰ recognizing that pedagogical training was a core activity for the Brothers in the Christian Schools. Through life in community, the Brothers had daily opportunities for collective reflection upon pedagogical practice. Indeed the "Director of the community house maintained a schedule of morning readings of the *Conduct*, and midday and evening 'recreations' consisting of pedagogical discussions with peers and older teachers."¹¹

Consistent with De La Salle's emphasis on building relationships with fellow teachers, the evolution of a campus community around the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) both reinforces relationships with peers and calls us to actively reflect and learn from our *praxis* in association. As Brother Luke Salm writes,

the traditional sense of association is now understood in terms of a genuine educational community where, in the pursuit of knowledge, persons meet persons, mind speaks to mind and heart to heart.¹²

The creation of a community around SoTL extends the foundational work of De La Salle, builds upon the many contemporary brothers and Lasallian educators who are pedagogical scholars, and answers the call for Lasallian educators to engage in continued work and research in the area of learning innovations.¹³ This paper will discuss how one university created a community to answer this call. First, we discuss the concept of SoTL and describe how it is a self-reinforcing process of discovery, learning, and growth. Next, we reflect upon one institution's journey as both a reflection of De La Salle's journey and as a potential roadmap for other schools interested in incorporating SoTL into their *praxis*.

What is SoTL?

The modern academic conception of the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) originated from Ernest L. Boyer's seminal book, *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate*.¹⁴ Boyer asserts that while traditional "basic" research aims to create new knowledge,

the work of the professor becomes consequential only as it is understood by others ... What we urgently need today is a more inclusive view of what it means to be a scholar – a recognition that knowledge is acquired through research, through synthesis, through practice, and through teaching.¹⁵

Jane Schmidt-Wilk, the former editor of the SoTL-focused *Journal of Management Education*, concurs, arguing for the application and evaluation of teaching practices "in determining whether one's creations have been effective in helping students learn."¹⁶ Hence the present-day conception of SoTL mirrors De La Salle and the De La Salle Christian Brother's concept of teaching communities focused on improving the practice of teaching.

Boyer's work spurred a substantial growth in evidence-informed teaching and learning and related research activities under the collective SoTL umbrella.¹⁷ Nathan Kenney and colleagues describe several essential components needed for implementing SoTL in university contexts. Among the components identified is a "network" of SoTL researchers.¹⁸ Over the last few decades, more than 100 SoTL groups have been formed at universities across the United States,¹⁹ and particularly at institutions where teaching is a primary focus.²⁰ Yet despite robust growth in university SoTL groups, there is little documentation of the existence and origin stories of SoTL groups at Lasallian colleges and universities.

Researchers have enumerated diverse goals and aims for university SoTL groups.²¹ Yet across institutions, SoTL groups frequently share similar and overlapping missions. These include developing a culture of SoTL on campus with institutional recognition for research activities focusing on teaching enhancement and student learning.²² SoTL groups play an important role in fostering community and fellowship between colleagues, especially those from different disciplines.²³ SoTL groups can also serve as faculty learning communities for the discussion of teaching and learning topics.²⁴

Many SoTL groups, including ours, are created using a Community of Practice (CoP) framework.²⁵ The CoP framework provides a social learning environment for members to engage in SoTL activities and conversations while receiving support from the group members. Ongoing interactions within CoPs cultivate the development of a shared repertoire of practices. Researchers have shown how CoPs serve as a scaffold for SoTL development by fostering the supportive culture and social energy to sustain SoTL activities for academics across disciplines and at various entry points.²⁶ In the focal CoP, SoTL is the shared domain of interest which naturally led to our identity formation of the community. We sought to discover techniques to evaluate and enhance our teaching methodologies and student learning outcomes.

In the next section, we share the story of how our SoTL CoP cohort came to be formed and what we achieved in the first year of our group. We use members' self-reflections to illustrate the personal and collective value of the group and to describe obstacles that we faced implementing SoTL at our university. Additionally, our reflections show how our group helped junior faculty learn to become Lasallian educators while strengthening senior faculty members' commitments to Lasallian pedagogical principles. We conclude by sharing early victories and challenges that may serve as practical insights for faculty and staff interested in implementing SoTL at their institutions.

Purpose and Development of SoTL CoP

A variety of institutional and contextual factors paved the path for the formation of our SoTL CoP in the 2019-2020 academic year. The initial groundwork was primarily laid by two actors who became the co-leads of the cohort: a staff member in the university's faculty development institute and a faculty member in the School of Business with a track record of SoTL research. This duo recognized the nascent interest of faculty in SoTL, the administration's desire to develop an institutional reputation for SoTL, and the opportunities for building a related CoP. The teaching and learning institute staff member had built relationships with faculty across the university over a number of years, which helped her identify interested faculty members to invite to the group. She also had experience establishing and / or cultivating campus CoPs, primarily focused on community-engaged teaching and learning. The School of Business faculty member not only had the experience of developing SoTL projects, but also had served as an associate editor of a SoTL journal in his discipline. This meant that the newly formed SoTL CoP could count on in-house expertise to inform the content of the group gatherings.

Three crucial sparks further ignited the strategic underlay. First, in Spring 2019, the business faculty member invited a colleague with expertise in SoTL to campus as a visiting scholar, with the university's official support, including a formal invitation, office space, and campus privileges. During her time on campus, the guest consulted one-on-one with faculty on SoTL projects and conducted a methods workshop for a broader university audience. Her meeting led to some initial buzz around building a community focused on SoTL work. Second, in a Fall 2019 meeting with pre-tenure faculty and later in communications to the university community, the university president indicated her intention for SoTL to serve as a key criterion for promotion and tenure, predicated upon her desire to see the university be recognized for its teaching excellence. Third, the university's application for the 2020 Carnegie Classification for Community Engagement, while successful, uncovered the relatively limited amount of scholarly work dedicated to our community-engaged teaching and learning across campus. The on-campus committee that prepared the application highlighted this deficit to senior administrators who, on the heels of the president's interest in SoTL, affirmed their support for greater engagement. This helped facilitate the faculty development staff member's ability to carve out time to organize a SoTL cohort.

It is also important to note that the university has a previous history of SoTL, the background of which is outside the scope of this article. Significantly, however, this history does mean that some post-tenure faculty included SoTL publications as a component of their tenure applications, and thus there was a baseline of recognition for SoTL on campus. The faculty development staff

member identified faculty publications and curated a list for the faculty development website in order to highlight the legitimacy of SoTL at the university, to animate faculty embarking on this research path, and to communicate the existence of a SoTL culture on campus.

Finally, it would be impossible to ignore the impact of COVID-19 on the development of our SoTL CoP. The group's first meeting was in October 2020, over six months into the global pandemic and mid-way through the first full semester of remote teaching and learning. The cohort met virtually on seven subsequent occasions over the 2020-2021 academic year. A subset of members then met weekly through the summer to collaborate on a shared writing project and to create a space for writing accountability. Participants have noted that their craving for authentic community and desire to engage in scholarship during the pandemic contributed to their commitment to the cohort. Additionally, the ease with which members could sign into virtual gatherings from any location facilitated participation.

The initial SoTL cohort session in Fall 2020 was designed to launch a campus conversation on SoTL, generate ideas for campus collaboration, gauge faculty interest, and surface faculty experience. The group consisted of ten faculty and staff members from across disciplines and representing all three schools within the university: the School of Arts and Sciences, the School of Business, and the School of Nursing and Health Sciences. The co-leads facilitated introductions, community-building exercises, and an introductory presentation on SoTL. The business faculty member's presentation included reflective prompts, an overview of SoTL definitions and types, and a discussion of steps to creating publishable work. The group also conversed about the history of SoTL and its growing significance in academia.

During the introductions and community-building activities, participants shared their motivations for attending the session. The business faculty member integrated reflective prompts designed to trigger active engagement, including the following:

- What do you believe to be your best or most effective teaching activity or exercise? If you have not yet taught a class, think about one that you'd like to create.
- Describe the overall activity in 2 to 5 sentences.
- What do you believe makes the activity unique and / or effective?
- What would make someone else want to use the activity in their course?
- How do you know that the activity accomplishes what you want it to do?
- If you're unsure if the activity is effective, what data / evidence do you need to collect to evaluate it?

The prompts stimulated rich conversation and a variety of responses. Themes included understanding the mechanics of research, understanding the Institutional Review Board (IRB), exploring how to involve students in research, learning how to incorporate classroom pedagogy and teaching excellence into research activity, learning how to integrate a new research path such as SoTL into existing scholarly work, developing a community of SoTL at the university, exploring how to communicate exemplary pedagogy, extending SoTL knowledge beyond disciplines, and learning to plot a research trajectory (i.e., pre-planning research activities vs. writing about serendipitous classroom events).

By the end of the session, participants were already beginning to brainstorm next steps. These steps included practical suggestions, such as the need for a Learning Management System page to serve as a repository for materials and infrastructure for group communications, the creation of a regular meeting schedule for the semester, and ideas for potential publication outlets – all of which the faculty development staff member could implement immediately following the gathering. Other recommendations included the desire to integrate discussions of published SoTL scholarly work into the cohort and to create spaces for participants to share works-in-progress, gather feedback, consult with one another across disciplinary lines, and identify gaps in the scholarly literature for potential projects. The co-leads used these ideas to shape subsequent sessions, which were divided into the following activities for the remainder of the academic year: visits from guest speakers (e.g., the IRB chair), discussion of SoTL journal articles, consultation on evolving projects, and research design tutorials. The members also recognized the variety of SoTL experiences within the group: some had extensive publications and editorial board experience, others had emerging publications or peer collaborations, and still others had no publications or training in the area. The group members decided to use this spectrum of experience as a strength, establishing mentorship opportunities within the group, developing tools, and building a CoP – very much in keeping with the Lasallian tenet of “together and by association.”²⁷

As the sessions were drawing to a close in the Spring, one cohort participant launched a two-hour weekly virtual writing-accountability session which ran through the Summer. As the cohort continued to meet, members proposed a shared project to describe the cohort’s origin story. This proposal evolved into the current writing piece. Despite one of the original co-leads leaving the university, the cohort continued and a new faculty co-lead emerged, signaling momentum that extended beyond the university’s faculty development institute.

Next, we present a summary of our early reflections on the SoTL cohort. This process provided insight into our own goals, development, and needs. Surprisingly, it also highlighted that our work reflected our own enactment of Lasallian values and revealed areas where further connection to our values could bloom.

Themes of Self-Reflections

As part of its self-reflection and community-building process, eleven cohort members wrote individual responses to the following five prompts in late Spring 2021:

- What drew you into this community?
- What kept you in?
- What have you / we gotten out of this group?
- What are you looking forward to?
- What lessons / insights do you have for other schools beginning to go on this journey?

Responses consisted of seven single-spaced pages and are discussed thematically below.

Three overarching themes emerged in response to the prompts. First, developing a CoP around SoTL fostered a sense of belonging among cohort members. Second, through this community,

members engaged with each other with humility, fostering sibling-like relationships. Finally, the CoP cultivated social impact in a variety of domains including the sharing of knowledge, the improvement of *praxis*, and the formation or reaffirmation of Lasallian values among cohort members. In reality, these themes are highly interconnected, but the following discussion, by necessity, presents them somewhat independently.

Building Community and a Sense of Belonging

The centrality of the value of community can be found in the contrast between the wording of the advertisement for the initial meeting that brought the cohort together in October 2020 and the actual work to date of the group. The initial virtual session was entitled, “The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning: Transforming Teaching into Research,” and was presented as a faculty development opportunity led by the aforementioned faculty member in the School of Business that would include “a discussion around how to get a SoTL project started, where to publish, and how to position the work within your broader portfolio.” Since the description mentioned only individual-based outcomes explicitly, one might assume that the session would have attracted colleagues interested exclusively in developing personal proficiency in SoTL. Based on the framing of the advertisement, attendees’ focus might be expected to be narrow, that is, restricted to their own disciplines or career paths. However, by the end of the initial meeting, there was a sense that the individual attendees had already, to some extent, coalesced into a cohort with the potential for substantial collaboration. The reflections of the group members confirm this early presence of community, a value that gained even more importance over time.

When asked what drew them to the group, participants underscored the desire to be a part of a supportive community. Members expressed interest in wanting to connect with “like-minded” educators and foster a sense of community, particularly in response to the void caused by the pandemic. Some members noted that they enjoyed the discussions with colleagues and the sense of collegiality and camaraderie between members. What initially was framed as a place to learn about and advance SoTL work transformed into a space for community members to be together in the work. As a co-founding staff member explains, the goal was to

build a community of practice and support, provide the engine and build the infrastructure, see which faculty we might attract and support their needs ... My strategy was to appeal to interested faculty and build a group around that leadership and energy.

The attendees of the first few meetings quickly drew value from the community component of this CoP. As one member explains, “the support, encouragement, and camaraderie amongst colleagues from across the university” inspired his decision to join and remain in the group. For another member, the shared mission and focus on teaching reinforced this sense of commonality. She explains,

I have tried other Zoom groups specific to our discipline, but I like the idea of being with colleagues at the same institution guided by the same mission with a similar focus on teaching.

When reflecting on what they have gained from the SoTL CoP, members discussed a sense of belonging outside of their own departments, a connection to colleagues across the campus, and a shared vision as Lasallian educators. A variety of macro-environmental factors impacting the university have severely limited both temporal and physical spaces for faculty and staff to coalesce. For example, the faculty dining room was closed as a cost-saving measure. The reduction in space was compounded by the pandemic which caused many university events, including graduation, to be held virtually and without the ability to see or interact with the others in attendance. As one member shares,

honestly, this work has been among the most edifying of this pandemic year: we were able to co-create (new) community during a pandemic.

These personal reflections of cohort members reveal a strong need and regard for the value of community. This desire echoes the original strategy of De La Salle and the Brothers of the Christian Schools to dedicate themselves to one another as they operationalized shared educational goals for community benefit. While some may interpret that approach as simply *working* “together and by association,” Brother Luke Salm suggests that it entails *being* together.²⁸ The cohort manifested “together and by association” by designing and sharing routine spaces for reflection on challenges and triumphs which built personal and professional interconnection. Choosing to work together on this collective writing project suggests that participants see value in documenting the group’s origin story and trust one another as fellow community members.

As Brother Michel Sauvage reminds us, Lasallian association “implies pedagogical sharing,” and it is this very sharing that “represents a permanent force for adaptation and innovation ... that resulted in *The Conduct of the Christian Schools*.”²⁹ Thus, the Brothers, working and being together, demonstrated that their experiences and knowledge of the classroom were more powerful on the collective level than solely on the individual. The cohort uncovered that the sum was indeed greater than the parts and that being together in a community focused on SoTL reinforced its commitments to scholarship, teaching, learning, and the mission of the university. While Lasallian educators have written extensively on building “faculty learning communities,” particularly in reference to new hires,³⁰ and on discussing Lasallian formation,³¹ less work has been done to discuss how Lasallians across various stages in their careers may form a community. The outcomes, from new hire or formation-focused communities, can be replicated across other formulations. Brother John Crawford proposes:

A new dimension of the ministry of the Brothers, especially in the formation of future Lasallian teachers, may include hosting “circles of trust” among interested teachers. It is both logical and hopeful that by convening regular opportunities for dialogue and interaction, the Brothers could encourage and support their colleagues in the educational ministry to young people.³²

Outcomes of a “circle of trust,” punctuated by regular dialogue, include learning from each other and the reanimation of the Lasallian charism. As Brother William Mann suggests:

the teacher-to-teacher relationship provides the model in the Lasallian school of that which the students are being encouraged to emulate ... Our personal integrity, academic zeal, and good work habits ... the quality of our dealings with one another ... the mutuality, caring, respect, and collaboration manifest in our relationships ... provides not only the model but also the credibility of the “invitation” the teacher proposes.³³

Beyond the building of community, such a “circle of trust” engenders a sense of workplace belonging. During a time in which financial constraints and macro-environmental factors negatively impacted faculty and staff morale, the SoTL cohort offered a point of hope and togetherness. As Anthony C. Behan argues:

Lasallian ministries have a unique opportunity to keep the gem of Lasallian unity in community shining through creative community practices. These practices, when done authentically and with mission in mind, can serve as a model for other organizations, and be a shining star in an often dark and divided world.³⁴

Thus, creating CoPs, such as a SoTL CoP, offers the possibility of building belonging, increasing morale, and offering support to help participants reach goals that benefit the individual, the group, and the institution.

Cultivating Humility and Sibling Relationships

John Baptist de La Salle and the Brothers of the Christian Schools prioritize the value of a sibling bond in the very naming of De La Salle’s early followers. By selecting the title “Brother,” the group identifies the importance of camaraderie and the dissolution of hierarchy. In a meditation in which Brothers are asked to reflect on this practice, the Founder suggests:

The first reason why there is sometimes so little union in a community is that some wish to place themselves above others on the basis of some human reasoning. This is why Our Lord says to his apostles that none of them should either call himself or let himself be called teacher, because they had but one teacher, who was Jesus Christ. Our Lord says that the one who believes himself to be the greatest among you, or who really is, must even consider himself and look upon himself as the least of all. Examine whether you have acted this way during the past year toward your Brothers.³⁵

Thus, it is *how* the Brothers interact, through sibling relationships, that is the crucial element of (comm)unity. Echoing the practices of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, the current cohort found that the way we interact with each other mirrors the type of interactions prompted by John Baptist de La Salle. Despite varying levels of rank and experience with SoTL, the cohort members approached each gathering with humility and the recognition that we all both have something to contribute and to learn. If it was the idea of authentic community that prompted participation from the beginning, it was *how* the community interactions unfolded that fostered engagement.

As evidenced by the reflections from cohort members, meetings felt like a “safe space for junior faculty to be vulnerable.” Another member shared:

I learned so much! I enjoyed the warm and open atmosphere and was exposed to so many new journal avenues. I also was encouraged by the cross-disciplinary collaborations that were possible and being formulated. It seems that that space doesn't occur as much as it should on campus.

The “warm and open atmosphere” shaped a space where colleagues felt comfortable to share “stories of successes and challenges, [so that you] know you're not alone in your journey.” For some participants, SoTL was a completely new and unexplored area. Nevertheless, the novices were able to learn through listening to their “colleagues’ insights into the texts [which] allowed [them] to start piecing together a vision for what SOTL entailed, and the possibilities for [their] own research.” Particularly for early career faculty, it was also a space to build skills and learn from others. One colleague stated:

By far the most personally valuable moment this year has been the opportunity I had to present my own research. My colleagues asked thoughtful, probing questions, suggested some possible avenues to pursue, and shared resources that might prove useful going forward. It was very encouraging to have the support of my peers, especially as a SoTL novice.

Another colleague added:

I have gained a greater sense of confidence in my abilities to write a SoTL article. [I also gained a] sense of belonging outside of my own department especially during the pandemic, expert-advice, and dedicated time and space to engage in SoTL work; [and I felt] empowered to share my voice. [This work has been] mutually beneficial (tapping into the various strengths and perspectives across the community).

The encouragement and sense of empowerment expressed in these quotations illustrate how cohort members’ participation elevated their work and identity. The varying levels of experience with SoTL allowed for those with less experience to learn from their colleagues about SoTL and to gather feedback on their research. For those with more experience, the cross-disciplinary sharing promoted further learning. As a mid-career colleague wrote,

I find it interesting to hear perspectives from other disciplines. For example, [colleagues from the education department's] presentation of a SoTL project in education had very interesting theoretical underpinnings that could certainly apply to projects across disciplines, but seem to be much better articulated in their field. Mostly, I continue to join the sessions because I simply enjoy them. I like reading and discussing articles, I like talking about research and I genuinely enjoy being with my colleagues.

The humility exhibited by each member contributed to the perpetuation of the group. There was a “come as you are” attitude that was reinforced by communication about and within the meetings:

I believe part of the success of our cohort has been the minimal barriers to entry. Most importantly, previous SoTL experience is not required to come to a meeting. Participants merely need to have an interest in learning more about SoTL. But, to support this, we have participants with more SoTL experience, including experience as published SoTL researchers, peer reviewers for SoTL journals, and a SoTL journal editor.

As this member explained, it's not that the experience of some of the members led to a hierarchy of knowledge, but instead the varying levels of experience "support" the exploration, skill building, and cross-disciplinary learning.

The style of the meetings was both intentional, through one of the founding member's encouragement, and organic, through the accompanying "rise to the occasion" by cohort members. The founding member shared that her strategy was:

to build faculty buy-in by inviting them to take leadership, that is, select articles for discussion, lead discussions, suggest next steps, thereby placing the decision-making into the hands of faculty and not administrators. It was also key to recognize that we needed an administrator to build the infrastructure, such as take notes, send reminders, organize agendas, set up meetings, create the Canvas [the institution's learning management system] page.

This intentional strategy led to a rotation of contributions, with members from different disciplines selecting and presenting articles from their home disciplines to engage in cross-disciplinary discussion. Organically, when one member stepped forward to organize the writing group, which gave the founding member a moment of "Yes, they are in it and see value here!" This also occurred when another member accepted leadership for managing our preparation for a joint article.

This sentiment is echoed in the work of Brother John Crawford. He explains,

In relation to one another, sibling-minded teachers extend themselves to their colleagues as mentors, offering sympathetic ears, working as collaborators in ministry, and demonstrating genuine concern for one another.³⁶

The sentiment permeated the community interactions. As one cohort member explained,

The fact that this community is working within a Lasallian context is perhaps its greatest strength. I feel that the Lasallian philosophy of teaching is the one most closely aligned with my own. I see that playing out not only in the types of research that my colleagues are conducting, but also in how we treat each other. There is a sincerity and humility that permeates our discussions. And while not all our meetings could be described as "electrifying" (and much of that may be due to the Zoom format), they have all been worthwhile if only for the community building that is a natural byproduct.

The internal interactions of the group initially offered a way to learn about SoTL, a sounding board for individual SoTL projects, and opportunities to learn outside of one's discipline. It transformed into a space for collaboration, support, and mentorship.

In the next section, we describe how the internal dynamics, exhibiting our expression of the values of our Founder (namely, working in community and with humility) further manifested itself in the growth and reinvigoration of additional aspects of the Lasallian charism.

Enjoying the Fruits of the SoTL Work

According to *Circular 461*, “the immediate and ultimate goal of all Lasallian association is our educational mission.”³⁷ Through this CoP, the cohort embodied our shared commitment to a human and Christian education. We view the outcomes of this as being enacted in various ways. After a year and a half of continued community, we assert that our collective work illustrates social impact through scholarly publication, improving our *praxis*, building relationships with students, and the potential for impact through influencing the university community and the greater Lasallian educational community.

A *first outcome* is our dedication to and advancement of SoTL. Our university uses the Teacher-Scholar Model, popularized by Boyer,³⁸ that prioritizes (1) discovery, (2) integration, (3) application, and (4) teaching. As Kenneth P. Ruscio affirms, “the dash between teacher and scholar is meant to be a link, not a line of demarcation.”³⁹ Thus, teaching informs our scholarship and scholarship informs our teaching. Through the cohort, members were able to advance individual and collective projects, one of which is this very article. As noted earlier, advancing SoTL is a reinforcement of our commitment to providing a human and Christian education. Through testing pedagogical techniques to determine which lead to better outcomes of learning for students, engaging in SoTL is, in a sense, a formal assessment of the mission-oriented work. Producing published, peer-reviewed work requires a refinement, justification, and documentation of selected techniques.

A *second outcome* is the improvement of pedagogy and *praxis*. Through cohort gatherings, members discussed and learned from others' pedagogical techniques, classroom management, and how to build and deepen relationships with students. Through reading work in other disciplines, we increased our understanding of disciplinary ways of knowing and engaging in pedagogy. Continued interaction and deep dialogue allowed further exploration of how we might apply such ideas to our own classrooms.

A *third, and wonderful, outcome* is that cohort members reaffirmed and reanimated the Lasallian charism. Through engaging in dialogue around our shared mission, cohort members reported learning more about De La Salle and the Lasallian mission. This occurred both intentionally, through selected readings from the *AXIS* journal, and serendipitously, through the organic unfolding of our community dialogue. As one member shared,

I was drawn to [this university] because of its overt focus on teaching and service to the poor. [This university] has given me the opportunity to work closely with students and people in the community; however, it was not until I became involved in the

conversations and activities of this group that I began to understand the Lasallian guiding principles and their practical application to my work at the university. This group has been a formative influence on my journey toward becoming a Lasallian educator.

As the dynamics unfolded, the group noticed that our discussions about SoTL often circled back to discussions of the Lasallian mission. As this became more apparent, the cohort began to examine articles from *AXIS* to learn more about and reaffirm Lasallian values. Many noted that despite having been at the university for years or decades, we did not often have the space to review Lasallian scholarship. By explicitly connecting our SoTL discussions to Lasallian scholarship, the group discussions centered around our own interpretations, forming a bridge between past writings and our contemporary understanding.

A *fourth outcome* is our hope that our work will impact the university community through inspiring others to engage in the scholarship of teaching and learning given both the practical professional outcomes, the community-building outcomes, and the mission-oriented outcomes described above. It is also our hope that through sharing our story we might inspire the greater Lasallian community to form similar CoP around SoTL. Anthony C. Behan reinforces this notion in his discussion of cultivating Lasallian workplace belonging.

The Lasallian work context stresses the importance of faith and zeal along with community and commitment to a common mission. One way of preserving a strong and healthy sense of belonging is to share with others within the community common values and stories.⁴⁰

Thus, the creation of a SoTL CoP is not only a way to bring people together, but also a way to foster a sense of Lasallian belonging. What initially began as an effort to elevate individual professional impact blossomed into a collective force pushing forward SoTL and the outcomes of that work at micro, meso, and macro levels of the institution. As evident in the personal statements, SoTL discussions reinforced our commonality and helped us to realize that the sum is indeed greater than the parts. As another point of evidence, the university's faculty development institute has both looked to this group for advice on how to expand and support SoTL at the institutional level and lifted the group as an exemplar of improving teaching and learning.

Victories and Challenges

While much of the impetus for our group's formation was based upon the individual members' practical needs to familiarize themselves with SoTL concepts, the themes of our reflections reported above also highlighted that its collective journey has been guided by, and is an enactment of, the Lasallian virtues. This journey inspired us to identify both our early victories and our ongoing challenges, and what insights they hold for our colleagues at other De La Salle Christian Brothers schools who are contemplating embarking upon similar journeys. We discuss those victories and challenges below. This section will describe five of those successes, along with insights for other institutions that are considering embarking upon a similar journey, before moving on to the ongoing challenges and the cohort's future needs.

Early Victories

While the group has only existed formally for about a year and half, it has already had several successes. The following is not meant to be comprehensive. Instead, it provides readers opportunities for thought about how to build some “early wins” into their own institution’s SoTL journey.

Our *first achievement* is that we took advantage of some prior informal campus SoTL work that had been done before the group formed. One early meeting of the group featured a faculty member reporting back on the progress they had made on their course design and attendant research study they had launched based on the feedback of the visiting scholar. This served to signal to the group’s members that SoTL work was both valuable and already present in the campus community. *Thus, we suggest that people looking to form SoTL groups at their own institutions should seek out and provide “early wins” based on prior formal and informal work within the domain to build the group’s commitment and institutional legitimacy.*

Another early victory for the group was the recognition, and then taking advantage of, the highly interdisciplinary nature of SoTL as a source of community-building. Members had expressed some initial doubts about the group’s ability to generate value based upon the perceived differences in the ways of knowing in the humanities, social sciences, sciences, and health professions. However, the group’s “journal article” club quickly dispelled that notion; and it is perhaps now the group’s most institutionalized and formalized activity. This became especially apparent when one group member shared an article from a psychology SoTL journal about possible student anxiety related to experiential exercises – a pedagogical approach common in a significant number of disciplines.⁴¹ Likewise, another member shared journal articles regarding “close reading” techniques commonly used in the humanities,⁴² of which most of the group’s members were previously unaware. This was also evident in the group’s ongoing opportunity for members to receive feedback on their SoTL research projects. One example of this occurred when two education faculty members presented their study and received useful feedback from a number of members regarding their methods. *Thus, we suggest that people founding SoTL groups at other schools deliberately design their activities to embrace the diverse “ways of knowing” to build group cohesion and a sense of efficacy. As a starting point, we suggest reading Gurung⁴³ for an overview of the cross-disciplinary tensions that can arise within SoTL and reading Little and colleagues⁴⁴ for an account of a multi-university, cross-disciplinary SoTL project that faced and overcame cross-disciplinary tensions.⁴⁵*

A third early victory occurred when the group realized, as part of its ongoing conversations on research methods, that the university’s (IRB) standards documents had, in some respects, been written from discovery and applied research perspectives, with less explicit emphasis on SoTL work. Subsequently, the group asked the university’s IRB chair if she would be able to provide a SoTL-focused IRB talk. The chair was delighted (and surprised!) by the invitation. The presentation provided a rich discussion for the group’s members, and the chair invited the group to provide feedback on the university’s IRB document. While the group’s suggested changes were relatively minor, the process served to both build the group’s relationship with other relevant institutional units and to provide members with a deeper appreciation of the formal requirements of SoTL work. *Thus, we suggest that people founding SoTL groups at other*

institutions reach out to “friendly” units in the organization (such as IRBs and contracts and grants offices) to provide both group training / development and to establish the group’s legitimacy within the institution’s operations.

Our SoTL group also achieved a *fourth early victory* with its recognition of some gaps in fully understanding the nuances of Lasallian education values. The group responded by inviting a De La Salle Christian Brother who is an expert on Lasallian pedagogy to speak to the group. This meeting proved to be powerful and insightful, so much so that the rest of the meeting’s agenda was set aside due to subsequent time constraints. Apart from giving members a deeper understanding of the nuances of what it means to be a Lasallian educator, the session has also guided the group in a number of areas, such as meeting content and initial discussions about how to more fully acculturate its members and the entire campus community into Lasallian pedagogy. *Thus, we suggest that those founding SoTL groups at other schools seek to involve members of their campus communities who are most knowledgeable about the institution’s values regarding teaching and learning.* While we suspect that institutions with explicit teaching missions (such as those run by the De La Salle Christian Brothers and the Jesuits) will be able to achieve this quickly, we believe it is just as important for schools with a less significant focus on teaching to begin to build a campus-wide culture / expectations of what represents “teaching excellence” (perhaps by working with and through their teaching and learning centers).

A *final early victory* for our group emerged from our eagerness to share our story, and the value of SoTL work, across campus. As Parker Palmer notes, teachers, unlike lawyers or surgeons, practice in isolation from other professionals, which eliminates the opportunity to explore our shared experiences.⁴⁶ Thus, our actions to share our story have been both opportunistic and proactive. As an example of one opportunistic moment, our group was invited by the Provost’s office to share its story and its work at the university’s annual forum of sabbatical research presentation (this was largely due to the fact that the group’s co-founding staff member reported directly to the Provost’s office). We provided a brief overview of SoTL research along with an invitation for faculty to join our group. More proactive initiatives by the group have included members sharing their SoTL publications through the university’s monthly campus-wide “research success” announcements and a commitment by its members to actively engage in the institution’s bi-annual teaching institutes. Similarly, the SoTL group has established an informal relationship with the university’s teaching and learning center, which has been happy to highlight our meetings and work in its communications. (However, this relationship has also led to one of the group’s challenges – see below). All of these actions – both big and small – have served to slowly raise the profile of the group on campus and highlight the extent, and importance, of the institution’s SoTL commitment (both formally and informally). *Thus, mindful of Palmer’s observation,⁴⁷ we suggest that those founding SoTL groups at other institutions proactively create, and take advantage of, opportunities to inform, share, and educate their colleagues about the SoTL work happening on their campuses.*

Ongoing Challenges

As we move forward, there are still many challenges that we will continue to work through. We expect other institutions that wish to bring SoTL to their campus to face similar circumstances.

We present three challenges and, as with the above discussion, provide suggestions for how other institutions may proactively anticipate and address them.

First and foremost is the *challenge* of developing and then nurturing a campus culture that values research activities focusing on teaching enhancement and student learning. We have been fortunate that our Lasallian university already had key administrators who were aware of SoTL and recognized its value. Although they were not directly involved with the formation of our cohort, they were supportive when they learned of the group and explicitly looked for additional opportunities to bolster our work. *Other institutions may find they have to put more effort into educating key administrators about the value of SoTL research. Ideas include inviting them to attend a meeting, assessing the progress of the SoTL group and sharing that resulting data with administrators, and finding opportunities to present SoTL work on campus.* Of note, at our university, the joint effort between staff and faculty to create our SoTL CoP was invaluable because our group's staff member already had mechanisms for recording meeting minutes and keeping track of the "wins" each member of the group experienced. Thus, it was easy to share assessment data with administrators.

While having supportive administrators is helpful, it is also important (a *challenge*) to infuse SoTL into the formal systems of the university. Examples of this include fostering institutional recognition and value of SoTL research in tenure and promotion as well as in hiring decisions. Because traditional research requirements within the academy did not include SoTL, it is necessary to explicitly name SoTL separate from discipline-focused research in guidelines for hiring, tenure, and promotion. At the focal university, an example of this occurred when one of its schools added numerous SoTL publications to its preferred scholarship outlet list in response to feedback from its outside accreditor regarding the need to explicitly align its research with its mission. While this represents an "early and big win" for our SoTL group, in many respects it was also happenstance-based and opportunistic due to the school's need to respond to its accreditor and its leadership knowing that several of its faculty were involved in the SoTL group. *We recommend that other institutions considering embarking upon the SoTL journey devote significant energies to overcoming this challenge, as it is likely to present some of the greatest obstacles to, and foundations for, success for any institutional SoTL initiative. An indicator of future success can be identified through current or upcoming strategic plans, and whether the university, schools, or departments explicitly name SoTL as important and valued.*

A final important *challenge* is the need to maintain the momentum for SoTL, within both the SoTL cohort and the university community. At our university, the SoTL group has maintained its momentum through a number of activities. The first activity is its popular "journal article" club, which it used to ensure consistent and timely meetings even when other agenda items are not immediately evident. Another momentum tool has been the opportunity for members to share research ideas or research-in-progress to receive feedback. However, given the typically "non-routine" nature of research output, the group has not relied upon this as consistently as its "journal article" club. At the university level, the challenge continues to be finding a "proper role" for the cohort within the larger context of its teaching and learning institute. We have been fortunate at the subject institution that the co-director of its teaching and learning center is now a regular attendee at its meetings. However, this has highlighted questions of how much formal administrative support the group wants (or needs), how quickly the group wants to expand

beyond its core founding members, and what the university wants and expects from the group in return for its formal support. While this is, in many respects, a wonderful challenge to have, it still highlights key issues regarding the group's ultimate path and future. On the one hand, the current group is largely organically driven by faculty, but also somewhat limited in its size, scope, and abilities (for example, organizing each meeting involves a fair amount of faculty time and effort). On the other hand, more formal institutional support means a greater campus impact, but perhaps some loss of the group's shared identity. Notably, there is no longer staffing to support the administrative needs of the group given recent departures from the university. The SoTL cohort and administration at the subject institution have collegially agreed to move forward at a "pace that feels right" for both parties, but we realize those at other institutions will likely have their own unique circumstances to consider. *Thus, our recommendation for other institutions considering embarking upon the SoTL journey is to carefully consider both the immediate need of establishing community and momentum (such as the aforementioned "journal article" club and research feedback), but also those longer-term aspects such as gaining ongoing institutional support and impact within the campus community via mechanisms such as relationships with its teaching and learning institute.*

Conclusion

Although there has been growth in university SoTL groups, no known articles have described the formation of such a cohort at a Lasallian institution. In this article, we describe how one Lasallian university used a CoP framework to create a faculty and staff SoTL group; and through a series of self-reflection questions, we illustrate the personal and collective value of our group. Initially, we came together for discussions on applying evidence-based teaching in the classroom and learning techniques for examining the effectiveness of our pedagogical practices. However, the group also became a place for having conversations and reflections on the mission of a Lasallian educator. For our junior faculty, this was often the first time they were exposed to the ideas of Lasallian pedagogy; and for our senior faculty, the group served as a humble reminder that we are always in the process of learning. While our journey is still only in its infancy, we have found the CoP to be a powerful source of inspiration; and we invite other universities to embark on this journey with us. We offer recommendations based on our experiences to cultivate your success and look forward to continuing our work "together and by association."

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