

CREATING A SENSE OF “ALIVENESS” IN A SoTL CoP ON A RURAL CAMPUS

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ABSTRACT

The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), as a research-based inquiry into student learning, is a continuously evolving practice. SoTL, as a practice, guides academics in improving upon their teaching, which is based on their specific context and student cohort. However, since academics are ultimately specialists in their own fields, completing research based on higher education topics is most often unfamiliar territory; it can, however, be supported through SoTL communities of practice (CoPs). The principles of SoTL and of cultivating CoPs can play a key role in designing these CoPs for “aliveness”. In this action research study, feedback and outputs from the SoTL CoP members at a South African higher education institution indicate that to support researchers optimally, a flexible approach, embedded in an organised schedule and integrated with sound research practices, ensures a sense of “aliveness” for members that participate in the CoP.

Keywords: Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, Community of Practice, Academic Staff Development, action research

INTRODUCTION

Since 2012, a Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) group has existed on the Qwaqwa (QQ) campus of the University of the Free State (UFS). This SoTL group has boasted various successes in providing a platform for learning and teaching (L&T) research and knowledge-sharing on various levels and came to be known as the SoTL Community of Practice (CoP). One of the aspects supporting the success of this group has been the familiar face-to-face (f2f) environment that allows for relationship- and trust-building between the SoTL members and the coordinator of the group. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020/2021, this group had to direct its practices (such as meetings, training, information sessions, and interactive sessions) to an online platform in line with the adjusted approaches of the institution. This necessitated a new approach to keeping its members committed and to ensuring the effectiveness of their various projects. Similar challenges were experienced by other researchers during this COVID-19 remote work period (Cruz and Grodziak 2021). In 2022,

with the opportunity to interact f2f once again, yet another new design needed to be implemented, with the aim of keeping the best of both the f2f and online worlds.

Drawing on existing proven practices for this reimagined design, the seven principles for cultivating Communities of Practice (CoPs) (Cambridge, Kaplan, and Suter 2005), were applied as well as Felten’s (2013) SoTL principles of good practice. Although other attributes, frameworks, and approaches to SoTL exist (e.g., Mirhosseini et al. 2018; Manarin et al. 2021; Godbold et al.), Felten’s principles were deemed as most aligned with the pragmatic paradigm of the QQ team.

Using the principles of Felten (2013) and Cambridge et al. (2005), the following main question evolved: How can the seven principles for cultivating CoPs and the SoTL principles of good practice be integrated into a blended SoTL CoP on the rural Qwaqwa campus to create a sense of “aliveness” (a term that will be unpacked in the literature review)? In other words, the researcher sought to determine what CoP principles guide decisions on how the SoTL group should meet and be supported, and what SoTL principles should guide the approach taken by members to their research. The secondary questions that feed into this main question are:

1. What are the SoTL CoP members’ perceptions of the seven principles of a CoP in creating “aliveness” for the group?
2. What are the trends and perceptions of the members around completing their SoTL research projects while part of the CoP?

LITERATURE REVIEW: DESIGN PRINCIPLES GUIDING THE INTERVENTION

Cambridge et al. (2005, 1) define CoPs as “... a group of people who share a common concern, a set of problems, or interest in a topic and who come together to fulfil both individual and group goals”. In the seven principles of cultivating a community of practice (CoP), these researchers stipulate the importance of using a flexible structure when designing and implementing a CoP to create a sense of “aliveness”. This sense of “aliveness” is explained in terms of: 1) *individuals experiencing* excitement, relevance, and value; 2) *actions* that suggest opportunities to interact and build relationships; and 3) the group, which develops internal direction and character. Indeed, this sense of “aliveness” is key “[b]ecause communities of practice are voluntary” and “what makes them successful over time is *their* ability to generate enough excitement, relevance and value to attract and engage members” (Wenger, McDermott and Snyder 2002, 9). This sense of aliveness is created on a practical level, through applying the seven principles, as explained by Wenger et al. (2002). The seven principles are: 1) design for evolution; 2) open a dialogue between inside and outside perspectives; 3) invite different levels of participation; 4) develop private and public spaces; 5) focus on value; 6) combine

familiarity and excitement; and 7) create a rhythm for the community.

The first principle mentioned above means that CoPs need to be designed in ways that allow for evolution since members bring new interests and expertise to the CoP; life-long learning is the main goal for the members and, as the environment changes, the CoP needs to be able to change and evolve. The second principle of including different perspectives is based on the idea that members understand both the CoP's character and what the needs of the members are (and thus their perspectives are included). Importantly, outsiders (non-members) can also help see new possibilities and potential for the CoP to develop and grow. The third principle encourages different levels of participation, as people are part of a CoP for different reasons; a coordinator, mentors and leaders, active participants, and observers would all have different roles to play. The fourth principle stresses that the ways in which meetings or interactions take place will differ in terms of space and nature. Meetings can take place in different spaces, such as an online platform, via a Learning Management System (such as Blackboard [Bb]) or f2f. Meetings can also differ in terms of their nature: group training sessions, one-on-one meetings, and personal emails are but a few examples. The fifth principle encourages the CoP to focus on value; events, activities, and relationships will then be created to serve that value, and will help to determine new and better ways of supporting CoP members. What is then deemed valuable will also evolve. The sixth principle poses that the familiar needs to be combined with the exciting, thus creating a space where members feel comfortable, but also excited. Lastly, the seventh principle encourages the creation of a rhythm for the CoP, such as proper planning, structure, and pace.

SoTL, in turn, captures activities related to enhancing practice in higher education through reflection; as Fanghanel et al. (2016, 6) argue, "SoTL covers concepts as diverse as reflection and inquiry on learning and teaching practices, strategies to enhance teaching and learning, curriculum development, the promotion of research-informed teaching, undergraduate research, and student engagement in disciplinary or SoTL research". The research component is therefore quite evident when committing to SoTL practices. The QQ SoTL CoP has accordingly been guided through their research practices by Felten's SoTL principles since 2018 (Felten 2013; Fanghanel et al. 2016; Kenny et al. 2017). These principles are that the inquiry must be: 1) Focused on student learning; 2) Grounded in context; 3) Methodologically sound; 4) Conducted in partnership with students; and 5) Appropriately public. A sixth principle was added in 2018 by the QQ SoTL group following a focus group. This additional principle is that the inquiry should also focus on the self-development of the researcher.

The first SoTL principle dictates that the ultimate goal of the SoTL group members' projects is to impact student learning, and is therefore based on a learning-centred approach. The second principle ensures that the members' projects are not generic, but tailored and

moulded to suit the rural, multi-campus model of the QQ campus and student population (thus, what might work at one institution, or in one module, might not work in another). Thirdly, the projects need to be completed as formal research projects, which follow the design and data collection principles of what are deemed to be sound research practices. Furthermore, the student voice needs to be included, and findings need to be shared somehow. The last principle is one added by the QQ SoTL group to ensure that the researchers do not stagnate in their SoTL projects, but rather that their projects evolve yearly or over time (especially for recurring members). These adapted principles were thus used as a guiding framework for how the research projects should be completed by the SoTL members. Table 1 is a summary of the two sets of principles:

Table 1: A summary of the principles of a SoTL CoP

SoTL principles: how the individual members complete their research projects through sound practice (integrated into the CoP approach)	CoP principles: how the coordinator creates a sense of “aliveness” through certain practices
1) Inquiry focused on student learning; 2) Grounded in context; 3) Methodologically sound; 4) Conducted in partnership with students; 5) Appropriately public; and 6) Self-development of the researcher.	1) Design for evolution; 2) Open a dialogue between inside and outside perspectives; 3) Invite different levels of participation; 4) Develop private and public spaces; 5) Focus on value; 6) Combine familiarity and excitement; and 7) Create a rhythm for the community.

Using these seven principles of a CoP could assist the coordinator in ensuring continued member engagement and that optimal support is provided to ensure the “aliveness” component. These principles also enable enough flexibility to continuously adjust the structure of the CoP with the aim of completely supporting the group based on *their* needs, and not the preferences of the coordinator. The principles of SoTL, in turn, could ultimately ensure that although the interventions are sometimes completed on a small scale, within one module or course, and done pragmatically and almost intuitively, it still follows a formal and appropriate research design and methodology. Collectively applying these two sets of principles, and how these principles should be used in practice for optimal impact, is what this research article focuses on.

METHOD AND METHODOLOGY: HOW THE INTERVENTION WAS DESIGNED AND ITS IMPACT TESTED

Using an action research approach to design the intervention

This research takes a pragmatic research lens, which means that the research project has undergone continuous processes of testing, implementation, and improvement so as to improve practices through evidence-based approaches (Feilzer 2010, 13). As such, this project also fits

under the umbrella of action research, of which many models exist. A simplified model, which easily explains the processes followed for this research, is the ITDEM action research model (Susman and Evered 1978; Norton 2009, 70). The ITDEM model follows 5 steps: Step 1: Identify the problem using evidence and literature (as indicated in the literature section); Step 2: Think of ways to improve. Here, an intervention is designed and, based on existing theories, models and materials are developed in line with the design (as indicated in the literature review section); Step 3: Do it (implement the intervention); Step 4: Evaluate the intervention. (collect data to establish what worked and what did not work, based on the aim of the intervention, such as surveys); Step 5: Modify the intervention (based on the data and findings, adjustments are made to the existing intervention and implemented again).

For this research project, after this one cycle of implementation (in 2021), a second cycle commenced, and data was collected to continue establishing what worked in terms of creating a sense of "aliveness" in the QQ campus SoTL CoP (in 2022).

Using a mixed-method approach to test the impact of the intervention

In 2021, a multi-method or mixed-method data collection model was followed, which included quantitative and qualitative data, and embedded the findings for future changes. A purposive non-probability sampling method was used to collect the data: all members were invited to provide their inputs, which they could do voluntarily and anonymously (Plowright 2011, 42). Data sets were derived as follows: a short Likert-type survey, with open-ended questions, was distributed to members to qualitatively establish their perceptions of their experience. The Likert-type questionnaire comprised 10 quantitative, 5-scale questions from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree" and was circulated online. These questions related to the SoTL CoP sessions and the SoTL CoP members' perceptions of the 7 principles of a CoP in creating a sense of "aliveness" within this SoTL group. In essence, questions were posed around members' personal development; the development of their learning and teaching skills; project progress related to the sessions; the structure of the sessions; the individual contact; and peer learning. Two open-ended questions were posed to gauge overall perceptions of the value of the CoP, and possible improvements for the next year. The open-ended questions were thematically analysed (McMillan and Schumacher 2014, 369–377) through descriptive statistics, and a thematic interpretation method (Owen 1984, 275) linked to the seven principles of a CoP was used, while considering the research-based considerations of SoTL. The number of outputs of the group was also considered, such as conference presentations, awards received, and successful applications for institutional initiatives, as these indicated the development of the researcher (thus, sound research practices and a link to the principles of SoTL).

In the following year, 2022, a short survey was again distributed to members to qualitatively establish their perceptions of their experience, both online and f2f. A response rate of nine out of 20 was reached. Due to the small number of participants, the quantitative questions were reduced to one rating question ("please rate the SoTL CoP"), with 3 robust open-ended questions to ensure more detailed qualitative feedback. An advantage of this survey was that colleagues could complete it in person at the end of the last SoTL session of the year. For the duration of 2021 and 2022, some research outputs were considered: the number of conference presentations, awards, and article publications, as well as SoTL members who applied and succeeded in forming part of the institutional learning and teaching fellowship.

METHOD AND METHODOLOGY: ACTUAL DESIGN, DEVELOPMENT, AND IMPLEMENTATION OF INTERVENTION IN CYCLE 1 (2021)

An online approach to contact sessions and support from the coordinator had to be followed in 2021 due to the pandemic and the resultant inability of the SoTL group to meet f2f. Based on the principles of a CoP, the following design elements were applied to practically create the CoP sessions (Wenger et al. 2002, 9):

Using the first principle of *adaptability*, although a specific structure or schedule was created for synchronous and asynchronous sessions, members could change their projects, the roles they played in the CoP, and their approach to meetings and sessions (including one-on-one sessions where needed).

Considering the second principle of *including different stakeholders*: outside stakeholders (such as statistical analysts, experienced researchers, and critical readers) were invited to present workshops, or assist with the projects where needed.

The third principle offers to *allow different levels of participation*; as such, UFS QQ lecturers, facilitators, and even academic support service staff could sign up to be members, and could either be full participants (i.e., attending most sessions and completing a project), observers (i.e., attending sessions but not implementing an actual project), participants who only consulted one-on-one (i.e., experienced researchers who never attended group sessions), and group-project participants. Although 30 QQ staff members signed up for the group initially, 10 continuously and actively engaged in meetings, and undertook learning and teaching projects. At least three members remained on the periphery, attending meetings but not implementing projects.

To apply the fourth principle of *using public and private spaces*, most online contact sessions included the entire member group, while individual emails were circulated, one-on-one meetings were scheduled where needed, and a BB portal was created with research and

learning and teaching information. Three outside stakeholders were also involved. They presented on ethical clearance, supported the implementation of the Classroom Survey of Student Engagement (CLASSE) projects, and participated in the SoTL writing retreat as research consultants.

The fifth principle, namely to *focus on value*, was embedded by creating meetings with a specific aim in mind, followed by question-and-answer sessions, and obtaining continued feedback from the CoP members to ensure that members found the meetings and discussions helpful. Research and learning and teaching topics were the focus of these discussions.

The sixth principle, which involves making use of a combination of *familiar and exciting spaces*, was perhaps the most difficult to implement because all sessions had to be online (a space deemed “unfamiliar”) due to lockdown restrictions. An attempt was made to mitigate this through email communication, phone calls, and opportunities to build relationships with the members, albeit in an online space.

The last principle involves creating *a structure* (or rhythm) for the CoP, which was done by creating a structured schedule, based on a projected developmental track that members followed. The schedule was flexibly implemented based on contextual factors and individual needs. The schedule took the form of one monthly online meeting, and homework cues in between. Table 2 outlines the schedule that the QQ SoTL group followed in 2021.

Table 2: QQ SoTL CoP 2021 schedule

Meeting 1: February 22 Feb 9–11	What is the scope of this CoP? (How does it align with the new Fellowship?) Presenting the draft planning for the year Semi-structured interview to identify needs: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does a particular topic or discussion come to mind that you would find meaningful? • Are there topics that you would like to see discussed in the future? • What one or two things do you would like to see take place in the CoP? • What features would you like to see added to the CoP that are not currently available (i.e., a WhatsApp group).
Meeting 2: March 1 March 11:00–13:00	Topic 1: Blended learning models in Teaching and Learning Topic 2: Research models in Teaching and Learning (steps)
Meeting 3: March 23 March 09–11	Topic 1: Possible theories and frameworks in T&L (what do you want to improve / /impact? What possible innovation will help with this improvement?) Topic 2: Possible tools to use in blended learning Homework: answer the following questions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What model of blended learning will I use? • What model / framework will I use to do the research? • What theory underpins my project? [What do I want to improve/develop, e.g., writing skills, research skills] • What specific tools do I want to use in the classroom? • What tool / innovation do I want to test?
Meeting 4: April 13 April 9–11	Topic 1: Homework feedback from members Topic 2: Ways (tools) to test the effectiveness of your project Topic 3: Ethical clearance for your project
Meeting 5: May 10 May 9–11	Topic 1: Philosophies of T&L: which one suits you? Topic 2: Information session – Institutional Fellowship
Research retreat/day 1: June (virtual / f2f) tbc	Day 1: Basic workshop focusing on research Day 2: Planning and applications to own project/research

Meeting 6: July 20 July 9–11	Topic 1: Writing an abstract for a conference application Topic 2: Funding applications for conference attendance
Meeting 7: August 10 Aug 9–11	Topic 1: Proper PowerPoint design and presentation tips
Meeting 8: September 13 Sep 9–11	Topic 1: What is currently trending in Higher Education and T&L? Topic 2: Interesting findings from the QQ Student Success Task team
Meeting 9: October 11 Oct 9–11	Topic 1: T&L portfolios Homework: finalise decisions around products which emanate from projects; planning for 2022
Meeting 10: November 15 Nov 9–11	Topic 1: Applying for the Institutional L&T fellowship Topic 2: Feedback from members: what products do I have to show at the end of the year?

RESULTS AND FINDINGS OF CYCLE 1: 2021

To establish if a sense of “aliveness” was created, data from the Likert-type questions were analysed based on the seven principles of a CoP, as indicated in Table 3.

Table 3: Quantitative responses for cycle 1

Item theme	Response
The topics discussed in the CoP sessions were valuable for personal development	100% of the participants agreed/strongly agreed
The topics discussed in the CoP sessions were valuable for project progress	91% agreed/strongly agreed
The emails were valuable for personal development	100% agreed/strongly agreed
The emails were valuable for project progress	91% agreed/strongly agreed
Individual meetings were valuable for personal development	100% agreed/strongly agreed
Individual meetings were valuable for project progress	81% agreed/strongly agreed
The way in which the CoP was structured helped with L&T skills development	91% agreed/strongly agreed
There were opportunities to discuss projects with other members	91% agreed/strongly agreed

Data from the open-ended questions are unpacked below.

For principle one, to design for evolution, the CoP assisted with teaching the members about flexible teaching strategies, and can be a space for learning. Two participants, for example, elucidated this when they said that “... [the SoTL CoP] helped ... to work on mitigating factors to reduce the effects of online learning especially among the students” and “... the community is a platform for learning”.

To create an open dialogue between inside and outside perspectives (principle two), the support that participants gained from the CoP was deemed “amazing” and “highly appreciated”, and the interaction from peers was deemed helpful. One participant particularly referred to the reflective aspect that peer support allowed: “Colleagues sharing projects assisted me by giving reflection of how colleagues manage their projects and in turn served as tips for me”.

In terms of inviting different levels of participation (principle three), members acknowledged the importance of being allowed to participate in different ways; some members were more involved, and others were less involved depending on their needs and circumstances. One participant wrote about the value of being able to observe and learn before undertaking

SoTL research, "I was an observer as I am a novice", while another referred to the value of the team's support in the development of their SoTL research project, "I am very grateful to the CoP team and their leader". Some suggestions related to adding postgraduate supervision of sorts (which is not really the aim of a CoP), and other research processes. For example, one participant referred specifically to the guidance they needed with obtaining ethical clearance: "Please apply for a blanket ethical clearance for CoP mini projects"; "I believe the CoP can be of assistance to UFS colleagues who are busy with their PhDs".

Data related to principle four, to create private and public spaces, was limited, but a suggestion was made to "... have more individual meetings".

For a focus on value, motivation and engagement with research were mentioned and seemed to be an unintentional outcome: "CoP encourage [sic] one to constantly do research" and "The meetings kept me engaged and learning more on practices I can use in my future research".

To combine familiarity and excitement (principle six), participants indicated a need for more in-person interaction: "At least if we can have one face to face training to bring human element".

Lastly, in terms of creating a rhythm for the community, members felt the need to see the progress of where they were in the research process and suggested "Providing an overview of the process in the first meeting, and or every other meeting, [in order to] have a display of how far we now are in the process". Another participant suggested that "... each person should be provided a task".

Other outcomes (or outputs) of the CoP included that two members received institutional L&T awards, two presentations were made at conferences, and three SoTL CoP members were chosen to be part of the institutional L&T fellowship.

In summary, the elements put into place as part of the 2021 online CoP, such as individual sessions, online sessions and emails were deemed valuable, relevant, and indicated a trajectory for some individuals to more advanced SoTL-related practices. However, the face-to-face component seemed to be needed. More direction was also needed to guide the researchers in their projects, specifically the progression thereof.

METHOD AND METHODOLOGY: ACTUAL DESIGN, DEVELOPMENT, AND IMPLEMENTATION OF INTERVENTION IN CYCLE 2 (2022)

Based on the feedback from cycle 1 the following design elements were adapted for the 2022 cycle:

To ensure the principle of adaptability, fewer details were added in the planning stage to allow for more flexibility and individual progress. However, more guidance was given to

members for their research projects. Members could opt for a research project linked to the larger, institutional SoTL theme. For example, members were given a platform statement into which they could substitute their foci: "Implementing blended/online XX (e.g., tutorials, Turnitin assignments, scaffolded essay writing) to improve student XX (e.g., engagement, student success, decoloniality, or graduate attributes) on a rural campus: a case study of XX students (e.g., 1st/2nd/3rd year Accounting/Biology students)". This topic was a generalised topic, which members could adjust or deviate from if they chose to. Training and support could then be aligned to this generalised topic.

To allow for different stakeholders (principle two), members signed up at the beginning of the year, and outside stakeholders were again invited to present workshops, or assist with the projects (as mentors of sorts) where needed. Different levels of participation were allowed (principle three), where members could again choose to what extent they wanted to be involved (as observers, completing entire projects, only designing projects, etc.). To create public and private spaces (principle four), members, as well as external stakeholders, were involved again, and group and individual sessions were held.

A focus on value was attempted (principle five) by including discussions during contact sessions around the kinds of output that could evolve from the projects. Conference dates, article writing workshops, and applications for institutional learning and teaching initiatives were also communicated to the group to show how they could transfer what they do in the SoTL group to larger and more impactful endeavours. The ADDIE model (Cheung 2016), as a research model, was also embedded into the structure of the discussions, and so good research design was taken into consideration as stipulated by Felten's SoTL principles. (The ADDIE model is an instructional design model, with five steps: Step 1: Analyse the context through data and literature; Step 2: Design the intervention; Step 3: Develop the intervention (such as learning materials, etc.); Step 4: Implement the intervention; and Step 5: Evaluate the intervention through datasets like pre-post-tests, student surveys, module evaluations, artefact analyses, etc.).

To create the balance between familiar and exciting spaces (principle six), instead of a fully online approach (as was taken in 2021), the SoTL CoP was now able to add a monthly two-hour, face-to-face session to the programme, thus creating a more "familiar" space for the discussions. The online platforms were used to communicate via email, create a resources hub, and for the purposes of short training sessions.

The last principle aimed at creating structure (or a rhythm) for the SoTL group, was considered in the following ways. Members could attend:

- a monthly one-hour, online project or training meeting;
- a monthly two-hour, face-to-face meeting (which could also be a writing session); and
- two writing or research retreats in June and November.

Individual meetings were arranged based on the members’ needs, and they were encouraged to attend certain external workshops (e.g., qualitative research workshops presented by the Centre for Postgraduate Support). Some workshops were also created and scheduled specifically for the SoTL CoP group. Additionally, during the face-to-face discussions, the coordinator would show the progress that was supposed to have taken place up to a specific point (as decided in a previous meeting) (for example, “last month we discussed X, and you had to use X to go and do Y. Today, we will discuss Z”). However, more flexibility was allowed, especially during the face-to-face contact sessions, by not necessarily adding specific details to the schedule. Table 4 shows the adapted schedule used for the 2022 cycle.

Table 4: QQ SoTL CoP 2022 schedule

Month	1-hour monthly meeting Online, synchronous	2-hour work session F2F, Pitseng	Other / To note
March	Friday, 18 March, 12:00–13:00 Introduction	Friday, 25 March, 09:00–11:00 <i>Members need to come to the session with at least an idea of a project or innovation they would like to implement this year.</i>	
April	Thursday, 21 April, 14:00–15:00	Friday, 29 April, 11:00–13:00	30 April Submission date: interest to apply for awards
May	Thursday, 17 May, 14:00–15:00	Friday, 27 May, 11:00–13:00	
June	None	None	14–15 June Retreat; *24 June submission of LT awards
July	Thursday, 21 July, 14:00–15:00	Friday, 29 July, 09:00–11:00	
Aug	Thursday, 18 Aug, 14:00–15:00	Friday, 26 Aug, 09:00–11:00	
Sept	None (attend conference)	Friday, 23 Sept, 09:00–11:00	*UFS LT conference: 13–16 September
Oct	Thursday, 20 Oct, 14:00–15:00	Friday, 28 October 11:00–13:00 Closing	UFS LT awards: 12 Oct

RESULTS AND FINDINGS OF CYCLE 2: 2022

For 2022, a rating-only quantitative question was asked, where six out of nine participants rated the SoTL CoP “excellent” and two “good”. One participant omitted a rating.

However, although nine was the final response rate, valuable and rich feedback was obtained from the respondents. This feedback is presented according to the seven principles for “aliveness”, with some example comments included.

Data related to principle one, thus to design for evolution, indicated that informal

discussions (“... the more informal discussions, also valuable”), and using meetings to brainstorm were deemed supportive: “Meetings where we brainstorm and discuss”. Some participants saw overall development: “Everything contributed to my growth professional [sic].”

Considering the theme of creating an open dialogue between inside and outside perspectives (principle two) (thus, internal members as well as outside stakeholders), members enjoyed peer learning opportunities, but would like to interact more with experienced researchers as well. One respondent indicated that he “(l)ove(d) hearing from other colleagues and what they are busy with ...”. Another respondent stressed the value of sharing discussions with internal members, but also having more advanced researchers present, suggesting that the coordinator should “(f)ind way(s) to motivate everyone to attend as to share their experiences. Even if we can get one of the best scholars to share the current threads [sic] with us”.

For principle three, thus to invite different levels of participation, the overall support and project discussions, and having a facilitator as well as other group members present seemed helpful: “What I found valuable was the overall ... support. Provided from the beginning of the project until the end.” The varied contribution by the facilitator and the regular members were specifically mentioned: “The project discussions by the facilitator and the other group members helped me to keep my project into a shape since I was able to produce the abstract.” One suggestion related to embedding more time for research or work sessions during these discussions: “Try to have more time for doing some research, i.e. reflections on my teaching and assessment.”

For principle four, developing private and public spaces (thus individual as well as group sessions), these sessions were seen as spaces where peer learning opportunities were created: “Love hearing from other colleagues and what they are busy with, the more informal discussions, also valuable”, “Valuable discussions by sharing with the community and learned a lot from each other” and “Colleagues sharing what’s work the best for them in their Teaching and learning”. A possible change is to include more workshop type sessions: “Workshops, like discussed, in today’s session”. One respondent did indicate the need for “(m)ore one-on-one attention to individual SoTL project(s)”.

Where the focus on value (principle five) comes to play, it seems that different elements were deemed valuable by different participants. New and beginner researchers specifically mentioned the value based on their newness: “nothing was irrelevant for me as beginner” and “As a new staff member of the University of the Free State, there is alot [sic] that I did not know and many connections I was able to make through my membership at SoTL”. The opportunity for sharing ideas was mentioned again: “Valuable discussions by sharing with the community”.

Support in general was also mentioned: "[What I found valuable was] the overall ... support". For future, perhaps a beginning of the year survey or discussion would lend more information around where the focus should be in terms of value for that specific cohort before proceeding with the year's CoP.

When combining familiarity and excitement (principle six), especially in-person discussions (as a "familiar" approach) were well received: "The f2f sessions/retreats."; "The f2f meetings and sharing about teaching and learning". One element that stood out was that it created time for members to progress with their work: "The retreat helped a lot on working in the proposal of the project"; "those meetings where we were able to work on our SoTL projects, that gave us time and opportunity to share and get feedback". The online sessions were not deemed engaging, and thus less valuable, even though the aim with these sessions was rather information sharing. So, either the approach needs to change, or communication around the purpose of the discussions needs to be made clearer: "The online session as for me, there was not a lot of engagement".

For the last principle, creating a rhythm for the community, scheduling and creating a time slot to work on projects (thus a work session) was helpful. This links with data in the previous section. Aspects such as focus ("I find taking time out of my schedule only focussing on the task at hand, helps a lot" and "The retreat made me very focused and progressive") as well as being able to write ("The days set aside for writing (the 2 hours) schedules helped because I got to get out of the office and work on the project") were mentioned. To improve on these, the coordinator could explore how to assist those members with clashes in their schedule, as some respondents did indicate challenges with attending: "I could not attend most of the online sessions, due to class/other responsibilities". Furthermore, more retreats, or longer-type f2f sessions should be embedded in the scheduling: "Session days where we apply for a conference"; "More retreats definitely"; "Longer sessions, maybe over 2 full days or more depending on what is being delivered/shared"; and "Moving on, I would love to see more /only face to face sessions".

Other outcomes of the CoP as a datapoint (related to individuals) included one member receiving an institutional L&T award, six conference presentations and one pre-conference presentation, and one member who was chosen to be part of the institutional L&T fellowship.

In summary, members find sharing best practices with other colleagues especially valuable, whether related to L&T in general or research in L&T. Face-to-face and longer writing sessions are deemed most useful. Ultimately, the scheduled sessions assisted with managing or setting aside time to progress with projects. The support and discussions from the coordinator were also deemed helpful.

CONCLUSION AND WAY FORWARD

The following research questions were posed at the beginning of this article: How can the seven principles for cultivating communities of practice and the SoTL principles of good practice be integrated in a blended SoTL CoP on the Qwaqwa campus to create a sense of “aliveness”?

The most evident findings of this research project are connected to value: the value of creating structure and rhythm; the value of meeting face-to-face; and the value of guidance in the members’ project progression. This research further evidences the importance of setting up a sound structure to support the principles of good practices in SoTL. This includes, for example, integrating certain research-focused (or SoTL) elements in the planning: a research design or model, the aims and timelines of when to present findings publicly, and discussions around possible institutional or farther-reaching SoTL initiatives.

The ways in which such a CoP could be designed for a rural campus context is based on the 2023 design of the QQ SoTL group, which in turn, is based on 2022 and 2021 data.

Based on principle 1, to design for evolution, a space for change and learning could be created; thus, although a fixed schedule may exist, members need to be approached and met with individually by the coordinator to provide support and mentorship, and allowed to develop at their own pace throughout the cycle.

To apply principle two, and thus to open a dialogue between inside and outside perspectives, one internal group could exist with one coordinator; however, other specialists and consultants should be invited to present some sessions (e.g., a session on ethical clearance) or to act as critical readers at writing retreats. These outside perspectives provide fresh insights, while the original (or “insider”) group creates familiarity. Furthermore, additional workshops presented by other units, such as a research centre (on how to do research) or a staff development unit (on what good teaching looks like) is most often applied by participants in their research and pedagogical practices.

Principle three, thus to invite different levels of participation, would entail members having the opportunity to decide on their level of participation. They can, for example, be a fully active member (who completes a project); an advanced member who mentors and writes articles, or just an observer who attends some of the sessions.

In order to develop private and public spaces (principle four), different spaces should exist for the CoP to function to its maximum potential. Different spaces include an online space (for online workshops), a Blackboard hub, emails, individual one-on-one consultations, f2f meetings, and retreats and presentations where outside stakeholders and specialists are included. How these spaces are then used is also important.

To focus on value (principle five), what is deemed valuable for each new group needs to be established and focused on at the beginning of the intervention (e.g., is this a new group of researchers who are also learning about research? Is this a new group of lecturers who need to learn about good teaching? Are there individuals who want to complete a project for promotion purposes?). This value component should be considered throughout the CoP programme.

Considering principle six, thus to combine familiarity and excitement, a blended approach, with a strong emphasis on f2f sessions seems to work best. For example, arranging a one-hour online workshop session per month, and a two-hour f2f work session per month (with the blend explicitly indicated as synchronous, asynchronous, and online or f2f). Added to this blend, could be one or two f2f retreats. Additionally, one-on-one meetings and emails (including direct written feedback on project planning worksheets) could also be used based on individual project needs.

Lastly, (principle seven), to create a rhythm for the community, a detailed plan based on a formal research design model (such as the ADDIE model of instruction) (Cheung 2016) is needed. Included in the plan should be timelines, and consistency in how the sessions take place. The progress of the research projects should be embedded in the planning based on the research design model, and be communicated to members. Certain important dates relating to conferences and applications for other initiatives could also be added to the planning.

Table 5 summarises this integration of the principles of a CoP and the principles of SoTL to create a practical framework for our SoTL group:

Table 5: An integrated approach to creating “aliveness” for a SoTL CoP

SoTL principles: how the individual members complete their research projects through sound practice (integrated into the CoP approach)	CoP principles: how the coordinator creates a sense of “aliveness” through certain practices	Integrating the SoTL and CoP principles to create a sense of “aliveness”
1) Inquiry focused on student learning; 2) Grounded in context; 3) Methodologically sound; 4) Conducted in partnership with students; 5) Appropriately public. 6) Self-development of the researcher.	1) Design for evolution; 2) Open a dialogue between inside and outside perspectives; 3) Invite different levels of participation; 4) Develop private and public spaces; 5) Focus on value; 6) Combine familiarity and excitement; and 7) Create a rhythm for the community	1) Create a fixed schedule for group sessions, with flexibility around individual support and individual progress, with research steps embedded. 2) Allow for one internal group of members with a coordinator, with external consultants and mentors who present workshops, attend retreats, and provide overall research and L&T-based support when needed. 3) Allow members to be: fully active members aiming to complete a project, research groups, observers, academic and academic support staff, project leaders who only interact individually with the coordinator, etc. 4) Create a blend of different spaces, such as an online space (for online workshops), a Blackboard hub, emails, individual one-on-one consultations, f2f meetings, and retreats and presentations where outside stakeholders

SoTL principles: how the individual members complete their research projects through sound practice (integrated into the CoP approach)	CoP principles: how the coordinator creates a sense of “aliveness” through certain practices	Integrating the SoTL and CoP principles to create a sense of “aliveness”
		<p>and specialists are included, especially considering research development training and support.</p> <p>5) Establish a new set of values for each new cohort at the beginning of the year, which should be a golden thread throughout the CoP.</p> <p>6) Combine the familiar with the exciting by blended online and f2f components, asynchronously and synchronously.</p> <p>7) Create a rhythm through a detailed schedule and planning according to the steps completed in a research project (e.g., ADDIE, ITDEM, action research), and adding important information related to value and progress of the projects (e.g., dates for conference applications, etc.).</p>

An example structure, based on these integrated principles, is illustrated in Table 6 (as implemented in 2023):

Table 6: QQ SoTL CoP 2023 schedule

Date	Session theme	Online or f2f	Mode	Notes
FEBRUARY				
1 Feb	Orientation	Online	Synchronous 1 hour Teams	During this session we will discuss the plan and structure for 2023, and gage which days would suit most SoTLers to attend the online and f2f sessions.
	What is SoTL and why is it important?	Online	Synchronous 1 hour	We will explore what it means to be a scholarly teacher and what SoTL entails. We will also discuss different roles when being part of the QQ SoTL CoP, linked to expectations.
	Creating your aims within SoTL for 2023; What is the project/initiative that you would like to implement?	F2f	Synchronous 2 hours Pitseng	You will determine your aims for this year (what do you want to walk away with by the end of 2023), so that we know how to plan your projects. You will also make notes (worksheet) to brainstorm a first draft of your idea of a project.
Additional events for February				BB training for staff: 6–17 February, online
MARCH				
	Exploring L&T theories and models	Online	Reading: asynchronous Synchronous 1 hour	You will first read a summary document explaining 15 L&T theories and how they fit together, before coming to the session. Then attend the 1-hour session where we briefly discuss 1 or 2 of these theories and explore which ones you find appealing and why. (Note: these could become the foundation of your research project.)
	The first step in creating your project: analyse the context or problem through data	F2f	Synchronous 2 hours Pitseng	During this session, you will complete the first step in the ADDIE model (analyse)

Date	Session theme	Online or f2f	Mode	Notes
Additional events: March				13–17 March, QQ CRP f2f
APRIL				
	How you need to start thinking about ethical clearance for your project	Online	Synchronous 1 hour	We will briefly discuss why we need ethics and how you need to think around it. We will also do a short demonstration about how the RIMS system works.
	The second step in creating your project: design the intervention and the data collection methods	F2f	Synchronous 2 hours Pitseng	During this session, you will complete the second steps in the ADDIE model (design): HERE, we also want to create a schedule for you for when you implement the project (with timelines)
Additional events for April				Due date: submission for abstracts for SoTL conference – 28 April Teaching portfolio workshop, QQ, f2f 4 April: Call goes out for LT awards and conference
MAY				
	Start completing your ethical clearance, especially if it does not fit into the SoTL umbrella clearance.	Online	Asynchronous	Use this time to complete your ethics, based on a template provided, or directly onto the system. Ask help where needed.
	The third step in creating your project: developing the intervention	F2f	Synchronous	Here, you need to practically start developing the materials you need for the project: online assessments or activities, evaluation forms, communication with students, etc. You need to get these ready for the 2 nd semester. Some materials will be sent to support structures for uploading: in some instances we will see that you need training.
Additional events: May				31 May: Due date for submissions LT conference and awards
JUNE				
	Events to get ready for / apply for: LT fellowship, LT awards and conference	Online	Asynchronous	Information will be shared about the events that you can apply for that aligns with your project
	Writing an abstract	F2f	Synchronous 2 hours Pitseng	A short discussion on how to write an abstract; participants will start writing abstracts
JULY: RECESS ETC.				
AUGUST <i>During semester 2 the project implementation will take place</i>				
	Ways in which to evaluate impact of an initiative	Online	Synchronous	We will explore different ways to evaluate your project
	Sharing of project plans and ideas	F2f	Synchronous 2 hours Pitseng	Individuals will share what they have planned for sem 2, and we will discuss any concerns, support needed, and share ideas.
SEPTEMBER				
	So: I have been doing a research project, but still don't know much about formal research	Online	Asynchronous	Video and reading shared as preparation for the f2f session, exploring basic research principles, terms, etc.
	A word on methods and methodology	F2f	Synchronous 2 hours Pitseng	As we start moving into implementing your project, we consider how this will look in research terms
Additional events for September				UFS L&T conference: 11–15 September
OCTOBER				
	Data analysis of	Online	Synchronous	A brief discussion on thematic analysis

Date	Session theme	Online or f2f	Mode	Notes
	open-ended questions or focus-group data		1 hour	
	Writing retreat: Writing up your work	F2f	Synchronous Clarens 1–2 days	We will use this session to see how SoTLers can start writing up the work that they have done
NOVEMBER				
	Scholarly teaching in 2023: a self-reflection	F2f	Synchronous 2 hours Pitseng	Based on Fink’s Learning How to Learn, we will complete a reflection exercise, where each participant will consider how their teaching changed and evolved in the past year
	Please evaluate the programme	Online	Asynchronous	Participants will complete an evaluation of the CoP
Additional events for November				SoTL4 conference, Golden Gate, 21 to 23 November

Further research will take the form of a third cycle of data collection to establish the extent to which the above approach was impactful. Ultimately, however, just as the members need to consider their context and students in their own project implementation, each year’s approach needs to be adjusted to serve the needs of the environment and that year’s specific SoTL CoP cohort.

This flexible, yet structured approach to the roles, the space, and the schedule is the essence of what ensures “aliveness” in a SoTL CoP.

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