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Recommendations for Success in Forming and Maintaining a SoTL Community of Practice

ABSTRACT

Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) communities of practice (CoP) have emerged as collaborative learning environments that unite people with a shared interest. However, forming and maintaining a successful SoTL CoP can be challenging, requiring careful planning and execution. As academics, we face various challenges in our teaching and learning practices, particularly in a discipline-focused environment in South Africa. Researching these challenges is the obvious path to finding answers. However, many academics are unsure where to start or how to conduct teaching and learning scholarship. As novice SoTL researchers, we established a SoTL CoP in 2021. We used Participatory Action Learning and Action Research (PALAR) principles to form and function as a CoP. After two years of successfully maintaining our SoTL CoP, we analysed the data gathered during our meetings. We identified two main themes: domain and community. With these themes in mind, we compiled recommendations for the successful formation and maintenance of a SoTL CoP. Implementing these recommendations will support the development of a collaborative and supportive environment for the advancement of SoTL practices. By prioritising these recommendations, a CoP can thrive, fostering a collaborative and cohesive community where members actively participate, share their expertise, and contribute to collective growth.

KEYWORDS

community of practice (CoP), recommendations, higher education, participatory action learning and action research (PALAR), South Africa

INTRODUCTION

The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) plays a pivotal role in higher education, because it focuses on the systematic study of teaching and learning practices with the aim of improving student outcomes (Hubball and Clarke 2010; Waller and Prosser 2023). Central to this are Communities of Practice (CoPs), which are collaborative networks of individuals who share a common interest in SoTL but may come from different disciplines and research contexts. CoPs are defined as groups where members engage in collective learning and knowledge sharing in order to enhance their practices within a particular domain (Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder 2002). These CoPs foster connections among individuals who share a passion for SoTL, facilitating the development, dissemination, and advancement of knowledge (Tierney et al. 2020). CoPs offer numerous benefits that are particularly valuable in the context of SoTL. First, CoPs facilitate collaboration and knowledge

sharing. They are a place to exchange ideas, teaching strategies, and research findings, allowing members to learn from each other's experiences and insights (Tierney et al. 2020). This collaboration can lead to the development of innovative practices and improvements in teaching effectiveness. Second, by participating in CoPs, academics can improve their skills and understanding of SoTL methodologies, thus gaining confidence and expertise in conducting SoTL research and developing as professionals (Bozalek et al. 2017). Third, CoPs create a supportive network where members can discuss challenges, seek feedback, and receive encouragement, which are all crucial for navigating the complexities of SoTL research (Wilson-Mah et al. 2022).

However, establishing and sustaining a CoP demands careful planning and implementation (McDonald and Star 2008), especially in higher education institutions in developing countries like South Africa. However, CoPs offer valuable insights and enrich our understanding of SoTL through collaboration, interdisciplinarity, innovation, and validation (Anselmo, Wright, and Stepanchuk 2022; Hubball and Clarke 2010). A SoTL CoP can provide "a forum where shared interests can create momentum and energy, promote innovation and creativity, enhance scholarly productivity, and thus provide a way to attain individual and common goals" in order to achieve SoTL outputs (Edwards et al. 2017, 802).

Our context

South Africa, classified as a developing upper middle-income country, faces various challenges that influence and shape our teaching and learning in higher education (World Bank 2024). Some of these include environmental challenges such as electric outages (loadshedding) and shortcomings in schooling systems. The latter includes a lack of community support, political issues, corruption, and socio-economic challenges (Mouton, Louw, and Strydom 2012), which limits a student's ability to study and spend time on learning tasks. Furthermore, economic constraints, such as limited financial support, result in a digital divide—the gap between those who have access to computers and the Internet and those who do not (Chetty and Pather 2015). Moreover, the #FeesMustFall movement, characterised by student-led demonstrations against tuition fee hikes in 2015 and 2016, also play a significant role. Students who need financial assistance for essentials, such as food, transportation, accommodation, and textbooks often cannot attend lectures or practical sessions. Consequently, the educational journeys of those dependent on the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) often face interruptions. Studies by Garrod and Wildschut (2021), Ntombana, Gwala, and Sibanda (2023), and Nzimande (2022) highlight that delayed payments (mostly from NSFAS) pose a threat to the quality of higher education. Given these many challenges, there is a pressing need for innovative solutions and research, such as SoTL, in order to enhance teaching and learning practices, making it especially relevant in fields like Human Movement Science (HMS), where such research remains underexplored.

The field of HMS is dedicated to the education and training of students in the disciplines of human movement science, biokinetics, recreation, sports and coaching. It enables them to become practitioners, leaders and innovators (NWU 2023). Despite the importance of HMS, there is a lack of existing HMS-based SoTL research. This absence of HMS-focused SoTL research discourages researchers from engaging with this unfamiliar research environment. According to Charles et al. (2023), we are experts in our field by providing content knowledge but are not able to conduct higher education research due to the lack of knowledge regarding instruction and learning as well as pedagogical knowledge. However, in South Africa, there has been an increased interest in SoTL research (Bozalek et al. 2017), signalling a positive trend towards enhancing educational practices. Further, there has been growing support from local government bodies, such as the South African

Council for Higher Education and higher education institutions, to conduct SoTL research (Du Pré and Baumann 2017). Despite this increased attention on conducting SoTL research in South Africa, the interest in conducting SoTL within the field of HMS is limited. This discrepancy highlights the crucial need for targeted initiatives and support for SoTL research in HMS.

Our challenge

Leibowitz and Bozalek (2018) highlight many factors affecting academics' abilities to commit to SoTL in South Africa, such as high work demands, in part due to large student to teacher ratios, limited staff capacity, time barriers, negative perceptions of SoTL's relevance to discipline-specific research, and performance outcomes that are not aligned with SoTL results. At our specific institution, our time as academics is intricately divided among various responsibilities, including teaching and learning in our specific discipline, postgraduate supervision, research projects and outputs, academic leadership, and involvement in community engagement—all of which are essential for a professional promotion (NWU 2022). The high work demands, as experienced by HMS lecturers, make it challenging to conduct SoTL research. This agrees with Happel and Song (2020), indicating that creating a SoTL CoP within a higher education setting poses challenges in finding time for meetings due to heavy workloads and individuals' perceptions of lacking competence in SoTL research knowledge and skills. Additionally, another challenge is to find common goals to start SoTL-focused research projects, since CoP members have different points of view, unique perspectives, expertise, and interests.

Against this backdrop, the prevalent belief that engaging in SoTL can divert academics from their core discipline-specific knowledge and the perception that it is a "nice to have" form barriers to this type of scholarship (Leibowitz and Bozalek 2018, 11). This is evident within South Africa where, as prerequisites for achieving national recognition as a rated researcher, we must demonstrate a focused research path, typically within our specific academic discipline. Therefore, combining research within one's own academic discipline, such as biokinetics, kinder kinetics, sport science, and recreation and leisure with SoTL deviates from this focus, inadvertently impeding SoTL research.

Discipline-focused research often overshadows SoTL, making it appear daunting to those not specialising in higher education or teaching and learning as their discipline (Hubball and Clarke 2010). As academics, we recognise that researching teaching and learning challenges within our environment is essential; however, despite recognising the importance of this research (Tierney et al. 2020), academics in various disciplines are uncertain about how to effectively research teaching and learning. Moreover, our unfamiliarity with SoTL research methodologies and terminology further complicates this challenge, echoing the experiences of many fellow academics (Tierney et al. 2020). However, several courageous individuals have successfully ventured into this new research domain (Billot et al. 2017), and many more are interested but are hesitant, emphasising the need to establish teaching and learning communities of practice (CoP) (Bozalek et al. 2017).

Our solution

CoPs have emerged as valuable platforms that foster collaboration among academics as they exchange ideas, receive feedback, and share knowledge in various fields, especially in the realm of SoTL (Tierney et al. 2020). Grounded in the work of Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002), a CoP enables its members to collaborate on interdisciplinary research projects and share resources and expertise to strengthen their individual research programmes. Wenger's foundational work on CoPs defined three core structural features: "domain," "community," and "practice." The domain signifies the shared interest that draws members together, maintaining the CoP's focus and relevance. The

community aspect sustains the CoP, emphasising relationships and mutual learning, as well as measures to foster connection and trust. Practice emerges as members share and develop a collective identity and resources, addressing challenges and producing tangible outputs that reflect the CoP's identity and achievements (Mercieca 2017). The CoP concept is an opportunity to learn about SoTL practices, as individuals and share perspectives around this domain of interest in a collaborative learning community (Wilson-Mah et al. 2022). CoPs offer a conducive environment in which academics can share insights into their pedagogical practices in a supportive and secure setting, creating a dynamic space for mutual learning and growth. This environment fosters confidence in engaging with SoTL through collaborative efforts (Bozalek et al. 2017).

CoPs specifically contribute to SoTL by facilitating the sharing of best practices, innovative teaching strategies, and research findings among academics, which can be directly applied to SoTL projects to enhance teaching effectiveness and student learning (Bozalek et al. 2017). Additionally, CoPs provide opportunities for collaborative SoTL research endeavours in a supportive environment, allowing academics to combine their expertise, resources, and perspectives to tackle complex teaching and learning challenges. The collaborative nature of CoPs fosters a culture of continuous improvement and critical reflection among educators, which is at the heart of SoTL (Bozalek et al. 2017). Lastly, CoPs can serve as effective forums for disseminating SoTL research findings, allowing academics to learn from each other's successes and failures, thus advancing the collective knowledge of the academic community (Tierney et al. 2020).

As novice SoTL researchers, we realised the value of a CoP, and that such a platform can provide various benefits, including opportunities for professional development, collaboration, dissemination of research findings, and support in taking that first step into uncharted territory (Tierney et al. 2020; Wilson-Mah et al. 2021). We established a SoTL CoP in 2021. Within our particular SoTL CoP, our varied backgrounds and expertise have assisted our SoTL exploration. This cooperation has encouraged us to transform our thinking and to identify new perspectives and approaches to our teaching and learning. Following two years of successful maintenance of the CoP, we have analysed the data gathered from our meetings and compiled recommendations to establish and maintain a CoP of SoTL in our South African context.

Aim of the article

The formation and sustainability of a CoP dedicated to SoTL are crucial for fostering collaborative research, sharing innovative practices, and developing professionally. Although a CoP does not directly alleviate issues such as high workloads or socioeconomic barriers, it provides a supportive community for discussing and developing new teaching strategies that are responsive to the challenging context and specific to the discipline. This situation underscores the need for a systematic approach to forming and maintaining SoTL CoPs, which can navigate obstacles and contribute to the advancement of teaching and learning in higher education within a challenging context like South Africa. Therefore, the research question guiding this study is: What are the recommendations associated with the formation and maintenance of a SoTL CoP in a discipline-focused environment, with a particular focus on the South African higher education context? This question aims to uncover the multifaceted aspects of establishing a SoTL CoP, including the strategies that lead to a CoP's successful formation and sustainability. This research's focus on the development and sustainability of a SoTL CoP within the specific context of South Africa's higher education, particularly in the discipline of HMS, fills a gap in current CoP research. It provides valuable insights and practical guidelines applicable not only to South Africa but also to other developing countries facing similar challenges.

METHODOLOGY

Research design

Our research design is grounded in the Participatory Action Learning and Action Research (PALAR) approach, guided by the theoretical framework of Zuber-Skerritt (2015). As Wood (2019, i) states, "PALAR is a transformative, collaborative, and democratic process to resolve complex problems within the context of sustainable professional, organisational and community development." This methodology, grounded in principles of collaboration, communication, critical reflection, coaching, commitment, compromise, competence, reflection, relationships, and recognition (Wood and Zuber-Skerrit 2013), is highly effective for a SoTL CoP. Therefore, it was chosen for this study, as it provided us with an opportunity to plan, act, observe, and reflect on our SoTL project creations together. PALAR promotes collaborative engagement and enables academics to share and co-create pedagogical knowledge, thereby fostering a supportive environment. This approach not only has facilitated a robust and participatory research process but also ensured that the study's results are grounded in the lived experiences and insights of the CoP members. This approach aligns with the principles of our study, which seeks not only to investigate a problem but also to implement and evaluate solutions in a real-world context. Wenger's (1998) concept of a CoP underpins our approach, highlighting the importance of social learning, knowledge sharing, and the development of shared practices. Ultimately, PALAR helps build a supportive learning community, crucial for innovation in teaching practices and the advancement of SoTL, making it a comprehensive and dynamic framework for enhancing teaching practices and contributing to SoTL.

Participants

Our CoP consisted of six academics representing different HMS disciplines, including biokinetics, sport science, kinder kinetics, and recreation and leisure. The broader focus of the HMS programme at our institution is to cultivate well-rounded experts specialising in human movement, sport, health, and recreation, preparing graduates to meet the demands and requirements of their prospective fields (NWU 2023). In particular, the CoP was made up of two male and four female HMS staff of various academic levels. Although the participants come from the same field, they have different experiences due to their different disciplines. The members included two lecturers (one pursuing a doctoral degree and one with a completed doctorate), one postdoc fellow (holding a doctoral degree) who has since been appointed as a lecturer, two senior lecturers (with completed doctorates), and one full professor. The members' years of academic experience range from five to 16 years. Their keen interest in SoTL catalysed the establishment of the SoTL CoP, which was initiated by the postdoc with extensive knowledge of the PALAR study design. However, an equal partnership was established as the CoP developed and evolved (Zuber-Skerrit 2015) by means of collaboratively drawing up of group norms that ensured the academic levels and disciplines of participants did not influence collaborative interactions. Furthermore, each member had the opportunity to take the lead during different meetings.

Data collection and analysis

For this article, four half day meetings were recorded and transcribed. The meetings focused on various topics related to SoTL, including identifying possible SoTL projects, initiating projects, discussing teaching problems and successes, and preparing conference presentations. These gatherings focused on answering key questions relating to what SoTL is and why we should engage in it. Furthermore, we wondered how we could create and sustain such a community and what SoTL research projects we could undertake. We employed various techniques to gather data during our

meetings, mostly open-ended collaborative discussions based on democratic dialogue principles outlined by Gustavsen (1992). These principles include equal participation during discussions, sharing our experiences and coming up with joint solutions. Furthermore, participatory activities such as icebreakers, collages, and photovoice were also used to encourage interactions and discussions (Brookfield and Preskill 2016).

We voice-recorded, transcribed, and coded the meetings, making use of ATLAS.ti 23. Braun and Clarke's guidelines (2006) for thematic analysis were used. Starting off with phase one, which included familiarisation with the data through collaboratively reading and re-reading transcripts. During phase two, initial codes were created. This coding process commenced with inductive coding and helped us identify unbiased codes (not based on preconceived ideas) to allow for a diversity of findings (Azungah 2018). Thereafter, we deductively analysed the data with key questions in mind. This article focuses on our recommendations to form and maintain a CoP. The deductive process consisted of two CoP members independently coding the data and conducting a consensus meeting to ascertain whether these codes accurately represented the CoP's collective inputs. This independent and then collective co-coding process ensured that our findings were trustworthy (Azungah 2018). Phases three and four consisted of generating and reviewing potential themes. Phase five consisted of naming, defining, and conceptualising the themes. To further enhance the trustworthiness, CoP members shared the themes with each other for validation. As part of collecting the data, we followed the PALAR validity criteria, encompassing outcome, process, catalytic, and democratic validity (Herr and Anderson 2014). We achieved these standards collaboratively by adopting action-oriented strategies, transforming our educational methodologies, participating in reflective learning cycles, and effectively addressing or re-evaluating our SoTL challenges. The final phase is producing the report through identifying the most compelling verbatim quotes for each of the relevant themes and sub-themes.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION
Upon reviewing our discussions, we formulated the main themes based on two of Wenger's three core structural features: domain and community (Mercieca 2017). The third feature, practice, focusses more on the outputs of a CoP and therefore did not form part of our focus for this article. This decision was made based on our focus of providing recommendations on how to form and maintain a SoTL CoP.

Figure 1. Themes related to recommendations for the formation and maintenance of a SoTL CoP
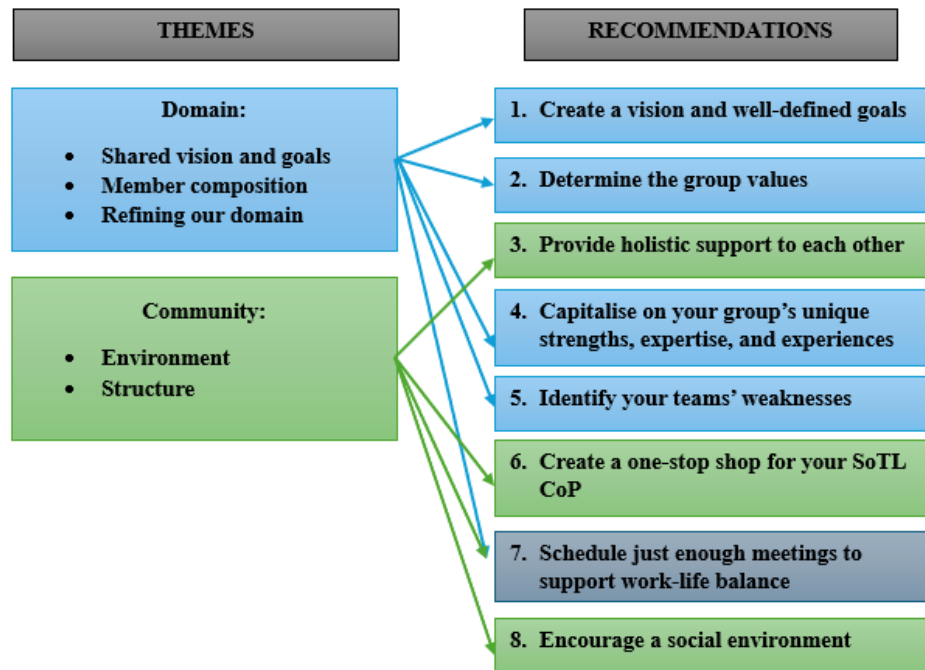
Theme 1: Domain

Domain as a theme for a SoTL CoP provides the CoP's members with a unique identity and sense of belonging. It highlights how this CoP fosters a valued skill set and learning environment, irrespective of external recognition or validation (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner 2015). In the context of our SoTL CoP, the concept of a domain as a theme becomes meaningful due to its shared interest in enhancing teaching and learning in higher education. As members of the CoP, commitment to the CoP signifies a commitment to SoTL itself. The shared competence among members in this domain is what differentiates them from individuals outside the community and involves a continuous process of learning, sharing, and collaboration. The domain therefore serves as the cornerstone for building a SoTL CoP. The following sub-themes were identified based on our shared vision and goals, the composition of our membership, and how we had to redefine our domain to focus on our team's strengths and weaknesses.

Sub-theme: Shared vision and goals

As mentioned by Mercieca (2017), a CoP should be rooted in a shared interest that motivates people to gather. Initial meetings and discussions played a pivotal role in providing the opportunity to explore and affirm these shared interests, allowing members to discuss their expectations and what they sought to achieve through the CoP. Our shared interest was teaching and learning through SoTL, within our CoP. This sub-theme underscores the importance of establishing clear SoTL goals and a shared vision to achieve specific SoTL outputs within the CoP. According to Happel and Song (2020) and Wenger (1998), setting clear goals is vital for a CoP to thrive and achieve its intended outcomes; such goals include collaboration between team members with agreed-upon outcomes. Furthermore, setting common goals that align with individual goals (Trust and Horrocks 2019) promotes a sense of collective responsibility, aligns individual efforts, and improves collaboration among members (Mohammed Alrubian 2022). The following statements by group members highlight the significance of defining a shared vision and mission within our CoP; "So, the question I have for the group is, given

what you have done today, what is our vision as a group? How are we going to work together moving forward? What do we want to achieve as a group?" and "The vision is to be actively busy with SoTL projects that are impactful and directly contribute to HMS while keeping cultural and academic literacies in mind . . . then our mission is to learn how to be SoTL researchers to get projects going."

According to Happel and Song (2020), the presence of shared goals and structures (i.e. setting and agreeing on a goal and identifying and using the strengths of individuals) were considered important facilitators for effective collaboration, while their absence (i.e. disagreements on topics and design, uneven distribution of responsibility, cross-disciplinary differences) presented a barrier. Thus, the emphasis placed on discussing goals and aspirations when forming the CoP aligns with the literature and contributes to establishing a focused and purposeful community. In particular, this sub-theme contributes to the collective efforts of the SoTL CoP, highlighting shared goals that promote diverse perspectives and the expertise of members. Lastly, it reinforces working harmoniously towards common goals, nurturing collective voices within different disciplines.

Sub-theme: CoP member composition

When forming a successful CoP, it is important to rely on the characteristics and dynamics of its members. Efforts were made to recruit and engage members who not only share the SoTL interest but are also committed to contributing to the domain. One of the members highlights this sentiment, stating: "We've got a good starting point to jump off from, and I think we're a good team. It is a nice team; I think we will work together nicely." The pivotal role of member composition in fostering productive SoTL CoPs supports the notion that if members like each other, they will collaborate more effectively. Supporting this, Maronge and Chisango (2022) acknowledge that teamwork promotes the sharing of knowledge and skills, as well as networking. This perspective aligns with Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002) who emphasise the importance of having committed and like-minded individuals who share a common purpose and values, further highlighting the crucial role of positive interpersonal relationships within the SoTL CoP.

Research by Wilson-Mah et al. (2022) indicates that a supportive and collaborative atmosphere supports a CoP's effectiveness, affirming the importance of member compatibility when forming a CoP in order to ensure a cohesive and harmonious community. This concept is reinforced by a member's observation: "I think that this is the novelty (the members) . . . that the support we're having and the strengths, is what is making the group, I think real." This compatibility is directly related to the main theme of "domain," where Wenger (1998) describes that through continuous engagement with challenges and experimentation with various strategies over time, members of a community gradually cultivate expertise in their specific field of interest, thus achieving a high level of competence within their chosen domain. Creating a unified team therefore involves nurturing collective voices, while accommodating individual differences and ensuring each member's voice is recognized, as one member notes: "The goal of uh with this, within the group, is to make sure that every person's voice is heard, and we find a consensus that meets every person's personal passion." Bozalek et al. (2017) stress the value of an environment that encourages members to express their views, signifying that the success of the SoTL CoP is deeply intertwined with collaboration and positive interrelations among members.

Sub-theme: Refining our SoTL CoP domain

During the formation of our SoTL CoP, we refined our community's values in response to our needs and interests. To understand these needs and interests, it is important to identify and understand the values, strengths, and weaknesses of the members and the SoTL CoP (Mercieca 2017).

During our first meeting, we discussed the importance of values for the success of our SoTL CoP and the values we deemed important for fostering an effective SoTL CoP. A member expressed this concern by asking, "What do we value as a group, and how do we uphold these values?" The importance of identifying values for a SoTL CoP is supported by Wilson-Mah et al. (2022), who reported on shared values, such as care, trust, collaboration, and sharing, that keep group members connected and provide a "safe space" for open discussions. Among the most prominent values identified by our SoTL CoP was trust, as one member clearly stated: "I think trust . . . Yes, when you are not coping, when you . . . need to be vulnerable. To be able to say. Listen, I am not coping this week, or this is the problem, to be able, to be honest." Another member echoed the importance of trust by adding: "I think that is a value that needs to be added. I think to be able to say what you want to say and how you feel without thinking: oh, hell, now the entire HMS is going to know. I think it should be that confidentiality." Other core values identified in our CoP included "collaboration," "respect," "authenticity," "openness," "resilience," "fun," "kindness," "responsibility," "commitment," and creating a "caring" environment. Identifying these values during the formation stage contributed significantly to the long-term success of our SoTL CoP.

The second part of refining a SoTL CoP was identifying the strengths and weaknesses of the CoP's members. Our deliberations on recognising strengths in our team aligned with the insights from Happel and Song (2020), substantiating that identifying a group's strengths can foster effective SoTL research collaborations. One member also articulated: ". . . to see what your strengths are and to play on it . . . and use that because it is needed in the group." Delving further into strengths, some of these strengths were related to practical skills, as expressed in this statement from a member: "But once again I think something like that I think we should play on our strengths, I will help making PowerPoints and that but I think you have some members that would prefer to be the presenters and some who will actually rather be helping behind the scenes in the write-up and stuff because once again to have eight people presenting sometimes is a bit of a challenge for an audience as well . . ." Furthermore, another member said ". . . so it's more than support of each other, and we all have different strengths and by combining that, you're making your work easier." Other strengths were related to expertise and knowledge: "A said she is feeling that she is falling off the bus and she is heavy research orientated and stress about this, but she will provide so much input about research, and you, on the other hand, have done so much SoTL and what do we learn from you. So, we are taking something from each member."

Conversely, our explorations of our strengths highlighted crucial gaps that demanded attention from our SoTL CoP. One of the significant gaps we identified was a lack of knowledge of SoTL-specific research methodologies; "Well, it is difficult because for me, still, SoTL feels like I need to go to the qualitative, the interviews, and they reflect where the research that we are doing is quantitative." This methodological awareness deficit echoed Tierney et al.'s (2020) documented findings. It underscored the potential discomfiture faced by academics who may be experts in their discipline but are unfamiliar with SoTL. Wenger (1998) noted 25 years ago that a CoP has the potential to provide insight to novice members from experienced peers. Recognising these weaknesses not only elucidates areas necessitating expertise but also paves the way for targeted workshops to augment and advance our collective knowledge.

The process of continually refining our domain exemplifies the adaptive and collaborative nature of our community. This ongoing refinement process ensures that our CoP remains relevant and responsive to the evolving interests and needs of its members.

Theme 2: Community

The first theme, domain, focused on forming the foundation of our SoTL CoP. The second theme, community, is about maintaining the CoP and ensuring ongoing participation from all members. Community revolves around creating a supportive environment with specific measures to nurture these connections.

Sub-theme: Environment

According to Mercieca (2017), a team works on a task then disbands, whereas a CoP continues over time, with members experiencing growth through trust and mutual respect. This sub-theme highlights the essential role of a supportive and social environment, as highlighted in our discussions.

Creating a supportive and conducive environment is essential for the success of a CoP where members can express viewpoints and make contributions (Bozalek et al. 2017). The following statement from one of our CoP members supports the significance of providing a supportive space: "The environment and the people that are here are conducive to working together." The quote aligns with the literature on CoPs, highlighting the importance of fostering a positive, supportive, and inclusive environment that encourages participation, trust, and open dialogue (Camarao and Din 2023; Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder 2002; Wilson-Mah et al. 2022). This supportive environment should be task-oriented in order to ensure that goals are attainable, as captured by a member's powerful revelation: "SoTL was up until now, you in your own boat alone, but today I have learned that SoTL can be a team thing, and it makes it nicer, a lot better, more fun and helps to think productively." This statement underscored the transformative impact of CoP support, catalysing the start of a SoTL research journey. As echoed by this member, the support garnered within the CoP instilled newfound confidence and motivation to reach SoTL goals: "I've struggled for two years, and I want to do SoTL . . . after today, it's actually going to happen. Now I feel I'm going to have the support to do this." The impact of task-oriented support within the CoP is pivotal in nurturing collaborations, fostering success, and empowering individual research journeys.

Equally important is person-oriented support; a team's behaviour that deals with group interactions and development (Pratoom 2018). Throughout our CoP meetings, this sense of person-oriented support was demonstrated repeatedly, as a member noted: "We are actually a team here that wants to help each other and support each other." Another member echoed this sentiment further, underscoring the CoP's role in nurturing a supportive milieu conducive to mental well-being and personal growth: "I think it comes back to the mental health and support system thing . . . So, you can just have like a talker in, like a talk we're having now and obviously discuss it the issues and obviously you'll get this obviously to an answer that will help you; I think that is the novelty, the CoP that the obviously the support we're having and the strengths, is what making the group I think real." This revelation resonated with the findings articulated by Tierney et al. (2020), advocating for CoPs to make their members feel valued and included. Our SoTL CoP's collective recognition of the symbiotic significance of both task-oriented and person-oriented support outlines a vital narrative. These forms of support played crucial roles in nurturing a collaborative and supportive environment, critical in driving our members' research endeavours.

The value of incorporating a social element in the CoP environment was an important factor in the maintenance of our SoTL CoP, as highlighted by a member: "Keeping a balanced social component to these meetings as well because it is fun, and I am enjoying myself for the first time this week, apart from working." Camarao and Din (2023) emphasise including the element of fun, and laughter highlights appreciated moments during meetings. In the guidelines recommended by Cox and McDonald (2017) for creating and sustaining effective learning communities, they highlighted the

importance of providing social moments. Research suggests that social interaction and a sense of belonging positively impact engagement and knowledge sharing within CoPs (Wasko and Faraj 2005; Wilson-Mah et al. 2022). Establishing a supportive, social atmospheres within a SoTL CoPs aligns with the literature and embodies this sub-theme.

Sub-theme: Structuring our SoTL CoP
In building and maintaining our SoTL CoP, numerous discussions centred on how to structure the group with an emphasis on two points: meetings and managing resources. The importance of well-organised and frequent meetings was highlighted. Recognising the intricate balance between work and personal life, the planning of meeting frequency became a strategic element. As a member suggested, ". . . we have a check-in maybe in two weeks about all this stuff that we read up on Microsoft Teams." Tierney et al. (2020) argue that regular opportunities for engagement should be provided. The author's argument is consistent with Wenger's theoretical design principles for a CoP, highlighting the importance of creating a rhythm for the community by organising convenient meeting dates and times and adding them to the members' calendars (Reaburn and McDonald 2017). Recommendations on regular meetings were also given in Cox and McDonald's guidelines (2017). Maintaining regular contact is vital to maintaining momentum within the CoP. Participants are busy managing their priorities, so they must be informed through concise emails with bulleted information and regular face-to-face or online interaction via platforms such as Moodle (or any learning management system), LinkedIn, Microsoft Teams, or a dedicated Facebook page. The CoP participants should determine their preferred mode of communication themselves. One CoP member said, "Okay, so then on communication, I think we are sorted, face-to-face, the round-robin idea here, Teams with all our specific documents put there, especially the formal stuff, using the @function . . . and then WhatsApp for informal when needed."

Furthermore, the necessity of strategic resource management was also stressed. Effective strategies and action plans are necessary to manage and share resources within the CoP (Tierney et al. 2020). Discussions on resource management are essential, as indicated by the statement of one member: "Our action plan is, let's first start a Teams group, put our documents or whatever you come across (on Teams), maybe we can create folders." It is also suggested, and supported by the literature, that it is best to decide on a way to stay in touch and ensure regular contact (Reaburn and McDonald 2017). Another member suggested: "I think what we can do this . . . the things we're talking through a meeting, can we maybe just note that down and then afterwards throw it on Teams and if you wanted to add on a certain topic that you felt during the session you can add it on, maybe on Teams . . ." From these quotations and the literature, a systematic approach to sharing documents and relevant information is required (Tierney et al. 2020).

Theme 2 focused on nurturing and sustaining a vibrant community of engaged members
Under the sub-theme of "environment," we recognize the importance of fostering both a supportive and social atmosphere. Creating a supportive environment allowed for open dialogue and collaboration, empowering members to contribute meaningfully to the community's goals. Additionally, the incorporation of a social element added enjoyment and camaraderie to our meetings, improving member retention. In structuring our SoTL CoP, discussions emphasise the importance of well-organised meetings and strategic resource management while keeping a focus on work-life balance. Regular meeting schedules ensure ongoing engagement, while effective resource management facilitates knowledge sharing and collaboration. By prioritising both the environment

and structure of our SoTL CoP, we aim to cultivate a cohesive SoTL CoP that supports the growth and success of its members. From these themes, we compile a list of recommendations for successfully forming and maintaining a SoTL CoP. These themes were discussed in the context of recent literature to illustrate how we generated the specific recommendations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This article presents recommendations derived from identified themes and sub-themes for successfully forming and maintaining a SoTL CoP. The recommendations aim to provide a framework for establishing an effective and sustainable SoTL CoP within the context of South Africa, a developing country.

1. Create a vision and well-defined goals for your SoTL CoP

A shared vision, especially, when faced with various academic demands, is essential. Well-defined and measurable goals should be established to guide the activities and purpose of the SoTL CoP. These goals provide the community direction and focus, ensuring everyone works towards a common purpose (Theme 1: Domain). To establish a shared vision and clear goals within a SoTL CoP, start with a collaborative goal-setting session where members articulate their SoTL interests and expectations. Regularly review these goals in scheduled sessions in order to assess progress, address challenges, and ensure activities aligned with both the collective vision and individual aspirations.

2. Determine the group values during the formation of your SoTL CoP

The CoP should define, redefine, and maintain a set of values and principles that govern the actions and interactions of the CoP members. Sharing values promotes a cohesive community, ensuring that everyone is aligned and working towards common goals (Theme 1: Domain). To practically instil and maintain core values within a SoTL CoP, start with an initial conversation where members collaboratively define and agree on values. In addition, document the established values and integrate them into CoP activities and decision-making processes.

3. Provide holistic support to each other

The CoP should cultivate an environment that addresses its members' emotional and personal needs. The recommendation includes recognising the importance of both task-oriented, which provides teaching and learning practices, and person-oriented support, which is related to individual well-being and professional growth (Theme 2: Community). By fostering an environment that encourages open dialogue and collaboration, members can freely express their points of view and contribute to the CoP's goals. Additionally, enrich the CoP experience by including social elements that add enjoyment and camaraderie, recognising the importance of a supportive and social environment. To do so, we recommend providing holistic support.

4. Capitalise on the unique strengths, expertise, and experiences of your group

Identify and utilise the unique strengths, expertise, and experiences of the CoP members. To effectively capitalise on the unique strengths, expertise, and experiences within a SoTL CoP, conduct a comprehensive survey to map out the diverse skills and knowledge areas of your members. Use this data to assign roles and tasks that align with individual strengths, fostering a culture of collaboration and efficiency. Regularly review and adjust these strategies so that they reflect the evolving needs and contributions of the CoP, maintain relevance, and promote sustained engagement. By leveraging its

members' diverse skills and backgrounds, the CoP can benefit from various perspectives and insights (Theme 1: Domain).

5. Identify the weaknesses of your teams

The CoP should actively identify areas of improvement or deficiencies and seek external resources or expertise to address any gaps in SoTL projects. These strategies foster a culture of continuous growth and development, ensuring that the community remains responsive to evolving needs (Theme 1: Domain). Therefore, we recommend acknowledging gaps or weaknesses during discussions. The identification of weaknesses arises naturally from discussions about the CoP's values and members' strengths, suggesting that understanding what the group values and excels in provides a backdrop against which gaps can be seen and addressed more clearly. This process underscores the importance of creating a supportive environment where members feel safe to express vulnerabilities, thus facilitating a better understanding of the collective expertise of SoTL CoPs and areas for development. Address identified gaps by organising targeted workshops or inviting external experts, ensuring that the CoP remains adaptable and that the skills of its members are continually developed.

6. Create a one-stop shop for your SoTL CoP

Establish a central and accessible repository of resources, such as MSTeams, in our CoP case. The accessible resource repository ensures that all members can access the relevant materials and information. The repository should be structured as clearly labelled folders or channels, such as research articles, teaching resources, best practices, and other materials that support the community objectives (Theme 2: Community). To populate the repository, ask for contributions from all CoP members. Highlight how this shared knowledge base can foster a collaborative and informed community environment. To accomplish these goals, we recommend a centralised resource repository.

7. Schedule just enough meetings to support work-life balance

Conduct frequent meetings to maintain consistency, track progress, and facilitate communication within the CoP. However, it is important to consider the members' other responsibilities and time constraints in order to ensure that meetings are productive and accommodate everyone's availability (Themes 1 and 2: Domain and community). To make this work, you need to establish a regular meeting schedule for the SoTL CoP that aligns with the objectives of the group. Begin scheduling meetings by considering everyone's updated calendar and finding a suitable time for everyone. We recommend holding bi-weekly or monthly meetings, depending on the SoTL goals and the complexity of projects. Each meeting should also have a clear agenda distributed in advance. Additionally, to support work life balance, consider alternating between formal meetings focused on project progress and informal gathering or virtual check-ins that foster community engagement without adding to members' workloads.

8. Encourage a social environment

Encourage an enjoyable atmosphere within the CoP. Fostering a positive and enjoyable environment can enhance motivation, creativity, and overall member engagement. To foster a positive and enjoyable atmosphere within a SoTL CoP, incorporate social icebreakers, thematic discussion sessions, and show-and-tell presentations. Collaborative projects and activities significantly enhance member engagement and creativity. Additionally, organising informal social gatherings, creative feedback sessions, and cultural exchange events promotes a sense of belonging, enriching the community aspect of CoP (Theme 2: Community).

CONCLUSION

Forming a CoP within South African higher education, particularly in the domain of HMS, represents a critical effort towards enhancing SoTL. Central to this formation is the establishment of a shared vision and well-defined goals, which transcend individual contributions in order to forge a collective identity and purpose. This foundational step is essential not only to align members towards common objectives, but also to navigate challenges inherent to South Africa: from socioeconomic disparities to infrastructure constraints and the digital divide.

Our study illustrates a shared vision that can act as guidance for the CoP's efforts; it addresses specific educational challenges and fosters a collaborative, supportive environment conducive to pedagogical innovation and resilience. The strategic emphasis on task- and person-oriented support within the CoP reflects an understanding of the hurdles faced by educators, offering a model for holistic engagement and well-being. In addition, leveraging the diverse strengths and experiences of CoP members through a collaborative approach exemplifies a potent strategy for overcoming resource limitations and improving pedagogical quality. The structured engagement and efficient resource management practices that we have adopted not only facilitate consistent participation, but also align with the pressing realities of balancing academic ambitions with broader societal issues in South Africa.

Additionally, the study highlights the significance of PALAR principles in shaping a dynamic group, indicating that members might not have naturally gravitated towards one another individually. The PALAR process can forge connections between individuals, underscoring the instrumental role of PALAR in the creation of a cohesive team and supportive environment.

By articulating a pathway for the effective formation and maintenance of a SoTL CoP, our findings offer valuable insights into the potential of such communities to catalyse meaningful advancements in teaching and learning practices. The adaptive and responsive nature of CoPs, as demonstrated within the South African higher education system, provides a compelling model for other disciplines and contexts where academics face similar challenges.

Ultimately, the journey to form and sustain a SoTL CoP in this distinctive context highlights the power of collective action and shared commitment to educational excellence. Although a CoP does not directly resolve issues, such as high workloads or the digital divide, it provides a crucial platform for discussing new teaching strategies and creating a supportive community that adapts to challenging contexts. This approach is applicable not only to South Africa, but to other developing countries facing similar socioeconomic issues, highlighting the broader relevance and potential impact of our findings.

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ETHICS

The research project obtained ethical approval from the University Health Research Ethics Review Committee, where the research was conducted before beginning data collection within the CoP. The study followed the participatory ethical conduct principles outlined by Wood and Kahts-Kramer (2023).

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