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**Healey, Michael J ORCID: 0000-0003-1195-0370 and Matthews, Kelly E. (2017) Learning Together Through International Collaborative Writing Groups. Teaching and Learning Inquiry: The ISSOTL Journal, 5 (1). pp. 1-6. doi:10.20343/5.1.2**

Official URL: <https://doi.org/10.20343/5.1.2>

DOI: 10.20343/5.1.2

EPrint URI: <https://eprints.glos.ac.uk/id/eprint/5218>

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## GUEST EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

# Learning Together Through International Collaborative Writing Groups

## ABSTRACT

The International Collaborative Writing Groups (ICWG) initiative creates a space for ongoing collaboration amongst scholars of teaching and learning who co-author a manuscript on a topic of shared interest. The second ICWG, linked to the 2015 International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Conference in Melbourne, Australia, involved 59 scholars from 11 countries. In this piece, we describe the aims, process, and outcomes for the ICWG, comparing it with the first ICWG in 2012. While international collaboration around a topic of shared interest is generally viewed positively, the realities of collaborating online with limited face-to-face interactions to complete a manuscript can be challenging. We argue, despite such challenges, that ongoing collaboration amongst scholars is vital to the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) movement. Drawing on our experience of leading the overall ICWG initiative and our research into participants' experiences, we suggest there are individual dispositions toward collaboration that enrich and enable successful participation in ICWG experiences. We end by highlighting the final products arising from almost two year of collaborative thinking and writing from six groups.

## KEYWORDS

collaborative writing, international co-authoring, scholarship of teaching and learning, writer's experience

## ENCOURAGING COLLABORATION IN ISSOTL

Wouldn't it be nice to have more time to collaborate with liked-minded peers from different countries and contexts? What benefits would we gain if we harnessed the diversity of perspectives—differing countries, types of institutions, experiences in scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL)—in a creative, collaborative learning environment that advances individual practices *and* collective SoTL wisdom?

Bringing people together to grapple with big topics to advance our collective understanding of SoTL is important work because the SoTL movement represents an increasingly broad and diverse community of scholars passionate about learning and teaching in higher education. Our annual International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (ISSOTL) conferences are a vital gathering for the SoTL community that allow us to share practices, engage in critical conversations, and expand our network of SoTL scholars that extend beyond our disciplines, countries, and contexts.

Between conferences, we often struggle to create the time to continue meaningful collaborations. Structured writing groups offer a means to continue working together.

## INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATIVE WRITING GROUPS

The ISSOTL International Collaborative Writing Groups (ICWG) initiative creates a space for ongoing collaboration amongst scholars of teaching and learning, both students and staff, who work together to co-author a manuscript on a topic of shared interest. Three years after the first ISSOTL ICWG met in Hamilton, Canada prior to the ISSOTL 2012 conference, the second ICWG met in Melbourne, Australia prior to the ISSOTL 2015 conference. Together these have involved over 130 people from 16 countries and resulted in two edited collections of articles published in an internationally refereed journal. The ICWG initiative, on both occasions, was designed to achieve two main aims:

1. To build the capacity of participants to work on and write about SoTL in international collaborative groups.
2. To make a contribution to the literature on relevant SoTL topics, informed by international perspectives, via a special issue/section of *Teaching & Learning Inquiry: The ISSOTL Journal (TLI)*.

The writing groups worked at a distance over a period of a year or more with a key part of the process being a two- to two-and-a-half-day residential event prior to the commencement of the ISSOTL conference. Though restricted by the people who applied, we attempted to select groups whose members, both students and staff, were based in a variety of countries and had a range of previous experience of SoTL. The experience was designed on the premise of SoTL as a collaborative practice and drew on ideas from the literature on writing groups and students as partners (Healey, Flint & Harrington, 2014; Hutchings, Huber, & Ciccone, 2015; Murray, 2009; Weaver et al., 2013). Both events were influenced by the experience of running similar international collaborative writing groups by the International Network of Learning and Teaching Geography in Higher Education (Healey, Pawson, & Solem, 2010).

Research into the ICWG2012 found overwhelming positive experiences with participants highlighting diversity of group membership and facilitator leadership as essential to their perceptions of the initiative (Healey & Marquis, 2013; Marquis, Healey, & Vine, 2014; 2016; Marquis, Mårtensson, & Healey, 2017). The face-to-face workshop prior to the ISSOTL conference also emerged as a vital element in group formation and development. The success of the inaugural 2012 initiative allowed us to focus more on learning in the 2015 ICWG. We drew on the literature on communities of practices to frame co-writing as a collaborative learning process more explicitly linked to being or becoming a SoTL scholar (Matthews, Marquis, & Healey, 2016). While the aims, structure, and goals were broadly similar in 2012 and 2015, there were also some unexpected differences in the experiences and outcomes.

## SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES BETWEEN ICWG12 AND ICWG15

In both the ICWG2012 and ICWG2015, two co-leaders took responsibility for overall coordination and they invited group facilitators in advance of an open call for group members. Broad topics were decided in consultation with group facilitators. In 2015 we had the same number of leaders (9), though one fewer groups (8), because one group had joint leaders. Participants were chosen to maximize the variety of experiences in each group. There was a 44% increase in the number of applicants from 2012 to 2015, suggesting the success of the initial ISSOTL ICWG led to broader interest in 2015. This, of course, meant the acceptance rate fell from almost a half to less than a third. Each group started with seven team members, plus the leader(s). Inevitably some people were not able to take up the offer

or withdrew in the period prior to the meeting at the conference (most commonly because of not being able to raise the finance to come to the workshop). However, the rate of withdrawal was also higher in 2015, 20% compared to 13% in 2012, perhaps in part reflecting the higher cost for many of travelling to Australia. In the first few months, substitutes were made from a waiting list (Table 1).

**Table 1. ICWG12 and ICWG15: A statistical summary**

	ICWG12	ICWG15
Number of applications	135	194
Number offered places (excluding group leaders)	63 (47%)	56 (29%)
Leaders	9	9
Total at beginning	72	65
Number dropped out before workshop	9 (13%) <sup>1</sup>	13 (20%) <sup>2</sup>
Number participated at workshop	69	59
Number that completed articles	69	55
Number of groups	9	8
Number of papers not ready to submit or not suitable for <i>TLI</i>	1	2
Number of articles published in <i>TLI</i>	8	6
Number of countries represented at workshop*	13	11

1. Including 3 withdrawals not replaced

2. Including 6 withdrawals not replaced

#### Country breakdown of participants

2012—Australia: 4; Belgium: 1; Canada: 25; Hungary: 1; Ireland: 1; New Zealand: 5; Norway: 1; Singapore: 1; South Africa: 1; Sweden: 1; Trinidad & Tobago: 1; UK: 12; USA: 15. Total = 69

2015—Australia: 31; Belgium: 1; Canada: 4; China: 1; Ireland: 1; Netherlands: 2; New Zealand: 1; Singapore: 1; UK: 7; USA: 9; Vietnam: 1. Total = 59

At the time of the workshop there were delegates from 13 different countries in 2012 and 11 in 2015. Not surprisingly, the geographical distribution was different, with 58% coming from North America in the first cohort and 54% from Australasia in the second. At least one student started as a member of each group and we managed to find additional finance to subsidize the cost of out of province/state participating students. In 2015, all students received ICWG fee waivers for participation in the workshop and an offer of free accommodation in Melbourne.

On both occasions, groups uploaded brief summaries of their proposed papers to an online ICWG group space four to six weeks before the pre-conference workshops and each participant was requested to provide feedback online on one allocated paper and one other of their own choosing. The structure of the workshop was also similar at both events, with a mixture of plenary sessions designed to help the teams clarify their focus, and time for each group to work on their own. The event was extended by half-a-day in 2015 in response to feedback from the previous cohort that participants thought the event was too hurried. On both occasions, some groups made significant changes to the foci of their papers during the face-to-face meeting. We also extended the deadline for manuscript submission after the event from less than three months in 2012 to almost six months in 2015. This longer period may in

part explain why four team members withdrew during this period in 2015, mainly due to their changing commitments (whereas all participants saw it through to article submission in 2012). On both occasions, one article was judged not yet ready for publication in *TLL*, and in 2015 it was recommended that another of the submissions be submitted to a different journal (Table 1).

## EXPERIENCE OF ICWG PARTICIPANTS

Gathering evidence from participants was central to both iterations of the ICWG. In 2012, Marquis, Healey and Vine (2014; 2016) assessed the anticipated and actual experiences of ICWG members and the initiative's perceived capacity to develop SoTL scholars. Data were collected via surveys early and late in the process, and focus groups scheduled during the face-to-face workshop session. Key findings from this research included the significance of leadership to the success of the initiative, and the value of experiential and social learning opportunities, despite challenges of working in large, diverse groups of participants (Marquis Healey & Vine, 2014; 2016). The 2015 ICWG research drew on the literature on communities of practice (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002) and student-staff partnerships (Healey, Flint & Harrington, 2014) exploring learning (e.g. about SoTL, collaboration, and professional development) using a longitudinal study that involved participant reflections at the beginning, middle and end of the yearlong process. The 2012 ICWG research focused on the initiative processes and outcomes that typically revealed positive experiences, match between anticipated and actual experiences of the ICWG, and important indicators for the success of such initiatives. The ICWG 2015 research focused on individual journeys as participants navigated the experience of collaborating and co-authoring with a diverse, international group of SoTL scholars. Early analysis of the 2015 research supports findings from the 2012 research, specifically the:

- Transformational experience of 'becoming a SoTL scholar';
- Richer, more nuanced depth of understanding of SoTL as a field and practice;
- Sense of belonging to a SoTL community; and
- Comfort with the broad, ambiguous field that is SoTL.

However, the 2015 research also allowed space for experiences to surface that were not 'representative' of the whole, but signified important experiences of *some* participants, including:

- Group dysfunction;
- Stressed out group facilitators;
- Questioning of diverse collaboration leading to quality manuscripts;
- Further challenges for English-as-an-additional-language participants;
- Traditional student/academic hierarchies;
- Discomfort with the broad, ambiguous field that is SoTL; and
- Group members as 'strangers'.

The 2015 ICWG research showed the roller coaster ride of the 18-month journey, reflecting the messiness of ongoing collaborative processes with diverse membership.

We argue, despite such messiness, that ongoing collaboration amongst scholars is vital to the SoTL movement. However, this form of collaboration, heavily reliant on online interactions with a diverse group of scholars, many of whom are meeting for the first time, is not for everyone. We believe that participants have to come to such collaboration with certain dispositions.

1. Willingness to collaborate on a journey that has an uncertain outcome.
2. Adventurousness that embraces a journey of co-creation with unknown, diverse scholars.

3. Open mindedness to question *what one thinks* is SoTL.
4. Empathy for others from different cultures and contexts that affect how they collaborate.
5. Willingness to make time and space for collaboration using online tools.

These desirable dispositions could usefully be made explicit at the time of recruiting participants for future ICWGs. Greater awareness of the nature of the journey they are signing up for, and realism about whether it is likely to suit their personalities, should make for a more enjoyable and satisfying experience for all the participants.

## THE 2015 ICWG CONTRIBUTION TO COLLECTIVE SOTL UNDERSTANDING

Six manuscripts were accepted for publication in this special section, each contributing further insights on topics important for the field of SoTL.

Lawrie, Marquis, Fuller, Newman, Qiu, Nomikoudis, Roelofs, and van Dam explore inclusive learning and teaching in light of ‘widening participation’ agendas unfolding across the higher education sector. They argue for whole of institution approaches that enable partnerships between the myriad of stakeholders who should be involved in creating cultures that value inclusive learning environments. Also emerging across the sector is a focus on work-integrated learning opportunities that enable students to link theory and practice. Thomson, da Silva, Draper, Gilmore, Majury, O’Connor, Vásquez, and Waite explore student voice, comparing literature from two disciplines, and challenge SoTL scholars to reconsider how they involve students in work-integrated practice and research. The role of technology in affording new and exciting assessment opportunities is the focus of Sweeney, West, Groessler, Haynie, Higgs, Macaulay, Mercer-Mapstone, and Yeo. Using a systematic literature review, they highlight SoTL examples of technology being employed to truly transform assessment and feedback practices that foster student learning. Jenkins, Bokosmaty, Brown, Browne, Gao, Hanson, and Kupatadze dig deeply into the ‘flipped classroom’ and offer a model to guide instructors seeking to flip classes that is grounded in high-level pedagogical thinking.

Two groups collected primary data to explore their topics. Scharff, Draeger, Verpoorten, Devlin, Dvorakova, Lodge, and Smith use a survey across several institutions of both students and staff to further our understanding of the learning transfer in relation to meta-cognition. Using interviews with experienced SoTL scholars, Billot, Rowland, Carnell, Amundsen, and Evans investigate how these scholars developed credibility in their SoTL work.

These six papers draw on the perspectives of a diverse range of scholars who spent almost two years collaborating on their respective topics to make a specific scholarly contribution to SoTL. Drawing on experiences, literature, international diversity, and in two cases primary data, the writing groups offer unique insights into cross-cutting SoTL topics. The ICWG initiative, supported by ISSOTL, advances individual practices of those involved *and* furthers our collective SoTL wisdom as an international community.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We wish to express our gratitude to Geoffrey Crisp and Angela Carbone as 2015 ISSOTL Conference Conveners; Nancy Chick and Gary Poole as TLI Editors and enthusiastic advocates for collaborative SoTL; the Institute for Teaching and Learning Innovation at the University of Queensland and the Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia for ICWG sponsorship; and to all the committed ICWG participants and facilitators who worked together for over a year to further our understanding of SoTL.

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