

REVIEW

Building and Enjoying the “Big Tent” Together: A Review of ISSOTL17

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The *International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning* 2017 conference (ISSOTL17), cohosted by the University of Calgary and Mount Royal University, invited attendees to ponder aspirations, anxieties, adventures, and new horizons under the theme of *Reaching New Heights*. Hosting over 600 delegates in Calgary, Canada, for ISSOTL17 was no small feat, and here I share a glimpse into how student partnerships manifested in planning and holding the society’s flagship event.

In the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), the “big tent” metaphor (Huber & Hutchings, 2005) describes the individuals from many disciplines and perspectives who come together to converse about teaching and learning. Engaging students as partners in SoTL is considered good practice (Felten, 2013). Inviting students to build the “big tent” alongside faculty (and staff) showcases how the society values student collaborations. Poole and Chick (2016, p. 3) argued as “we are all still trainees in our own ways”, students and faculty both contribute ever-developing knowledge and skills to a collective expertise. In helping host the conference, I learned a lot from faculty, but also they often asked for my expertise—we learned together.

Broadly, partnership relies on “respect, reciprocity, and shared responsibility” (Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2014, p. 1). Although conference planning may not impact teaching and learning practice directly, the ISSOTL conference sets the tone for how student partnerships are discussed, enacted, and perceived in the wider SoTL field.

In late 2016, I joined the ISSOTL17 program committee as a member of the society and as a student of the University of Calgary. In partnership with the conference organizers, students led and supported critical elements such as the conference commons, the program, the video-trailer, volunteers, submission reviews, and newcomer initiatives. Throughout, I never felt my contributions were perceived as *lesser-than* compared to faculty (or staff). Expectations and trust were high for everyone, and when issues arose, students and faculty tackled the situation. Together, they shared the responsibility of a challenge and collaborated as peers to overcome it.

A humbling aspect of SoTL is the winds that fill the sails of traditional academic hierarchies (e.g., full versus assistant professor, director of XYZ institute, number of publications) seemed to carry less weight at the ISSOTL conference. What mattered were reciprocal, “scholarly, engaged, inclusive, and collegial” (Chick et al., 2017, p. 14) conversations about teaching and learning that leveraged the range of expertise brought by faculty and

students. During the conference, I felt the collegiality and a mutual ethos of learning waft through ISSOTL17. At the registration desk, a student recruited experienced attendees to be ambassadors to newcomers. Student attendees were offered a “student” ribbon to wear, not to perpetuate hierarchy, but to celebrate students as “rock stars” (N. Chick, personal communication, October 2017) and to help ambassadors initiate conversations.

At the opening plenary, Gary Poole (2017) charged attendees to question who gets to be part of SoTL, and whether they engage in conversations that facilitate or hinder SoTL journeys, including work with students. Later, Rachel Foot, Alicia Crowe, Karen Tollafield, and Chad Allan (2017) shared how faculty and student collaboration empowered them to “encourage, engage, and evolve” as professionals. Chad remarked how SoTL gave him, as doctoral student, a place *to belong*.

In the closing plenary, with suitcases lining the walls and the blissful glow from an invigorating week, Helen Sword (2017) urged more “stylish” writing to make SoTL work more potent and accessible to wider audiences, and to foster better conversations. She challenged disciplinary practices, such as forbidding the use of “I” in graduate student theses, as they literally snuff out students’ voices in research.

Beyond high-level nods to students were tangible efforts too. Organized and awarded by the Students and SoTL committee, an emerging scholars fund supported 25 student attendees. These efforts also included student presentation and poster awards, a dedicated students-as-partners conference track featuring 22 presentations, a student welcome session, and well-attended student interest group meetings.

I frequently hear from faculty and students that ISSOTL is their favourite conference. I think ISSOTL17 set the bar high, and the strong student presence was key in making the conference a success. As Green (2017) wrote, “ISSOTL as a whole is remarkably welcoming of students, student voice, and student participation. This is particularly palpable at the annual conference.”

Finally, the best things in life keep you wanting more and ISSOTL is no different. Before the “big tent” was packed away, several students and I were already discussing ways to engage students even more at ISSOTL18. I eagerly await new conversations, shared meals, stories, presentations, posters, collaborations, hugs, and laughs as students and academics walk into the “big tent” together, once again.

NOTE ON CONTRIBUTOR

Christopher Ostrowski is a PhD student at the Werklund School of Education and a co-chair of the ISSOTL Student Engagement interest group. He has engaged in multiple SoTL projects in partnership with faculty and is interested in how educators conceptualize teaching and learning.

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