

SoTL Seed Support Model – Curriculum and Course Services

Project type: Other service

The SoTL Seed Program provides support to faculty members as they seek to study and evaluate their teaching. Every year, project proposals that incorporate inquiry of teaching and learning in higher education undergo a competitive adjudication process and 6-12 Scholarship for Teaching and Learning projects are selected based on their potential contributions to the UBC community and beyond, their novelty, and practicality. Projects are strategically selected to reflect the breadth of work at UBC in terms of disciplines and scholarly approaches. The expected life cycle of a project is one to two years. More can be found at <http://isotl.ctlt.ubc.ca/sotl-seed-program/>.

Support model and scope

Since 2014, the program has supported 24 projects from 12 Faculties and Colleges. Starting in 2015¹, awarded projects receive a support package that includes the following:

- Up to 80 hours of a SoTL Specialist. SoTL Specialists are Graduate Research Assistants with experience in a variety of SoTL-related topics such as research project design, ethics applications, surveys, focus groups, experiments, observation, text analysis and analytics.
- Cohort-based meetings that provide opportunities for networking and for receiving and offering informal feedback from peers and participants in the program.
- CTLT consultation during the entire life cycle, from design to publication.
- Up to \$500 in discretionary funds to support project requirements such as participant costs and Teaching Assistants' time.
- Up to \$500 to support presentation in SoTL meetings and conferences.

Goal of evaluation

The SoTL Seed Program applies an unprecedented model of institutional support for Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) activities.

Our evaluation goals are:

- A. To evaluate if and how offered support matches project needs and brings projects to successful completion.
- B. To identify the impact of the program on instructors' teaching beliefs and practices and career advancement.
- C. To evaluate the impact of the program on the Graduate Research Assistants' (GRAs) personal and professional growth.
- D. To evaluate the extent of the contributions of the program on the field of SoTL through publications, conference presentations, and other forms of dissemination.

¹ The 2014 round consisted of monetary support. The current model was initiated in 2015.



Methodology

The evaluation of the SoTL Seed Program has been ongoing from the onset. Different sources of data have been used to evaluate our work:

Instructor's feedback: Once a year, all project leads are contacted via email to gather feedback around the support provided, their needs, and project progress in general. Our recurrent interactions with instructors offer other opportunities to regularly gather feedback.

End-of-year surveys: Eight project leads from the 2015 completed a standard end-of-year online survey in July 2016. Another survey will be sent out in July 2017.

Instructor interviews: Six 2015 project leads were interviewed about their experiences with their near-end projects by one of our senior SoTL Specialists.

SoTL Specialist focus group: Scheduled to take place in spring 2017 in order to explore GRAs' professional and personal experiences resulting from their involvement with the program.

Systematic publication record: With the help of Specialists, we keep a current record of dissemination efforts stemming from SoTL Seed activities.

Findings

We found that the program has been successful in supporting the projects throughout their life cycle and bringing them to successful conclusion (goal A). This was expressed by principal investigators (PIs) in their email feedback, end-of-year surveys, and interviews. Specifically, all of the PIs have responded very positively to the role of the SoTL Specialist working on their project and many communicated in different occasions that their Specialist was integral to keeping the project on task and in full momentum. Areas where support was generally sought and perceived as valuable include: project planning, ethics clearance, and data collection and analysis. Some project leads requested more support with writing and dissemination of results. The contributions of SoTL specialists, in the form of methodological advice, data analysis, attentiveness, and convergence of research interests, were highlighted in the survey responses.

“Our RA was terrific and we very much appreciated the support, and could not have done this project without that support!”

Project leads consistently indicated that the support received from Specialists and CTLT consultation enabled them to go beyond their expertise and investigate aspects that were not approachable otherwise. From one of the interviews:

“The most attractive part of the SoTL seed fund was [the research specialist]. The idea of having a research assistant because reflecting on your own teaching, you know, you have blinders on, so having a research assistant was a really attractive part of the fund.”

There was also general agreement that implementing a SoTL project and participating in cohort-based meetings helped instructors transform their teaching practices and specific courses based on evidence (goal B). Almost all the PIs said that their SoTL projects have changed the way they teach their courses. In fact, one person totally re-vamped their course in accordance with results from the project while others expressed a total shift in their mentality around teaching:

“For me, SoTL was a light going on. Before that I had been teaching without the awareness, really, of how research in the classroom could be used to enhance the classroom.”



“I’ve always been in the teaching field, but to have the opportunity to just sit and reflect on your teaching and try to think about new ways and new ideas of how to improve things, and how to incorporate technology for the best use of it, not just for the sake of it, along with ways to engage students—how do I add value to this work? If you care about teaching, it’s important to have these opportunities. It’s almost like a tune-up.”

Participating in SoTL activities also affected PI’s interactions with students:

“I’ve learned to be clearer with students about what I expect from them. And [it] has also made me wonder why I am doing the things I am doing a bit more.”

One PI commented in the interview that participating in the program made her feel less afraid of running her class differently, which in her view is something that is important for young professors, but particularly important for those on the instructor track.

“It’s made me less afraid of running my class differently, because I know that I’m not just running it differently for the sake of running it differently, I’m running it differently because I’ve thought about the benefits of it. And I think that’s built my confidence even though the focus groups and reflections opened me up to criticism from students, despite that it’s actually made me more confident in what I’m trying to do, even though I’m not doing it perfectly.”

In terms of career advancement, however, larger challenges were identified both in surveys and interviews, such as the (lack of) institutional recognition of SoTL as a valid field of research and a prevailing culture that struggles to consider teaching as an element for career advancement.

“I think it’s super important, but I feel that the ability to engage in SoTL is limited given the current state of higher education. [...] I feel like most research professors—it is not something that they see as a good use of their time in terms of getting tenure. So I think it’s a wonderful field, I wish that more professors would do it, and I think students at UBC would benefit from more professors reflecting on their teaching, but I totally understand why more professors don’t do it. I think, the university, if they want to encourage SoTL, you need to make it a more explicit criteria within tenure track, professorial tenure track files.”

Goals (C) and (D) from the list above are yet to be addressed.

Recommendations

- For SoTL Seed: We will sustain the current support model and consider a few adjustments. Namely, we will increase the effort to support instructors’ career advancement by: increasing the frequency of project lead meetings, offering professional development opportunities, and revamping the support for publication of results. We will also revise our Specialist-project matching process to give our GRAs a more active role in it.
- For future evaluation: Although our frequent interactions with project leads have provided us with useful evidence of the impact of the current support model, regular check points with project leads are necessary and useful as means of formative feedback. Our current survey proved to be lengthier than needed and some revisions will be made accordingly. We will continue to interview PIs after projects close in order to gather qualitative feedback both on the impact of SoTL in their teaching and on the support received through our program.
- For participants: SoTL offers a unique opportunity for instructors to learn and reflect about their teaching and to apply such knowledge to the benefit of students. If interested in exploring an existing idea or simply starting to think about engaging in SoTL, they should contact the SoTL Seed team. We will be glad to help them think about ways in which to engage with this fascinating field!



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Additional Information

[The SoTL Seed program webpage](#)

Evaluation resources

