

Navigating SoTL: Identity, time, and transformation in academic decision-making

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ABSTRACT

Engagement in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) remains a contested space in tertiary education. Within Human Movement Sciences (HMS) in South Africa, research tends to centre on discipline-specific inquiry, with limited engagement in pedagogical scholarship. As a newly formed Community of Practice (CoP), we set out to explore how SoTL might be integrated into our diverse academic contexts, without assuming a one-size-fits-all model. Since 2021, our group has used a Participatory Action Learning and Action Research (PALAR) design to guide collective inquiry, drawing on data from three workshops and a focus group, thematically analysed through democratic dialogue. Three interrelated themes emerged: professional identity, time to SoTL, and SoTL transformation through collaboration. These themes form a conceptual compass that academics use to navigate the complex decisions surrounding SoTL engagement. Identity and time were not fixed obstacles, but fluid constructs reshaped through CoP participation. Collaboration emerged as a powerful enabler of transformation, reducing the burden of individualised inquiry and fostering reflective, shared learning. Our findings support a flexible, context-sensitive approach to SoTL, grounded in autonomy, dialogue, and institutional responsiveness. We argue that such an approach holds promise for reimagining SoTL as an integrated, sustainable aspect of academic practice.

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Introduction

Embracing SoTL alongside discipline-specific research is a transformative practice that can empower academics to enhance their teaching efficacy and contribute to the advancement of their disciplines (Hubball & Clarke, 2010:8; Swart, Luwes, Olwagen, Greyling & Korff, 2017:664). In South Africa, and specifically within the field of HMS (and more specifically the disciplines of Sport Science, Biokinetics, Kinderkinetics, Recreation Sciences, and Coaching Sciences), traditionally, the primary focus of academic research has been on disciplinary-specific knowledge generation with less emphasis on pedagogical aspects of teaching. As Webb (2019:1) notes, this tends to be standard practice in academic fields. However, in recent years, there has been a growing recognition of the value and significance of incorporating SoTL-related research into academic pursuits as it strengthens teaching practice while creating new opportunities for research productivity and publication (Bozalek, Dison, Alperstein, & Mitchell, 2017:7; Swart et al., 2017:665). Despite this shift, SoTL remains largely underutilised within HMS departments across South African universities, where systemic and structural pressures continue to prioritise outputs linked to field-based publications and the generation of grant income. Furthermore, in the South African sector, national and institutional frameworks increasingly foreground SoTL, but studies of promotions and reward structures indicate that SoTL outputs are still inconsistently recognised and that discipline-based research remains the dominant currency in performance appraisal (Cupido, Naidoo, Chitanand & Vorster, 2023:1; Pitso, 2013:204; Subbaye, 2018:255). In response to the lack of professional development specifically focused on SoTL and the acknowledgement of the many benefits of SoTL in HMS (Kahts-Kramer, Oosthuizen, du Plessis, Schreck & Bisschoff, 2025), our initiative as HMS specialists was to form a CoP, guided by PALAR study design (Wood, 2020), to explore the addition of SoTL in our research identities. This approach facilitated a holistic and collaborative understanding of the benefits and opportunities in SoTL while helping us address barriers such as limited time and lack of institutional recognition for SoTL that we face as lecturers in higher education. Since the CoP offered us opportunities for mentorship, collaboration, and shared resources (Hubball & Clarke, 2010:9; Swart et al., 2017:665; Kim, Popovic, Farrugia, Saleh, Maheux Pelletier, & Frake-Mistak. 2020:165), it was an ideal approach to assisting novice SoTL researchers in including SoTL research into their research identities. The CoP also provided us with an opportunity to develop evidence-based teaching and learning practices, thereby enriching both SoTL and discipline-specific outputs (Haigh Gossman & Jiao., 2009:11; Draeger, 2013: 17; Bozalek et al., 2017: 8; Breen & Knudson, 2022:12).

Given the limited presence of evidence-based teaching and learning practices within South African HMS (Kahts-Kramer et al., 2024), our decision to establish a CoP emerged as a strategic response. This is particularly important because we work in a post-developed country with unique challenges including student strikes, rolling electricity blackouts due to load shedding, inadequate school systems that fail to prepare students for higher education, and unstable internet access (Chetty & Pather, 2015:1; Rapanta, Botturi, Goodyear, Guàrdia & Koole, 2021:735; Vambe & Pindura, 2022:82). These factors can impact both student readiness and lecturer capacity to manage the additional challenges alongside their normal work commitments. Given these challenges of a post-developed higher-education system like in South Africa, where there is an urgent imperative to ensure more success for more students from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds, it is important to investigate the need for academics to integrate or supplement SoTL into their discipline-specific research fields, such as HMS. It is well documented that consistently embracing SoTL represents a fundamental trait of exemplary teaching in HMS and offers benefits for both individual educators and the broader academic community (Guillory & McLaughlin, 2018:85). For example, SoTL practice aids in identifying optimal pedagogical approaches, thereby establishing a foundation for proficient classroom assessment, as highlighted by Gurung and Wilson (2013:5). Knudson and Meaney (2018:330) demonstrated that an innovative, active learning approach could effectively teach kinesiology to large classes, while transforming the class infrastructure and layout (mobile desks and tables, limited computers, overall low-tech approach) contributes to fostering a more conducive environment for active learning and so also proved beneficial. Likewise, student-centred approaches in “exercise program design” courses have improved critical thinking skills within exercise prescription contexts (Pancio, Kern, Ankam & Zhang, 2023:5). However, several researchers (Bozalek et al., 2017; Swart et al., 2017; Webb, 2019; Kim et al., 2020) emphasise that achieving proficiency as a teacher and a researcher in higher education requires unwavering commitment to SoTL principles, which can be difficult for discipline-focused academics to achieve.

Academics in discipline-specific professions often perceive SoTL as time-intensive and beyond their field-specific priorities (Swart et al., 2017:666). This perception, coupled with limited institutional incentives or recognition (Rapanta et al., 2021:730) and inadequate pedagogical training (Tierney, Aidulis, Park & Clark, 2020:33; Almond, Parson & Resor, 2021:1601), can foster resistance to SoTL. Furthermore, the pressure to meet performance-based research targets, such as publication unit outputs and National Research Foundation (NRF) ratings, tends to sideline teaching innovation unless it clearly contributes to the academic’s research focus area (NRF, 2025). Like many other lecturers, we juggle grant applications, administrative responsibilities, and heavy teaching loads.

Although NWU offers many supportive initiatives, our limited time must still be prioritised for disciplinary research, even as we acknowledge the potential value of SoTL (Bennett, Hobson, Jones, Martin-Lynch, Scutt, Strehlow & Veitch, 2016:225). The decision to adopt SoTL, therefore, remains a contentious topic, spurring the question: whether, and in what ways, might SoTL be integrated into our diverse teaching and research practices, without presupposing universal adoption?

While CoPs are well established as effective knowledge-sharing structures, their use within HMS to drive collaborative inquiry through PALAR as a research design remains unexplored (Kim et al., 2020:169). PALAR combines iterative action research cycles with reflective, participatory learning to co-create practical solutions to the challenges academics face in engaging with SoTL (Zuber-Skerritt, 2015; Wood, 2019), and Schiller, Jaffray, Ridley & Du Plessis (2021) have demonstrated its power in South African social sciences. Despite its promise, PALAR has not yet been employed as a collaborative professional development approach in HMS. By applying PALAR within a CoP, this study addresses that gap and shows how SoTL engagement can be supported in ways that remain flexible, context-sensitive, and responsive to academics' diverse identities, priorities, and time pressures. This research, therefore, responds to the urgent need for models of SoTL engagement that are both practical and adapted to the lived realities of HMS academics in South African higher education.

Methodology

Participants:

We started a CoP to achieve the goals within the School of HMS. Our CoP consisted of six lecturers from different fields of study within HMS, including Biokinetics, Sport Coaching, Kinderkinetics, and Recreation Sciences. The CoP members represented a range of academic levels, including five doctoral graduates and one Professor. Regarding race and gender, the group comprised two white males and four white females. All the participants had five to 15 years of teaching experience each. None of the participants has a formal teaching qualification; however, all participants have been awarded a faculty teaching excellence award, attesting to everyone's goal to enhance teaching and learning outcomes. The formation of our CoP took place in 2021, amidst the COVID-19 pandemic and during our university's transition back to face-to-face teaching. Initially, the last author started and facilitated the group; however, over time, the CoP evolved into an equal partnership, which is a common practice in PALAR (Zuber-Skerritt, 2015).

Limitations:

This study is not intended to produce generalisable findings, but it offers a situated example of how a small group of South African HMS academics engaged with SoTL through a CoP using a PALAR approach. Thus, though the themes may hold relevance for similar contexts, they must be read in light of the group's demographic and institutional homogeneity. The participants shared similar disciplinary backgrounds, academic ranks, and social identities, which may have shaped how they experienced time pressure, institutional culture, and relational forms of SoTL engagement. However, participation in the CoP was voluntary, and although the group was neither demographically nor geographically diverse, it reflected academic scholars who chose to engage.

Study design:

We employed the PALAR study design to guide our data collection and analysis processes (Zuber-Skerrit, 2015), as depicted in Figure 1. PALAR can be seen as a research approach combining action learning and action research principles in a participatory and collaborative manner. These principles include iterative cycles of action and reflection, a focus on practical change, and the co-construction of knowledge through participation. Within this framework, we embraced a relational ontology, which assumes that knowledge is co-created through human relationships, and a dialectic epistemology, which positions learning as emerging from cycles of dialogue, contradiction, and critical reflection. This also encompassed values such as collaboration, commitment, competence, compromise, critical attitudes, coaching, reflection, relationship, and recognition (Wood, 2020). To align with the PALAR study design, the Figure Eight Model (Wood, 2022:60), the CoP first prioritised establishing strong relationships before embarking on research initiatives. We formed an Action Learning Set (ALS), which is a collaborative group formed to address a common problem through inquiry and reflection, fostering shared experiences and learning among members (Wood, 2019).

Data collection and analysis:

During our ALS sessions, we employed the technique of democratic dialogue, drawing on the principles described by Gustavsen (1992) and Brookfield and Preskill (2016). These interactions began with open-ended questions, such as exploring the purpose and value of engaging in SoTL and how such engagement could be translated into our diverse HMS teaching contexts. Over time, our reflective inquiries became more specific as we grappled with whether we could and should

integrate SoTL alongside discipline-specific research. The PALAR process unfolded across three day-long workshops, each functioning as an iterative action-learning cycle involving collective inquiry, co-analysis, and planning. To complement these generative sessions, we held a 60–90-minute focus group as a separate methodological step. Whereas the workshops were developmental and exploratory, the focus group served as a reflective consolidation space, in which participants revisited emerging themes, articulated individual and collective perspectives, and validated the insights through member checking.

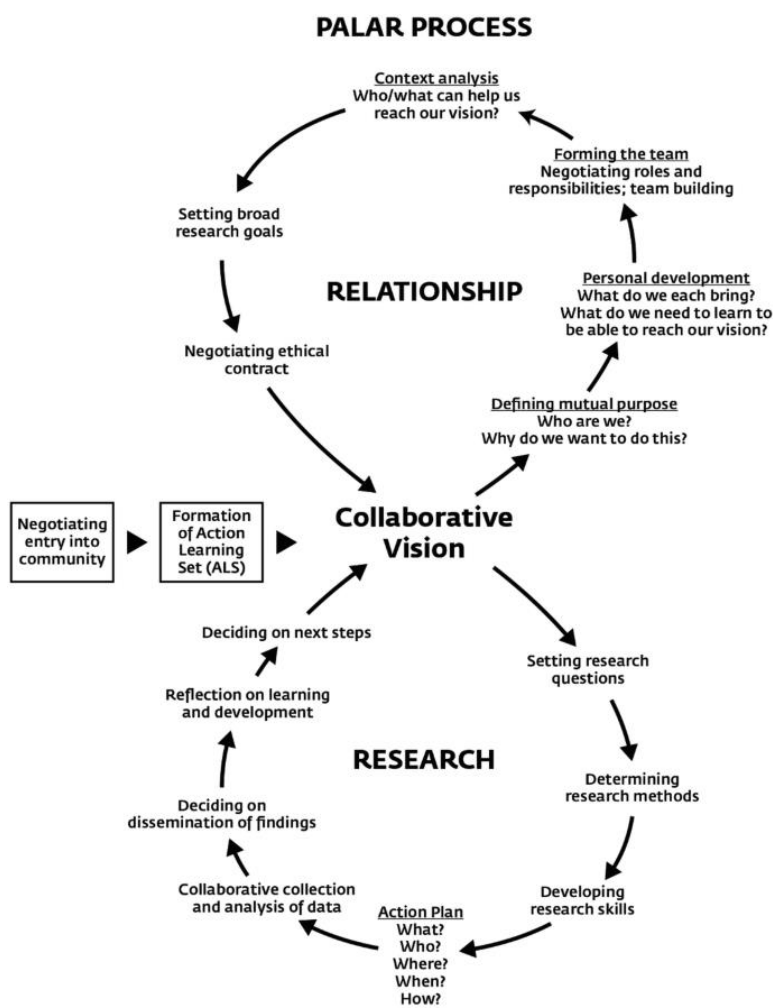


Figure 1: PALAR Figure Eight Model (Wood, 2022: 60).

We generated four sets of transcriptions from our interactions and analysed them collaboratively. Adhering to the democratic principles of the PALAR methodology (Wood, 2020), we shared the transcripts on a common platform for all members to review. Each CoP member thoroughly examined the transcripts and contributed innovative ideas and reflections as part of the collaborative thematic analysis process, grounded in our ALS discussions. Thus, to conduct a

thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021), the four transcripts were divided equally among the group members. Two CoP members independently conducted an inductive analysis (Azungah, 2020), allowing codes, categories, and themes to emerge without preconceived notions. Subsequently, they held a consensus meeting to finalise their analysis. The findings were then shared with the ALS for member checking and critical reflection. Next, two CoP members reanalysed the data deductively (Azungah, 2020) in relation to the PALAR guiding question, which asked how we might integrate SoTL alongside discipline-specific research in HMS. The findings were presented to the ALS, leading to further member checking and critical reflection. We engaged in iterative discussions of the data until data saturation was achieved and no more themes and categories could be identified (Saunders, Sim, Kingstone, Baker, Waterfield, Bartlam et al., 2018).

Finally, we applied the validity criteria of PALAR—outcome, process, catalytic, and democratic validity (Herr & Anderson, 2014)—not as a separate evaluative stage, but as principles embedded throughout the PALAR process. These forms of validity are reflected in our findings through examples of changed teaching practice (outcome validity), iterative and participatory analysis (process validity), shifts in identity and perspective (catalytic validity), and collaborative meaning-making within the CoP (democratic validity). Furthermore, while we discuss relationality primarily in terms of collegial collaboration and shared inquiry, we also recognise that relationality has deeper resonance within Global South scholarship, where it reflects the interconnectedness of people, knowledge and context, and serves as a counterpoint to individualistic academic cultures.

Ethics:

The research project obtained ethical approval from the University Health Research Ethics Review Committee before beginning data collection within the CoP (NWU-00028-22-A1). The study followed the participatory ethical conduct principles as outlined by Wood and Kahts-Kramer (2023).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In our discussions, three themes emerged (see Figure 2), which will be discussed next.

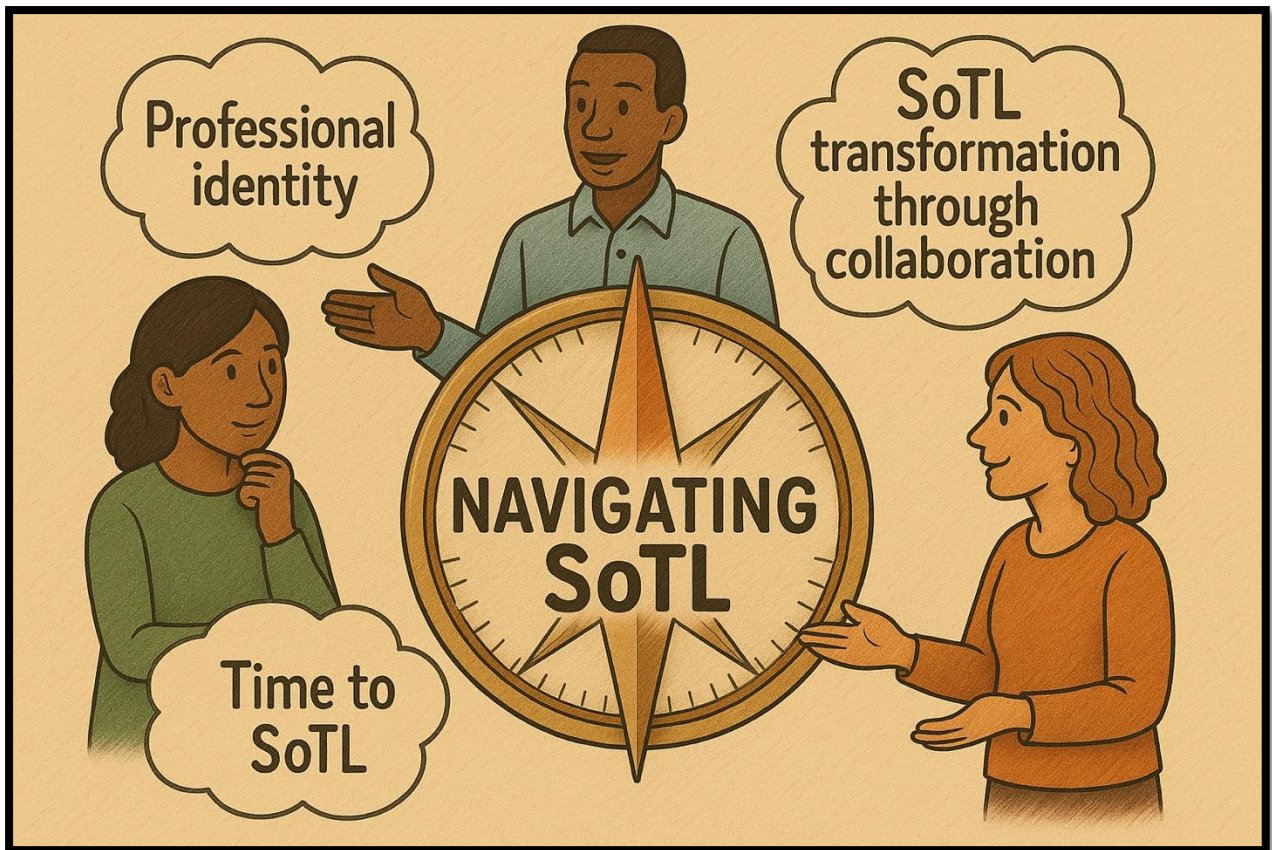


Figure 2: The compass of the decision-making to SoTL (Figure created using AI tools, ChatGPT by Open AI 2025 with Human input and direction)

Figure 2 uses the metaphor of a compass to illustrate the decision-making landscape that shapes academic engagement with SoTL. At its centre lies the act of navigating SoTL intentionally, guided by three interrelated themes: *professional identity*, *time to SoTL*, and *SoTL transformation through collaboration*. Each directional point reflects a critical influence on the choices academics in general make about whether, when, and how to engage with SoTL. The individuals surrounding the compass symbolise ongoing peer dialogue and reflection, where identity, time constraints, and collaborative energy are actively negotiated. Rather than linear or isolated, these elements interact dynamically and often simultaneously, shaping each academic's unique trajectory. Together, these themes represent a complex but navigable process of SoTL engagement, further unpacked in the discussion that follows through voices from the ALS and relevant literature.

Theme 1: Professional identity

This theme explores the varying degrees of engagement academics have with SoTL, foregrounding the fluid and negotiated nature of professional identity as it intersects with institutional

expectations, career advancement, and personal research interests. In higher education research, professional identity refers to how academics see themselves in relation to their roles, values, and scholarly practices (Billot, 2010:712). As Simmons, Abrahamson, Deshler, KensingtonMiller, Manarin, MoronGarcia et al. (2013:9) and Mathany, Clow and ASpenlieder (2017:1) note, academic identity is often challenged in this process of engaging with SoTL, with scholars “anxiously mov[ing] between perceptions of identity as disciplinary researchers and SoTL researchers.” However, identity is not fixed. As Miller-Young and Chick (2024) argue, academic identity can evolve as scholars gain confidence and experience with SoTL. This theoretical framing is reflected in our findings, which show that SoTL is integrated in flexible ways across a spectrum of engagement, ranging from a strong focus on discipline-specific research, to full commitment to SoTL, and in some cases, a deliberate attempt to blend the two. These variations are shaped by the academic’s identity and by structural forces—such as performance appraisals, promotion criteria, and the NRF’s focus on narrow research specialities—which together influence how academics position their SoTL work relative to their disciplinary and institutional roles. Such institutional constraints often narrow the perceived viability of SoTL as a core research trajectory. As Participant 6 explains, the requirements of her performance agreement are what direct her decision-making:

"I do agree that if you are a lecturer, you have to SoTL sometime in your academic career. However, I do not feel that you need to be a PI [Principal Investigator] in a SoTL project to do SoTL research. My opinion, I will not become a PI in any SoTL project. I cannot really take my eye off the ball for my next performance or evaluation in five years. So, I cannot all of a sudden change to only SoTL research and to be PI in both, it is not going to work."
(P6)

This view underscores a pragmatic orientation to SoTL: it is acknowledged as important but not pursued as a primary research trajectory. As Webb (2019:11) suggests, academics often experience internal tension when trying to reconcile their professional aspirations for recognition in their discipline with a desire to make meaningful contributions to teaching and learning. Participant 6’s response illustrates this tension as a strategic form of boundary maintenance, where engagement with SoTL is limited to protect disciplinary advancement. In this context, boundary maintenance refers to the deliberate preservation of one’s disciplinary identity and scholarly territory by prioritising research activities that are institutionally rewarded or aligned with established expertise (Billot, 2010:719). By keeping SoTL at the margins of their academic work, participants safeguard their credibility, productivity, and career progression within disciplinary structures that tend to value specialised research over pedagogical inquiry.

In contrast to Participant 6's strategic decision to limit SoTL engagement to prioritise disciplinary advancement, other participants expressed a strong inclination to position SoTL as a central part of their research identity. Participant 1 shared: "I think I am at exactly the opposite point where P6 is. I want to do SoTL... I see that it is where my research career is going; it is more specific in teaching and learning, overall research." (P1). In this comment, Participant 1 indicates that their scholarly direction is increasingly orientated toward teaching-and-learning inquiry, with SoTL offering a clearer and more meaningful trajectory than discipline-focused research alone.

This perspective illustrates a shift in scholarly identity, with SoTL becoming a core area of inquiry rather than an auxiliary interest. Participant 3 offered a nuanced approach to integrating both teaching and disciplinary focus:

"I am very passionate about teaching and learning, but I want to bring it back to my discipline and so, if I can find ways to merge the two, that will be my future focus... I feel I want to hone in my skills as a Biokineticist within the areas that I work. For now that would be work integrated learning, service learning, or it would be running a clinical project and having students experience that process as part of their learning." (P3)

Participant 3's reflection demonstrates the potential for disciplinary SoTL, where inquiry into teaching is situated within a specific professional or scientific context, such as Biokinetics. The views shared by Participants 1, 3, and 6 echo Billot, Rowland, Carnell, Amundsen and Evans (2017), who highlight that for many academics, SoTL offers personal fulfilment and the opportunity to directly improve teaching practice and student learning, but that these outcomes are achieved in different ways. Taken together, these examples reveal that identity work around SoTL is not merely personal but deeply shaped by institutional culture, recognition systems, and discipline-specific norms.

This range of perspectives in how to incorporate SoTL into one's research identity also reflects the broader structural and cultural realities within the South African higher education system, where academic staff are expected to contribute to not only focused discipline-specific research, but also teaching, and community engagement. Introducing SoTL into this already multifaceted professional role requires academics to make intentional, often strategic choices. The findings suggest that there are different ways of integrating SoTL into an academic's research practice. It can be seen as competing with discipline-specific research or as complementary, depending on how an academic frames their professional identity in relation to institutional expectations. In each case, academics should be exposed to some form of SoTL research, as it is often the case that exposure leads to participation (Karcher, Koltes, Robinson, Zuidhof, Grenwich & Applegate, 2023).

Theme 2: Time to SoTL

Regardless of the strategy chosen to integrate SoTL into one's research identity, time constraints shape academics' engagement, often serving as a significant barrier to sustained involvement. Time, in this context, is not a singular challenge but a multidimensional one, comprising the finite hours in a day, the timing of research within career trajectories, and the temporal demands of particular methodological choices.

Within the ALS's focus group sessions, this multidimensionality was reflected in how participants described their relationship to SoTL. One ALS member noted, "I know what I am doing is actually SoTL, but I do not write it up" (P6). This highlights a common challenge in higher education; while academics often engage with SoTL principles informally through reflective teaching practices or curriculum innovation, there is often insufficient time to document and disseminate this work as formal SoTL research. Other ALS participants echoed this tension, describing a shared struggle to balance SoTL with discipline-specific research, teaching responsibilities, and institutional demands. Time management challenges, particularly related to workload and career stage, emerged as a recurring tension influencing how SoTL is prioritised or sidelined within the academic lives of the members of the CoP/ALS members. Participant 4 articulates the reality of finite time and the necessity of prioritisation:

"Time management for both of these are the same. So, whether you are going to do SoTL research or discipline-specific research, it is going to take the same effort and that is why I agree with you, you need to decide which one is going to be your main focus." (P4)

This reflection fronts the notion that pursuing both types of research with equal drive may be unsustainable from a time management perspective. This struggle to integrate SoTL into a coherent academic trajectory is echoed by Participant 7, who warned of the negative consequences of a divided research focus: "If you have a split focus, it can obviously deter you to do something as good as you want to, and I think that will be the problem, is to manage your time efficiently" (P7). Here, SoTL is not rejected outright, but perceived as competing with disciplinary research productivity, especially when institutional structures reward the latter. The ALS agreed that each individual had to reflect on their academic identity and priorities and make a decision regarding how they would manage their time.

Another factor affecting the perception of “not having time for SoTL” was the chosen study design, namely PALAR. Participant 5 shared a sense of fatigue with the PALAR study design, hinting at the need for an alternative approach, given the time required:

"I would engage in such a project again, but as someone who has been involved in SoTL for a year or two now, I feel I've reached my limit with this approach [PALAR research design] and need to reevaluate how I would proceed [with an alternative study design]. If you have the time for it [PALAR], that's great. But personally, at this point in my career, I don't think I would take this on alone." (P5)

The study design challenge was further compounded by the labour-intensive nature of qualitative research, especially since most of the ALS members were quantitative researchers:

"From my understanding, SoTL involvement requires a great deal of qualitative research... it takes a lot of time if you have a high teaching load, other supervision and especially teaching a practical module... I could not continue with SoTL research." (P2)

These perspectives suggest that the burden of SoTL may not be intrinsic to the work itself but linked to disciplinary norms and lack of familiarity with the many potential methodologies that can be used in SoTL research. At this point, it was important for the ALS to understand that PALAR was an appropriate study design for the CoP but was not a universal study design for all SoTL research. We discussed this perception and less intensive methodologies such as questionnaire-based surveys, observing learning analytics, personal narratives, and mixed method approaches (How, 2020:17–18). Furthermore, Laidlaw and Din (2020:9) identify multiple SoTL engagements, including peer-reviewed dialogue, cross-disciplinary insights, and ongoing professional growth, each of which could be researched.

Rather than abandoning SoTL due to time pressure, the ALS explored alternative designs that maintained rigour without overextending capacity. This reframing allowed SoTL to re-enter the professional identity conversation not as a burden, but as a flexible option.

In addition to the constraints inherent in a 24-day period, another aspect to consider is the timing of the academic workload cycles. Within higher education, academic staff experience alternating periods of intense teaching, administration, and research obligations, followed by quieter intervals that allow for reflection and planning. In this PALAR-based study, the group convened approximately every three to six months, which aligned naturally with these workload fluctuations. This rhythm not only respected the participants' capacity constraints but also enhanced the action learning process (Farrel, Buydens, Bourgeoislaw & Regehr, 2021:84). The spacing provided participants with sufficient

time to implement ideas, observe outcomes in their teaching practice, and reflect meaningfully before the next session.

We argue that this rhythm of engagement, in line with academic calendars, offers a sustainable model for SoTL integration. Participatory action learning structures such as PALAR, when synchronised with workload cycles, can foster deeper experiential learning and sustained involvement without overburdening participants already navigating demanding academic calendars (Powell, Dawson, Topakas, Durose & Fewtrell, 2014:83).

Theme 3: SoTL transformation through collaboration

Collaborative engagement within a CoP repositions SoTL as a shared, transformative endeavour rather than a solitary academic responsibility. Providing opportunities to explore one's academic identity, the time dedicated to SoTL and the timing of when it takes place can be positively influenced by sharing stories of SoTL success. This theme highlights how participating in a CoP focused on SoTL can reshape how academics conceptualise its role within their professional lives.

What kept the ALS engaged, regardless of their varying academic identities and time constraints, was the recognition that SoTL is more than a research activity; it also functions as a reflective, developmental, and collaborative practice. Collaboration eased the emotional and logistical burden often associated with SoTL and created a sense of collective ownership. As one participant reflected: "SoTL was up until now, you're 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."

As shared in du Plessis, Schreck, Bisschoff, Coetzee, Kahts-Kramer and Oosthuizen (2025:10), this statement underscores the transformative impact of CoP support, which in this study was grounded in PALAR as a research design. ALS sessions were described as deeply personal and developmental. The PALAR approach, while time-consuming and iterative, helped participants reimagine not only their academic identities but also their approaches to pedagogy, curriculum, and the broader student experience. These outcomes are consistent with Wood's (2019) argument that PALAR fosters deep reflection and critical engagement, although they also raise questions about the feasibility of such models in fast-paced or metric-driven academic environments. Participant 3 affirmed the value of peer learning: "I do not like working alone, I learn more from others... I am a team player."

The CoP served as a scaffold for SoTL engagement, lowering the threshold for entry and offering both intellectual stimulation and emotional support. As Participant 1 explained: “One of the big keys is to actually be involved in a group... divide the functions and the work... rather than try and do it on your own.” These reflections suggest that collaborative models not only reduce the perceived burden of SoTL but also build capacity for sustained engagement. They challenge institutional norms that frame academic research as competitive and individualistic, revealing the value of relational and distributed approaches to scholarly inquiry and giving scholars the opportunity to share their approaches with the international academic fraternity (Marongwe & Chisango, 2022:159).

Importantly, while this theme centres on the collaborative nature of transformation, elements of transformative thinking were also present in other areas of the study. As illustrated in Theme 1, shifts in academic identity emerged as participants reflected on how to integrate SoTL within their research practice. In Theme 2, participants began to reconceptualise time, not only as a constraint but as something to be negotiated and restructured through alternative methodologies or workload rhythms. Together, these insights point to SoTL’s broader potential to prompt reflective change across multiple dimensions of academic life.

This collaborative preference signals the need to institutionalise supportive structures, including SoTL communities, mentorship networks, and co-authorship models that can legitimise and sustain this form of engagement. In this light, the CoP not only negotiated limited time but also redefined it. In resisting linear and output-driven academic rhythms, participants enacted a cyclical, collaborative temporality aligned with PALAR. This constitutes a form of “speaking back” to institution-based time regimes by repositioning time as shared, reflective, and pedagogical.

In conclusion, the narratives in this theme suggest that academics are motivated not only by institutional incentives but also by a genuine desire to better understand student learning and improve their own teaching practices. The reason they stay in a CoP, despite time pressures and identity tensions, is the transformative potential it offers. In this way, SoTL becomes a bridge between professional development, teaching innovation, and scholarly inquiry. It affirms that success in teaching is increasingly recognised not only through student outcomes but through the educator’s commitment to reflective practice, collaboration and contribution to a collective knowledge base.

Conclusion

This SoTL-focused PALAR study highlights the complex, evolving nature of academic engagement with SoTL, revealing both persistent barriers and meaningful shifts in thinking. While structural constraints such as institutional reward systems, disciplinary expectations, and time scarcity shape how SoTL is initially approached, our findings illustrate that these barriers are not fixed. Through ongoing cycles of reflection, dialogue, and co-inquiry within the CoP, participants began to reframe their relationship with SoTL, gradually moving from hesitation or resistance toward curiosity, integration, and in some cases, commitment.

Consistent with the framework of Haigh, Gossman and Jiao (2010:18), participants navigated push factors like performance demands and promotion systems, and pull factors, including impact on students and collegial support. However, the PALAR process itself served as a critical catalyst for transformation. It allowed participants to interrogate assumptions about identity, time, and methodology, and to reimagine SoTL not as a competing priority but as a reflective and relational practice embedded in their academic work.

Across all three themes, transformation emerged not in sweeping declarations but in small, intentional shifts. These included reframing time as negotiable rather than a constraint, reconsidering identity as flexible rather than fixed, and reevaluating collaboration as a source of both practical support and professional renewal. The compass metaphor used in our visual framework aptly captures this journey. Academics do not follow a single path but navigate ongoing decisions about direction, values, and purpose.

Our findings confirm that SoTL engagement is deeply rooted in the realities of South African higher education, where academics must balance multiple roles and pressures. Yet, it also shows that with the right structures such as dialogue-rich spaces, supportive peers, and flexible, context-sensitive methodologies, SoTL can be repositioned as a meaningful, sustainable form of scholarly inquiry. Rather than prescribing universal participation in SoTL, we advocate for a career-aligned and methodologically diverse approach to fostering SoTL cultures. Such an approach honours both the constraints academics face and the transformative possibilities that emerge when those constraints are explored collaboratively. In this way, SoTL holds not only the potential to improve teaching and learning but also to renew academic identity, relationships, and purpose.

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