Continual appraisal of and reflection on our pedagogical approaches is imperative to ensure that our teaching strategies are successful, and enhance the learning experience of our students. It is often deeply informative when we gauge the success of such strategies through systematic investigation; an approach commonly referred to under the umbrella term of Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL)(1). SoTL can often provide transformations in higher education as educators work at the intersection between pedagogical and disciplinary work and are able to address teaching challenges by viewing them as opportunities to evolve disciplinary work required of their students and gather evidence on their effectiveness (2), (3). Engaging in SoTL studies equips us with the knowledge and skills needed to transform our research ideas into concrete research questions and hypotheses. Exploring these questions and hypotheses in well-designed SoTL studies could positively impact our classrooms. As university educators, we believe we have an obligation to both model inquiry, and ground our scholarship in published research findings. Hence, engaging in SoTL is in our opinion, a sine qua non of our academic roles. Although there is no shortage of excellent research ideas among teaching stream instructors at UTSC, we identify two significant barriers to SoTL:

1. Hesitation to conduct studies due to a lack of familiarity with education-research approaches (given that disciplinary training rarely intersects with these methods in most disciplines).

2. Lack of an on-campus community that could provide peer support, dedicated space and time, and opportunities to receive feedback on research design (based on best practices in education or peer instructor experiences).

This proposal outlines a plan to address these barriers by bringing together instructors across disciplines that are interested in SoTL work as a pilot CoaCH-SoTL cohort. It is our goal to promote collaboration among instructors with SoTL research interests, while providing structured time and space for peer mentoring. In addition, we seek to draw on the expertise of educational research scholars at OISE (or other departments), who are familiar with the published literature and research methods, and who could provide one-on-one guidance or group consultations at regularly scheduled meetings. Importantly, this moves away from the extant models of SoTL that are often discipline-limited, solitary experiences for faculty. Dr. Carol Rollheiser, Director of CTSI, has generously offered the support of her office in identifying and connecting the group with peer-mentors with specific expertise, as needed (personal communication, Nov 23rd, 2018). We draw inspiration for the proposed group work from successful, larger scale collaborative SoTL models such as the Conceive-Design-Implement-Operate (CDIO) initiative across universities and countries that collaboratively re-designed the undergraduate engineering curriculum (4), (5). Finally, we hope that CoaCH-SoTL will provide another means by which the teaching expertise of our faculty in pedagogical design are made more public.

If funded, the first task of the pilot CoaCH-SoTL group would be to identify research themes of common interest. Some sample themes could include the study of the impact of active learning strategies, experiential learning and research assignments, or to examine the effectiveness of creative classroom experience tools. We envision that the SoTL approach can be enacted collaboratively, with a joint approach to hypothesis inception, study design, data collection and analysis as has been recommended in the literature as enquiries that help us “learn about learning”(6). Setting specific goals for the group as well as delineating the structure and scope of group
meetings would then be logical next steps. With the guidance of peer-mentors, we would then proceed to survey the literature and collaborate on the various individual components of the project. Our hope is that the mentors would provide support throughout the process, but that the group members are able to engage sufficiently with the literature and methodology, that they feel confident running similar projects independently in the future. The result of this project would be an example of interdisciplinary SoTL collaboration and would undoubtedly foster a stronger community of teaching and learning researchers at UTSC. Figure 1 provides a detailed timeline for the CoaCH-SoTL pilot. We want to underscore the alignment of this proposal with literature that suggest that a framework for SoTL must consider the context of institutional commitment (explicit support for SoTL work) and a “microculture” among faculty who communicate and collaborate on SoTL projects. The CoaCH-SoTL model advocates for institutional support for grassroots peer-mentorship and SoTL leadership as a part of faculty development (7).

Figure 1: Project Time Line
We anticipate that there are two levels of work that we could report on at the conclusion of this pilot year:

1. A process focused report that describes the CoaCH-SoTL model, which if successful, could serve as an example for colleagues at other campuses and institutions that wish to promote collaboration in SoTL (8).

2. The results generated from the SoTL research project undertaken by the CoaCH-SoTL pilot group.

We would plan to disseminate our early results locally at the CTL Teaching and Faculty Showcase and the CTSI Annual Teaching and Learning Symposium. The Society of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (STLHE) would provide a national forum in which to share both the CoaCH-SoTL model as well as our group’s research outcomes, with other educators.

While we hope to work towards building a large community of collaborative SoTL work on campus, we believe that this can only be possible if we first implement a pilot that includes a few colleagues who have expressed considerable interest in this type of consortium. The appendix submitted with this proposal lists direct quotes from peers who were asked to comment on the potential peer-mentorship and collaborative value of CoaCH –SoTL.

References:


