

Chapter 8

Strengthening Program– Level Learning Through Multidisciplinary SoTL: Insights From Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores how informal academic interactions can drive advancements in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) through interdisciplinary collaboration. My experiences at a Malaysian university showed that casual conversations with Dr. Jamal, head of the computer science department, inspired a SoTL project on capstone challenges. We examined the difficulties students faced in applying theory to practice. Our qualitative study revealed issues like insufficient orientation, unclear mentor roles, and a mismatch between student skills and project demands. These findings informed recommendations to enhance student support, refine project selection, and foster interdisciplinary learning. The chapter highlights SoTL's role in promoting professional growth through reflection and collaboration. It also suggests expanding this program-level, multidisciplinary SoTL approach institutionally, advocating for faculty-student partnerships that drive innovation and improve teaching practices.

INTRODUCTION

The intersection of academia and leisure activities often yields unexpected benefits, particularly in fostering interdisciplinary collaboration. This phenomenon is exemplified by my personal experiences at a prominent Malaysian public university between 2004 and 2020. While golf is not typically a topic of discussion in academic discourses, especially in the context of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), it was precisely on the golf course that my SoTL journey took shape.

I commenced my tenure as an educational leadership faculty at a large Malaysian public university in 2004, where I remained until 2020. My affiliation was with the School of Education and Modern Languages within the College of Arts and Sciences. This institution, ranking among Malaysia's top

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five universities, boasts a student population exceeding 30,000 and offers diverse academic programs, including various disciplines in education, business, economics, psychology, and computer science. The university's expansive green campus is nestled between lush mountains on two sides and enveloped by dense vegetation on the remaining two. A picturesque mountain river meandering through the campus further enhances its natural allure.

A distinctive feature of this university's campus is its 18-hole golf course, which serves as more than just a recreational facility. This amenity became a central hub for leisure and informal professional networking for many faculty members, including myself. The university's remote location further amplified the significance of these golfing sessions. The golf course emerged as a vital space for cross-departmental mingling in an environment where opportunities for diverse social interactions might otherwise be limited. This setting provided a relaxed atmosphere conducive to informal discussions, idea exchanges, and forming professional relationships that might not have occurred within the more structured confines of academic departments. The conversations initiated on the fairways and greens often led to the conception and development of interdisciplinary collaborative projects. This organic process of idea generation and project formation demonstrates the potential for informal settings to contribute significantly to academic innovation and the cross-pollination of ideas. My first significant SoTL experience resulted from an informal conversation on the golf course.

Among the diverse faculty members with whom I engaged in golf, a select few became regular playing partners. One such individual was the head of the computer science department, whom I shall refer to as Dr. Jamal. A respected figure in the university for over a decade, Dr. Jamal was admired by colleagues and friends alike for his scholarly achievements and affable demeanor. On a particularly sweltering afternoon, as our golf balls seemed more attracted to the bushes than the fairways, our conversation drifted toward the challenges Dr. Jamal was facing in his department. As he elaborated on these issues, he pondered aloud whether my expertise in education might offer some insights into potential solutions. Recognizing the potential for a fruitful discussion, I suggested we conclude our game and continue our conversation over coffee at the clubhouse, a proposal Dr. Jamal eagerly accepted.

Dr. Jamal explained that the final year project at his department serves as a capstone experience for students pursuing a Bachelor of Science (Hons) degree in Information Technology. This project is designed to be a culminating academic endeavor to prepare students for their professional careers by synthesizing the knowledge and skills acquired throughout their undergraduate studies. The capstone project's significance lies in its potential to bridge the gap between academic learning and real-world application, providing students with a comprehensive understanding of their field and the challenges they may face in their future professional roles.

The capstone project is structured as two sequential courses. The first course is predominantly theoretical, focusing on the initial documentation and planning phases. Students define technical requirements, laying the groundwork for the subsequent development phase. The second course emphasizes the practical implementation of the proposed project, requiring students to translate their theoretical plans into tangible outcomes. These projects are provided mainly by industry, are real projects, and serve as a potential recruitment exercise for companies that need young IT professionals with the desired technical expertise.

A concerning trend has emerged over several semesters: students excel in the theoretical phase but consistently underperform in the practical implementation. Recruiters providing capstone projects frequently report that students lack readiness to execute their proposals. This discrepancy reveals a significant gap between students' theoretical knowledge and their ability to apply it in complex, real-world scenarios. The pattern suggests that while the degree program successfully imparts theoretical concepts,

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