

# An OT and PT Explore SoTL: Our Journey Towards Strengthening, Expanding, and Scaffolding Anti-Oppressive Pedagogy in a School of Rehabilitation Science

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Résumé de l'article

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## **An OT and PT Explore SoTL: Our Journey Towards Strengthening, Expanding, and Scaffolding Anti-Oppressive Pedagogy in a School of Rehabilitation Science**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Physical therapy (PT) students and graduates in Saskatchewan, Canada, are entering a health system requiring enhanced cultural humility, social justice, self-decolonization, and anti-oppressive practice skills. In this reflective essay, we describe our exploration of the complexities of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), which provide insight into our current and evolving teaching and learning practices in a Master of Physical Therapy (MPT) academic program. Applying SoTL to our MPT pedagogy provides a rigorous, evidence-informed research approach impacting social-justice learning outcomes among PT learners, but we emphasize that it is more than the outcomes that give SoTL its strength. SoTL is also a process that strengthens relationships, builds a culture of collective leadership grounded in relational accountability and humility, lays the foundation for equitable engagement with students as partners, requires reflection and introspection, and could arguably itself be considered a social justice intervention.

*Keywords:* anti-oppression pedagogy, cultural humility, physical therapy education, students as partners, action-oriented

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Health inequities disproportionately impact Indigenous populations in Saskatchewan, as in Canada as a whole, and are directly linked to a complex constellation of factors including systemic racism, colonization, and discriminatory health care policies and processes (Crowshoe et al., 2018; Czyzewski, 2011; Jacklin et al., 2017). These system-level factors unjustly and persistently oppress Black, Indigenous, and people of colour (BIPOC), creating unsafe health care contexts that normalize racist behaviours among health care providers (El-Mowafi et al., 2021; Naem et al., 2023). Health care researchers, clinicians, and educators must take action to dismantle the colonized structures and behaviours that perpetuate harms and health inequities among BIPOC populations accessing health care. We have a responsibility to prepare future health care providers to engage in self-decolonization, to build awareness of the impacts of colonized thinking/practice, and to dismantle problematic beliefs and values that are driven by mainstream colonized societal norms (Chick, 2022; De Weger et al., 2018; Hardy et al., 2023; Jones et al., 2024; Kreber, 2013; Physiotherapy Education Accreditation Canada [PEAC], 2020; Zinga & Styres, 2019). In turn, we can work towards building and growing a collective of health care practitioners trained in anti-racism and anti-oppression, who are committed to redressing racism, narrowing health disparities, and improving health equity among all people and populations, now and in the future.

Transformative, systemic change is never simple. It takes tremendous amounts of time and patience, is often interdisciplinary, and requires a collective and relational approach that engages diverse individuals, including those who work within the health system and those who access it. Literature suggests that a good place to start dismantling colonized practices, processes, and policies is in higher education, specifically within training programs for health care professionals (Durham Walker et al., 2023; N. H. Nguyen et al., 2020; PEAC, 2020; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada [TRC], 2015). Therefore, as physical therapy educators working in the Master of Physical Therapy (MPT) program at the University of Saskatchewan (USask) School of Rehabilitation Science (SRS), we are committed to creating anti-oppressive pedagogy (AOP)<sup>1</sup> and curricular pathways supporting enhanced cultural humility, anti-racism, decolonization, and social justice skills among MPT learners. Over the past decade, several USask MPT educators have developed and integrated social justice and health equity topics within courses focusing on professional practice. For the purposes of this paper, we define AOP as a teaching and learning approach that actively challenges and aspires to dismantle diverse forms of oppression, including racism, sexism, ableism, and colonialism, within educational contexts. It involves continuous critical self-reflection, lifelong learning, and the implementation of individual and collective-

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<sup>1</sup> For clarity, this paper will use the term anti-oppressive pedagogy (AOP) to encompass related concepts such as anti-racism, decolonization, social justice, cultural humility, and equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI). This unified terminology aims to simplify discussions and enhance collaboration in curriculum design by capturing critical learning objectives that challenge systemic forms of oppression (Smith et al., 2024).

level strategies that promote equity and social justice (Loyola University Chicago Faculty Center for Ignatian Pedagogy, n.d.; Smith et al., 2024).

Although we have integrated AOP principles throughout our professional practice courses, we recognize this content must be meaningfully interwoven throughout more courses across the entirety of the two-year MPT program. It is time for us (co-authors Sarah and Carrie) to engage in a rigorous, evidence-informed, research process that builds on what we are already doing, integrates rigorous pedagogy practices from academic literature, and invites input from the MPT collective, including students, faculty, and instructors. We are curious to learn if the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) model will support our commitment to expanding AOP across the USask MPT, thus equipping the next generation of physical therapists with anti-oppressive professional practice skills essential to redressing systemic racism and narrowing health inequities. This essay summarizes our experiences, curiosities, reflections, and observations as we took a leap into exploring the depths of what SoTL might offer on our quest to decolonize MPT curriculum at USask.

This essay focuses on our early experiences with SoTL as we sought the most relevant and meaningful research approach to drive our current and evolving teaching and learning practices, with a focus on social justice, cultural humility, anti-racism, and anti-oppression. Our intent is to share a reflection of why we feel SoTL is an ideal approach for engaging in research unique to decolonizing physical therapy curriculum. Further, we will highlight what we believe are the key elements of SoTL that naturally, by its design, lay a strong foundation for an anti-oppressive approach to sustainable teaching and learning research and practice.

## **SITUATING OUR RESEARCH: RELATIONSHIPS, RECIPROCITY, RECOGNITION, AND THE LAND**

We want to thank, recognize, and acknowledge the many Indigenous knowledge keepers, cultural advisors, colleagues, teachers, mentors, thought leaders, and guides<sup>2</sup> with whom we have long-standing relationships, and who continually bring their generosity, kindness, respect, lived experience, passion for equitable change, and cultural knowledge into our conversations, community-engaged research activities, and teaching/learning spaces. We want to acknowledge the tremendous responsibility each of these individuals take on, bringing unique Cree, Saulteaux, Dënë, and Métis knowledge—passed down from previous generations—to shape and guide our thinking and actions within our collaborative projects, across diverse homelands, territories, and treaties (Treaty 4, Treaty 6, and Treaty 10).

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<sup>2</sup> Thank you to Marie Favel, Liz Durocher, Louise Halfe, Leah Dorion, Val Arnault-Pelletier, Gilbert Kewistep, Judy Pelly, Margaret Laroque, Dënë Cheecham-Uhrich, Veronica McKinney (and others) for your continual support and patience guiding me (Sarah), and now Carrie, as we strengthen our relationships and come together in good ways to mobilize change in the spirit of reconciliation. Much gratitude. Marssi, megwitch, marsi cho, merci, thank you.

Reciprocity, the act of giving back or exchanging—in this case knowledge—often for mutual benefit, has always been foundational to the Indigenous teachings I (Sarah) have received over time. The process of engaging in Indigenous-driven community-based participatory action research (CBPAR), grounded in the Five Rs—respect, relevance, responsibility, reciprocity, and relationship (Harris & Wasilewski, 2004; Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991; Styre & Zinga, 2013; Tessaro et al., 2018; University of British Columbia, n.d.)—has been critical for my own reflective practice, learning, and professional development as a non-Indigenous, settler woman. I have a tremendous sense of responsibility to share these experiences, reflections, and insights within my role as an equity-driven and justice-oriented educator and clinician. It is important I apply an engaged scholar approach so my experiences and knowledge as a researcher also benefits the learners I interact with and mentor, and reciprocally that I also learn and benefit from the learners' experience and knowledge. As I engage in anti-oppressive practices and actively commit to lifelong learning and a practice of critical self-reflection that is grounded in cultural humility, it is imperative to give back through leadership, advocacy, and respectful mentorship and call in others with whom I reciprocally learn and work. Collaborating with and mentoring my co-author Carrie is one example of this.

We also acknowledge the traditional Indigenous territories (treaty lands, unceded lands, and Métis homelands) on which we live, work, teach, and learn. We are writing this essay on Treaty 6 territory—Métis homelands and the traditional lands of the Cree, Dëñë, Dakota, and Saukteaux people—where the University of Saskatchewan is located. We affirm our commitment to respectful relationships with one another, and the lands, waters, and skies that nurture us all.

## **POSITIONING WHO WE ARE**

It is important that we not only describe and acknowledge the location of our collaborative research and pedagogy experiences, but also that we situate ourselves in relationship to the places and people we are interconnected with, including relationship to one another as Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. The social justice pedagogy research we are involved in is grounded in relationship and relational accountability with all Indigenous and non-Indigenous people with whom we collaborate, learn, and engage daily. In the spirit of understanding who we are as co-authors, the impacts of our ancestors' actions, and how we position ourselves within the context of social justice pedagogy in the MPT program, we offer these introductions.

### ***Sarah***

I am a first-generation Canadian settler with mixed ethnicity bridging two families from distinctively different cultures and parts of the world. My dad comes from a Muslim family who are originally from India and settled on the tropical island of Mauritius, where my dad grew up. My dad speaks English, French, Creole, and Urdu. My mom is from a Welsh coal-mining family, originally from South Wales where most of our family still resides. My parents emigrated to Canada in 1970. I was born and raised on Treaty 6 territory—lands of the Saulteaux, Cree, Dënë, Dakota and the homeland of the Métis—in a small town just east of Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. I identify as a bi-racial (East Asian-Mauritian and Welsh), cis-gender woman, who is white-presenting. I identify as a mother (of two teenagers), a partner, a daughter, a daughter-in-law, a sister, an aunt, a grateful friend to many, a physical therapist, a co-liberator, and an Indigenous health intervention researcher passionate about AOP. I am committed to standing up with and for the rights of all peoples and humanity, as well as creating opportunities for respectful and courageous conversations with diverse individuals to grow a collective community of co-liberators and change-makers in ways that are respectful, meaningful, relevant, accountable, and responsible. It is important for me to note that I have been, and continue to be, a learner, an active co-liberator, and a culturally humble practitioner, who is always seeking to better understand (and act to dismantle) my own privilege and role in the systemic power hierarchy that perpetuates racism, discrimination, and oppression in our profession, institutions, and broader society. These are lifelong commitments and, as Zinga and Styres (2019) note, instructors must engage in their own process of critical self-reflection, un-learning, and re-learning to navigate the complexities of meaningfully supporting learners through their own pathway towards decolonization/anti-oppression. I thoughtfully bring forward my own critical perspectives, thoughts, and values that have evolved over the past 17 years as I have been actively engaging in Indigenous-driven CBPAR health promotion intervention research. I want to emphasize that I could not do this work without maintaining respectful relationships with Indigenous knowledge keepers, cultural advisors, colleagues, teachers, mentors, thought leaders, and guides. This relational approach to this work is essential and often not visible. Therefore, as I share in the reflections throughout this essay, it is not just my voice that you will be hearing, but the voices of respected and valued Métis, Cree, Dënë, and Saulteaux teachers who continue to inform, shape, and guide my/our thinking, perspectives, and experiences (as recognized in Footnote 2 above).

### ***Carrie***

I am a daughter, a sister, a wife, a mother, a friend, a clinician, an instructor, and a new researcher and ally. I acknowledge that I am currently residing and raising a family on Treaty 6 territory, the traditional lands of the Cree, Saulteaux, Dakota,



and Dēnē peoples and the homeland of the Métis. I am a second-generation Canadian settler, with roots tracing back to Norway. My family settled and farmed in Govan, Saskatchewan. My grandfather immigrated to Canada with very little, built a farm, and passed it to my father, who continued to be successful.

Growing up, I believed my grandfather was a hero who worked incredibly hard to achieve what he had. While he did work hard, I have since come to understand that he did not face the systemic barriers that many others do, especially Indigenous peoples. He only needed to Westernize his name and stop speaking his native language to fit in, making it relatively easy for him to secure work and buy the farm. Learning this new information has shaken my roots and reshaped my understanding of our family's history. I now realize that this land was never truly ours to claim. I greatly benefited from this Indigenous land that has provided me with many opportunities. Today, I am an occupational therapist (OT) and an instructor in the MPT program at USask, allowing me to provide for my family and live a high-quality life. My family and I spend cherished moments at a cabin near Waskesiu, fishing, hiking, and boating, where my husband and I teach our boys to be stewards of the land. I humbly acknowledge that I am on a continuous journey of learning and unlearning, diligently finding my voice to meaningfully stand up in solidarity to dismantle societal systems that perpetuate racism. Recognizing the ease with which my family was able to establish themselves here, I am committed to understanding the impact of colonization and supporting reconciliation efforts. This acknowledgement is a step in my critical journey to understand my role in this history and to use my privilege towards action and uplifting Indigenous voices. The experiential knowledge and wisdom that my co-author Sarah has shared with me, as she learns with and from Indigenous knowledge keepers, community members, and thought leaders, has been essential to my own understanding and practice of critical self-reflection and self-decolonization. Through my collaboration and mentorship with Sarah, I continue to evolve my own approach to anti-oppressive practice, clarifying my responsibility as a citizen, clinician, instructor, and new researcher to address and redress racism. I am fully committed to learning, unlearning, evolving my understanding of the impacts of colonization and oppression, and transforming the way I approach research, teaching, and learning.

## **CONTEXTUALIZING OUR ANTI-OPPRESSIVE TEACHING AND LEARNING APPROACH TO DATE**

We have been implementing anti-racism and anti-oppressive teaching and learning practices within the MPT program (USask) for more than 10 years, both within the classroom and also by actively engaging learners in diverse experiential learning activities, including a Métis-informed community practicum (Fricke et al., 2024; Oosman et al., 2019a). Specific to the research that I (Sarah) co-lead with Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars (Oosman et al., 2019a; Oosman et al., 2019b; Oosman et al., 2021), we integrate an engaged scholar approach,

interweaving engaged teaching and learning opportunities within an Indigenous community-driven research program (Oosman et al., 2022). In this way, learners engage in a research and learning culture driven by and with Indigenous knowledge and grounded in the Five Rs— respect, relevance, responsibility, reciprocity, and relationship (Harris & Wasilewski, 2004; Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991; Styres & Zinga, 2013; Tessaro et al., 2018; University of British Columbia, n.d.). Our research team co-created a truth and reconciliation lanyard card with Métis community partners, acknowledging the lands we live on and highlighting our own interpretation of the 5 Rs within the research, teaching, and learning contexts (S. Oosman, S. Abonyi, T. J. Roy, & L. Durocher, personal communication, August 4, 2024). Importantly, this lanyard card is currently being used among learners, trainees, faculty, and staff within the College of Medicine and SRS (USask), demonstrating our commitment to reconciliation, decolonization, and anti-oppressive practice.

The community-engaged MPT practicums are co-designed by Métis community partners. They strategically integrate Mezirow's transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1997), essential pillars of cultural humility (Tervalon & Murray-Garcia, 1998) and AOP (Smith et al., 2024), and a backbone of reflective practice and supervisor mentorship (Mezirow, 1997; Oosman et al., 2019a). Throughout this process, we learned that MPT practicum learners preferred learning about Indigenous health, cultural humility, and anti-oppression, and, in contrast to reading books or articles, gained a deeper understanding of the complexities of oppression, racism, power, and privilege through their community-engaged experiences (Oosman et al., 2019a). It also became clear that MPT practicum learners were able to critically reflect in more depth if they had previous anti-oppressive knowledge, training, and mentorship prior to the practicum, highlighting the need to augment AOP early in the MPT program.

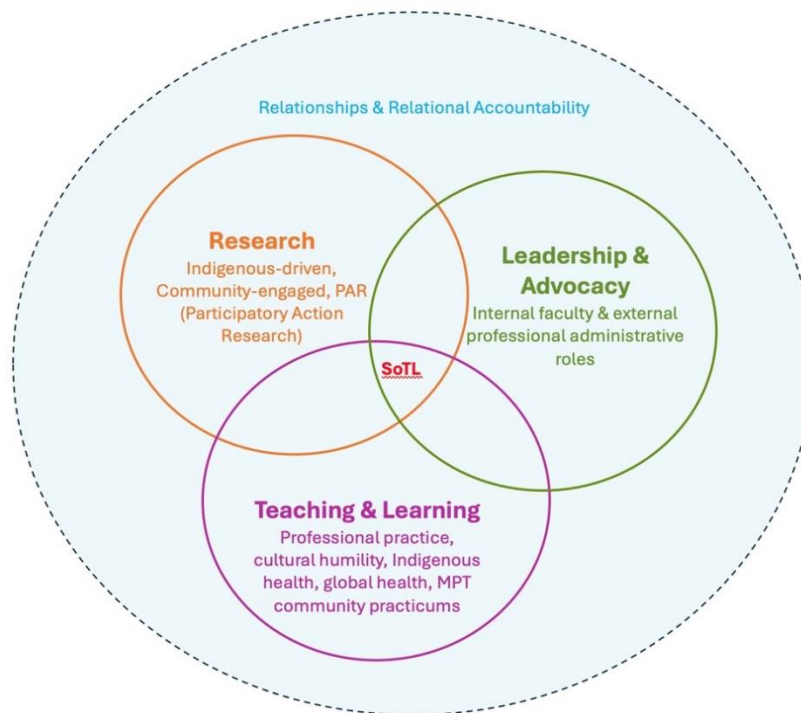
It is important to point out that these community-engaged MPT practicums have been implemented within a pre-existing Indigenous-driven CBPAR research project (Oosman et al., 2019a; Oosman et al., 2021; Oosman et al., 2022; Smith et al., 2021). They were not explicitly designed to shed light on pedagogical practice, improved student learning, or curricular development and renewal. However, it became clear that there is tremendous potential for our team to extend this work into a rigorous SoTL program of research, and this is how we came to write this reflective essay, as we contemplated long-term impact. As we continue our own learning—actively reflecting on our teaching/learning experiences and those of learners over time—we recognize the need to further develop our current engaged teaching and learning practices in ways that are research-driven, evidence-informed, methodologically sound, and student/community/faculty-engaged (Wilfrid Laurier University, n.d.; Center for Teaching and Learning, University of California, Berkeley, n.d.). AOP and social justice are ever-evolving constructs that change over time, thus requiring change within the teaching and learning environment (Center for Teaching and Learning, University of California,



Berkeley, n.d.). Therefore, we became very interested in strengthening, expanding, and scaffolding AOP within the MPT program (for a detailed illustration of the Engaged Scholar Model, see Figure 1). We concluded that to do this we needed to apply a rigorous research pedagogy approach, something we had been missing for some time. As we prepared ourselves to embark on an exploration of critical pedagogy research frameworks, it did not take us long to discover SoTL as a promising research avenue.

### Figure 1

*Engaged Scholar Model: SoTL at the Intersections of Research, Teaching, and Leadership*



## OUR DISCOVERY OF SOTL

We first learned about SoTL in 2023 when we received a general campus-wide invitation to apply for a SoTL Spark Grant through the newly created Jane and Ron Graham Centre for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning at USask. This invitation arrived as our SRS faculty was in the early stages of curricular renewal in the MPT program, considering how to build on existing AOP and actively responding to new national physical therapy accreditation standards related to social justice, anti-racism, anti-oppression, equity, diversity, and inclusion (Physiotherapy Education Accreditation Canada, 2020). This was also a time when we were expanding our MPT academic program and preparing for our inaugural

Indigenous Coordinator position within the SRS. Although it appears that we are two settler authors mobilizing anti-oppression teaching and learning practices, we were in the process of integrating an Indigenous perspective essential to guiding us. This reflective paper is based on Sarah's long-standing relationship with diverse Métis, Dënë, Cree, and Saulteaux knowledge keepers, thought leaders, and research partners, as well as Sarah and Carrie's ongoing cooperative teaching and mentorship practice. The SoTL Spark Grant seemed to align well with the challenges we were facing. We could not resist jumping into the SoTL world and decided to apply for this intriguing SoTL opportunity, not really knowing the depths of what SoTL could offer.

To our pleasant surprise we were awarded a 2023–2025 Spark Grant (The Jane and Ron Graham Centre for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning [Graham Centre for SoTL], 2023), which opened the doors for us to start our exploration of SoTL. The purpose of the USask SoTL Spark Grant was to provide seed funding over two years to spark our initial SoTL research ideas. In the initial year, Spark awardees must attend the annual Mount Royal University (MRU) SoTL Symposium solely as observers to understand SoTL processes and connect with and learn from SoTL researchers from a variety of disciplines and experiences. In the second year, Spark awardees are required to give a presentation at the symposium, describing their progress on their SoTL project and including initial research findings. We believe that the Spark Grant design offered a positive and strategic way to mentor those of us new to SoTL within a community of experienced SoTL researchers. We felt completely supported and included in the SoTL community and want to acknowledge the importance of the relationships that underpin our SoTL journey to date. Our early SoTL experiences, as USask Spark awardees and first-time attendees at the MRU SoTL Symposium, catapulted us into a transformative SoTL journey where our curiosity has been sparked. A series of “aha” moments awakened us to the strengths and diverse possibilities of what SoTL could offer.

## **JUMPING INTO SOTL: OUR REFLECTIONS AND INSIGHTS**

In the following paragraphs, we offer our reflections and new insights about how we perceive SoTL research as a multifaceted interplay of philosophy, approach, process, and practice, which meaningfully intersects with the complexities of strengthening and scaling anti-oppression and cultural humility curricular content within a MPT program. The more we learned about the SoTL model and philosophy at this early stage, the more we reflected on connections to our own experience, including, for example, the synergies with Sarah's CBPAR and decolonized approach to Indigenous health research (Oosman et al., 2019a; Oosman et al., 2021; Oosman et al., 2022; Smith et al., 2021). It did not take us long to recognize that the essential SoTL pillars seemed to correspond and intersect with those of an anti-oppressive, culturally humble perspective/philosophy. We will draw these

reflective connections and synergies forward throughout the following series of shared reflections.

### ***Reflection #1. Slow Down, Build Relationships, and Take Time***

As we embark on this journey, we note that SoTL is not only a research model and framework, but also a welcoming community of like-minded scholars. Within the Graham Centre for SoTL, we meet regularly with other Spark Grant recipients to share ideas and initiate knowledge exchange across diverse disciplines. Spark sessions typically begin as a roundtable discussion, where Spark awardees share ideas, project strengths and challenges, and the status of projects. These sessions often create reciprocal sharing between all SoTL scholars (including graduate students, new SoTL'ers, and experienced SoTL'ers), opportunities for new SoTL'ers to identify various learning needs and requests that the Director of the Graham Centre for SoTL actively responds to, as well as a culture of relationship, collaboration, and inclusivity. Respectful relationships have been formed within this community, thus promoting inclusion in and across various SoTL projects—as we are able and/or interested in joining—and nurturing a strong sense of being valued SoTL community members. We often feel inspired, energized, and supported, which moves our SoTL research projects forward in positive and strength-based ways.

We jumped feet first into our research project, and, within the first four to six months of receiving a Spark Grant, we were already trying to complete typical processes (e.g., literature review, formulating potential research questions, outlining SoTL methodology and methods, and initiating our own environmental scan and mapping of anti-racism MPT curriculum). We thought that we were on track and had started to think about initiating a planned scoping review, designing a master reflective practice rubric (specific to cultural humility, anti-racism, and anti-oppression throughout the two-year MPT program), and recruiting MPT students to participate in focus group discussions to consider the findings from the scoping review and environmental scan. We felt strongly about obtaining student perspectives to integrate learner perspectives within curriculum that will directly impact students. However, as we learned about SoTL, with the support of the Graham Centre for SoTL Director, Dr. Hamilton, we recognized the need to pause, reflect on the goal of our project, take time to attend the MRU SoTL Symposium, and create space to “spark” new SoTL ideas while learning with and from experienced SoTL researchers.

We recognized at this early stage that taking time to mindfully engage in the process of SoTL is as essential to driving research success and impact as focusing on the research outcomes and summative findings (Felten, 2013; Franzese & Felten, 2017; Grant & Hurd, 2010; Hamilton & Yeo, 2024). We discovered the importance of focusing on the means (process) of SoTL research, not just the end. Further, if researchers jump into SoTL too quickly, do not engage in reflexive and reflective

practice, and focus on getting to the final outcomes and findings, we may miss critical and essential findings that show up in the process of doing SoTL (Breen et al., 2023; Grant & Hurd, 2010; Leibowitz et al., 2017b; Zinga & Styres, 2019). SoTL researchers are therefore able to respond to new ideas that are unveiled during the research process, thus actively integrating knowledge into the research cycle as it is revealed. This process of discovering and integrating new knowledge is identical to what we describe as integrated knowledge translation (IKT) in Indigenous-driven CBPAR community-based participatory action research (Kothari et al., 2017; T. Nguyen et al., 2020). Integrated knowledge translation is a natural fit for pedagogy research to implement change in a more immediate and timely way. In this way, we also suggest that the SoTL research process could serve as an intervention itself, something we are curious about exploring further.

### ***Reflection #2. Uncovering Intersections: Participatory Action Research (PAR) and SoTL***

Embarking on our Spark-funded project, including attending the MRU Symposium for SoTL, opened our eyes to the key pillars and elements of SoTL that aligned with the Indigenous health research, AOP teaching, and service learning that we were already incorporating into the MPT program (Oosman et al., 2019a; Oosman et al., 2019b). It is important to ground our research in strength-based conceptual pedagogy frameworks (Miller-Young & Yeo, 2015), utilize rigorous and interdisciplinary research designs and methods (How, 2020), prioritize application to student learning and learning outcomes as well as the active engagement of students (McKinney, 2012a; Bhattacharjee et al., 2024), and employ critical analysis and reflection, all of which are essential in good SoTL practice (Felton, 2013; Waller & Prosser, 2023). SoTL therefore strategically provides us with the bridge that we were missing to meaningfully link the service-learning opportunities created in partnership with Sarah's program of health-intervention research among Indigenous populations with our currently evolving teaching practice and commitment to enhancing anti-racism and cultural humility when teaching MPT students. In other words, SoTL offers us a framework and approach to our inquiry into MPT student learning in the context of teaching cultural humility, anti-racism, and anti-oppression in ways that resonate with how we approach community-engaged research using participatory action research (PAR). This allows research participants to drive the research that will ultimately impact them as recipients of the research. SoTL similarly creates a culture of dismantling the power hierarchies that often exist between instructors and students (Fedoruk & Lindstrom, 2022) by engaging students as partners (SaP). This is where it became clear that as we work to dismantle oppression and racism in MPT curricular content through a SoTL research lens, we are actually practicing and embodying anti-oppression in its design. This was a brilliant and exciting connection for us and will certainly be something that we explicitly name as we move forward.

### ***Reflection #3. Reframing Power Hierarchies***

The realization that SoTL would allow us to actively address problematic power dynamics that exist between students and instructors was a welcome awakening that opened our minds to what we perceived as the possibility of embodying an anti-oppressive practice within the research process itself, in ways that would honour the values and goals of our anti-racism teaching/learning research project. For example, by engaging SaP throughout each stage of the research process, we are creating space for learners to contribute their unique worldview and lived experience to the co-design of anti-oppressive curricular content. This actively reframes the faculty-student power relationship, moving away from faculty having “power over” students, to faculty having “power with” students (Adams et al., 2023; Cabral et al., 2023; Cook-Sather & Bala, 2023; Dianati & Hickman, 2023). Designing an anti-racist, anti-oppressive teaching and learning research project that is grounded in and driven by these same critical concepts will more likely lead to long-term, sustainable, and meaningful transformational results. Basically, if we do not change how we are conducting and designing research, it is unrealistic to expect different results. The status quo will be maintained, and an anticipated evolution of AOP will be unsuccessful.

Upon reflection on these observations, we became more aware that SoTL gave us permission to consciously dismantle Western-driven, colonial research practices that often perpetuate racism, oppression, and discrimination within research activities and outputs. These are the very concepts and behaviours we are actually wanting to avoid and redress within our broad research goals. Several SoTL leaders have extensively advocated that the SoTL model has the potential to provide a solid foundation for understanding how SoTL can reframe power dynamics and support anti-oppressive practices in educational research (Felton & Geertsema, 2023; Kim 2023; Leibowitz et al., 2017a). These contributions continue to align with our own research and teaching philosophies and priorities, leaving us with heightened curiosity as we continue on our SoTL journey. It is clear, however, that applying the SoTL model to reframe power dynamics in higher education is fraught with unique challenges due to complex institutional structures, diversity among teachers and learners, always-evolving contextual factors, and the desire of some faculty to maintain certainty and control when anti-oppressive practice, in its very nature, creates tremendous uncertainty and discomfort (Felten & Geertsema, 2023; Hill, 2023; Scharff et al., 2023; Sakamoto & Pitner, 2005). Ultimately, by engaging in SoTL as a process or approach, we are automatically dismantling the power hierarchies that are often pervasive in Western science and pedagogy research (Fedoruk & Lindstrom, 2022; Leibowitz et al., 2017b). This is extremely important as we strive to decolonize curriculum because if we do not thoughtfully dismantle colonized, oppressive forces grounding and driving our entire research project, then the results may not lead us to changing practice. If we do not change what we are doing and how we are doing it, how can we expect to change things in the long term?



#### ***Reflection #4. Of Course, Students as Partners!***

The presentation that resonated with us most at the MRU SoTL Symposium was entitled *Students as Partners in Creating the Conditions of Collective Leadership in SoTL* (Reena et al., 2023), perhaps because it was our first workshop experience entering into the world of SoTL. This presentation highlighted the strengths of including students as equal partners in co-creating and negotiating research roles, sharing leadership, and nurturing a relational approach within the research process. The presenters reiterated that including students as partners contributed to dismantling unhelpful power hierarchies in academic scholarship, thus creating an environment where students felt respected and valued as research team members. Relational accountability is a core principle in both PAR and SoTL, requiring the development of trusting, respectful relationships among all researchers and participants, and ensuring participants actively engage throughout all phases of the research (from research project co-creation, to analysis, to dissemination), thus ultimately revealing research results that are relevant and meaningful to the participants (Blackstock, 2007, 2011, 2019; Kovach, 2021; Wilson, 2001, 2008). This relational accountability is a strong value underpinning our broad program of research as well as our teaching philosophy, another synergy/intersection we discovered with SoTL. We recall looking at each other during this workshop with a look that said “Of course! Students as partners!”. We knew immediately that this would be one of the first modifications we would make to our SoTL Spark project. We needed to invite students as partners to integrate important student perspectives and voice from the beginning of our project. We had always planned to involve students to gain their perspectives but, looking back, we considered students as consultants on the utility of a curricular tool or deliverable, rather than as active, engaged research partners collaborating on a shared goal. We immediately applied for internal USask student funding (and we do mean immediately because we prepared and submitted an application requesting student funding during breaks at the symposium). This was a classic “aha” moment for the two of us. We are pleased to report that we are now employing two graduate students as partners (one MPT and one Master of Public Health student) who not only bring student insight and perspective, but also diverse cultural lived experiences important to this project. Cabral et al. (2023) suggest that engaging students as partners who bring diverse worldviews into pedagogy research will promote their engagement, intrinsic motivation, ownership of learning, and confidence in learning, thus supporting their successful transition into the workforce.

#### ***Reflection #5. Engaging Our Biases in SoTL***

In a presentation entitled *Throughlines to Inquiry: Applying a Framework of 3M Principles of Engagement to SoTL*, Simmons (2023) outlined key data sources to inform teaching and learning processes. These included students, literature, colleagues, and yourself. Simmons stressed the importance of connecting learning



to lived experiences, using multiple approaches, and learning as a community. Therefore, as researchers, we can consider ourselves as active research participants, bringing past experience and knowledge that can be applied in our own SoTL research projects and beyond. We have both been co-teaching AOP content among MPT learners over the past several years, thoughtfully modifying, refining, and adapting our approach to teaching based on student feedback, the transfer of knowledge gained with and from Indigenous community partners, and our own ongoing reflections as instructors and engaged scholars. However, we were unsure how to bring our own teaching knowledge and experience from past years into our SoTL Spark project because we felt that it would add inappropriate bias to the research process. We were also concerned that our past experiences were not driven by a specific research paradigm. Simmons's workshop provided us with new insight into how we can integrate our own curiosity and lived experience as one part of the evidence guiding our SoTL research process. Introspection is described as an element of SoTL research such that we, the researchers, can be part of our own inquiry (Poole & Chick, 2022). Further, one of Felton's (2013) principles of good SoTL practice is "inquiry focused on student learning," which requires more than just focussing on student learning, but also our own learning. Positioning who we are in research (as we have done at the beginning of this paper, positioning who we are in the context of this research project) is an act of introspection that SoTL welcomes and that is an essential component of teaching, learning, and practicing anti-oppression.

### ***Reflection #6. Building a Culture of Collective Leadership Using SoTL***

The pre-symposium workshop presented by Hill (2023), entitled *Challenging the Ways of Being, Knowing, and Doing*, emphasized the importance of collective leadership and reciprocity, understanding all perspectives, and envisioning change together. Hill explored how to create safe spaces to transform teaching and learning. We participated in various small group activities, actively engaged in developing our SoTL research ideas and providing feedback to one another in ways that elevated everyone's ideas as well as the energy in the room. We learned that SoTL values collective leadership, inviting diverse perspectives to move thinking forward. Interestingly, a collective leadership approach is also a decolonized approach, creating a space where everyone's voice and contributions are equally valued, encouraging shared responsibility for educational practices among group members (Bolden & Gosling, 2006; Hill et al., 2019; Hill, 2023; Khalifa et al., 2019). Similarly, in the contexts of decolonization and reconciliation in post-secondary education, the concepts of "collective" and "shared responsibility" are intimately intertwined and necessary in today's society. Mobilizing change and creating equitable, anti-oppressive educational curriculum and teaching/learning spaces cannot be done by only one or two individuals, but instead must be done collectively. Again, the SoTL model sets the stage for expanding the collective, thus aligning well with our teaching/learning research goals.

## MOVING FORWARD ON OUR SOTL JOURNEY

Designing, implementing, and evaluating AOP and curriculum within health care professional education programs is an important way to address racism in the health system and support future health care providers to take action to narrow health inequities among Indigenous populations in Canada. Systemic racism, discrimination, and colonization contribute to the complex social determinants of health that drive inequities among Indigenous populations (Reading & Wien, 2009).

Physical therapy graduates entering the health system require essential skills in cultural humility, social justice, self-decolonization, anti-racism, and anti-oppressive thinking, practice, and advocacy to mobilize change and be part of the solution—dismantling systemic racism and improving equitable health outcomes. SoTL research is complex and provides a meaningful avenue to support the reframing and redesign of physical therapy curriculum to better prepare physical therapists for the social justice challenges they will face when entering the workforce. That said, SoTL also requires thoughtful anti-oppressive reframing in order to prevent or avoid perpetuating colonized approaches in teaching and learning contexts that are pervasive throughout higher education (Felten & Geertsema, 2023; Smith et al. 2024). Therefore, although there are important opportunities for AOP within SoTL, diverse challenges and barriers, such as fostering critical consciousness, creating equitable classrooms, and addressing historical context and systems of oppression, have been identified (Aqil et al., 2021).

SoTL is designed in a way that nurtures an introspective, reflexive, reflective, lifelong, anti-oppressive approach that could be considered an intervention in and of itself (Franzese & Felten, 2017; McKinney, 2012b). SoTL values and elevates students as active and equal partners in the research that ultimately impacts them, thus providing a platform for students to be part of mobilizing educational change. SoTL principles encompass inclusion, diversity, partnerships, reciprocity, humility, vulnerability, collaborative leadership, multidisciplinary interconnections, and learning as a community, which align exceptionally well with social justice, cultural humility, and AOP. Even though we are at the beginning of our SoTL journey, we see the many strengths that SoTL can offer and believe it is an ideal framework for building a pathway to decolonizing teaching and learning in the USask MPT curriculum. We have much gratitude for being invited into the world of SoTL and are excited to see where the next chapter of our SoTL journey will take us.

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