

# Xchange FORUM - Episode 12 - The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning with Dr. Anita Acai

## Transcript

Note: This transcript was edited for readability.

(XCHANGE PODCAST INTRO MUSIC)

KATE KLEIN, HOST:

Hello and welcome to The Exchange Podcast, brought to you by the Teaching and Learning Exchange at George Brown College. My name is Kate Klein. I'm an associate at the TLX, as well as a full-time professor in the transitions to post-secondary education program. Here with me today is Doctor Anita Acai. Anita's work has focused on helping faculty, staff, and learners develop their skills and education scholarship, as well as leading research projects that centre around the intersections of education, equity and well-being, assessment and competency based medical education, learner centred pedagogies, and SoTL. And we're going to tell you what SoTL means in just one second. Welcome to the XChange Podcast, Anita.

ANITA ACAI: Thanks so much, Kate. It's great to be here.

KATE: Happy to have you. So, I mean, I know in our department SoTL is a super-hot topic, but can you tell us what that means? What does SoTL stand for? What is it and what are you focusing on in your role at George Brown College?

ANITA: Absolutely. SoTL stands for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning. And really, I think it's about taking a curious and kind of research informed approach to teaching. Asking thoughtful questions about what's happening in the classroom, exploring those questions, using available research methods and then sharing the findings so that others can learn from them, too. And a lot of SoTL projects start with a curiosity or a question. What I like to call a spark. We named our grants program after that. So maybe you've noticed how a certain teaching strategy isn't landing the way that you've expected, or you're curious about how students are engaging with course material. That can lead to some data collection that allows you to dig deeper into those questions. And I think what makes SoTL really impactful is the sharing part. Teaching and learning are incredibly contextual but being able to bring back findings to your colleagues, especially at the local level, can really help people refine their practices and ultimately improve student learning, which I think is really the goal of most SoTL projects. And also, just to answer the last part of your question there around my role.

My role is as director of SoTL at George Brown. And I think it's all about helping grow and support SoTL across the college. Working on a big-picture strategy for SoTL, creating opportunities for faculty to develop their skills and connect with each other and through different events, communities of practice, and then helping to make sure that there is funding and support available to bring SoTL projects to life and be able to share their impact.

KATE: So exciting, and I can't wait to see what comes out of all the work that you're doing. So often when people talk about the difference between college professors and university professors, the huge difference often that's indicated is that most university professors do research in addition to their teaching, whereas college teaching is “ just teaching”. Obviously, that's changing. Can you tell us why is research relevant to college professors and what's GBC is doing these days to support this increased focus on research and the scholarship of teaching and learning?

ANITA: Absolutely. I think the idea that, you know, college professors are just teaching is as outdated. And I know people think that, but it's really something that, you know, I don't think is true anymore. I think that, of course, teaching is so central to what we do in colleges. But research, which includes applied research and SoTL is becoming really, I think, essential, in terms of enhancing student learning and ensuring that our programs are aligned with industry needs.

And it's also crucial in helping us navigate the rapidly evolving teaching and learning landscape that we're part of. Whether it's adapting to shifts in the workforce or making education more accessible and inclusive, or even understanding the impact of things like COVID-10 or Generative AI in the classroom, we need SoTL to ensure that our teaching remains responsive, relevant, and effective.

I think the other piece for me is that research matters for college professors, because it allows them to continuously refine their teaching practices and figure out what's working or not working in the classroom and create more engaging, inclusive, and robust learning experiences for students. And the thing is, like many faculty are already doing this as part of their teaching practice, and maybe they just don't have the label for it as SoTL, but they're already engaging in this work.

So I think that in many cases, our faculty are already well on their way to becoming teaching and learning scholars. Since I've been at George Brown, I've been so excited to see the growing institutional support for SoTL. We have a lot of resources that faculty can access, many of them through the TLX. One of the biggest things I've been working on is launching our new SoTL Spark Grants program, which runs twice a year in January and September.

And this is a cohort-based model where faculty can get up to \$2,000 in funding, some protected time to focus on a SoTL project, and the opportunity to workshop their ideas and build a community with peers. Beyond that, I'm running monthly "SoTL Lunch and Learn." These are interactive discussions for faculty at any stage in their SoTL journey, as well as workshops on SoTL-related topics like methodologies. And if you're looking for kind of more personalized support, I do offer one-on-one consultations. Anyone who's interested in that can reach out to me directly. There's a ton happening, and it's really exciting to see how faculty are embracing saddle to enrich their teaching and support student success.

KATE: Amazing. It does really seem like so much that you're doing already in the short time that you've been here. Love to hear it. Speaking of new things, people might not know that very recently, the new faculty Academy that all newly hired full time faculty go through with the TLX has expanded to include a SoTL component. Can you tell us about what that's been looking like? Some of the topics that faculty are exploring and what you've been hearing from them about what it's been like to experiment with applied research around teaching and learning?

ANITA: Yeah, absolutely. And I think one of the big reasons that so little was integrated into the New Faculty Academy was to introduce new faculty to the idea that teaching isn't just about delivering content, but it's also about being reflective, curious and well informed on how we approach teaching and learning. And I think this is a really great opportunity to emphasize how SoTL isn't just a one-size-fits-all, and our projects that are coming out of the New Faculty Academy really highlight the diversity of sort of projects that exist, and what it can look like. Some faculty are collecting quantitative or qualitative data from students or their colleagues to explore the impact of different teaching strategies or programs. Others are conducting scoping reviews or literature syntheses to analyze existing research. Some projects are fairly large in scope, so they span multiple courses or programs, and others are focused on refining a single assignment or classroom activity. There's really quite a range and there's no single right way to do SoTL I think that is the flexibility piece that makes SoTL really accessible to faculty at all experience levels. And to me, what matters the most is that these projects are useful and meaningful to the people that are doing them. And the SoTL component is a pretty new part of the new faculty academy.

We're still getting feedback and continuing to refine what that experience looks like for faculty and I'll be honest, because I think sharing challenges is important. There's definitely a learning curve for some faculty, especially when it comes to understanding what SoTL is, why it matters, and importantly, how to fit it into their already very busy schedule. I do think the nice thing with something like the New Faculty Academy is that the faculty aren't doing it alone. They are part of a cohort and hopefully they feel like they're well supported by me and others, and that maybe by the time they finish their projects, they'll be able to see firsthand how SoTL can

enhance teaching practices and improve student learning and then be able to share those insights with others.

KATE: You've been with us for about half a year now, and I imagine still in a place of getting to know the college. I remember when I started at George Brown, it took me ages to get to know all the departments of the acronyms and the websites.

ANITA: There are a lot of acronyms.

KATE: But you've been doing a lot of work already. Anyway, that is the present. I would like to invite you to think towards the future. What is your vision of a George Brown College that is much more immersed in the scholarship of teaching and learning? How do you think faculty's daily work would be different, or maybe even better or easier, with more connection to this type of scholarship?

ANITA: Absolutely. I think my vision is really to cultivate a vibrant community of excellence in teaching and learning scholarship at George Brown. SoTL isn't just an add on, but it's an integral part of how we think about and approach education. When I want to see SoTL driving innovation, fostering inclusivity, and ensuring that our teaching practices are not just informed by what is already known, but actively contributing to that knowledge base.

And in the college, deeply immersed in SoTL, I think faculty would really feel empowered to ask meaningful questions about teaching, experiment with new approaches, and collaborate with colleagues to enhance student learning. Instead of wondering "Is this working?" they'd have the tools and support to explore what's effective, refine their strategies, and share what they've learned. And as a result, I think students would really benefit from learning environments that are engaging, inclusive, and truly responsive to their needs.

On a day-to-day level I think SoTL could really add a lot of variety and fulfillment to faculty's work. It really is an opportunity to step back from the routine and reflect on teaching in a deeper way and make intentional changes. And it can also help faculty build new relationships: Whether that's through working with students as research partners, collaborating with colleagues, or connecting with the broader teaching and learning community, whether that's at George Brown or beyond.

Ultimately, engaging in SoTL is about improving student outcomes. But I think it's also about making teaching more dynamic, rewarding, and connected for faculty. And when I think about the future, I've been thinking a lot about how we share SoTL. Traditional research articles in conference presentations are valuable. But I'm also really interested in developing innovative ways for faculty to showcase their work in creative and engaging format.

For example, at Congress this year we'll be hosting a SoTL photo showcase where faculty can use powerful images to tell the story of their research in a compelling and accessible way. And I'll also be launching a new research journal that will emphasize diverse and creative approaches to dissemination. Hopefully that'll make subtle findings more engaging and applicable to teaching practice. By broadening how he shares SoTL, I'm really hoping that we can make it more inclusive of impactful and integrated into the daily work of educators.

KATE: Well, as somebody who is very nerdy about teaching, I really resonate with that vision. And I can't wait to be a part of some of those things and find new ways of connecting with my colleagues around all of the things that we're learning through these processes. I really, really appreciate you taking the time to share your thoughts on these topics, Anita. And again, I really look forward to seeing some of the research that's led by my colleagues in a George Brown faculty in the next few years, as we all kind of dive into this experiment of integrating SoTL more into our teaching practice.

ANITA: Oh, you're very welcome. Thanks so much for having me. And I'm really excited too.

KATE: Absolutely. And for the next episode of XChange, we are actually going to be swapping seats. So, you will be the host, and we're going to get to hear from a few, both new and seasoned faculty, about some of the SoTL projects that they're undertaking. So, I think that's going to be great. Until then.

ANITA: Thanks so much. I'm excited and looking forward to entering faculty. I think hearing from them will be really impactful, so can't wait. Thanks so much, Kate.

KATE: Thank you, Anita.

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