

THE CHANGING ROLES AND IDENTITIES OF TEACHERS AND LEARNERS IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN IRELAND: AN INTRODUCTION

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In 2007, a group of researchers involved in supporting teaching and learning in Irish higher education institutions came together with the intention of producing a book as a resource for their colleagues across the higher education sector. All were members of the Educational Developers in Ireland Network (EDIN). The group decided that, rather than produce a resource for beginning teachers, of which there are already many good examples, group members should write about their current research in teaching and learning in higher education. Co-authoring and collaboration among colleagues from different institutions was encouraged, as part of an attempt to explore and document collective wisdom.

Thus, as with EDIN's first writing project, *Emerging Issues in the Practice of University Learning and Teaching* (O'Neill et al, 2005), this collection – *Emerging Issues II* – showcases the continuing development of the EDIN community of practice. The writing process included peer review, external review and formative feedback and was thus developmental for the authors and the EDIN network itself. **O'Farrell, Chapter 2**, discusses how this process strengthened collaboration and promoted linkages; it has also resulted in further collaborative projects.

This book presents a wide selection of issues currently of interest and concern in higher education institutions in Ireland. The chapters are snapshots of the intersection between theory, practice and research in particular settings; they are not meant to be comprehensive. Nevertheless, they present practice approaches, new theoretical considerations and informal conversations, and include signposts to important literature in the area. The authors contextualise current concerns, and discuss how they have responded strategically to national and international trends in higher education. They also highlight how new roles and identities for staff and students in higher education have emerged in response to changes in institutional, social and technological contexts, among others.

We hope that the audience for this book will be as broad as the range of issues canvassed, including all who teach and carry out research in higher education, as well as learning support staff, policy makers and academic managers. The aim is that individual chapters will give insights into research, practice and theory, which readers can discuss, debate and use as the basis for their own learning and teaching work.

Emerging themes

The *Emerging Issues II* project has provided an opportunity for colleagues to work together, develop a discourse and identify common themes and patterns. At an advanced stage in the project, it became clear that there were two pre-eminent themes emerging from the ideas, initiatives, evidence and concerns being documented. The first was that all of the contributors were reporting on and urging change, particularly change in relation to roles and identities across the higher education sector. The second was that the process of collaboration, debate and dissemination encouraged by and embodied in the *Emerging Issues II* project was promoting pedagogic research, and beginning a movement towards a scholarship of teaching and learning.

Changing roles and identities

The chapters in this book document changes in roles and identities in higher education, at the same time as they advocate the continuation of change. There are changing roles for staff who teach. For example, academic teachers now see themselves as facilitators of learning, rather than as transmitters of knowledge; they may also be beginning to see themselves as researchers of learning. Learners' roles are changing too, shaped both by the changing expectations of their teachers as well as by, for example, changing technologies. In the context of teaching and learning, *role* can be defined as an individual's function, what he or she is appointed or expected to do. Subtly different, *identity* relates more to individuality and personality – who individuals are, and how they see themselves. In teaching and learning, change is occurring so rapidly that roles, goals and outcomes need to be reviewed continually. On the other hand, identity shifts may not take place so quickly and may not align with roles. Can we move roles and identities closer together? This book helps us to begin to explore this question. In addition, centres and institutions must be flexible enough to respond to change, including changing government initiatives and funding opportunities. This makes for exciting times, and means that none of us can stand still. There is, therefore, clearly a need for a publication such as this to document change while it is happening.

Changing Roles and Identities of Educational Developers

It is no surprise that educational developer roles are often undertaken by individuals who have not had a traditional academic pathway. For example, some educational developers are academics who have stepped temporarily but wholeheartedly from their disciplines into the teaching and learning arena, building on their own experiences as teachers to mentor others. Others are employed as full-time educational developers, a role which is sometimes defined as administrative and sometimes as academic. As a result, educational developers are often accustomed to and adept at adaptation. For this reason, they are often ideally suited to leading change both institutionally and nationally.

For some educational developers, however, there may be a gulf between their defined roles and their identities. For example, they may be academics from particular disciplines but appointed into administrative structures, or vice versa (O'Farrell, Chapter 2). Such a position can be uncomfortable, and can even undermine the educational development role. It may be that educational developers – who must often simultaneously be teachers, learners, researchers, facilitators, managers and so on – are working at “the boundaries where fields converge” (Boyer, 1990, p. 19).

In fact, because the term “educational developer” can be applied to such a wide range of roles and identities, it is not necessarily a comfortable name for all those who bear it. In a report prepared for the Irish Universities Quality Board, Hyland (2007) looked at the various names and roles attached to staff who are employed to support learning and teaching in higher education, and concluded that there is a huge range of roles for such staff. Indeed, using only one term to encompass all these roles may be problematic.

Fortunately, the EDIN network is capacious enough to accommodate the wide range of educational development roles in Irish higher education. Indeed, the network itself is changing and has become a community of practice, which benchmarks itself internationally. The EDIN community welcomes a range of practitioners and practices, and this very diversity has enabled it to move beyond a training model with a technical “How do I do it?” approach. Rather, accepting that there may be many ways to “do” educational development means that

the network has been able to adopt a more conceptual focus, which underpins its shift towards the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL). This shift from “terminal remediation to ongoing investigation” (Bass, 1988/1999) also shapes EDIN’s view of and approach to its activities and projects, which may now be seen in terms of academic and scholarly professional development. As we have noted above, this is true of the *Emerging Issues II* project, which has given EDIN members the opportunity to meet and collaborate on ways of investigating and documenting evolving conceptual change and practice in teaching and learning in higher education. As such, it will enhance members’ ability to provide scholarly and practical staff development in their home institutions.

Changing Roles and Identities of Students

Educational developers focus on helping academic staff to understand and improve student learning. It is important to remember, however, that students are agents of change themselves, particularly in their use of technology. For example, they may not always actively engage in the online discussion forums set up by teachers, but they are proactively engaged in conferences that they have constructed themselves. **Jennings and Cashman in Chapter 3** urge us to take note of this and incorporate appropriate technology into our teaching, for a student generation that may be spending up to 18 hours a week online. This means, Jennings and Cashman argue, that most student identities are firmly embedded in the Internet generation, but that many teacher identities are not. They suggest how we might deal with the gap between these different identities.

Students must also respond to the changes associated with more student-centred teaching. As pedagogies such as problem-based learning, seminars and field-based learning become widespread, students are challenged to take a more active role in their own learning. They are expected to understand something about their own learning and to engage with the language of learning outcomes, reflection and learning how to learn. They are also increasingly required to be researchers and even to direct their own learning, which may take them outside their chosen discipline. For example, **Higgs in Chapter 4** describes how first-year students moved from feeling that they learned best by listening to the teacher to recognising the importance of learning from peers. At the same time, these students reported that their favourite activities were those that were the most physically and mentally demanding.

In some cases, students are being asked to take risks, to step into “liminal spaces” (Meyer and Land, 2003), in order to grasp important concepts and move from being novices to being experts (**Moore et al, Chapter 5; Higgs and Hall, Chapter 6**). This is a transformative journey for students, but it can easily be taken for granted by experts in the discipline. This is why it is important to fully recognise the various stages of learning. In their discussion of ideas for teaching large classes, for example, **O’Neill and Moore, Chapter 7**, address the issue of engaging students in learning and conclude that students must develop capacities for knowledge creation. The importance is not so much what the student learns, but what they can do with the learning – that is, apply it and be creative with it.

It is important here to make a distinction between the changes that occur year to year with different student cohorts, on the one hand, and the developmental changes that individual students experience on their journey through undergraduate studies and postgraduate research, on the other. **Potter and Hanratty in Chapter 8** consider the role of graduate teaching assistants, who carry out significant teaching in undergraduate courses. These graduates usually assist in the “learning by doing” activities, and thus may have a major

influence on undergraduates' learning. It is increasingly necessary, therefore, to embed the study of teaching and learning into doctoral programmes, so that the doctorate becomes a professional qualification and its graduates are seen as "professing" knowledge.

Changing Roles and Identities of Teachers

Teachers are constantly being urged to change. The chapters in this book are testament to that. During the past decade, for example, the disciplinary researcher who also teaches has begun to put a toe into new teaching and learning waters. This is in response to the call for more student-centred teaching. Academics who have traditionally seen themselves as knowledge authorities are being challenged to hand over power, and "gift the learning to the learner" (Malone, 2002). For some academics, this represents a small change in their role. For others, it is an identity shift and transforms the way they view themselves as academics. Indeed, it can result in the teacher becoming the learner, and the learner becoming the teacher. Understandably, not all staff are comfortable with these shifts.

On the other hand, how do *new* academics view themselves? As part of University College Cork's (UCC) staff induction programme in 2007–08, new academics were asked, "What are you ...?" (rather than "Who are you?" or "What do you do?"). This was part of an attempt to understand academic identity. Participants' answers fell into two clear categories: they saw themselves either as lecturers/teachers/facilitators of learning or as biologists/historians/economists/nurses and so on. In other words, they tended to choose between their teaching and their disciplinary roles.

Regardless of how they view themselves, both experienced and new academic staff are now required to design learning outcomes and assessment, give and respond to feedback, embed an increasing range of skills into the curriculum, maximise the opportunities associated with classroom diversity and consider ethical issues. They are expected to be aware of, and better still to understand, the theoretical underpinnings of all of these aspects of their teaching and student learning. They are being asked to be more intentional in their teaching.

Unless teachers are supported in these activities, it is unreasonable to expect all this from them. One increasingly popular way to support academic teachers is to help them build learning communities – which, of course, may be challenging for those teachers who are accustomed to seeing teaching as a highly "private" experience (what happens in the classroom stays in the classroom). Nevertheless, staff are frequently now called on to communicate their experiences, to report on what works and what does not. By sharing their practice with others, staff not only discover other ways to do things, but also identify those learning and teaching issues that are most interesting to them. For example, **McCarthy, Chapter 9**, documents how staff on an accredited programme are moving from a concentration on their own performance to a focus on their students' performances by asking, "How do I know what my students know and understand"? This is known as teaching for understanding (TfU).

Such approaches emerge from the recognition that teachers must consider what they are doing to help or hinder student learning and understanding. Moore *et al* in Chapter 5 suggest a way of understanding the learning experience by charting the journey from novice to expert, and considering how teachers can help students undertake this journey. On the other hand, **Barrett and Donnelly, Chapter 10**, are concerned about how teachers can inhibit or suppress learning. They believe that the first role of educators is to encourage creativity, and to widen the range of strategies that create a spark in their students.

Educational technology opens up a new spectrum of roles and identities for academic teachers. Some may shun it altogether, whereas others dabble in it, perhaps using VLEs, and yet others become enthusiasts or even experts. Jennings and Cashman, Chapter 3, point out that there is little choice for academics other than to adopt and adapt to educational technology. Wherever teachers are situated on the spectrum, the most important issue is which they put first – student learning or technology.

With appropriate priorities, teachers can incorporate educational technology into a toolbox of flexible pedagogical strategies, assessment techniques and modes of delivery. This means that they need no longer worry about “covering” everything at the expense of active learning strategies, which aim to help students to uncover and discover disciplinary knowledge for themselves.

Clearly, the expectations that academics build this new repertoire and that they also take a professional – even scholarly – approach to teaching and learning, as well as to their disciplinary research, has the potential to prompt an identity crisis of greater or lesser degree. Accustomed to being disciplinary experts, they are necessarily novices in teaching and learning, undergoing experiences similar to those of their students. For example, on accredited courses, they may hand in work late, not read the handouts and baulk at the rigour of the assessment activities. They want to know the mark, they do not always read the feedback, and neither do they act on it. They are distracted by life outside of work.

Unsurprisingly, these experiences can be quite disempowering, and many academics wonder how they are to progress along the path from novice to expert. One way out of the maze is to stand back from practice and “go meta” as Hutchings and Shulman (1999) suggest, by sharing practice, documenting it and conversing with others. **Palmer and Heagney, Chapter 11**, testify to the power of such conversations, which give rise to a language that develops into a discourse, defining discussion and acting as a catalyst to spark collaboration and action. Such conversations also make academics aware of their roles, giving them an opportunity to evaluate them and apply them effectively, integrating them into a more holistic sense of identity.

Changing Roles and Identities of Library, Support and IT Services

Many people who have traditionally supported learning have not called themselves teachers or academics. We find, however, that this is another area of higher education in which roles and identities are changing. Library staff, technologists and disability support officers are now enrolling as students in accredited modules in teaching and learning. This is possible only because they are already engaged in designing and delivering teaching sessions. Their roles allow this natural progression, and for some this has even meant a better alignment of role and identity. For example, **Fallon and Breen in Chapter 12** explore the emerging role of academic librarians in the learning and teaching process through their involvement with teaching staff in the development of student information literacy skills.

In some instances, educational support staff co-teach with academic staff, fostering effective partnerships that assist learners. In other situations, these staff act as experts in professional development programmes for academic staff. For example, **McAvinia et al, Chapter 13**, report on the use of VLEs in the context of teaching information literacy. They recognise their new role and relationships: instead of being helpful librarians at the end of the telephone, they are now “lecturers and examiners imposing deadlines and standards”.

Interestingly, the specialist knowledge of experts such as these facilitates new insights into aspects of the student learning experience. For example, there are conflicting views on the importance of blogs and wikis in constructing knowledge. As librarians, Fallon and Breen in Chapter 12 find blogs and wikis of minor importance in research, whereas Jennings and Cashman in Chapter 3 stress their importance in social learning. Hutchings (2006) calls on staff to help students manage and build new knowledge from these co-curricular and cross-cutting literacies.

Nevertheless, we cannot be expert at everything. Even technologists find it hard to keep up with new technological applications. Jennings and Cashman, Chapter 3, urge us to be innovative, but who will help us? The message is that working together to build integrative curricula may be the way to go (see Higgs, Chapter 4).

The Changing Roles and Identities of Institutions

In the 1980s, academics were told not to worry about teaching when applying for positions at The National University of Ireland. In the 1990s, there were no mechanisms for measuring a commitment to excellence in teaching on applications for promotion. But in 2008, significant progress has been made: for example, applications for promotion must address the applicants' contributions and commitment to learning and teaching. What has prompted these changes at the institutional level?

The centrality of teaching in the university's mission in Ireland is adverted to by Malcolm Skilbeck in his 2001 report, *The University Challenged*, when he remarks:

"New and improved ways of teaching students is one of the challenges facing higher education staff" (p. 72). By 2001, the Irish Government had begun to provoke change by funding certain initiatives:

from the mid 1990s, targeted funding was made available through the Targeted Initiatives (subsequently renamed Strategic Initiatives) scheme. Innovations in teaching and learning were also supported through the Training of Trainers fund during that period. The increasing emphasis on the link between research and teaching and learning in the HEA's Programme for Research in Third Level Institutions (PRTL), highlighted in PRTL3 and PRTL4, led to a refocusing of teaching and learning in many institutions. And within the past two years, the availability of significant funding from the Strategic Innovation Fund to support and enhance innovation in teaching and learning has had a major impact on the visibility of teaching and learning in Irish universities (Hyland, 2007, p. 4).

As a result of these initiatives, a commitment to research-led teaching and to teaching as a form of scholarship has gained momentum in Irish higher education. Without these initiatives, publications such as this one would not be possible.

At the same time, professional bodies are also driving change. For example, disciplinary conferences and journals are beginning to allow some focus on education within the discipline. Researchers have responded to this by presenting their evidence on student learning at conferences, and publishing it in papers.

Strategic plans, parity of esteem for teaching, and inspirational leaders of change are vital if we are to bring about change within our own institutions. When making changes, however, we must be careful to ensure that wisdom and experience balance the excitement of new

initiatives. For example, institutional collaborations are being encouraged by the Higher Education Authority. Do institutions set up structures that help or hinder this collaboration? If the institution managers do not see these interactions and collaborations as important, and recognise the needs of students and the centrality of research in teaching as part of this, they may inadvertently allow agendas to dominate and structures to be set up that hinder progress. The recent emergence of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), for example, will play a significant part in future change in the third-level sector. Will we have the opportunity to define the KPIs that relate to learning and teaching, or will we simply be expected to respond to them?

Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

Hutchings (2004, p. 1) summarises the core habits and commitments of a Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) approach. They are:

that teaching is intellectual work, that student learning poses challenging problems that require careful investigation, that rich evidence about learning needs to guide thoughtful improvement and that the important work of learning and teaching should not be allowed to “disappear like dry ice” (Shulman, 2004, p. 142) but be made visible, shareable and useful to others.

The production of this book reflects a commitment to these values and a movement towards a scholarship of teaching and learning. For example, the contributors consider teaching and educational development in terms of research and are thus bridging the gap between teaching and research with the aim of improving student learning. As Hutchings and Shulman (2004 p. 150) note:

A scholarship of teaching is not synonymous with excellent teaching. It requires a kind of ‘going meta’, in which faculty frame and systematically investigate questions related to student learning – the conditions under which it occurs, what it looks like, how to deepen it and so forth – and do so with an eye not only to improving their own classroom but to advancing practice beyond it.

In the process of writing this book, contributors’ work has been made public for critique, following literature research, evidence collecting, analysis and discussion. As a result, we have begun to develop a common language of practice, and have engaged in the antithesis of “pedagogical solitude” (Shulman, 2004, p. 142). Thus the writing of this book has clarified the changing role of EDIN, from network to community of practice. Indeed, for Shulman (2004) SoLT can be accomplished only in the context of a community of scholars.

Conclusion

This book documents how change is occurring in the Irish higher education sector, from the top down and from the bottom up. It prompts us to consider our attitude and response to change: is it proactive or reactive? It therefore looks at some of the drivers of this change. It also makes clear that those involved in learning and teaching in Irish higher education can be the agents of change themselves, although some may first need to overcome potentially disempowering mismatches between their current roles and their senses of identity. What may be needed is a more holistic sense of academic identity, which can integrate traditional research-based roles and newer emphases on teaching and its scholarship.

To achieve this, teachers will need to acquire the skills they advocate for their students: learning how to learn and adapt, learning by doing, having clear goals, and knowing when to

ask for help. Teaching for student learning is complex, and the answers we seek are not in any one book. As teachers, we have been set free to find new ways of promoting students' conceptual development. If we can build a wide repertoire of teaching strategies, and adapt to the circumstances we find ourselves in, we will not only survive but thrive!

We thank all of the authors and readers who are striving with good intentions to support staff and improve student learning. And we offer this book as a step along the way.

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