REFLECTIONS ON CONVERSATIONS
AS A CATALYST FOR CHANGE 2003-2007

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Introduction

This chapter presents a four-year dialogue between the authors, both lecturers in an institute of technology, during which time we explored concepts such as learning, collaboration, power and complexity. We also focused on the impact of teaching on students, colleagues, the Institute and the outside world. As we discussed teaching and learning, the context in which we worked changed. Here the dialogue is presented through the signposts we remember. We assess how this dialogue affected us as teachers in higher education, and we claim that our conversations changed our practice.

Haigh's (2005) article about conversations prompted this chapter. He argues that, even though everyday conversations with colleagues may be unplanned and occur with a range of people, they have an impact on thoughts about teaching and learning. He says that such conversations are spontaneous, typically ranging across an impromptu choice of local and personal topics; they value all contributions, are non-threatening, and have storytelling as a common ingredient (Haigh, 2005, p. 4). We could identify with these observations, and with Haigh's finding that as his knowledge of the value of conversations has moved from tacit to explicit, he has come to see conversations as a support for professional learning (p. 11).

This last point is particularly relevant to us as lecturers in an institute of technology, where there is no requirement for formal education or development of teachers. Therefore professional knowledge about teaching is necessarily learned informally, and much of it is tacit. Eraut (2000, p. 133) argues that tacit knowledge can be "embedded in taken-for-granted activities, perceptions and norms" – activities such as conversations.

Russell and Bullock (1999, p. 32) argue that critical dialogue can be powerful in "naming and transforming teachers' professional knowledge". The notion of critical dialogue seems particularly relevant to an exploration of the value of conversations as a source of tacit professional knowledge, so we have adapted it as the basis for this chapter's structure. That is, in this chapter, we present a synopsis of our discussions (as we remember them) and then critique them.

The chapter starts with an introduction to the context in which we work, then moves through our conversations as a journey. We provide a milestone for each snippet of conversation, and we also present both our points of view. We conclude by considering how our conversations have changed our practice as teachers.

Context

We work in an institute of technology. In Ireland, institutes of technology provide higher education with a strong practical focus on vocational education, and an emphasis on industry links. There are 14 institutes of technology in the country, ranging from large institutes such as Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) to small institutes such as Dun Laoghaire Institute of Art Design and Technology (IADT).

IADT became an institute in 1997, and its programmes in Business and Humanities and Creative Technologies were developed and introduced between 1998 and 2001. It now has 1600 students across its three schools. Our students come from a broad range of backgrounds and with a wide range of points at Leaving Certificate level. We are required to work within the Irish National Qualifications Framework and have delegated authority to make awards at level 8. IADT programmes are developed and assessed locally.

As lecturers, our focus is on teaching (rather than research) and we are required to teach 16 hours per week during term. As teachers, we have full responsibility for curriculum, teaching and learning, and assessment. Each programme (course) is managed by a programme board, which consists of the programme lecturers with one person acting as programme coordinator, students representing the different years, and representatives from industry when available. The lecturers form a programme team to implement the programme.

Marion is now Head of Department of Learning Sciences and teaches instructional design. She used to teach physics and worked with primary and second-level teachers. Conor teaches accountancy, tax and other aspects of business and is programme coordinator for a level-7 degree in business and enterprise.

The conversations reported below took place as we went about our daily business. Sometimes we would meet to discuss a particular matter or plan a workshop or seminar. More often, we talked as we met in the corridor, over coffee and lunch, and occasionally in our offices.

Conversations and milestones

January 2003
From January to March 2003, Marion developed and ran a series of three workshops on "Learning", "Teaching" and "Assessment".

> *Marion*
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> *I joined the Institute nearly ten years ago as a lecturer in science education after twenty years teaching and working at second level. The interest and engagement of my colleagues immediately struck me but I was stunned by the lack of theoretical frameworks for teaching.*
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> *Taking courage, I organised and ran a series of workshops on learning, teaching and assessment. Originally the workshops were for my school (Science and Technology, now Creative Technologies), then I invited colleagues from Business and Humanities. Through these workshops I met Conor. We started talking about learning, teaching and assessment.*
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> *Conor*
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> *I joined the Institute in 2002. Previous work experience includes nine years as a third-level lecturer and 16 years as an accountant/tax adviser in three countries. My notion of teaching was based on how I had been taught – that is, keep explaining until most of the class "seem to get it". I had no idea of theoretical frameworks for teaching.*

September 2003

At the start of the new academic year, we set up an ad hoc Learning and Teaching Group with a colleague from Creative Arts. We recruited interested colleagues via email. About 25 of our colleagues from across the Institute expressed an interest in joining. During the year, we held several events, including workshops on setting exams and on using PowerPoint for presentations. These were well received.

> *Conor*
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> *In the competitive world of accountancy practice, there is a natural desire to improve one's professional abilities in any way possible. As the third-level teaching environment is somewhat less competitive, I thought it would be logical to set up the ad hoc Learning and Teaching Group. I looked on this initiative as evolutionary – that is, helping learning by improving my/our efficiency – rather than revolutionary – that is, changing pedagogical philosophy. At Marion's seminars on learning, teaching and assessment in early 2003, I would sometimes disagree with her. When this happened, I would ask a few questions during the seminars and we would basically agree to disagree. Because I did not know Marion very well at that stage, I did not discuss informally my disagreements. While still firmly rooted in my "teaching delivery" approach, a few niggling doubts began to pop into my head.*
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> *Marion*
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> *Setting up the ad hoc Learning and Teaching Group was important. Even though in practice we did very little, it made a statement about teaching and learning in the Institute. It showed that we thought learning and teaching was important. It also made me start reading about teaching, learning and assessment in higher education.*

At this stage, we didn't quite know what we were doing. Teaching and learning was important. We thought everyone should be interested and many were. But the time to explore and consider our teaching practice had to be squeezed into the busy academic year. Were lecturers willing to make time? Did they just want teaching tips or did they want to understand the processes of teaching and learning?

Moreover, learning to teach in the institutes of technology is an on-the-job process; that is, new lecturers are allocated the same teaching loads as experienced lecturers. As a result, they may have "very challenging roles in their first week" (Eraut, 2007a, p. 408) and struggle to survive. Eraut (2007a, p. 408) suggests that for workers in such contexts, survival in the first year depends on prioritising tasks and developing routines to help manage the cognitive load. These routines can become tacit and embedded in personal knowledge and work for the lecturer. Engaging with ideas about teaching and learning can challenge lecturers' personal knowledge and make them question their tacit routines.

March 2004

All programmes were revalidated to match the new National Framework of Qualifications (see http://www.nfq.ie/nfq/en). This was the first contact we had with the Framework. One of the things we had to do was reframe our programme in terms of learning outcomes rather than content taught – this was a demanding task for some of us.

Marion

I found the revalidation process easy. I have worked in curriculum development and the matching of programme objectives to the Framework I found straightforward and enjoyed. The dimensions of the Framework made sense to me as I had read work by Lawton, Stenhouse and other curricular leaders. I didn't realise the fundamental shift it made to our work. The student-centred focus meant that we had to consider the practical implications.

Conor

I found the revalidation process tortuous. The terminology was difficult to understand, and the whole point of the exercise was lost on me. The process appeared to be limited to documents with little or no practical relevance. I saw this process as a distraction from the learning process. At this stage, I was "on my high horse" and convinced that I was correct. I did not think there was any need to discuss, either formally or informally, this issue. Perhaps this is a weakness of critical dialogue (Russell and Bullock, 1999) in that such a dialogue requires both parties to appreciate that there is an issue.

Marion

I disagreed with Conor. I saw the value of the process and thought it easy to do. But I did focus on the curriculum and the nature of the documents and didn't consider the impact on the assessment.

The implementation of the National Qualifications Framework for all our programmes was a critical point for teaching and learning in the Institutes of Technology. It shifted the focus of the curriculum from coverage of content – that is, teacher-centred – to learning outcomes – that is, student-centred. The implications of this shift are still being explored. There is an additional consideration here. The Framework was developed because the legislative basis of our sector of higher education changed with the *Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999*. This legislation very clearly states our responsibility in terms of fair assessment of students (Government of Ireland, 1999, p. 26). This is a further shift from content delivery to learning enablement.

September 2004

Three of us from IADT attended the first All Ireland Society for Higher Education (AISHE) Conference at Trinity College Dublin. Marion presented a poster on assessment and our colleague presented a poster on the National Qualifications Framework.

During this period, Peter Doolittle from the Educational Psychology Program at Virginia Tech spent a term at the IADT. Peter had presented at EdTech conferences over the years and is an educational psychologist with a strong interest in learning, teaching and e-learning. He developed and presented a series of seminars for IADT staff during the term he spent with us. Subsequently, he set up the *International Journal for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education* (see http://www.isetl.org/ijtlhe).

As part of the academic cycle, we are required to review all our programmes on a five-yearly basis. As a new institute, we started our first programme review at this time.

Conor

The AISHE conference was an energy booster. The exposure to so many practitioners with a genuine passion for teaching and learning boosted my confidence in the pursuit of better practice.

Peter Doolittle gave a series of seminars on teaching, learning and assessment from an educational psychology viewpoint. This profoundly changed my attitude to my work; the emphasis moved from what I did to what the student did (from teaching to learning). I began to make connections between what Peter and Marion were saying. It would have been easy to dismiss Peter's message as American and not applicable to the Irish learning environment. But because Marion attended Peter's seminars, I was able to approach Marion in the staff canteen to tease out the relevance to our students. These chats typically involved other academics who happened to sit at the same table. The general thrust of the conversations concerned how these ideas could make a difference to our students. The bouncing of these new (to me) ideas back and forth in a non-threatening environment was fascinating. I felt comfortable contributing to the conversations even though the area of educational psychology appeared to be a huge area of study. The conversations sometimes happened over two minutes in a corridor. If a thought came into my mind a few days later, I would just raise it with Marion or Peter the next time I bumped into them.

The combination of formal seminars and readily available informal conversations made a big difference to my approach to teaching and learning. It could be argued that I was very fortunate in having access to experts like Marion and Peter. But the availability of back-up informal conversations gave me and other people an opportunity to reflect on formal learning and tease out the issues relevant to our students.

Marion

This year brought many changes. We attended the first AISHE conference with a colleague. This linked us into the network of educational developers and those interested in teaching and learning in higher education. Independently, I attended all of Peter Doolittle's sessions. They were stimulating and although I was familiar with the concepts through my background, it was refreshing to hear and discuss them again. I refer to Peter's notes often. Peter's seminars provided a theoretical framework to start discussing teaching and learning and a context for conversations with colleagues.

The process of programme review was challenging. I became a programme coordinator of a level-8 honours degree in Psychology Applied to Information Technology. As programme coordinator, I had to lead the review. From a curriculum point of view, my experience in curriculum development helped. A colleague and I developed a template for writing modules and worked with the two schools to support module writing. I saw the gap between the modules and the different styles of writing learning outcomes, indicative content and particularly references and the overall programme. Linking modules to programme learning outcomes was quite a challenge. At this stage, I was reading Biggs

*(2003) and thinking about constructive alignment, and we tried to incorporate
this idea into our curriculum planning.*

The teaching and learning seminars made teaching visible in the Institute. At the same time, programme review demanded that we review and develop an understanding of curriculum in higher education so that we could support each other and our colleagues. The two processes provided a theoretical framework for further development. Osborn and Johnson (1999, p. 5) argue that although "learning and teaching is finally receiving the recognition it deserves in tertiary education", the time needed to develop teaching is still at a premium. Informal discussions therefore provide a means of enabling lecturers to make changes in their everyday practice, even when their time is mostly taken up with large-scale changes such as programme review.

June 2005

By the end of the academic year, both schools had completed programme review and the revised programmes were ready for implementation in September 2005.

> *Marion*
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> *By the end of programme review, I was tired. We reviewed the Psychology programme and developed it considerably. We focused on the needs of the students and tried to develop a coherent experience that enabled them to develop the disciplinary knowledge and skills required of psychology graduates. I am not sure that it is fully student-centred but it is a step on the way. I found again that when developing the curriculum, you get to a stage where all you want to do is to get it done. Did this affect the quality of the curriculum?*
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> *Conor*
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> *The review resulted in a complete overhaul of our business programme. Substantial change involves risk-taking, but the ability to run ideas by Marion on a continuing basis was extremely valuable. By this time, we had developed a working relationship where it was relatively easy to go straight to the issue without any distractions.*

This was a year of contrasts. There was the focus on teaching and student learning through the series of seminars and the curriculum focus of programme review. It was stimulating, demanding and exhausting.

2005–06 Academic Year

This year, IADT prepared for and received delegation of authority to make awards to level 8 in the National Qualifications Framework from the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC). Marion Palmer was seconded half-time to support e-learning across the Institute.

> *Marion*
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> *In 2001, I started the Doctor of Education degree at Queen's University Belfast with the idea of researching science education. As I talked to Conor and other colleagues, I realised that I wanted to find out more about teaching in the institutes. This is now the focus of my doctoral dissertation. Our conversations*

challenge me to support my arguments about teaching and learning with appropriate research. Talking to colleagues about e-learning has made me articulate my ideas more clearly.

Conor

During the programme review process, we had committed ourselves to an annual "mini programme review" process. During the first review, it became clearer that the learner-centred approach required a more team-oriented approach from the teaching staff. It is one thing to formally declare that we will act as a team; however, it is quite different to get the team to act as a team or community (Kofman and Senge, 1993). Perhaps informal dialogue can help to bind individual academics into a team striving to bring students to their programme learning outcomes?

Marion

What struck me was how Conor used the resources available. For example, each year we host students from Loras College Dubecq Iowa. Each year, they are accompanied by a lecturer – in this case, psychology lecturer Dr Mary Johnson. She gave one presentation to students on the psychology programme, but we didn't meet her and talk to her about teaching and learning psychology. Yet Conor used her to help revise and develop the business programme.

September 2006

The second AISHE Conference was run at NUI Maynooth, and we attended. Again this gave us an opportunity to discuss teaching and learning with colleagues from across the third-level sector. It also provided stimulation and thought for the start of the year. Conor continued as programme coordinator. Marion was coordinating the psychology degree and continued her secondment to support e-learning. Marion started researching teaching in institutes of technology. One major change was the implementation of a new version of WebCT, which had to be rolled out to staff and students.

March 2007

As a result of many factors, the Institute established a Teaching and Learning sub-committee of Academic Council, meaning that learning, teaching and assessment were highlighted within the terms of reference of Academic Council. Marion and Conor became members of both Academic Council and the Teaching and Learning sub-committee.

Marion

I became Head of Department of Learning Sciences in February 2007. I am now responsible for leading the Institute in teaching and learning. This is a challenge. How do I help the Institute develop a coherent approach to teaching and learning?

Conor

Marion's advice, through informal conversations, has proven invaluable in helping the dramatic overhaul of a business programme during a time of significant

external changes. While we have very different teaching styles and paradigms, I think our conversations have worked for me because I:

- *had external challenges – that is, I moved to a new Institute with different students and different programmes, and also had to deal with the National Qualifications Framework*
- *was exposed to new ideas through Peter Doolittle's seminars*
- *had easy access to conversations with colleagues where the new ideas could be "tested"*
- *appreciated the non-threatening environment provided by such conversations (no minutes are taken). It is easier to fully examine ideas in an informal environment where political tensions are unlikely. It is easier to ask questions in a conversation than in a formal seminar because there are usually fewer participants*
- *found that informal conversations are, by their nature, customised to one's students.*

Marion

Over the past four years, I have been astounded at how Conor has put into everyday practice what we read and discuss. At the beginning of our conversations,the business courses were innovative in focus but delivered in a traditional way. Assessment was 70 percent examination and 30 percent continuous assessment (CA). The CA was Christmas and Easter exams. Now many of the modules are 30 percent examination and 70 percent CA. There is team teaching and integrated practical assessments. Conor and his colleagues have developed a process of using the academic structures, such as programme boards, to review the programme on an annual basis. The students are an integral part of the conversation. There seems to me to be true partnership. It is also clear that Conor and his team have made a paradigm shift from teaching to learning (Kugel, 1993, p. 321): they really have become student-centred.

The learning from experts, peers and students required by professionals (Eraut, 2007b, p. 132) was evident in the business programme where they had been revising and developing the curriculum and the programme teaching and learning strategies, as well as developing new and demanding assessments.

September 2007

At this time, the Teaching and Learning Committee was developing the Institute teaching and learning strategy. Many of the ideas and theories about learning and teaching, which we had discussed, were being fed into the strategic review process that was underway in the Institute. Conor was more confident in his own ideas because he felt that they had been "tested" in chats with Marion. There were many challenges – for example, all programmes in the Institute must achieve the same standards as identified by the learning outcomes in the National Qualifications Framework. The focus on learners and learning meant that assessment and assessment strategies were (and are) key issues in the Institute. Yet the allocation of resources – for example, teaching hours and class sizes– was and is related to traditional models of teaching in the disciplines.

At the time of writing, the Institute seems to be straddling two paradigms (Barr and Tagg, 1998, p. 700–701): the instructional paradigm and the learning paradigm. This is where we are now.

Review

We are now teaching (and learning) in an environment and a period that is different from the environment and period in which we learned; this means that our experiences as students are not sufficient for teaching today's students. One of us has formal education for teaching and the other does not, but we both find that putting educational theory and knowledge into practice is demanding and challenging. We agree that how we think about teaching and learning impacts on practice, but there is still a gap between theory and practice. Our conversations have informed us about our practice and values. One of us – Conor – has moved from tips to theoretical structures that support teaching practice; the other – Marion – has been challenged to put known theory into practice and has moved to research teaching.

These conversations were informal work-related discussions (Eraut, 2000, p. 120) where we explored our ideas about teaching and learning. There are considerable advantages to this type of informal workplace learning. For example, it suits the culture of teaching in the Institute; it can make an impact and change practice from the bottom up in classrooms and lecture halls; and it can explore new and risky ideas (Eraut, 2000, p. 120). There are also disadvantages, however. For example, learning may not take place if teaching and learning is not part of the everyday discourse. There is also a lack of documentation or record to revisit or follow up (Haigh, 2005, p. 14).

We are not educational developers – or at least not formally – but these conversations have been a form of educational development for both of us. This chapter is a means of reviewing and analysing a process that has emerged over a period of years. We have tried to capture "the spirit and vitality of the conversations" (Peseta, 2007, p. 17), so as to add to the discourse of educational development in Ireland.

Conclusions

These are just some of the conversations we have had about learning, teaching and assessment. They reflect our learning from and through theory and practice. Many of our colleagues contributed to these conversations. They have helped us develop as teachers in higher education. They have helped change career paths.

We claim the power of conversations and their impact on our teaching practice. Through talking over the years, we have explored assumptions about teaching and learning. We have put theory into practice in different ways. We have moved from changing ourselves and developing our students to changing and developing our Institute.

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