

## WRITING IDENTITY THROUGH THE EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPERS IN IRELAND NETWORK (EDIN)

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### Introduction

In Ireland we are only beginning to identify the role educational development should play in learning and teaching, policy-making, educational research and scholarship. With this background in mind, this chapter asks whether countries such as Ireland should look to contexts with a more defined history to fashion an identity, or forge a scholarship based on our distinctive perspectives, skills and approaches. The chapter uses the Educational Developers in Ireland Network (EDIN) – and in particular the EDIN writing retreat (from which this publication stems) – as a case study in the value of the latter approach. As part of its analysis, the chapter considers the notion of cross-institutional collaborative writing and discusses it in relation to the emerging identity of EDIN.

The chapter is divided into three sections. The first introduces the EDIN network and its attempts to establish a more formal identity in a country emerging in educational development. It discusses the complexities of defining an identity and asks just how open countries such as Ireland should be to outside contexts and influences. The second section examines the notion of writing collaboratively as a key characteristic of the EDIN network. It introduces some possible theoretical frameworks that could be used to research cross-institutional writing and describes the writing process undertaken for *Emerging Issues II: The Changing Roles and Identities of Teachers and Learners in Higher Education* linking our writing to our roles as educational developers. Finally, the third section explores whether it is possible to construct an identity, or at least establish a cohesive voice, through either the process or products of our writing.

### What is EDIN?

The Educational Developers in Ireland Network (EDIN) was established in 2002 and currently has over 50 members from each of the seven universities in Ireland and many of the institutes of technology. Members include educational and academic developers and other staff charged with learning and teaching development responsibilities.

Originally a small, informal network, EDIN has expanded not only in size but in output – in the growing number of collaborative projects we undertake, in our exchange of information and expertise, and in our applications for and securing of funding. This growth alone has raised questions about our identity, our objectives and our aims as a network. Many extensive formal and informal discussions have taken place including an “away day” held in 2005 to clarify a vision for the network, and a commissioned research and consultancy project undertaken in 2006. The final commissioned report (Wisker and Antiniou, 2006) proposes a framework for the sustained development of EDIN by reflecting on the “history and nature of educational development networks and locat[ing] EDIN within a rapidly changing international context” (p.2).

The establishment of a more formal identity for our network is challenging. The survey carried out as part of the 2006 report revealed that many EDIN members originally joined to

network with other professionals, to share information and to support others in educational development roles. For example:

*I thought it an excellent opportunity to finally get to know all my peers from around the country working in educational development (quoted in Wisker and Antiniou, 2006, p. 12).*

*To develop my identity as an educational developer [...] To have honest conversations and enjoy one another's talents, creativity, specialisms and company (quoted in Wisker and Antiniou, 2006, p. 12).*

As we grow in size and output, however, some members have raised questions such as the following about EDIN's future:

- Can we continue to develop at the same rate while maintaining such an informal structure?
- Is it appropriate to be represented at national level by unelected members without a mandate?
- How can we maintain our independence?
- Is there a danger that other groupings or organisations may replace EDIN if we do not firmly establish our presence?
- What funding models are we going to follow?
- Has the time now come to secure a clear management structure, with well-defined roles and transparent lines of communication?
- As the network has no official status, is anyone outside of aware of us? (Wisker and Antiniou, 2006, pp. 12–13)

These questions generate broader concerns about our aims and identity. For example:

- To what extent is our identity as EDIN confined by the boundaries of this group?
- Can we map our individual identities as separate members to our collective identity as a network?
- To what extent can our current structure underpin a substantial identity for EDIN?
- How open are we to outside contexts and influences?
- And how can we move forward as a cohesive group with unified aims and objectives and focused EDIN activities?

The Wisker and Antoniou (2006) report questions whether EDIN represents a community of practice; it asks us to consider what disadvantages we might find in a more developed EDIN; and it asks how far EDIN's growth and development mirrors the international context.

As educational developers in Ireland, our individual identities are still forming, and it is important to remember that EDIN's identity is shaped not least by our roles as educational developers within widely varying institutes and universities. Moreover, Ireland has little history of educational development and lags far behind the US and Australia. Even our neighbours in the UK have established themselves as educational developers and in the process formed an identity (Land, 2004). In Ireland, we are only starting to demarcate the role of the educational or academic developer, and the part people in that role should play in learning and teaching, policy-making, educational research and the scholarship of learning

and teaching. But the extent to which EDIN's role will or indeed should mirror international contexts remains to be seen.

As a nationally based professional community, I would argue that EDIN cannot yet be neatly categorised. For example, EDIN possesses many characteristics of *communities of practice* – shared concerns and passions, a joint enterprise, a commitment to learning together through mutual engagement, a shared repertoire of communal resources (Wenger, 1998; Wenger *et al.*, 2002). But look to characteristics of *learning communities* and we also find features in common with EDIN – commitment and professionalism, value of ideas, collaboration built into the fabric of the culture (Johnson in Retallick *et al.*, 1999). And then EDIN can also be usefully compared to *social covenants*, insofar as it is maintained by loyalty, kinship, obligation, duty, responsibility, and reciprocity (Sacks 1997, quoted by Sergiovanni in Retallick *et al.*, 1999). Indeed, even the notion of the *learning organisation*, once used solely in the context of business and industry, is now becoming applicable to the changing identity of higher education institutions in Ireland and abroad. After all, terms such as “quality learning”, “organisational learning” and “empowering the learner” are beginning to infiltrate the vocabularies of the institutions we represent, at the same time as the language and principles of business and commerce are becoming increasingly intertwined with the language and principles of the university (Coombe in Retallick *et al.*, 1999).

Therefore, if we cannot yet define *what* EDIN is, perhaps we should not rush to conclude *who* EDIN is. Identity is constantly fluid, and arguably should be viewed as a process rather than a thing – as something that is constantly “becoming” and that does not necessarily ever reach a state of “being”. It is something that is undoubtedly influenced by the past and nurtured by the present, but it also anticipates the future. Lawrence Grossberg (1996) proposes the notion of “belonging without identity” – that is, the idea of being free-flowing, not tied to any fixed structure or membership.

Nevertheless, certain pressures – to authorise our work as educational developers, influence or inform policy-making, present our work on a national or international stage, and foster a research community – drive us to formalise who we are and what we do. To do this, perhaps we need to look not only outwards but also inwards to the core of our network, considering what features might be unique, or at least particular, to EDIN. One such feature is EDIN's record of organising cross-institutional collaborative writing retreats, which produce joint publications such as *Emerging Issues II*. These writing products not only reflect the professional issues and concerns that drive us as individual network members, but viewed collectively embody the emergence of a broader picture of educational development in Ireland. But can the process of writing collaboratively be linked to identity definition? The next part of this paper explores the notion of the writing retreat and collaborative writing in relation to EDIN, before asking whether it is possible to form an identity or at least claim an independent but cohesive voice through both the process of our writing and the products of it.

## **Expressing Identity through Writing**

### *Possible Theoretical Frameworks*

When examining a cross-institutional network collaborating through writing, it is challenging to find an appropriate theoretical framework. Here I simply point to some frameworks that could inspire more in-depth research in this area, particularly those that incorporate the notion of dialogue, writing, conversation or narrative.

Perhaps the obvious theoretical departure point is the socio-cultural perspective of group cognition. The collaboration of intellectual peers in educational development is consistent with the activities referenced in socio-cultural theory, and could form a guiding theoretical paradigm. But it should not be the only one. For example, in the educational field, narrative enquiry has been proposed as a way of investigating the processes involved in identity construction (for example, Connelly and Clandinin, 1987; 1995). Narrative theorists argue that “it is in narrative tellings that we construct identities: selves are made coherent and meaningful through the narrative ... work that they do” (Benwell and Stokoe, 2006, p. 42). Therefore, the construction of academic identities through participation in a network such as EDIN could be studied through an interpretive analysis of participants’ verbatim narratives.

Another theoretical lens that might help reveal the practices, narratives and dynamics of this collaborative network is Bakhtin’s work on voices, social languages and dialogicality (Bakhtin, 1986). That the individual and the social environment are inherently related is fundamental to Bakhtin’s dialogical thinking. But a consideration of the individual as dialogical self, composed of mutually defining “I-positions” (Hermans & Kempen, 1993) might be a means of broadening the socio-cultural approach to include both individual and group-specific histories that inform collaboration.

The notion of writing collaboratively for academic publication, and the move from private to public that this involves, is also interesting here. One common belief is that “the act of writing transfers private thoughts from the purely subjective into a public domain of shared language and discourse” (Carlile and Jordan, 2007, p. 26). But dialogical theory emphasises the social, cultural, situational and historical nature of cognition and other “subjective” activities (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Saljo, 2002; Bakhtin, 1986; Vygotsky, 1978). If subjectivity is socially and culturally mediated, is writing, as an expression of voice, less subjective than one might assume? Moreover, a person usually speaks to or writes for someone – even if that someone is only the self. Thus, dialogue is never free from its relations to other people, history, culture, community: The word in language is half someone else’s. It becomes “one’s own” only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention. Prior to this moment of appropriation, the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language (it is not after all, out of a dictionary that the speaker gets his words!), but rather it exists in other people’s mouths, in other people’s concrete contexts, serving other people’s intentions: it is from there that one must take the word and make it one’s own (Bakhtin, 1986, pp. 293–294).

Bakhtin’s observations prompt three questions:

- If our individual stories are neither autonomous nor socially detached in the first place, can we truly write or express “the self”?
- Does this mean that the notion of collaborative writing as a *shared story* gains strength?
- If we are writing an “emerging identity” in these collaborative retreats (either as a network or as individual educational developers), to what extent can this identity be located in both the content of what we write and in the methodological frameworks or epistemologies we choose or are expected to write in?

### *Writing within Our Roles*

Roles within the EDIN community vary widely. Not only do educational developers within the network come from a variety of institutions (often with varying learning and teaching agendas and emphases), but we have different levels of expertise and, more often than not, different discipline or career backgrounds. Consider, for example, the authors in this volume: of those who work directly in learning and teaching or academic practice and have broadly similar roles, none bears the title “educational developer”. Rather, we see a range of other titles (Lecturer in Educational Development, Academic Developer, Academic Coordinator, Dean of Learning and Teaching, Lecturer in Education, Learning Development Officer, Programme Coordinator, Teaching Support Officer and so on). Likewise, some members are employed as academics, as “lecturers” expected to research and publish accordingly; others are employed as administrators, many of whom are academics who have migrated from various disciplines, but now have administrative rather than academic appointments. This diversity gives us exciting opportunities to look beyond the “known” of our immediate contexts in developing our professional identities; at the same time, in this cross-organisational yet collaborative context, it is challenging to create a joint dialogue, a common language that bridges our organisational structures, and a shared identity that nevertheless reflects our diverse backgrounds.

As educational developers (in the broad sense) both coming from and working across diverse disciplines, we are also acutely aware of the different methods and frameworks for academic enquiry used across our institutions, as well as those that belong to our disciplinary backgrounds. But what about our own methods and frameworks? Can we articulate our own field of inquiry, our particular scholarship of teaching at university level, so that it frames enquiries into teaching and learning as a scholarly activity? Peseta (2007) suggests that arts-based enquiry can support academic developers’ desire to create “a space in which to examine and re-imagine what can legitimately be written about the project of academic development” (Peseta, 2007, p. 15). She also observes, however, that the writing in the field of academic development fails to express how the work itself feels:

*Many of the research accounts I come across lack the spirit and vitality of the conversations that take place among us – the wonderful laughter and energy of our practice; occasionally its sadness, longing, regret, and desire, the confusion of difficult decision making; and at other times, the joy and celebration of collaborative successes, too (Peseta, 2007, p. 17).*

The pressures of conforming to writing within an imposed framework might well have something to do with this. There is no doubt that it is important to establish a culture of research, scholarship and publication in educational development. We also need to publish to advance our careers as educational developers. But often we must do so according to the norms and conventions of an often unfamiliar research paradigm. To date, educational development has taken on board the “language of the tribe” (Clough, 2002). It is only since educational development internationally has begun to claim a history of practice and scholarship that questions are being raised about the possibilities and limitations of its research economy (Brew, 2003; Eisner, 2004; Harland and Staniforth, 2003; Peseta, 2007).

Even educational developers employed in “administrative” rather than “academic” positions are increasingly expected to combine a strong track record of research publications with practice-based skills. The pressure to publish coupled with lower than desirable publication rates are recurring themes in the literature. According to McGrail *et al* (2006), there are many

reasons why academics do not write for publication including lack of momentum, lack of support structure, time constraints, lack of framework, lack of confidence in ability, limited understanding of the writing process, fear and anxiety. Ideally, academic writing is a process through which learning and scholarship are nourished, and through which positive dialogue within and between the disciplines is initiated and sustained. But the emergence of the “new public management” has moved writing away from this ideal, so that it is now often driven by a “negative ethic” (Murray and Moore, 2006, pp. x–xi).

Academic writing retreats and writing groups are beginning to emerge in the literature as valuable and credible means to increase academic writing output (Lee and Boud, 2003; McGrail *et al*, 2006; Murray and Moore, 2006). As Barbara Grant notes, “writing is so often done in an atmosphere of privation, loneliness, pressure, anxiety” (2007, p. 10). On the other hand, the evidence suggests that short-term, collaborative, intensive writing environments can boost the quality of ideas (Grant and Knowles, 2000). This is because they temporarily remove people from the day-to-day distractions of their professional lives inside the university and personal lives outside it (Grant, 2007; Moore *et al* 2005, Moore, 1995; 2003).

#### *The EDIN Writing Retreat Process: Emerging Issues II*

Certainly, the EDIN writing retreats confirm the findings in the literature. For example, feedback from the 2006 EDIN writing retreat (which focused on individuals writing for separate publications) highlighted the value of time to write and freedom from interruption; the balance between solitude and communal time; the relaxed and supportive atmosphere; and the beautiful surroundings that stimulated thought processes. All those surveyed viewed themselves as having achieved at least 90 percent of their writing goals. Some members new to the retreat process expressed surprise at how much they could actually write in such a short period of time. But the success of the writing retreat was not defined solely in terms of productivity: it was also measured by the extent to which the retreat created a forum in which honest dialogue and critical debate could take place. The collegial aspect of the retreat was also well received – the support of others, the pleasant sociability, the informal and yet informative atmosphere in which to engage with ideas, and the stimulation of everyone working at the same time.

The origins of the EDIN writing retreat are well documented in *Emerging Issues in the Practice of University Learning and Teaching* (O'Neill *et al*, 2005). In many ways, the writing retreat for the present publication, *Emerging Issues II*, borrowed heavily from the successes of previous EDIN retreats, but it also departed from them. Essentially, its aims were similar to those of *Emerging Issues* (O'Neill *et al*, 2005), insofar as a group of educational developers gathered to produce a series of writings on issues of learning and teaching, to be published as a single, cohesive output. The cohort of writers for *Emerging Issues II* differed somewhat from the earlier retreat, however, as did both the process of the publication decision-making process, and of the retreat itself. These differences reflected the current context of EDIN and educational development in Ireland. The writing retreat for *Emerging Issues* (O'Neill *et al*, 2005) took place close to the end of the writing process, as the culmination of some months of pre-work and writing preparation; participants' attendance was in part motivated by the desire to complete and/or review their chapters. In comparison, the *Emerging Issues II* retreat was spread out over time: its initial two days took place post-abstract but before the submission of a first draft; its second two days occurred some months later, after a full draft was written and a peer review had taken place.



The planning and writing process for *Emerging Issues II* also differed from *Emerging Issues* (O'Neill *et al*, 2005). Once funding for the project was secured and some months before the retreat took place, EDIN members were invited to submit “ideas” for a new publication. These ideas could be written up on the EDIN website, sent to members via email, or simply “talked through” at a group meeting. Some weeks later, interested parties met for a day to decide on the exact nature of the publication and the process involved. Ideas ranged from a well-developed proposal for a book, to general thoughts and ideas. The members of the group knew each other well and were all passionate and vocal about their interests, so the ensuing dialogue was purposeful, critical and collegial. Interestingly, an almost seamless discussion led to a unanimous decision to create a successor to *Emerging Issues* (O'Neill *et al*, 2005), entitled *Emerging Issues II: The Changing Roles and Identities of Teachers and Learners in Higher Education*. Undoubtedly, we had all grown as educational developers since the previous publication, but in our conversations at that meeting it became apparent that we were still very much emerging both as a network, and as a group of educational developers attempting to work collaboratively across institutions. Our collective ideas for the project showed us that there was a new series of issues emerging for the educational developer in Ireland, new themes that called for exploration, and a growth and change within this context that deserved to be documented or challenged.

It was decided that because we all valued the collaborative nature of EDIN, the call for chapters should strongly suggest (though not prescribe) that chapters be co-written, ideally with someone from another institution or university. Feedback from the 2006 writing retreat prompted this decision, because it showed that many of the participants (both new EDIN members and old) had noted networking and collaboration as a positive outcome. As one participant noted, “even though we meet fairly regularly at meetings we don’t have time to discuss our work so the retreat served as a different type of networking experience – research networking – as opposed to professional practice networking that occurs at meetings” (Unpublished feedback in possession of EDIN).

#### *The Peer-Review Process*

At the meeting described above, we also decided that the writing of this book should be strongly developmental in approach. Consequently, we agreed that the writing process would include peer review, which would be supportive but also thorough and critical. It would be founded on trust: “mistakes” would be accepted rather than criticised, and the project’s cooperative aspect would be highly valued (Anderson and Boud, 1996).

The peer review process was as follows. Interested authors submitted chapter abstracts followed some weeks later by a chapter plan. Then the first of two two-day writing retreats (held in April 2007) focused on peer review. On the first day of this retreat, chapter plans were presented for peer review, which was given in front of the whole group and which included critical evaluation as well as positive commentary. Writers were encouraged to seek focused feedback, but participants were also given a general feedback sheet that prompted them to consider the following questions when reviewing each plan:

- Is the work timely in relation to contemporary dialogue, and does it add new ideas?
- What is the intended contribution to the literature?
- Has the relevant literature been identified?
- Is the intended audience clear and apt?
- Is the topic clearly stated?
- Is the scope of the paper established or is the work trying to cover too much ground?

- Is there a clear logic to the outline as presented?

Because all participants engaged with the plans of their fellow authors, the writing process developed a sense of purpose and context: links were forged, common themes emerged, and people began the process of cross-referencing others. Groups of three to four chapters based on similar themes, structures or challenges formed, and we agreed that the members of each group would peer-review their written drafts using a standard form (see the Appendix) before the second retreat. After this, an independent peer review would be commissioned for each chapter, before the copy-editing process. Both peer review processes envisaged reviewers as critical friends, rather than gatekeepers determining what gets published.

The writing process started on the second morning of the first retreat with a five-minute writing prompt that asked participants what they intended to write that day as a result of the feedback they had received the day before. Participants used the remainder of the day to write at their own pace.

The follow-up writing retreat took place in November 2007. It gave writers an opportunity to write a revised draft, on the basis of peer review feedback.

Our peer-review process goes some way towards supporting participating authors in their writing and making the writing process more affirming and productive – undoubtedly a valuable outcome. But with increasing numbers of participants feeling the pressure to publish in international peer-reviewed journals, the choice made by EDIN members to focus to date on a purely developmental approach may have to be reconsidered for the next project.

### **Constructing a Voice through What and How we Write**

Perhaps EDIN members are some way from writing about their practice “as it feels”. Perhaps our writing will emphasise “victory narratives that defend and extend our relevance as a community, rather than making public the intense difficulty of our work” (Peseta, 2007, p. 17). Perhaps our voices are still muffled by the protocols of more established research communities. Even so, we must not forget that we are at a crossroads, with a unique opportunity to begin forging an identity inspired by our particular contexts – our collaborative projects and our collaborative writing ventures.

As academic writers, we are all too aware that developing an individual voice appropriate for broadcast is often far from simple. Co-authoring with someone from a different institution increases the complexity, and the challenges go well beyond the demands of fusing different writing styles. Genuinely collaborative writing involves working together over a period of time to address concerns, tease through ideas, discover new paths, find common ground, form consensuses, and present a piece as a unified whole.

EDIN is a network that does not just talk about collaboration and dissemination in theory but embraces it in practice – this adds a crucial dimension to its emerging identity. EDIN’s members may differ widely in their roles within the network, their institutional disciplines and their day-to-day jobs; however, the integrity of the group is founded on members working jointly on issues and passions that can override institutional concerns if necessary. This lends cohesiveness and honesty to the voice we develop when we write collaboratively.



Participating in networks, retreats and publications such as those sponsored by EDIN gives us the time and space to contribute to and benefit from both informal and formal spoken and written conversations in which we share, dissect and disseminate knowledge. Through dialogue of this kind, we discover shared experiences to write about, such as those canvassed in the chapters in *Emerging Issues II*. But *what* we write about provides only a limited basis for the creation of our voice and identity. Therefore, our EDIN dialogue is important because through it we gain the confidence to write and theorise about practice that challenges, excites and motivates us. And eventually, because we are expressing *who* we are – our particular challenges, concerns and investigations – through a process (of critical exchange, peer review and publication) that complements this exploration, it is likely that key identities will emerge effortlessly from the writing process before they dissolve into another stage of becoming – as they should.

### **Final thoughts**

Writing is commonly and somewhat naively seen to be an act that preserves a self in time, but writing can never be a simple or timeless expression of identity. Writing and identity wrap around each other seamlessly; where one ends and the other begins is impossible to define. Identity, as I have argued, is constantly fluid, never static. Moreover, there can be no doubt that the process through which we make our writing public gradually estranges our writing from ourselves. Therefore, we should be satisfied to allow our identity as EDIN to continually grow and change as its members grow and change, and as our concerns (either individually or collectively) grow and change. Moreover, as we disseminate our writings to a wider audience, we must be content for our transient identity to merge with the many different contexts of our readers, and to take shape beyond our individual and collective selves. Perhaps the value and meaning of this identity will emerge only when we give others the freedom to deconstruct it.

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## APPENDIX

### *Peer Review Feedback Sheet*

Author to complete and give to peer reviewer:

1. What is the audience for this piece of writing?
2. In one reader-friendly sentence, what is the main hypothesis/thesis you are arguing/testing?
3. What is the answer it will provide?
4. What stage of the writing process are you seeking feedback on?
5. How does your paper add to theory/practice?
6. What remains unresolved?
7. In the box below, tick the issues you are seeking feedback on (tick up to 4).

A	Reviewers' immediate impression after reading piece	
B	Specific strengths of piece	
C	Specific weaknesses of piece	
D	How well is the focus developed?	
E	Is supporting information clear, relevant, orderly?	
F	How well does the writer integrate primary/secondary source materials?	
G	Has the author communicated her/his intent clearly to the audience?	
H	Is the author's voice appropriate in tone? Where is his/her voice most alive, most powerful? Where is it weak?	
I	What is your main suggestion for improvement (within 20 words)?	
J	How might improvement be best achieved (within one paragraph)?	
K	(Author to add as appropriate)	
L	(Author to add as appropriate)	
M	Anything else reviewer might feel.	

*(Peer reviewer to cut and paste specific author issues and return replies to author.)*