

Ciara O'Farrell and Alison Farrell *editors*

# Emerging Issues in Higher Education III

From Capacity Building to Sustainability



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Finally, we each dedicate this book as follows:

to Dr Brian Coates, the teacher who mattered most (AF)

to Cameron, Luke and Josh, students of the future (COF).



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# 1

## Introduction: Conversations on a journey

Alison Farrell, National University of Ireland, Maynooth, Ireland.  
email: alison.m.farrell@nuim.ie

Ciara O'Farrell, Trinity College Dublin, Ireland.  
email: ciara.ofarrell@tcd.ie

### Context and scene setting

'Enigma', the beautiful bronze figure that graces our cover, stands tall, poised and reflective. She is composed and dignified, looking out to the sea and beyond with quiet resolution. For us, she embodies a self-contained strength and an inner integrity; despite the hint of uncertainty in her outlook she remains grounded and stoic. She is framed in a landscape and is, we believe, an apt visual prompt for *Emerging Issues in Higher Education III: From capacity building to sustainability*. Higher Education in Ireland is at a crossroads, at a puzzling time in an uncertain climate with a range of important strategies, policies, missions and pedagogies contributing to the opportunities on the horizon and, sometimes, to the confusion of the moment. In this space, courageous goals can be achieved despite the unpredictability. Though the ambiance is one of flux and change, collaborative efforts such as those by EDIN, and we hope the newly formed National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, can scaffold and mould the work which will collectively provide clarity for us as individuals and as a learning community. We hope that this publication will contribute to this journey and to the dialogue that will occur on the way.

'The original idea for producing this series of papers came about (as many ideas do) as the result of a conversation.' (EI-I: 1) Thus begins *Emerging Issues in the Practice of University Learning and Teaching*, published in 2005. The conversation, which resulted in the book, began in 2003. At that time, O'Neill, Moore and Mc Mullin could not have known that the series of papers was to become a series of books, and that 10 years later colleagues from within higher education in Ireland would gather together to process and produce *Emerging Issues in Higher Education III: From capacity building to sustainability*. Given how far we have come as a community of scholar-teachers an examination of the capacity building that has taken place is a worthwhile exercise. In tandem, the sustainability of the community and of the valued, creative and collaborative way of working that has emerged merits consideration.

### *Emerging Issues in Higher Education III* and its relationship to the landscape

None of our work exists in a vacuum and the capacity building of this network and the *Emerging Issues* initiative has been impacted by the Irish Higher Education landscape and



policy over the past ten years. When EI-I was published the area of educational/academic development was new in Ireland; it had a short history of sporadic interventions, project and funding-related initiatives and very few dedicated posts. In the late 1990s/early 2000s, institutions were beginning to make public commitments to this area through the appointment of staff under the general headings of educational/academic developer and teaching support/development. As these posts became established across the sector, a community emerged and the Educational Developers of Ireland Network (EDIN), held its first meeting in Kilkenny in 2002. A comprehensive picture of what EDIN is and how it developed is presented by O'Farrell in *Emerging Issues II: The changing roles and identities of Teachers and Learners in Ireland* (2008); and a contemporary record of the Network is provided in this book by Nuala Harding in her contribution.

Having lived the history of the network from 2002, we observe now that though our impulse to gather in the first place could not have been defined as capacity building, looking back that is essentially what we were trying to do. With many of us being new appointments to new roles, the desire to share experiences and expertise was very great indeed. Though at that time we were, for the most part, well funded in our individual institutions, particularly through the National Development Plan and Training of Trainers Programme (administered by the HEA), one of the things that we needed, specifically, was to build relationships and share practice. Funding received via the HEA enabled this activity. In interrogating the capacity building that occurred over the years it seems that it was positively impacted by the following:

- Needing and wanting – openness and risk-taking
- Timing
- The newness of the area and the network
- The size of the island and the fact that people could meet face-to-face as the foundation for remote relationship building
- The tradition of talk
- Funding and incentivized activity
- Variety of expertise and experience and the diversity of context and focus
- Shared goals
- Incremental development
- External critical friends
- Positioning in larger international networks
- Support from senior management in individual institutions
- Protected space and time.

### **Emerging Issues III – changing times**

Without doubt, the context of *Emerging Issues III* is wholly different to that of the previous books. Though there has been significant capacity building over the past ten years, few of us could have predicted the utterly changed landscape with which we are faced. The current situation in higher education, and more widely in the country, means that sustainability is a key concern. Since *Emerging Issues II* Ireland has been propelled into a recession. In 2009, the Employment Control Framework was imposed on the Higher Education sector which placed a moratorium on recruitment and promotions; this still exists as we write, despite ever-increasing student numbers, and it impacts in practical ways, on staff numbers, and on staff morale. Many of us work in shrinking departments, units or centres with smaller budgets and increased workloads; but the whole notion of

‘being an academic’ has also been deconstructed in this pressurised work environment where proving and accounting for our value is essential in what Scott describes as one of the ‘most value-laden institutions in modern society’ (2004, p.439 quoted in Winter, 2009). As academic developers we are challenged to demonstrate the importance of our work, to find creative and inspiring ways to reassert our beliefs and principles and to voice our contribution.

### **EDIN – a collaborative model for sustainability**

Since 2002, the EDIN group has been involved in building capacity and becoming a learning community. When the Network was established as a result of the fertile groundwork of early adopters and national and local champions, there were promising shoots of growth in the area of supporting teaching and learning in higher education. From that modest but determined beginning, an entirely different reality now exists where the professionalisation of teaching and learning for academic staff is growing; a range of accredited programmes is on offer; and the scholarship of teaching and learning is evidenced in locally-produced publications and contributions to international offerings alike. Despite the progress in this area, education development has by no means plateaued and in light of the current and predicted future challenges to higher education in Ireland, its existence has never been more necessary.

In these difficult times, support for academic staff is essential and the academic developer plays a key role in this regard. EDIN, in turn, has a dual function in this regard where the network helps us to support staff on campus and also provides a safe environment for members where we can support each other in our work as academics and academic developers. O’Farrell and Fitzmaurice (2013) argue for a need for those of us who are academic developers to sustain *our-selves* in our work, and to unpack the emotions and draw from the values that define us. They point to EDIN’s importance in supporting both the self and the collective, in scaffolding and enhancing collegiality, and in driving sustainability. It is a network which is ‘safe and welcoming, where its members can celebrate the affective dimension of our role, and request and partake in professional development that supports and nurtures our needs’ (p.8).

The challenges expressed in the *Emerging Issues* series can be seen to mirror the struggle of the international academic development field with the implications of identity in the age of ‘supercomplexity’ (Barnett, 2000). This has more recently become relevant in terms of leadership, succession and the future (Lee and McWilliam, 2008) as academic life becomes more complex. As EDIN matures we are beginning to recognise the strength of our collective expertise and to harness the potential power of our diversity. As individual academic developers located in contracting units, in some cases to the extent of being the lone academic developer for whole institutions, it can sometimes feel that we are fighting a losing battle to be funded, to be heard, to make a difference – even to survive. But collectively, as a network, we have a strength that can not only inform and support, but potentially can lead. We are now confident that EDIN not only has a voice: it has a compelling one.

### **This book’s contribution to the conversation on teaching and learning**

The aims of *Emerging Issues III in Higher Education: From capacity building to sustainability* are to:

- Produce a text which reflects the situated reality of teaching and learning in

higher education in Ireland today, encompassing the hopes and ambitions for the area in the future and capturing the mood or *zeitgeist* which both supports and constrains it;

- Continue to give voice to those supporting teaching and learning in higher education;
- Provide an opportunity for experienced and new voices to contribute to the discussion about 'where to next' for higher education;
- Influence policy and practice;
- Produce a text which will be of national and international importance in this area;
- Build on the collaborative writing model that is a signature of the *Emerging Issues* publications;
- Initiate and continue conversations and relationships with international colleagues as part of our commitment to collaboration with our counterparts outside Ireland.

In terms of process, the editors of this book have expanded the writers' retreat and peer review process, and attempted to reinforce the connections that can be made between the authors of this collection, both within and across the Institutions, and internationally. Of the 15 chapters in this collection, 9 are co-authored, many of those being inter-institutional collaborations using a range of approaches and media. Currently in the Irish Higher Education system, deliberate and focused collaborations are being forged between institutions which have political ramifications and can be perceived to be influenced by a rationalisation agenda. What is represented in this book is a more organic collaboration where research and relationships are based on joint efforts, shared concerns and coinciding values.

The editors were determined that professional development be central to the writing processes associated with this book. The authors brought a range of writing proficiencies and dispositions; both novice and experienced writers participated in this journey. Part of the funding for the book was channelled into two short writing retreats where authors met, wrote and peer reviewed each others' work in progress. Within the structure of the writing sessions, we set and exchanged goals for our writing, we practised strategies for writing, for springboarding ourselves into our writing and for overcoming writer's block. Drawing from the literature on writing interventions, we unpacked the key benefits of our chapters and their contributions to the literature, and we discovered how our dialogue could inform each others' chapters.

We also built a peer review process into the second day of the retreat where all writers formed small groups and offered parts of their work to colleagues for constructive and collegial peer review; critical guidance and affirmation were encouraged. Authors benefitted from seeing how their developing paper was understood by others, what interested others and what wasn't working, before feeding back these considerations into their writing towards the end of the retreat. Some months later, when first drafts were due, authors were invited to meet again to undertake a similar peer review process and to seek feedback on their full drafts. The peer reviews and the writing strategies that scaffolded the writing retreat were very deliberately conducted in a safe and protected space, where those newer to academic writing were supported by more seasoned writers, but where everyone had an equal voice and equal value. As writers, we left the retreat and returned to our institutions with a suite of strategies to inform and grow our academic writing as well as, it must be said, with renewed or newly forged friendships with colleagues from across the higher education sector.

Stemming from our aim to broaden our reach internationally, an initiative new to *Emerging Issues III* is the inclusion of contributions from international experts. In this book, each chapter is followed by a commentary from an international expert who considers the chapter's key benefits, its application in an international context and where further research might be merited. We hope that this international dimension will expand the vibrant conversation that exists in this community of practice. We thank those international experts who so willingly gave their time to write their commentaries, and whose reflections have enhanced this publication. Seeking those connections among our peers, and forging subsequent relationships based on commonalities and shared vision is, we would posit, an environment conducive to creativity, collegiality and ultimately to sustainability.

## Overview of the book

### *Section 1: Collaboration as a way forward*

*Emerging Issues in Higher Education: From capacity building to sustainability* begins with a focus on collaboration. Many of our colleagues who have contributed to the book have enjoyed successful and fruitful collaborative ventures. The collegiality that still exists in the sector, and particularly in the education/academic development community, is highlighted in all of the contributions to this publication but particularly so in this first section.

The section begins with the EDIN network and a chapter written by the current chair, Nuala Harding, entitled 'Conversations on an Emergent Professional Network'. This chapter charts the journey of EDIN, and thus will inform other networks of the process of establishing, and the challenges of sustaining, a network. Equally significant in this piece is the tone and spirit of the chapter, of its desire to present an honest and open appraisal of the various stages of that journey and of its resolution to remain true to the collaborative core of EDIN. In her exploration of the development of EDIN, Harding taps into the dialogue that has been central to the network's development and uses a conversation between herself and three previous EDIN chairs/co-ordinators in a collaborative effort to record the oral history of the group.

The voice of academics and academic developers is also the prompt for Fitzpatrick and Vaughan's chapter entitled, 'Developing a Regional Approach to Outstanding Teaching and Learning: A case study', where the collaboration is inter-institutional rather than national. Set in the context of a regional development in the mid-west of Ireland, this chapter discusses how four institutions successfully worked together to achieve a goal of developing and supporting excellence in teaching, and explores how initiatives like this can be sustained. The authors describe two 'bedrock' initiatives: the development of a regional award process as a way of recognising and rewarding teaching excellence; and, as a corollary, the establishment of a peer support network for academics to develop and learn from each other through peer observation of teaching.

The tone and theme of Fitzpatrick and Vaughan's chapter is echoed in O'Riordan et al., the final chapter in this section. Having identified a gap in the feedback loop with regards participation at and contribution to conferences, O'Riordan and colleagues in a chapter entitled, 'Discourse and Connectivity: Capturing the voice of educators' explore a new approach for tapping into both the ideas and the energy of staff attending a pedagogical conference. This informal collaboration recognises the importance of conversation and collegiality, neatly expressed by the authors in the comforting analogy of an 'armchair session' whereby academics gather together to discuss the themes and pedagogical issues

that have emerged from the papers presented at the conference. This chapter shows us the authors' endeavours to ensure that such conversation is charted and channelled and that the collective voice actually informs the development of future conference themes. However, it also explores the process of co-enquiry and the challenges the authors met in tackling the myriad data that they had gleaned. The framework presented and the pragmatic advice included towards the end of the piece will be useful for colleagues considering similar initiatives.

## ***Section 2: Supporting Academic Development***

The second section of the book explores how institutions, departments, initiatives and individuals support academic colleagues in their work. These chapters remind us of the importance of self-care, of making time for our professional development, and of providing a safe, environment in which to achieve this. What emerges in all three chapters in this section is confirmation of the principles or beliefs that led many of us to be teacher-scholars.

In the opening chapter in this sequence, Slowey and Kozina report on findings from an empirical study of academic staff designed to ascertain their professional development experiences and interests. In 'Practising what they preach? Academics' views on professional development for their teaching role' the reader is presented with an enviable dataset from which many opinions around academic development are drawn. In their survey of four Universities and four Institutes of Technology in the Dublin region of Ireland, the authors explore a number of key differences based on respondents' levels of engagement with professional development over the previous three years, suggest some possible implications for policy and practice, and draw conclusions around the current and predictable future professional development provision for academic staff.

The need for professional development for academic staff continues in the next chapter by Joyce and Boyle entitled 'Sustaining Academic Leadership in Higher Education'. The authors explore an area of professional development that has enjoyed limited success to date in the mainstream academic community - leadership. For reasons explored in the chapter, academics are often reluctant to see themselves as potential leaders in their institutions, in terms of people management, though they may recognize themselves and indeed strive to be discipline experts and leaders in their research fields. In this chapter Joyce and Boyle review the leadership literature and present models of leadership to an academic audience. The authors' approach demystifies leadership, explores the hero myth around contemporary leadership style and, through a case study, exemplifies how modern leadership approaches can contribute to successful team achievement in practical terms and to professional development programmes more generally in higher education institutions.

The final chapter in this section focuses on another form of professional development opportunity described by the author as a 'possibility portal'. Clancy's chapter, 'Possibility Portals: Building sustainability amongst academics in challenging times' focuses on the need for protected time and space for professional development. In the context of her institution, and a case study of a Diploma in Higher Education, Clancy argues for the need for slow time, where academics can debate and/or reflect on the complexities of their roles and identities. She recognises that academic identity is continuously shifting, necessarily so, and that it needs support at all levels to be effectively developed.

## ***Section 3: Using technology to enhance teaching and learning***

Though still a relatively recent phenomenon in the long history of higher education,

technology in education and its pervasiveness will continue to have a significant impact on the lives of HE teachers and learners alike. The following chapters present the voice and lived experiences of the learning technologist and those supporting the application of technology to enhance student learning.

This section which is devoted to exploring three aspects of technology in HE begins with another pool of longitudinal data, which constitutes the largest collection of student experiences in relation to technology-enhanced learning in Ireland. In 'An Investigation of Students' Experiences of Using Virtual Learning Environments: Implications for academic professional development', Risquez and colleagues explore data collected from 2008-2012. The sheer volume of responses (15,385 responses across 12 institutions) is indicative of the omnipresence of technology in contemporary HE. The data allows for comparisons between institutions of the VLE uptake; however, this chapter focuses on student opinions of VLE usage and the extent to which students have engaged with the VLE. The data gathered poses many questions about the potential of VLEs and the capacity for further exploitation of the current systems. The authors argue that the VLE needs to move beyond being a repository of content and posit that, with the help of academic developers and learning technologists, it can become a more sustainable and creative platform for blended learning.

A joint author of the previous chapter, Mc Nutt explores in an individual contribution the issues of identity and role for learning technologies and staff involved in supporting teaching and learning through technology. In a chapter entitled, 'A Critical Discourse on the Role, Motivations and Beliefs of the Educational Technologist in Higher Education', and spurred by his belief that the impact of educational technologists is often constrained by its discourse, Mc Nutt explores the values which underpin the work of this group. Drawing on data collected at regional focus groups with 23 staff from six institutions, and using Bordieu's notion of habitus as a theoretical framework, this chapter explores what it means to be an educational technologist today.

In Marcus Quinn's chapter entitled 'Digital Repositories and their Associated Services: From Capacity Building to Sustainability', the author maps Open Educational Resources (OERs) in the context of digital repositories with particular attention to the Irish National Digital Learning Resources (NDLR) service. Marcus Quinn tracks OER development, the issues involved with such resources (including copyright and intellectual property concerns) and the continuing need to share digital resources and services. She concludes with a positive look at the legacy of the NDLR and remarks on two key contributions it has made to Irish HE.

#### ***Section 4: Emerging approaches and pedagogies***

This final section of the book emphasises the 'emerging issues' reflected in the publication's title. Higher education, with its several stakeholders, needs to be increasingly adaptable and fleet of foot. This agility is not typical of the sector, yet developments do occur and one can observe emerging trends, particularly with regards to pedagogies, that enrich the learning experience for teachers and students alike and which can prove transformative.

Huntley-Moore and colleagues open this section with a chapter entitled 'Promoting Student Engagement by Engaging Staff: Implementing a survey of student engagement', reminding us of the importance of the student voice. In this chapter, which explores the development of a student evaluation system based on the Australian model 'National Survey of Student Engagement' (NSSE), the authors sketch the design and implementation of a local student evaluation system. In a balanced manner, it examines the challenges and issues of implementing this type of survey, and discusses its value and possible



applications. Though all of the chapters in the book offer, we believe, timely and useful contributions to the dialogue around higher education in Ireland today, Huntley-Moore and colleagues' contribution was prescient given the recent launch of the Irish National Student Survey in March 2013.

In the second chapter of this section, Higgs and Cronin explore a theme which has gained ground in higher education over the past decade, the notion of threshold concepts. In 'Threshold Concepts: Informing the Curriculum' the authors outline the characteristics of threshold concepts and how they can inform curriculum design. The explanation offered by this chapter, which draws on the key texts in the area, is illustrated and elaborated upon in a case study of the application of threshold concepts in a 'Teaching History Seminars' series which took place in the authors' institution. Here Threshold Concepts are used with postgraduate students, who tutor undergraduate students, to decode a discipline approach and make explicit tacit discipline knowledge, and to encourage connections with other disciplines.

While Higgs and Cronin draw on the postgraduate voice in their dataset, the voice of first year undergraduates is brought to the fore in Diggins and colleagues' chapter entitled, 'Supporting First Year Students in their Academic and Social Adjustment to Higher Education: A case study of the First Seven Weeks Programme at the University of Limerick'. In what might be considered a threshold itself, the transition from second level to third level is the theme for this contribution. The development of a phased induction programme to help students to manage the move from one social/pedagogical environment to another, and the associated challenges of this shift, are explored and addressed in the provision of the First Seven Weeks Programme. The chapter explores the establishment, implementation and evaluation of this Facebook-enabled programme over two years (2010-2012) and shares the experience and lessons learned in providing such an intervention.

Donnelly and Fitzmaurice present an innovative approach to supporting writing which brings the reader back to the postgraduate voice. Their chapter, 'Development of a Model for Blended Postgraduate Research Supervision in Irish Higher Education', presents a comprehensive and much needed alternative to the single supervisor model for postgraduate study. It discusses a practical and research-informed project that suggests postgraduate supervision might be better tackled through a blended supervision model. Whereas much has been written on doctoral supervision, the authors focus on the gap that exists with regards variety and new approaches to supervision at masters level. This chapter challenges current models and provides a springboard for further conversations on this topic.

The final chapter in this section concludes this book with an important focus on two fundamental issues in higher education that are both inspirational and practical: civic engagement and curriculum design. Boland's chapter, 'Curriculum Development for Sustainable Civic Engagement', explores capacity building for students and community partners in the area of service learning. The author argues that integral to the success of this pedagogy is a planned curriculum that focuses on process and attends to values, outcomes, methodologies, assessment and evaluation. In this chapter Boland provides a number of approaches to designing service learning programmes. In our national strategy for HE in Ireland, and at our core as professionals, we articulate unapologetically that higher education should serve society and the public good. Our institutions aim to inspire our graduates to have a readiness to contribute to an inclusive society in a full and meaningful way, in both their professional and personal roles as members of local, national and global communities.



To return our gaze to ‘Enigma’: we stand with her in a context of uncertainty but look towards the future, composed, prepared and quietly determined. Her textured and organic qualities reflect the grassroots approach of EDIN, and our commitment to creative, values-oriented work which embodies our mission. Enigma encapsulates the essence and the spirit of higher education today and reminds us of the privilege and responsibility that it is to be part of this community.

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## **Section 1**

Collaboration as a way forward



## 2

# **Conversations on an Emergent Professional Network: a personal reflection on the background, development and sustainability of the Educational Developers in Ireland Network (EDIN)**

Nuala Harding, Athlone Institute of Technology.

Corresponding author: [nharding@ait.ie](mailto:nharding@ait.ie)

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this chapter is to capture an oral history of the Educational Developers in Ireland Network (EDIN), which was established in 2002, and to provide a snapshot of the Network as it is currently in 2012-13. The oral history/dialogue-based approach was chosen in order to chronicle key moments in the establishment and growth of the network leading up to EDIN's tenth anniversary this academic year.

The chapter is a personal reflection on a conversation among key players in the Network, which took place in the Athlone Institute of Technology, prior to the EDIN Annual General Meeting on May 28th 2012. The pre-scheduled conversation, which lasted for just over one hour, was recorded and subsequently transcribed. Four EDIN members who previously held or are currently chair of the network were invited to participate, namely:

- Dr Alison Farrell, Teaching Development Officer, Centre for Teaching and Learning, National University of Ireland, Maynooth – founding chair/network co-ordinator of EDIN from 2002-2006;
- Ms Anne Carpenter, Coordinator of the Teaching & Learning Centre, Institute of Technology, Carlow – chair of an EDIN working group from 2007-2008; appointed network chair of the inaugural committee in 2008;
- Dr Marion Palmer, Head of Department of Learning Services, Dún Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design and Technology - vice-chair of EDIN from 2008-2009; chair from 2009-2011;
- Ms Nuala Harding, Learning and Teaching Co-ordinator, Athlone Institute of Technology, vice-chair 2009-2011; current EDIN chair.

### **Context**

This chapter is written against the backdrop of an ever-changing landscape of higher

education in Ireland. According to the Irish government's higher education agency, the Higher Education Authority (HEA), a total of €33.5m was invested in teaching and learning since 2000 (HEA, 2011: 4). Over the past decade, government-funded strategic investment initiatives, such as Strategic Initiatives Funding (known formerly as Targeted Initiatives) which commenced in 2004 and more recently, the Strategic Innovation Fund (SIF) established in 2007, led to many learning and teaching developments. These included the establishment of learning and teaching centres or units in many institutes of higher education, the subsequent appointment of educational developer or academic developer roles, local and national teaching and learning initiatives, and a range of collaborative innovations and events (HEA, 2011).

This period was characterised by strong investment which coincided with a favourable economic climate and led to:

transformation in the resourcing of teaching and learning with greater availability and uptake of professional development opportunities, the adoption of new forms of pedagogy for enhanced student engagement, extensive usage of technology in Irish higher education and an increasing emphasis on teaching in the tenure and promotion processes for academic staff

(O'Connor & Chantler, 2011: 16-30)

In 2011, the government published the first overall strategic policy document for the Higher Education sector, the *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030*, known locally as the 'Hunt Report', which had as Section 3 of Part 2 'The mission of higher education' (Department of Education and Skills, 2011). This dedicated section on 'Teaching and Learning' recognises the significant advances made in teaching and learning over the past decade with the establishment of centres for educational development. The collaborative work undertaken by individuals, centres, units and specific voluntary networks such as the Educational Developers in Ireland Network (EDIN), the Irish Learning Technology Association (ILTA), and the All-Ireland Society for Irish Higher Education (AISHE) affected much of this change agenda, in tandem with an enhanced strategic focus within institutions on learning and teaching.

### **Beginning the EDIN Conversation**

EDIN began in 2002 with a small group of individuals who were focused on their specific needs at the time (Potter and O'Farrell, 2009). From these beginnings, the conversations within the group moved very rapidly from congenial dialogue to collegial discourse with members, 'collaborating and sharing experience and expertise in learning and teaching' (Potter & O'Farrell, 2009: 97). In tandem with the exploration of the area of education development and the emergence of the roles of education developers and academic developers, the Network was to provide a dedicated space – what was denoted in this conversation as 'a space that was ring-fenced where we could talk about our roles at that time.'

Initially, the network comprised of members who were working in the university sector and who had a shared interest in educational development. In 2005, representatives of the Institutes of Technology (IoTs) were actively encouraged to join by network members who were already involved and were experiencing the benefits of the group such as the opportunities to write for publications and to provide or attend expert sessions. Prior to this moment, very few staff held the role of educational developers in that

sector. Two authors in this edition of Emerging Issues - Sylvia Huntley-Moore and Roisin Donnelly - were cited in the conversation as having encouraged participation from IoT colleagues.

### **This chapter – why a conversation?**

This chapter explores, through dialogue, the origins and work of the group over the past ten years. Methodologically and philosophically, it is underpinned by the members' commitment to the importance of co-enquiry, co-creation of knowledge and conversation. As noted in the introduction, four chairs, current and past, met to discuss EDIN's history, its current iteration and activity, and its future. Farrell began by noting that she believed it appropriate that the group were having this conversation. She remarked that the Network:

didn't really begin with any strategies or documents or anything written down. It was just that we were seeking the opportunity to talk and to thrash out the things that we were facing at that particular time.

This approach, and the courage of the instigators of EDIN, echoes the advice given by Wheatly (2002) when she describes the behaviours of those who want to affect change in a collaborative and collegiate way:

Be brave enough to start a conversation that matters.

- Talk to people you know.
- Talk to people you don't know.
- Talk to people you never talk to.
- Be intrigued by the differences you hear.

(2002: 116)

Conversation has played a vital role in the development of the Network and in essence it is also the subtext of this publication. As noted in the introduction by Farrell and O'Farrell (2013), dialogue was central to the processes underpinning the writing of the book and both editors asked contributors to be particularly aware of the links between speaking and writing as part of the process of the composition of their chapters.

Conversation was selected as the prompt for this chapter in order to capture the spontaneity that occurs with open dialogue. Throughout the conversation, participants highlighted key themes and recollected important stages in the development of the Network from the early days; in the dialogue, they articulated their concerns and views in relation to the sustainability of EDIN. The process also served to record the oral history of the Network which we believe is of particular value. EDIN is greatly influenced by the strong relationships within it; having conversations reminds the network of its origins and contributes to its sustainability. Part of this chapter is the celebration of the importance of purposeful dialogue, now more than ever in this time of rapid change in HE, when educational developers are required to adapt to the changing context in which they work. As evidenced by the work of EDIN to date, providing opportunities for purposeful dialogue allows developers to support each other and can be the impetus for action and further collaboration, notwithstanding the diverse range of educational settings in which EDIN members operate.



In this particular conversation about EDIN four key themes emerged:

- Growth and Formalising the Network
- Funding
- Scholarship and Policy
- The Future

Each theme will be discussed in this chapter with specific commentary and observations made by the participants incorporated where appropriate.

### **Growth and Formalising the Network: Capturing the spirit of the Network and establishing an identity**

The history of EDIN is well documented in Potter and O’Farrell, (2009). Therefore, it is sufficient to say here that by 2006 the Network was a well-established group but one in need of formalising and role identification (O’Farrell, 2008; Potter & O’Farrell, 2009). EDIN was supporting an emerging profession of educational developers as opposed to higher education staff interested or involved in learning and teaching in Higher Education; however, it was operating on an informal basis. As part of defining who the group was, it needed to identify who it was not and this process brought about tension and uncertainty, not least because of the overlap in membership with other professional groups for HE staff. It became apparent to those concerned with sustaining the network, that a clearly defined role was required: one which would differentiate it from other groupings, particularly AISHE which is a professional society dedicated to the promotion of good practice in learning and teaching across disciplines throughout the island of Ireland. In addition, in order to sustain the network, a more formal approach was required. Palmer noted this in conversation where she says:

One of the difficulties at the start, and I think you can see it in *Emerging Issues I*, is the boundary between AISHE and EDIN. If you look at the authors in *Emerging Issues I* they actually are almost all education developers but it’s very definitely ... an AISHE publication.

Carpenter concurred and noted that one of the key factors in the Irish context at that time was ‘the emerging profession of education developers ... when AISHE started that wasn’t a clear role’. The requirement to define EDIN as Carpenter notes ‘led then to the whole move to a more formal network’ which she contended led to ‘a more robust structure’ based on Gina Whisker’s report. This report was commissioned by EDIN in 2006 (Whisker and Antoniou, 2006).

### **The Catalyst for Moving from the Informal to the Formal**

The Wisker and Antoniou (2006) report proposed a framework for the sustained development of EDIN. The report included a history of the network and considered the international picture for educational development. The proposals noted in the document included the drafting of a constitution, developing guidelines for membership, establishing a budget and specifying financial reserves, establishing a committee with specific roles and developing a timeline for development (Wisker & Antoniou, 2006: 21).

Carpenter described the Network at the time of commissioning the report as being in a ‘state of flux’. However, from this fluidity came a deliberate discussion, at a meeting in

2007, on the future of the Network, its identity and relevance. Although there was a fear expressed that a more formal structure, as suggested in the report, might 'diminish the congeniality', there was agreement to proceed with the establishment of a working group with the purpose of devising a more robust structure in a timely fashion. Carpenter, who chaired the working group, outlined that it also included representation from University of Limerick, NUI Maynooth, Dublin Institute of Technology, University College Cork, and Dublin City University.

The working group was required to make recommendations which would facilitate the Network in serving the needs of the growing number of professionals within Irish HE with 'a central role in developing or providing support for teaching and learning development'. In addition, it was noted at the time that the new structure could not be dependent on one person or one institute which had been the case in the beginning. Harding remarked that a key issue for the Network, which emerged from the Wisker & Antoniou (2006) report, was sustainability; if the Network was 'too reliant on one person and suddenly they're gone ... does that mean the network collapses?' Farrell indicated that the Wisker & Antoniou report really 'helped us to clarify matters and to consider a course of action' and that it was crucial in helping to achieve clarity. It was fortunate that the Network had, what Carpenter described as, 'the foresight' to commission the report.

In line with the proposals noted in the report, the working group called an AGM in May 2007 where the first committee was elected and the constitution was proposed and accepted. The establishment of what Carpenter described as 'a small executive committee' helped to 'steer the group, make decisions and plan for the future'. The committee, coupled with the AGM, enabled the Network to function, grow and perform. As might be expected, there was a transition phase from informality to formal structures which posed some issues, in particular as members got used to having a committee in place. Palmer noted:

In the move from the (informal collaborative network) ... to where you have a committee whose job it is to strategize ... there have been one or two hiccups. Moving from the informality is different to a formal structure.

The establishment of the new structure represented another phase in the Network's development. Palmer recorded that 'Anne Carpenter led the working group that developed the constitution which was approved in March 2008'. It was obvious that Carpenter played a crucial role at this time in formalising the network and establishing a schedule of regular meetings and events. Palmer and Harding subsequently occupied the roles of chair and vice-chair respectively and they put together a strategic plan; the document was straightforward and 'provided a road map.'

Another important outcome of the formalisation was that it helped clarify a specific role for the network where it could co-exist with AISHE and be explicit with regards to a differentiated membership. Palmer remarked that 'at the committee meetings ... it was very easy for us to say, when we looked at the membership applications 'yes' or 'no' because the Network was very clearly for academic/educational developers.' This group has subsequently grown to include e-learning professionals and education technologists. With regards the development of the Network, it was noted that membership was frequently symbiotic in nature. This is exemplified by Harding's experience. She outlined that her experience of the Network was one where in the beginning it helped to sustain her in a new role and in turn she became interested in sustaining the network by working on the committee. This in turn needed to be supported by her institute (as is true of her

counterparts in other institutes): ‘first of all my Institute supported me in being involved and that was crucial’. Harding remarked that:

My involvement started in 2007 ... I remember attending that meeting (when the constitution was agreed) and it was at that point I joined the committee, and I then worked as secretary ... And then we moved to the point where I was vice-chair with Marion Palmer. I’ve moved through the committee roles ... I joined at the point where the whole thing was in place... so I didn’t know EDIN before we had these formal structures.

Harding also commented that the essential role EDIN played in supporting those new to educational development in particular, should not be underestimated:

It does sustain people; there is no doubt about it. I had that extra support from the Network and it was a way of affirming the decisions I was making on my own because I was virtually on my own for the first three years in my role.

As a result of this process of formalisation, the group crafted a mission statement. The mission and constitution articulated the values of the network, its specific aims and objectives and the requirements for membership. In the conversation, it was apparent that formalising the network, which was certainly influenced by the Wisker & Antoniou Report (2006), was a key milestone, essential in the development and continuity of the group.

### The Growth of the Network

Having commenced with a small group of like-minded individuals in 2002, the membership of the network continued to grow; by 2005 there were 53 members on the mailing list (Wisker & Antoniou, 2006: 2). Since then, the membership has more than doubled and at present the total number of listed members is 116, with representation outlined in Table 1 which indicates the membership according to the type of institution and including independent consultants. The current membership is comprised of developers who are at a variety of career stages, with very different roles and a diverse range of research interests. Membership level and representation was a contributory element in the successful application to the National Academy for the Integration of Research with Teaching and Learning (NAIRTL) funding call in 2011 which led to this publication.

2012	Number by sector	Number of members
Universities	7	49
Institutes of Technology	11	45
Other HEs including private colleges	8	17
External HEs Universities in UK and Australia	2	2
Private Consultants	3	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>116</b>

**Table 1: EDIN membership 2012; source: EDIN distribution list November 2012**

The original EDIN Constitution, approved in 2007, was quite specific in terms of EDIN membership; it noted that it was open to those who held ‘a central role in developing or providing support for teaching and learning development in a Higher Education institute in Ireland’ (EDIN, 2007). In addition, a formal process for approving applications was established with the first committee. However, currently there are new trends emerging which are evidenced in the recent applications for membership and amongst members of the group; the most noticeable shifts are where members have changed career path and/or are working now as private consultants, particularly post SIF funding. In the past, members who moved to another country continued to be members of the network. Recently, the changing circumstances for staff engaged in education development and academic development in Ireland, and the interest generated through AISHE, led to a proposal to amend the EDIN constitution at the AGM in May 2012. This proposal was approved and membership is now open to ‘those who hold a central role in developing or providing support for teaching and learning development in Higher Education in Ireland’ (EDIN Constitution, 2012).

Palmer noted how the landscape has changed, particularly recently, and how the network needs to be mindful of this. She remarked:

It’s interesting now as we are trying to expand; Nuala Harding is proposing that we change the membership and we really need to do it because we now have education developers who have now lost their jobs and who have the skills and knowledge, who are there, and who need the network to stay in touch. If we only involve people who are currently employed in higher education we are going to lose a lot of good people.

As Palmer observed, the Network may be more valuable than ever now, particularly for staff in transition; she emphasised that ‘the network is providing great contacts in terms of work, short term contracts and the like because of the collegiality’.

## Funding

Since its origins in 2012 the Network has been very successful in terms of its applications for funding; as a result it has supported, among other initiatives, a writers’ week, the establishment of networking/travel fund and the development of a website (Wisker & Antoniou, 2006: 2). Grant funding secured through competitive bidding processes has also allowed for the commissioning of the Wisker report. This funding was extremely significant, indeed, critical, to the development of the fledgling network. As noted previously, the HEA’s funding for amongst other things, support for teaching and learning in the form of ‘Targeted Initiatives’, began in 1996 and was renamed ‘Strategic Initiatives’ in 2004. The ‘Support for Teaching’ strand of the initiatives, through which a host of teaching and learning projects were funded, commenced in 2000 (HEA, 2011). Over successive years, EDIN bid and secured funding recognising the importance of this support whilst in its infancy. Though the Network was conspicuously a collaborative effort, the HEA is to be commended for funding a group in the initial stages of network development. Both Carpenter and Farrell noted in this conversation that the funding served to support the day-to-day activity of the network and other initiatives. As Carpenter outlined the funding supported ‘network meetings, training and development, ... research, mentoring ... and supporting the network members then as champions of innovation etc.’ Farrell, as

founding chair of the network, remarked that 'I don't think we could have done quite so much without the funding; the funding was absolutely crucial'.

Funding was returned to again and again as a key theme in this conversation; it is an ongoing concern for the network. It was noted that, while it was always tempting for the network to bid for funding, being cognisant of its importance for sustainability and the achievement of strategic objectives of the network, it was also essential not to lose sight of the group's spirit and ethos. To some extent, the funding was a double-edged sword; it was necessary for the Network's activity and longevity, but there was a danger of being distracted by the funding at the expense of putting energy into that which really mattered or that which might have had some impact on the ground. It was noted that the achievement of funding, particularly through competitive bidding, helped to raise awareness of the network with the HEA and also amongst institutional senior management. This was, and continues to be, essential, as it is only in conjunction with institutional support that members can contribute to EDIN events, either by attending or facilitating meetings or other events that have helped to sustain the network. Carpenter emphasised this in the conversation:

I think the very fact that EDIN actually put in for funding, ... was recognised by the HEA and got funding ... was key ... that's the money that's still keeping us going ... it would be a big issue if there was no funding. The other thing is that over the last few years, because we were aware that that's the only funding that is there, the committee has been very conservative in how it should be spent, they are managing the money as best they can.

Palmer noted how the funding can greatly influence the activity of the network and, referring to the impact of receiving funding for this publication, she noted: '... it has taken the network on a different path to what it might have been and that's absolutely fine. That's the flexibility of the network and taking it through.' Farrell also reiterated this point noting that 'a network can be driven by funding ... we wouldn't want to go after a piece of funding and then find we had no sense of ourselves.' In response, Carpenter remarked that she believed that 'the funding had been used for the core mission of the group' and Farrell agreed noting that one would not want the network to be 'only a series of activities linked by one piece of funding to the next ... with nothing more strategic'.

The mention of strategy led the conversation from funding to policy and scholarship with participants sharing their views which were contrary in nature on occasion.

## Scholarship and Policy

From the outset, EDIN concerned itself with scholarship leading to members producing the first *Emerging Issues in Higher Education* publication in 2005. Government funding supported the first *Emerging Issues* which was co-ordinated as a project and edited by O'Neill, Moore and Mc Mullin. This work was a significant development not only because it addressed the need for localised scholarship and for the documentation of academic development in higher education in the Irish context, but also because it led to a developmental model for collaborative writing which included: a facilitated or structured writers' retreat allowing total immersion in the writing process; peer review; and the opportunity to engage with and be supported by a community of scholars. James Wisdom, then Co-Chair of the Staff and Educational Development Association (SEDA) suggested in his review of *Emerging Issues I* that the publication itself would be especially

valuable to those undertaking professional development programmes. He also made particular reference to the use of Creative Commons in the publication which essentially allowed for open sharing of the materials. In his review of the publication he commented:

while the content of the volume may be most particularly relevant to new lecturers, its ethos and method of production has plenty to say to members of SEDA in their work to build a community of practice around educational development

(Wisdom, 2005: 12).

This open source approach was utilised subsequently in Ireland by the National Digital Learning Repository (NDLR) for the sharing of digital learning resources and by the Learning Innovation Network (LIN) for sharing professional development modules and resources which were developed collaboratively amongst participating institutes. Thus, the editors of the first volume of *Emerging Issues* set a standard to be met which embodied EDIN's collaborative and collegiate spirit.

The developmental model of writing for publication was utilised again in *Emerging Issues II* (2008). The second book showcased the continuing development of the EDIN community of practice. Edited by Bettie Higgs and Marian McCarthy of University College Cork, both network members, it included chapters which provide situational 'snapshots of the intersection between theory, practice and research' (Higgs & McCarthy, 2008: 1). As predicted by James Wisdom, chapters from both editions are now used in a variety of developmental contexts (2005: 12).

The *Emerging Issues* publications are a touchstone in the history of education development and teaching and learning support in Ireland as they are the confident articulation of the voice of a newly emerging profession in Irish higher education. The Network continued to be concerned with publication outputs while other institutions and networks also filled the gaps in research and scholarship in this area from an Irish perspective. EDIN members sought to impact on policy through publication with the Network and through other groups.

Scholarship and policy were discussed in tandem during the conversation. It was noted that if the Network does indeed wish to influence policy, scholarship may be its most effective way of achieving this aim. Farrell remarked that she believed that EDIN could have a much greater impact on policy and that she considered the lack of 'lobbying' as a gap. She commented that 'I don't think that we do much (lobbying) but then maybe that's not what we are supposed to do ...' It would be fair to say that the Network has been ambivalent about its role with regards policy. This may be because it is still a relatively young organisation, with its basis in grassroots. However, ten years on and in a greatly changed higher education landscape, impacting on policy is very much on the table. EDIN was active in promoting its mission and activities during the consultation process in 2010 which informed National Strategy for Higher Education and members of the EDIN executive were involved in making submissions. In addition, Marion Coy, former president of the Galway Mayo Institute of Technology (GMIT) and member of the strategy group, presented at the EDIN AGM in 2011 in conjunction with Muiris O'Connor, Principal Officer in the Policy and Planning section of the HEA. This opportunity was used by the outgoing chair Marion Palmer to outline the mission and strategic plan of the Network, whilst emphasising the potential for this group of educational developers to play a key role at local and national level.

The EDIN committee also made a submission to the HEA in response to their call regarding the formation of a national forum (HEA, 2011). Farrell noted

I think that even if we haven't been explicit about lobbying, people *are* doing different things to try to influence policy which is important for us; we frequently have to implement policy but we can also influence it because we are on the ground and consequently we have a very good idea about what is needed and what would be constructive.

Carpenter remarked that it is 'policy at national level really that we wish to influence' and she believes that 'the publications are crucial' in this regard. Farrell agreed that the Network should be trying to influence policy and wondered about how forthright it could be about this aim. There was little disagreement about the role that publication and scholarship would play here but there is also a strongly held belief that as a Network we should not get too carried away with publication at the expense of pursuing our primary role which is to be a collective for those who are supporting teaching and learning. Having tracked the development of the network, it seems that giving consideration to and being in a position to influence policy at national level has been augmented as a result of formalising the operations of the network and increasing the membership.

The EDIN conversation which formed the basis of this chapter, in addition to the invaluable collaborative and collegiate efforts of Irish educational developers leading to another contemporary publication, should help to inform the contribution of the Network to the recently established National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning. The Minister for Education and Skills, when launching the National Forum on November 22nd 2012, suggested the forum will 'allow the system to provide all students with a teaching and learning experience of the highest quality through engagement with innovative pedagogies and the technologies that support these.' The Minister also acknowledged the existing strong areas of teaching and learning expertise throughout HE institutes believing the forum 'will build on that expertise and disseminate best practice throughout the system, raising standards of teaching and learning overall' (Quinn, 2012).

### **The Future: Network growth and development through activity, collaboration and identity**

Carpenter noted that EDIN started when the educational developer role was emerging in Ireland as a profession; although there was already a significant level of collaboration among educational developers, before EDIN there was no formal entity to support developers:

However, with SIF, there came a whole plethora of training ... nearly overload for a while. Now that has eased off now again because the funding is gone ... but the network filled a huge gap for a while and now ... EDIN has begun to think more and more of the needs of the education developers, what needs the network has, and it has the confidence to partner with others in events...

Harding commented that there have been 'very successful collaborative events with the NDLR and with LIN'. This type of activity demonstrates EDIN's ability to look beyond itself in order to define its identity. In addition, the executive has been mindful of an over reliance on experts from the British Isles. A sign of the maturity of the network is the invitation to experts within the Network to provide development opportunities for members in themes such as writing for publication, supporting curriculum design, teaching at third level and the evaluation of teaching.



Visibility and promotion of the network was also considered important and the ongoing development of the website was seen an essential element of this work. Palmer recorded that the 'website was set up in 2006 and that now EDIN is slowly finding a way of managing it and keeping it live, which is critical'. The website has been updated and now includes a blog, a project page, an events page and an online membership application process. In addition, there is a proposal to include minutes of the AGM and reports from the chair, secretary and treasurer. This would provide for even greater transparency and a clear record of activities. Regular contact with members is ensured through the monthly EDIN newsletter which offers the opportunity to inform members of events and calls for submissions to conferences and publications.

### **The Future: Is the network still relevant ten years later and how do we sustain it into the future?**

The final part of this conversation focused on looking to the future and considering the sustainability of the network particularly in the current economic climate. Farrell noted that 'one thing that we are trying to do in this piece is capture another snapshot of the organization at this time and place'. Harding observed that the NAIRTL funding this year 'did bring us in a different direction' but that she was 'very interested to see the authors selected from the review process, the themes for the chapters that are being written and the trends around technology, and the emerging pedagogies.' She also noted that the Network's strategic plan included five streams and whilst one of these was scholarship, through which we might impact on policy, continuous professional development (CPD) also remains very important to the group and its members and should remain so for the future.

This chapter is being written in a very different context to that in which the group was established and even to the landscape when it moved to a formal structure. We are currently in a maelstrom in higher education that includes cutbacks, proposals for rationalisation, mergers, the establishment of technological universities and a clearly articulated national strategy to 2030. Carpenter noted 'I think the key role at the minute in the current climate with cutbacks and people being let go, is to continue to provide support and to be a resource to members'.

Perhaps EDIN should consider these concerns in order to remain relevant. Ron Barnett (2011) suggests it is time to rethink the idea of university and he challenges educational developers to think creatively and to encourage 'daring, forward-looking and imaginative conceptions' among management and academic staff about what a university should be, including the idea of an 'ecological university' in the broadest sense: one that is 'dynamic, continuously remaking itself, but with a world view and not solely focused on its own interests' (p. 4-5). This publication should help educational developers meet current challenges as it includes chapters which focus on the implementation of innovative approaches such as: civic engagement; the use of technology to enhance learning and provide a flexible learning environment; capturing the student voice in curriculum design; the transition to HE for first year students; engaging students in learning processes which are transformative in nature.

Palmer suggested that she would like to see two things in the future, namely, increased university involvement, particularly in role of chair and vice-chair on the executive, and consistent CPD support for members. She remarked, 'I worry about supporting my colleagues in their day-to-day needs in higher education e.g. classroom management, planning classes, the real nuts and bolts of teaching and learning.' Participants agreed

that consideration should be given to developing ongoing supports for colleagues to meet these challenges.

Whilst accepting the issues which the current economic climate brings, this is still an exciting time in Irish Higher Education. It is hoped that the National Forum will provide a platform for the articulation of ideas and implementation of key initiatives, thereby offering EDIN the opportunity to engage in and inform teaching and learning, ensuring the Network not only remains relevant but is an integral part of the change agenda in Irish Higher Education.

## Final Reflections

Looking back over the key factors which led to the establishment and the advancement of EDIN has been an interesting and worthwhile exercise. In the process, factors such as funding and the objective evaluation in 2006 were outlined; both of these helped in transitioning from an informal group to a formal network with a mission, constitution and a strategic plan which provided a roadmap for the future. There has been a significant increase in the membership which now includes educational developers working in HE institutes and others supporting the development of teaching and learning, including private consultants.

The foresight of the original group must be acknowledged and its focus on the collegiality and the professional development of the members. However, the sustainability of EDIN is also reliant on the membership, and in particular those who take on a voluntary role on the committee. This commitment, albeit for a given period, is essential as this is the group who will lead the network by articulating and achieving agreed strategic objectives.

Through this conversation, specific areas for further engagement were identified including:

- making our commitment to scholarship more explicit;
- engaging in policy formulation at national and local level.

In addition, the participants considered it essential that EDIN return to first principles in supporting each other through this time of increasing change in HE and have a strategic focus on supporting early career academics, in addition to those working with an increasingly diverse student population and grappling with classroom management issues, assessment design and with developing strategies for teaching and learning including the use of technology. This publication should contribute to and assist in each of these areas.

Conversation is crucial to sustaining EDIN. I revert to Wheatly, to guide us on simple but effective ways to sustain the Network even within a formal structure:

Ask “what’s possible?” not “What’s wrong?” Keep asking. Notice what you care about. Assume that many others share your dreams.  
Trust that meaningful conversations can change your world.  
Rely on human goodness. Stay together.

(2002: 116)

I am very privileged to be involved with such a dynamic and committed group of educational developers in Ireland. My hope for EDIN is that it will continue to sustain, support and

engage members through annual events, opportunities for collaborative writing and the sharing of expertise with the resultant enhancement of the learning experience of students in Irish Higher Education.

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## Response to

### **Conversations on an Emergent Professional Network: a personal reflection on the background, development and sustainability of the Educational Developers in Ireland Network (EDIN)**

by Tai Peseta, Institute for Teaching and Learning, University of Sydney, Australia.

On first joining the community of educational and academic development, conversations of all kinds become particularly important forms of professional learning. They are essential for finding out about operational matters: how things get done; what has been tried in the past with success and failure; who the key learning and teaching players are and what they are each trying to achieve. Conversations are similarly important for extending one's conceptual and practical knowledge base – the scholarly substance of educational development. And conversations too, help us learn about each other.

Conversation is a meeting of minds with different memories and habits. When minds meet, they don't just exchange facts; they transform them, draw different implications from them, engage in new trains of thought. Conversation doesn't just reshuffle the cards; it creates new cards (Zeldin in Haigh, 2005: 14).

In this chapter, Nuala Harding reminds us that conversations are also mechanisms for remembering and relaying *history* – in this case – what the initial talk, curiosity and enthusiasm was that led to the formation of the Educational Developers Ireland Network (EDIN). While there is to my mind a focus on the beginnings of EDIN and the conditions leading to its arrival on the Irish higher education scene (together with its achievements), there is also a looming future focus to contend with: where should EDIN devote its energies in the second decade of its work? What should its proper focus be given the constant change which now besets the higher education sector? How best can EDIN demonstrate its impact on curriculum, teaching and student learning? What role has it yet to play in building individual and institutional learning and teaching capacity?

### **How might EDIN plan a sustainable future for itself?**

EDIN is clearly not alone in recognizing and being caught up this tension. Indeed, it is a very real one for many professional societies and organisations who must choose carefully how they will engage in improving higher education learning and teaching. The educational developer-on-the-ground struggling to support the diversity of new, casualised teaching staff (for example) is an issue the world over, and Harding's chapter raises tough and uncomfortable questions about the responsibility of organisations like EDIN to work at that level given its limited funding and resources. Extending its reach beyond the grass-roots level through policy, advocacy and scholarly publication appears to be the route to EDIN's national impact and sustainability. No doubt, there will be a challenge ahead to ensure that EDIN's early collaborative spirit does not become lost in its efforts to scale up.

Harding's history of EDIN, derived through reflection and conversation, demonstrates just where the gusto of a few individuals keen on educational development can lead. There are histories precisely like this one littered throughout educational development

– the Australian publication *Making a Place: an oral history of academic development in Australia* (Lee, Manathunga & Kandlbinder, 2008) – a story of academic development told through the eyes of Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australia (HERDSA) life members, is at the forefront of my mind. Although it is less a history of HERDSA, it builds a composite picture of the events leading to its development. But these examples are too few. One of the lessons from Harding's chapter is to consider how we can be systematic in capturing and researching the conversations that seed learning, teaching and educational development change.

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## 3

## Developing a Regional Approach to Outstanding Teaching and Learning: A case study

Mary Fitzpatrick, University of Limerick; Elaine Vaughan,  
University of Limerick

Corresponding author: Mary.Fitzpatrick@ul.ie

### Introduction and Context

It has often been acknowledged that teaching in higher education is afforded a relatively low status when compared to its more lucrative relation, research, and this is echoed in the literature (for example, Weimer, 1997; DfES, 2003 in Young, 2006). Teaching awards are reputed to provide many benefits to institutions and participating academic staff. Research indicates that teachers in higher education need recognition for their teaching efforts, respond positively to this recognition, and that teaching awards are one effective way of recognising and rewarding teaching (e.g. Ruedrich et al., 1992, 1986; Dinham and Scott, 2003). It is also acknowledged that when good teaching is rewarded, academic staff will remain committed to the improvement of teaching (Carusetta, 2001). This is not to suggest that the concept of the teaching award is universally ratified and supported (cf. Layton and Brown, 2011). Difficulties are reported, for example, in respect of identifying what teaching awards actually endorse (Chism, 2006). Other research has worked on identifying how to refine systems for recognising excellence, and interrogate, in a constructive way, the assumptions on which these systems are built (Skelton, 2004). Some recent commentary asks whether teaching awards and similar initiatives might actually lower the status of teaching despite best efforts to the contrary (see MacFarlane, 2011). The underlying challenge for the educational developers tasked with implementing the teaching award initiative described in this chapter was to establish a professionally useful process in a national (and global) environment of ‘entrepreneurialism, managerialism, massification, commercialism and reductionism’ (MacFarlane:163), a system which would have, and be perceived to have, academic and professional integrity. This system, which arose as part of a cross-institutional strategy of a conglomerate of higher education institutes, was re-imagined as a *process* which would, to as large an extent as possible, mitigate aspects of the ‘game’ of academic development, as Layton and Brown (2011: 164) characterise it, where ‘irresolvable, profound and unremitting contradictions hold sway’.

In a time of reduced resources but increasing competitiveness, the Shannon Consortium was designed to establish the Shannon region as a zone of excellence in teaching and learning at third and fourth level and was part of a broader targeted initiative (the Strategic Innovation Funding cycle, 2006-2010). Four institutions in the mid-west of Ireland (University of Limerick, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick Institute of Technology



and Institute of Technology Tralee) worked to achieve a regional goal of developing and supporting outstanding teaching. This comprised two bedrock initiatives: the development of a regional award process designed to foster teaching excellence and endorse it and, as corollary, the establishment of a peer support network through peer observation of teaching (PoT). This was a mammoth task insofar as there was no central support for teaching and learning in three of the participating institutions; consequently a new culture of teaching and learning had to be envisaged, developed and nurtured in tandem with the more practical work of establishing institution-based teaching and learning frameworks, in terms of systems and personnel. Two main objectives were identified in relation to meeting the regional goal and in terms of supporting academic staff in their continuous professional development. These were the establishment of a regional teaching award system and the initiation of a peer support system for academics to develop and learn from each other the various approaches to teaching within their disciplines. In order to establish and progress the high aspirations of the Consortium's teaching and learning vision for the region, a very high level of leadership was required in addition to transparency and support. The various organisational cultures which prevailed were crucial factors in relation to how these initiatives were viewed by the four institutions, and understanding these differences was also essential. Once all partner institutions had recruited a project leader by early August, regular meetings were established, complemented with on-going communication via email and phone.

This evidence-based chapter will provide the rationale for, insights into, and practical recommendations on how a regional approach to excellence in teaching and learning was successfully developed and sustained within the higher education sector in this region in a difficult economic climate. It provides key issues for consideration by educational development practitioners and academics alike.

## **Developing a Regional Approach to Teaching and Learning**

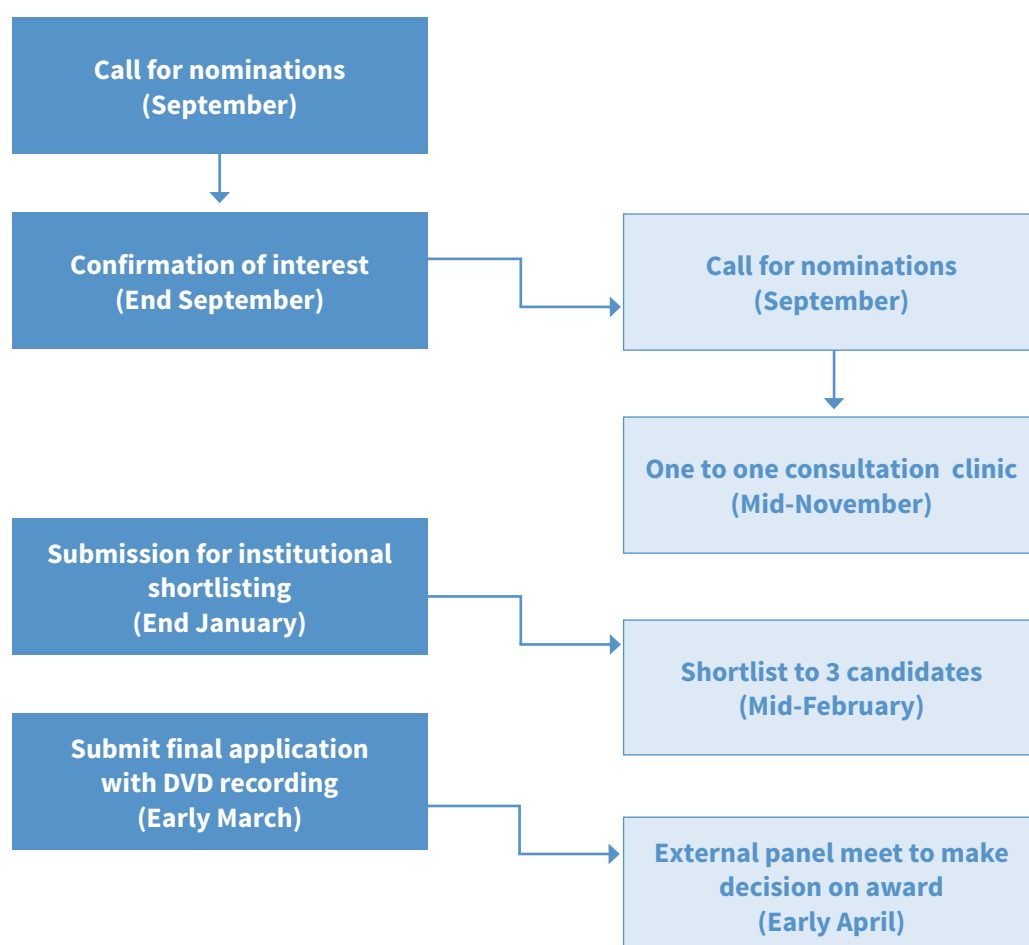
In order to contextualise the objective of the Shannon Consortium, and subsequently the practical steps that were taken to achieve it, it is important to position the activities themselves in the Irish higher education context. In comparison with the US higher education context, where it is reported that the first teaching award was given at the University of California in the 1950s (Sorcinelli & Davis, 1996; Skelton, 2007), or even the slightly more analogous, yet more advanced, teaching and learning climate in the UK, teaching awards are relatively new in Ireland. This is a significant difference to the international context. In Australia, for example, the Carrick Institute in Australia has done much to develop teaching awards in terms of processes, procedures and initiatives as has the relatively recent National Teaching Fellowship scheme which was established in the UK in 2000. In Ireland, within the Shannon Consortium the first year of the regional award was 2007. The National Awards for Excellence in Teaching (facilitated by the National Academy for Integration of Research, Teaching and Learning, NAIRTL) began in 2008. Although there were a small number of institutions offering awards for excellence in teaching prior to these initiatives (for example, at University College Dublin, Trinity College Dublin or the University of Limerick), collaborative and multi-institutional awards did not exist prior to 2007.

### ***The Regional Teaching Excellence Award***

As the regional award process is the only regional award of its kind in Ireland, many issues were considered in order to establish and promote this initiative across the four

partner institutions. The major objectives were to: (i) develop a process that would be motivational; (ii) have clear and realistic processes of progression in terms of professional development; and (iii) be perceived to be professionally valuable. It was acknowledged that as an incentive, the teaching award, according to reported best practices in developing teaching awards, should be ‘future orientated, perceived to be valuable, [be] moderately difficult to attain, but...realistically available’ (Menges, 1996:5). Therefore, in developing the overall awards programme, careful consideration was given to clear criteria in terms of broad general qualities of excellent teaching that are characteristic of all disciplines and environments within the third level sphere (Chism, 2006). The main consideration from all perspectives was encouraging as many academic staff members as possible to engage. Therefore, it was agreed that there should be an emphasis on the availability of support mechanisms. Subsequently, very clear guidelines were developed by the partner institutions which could be applied by all nominees irrespective of discipline, institution or background, and these formed the basis for the criteria upon which the portfolio would be assessed (such as teaching philosophy; volume, versatility and quality of teaching; planning and preparation; assessment strategies and evidence of continuous professional development). Each institution provided key milestones on their websites and internally circulated information on key dates for nominees in relation to regional workshops, one-to-one consultations and final submission dates.

The process was staged and each stage was made explicit in all circulated information. Figure 1 below presents a flowchart of the process.



**Figure 1: Flowchart of Shannon Consortium Regional Award Process**

A call for expressions of interest was made across the Consortium in early September where academic staff members were invited to submit an expression of interest for the award. Individuals were then contacted to confirm their interest in progressing these nominations and thereafter the process began in earnest. A regional workshop on portfolio development was offered in October, and was facilitated by an external consultant from the UK. This was followed by one-to-one support clinics offered by the same consultant in November whereby candidates sent their portfolios to her in advance of the meeting. The rationale for this confidential clinic was that individuals would get objective, frank, and constructive feedback from an external third party, and could convert this feedback into action points for finalising the teaching portfolios. The deadline for short-listing of the submissions was in mid-January and each institution made their own arrangements for short-listing with external consultants (in this case also UK-based consultants) deemed most appropriate in the first year.

All candidates received detailed feedback on their submissions with three candidates from each institution progressing to the next and final stage of the process. These candidates had three weeks to finalise their submission and record a teaching session for dispatch to the external panel. In line with best practice (Biggs, 2001), the focus was on the teaching (not just the teacher) and so a teaching portfolio, a DVD of a teaching session and evidence that supported the substance of the portfolio, such as peer observations, was to be included in each submission. The external panel received all application material one month before a meeting was convened to discuss the applications at the University of Limerick in April.

The panel was chaired by the UK expert on portfolios, with three UK academics and one Irish academic independent of the institutions involved on the panel. The meeting was observed by the Teaching and Learning advocate from the Consortium's lead partner in the overall teaching and learning strategies (in later years the Teaching and Learning Advocate from each institution would be present) and all feedback was carefully noted for dissemination to each candidate in order to provide everyone shortlisted with feedback that would round off and, within this context, 'close the feedback loop' (Watson, 2003), while also presenting material for future reflection. The overall process culminated in an award ceremony where all shortlisted candidates were acknowledged and where a presentation was made to the commended academic staff and to the overall winner.

A standalone, yet complementary, partner project, a peer observation and support network, was designed and established to run concurrently with the regional award process, and this process is explored below.

### *Peer Observation of Teaching Network*

While teaching awards date back to the late 1950s, peer observation of teaching, at least as a centrally supported and systematic institution-wide process (see Donnelly, 2007 or McMahon, Barrett and O'Neill, 2007), was also a new departure for the partner institutions in the Shannon Consortium. While peer observation is conceived of as an independent initiative in its own right, it does support the development of the reflective teaching portfolio integral to the regional award process. All candidates developed a reflective teaching portfolio for the regional award process engaged in peer observation of teaching and used it as a valuable source of evidence. However, the philosophy underpinning the initiatives was that they should be completely voluntary, optional and driven by individual professional development imperatives. The peer observation network was established and supported by the Teaching and Learning Advocates in the partner institutions

through an induction process which involved training and awareness-raising for staff. It was informed by the lessons learned in the United States and Australia in the 1990s but also the more recent experiences of institutions in the UK post-Dearing (Lomas and Kinchin, 2006). Chief amongst these was the need to ensure that participants were very clear about the purpose of peer observation, would feel comfortable about the process itself, and find it professionally beneficial in that it would inform and aid reflection on and development of their teaching practices.

The benefits and challenges of embedding peer observation at a structural level in higher education institutions have been well documented and were given serious consideration by the partner institutions from the outset. Gosling has done a significant amount of work on the various models of peer observation and the model that was considered most appropriate in this instance was the collaborative model (Gosling, 2005). The vision was very much in line with Bell's (2001:29) view that if the peer observation is truly collegial and developmental in nature it 'should encourage shared critical reflection on real life teaching experiences which could lead to transformation of both perspective and practice.' MacKinnon (2001) and others (e.g. Piccinin, 1999; Stanley et al., 1997) advocate the provision of formative feedback to teachers on their teaching as this can be one of the most powerful approaches to academic development. It has been suggested that consultation with a professional can have a long term effect on improving university teaching and creating an environment in which academics will feel more confident, competent and enthusiastic about their teaching (MacKinnon, 2001). It was with this in mind that the peer observation of teaching network was established to encourage teachers to talk about their teaching. The idea of creating a tangible, ratified context for dialogue around teaching, teaching beliefs and teaching practices was a critical one, as informal conversation with academic staff in the institutions had revealed that teaching staff rarely had the opportunity to discuss their teaching. Martin and Double (1998) have highlighted the benefits that accrue when teaching practices are unpacked and discussed in a peer observation context and acknowledge that teaching skills can be refined and developed through the observation of teaching and joint reflection in a supportive collaboration.

Furthermore, in the overall picture of evidencing teaching practice, it has been suggested that student evaluations of teaching, a relatively established conduit for generating this evidence, are not sufficient to provide the sort of information teachers require to enhance the quality of teaching and learning across departments (e.g. Gibbs and Habeshaw, 2002). Hence, supplementary evidence is required and peer observation can provide a useful means of filling that gap. However, it is not without its difficulties, including how it challenges academic freedom; questions around accuracy of what is reviewed; and concerns about the objectivity of those who review (Lomas & Nicholls, 2005). All of these issues and concerns were considered prior to launching the Shannon Consortium process. One very real concern was in relation to how peer observation can be viewed by some academics as an intrusion into a very private element of their work (Martin et al., 1999). That may well be the case, with others citing it as an intrusion to their professional autonomy (Blackwell and McClean, 1996). Hutchings (1994) argues that the notion of teaching being a private activity, viewed only by students, needs to be addressed. However, it is widely acknowledged that inviting a colleague into a teacher's teaching space can provoke anxiety (e.g. Courneya et al., 2008), and steps should be taken to mitigate this anxiety. One of the key ideas transmitted for the Consortium process was that participants not only voluntarily engaged in the process, but would do so by nominating a trusted colleague as an observation partner. Almost without exception, the

Teaching and Learning Advocate within the institutions took on the role of peer observer in the first year of this initiative. This was not explicitly encouraged, and participants were invited to nominate any of their colleagues as a preferred observer, as previously mentioned. However, it became the *de facto* practice initially, perhaps because the Teaching and Learning Advocate was perceived to be experienced with the process and unlikely to be engaged in the discipline of the person being observed, thus enabling a focus on process rather than content. With peer observation of teaching, how teaching is viewed by the observer can be key to the feedback provided. For example, as Brannigan and Burson (1983, cited in Courneya et al., 2008) point out, the element of subjectivity, which includes different views on teaching and teaching styles, can have an impact on the process. This was considered a key factor in the design stages of the Consortium model. Training was provided on principles of constructive feedback in order to draw attention to the fact that observers may bring different, perhaps even diametrically opposed, perspectives on ‘effective’ teaching. This was considered an essential preliminary to maximise the benefits of peer observation. Giving and receiving constructive feedback on teaching is, more often than not, a skill that academics may have had little interaction with, let alone training in (Cosh, 1998: 173).

The main approach of the partner institutions was, therefore, to address all actual and potential academic staff concerns and to ensure that professional security and confidentiality was maintained and respected throughout. The voluntary aspect of the scheme was paramount in this regard; information and guidelines were provided in addition to workshops and seminars. The guidelines incorporated UK best practice in that participants needed to be focused on reaching understanding (Habermas, 1984) rather than making judgements, which would help individuals become more open to the ideas. As previously mentioned, the idea that both roles – observer and observed – would yield significant insights into personal practice was also foregrounded (Martin and Double, 1998). Various guidelines were developed to encourage this professional practice in such a way as to help the academics consider teaching in a positive and professional light. The peer observation network was launched via email invitations to participate which were sent out by the teaching and learning advocates at each institution on agreed dates. Accompanying the email invitation was a peer observation request form, and a short overview of the aims and principles of peer observation at the Shannon Consortium institutions, with an emphasis on an ethos of collegiality, professional development and a non-judgmental environment.

Ultimately, it was designed to be a voluntary initiative that would give rise to increased dialogue and involvement in teaching and learning initiatives, and continuous professional development as a consequence of this discussion and involvement. Those who have been observed on a number of occasions have now become more involved as actual peer observers, sharing their experience and again increasing the profile of teaching and learning by so doing. In fact, it has proven to be the initiative that has become the most devolved, with academic staff adapting and interpreting the process in ways that have the most perceived utility and professional resonance for them (see, for example, Kenny, et al., (in press)).

### **Project Outcomes, Lessons Learned and Sustainability for the Future**

Some key learning and action points emerged over the lifetime of the project (and beyond) which resulted in the processes evolving. These provide an insight into the sort of outcomes we can identify which can be argued to support sustainability in teaching and

learning processes of this type. In addition, they point towards some guiding principles in implementing a process like this on a limited budget. In order to get the academic staff perspective on the process, interviews were conducted with participants in the lead institution at the end of the first year which identified some key supports that were considered to be very worthwhile in the overall scheme. One of the key supports that was considered to be of value was the one-to-one support available from the Teaching and Learning Advocates, the reasons for which are illustrated in the representative quotations below:

... the amount of support we got from T&L was fantastic. I knew there was somebody there, I knew the processes that were available to me, I knew the expertise was there, I knew the flexibility was there

The teaching and learning support was excellent. If I compare the first draft of the teaching portfolio to the last draft it's ... better and only because of feedback

Institutions with existing teaching and learning staff can therefore capitalise on one of the most important variables in supporting a new or adapted process. Workshops and interaction with other academic staff from different institutions (in the case of this process) and different disciplines were regarded as a hugely positive factor for participants:

I think it was chatting to other people as we were all broken into groups and just chatting to them about it as I never really talk about teaching – ever like – within our department.

The timelines, structure and deadlines were also seen as positive factors by participants in the process:

It was good in terms of allowing me or forcing me to take time to reflect and I know that in a busy academic life that is the way it is. This made you do it! There is nothing like a deadline to make you do it and I think that is a positive!

A staged, structured process comprising on-site development workshops and opportunities to interact with colleagues on teaching and learning themes can be managed on a small budget if there are dedicated teaching and learning staff within an institution. Equally, ensuring that there is a relatively light touch on reminders of deadlines, and a reasonable amount of support available in terms of feedback and advice is also possible even when budgets are constrained. From the perspective of the immediate partners, a number of issues that emerged at various stages of the project point to what we would argue are factors pivotal to the success of a process like this one. First of all, it is crucial that management level buy-in and support for the process has been established: in institutions where academic staff were sceptical about this, there was a much lower rate of participation. This connects to our second major learning: where an institutional culture of valuing teaching and learning activities exists and where academic staff are encouraged to develop professionally and be student-oriented, initiatives like those described easily take root. It takes longer where an institution has not previously been quite so teaching and learning focused, though this does not mean that embedding in such a culture is impossible. When teams that work on projects such as this share goals and engender positive team dynamics, this can be made possible. Ultimately, these foundational conditions need to be in place before communities of

practice can be nurtured and sustained, and a positive and organic process set in train.

There were a number of noteworthy outcomes for the institutions and individuals involved in establishing the processes. The first was for the Teaching and Learning Advocates who developed a growing portfolio of expertise and worked collaboratively on providing quality seminars, workshops and one-to-one support; this expertise had been previously sourced from outside the institutions – clearly, this has financial implications in a climate of ever diminishing resources. The Shannon Consortium *Conversations and Workshop* series has continued to grow and has provided opportunities for engagement in discussions and presentations in teaching and learning for academic staff from all partner institutions. To the extent that the aim of ‘increased dialogue’ is possible to quantify, the sustained engagement in these fora designed to create space for discussions about teaching and professional practice is encouraging.

In relation to the award process, the panel is currently chaired by a colleague from NUI Galway with three panel members from Ireland and the UK and some rotation over each academic year. The nomination process has been extended to include peer-nomination as a result of observations and feedback from others.

The programmatic aim was to foster inter-institutional dialogue by facilitating partnerships and groupings across the Consortium itself, through the development and nurturing of the community and communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) that emerged in the pursuit of this goal. While this was largely successful, certain geographic and time constraints came into play. Nevertheless, the overall outcomes exceeded expectations as all goals were achieved with the additional benefits of increased dialogue about teaching and learning which is now evident: there is increased participation in general teaching and learning activities, increased level of academic staff volunteering to deliver and present ‘Conversations’ sessions, and there is an increased awareness, and participation in, the area of portfolio development for both personal and professional purposes. In summary, the regional award system has served not only to draw attention to the importance of teaching as an essential skill and critical dynamic in higher education and learning, but also to encourage more individual teachers to participate in professional development for teaching. Participation across the range of complementary initiatives equips academic staff with the evidence they need to draw on for their own professional progression and development, and it can be extrapolated that this should, and can, presuppose an impact on student learning.

Interestingly, teaching in higher education does not require a particular qualification in Ireland as yet and while other professions are very open to, and engage in observation of practice, this was hitherto a rarity in higher education in the Irish context. Without the resources to sustain a peer observation scheme, for example, it has been suggested the danger is that interest in peer observation can peter out (Gosling, 2003; Hammersly-Fletcher & Orsmond, 2004; Crutchley, et al., 2005). It is clear within this region that the opposite is the case as people continue to engage in peer observation yet without the ‘middle man’ – with pairs and groups of individuals electing to work collaboratively on developing peer observation partnerships using as a baseline the supports that currently exist (see, for example, Kenny et al., (in press). Peer observation reports identify a clear shift in pedagogy with new methodologies initiated and adopted which illustrate a deeper understanding of student learning. The importance of the wider institutional environment can encourage or discourage peer review (observation) processes (Gibbs and Habeshaw, 2002; Gosling, 2003 and 2005; Ramsden and Martin, 1996; Cox and Richlin, 2004) and this appears to be the case when one considers the level of engagement in two of the institutions where no support or recognition of the process was given. There are research



groups in two of the partner institutions which are using the peer observation network to improve teaching in their departments and within their disciplines. In addition, the regional award has been aligned in some instances with the National Teaching Award (National Academy for the Integration of Research, Teaching and Learning) (for example, in the lead institution, the process is such that the overall winner is automatically put forward for the NAIRTL award).

The overarching success factor was the leadership and collaboration within the project team which allowed for the initiatives to take shape, and the flexibility in terms of supports offered at different locations/institutions. This was accomplished through combining expertise, by sharing best practice and by helping one another with the practical, political, organisational and pedagogical challenges that prevail in higher education settings. The Shannon Consortium has been acknowledged by the Higher Education Authority in Ireland as an example of successful inter-institutional collaboration and how this can successfully impact on not only the primary, original objectives but also give rise to ripple effects of positive and unexpected outcomes (see Davies, 2010). These initiatives have continued beyond the initial three years of the Strategic Innovation Fund project that gave rise to them and have now been mainstreamed with the lead partner leading and sustaining the initiatives. There is a constant focus on what is next in relation to excellence in teaching and learning and in these uncertain times it is an exciting adventure pinning that down.



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## Response to

### **Developing a Regional Approach to Outstanding Teaching and Learning: A case study**

by Jacqueline Potter, Head of Learning and Professional Development, Keele University.

This chapter describes the ambitious development, the challenges and the successes, of establishing infrastructure, culture and practices to underpin a cross-institutional, regional Teaching Excellence Award scheme and a peer observation of teaching network.

The authors describe the experience of developing a Consortium among four geographically close higher education institutes to work together to 'level the playing field' between teaching and research by collectively working to improve the status of teaching in their institutes. In three of the four institutes the project included developing a fundamental infrastructure of support, in this case, the appointment of advocates in each to lead and champion the Consortium's goals and work. The choice of title for these individuals seems very apt and indeed, as the authors reflect on the project, these role holders, as individuals and as a network in the region, have clearly had a substantial range of positive impacts on the profile and practice of teaching within and beyond the expectations of the original project. The authors' observations and cautious conclusions about the impact of the role holders and the scheme they championed will be of interest to international developers and higher education managers looking at the impact and effectiveness of resources spent on teaching and learning initiatives, in terms of returns on both investment and on expectations.

The authors articulate a well-developed sense of what was wanted from the outset of the project: to support reflection and developmental dialogue on teaching through peer review and a portfolio-based awards process. The leadership and clarity of vision that was clearly established among the team is commendable and evidenced in the chapter as it reports on the process and outcomes of the project.

The two main arms of the project, the regional award scheme and the peer review network, are areas of teaching and learning practice and development that have wide international relevance. Readers will be struck by the thoughtful use of the global literature, developing theory and experienced consultants to underpin the early delivery of the Consortium's goals. When the project began, the authors were aware that they were breaking new ground with their work and were careful to ensure that they learnt from diverse international practices and accumulated expertise. The work here described takes its rightful place among the global literature on developing awards and peer review schemes and provides a useful addition in that it explicitly addresses working across different institutional cultures. It also emphasises how dialogue and collegiality were principles at the heart of the success of the project in a range of ways and among both the team of advocates and the academic colleagues they supported across the region.

# 4

## Discourse and Connectivity: Capturing the voice of educators

Fiona O’Riordan, Griffith College Dublin; Susan Bergin, NUI Maynooth;  
Kevin Casey, Dublin City University; Larry McNutt, IT Blanchardstown

Corresponding author: [fiona.oriordan@gcd.ie](mailto:fiona.oriordan@gcd.ie)

### Introduction

Events such as symposiums, conferences, and workshops provide excellent opportunities to disseminate research. The networking opportunities provided *vis-à-vis* informal conversations with like-minded individuals are invaluable. Attendees have the chance to share and discuss their values, beliefs, and experiences related to their practice. However, this networking is rarely formally recorded or disseminated to the participants or the wider education community.

In order to address this shortcoming the authors developed a mechanism to capture this valuable information through an innovative framework, which addresses the challenge of capturing multiple disparate voices and conversations by providing an approach that encourages collaboration, sharing and dialogue. The approach involves providing iterative opportunities to review and re-engage with the data as it emerges and evolves. The structure of the framework is transferable, and experiences to date would suggest it has the potential to provide a viable platform from which events such as these could increase capacity and improve sustainability.

In this chapter, a case study of the experience of adopting this approach at the International Conference for Engaging Pedagogy (ICEP) conference will be provided, followed by a description and an evaluation of the framework. The chapter concludes with reflections and recommendations for educational developers who are interested in adopting the framework for similar events.

### The Background

This approach, a Framework for Capturing Informal Conversations (CIC Framework), is influenced by the theory of appreciative inquiry and it offers an opportunity to reposition current approaches to capturing the voice of Irish educators. Appreciative inquiry emphasizes reflection on our successful endeavours rather than deep analysis of our perceived problems and issues. The objective is not to ignore or gloss over problem areas, rather to re-balance the emphasis with the hope that a stronger more positive foundation will enable participants to ‘dream’ of alternative scenarios to the challenges they encounter as pedagogical practitioners. It is those very challenges and ‘dreamed’ alternatives that are discussed informally, but often not captured. The CIC Framework was conceptualised in order to record formally these often hidden or lost conversations,

with a view to using the analysis to inform and advance academic development initiatives such as conferences like ICEP.

Conferences are an integral part of academic life with participant roles varying from organizer to reviewer, to author, to listener/attendee, to presenter etc. These roles incorporate varying levels of authority at different stages in the conference lifecycle. In the early stages, the conference organizing committee and program committee are to the forefront ensuring that the logistics are in place and encouraging participation. As the submission deadlines approach, reviewers involved in the peer review process, and the refinement of conference thematic areas, are key players. The committee re-emerges in order to address the practicalities of hosting and managing the conference and to ensure that all delegates engage in the fullest manner with the final conference programme. For many people, both organizing and attending the conference, the informal activities are often as valuable as the formal paper presentations, with the opportunity to network and converse on a range of topics with colleagues and peers as beneficial as the formal presentations themselves.

The ICEP conference, which began in 2008 and is held annually in different locations, is one of many events occupying an already crowded space in the Irish higher education landscape. The steering committee for the conference was concerned that there seemed to be little difference between events, with most covering similar themes and utilising the same format. All appeared to encourage, yet ignore, the informal activities, such as the opportunities to network, that inevitably took place. In light of this, the ICEP committee conceptualised the CIC Framework so that participants at the 2010 ICEP conference would have a dedicated space to converse and informally share before the conference concluded. In facilitating this activity, the key questions for the organizers were (i) what shape would such a space take (ii) would participants be willing to engage (iii) how should their interactions be captured and (iv) how could we encourage ownership of the process and the end product i.e. their contributions. Engaging participants in a process that might encourage them to share and discuss their practice in a personal and emotional manner was a key concern. The decision to design a focus group to explore their motivations and challenges, referred to here as an armchair session, was approached with some apprehension, but also with an energy that sprang from recognition that the current de facto approach could be changed. The CIC Framework grew out of these initial concerns and discussions.

The CIC Framework is based on four key phases, but its value lies in the manner in which the cyclical and iterative nature of the Framework sustains and builds capacity for recurring academic development initiatives. Phase one is identifying the opportunity or problem that requires attention and re-direction; the second phase is about data collection i.e. where and how will collection of this valuable information be facilitated; phase three is analysis of the data; phase four closes the loop by disseminating the research and using it to inform future academic activities.

## Case study

ICEP seeks to support lecturers in addressing the challenge of creating a dynamic and engaging learning environment. A key success factor in achieving this has been to offer practitioners an opportunity to share their experiences with each other. This chapter is offered as a tool to support other educational developers as they endeavour to sustain academic development initiatives, through devolving ownership of the initiative to the participants; in this way, the collective voice informs and directs, and by default sustains,

the initiative. We recommend this process with one specific caveat i.e. it is by its nature 'fuzzy' and 'messy'. It is proposed as a skeleton – the flesh on the skeleton lies in the case study, or each case study that uses this approach. It is iterative in nature and composed of several stages that may or may not overlap. Its cyclical nature further sustains the initiative.

### **Problem Definition: The opportunity**

Our enterprise began with a meeting where we voiced our concerns about the future of ICEP. We had a collective desire to find a future for the ICEP Conference and to sustain ICEP in its transition from a local Irish conference to an international conference. We observed there were numerous competing conferences, for example, AISHE (All Ireland Society for Higher Education), NAIRTL (National Academy for Integration of Research, Teaching and Learning) and LIN (Learning Innovation Network) and that there was significant overlap between the themes that they and ICEP were attempting to address. We noted that the focus of many pedagogical conferences was on the 'what we do' and the 'how we do it' but that the 'why' was not the central question that we felt it should be. This observation led us to a philosophical debate about why we do what we do as pedagogical practitioners and about our desires to encourage practitioners to shift their thinking from pedagogic tools and resources to their personal values, beliefs and underlying motivation. This was not a trivial issue to address and as a first step we attempted to define the problem.

Although approaches to defining problems are outlined in the literature (Ritchie & Lewis, 2005; Silverman, 2006; Seale et al., 2007) they typically start by listing loosely defined problems, selecting one to address, and carefully refining it into a clear, concise problem statement. However, we soon realised the redundancy of this approach because we were inspired by appreciative inquiry and in that regard were more concerned with using the CIC Framework to create opportunities, rather than solve problems. We needed to shift our focus from problem to opportunity, thus providing ourselves with a focus that was motivated by a desire and an appetite to seek a more defined and sustainable future for the ICEP conference. The opportunity space that was unfolding was more amorphous than we expected and relied on group passion and commitment to challenge ourselves to improve something that was not necessarily broken, but could benefit from redefinition and focus. Our subsequent approach was inspired by appreciative inquiry in that we were 'dreaming' about a better future for ICEP. In the crowded space of Irish education conferences, the committee had to address the challenge of how to forge a worthwhile identity for ICEP. Through a series of discussions in early 2010, the team agreed on the broad scope of the core values which would underpin the CIC Framework. They included the following:

- ICEP would be a place where the voice of the educator would be paramount;
- the conversation that educators had would be the source for the future direction of ICEP;
- that we needed to facilitate and capture these conversations at ICEP2010 in order for attendees' voices to inform future ICEP conference themes;
- that if we were to get feedback from attendees, we needed to 'close the loop'. There had to be a meaningful return of results of that feedback, back to the original contributors;
- that the process, given the collective participation required, would naturally be 'fuzzy'. However, enabling and capturing the voice of the educator would be our starting point.



## Data Collection: Pace, place and people

Information gathering was a pivotal point in our process. There was considerable debate on the merits of quantitative vs. qualitative analysis, the choice of which would ultimately determine our data-gathering methodology. Initially the team gravitated towards quantitative approaches with statistical analysis; however, one of the authors had recently been involved with an appreciative inquiry project, for which qualitative data formed the backbone. After lengthy discussions about their experience, and the richness of the data that could be captured using such an approach, the team agreed that a qualitative approach would lead to more insightful conclusions.

As is the norm for most conferences, the themes for ICEP 2010 were chosen based upon what we envisaged educators would wish to discuss. Nonetheless, we were open to the possibility (and hoping) that the CIC Framework would facilitate attendees of 2010 identifying different views on what the themes should be for ICEP 2011.

ICEP 2010 was run as a one day conference with paper presentations by many of the attendees. In addition, attendees were assigned into one of four groups at registration for participation in a focus group session. Group assignment was random, based on the attendee's name. These four groups were colour-coded and attendees would know to which group they were assigned by a colour-coded sticker on their name-badge. This had the additional benefit that they would also be able to identify fellow group members throughout the day. An information sheet was also included in the registration pack to inform the attendees about the plan for the group session. Early in the day, during the keynote, we drew attention to our plans. We announced that we would be running parallel focus groups after the last presentation in the afternoon; there were various reminders of our plans throughout the day. Concerns were expressed that attendees would leave after the last talk of the day, so we employed a range of methods to incentivise their staying. These included presentation of the best-paper award after the focus groups had concluded, accompanied by a wine and cheese reception, followed by a free coach transfer back to the city. In the focus groups, attendees were encouraged to share their opinions and views; we hoped that the availability of a space and an opportunity for them to discuss their roles would be motivational.

We chose focus groups as a means to collect our data because they facilitated the gathering of in-depth information through open ended discussions. We felt it was important not to stifle contributions, but rather to stimulate them by using loosely defined headings to guide the discussion. The headings for each focus group were based on earlier conference themes and paper contributions. The advantages of the topic heading selection were twofold. Firstly, these topics were the focus of presentations and general discussion during the conference. Secondly, given that the attendees had chosen to attend a conference with these themes, they had an inherent interest in them and had something to contribute. We believed that the facilitator in the groups should be unintrusive and should allow discussion to emerge and take its own direction. However, we also recognised that the facilitator was tasked with balancing their hands-off role with the need to keep the group broadly on track (Ritchie & Lewis, 2005). It was essential that all facilitators were fully briefed and aware of their role so that there was uniformity with regards to the data collection which would assist in the analysis phase. Additionally, it was noted that facilitators should be similarly passionate and familiar with the objective of the exercise, and committed to the ultimate aim of valuing and being true to the voices captured and to the role that this rich data might ultimately play in informing the challenge. In reality, facilitators allowed the conversations to go off in tangents under the broad structure of headings. Ultimately, the overarching objective was to allow



contributors a platform or an opportunity to do something they clearly wanted to do – have their voices heard.

We committed that anyone who contributed to the discussion would be recorded as having done so in a paper based on the output from the focus groups; the content and their voice therefore would be captured and published formally. Subsequently, the ICEP 2010 research paper was presented during a plenary session at ICEP 2011. All focus group contributors were acknowledged in the ICEP 2011 published proceedings. Anecdotally, many participants expressed a strong interest in the dissemination of the results of the focus groups in the form of this promised paper and the pledge proved to be a strong motivator for the authors to complete the analysis after the conference had concluded.

Attendance at the focus groups in the afternoon was excellent, with 75% of those who attended the conference remaining for the 20-minute session. Each focus group was assigned a facilitator and the audio for each of the four parallel groups was recorded. The facilitator, or an assigned scribe, captured key points on a flipchart. Although each discussion was opened up around the theme for that particular group, the discussions were allowed to take the direction dictated by the participants.

Once the focus groups concluded, the attendees returned to the main conference venue for a plenary where each facilitator reported a summary of the group discussions and findings. Following these contributions, a further ‘Keep/Change’ session took place. During this session, participants were encouraged to place post-it notes on flipcharts placed around the room, allowing them to record what they would like to keep and what they would like changed with regard to the conference. This offered another layer to the consultation and a further opportunity for voices to be heard, particularly in relation to the conference structure and approach.

### **Methods of Analysis: Immersion and analysis**

Qualitative analysis provides an array of tools and approaches ideally suited to analysing and exploring complex media rich data. Our data were ‘messy’ data due to the natural way in which they were captured. The experience led us to endorse the sentiments of Spencer et al. (2005: 199) when they note that analysing qualitative data is challenging and ‘...requires a mix of creativity and systematic searching, a blend of inspiration and diligent detection’. In addition, we would suggest that commitment and endurance are also required. We were, as Gibbs (2007) proposes, using induction, as opposed to deduction, to move from initial specific observations towards broader generalisation and theories. We applied, as Spencer et al. recommended, diligent detection and inspiration, along with a sincere commitment to the voices of contributors, to search systematically for patterns or constructs (Gall et al., 2007) in order to work, in a bottom-up manner, towards theory generation. Some qualitative analysis traditions include ethnographic accounts: life histories and narrative analysis; content analysis; conversation analysis; discourse analysis; and grounded theory analysis. We were influenced by conversation analysis but essentially used grounded theory. Conversation analysis seeks to explore naturally occurring conversation and the manner in which the conversation flows. Though we had transcripts of the audio and we used these in our analysis, we frequently returned to the audio itself to explore, in a deeper manner, the flow and tone of the conversation. Although we had a collective body of knowledge regarding pedagogy, it was vital, in order to be true to our approach, that we did not initially engage in any focused or directed literature review. In this regard, our methodology was guided by Glaser (1978), who notes that the literature might ‘desensitize’ the researcher; in order to allow theory to

‘emerge’, it is best to keep an open and creative mind. Grounded theory is ‘grounded in a set of real-world data’, such as our data (Gall et al., 2007: 97). In analysing our data, we established categories and examined the frequency of occurrences within categories and associations between categories. We hoped that an emergent theory would bubble up to the surface as a result of data analysis through identifying categories and relationships (Ritchie & Lewis, 2005; Silverman, 2006; Seale et al., 2007). We spent prolonged periods of time, over many months, in the analysis phase. Working individually, notable points in the transcripts were flagged. Collectively, discussions ensued on the significance of the points noted. This allowed constructs to be derived from the data. We would estimate approximately half of the entire project time was devoted to this phase. In addition to our monthly meetings of approximately four or five hours, over a nine month period, we each spent individual time analysing and coding the vast data generated. We used Atlas.ti to code, annotate and capture the complex relationships in the data. Despite having the full transcripts, access to the audio tracks was useful at times, in order to capture exactly what the participants were trying to say and the context in which they were saying it.

The main output from this analysis phase was four groupings into which the major part of the discussion could be generally categorised. Earlier published conference proceedings have presented our findings in detail (McNutt et al. 2011; O’Riordan et al., 2010.) Discussions under these four groupings were not broken down along the original four parallel session topics. Instead elements of each of these four groupings were found in the transcripts of each parallel session. The groupings the authors identified were:

***The Role of the Educator*** – a substantial amount of the discussion in the various groups centered around the motivations and beliefs of the educators themselves.

***The Learner Profile*** – participants were keen to discuss the learners themselves. In particular, issues around their motivations, age-profiles and ethnic backgrounds were all discussed.

***Assessment*** – a recurring theme in the discussions was that of assessment. Some discussion was on how best to assess, but much of the debate centered around the observations that learners were perceived to be assessment driven. There was general agreement that this was a bad phenomenon and that educators needed to address this.

***Teaching methods*** – overlapping somewhat with assessment; discussions under this category centered on how to encourage deeper learning, to better engage students and how to use technology effectively in the classroom.

These groupings formed the streams for ICEP 2011, under a conference theme of ‘The Changing and Evolving Roles of Educators’.

One of the more positive results from the focus groups was that these four themes appeared in all of the group discussions. It was also striking that some of the groups did not adhere to the group’s assigned discussion theme for very long, mirroring the observations of Ritchie & Lewis (2005). For example, our transcripts show that one of the groups veered off-topic almost immediately to topics they wished to discuss with hardly a mention of the original topic. These tangential discussions were exactly what the authors were hoping for as they clearly reflected the issues that the participants were most interested in addressing.

## Methods of Dissemination: connection and closure

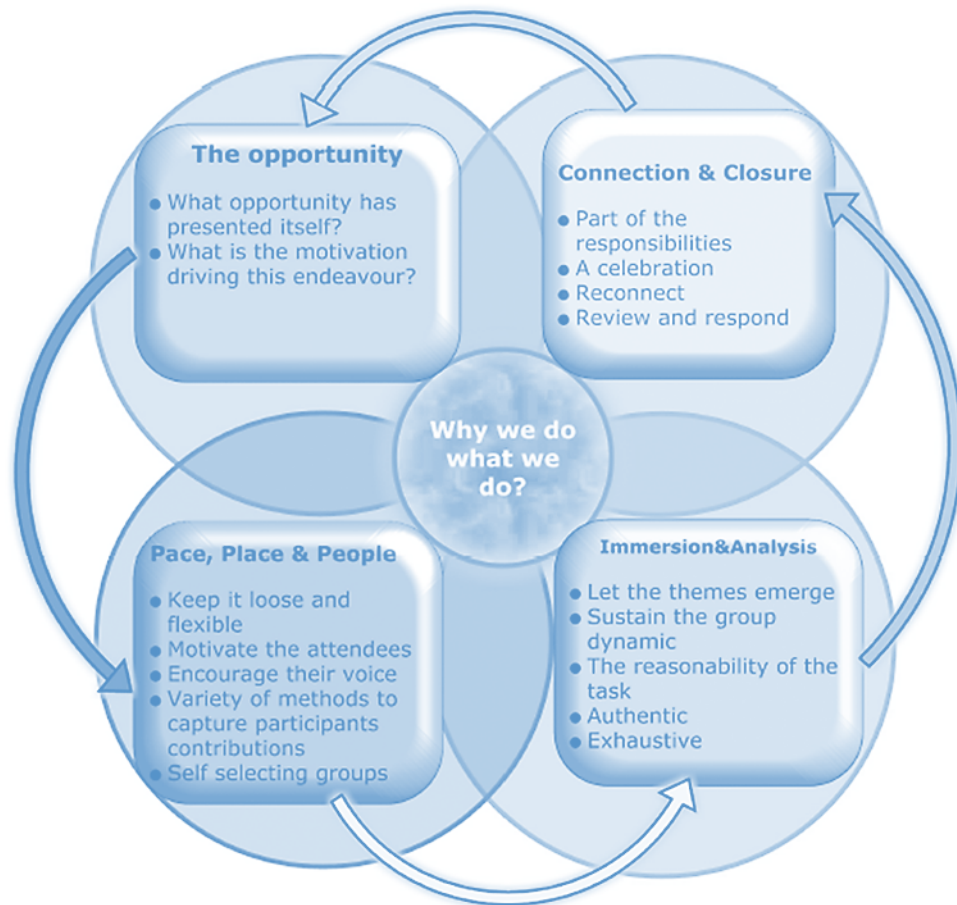
When disseminating research findings, consideration must be given to where the target audience might be, and what resources are available for dissemination. For us, the choice was obvious; we chose ICEP 2011 to disseminate the research, and to seek further feedback. We used a plenary session at the conference to present the research, in the form of a co-authored paper, and to remind the audience what the aim behind seeking their input was and what the research focused on. We then invited their feedback to the paper during the poster sessions over tea and coffee. We felt it was vital to close the loop and conclude the process by gathering the views of the stakeholders with regards whether the framework had resulted in a satisfactory plan of action for ICEP. The importance of closing the loop cannot be overstated, particularly if one is employing an iterative cycle such as we were. In ICEP 2011, we were able to point to how the feedback of attendees was made concrete by our shared paper and by using the findings to determine the new conference themes themselves. This made it considerably easier to seek further feedback in ICEP 2011. In an ideal world, there would not be significant changes in terms of the make up of the group between the collection of data at ICEP 2010 and the reporting at ICEP 2011. Given the changing nature of conference attendees from year to year, this was not entirely possible; however, online publication of the shared paper allowed attendees from ICEP 2010, who could not return in 2011, to see the results of their input.

## The Framework for Capturing Informal Conversations (CIC): A reflection

This CIC Framework has evolved through a planned process but the approach does not possess sharp edged boundaries. Though key tasks, phases and a process associated with the framework can be provided, we suggest that these elements in isolation offer only an artificial lifeless abstraction of the actual event. The overarching spirit of sharing and dialogue is for us the most salient feature; this is what we recognise as ‘an eternal conversation about things that matter, conducted with passion and discipline’ (Palmer, 2007: 106), that must be nourished and supported to enable an holistic approach to addressing the myriad of issues confronting higher education.

The CIC Framework can be represented as a series of interdependent phases gathered around one central theme and objective (see Figure 1). Each phase informs and shapes the next, building on the experiences and outputs as delicate contributions that must be treated with respect and sensitivity. Ownership and authenticity were important hallmarks of the engagements that continued and circulated through each of the phases and were the essential lifeblood necessary to sustain the energy and enthusiasm behind the endeavour. The CIC Framework, in essence, emerged and was nurtured by a desire to facilitate and encourage the use of informal conversations to inform, guide and develop a sense of ownership for ongoing academic development initiatives.

The starting point in this instance was a group of like-minded and like-motivated individuals who dreamed of ‘more’ with a view to augmenting or enhancing existing arrangements. Through the process, the voice of the practitioner was centre stage. This message was reiterated throughout the day of the conference and supported by the opportunities presented there to meet, share and commune at a pace conducive to conversation and discussion. Analysis of the data gathered required dedication and diligence in order to be true to the information and those who had provided it. The final phase involved reconnecting with the participants once more to seek their views and reflections. We see the CIC Framework as a four phase approach as represented in Figure 1.



**Figure 1: CIC Framework**

### **Recommendations for Educational Developers**

We believe this framework offers a mechanism to devolve ownership of a development initiative to academic members. It does so by providing a systematic approach for encouraging and capturing shared dialogue. In this way, the initiative can be self-sustaining. In our experience, members are keen to have their voices heard and they are quite happy to take the ball and run with it. Rigid structure is not necessary and may even impede the process.

An overarching concern was gauging the success of the initiative. However, on reflection we recognised that the CIC Framework is a process in and of itself, and in addition to its outputs, could become an integral and defining characteristic of the ICEP conference.

Key recommendations for other educational developers include the need for a passionate and committed research team who are dedicated to remaining true to the voices of participants, and the pivotal role those voices can play in sustaining educational development initiatives. We cannot over-emphasize the sheer volume of data such an approach generates and the commitment required to fully unlock and do justice to the richness of this data. Equally essential is the requirement to close the loop and show contributors that their voices were heard, and more importantly, acted upon. This will continue to be evidenced in subsequent iterations of the initiative.

In conclusion, if we could distill some essential ingredients from our experience of the process with a view to guiding others, we would recommend the following:

- Build a good research team who are passionate and committed to their cause;
- Emphasise the group/collective - each team member must be selfless and put the needs of the group membership ahead of their own;
- Do not over-orchestrate the process;
- Be flexible - the stages are iterative - there are no hard edges;
- Trust in the members to take responsibility and ownership;
- Provide closure.

We would like to conclude by echoing Palmer's observation that surface discussions around 'tips, tricks and techniques ... fail to touch the heart of a teacher's experience' (2007: 12). He suggests that 'good teachers possess a capacity for connectedness', and this has been our experience throughout this process (2007: 11). This framework supports this capacity for connectedness to facilitate deeper discussions which can drive ICEP and sustain its future relevance.

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## Response to

### Discourse and Connectivity: Capturing the voice of educators

by Sally Brown, Independent consultant, United Kingdom; Principal Fellow of the Higher Education Academy; Emerita Professor, Leeds Metropolitan University; Adjunct Professor at University of the Sunshine Coast, Queensland, James Cook University, Northern Queensland and Central Queensland University; Visiting Professor at University of Plymouth and Liverpool John Moores University.

Every year, thousands of people attend conferences on learning, teaching and assessment in higher education with the aim of learning more, so they can make their personal contributions to enhancing the student experience. However, few attending adopt systematic approaches to ensuring that their being at a conference actually does make an impact, nor do conference organisers in the main establish means to ensure permanence of impact. In this chapter, colleagues associated with the International Conference for Engaging Pedagogy (ICEP) conference in Ireland set out to remedy this omission by developing and using a Framework for Capturing Informal Conversations (CIC framework) attempting to capture the outputs of both the formal and informal interactions using an appreciative enquiry approach. As a UK-based contributor to the ICED conferences, I had the opportunity to see at first hand how this multi-stage practical approach worked.

The originators use this framework to enable dreaming of alternative scenarios and envisioning better futures for staff and students, and the analyses undertaken *post hoc* enables them to postulate that such a methodology is readily transferable to other conferences with similar formats in other nations. The strength of the approach is that it is not excessively structured and enables productive fuzzy thinking, where the voices of educator participants are not silenced within the discourse of the imposed conference structure, but are heard then and thereafter. Providing social spaces with hospitality and opportunities for free conversations were highly productive, and effective interaction was fostered by mixing participants up in random allocated groups for discussions. The ultimate purpose was to associate the conference programme with continuity, coherence and connectedness.

The authors make a convincing case that such an approach could be more widely used at pedagogic conferences internationally, since it fosters a collegial and collaborative approach, making space for thinking and reflection within the event itself and subsequently. Reflective practitioners tend to be more effective as educational developers, change agents and supporters of student learning (McGill and Beaty, 2001). The building of communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) relies substantially on effective and active reflection in collegial environments, of the kinds proposed in this chapter.

The approach merits further research and it would be valuable to learn of the impact of rolling it out both within the ICEP community and within other educational development organisations worldwide.

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## **Section 2**

### Supporting Academic Development





## 5

## Practising what they Preach?

### Academics' views on professional development for their teaching role.

Maria Slowey, Dublin City University; Ekaterina Kozina, Dublin City University.

Corresponding author: maria.slowey@dcu.ie

#### Introduction

The challenges facing higher education in Ireland are similar to those of many other states, including: reductions in public expenditure; increasing and more diverse student population; greater demands for public accountability; and 'relevance' in teaching and research. Frequently, academic staff carry the brunt of delivering diverse, sometimes competing, objectives (for example, Marginson & van der Wende, 2006; Clancy, 2007; Neave, 2007; Scott, 2007; OECD, 2008; Altbach et al., 2009). A considerable body of literature has emerged documenting the implications of these changes for the academic profession (for an overview see Locke et al., 2011). In addition, the changing nature of the academic profession has been the subject of several recent large scale international projects, including: *The Changing Academic Profession (CAP)* (Cummings & Finkelstein, 2011; Coates et al., 2009; Teichler 2009, 2010); *The Academic Profession in Europe: Responses to Societal Challenges* (EUROAC) (Kehm & Teichler 2012); and *The role of new Higher Education Professions for the redesign of teaching and studying* (HOPRO) (Kehm et al., 2010)

Our focus in this chapter is on one particular dimension of academic work which concerns the interests and practices of academics, as professionals. Our study explores academics' views of and engagement in professional development (PD) as a means of enhancing their teaching and, by extension, their students' learning. A comprehensive analysis of the literature on professional 'growth' of academic staff (in our terms 'development'), summarises the professional nature of their role which is to:

... apply their developed knowledge, skills, and values to complex problems, challenges, and goals for the benefit of society. Professionals such as faculty have significant autonomy and privilege and are expected to commit themselves to the highest standard of excellence and ethical behaviour in exchange for this autonomy.

(O'Meara et al., 2008:4)

The wider implications of the academic's role have been highlighted in a report, from a 'think tank', the Glion Declaration II *Universities and Innovative Spirit*:

A sustainable future will require the world's leading universities to continue to supply a growing stream of well-grounded and ethically responsible professional practitioners and leaders in every field of public life and endeavour, from medicine to engineering, from urban design to earth science, and from agriculture to economics. But it also will require that the sustained scholarship, basic research, imaginative thinking and creative technology that the universities have long provided should be nurtured, encouraged and supported...

(Rhodes, 2009:355)

In 2011, the *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* for Ireland drew attention to the importance of professional development for academic staff:

All higher education institutions must ensure that all teaching and learning staff are both qualified and competent in teaching and learning, and should support ongoing development and improvement of their skills.

(DES, 2011:18)

Independently - and in advance of the publication of the National Strategy - the member institutions of the Dublin Region Higher Education Alliance (DRHEA) identified Professional Development as one of its major areas of work. The DRHEA is a consortium of eight higher education institutions, supported by the Higher Education Authority's (HEA) - the Irish government's higher education agency - Strategic Innovation Fund (SIF). The Alliance comprises four universities (Dublin City University; Trinity College Dublin; University College Dublin; National University of Ireland Maynooth) and four institutes of technology (Dun Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design and Technology; Dublin Institute of Technology; Institute of Technology Blanchardstown; Institute of Technology Tallaght) (DRHEA, 2012). Under its Enhancement of Learning Strand (EoL), the DRHEA commissioned a survey to help inform the collaborative work plan of the Alliance. While individual institutions from time to time would have ascertained the interests and needs of staff, this commissioned piece was the first survey in Ireland of such a large scale and including academic staff from both parts of the binary system - the university and the institutes of technology sectors - which together constitute over half of the national system.

Building on seminal work from the 1990s - such as that undertaken by Boyer in the United States for the Carnegie Foundation (Boyer, 1999) and Elton in the United Kingdom for the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals (Elton, 1994) - a key principle of professional development is that provision should be based on expressed interests and the needs of those directly involved in teaching (Hollweg & Hill, 2003; Penuel et al., 2007). As professionals, academic staff are expected to keep abreast of new developments in their field and to enhance their knowledge and skills on an ongoing basis. They are also well placed to understand the gaps and barriers they encounter and to identify priority areas for professional development. Our primary aim in this study was to investigate academics' preferences for professional development in relation to teaching and learning in a direct way, namely, by asking them about their recent patterns of engagement and future plans. Based on the analysis of the data gathered, we argue that the sustainable commitment of academic staff to quality teaching provision, research and innovation is strongly associated with the extent to which they are both fully supported and engaged in their ongoing professional development. In our work, we explore, in the context of enhancing student learning, the main areas of interest for future academic staff development. The staff development proposals which we present are based on the responses from over 800

academic staff across the eight higher education institutions surveyed. We hope that our findings provide valuable information for centres for academic practice and those who support student learning across the Irish higher education system.

### Current Landscape of Academic Staff Development

Higher education in Ireland has faced significant change and development over the past decade. Since the late 1990s, higher education has become increasingly linked to a policy agenda associated with economic and social development (HEA, 2005; Expert Skills, 2008). This agenda features prominently in the major Irish higher education policy report *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* (DES, 2011). The National Strategy accords a central role to higher education in equipping graduates with generic skills and competencies such as critical thinking, problem solving capacity and entrepreneurship. The Strategy also outlines a number of significant achievements in the area of advancing teaching and learning including the establishment of centres of academic practice and teaching development. Additionally, as mentioned above, the National Strategy for Higher Education stresses that higher education institutional policies should reflect and support professional development provision for their academic staff.

In tandem with this renewed emphasis on teaching and learning, academics are accountable for engagement in other areas of work. Gornall and Salisbury (2012) note that the responsibilities, expectations and duties placed upon academic staff in the United States, the United Kingdom (UK) and elsewhere have expanded in the recent decade. This includes more intensive involvement with research (Bazeley, 2010) and increasing administrative workloads (Kolsaker, 2008). In Ireland, as elsewhere, national systems are ‘...embedded in particular historical traditions with highly contextualised developmental trajectories’ (Jones et al., 2012:191). The authors further point to three major global trends which are shaping the structural and environmental conditions in which academics work in their national systems, namely:

The increasing differentiation of national post-secondary systems and institutions and, as a result, their academic workforces; the introduction of staff management techniques and system-wide accountability frameworks; and lastly, the current and impending demographic shifts in the academic labour forces...

(Jones et al., 2012:191)

All of these features are evident in the Irish system. Thus, while within the Irish higher education context, structured academic professional development is a relatively new concept, it is one which has expanded rapidly over the last decade as is evident, for example, in the publications and activities of national networks such as AISHE (All Ireland Society for Higher Education), NAIRTL (National Academy for Integration of Research, Teaching and Learning), EDIN (Educational Developers of Ireland Network), LIN (Learning Innovation Network) and FACILITATE (the Irish Problem and Enquiry Based Learning Network). While provision has expanded, so too has the range of approaches to staff development. In Irish higher education, the academic staff development pressures and needs, as experienced at individual, department and institutional level, are taken into account by the institutional policies, while staff strive to develop their work in alignment to institutional strategies.

Internationally, a major comparative study on the changing nature of the academic profession in 20 countries *The Changing Academic Profession* (CAP) recently examined

the wider issues for the profession (Teichler, 2009, 2010). A follow-up study to the 1992 Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching research involving 14 countries, the main aims of the investigation were to contribute to an understanding of how academic work is changing, and how academics are responding to these changes in their external and internal environments (Locke & Teichler, 2007). It provides an important wider context for our study, notwithstanding our more explicit focus on the professional development interests of academic staff in Ireland.

### Objective of the Study and Participating Institutions

The concept of developing an evidence base which could inform policy and practice was central to the design of our study. As such, the sampling frame for our survey which we called *The Voice of Irish Academics: Towards a Professional Development Strategy*, included all academic staff on permanent and temporary contracts in eight higher education institutions in the Dublin Region. As noted previously, the study was conducted on behalf of the Dublin Region Higher Education Alliance (DRHEA). The principal aim of the study was to identify respondents' views on a range of issues regarding teaching and learning in higher education. Specific objectives were to:

- ascertain views of academic staff in relation to teaching innovation and changing student needs across Dublin Region Higher Education Alliance (DRHEA) institutions.
- identify main areas of interest for future staff professional development in relation to enhancing learning experiences of students.
- inform, directly, the work plan for the DRHEA and the Enhancement of Learning Strand.
- raise awareness of DRHEA across partner institutions.

An Expert Advisory Group assisted with the design and piloting of the questionnaire which was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Research Office of Dublin City University, and distributed to academic staff in the eight participating universities and institutes of technology (Endnote 1). The approach to distribution was a decision for each institution depending on their internal procedures: most were issued from either the Registrar's office, the institutional research office, or the centre for teaching and learning. One advantage of the online approach was that regular, cumulative updates could be obtained on a weekly basis as returns were made. There was no effective difference between interim results and those at the time of the close of the survey, giving confidence that, while response rates varied between institutions (possibly associated with the timing and method of distribution used), there is no reason to think that this had a significant impact on the final results. The tables in this chapter are based on primary data from this survey.

### Methodology

The questionnaire was distributed by email (with an electronic link) as the main mechanism of communication with academic staff in most higher education institutions. This approach also allowed for rapid analysis of electronic data so that interim results could be fed into relevant committees and working groups to inform future planning of staff development programmes. The questionnaire was distributed over a two month period and consisted of 55 questions distributed across the following five themes: (1) respondents' roles within their academic institutions; (2) issues around the changing nature of teaching and learning

in higher education; (3) the extent of respondents' participation in recent professional development; (4) respondents' perceptions of professional development activities which could be provided in the future; and (5) respondents' views and experiences in relation to support for professional development within the higher education institutions. Most of the questions required an answer on a seven point continuous Likert-type scale from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree', or on a four point ordinal scale indicating the extent of interest from 'no interest' to 'great interest'.

Each of the eight institutions was responsible for inviting engagement from their staff in the survey with responses being returned online through a common system. The data reported in this study are from a self-selected sample, and it was difficult to obtain precise numbers on academic staff in the eight institutions. However, based on available statistics of the numbers of full-time academic staff working in the eight institutions, we estimate that the response rate represented somewhere between 25% and 33% of the relevant target group - representing a good response rate for an online questionnaire. Just over half of respondents were women and 44.2% men; 71% of respondents were from the four universities and 29% from the four Institutes of Technology, a rate which is roughly proportional to institution size based on student numbers (HEA statistics). Information was sought on respondents' current positions in their higher education institution, number of years spent working in higher education, primary academic discipline, main area of teaching and primary area of research interests. Respondents were also asked to provide information on their academic grade within their institutions (the categories here are combined between universities and institutes of technology): c7% were Junior/Associate Lecturers; just over half (52.5%) Lecturers; 17% were Senior Lecturers; c8% Researchers; 4.5% Associate Professors and 5.4% Professors; a further 6.2% defined themselves as 'other' including some in substitute teaching positions. This range of experience was echoed in the spread across the disciplines; in relation to their primary academic discipline, the majority of respondents were based in the area of Social Sciences and Humanities (46.4%) with a slightly smaller proportion in Science and Technology (39.4%) and 14.2% in the area of Medical and Health Sciences.

## Findings

For the purposes of this chapter, we focus in particular on respondents' perceptions of the areas which they ranked either highest or lowest in terms of priority for professional development, in relation to enhancement of their teaching. (Another major theme of the survey relating to the interaction of teaching and research will be reported on separately in another publication). A rating scale was used to obtain an insight into respondents' interest in specific activities for professional development which might then be provided collaboratively through the Dublin Region Higher Education Alliance (DRHEA). The areas were then classified and ranked according to the percentages of responses falling into categories 'moderate interest' or 'great interest'.

Table 1 shows academics' priorities in relation to professional development. Areas which were identified by **80%** or more of respondents included: (i) innovative delivery methods (84.4%), and (ii) access to research in teaching and learning in their discipline (84.4%). In addition, **70 to 79%** revealed a strong interest in (iii) alternative assessment methods (79.7%), (iv) methods of obtaining useful feedback from students (79.6%), (v) peer exchange on good practice (78.6%), (vi) connecting with others in their own discipline (77.2%), (vii) use of new technology (76.9%), (viii) inquiry and problem based learning (75.5%), (ix) integrating research into undergraduate curriculum (73.5%) and (x)

access to research findings in teaching and learning (73.1%).

At the other end of the scale, professional development activities around microteaching to a peer group (39.6%) and managing teaching in a laboratory (36.6%) attracted the lowest ranking from the respondents.

Areas of professional development	Respondents (%)	Rank
Innovative delivery methods	84.4%	=1
Access to research findings on teaching and learning in my discipline	84.4%	=1
Alternative assessment methods	79.7%	3
Methods of obtaining useful feedback from students	79.6%	4
Peer exchange on good practice	78.6%	5
Connecting with others within my own discipline	77.2%	6
Use of new technology	76.9%	7
Inquiry and problem based learning	75.5%	8
Integrating research into undergraduate curriculum	73.5%	9
Access to research findings on teaching and learning in general	73.1%	10
Large group teaching methods	69.1%	11
Curriculum design	68.2%	12
Peer feedback on my teaching	67.3%	13
Aligning assessment and learning outcomes	65.3%	14
Small group teaching methods	63.3%	15

**Table 1: Areas of highest interest for professional development**

*Note: Based on primary survey data from Slowey and Kozina (2011) 'The Voice of Irish Academics', Unpublished Report. Average N respondents to this question was 640. The response scale comprised 4 categories: 'no interest', 'little interest', 'moderate interest', 'great interest'.*

## The Extent of Engagement with Professional Development

The survey data were analysed with regard to the respondents' levels of engagement with professional development over the previous three years. The majority of the respondents, (49%), indicated that they had participated 'occasionally' (including 9% engaging with disciplinary specific activities) while 27% indicated they participated 'regularly'. Around one quarter indicated that they had not participated in structured provisional development associated with teaching and learning over the previous three years.

	N	%
Participated regularly	176	27
Participated occasionally (including disciplinary specific)	324	49
No participation over previous three years	159	24
Total N	659	100

**Table 2: Engagement with professional development over the previous three years**

*Note: 'Participate occasionally' also includes those respondents who participate only in sessions relevant specifically to their academic discipline.*

Large scale international studies point not just to growing, but also competing, pressures on the academic profession as they seek to balance the demands of research, teaching, administration, management, consultancy, income generation, student satisfaction and success, community outreach and the like (well summarised by Khem and Teichler, 2012). In our view, the fact that three-quarters of respondents had chosen to participate in *structured* professional development (a bar set deliberately high in order to go beyond the self-directed, non-formal learning expected of any professional group) in relation to the enhancement of their teaching over the previous three years, could indeed, be interpreted as suggesting a high level of commitment to the aim of supporting student learning.

### Changing Nature of Teaching and Learning

While the overall aim of the questionnaire was to ascertain the views of academic staff in relation to priority areas for academic staff professional development, we were also interested in respondents' views on the dramatic changes which had taken place in higher education in the recent decades in Ireland, both in terms of scale of provision and the diversity of student population. Part 2 of the questionnaire explored their views on the implications for them of the changing nature of teaching and learning in higher education.

Drawing on relevant literature (including for example Beaty, 2001; Jary & Lebeau, 2009; Locke & Teichler, 2007; MacLaren, 2005; Penuel et al., 2007) and input from the Expert Advisory Group, statements were developed to ascertain respondents' views. Statements were focused on the areas such as: the extent of student engagement in the learning process; student attendance levels; diversity of the student population and its impact on teaching and learning; class size; the extent of preparation for third level learning; job satisfaction of the respondents; and the connection between teaching and research. The results of the survey are presented in Table 3 below.

	SD	D	Somewhat D	Neutral	Somewhat A	A	SA
The level of classroom engagement by students has improved in recent years	8.2	13.1	15.9	25.6	18.3	14.8	4
Student attendance levels are declining	4.8	11.6	11.4	22	18.3	22.2	9.7
Increased diversity of the student population has had a positive impact on the classroom learning environment	1.4	2.6	6.5	31.8	20.5	25.7	11.5
Students are increasingly well prepared for third level learning	17.4	26.7	27.3	16.9	6.6	4.3	.8
I am teaching increasingly larger group sizes	2	7.4	8.3	23.6	17.8	19.6	21.4
I struggle to keep with the use of technology demanded by students	20	31.2	15.6	15.7	10.9	4.1	2.4
Teaching is more demanding than any other aspect of my academic activities	6.9	18.6	13.8	18.4	15.5	18	8.8



	SD	D	Somewhat D	Neutral	Somewhat A	A	SA
My research informs my teaching	1.2	.6	3.4	7.2	17.7	36.3	33.6
Teaching is a source of job satisfaction for me	.8	.5	1.1	5.8	10.8	39.5	41.6
Student evaluation of my teaching provides me with useful feedback	1.5	3.8	2	9.8	19.5	37.6	25.8

**Table 3: Perceptions of the changing nature of teaching and learning in higher education**

*Note: SD' – 'Strongly Disagree', 'D' – 'Disagree', 'A' – 'Agree', 'SA' – 'Strongly Agree'. Based on primary survey data from Slowey and Kozina (2011) 'The Voice of Irish Academics', Unpublished Report. Average N respondents to this question was 660.*

One interesting finding is the even balance on perceptions of engagement by students in the classroom, with 37.1% expressing agreement, and 37.2% disagreement with the statement 'The level of classroom engagement by students has improved in recent years'. Reviews of student engagement literature suggest that there may be a relationship between academic discipline and student engagement (Jary & Lebeau, 2009; Trowler, 2010) a topic to which we plan to return in future analysis.

Just over half (50.2%) of the respondents agreed that 'Student attendance levels are declining' while just under one-third (27.8%) took a contrary view. Recent years have seen changes not only in the growing number of students entering higher education system, but also in the student profile and the associated new learning requirements they bring with them (DES, 2011). In line with these changes, a majority (57.7%) of the survey respondents saw positive aspects with regard the increasing diversity of the student population on the classroom environment – mirroring the results of a study of academic staff in a single institution (Keane, 2006): almost one third (31.8%) of the sample, however, were 'neutral' on this statement.

In total, 44.1% of respondents 'disagreed' or 'strongly disagreed' that students are being well prepared for third level learning – reflecting a widely held view that the national secondary school leaving examination in Ireland (the Leaving Certificate) may focus too much on examinations rather than independent learning (Hyland, 2011). Nevertheless, a minority of survey respondents (11.7%) expressed the view that students were in fact well prepared for third level learning.

One of the statements within this section was designed to explore academics' views on the demands of teaching in comparison with other academic activities. Respondents were asked to respond to the statement 'Teaching is more demanding than any other aspect of my academic activities'. Overall, just under one-third of the sample (26.8%) agreed or strongly agreed with this statement, with a total of 42.3% indicating general agreement. On the other hand, a rather similar proportion (39.3%) took the opposite view. A more detailed analysis indicated that the teaching aspect of the work was perceived to be more demanding by the respondents from institutes of technology than by those from universities (58% as compared to 35.9%). Further research would be necessary to ascertain the reasons for these differences, including to what extent, for example, might they reflect differences in teaching loads, diversity of intake of students, resources, career stage or background, balance of undergraduate and postgraduate teaching and/or research responsibilities.

Teaching is more demanding than any other aspect of my academic activities	SD	D	Somewhat D	Neutral	Somewhat A	A	SA
Universities	7.6	20.4	17	19.1	13.9	15.9	6.1
Institutes of Technology	5.5	14.4	6.6	15.5	19.3	23.8	14.9

**Table 4: Views of respondents in relation to teaching dimension of academic work**

*Note: Based on primary survey data from Slowey and Kozina (2011) 'The Voice of Irish Academics', Unpublished Report.*

Despite perceptions of a decline in student attendance levels, there is an impression that class sizes have increased. A majority (58.8%) expressed some level of agreement with the statement that they are teaching increasingly larger group sizes - 41% of whom 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' with the statement. At the same time just 9.4% of the sample said they were not teaching larger groups.

Given the focus in the *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* (DES, 2011) on new technology and student feedback, we were particularly interested to see how participants responded to the parts of the survey which addressed these areas. The majority of respondents indicated they feel well prepared to use the technology in their teaching and learning. In total, 51.2% 'disagreed' or 'strongly disagreed' with the statement 'I struggle to keep up with the use of technology demanded by students', with a further 15.6% 'somewhat' disagreeing. In addition, respondents to the survey (which predates moves to introduce a national system in Ireland for obtaining student feedback) indicated that they are very interested to hear feedback from their students. As can be seen in Table 3, an overwhelming majority (82.9%) said that student evaluation of teaching provides them with important feedback. Finally, and perhaps most importantly from the point of view of motivation and professional development, 91.9% of respondents indicated that teaching is a source of job satisfaction for them.

## Implications for Policy and Practice

This survey set out to provide an evidence base for the provision of professional development programmes for academic staff, based on expressed interests and needs. The survey results - in particular, the priority areas identified in Table 1 - were fed directly into working groups and committees responsible for planning programmes of professional development under the auspices of the Enhancement of Learning Strand of the Dublin Region Higher Education Alliance. The subsequent programmes were not only well attended, but frequently over-subscribed, indicating one of the major benefits of an evidence-based approach to programme planning. From an analytic perspective, interesting questions were identified which would merit more qualitative investigation.

More generally, taking the relatively high response rate to an online questionnaire as a proxy indicator, it does suggest that academic staff do indeed appear to have a high degree of interest in finding new ways to enhance their teaching. Furthermore, the fact that around three-quarters had recently participated in 'structured' professional development suggests a good level of actual engagement. However, respondents also reported in other parts of the questionnaire, and in response to open ended comments, on the pressures and the problems they faced in accessing relevant training and development and, it must also be borne in mind, that while the focus of the survey was on teaching, the vast majority of these people were also engaged in research (85%) with

just under half (48%) having research as their primary focus.

The National Strategy for Higher Education in Ireland states that all students:

...*must* have access to teaching that has been kept up to date and relevant through scholarship, research and professional development. Academic staff *should* make full use of the range of pedagogical methodologies available to them and be qualified as teachers as well as in their chosen discipline. All research and scholarship in higher education institutions *should* enhance the quality of undergraduate and postgraduate teaching.

(DES, 2011:13, emphasis added)

While the general objective of highlighting the important role of professional development in this statement must be welcomed, the results of our survey suggest that terms such as ‘must’ and ‘should’ imply a degree of persuasion which, in fact, is not required.

Though there will always be exceptions, the compelling evidence from our respondents is that they are engaged and enthusiastic about developing their teaching further: rather than having to persuade them to participate in professional development, from a policy perspective, it may be more a question of ‘pushing on an open door’. Our survey results suggest that, to quite an extent, academics do appear to be ‘practising what they preach’ to their students in terms of the benefits of continuing professional development and lifelong learning.

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### Endnote 1

Readers interested in obtaining a copy of the questionnaire are to invited to contact either [maria.slowey@dcu.ie](mailto:maria.slowey@dcu.ie) or [ekaterina.kozina@dcu.ie](mailto:ekaterina.kozina@dcu.ie)

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## Response to

### **Practising what they Preach? Academics' views on professional development for their teaching role**

by Shirley Walters, Director, Division for Lifelong Learning,  
University of Western Cape, Cape Town, South Africa.

One of the graduate attributes at my own university in South Africa is the development of lifelong learning capabilities amongst students. One very important way of achieving this is teachers role modelling being lifelong learners themselves. This is one of the reasons why it is important to ascertain what academics' attitudes are to their own professional development. The article by Maria Slowey and Ekaterina Kozina describes the results of a survey amongst academics in eight Irish higher education institutions in order to ascertain attitudes of academics to professional development in teaching.

The authors situate academics, briefly, within the challenges facing higher educators in Ireland and elsewhere. These include: reductions in public expenditure; increasing and more diverse student populations; greater demands for public accountability and 'relevance' in teaching and research. As they say, frequently, academic staff carry the brunt of delivering diverse, sometimes competing, objectives.

They clearly state that the aim of the study was to develop an evidence base which could inform policy and practice for professional development strategy. The sampling frame included all academic staff on permanent and temporary contracts in eight higher education institutions in the Dublin Region. They wanted to know respondents' views on a range of issues regarding teaching and learning in higher education. In order to do this, they administered a survey questionnaire which had 55 questions. They observe that the sample of responses received largely reflects the profile of academics in the institutions and therefore they believe their findings to be reliable. The methodology is carefully explained and reported.

They rightly point to the high level of commitment demonstrated by respondents to their own professional development by the fact that three-quarters of respondents had chosen to participate in *structured* professional development over the previous three years. This is impressive and it suggests, perhaps, that the 'pull factor' of, for example, the need to learn innovative teaching approaches, including use of emerging technologies, outweighs the pressures under which academics are working. It would be useful to explore this seeming paradox in more detail. What incentives are there to participate in professional development – which ones have more effect than others, amongst whom? Similarly, it would be informative to explore further the forms of the professional development i.e. the place, pace, mode, including the curriculum design and its relevance to academics' needs.

In addition, it will be illuminating to know whether the professional development that academics found most useful was accredited or not, given international experience that has demonstrated that accredited teaching and learning programmes in higher education institutions leads to significant positive impacts on teaching and learning, and that participants become more student-focused in their practice.

As the authors say, this article presents a partial picture of the data that has been gathered. The impression is created that the study has mined substantial data that can be processed in a range of compelling ways into the future, which can assist not only Irish colleagues but also international audiences who are grappling with similar issues. It is an illuminating study and I for one look forward to reading future articles which expound on the findings, and attempt to uncover the underlying reasons for academics' attitudes to their own professional development.



## 6

## Sustaining Academic Leadership in Higher Education

Pauline Joyce, Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland;  
Ciarán O'Boyle, Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland.

Corresponding author: [pjoyce@rcsi.ie](mailto:pjoyce@rcsi.ie)

### Introduction

*Leadership is not defined by the exercise of power but by the capacity to increase the sense of power among those led. The most essential work of the leader is to create more leaders.*

(Follett, 1942:3)

Both the higher education sector and the healthcare sector require people who do not identify with a formal role of leader to engage in leadership. In both sectors, leadership must be exercised on a continuous basis. Leadership development in higher education is influenced by an increase in managerial control, market competition, organisational restructuring and government scrutiny. Tensions between the need to meet requirements of industry versus academic requirements will continue as long as universities face these dual challenges in a competitive global economy. Universities are expected to be efficient and cost effective, flexible in their offerings, while being increasingly responsive to student expectations and needs. These tensions have resulted in some resentment from academic staff members who perceive that their autonomy is being reduced. This chapter presents current debates about leadership with a particular focus on higher education and leadership development of academic staff. Academic leadership is understood to incorporate the core academic functions of teaching/learning, and research and scholarship together with a broader focus on academic values and identity. The changing nature of this sector provides a background for current thinking about academic leadership. This chapter will draw on a recent case study from the healthcare sector which we argue contributes to the thinking on leadership not only in the healthcare sector, but also in higher education context. The chapter concludes with key messages for academic staff making a case for building capacity of leaders in education at all levels.

### The Changing Nature of Higher Education

Higher education continues to undergo significant change in response to such factors as government policy, continuing growth in demand for ever higher levels of educational attainment and credentials, rapid economic development, pervasiveness and society-wide impact of communication and information technologies, demands for increased access, internationalisation and globalisation (Bolden et al., 2012; Jones et al., 2012;



Skilbeck, 2001). The emergence of the concept of the knowledge economy and its importance as a driver of economic growth has increasingly challenged the higher education sector to provide a skilled workforce that can service such developments (Bolden et al., 2012; Thorp and Goldstein, 2010; Universities Alliance, 2010).

We believe that Irish higher education is not immune to these changes and the Irish higher education sector is likely to become increasingly important in the context of the economic challenges currently facing the country. The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 (Hunt, 2011) identified the specific challenges for the Irish higher education sector as: the increasing number of people entering the system; the changing profile of students; unemployment and changing patterns of work bringing new urgency and an emphasis on life-long learning and upskilling; the need for high-order knowledge-based skills, many of which can be acquired only in higher education institutions; and the importance of high-quality research to the teaching mission and to underpinning socio-economic development (Hunt 2011). This strategy suggests that, in Ireland, there is an opportunity not only to transform the higher education landscape, but to leverage the leadership skills of our current academic staff and to foster the leadership skills of our next generation of educators. Garvin (2012) supports this viewpoint calling for the management of universities to be put back into the hands of academics. Our experience with healthcare concurs with this perspective that sustaining academic leadership in higher education needs positive buy-in and engagement of staff and students to ensure leadership at all levels.

The changing demands on higher education are challenging traditional assumptions not only about the nature and purpose of higher education and its place in society, but also about the systems of management and leadership that should operate within educational institutions. Cowan and Heywood's (2001) research findings, and more recently those of Jones et al. (2012), support Ramsden's (1998:4) old argument that leadership should be distributed, rather than being based on a hierarchy, viewing leadership as 'how people relate to each other'. Bolden et al. (2012) contrast the traditional model of the University as a community of scholars with a highly democratic and decentralised process of decision-making, representing leadership as a shared responsibility, with increasingly common corporate or entrepreneurial approaches to leadership and management in universities. However, modern thinking about leadership highlights new approaches which might be considered for sustaining leadership in higher education.

### **Current Thinking about Leadership**

Current thinking about leadership moves from leadership as an innate characteristic of an individual to leadership as transactional, transformational, nearby or distant. In the context of a changing environment the ability to respond productively to the myriad of demands facing academics requires a re-examination of leadership thinking.

The research literature on leadership is extensive, of variable quality and accumulating at an extraordinary pace (Gill, 2011; Avolio, 2009; Yammarino et al., 2005). One of the most important debates in the present context relates to the question of whether leadership ability is innate: are leaders born or made? There is a broad spectrum of views on this, as one might expect, but the implications of one's position on this question are important. If leaders are born, then organisations need excellent selection systems and the potential for developing leaders is limited. However, if leaders can be developed, then attention must be paid to creating the conditions in which leadership can flourish. Using preliminary evidence from their behavioral genetics approach study, Arvey et al. (2007) claim that

approximately 30% of the variation in leadership style and emergence was accounted for by heritability. Their findings also claim that the remaining variation was attributed to differences in environmental factors such as individuals having different role models and early opportunities for leadership development. The authors suggest that predicting leadership emergence across one's career is much more influenced by the life context one grows up in and later works in, than heritability.

While no consensus exists, a reasonable position based on the research literature is that, even accepting that there are genetic influences on leadership, there is still significant scope for changing leadership behaviour. Leadership can be learned by application, practice and feedback (Gill, 2011): as Malvolio says in *Twelfth Night*: 'Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them'. The emerging consensus seems to be that leadership, as such, cannot be taught as a set of skills but it can develop. All of us have a degree of leadership potential which can flourish through recognition, development, growth and practice. Our experience with healthcare professionals supports this view.

Generally, transactional leadership is portrayed as managerial leadership, which is strongly directive, motivating people with rewards in exchange for performance which meets expectations. Avolio (2012) suggests that transactional leadership can form the basis for transformational leadership, despite the differences in their orientations; once you honour your dealings or transactions with your followers, they will, over time trust you. He considers it is the higher levels of trust, rather than compliance, that transformational leadership uses as its base for achieving excellent performance. Alimo-Metcalfe & Alban-Metcalfe (2006) stress the importance of distinguishing between 'distant' leadership and 'close' or 'nearby' leadership. They view distant leaders as those at senior and top levels in the organisations, while those leaders who were closer in terms of social distance were categorised as nearby or day-to-day leaders. Alimo-Metcalfe & Alban-Metcalfe (2006: 311) suggest that their model of leadership is very different from the 'heroic' models, which dominated previous decades; rather, they emphasise that leadership is a collective engagement of individuals working at all levels in the organisation, and not the sole responsibility of one person. More recently, reports on leadership in the National Health Service in the UK (NHS) reiterate that the model of the romantic superhero leader is not suited to current demands. The authors concur with this perspective that the ability to work across boundaries and persuading others (followers) over the right course of action is more important than gaining reputation for any one organisation (Grint & Holt, 2011; The King's Fund, 2011). In other words, there is a need for multiple individuals to share leadership by working collaboratively with a focus on organisation relations and connectedness.

### Leadership in Higher Education

Similar to the research by the King's Fund for the NHS, the Leadership Foundation in the UK invested in a number of studies focusing on leadership development in higher education from 2007 onwards. These studies took place during a significant period of change including restructuring of university governance, which challenged academic leadership. Focusing on leader behaviour and effectiveness in higher education, Bryman (2007) conducted a qualitative study with 24 leadership researchers about their experiences. Fostering a climate which balances support with maintenance of autonomy seems to have a particular importance for academics. Although there were no conclusively distinctive features of leadership effectiveness in higher education,

the expectations of academic staff included their need for consultation over important decisions and mutual cooperativeness. However, their findings suggest that there is an increasing tendency towards academic leadership as a career path. They suggest a number of important facets of leadership based on their literature review and study (See Table 1 for key characteristics of successful leadership in higher education, based on a sample of studies reviewed).

Key findings from Burgoyne et al. (2009) in their research of UK higher education institutions suggest that while 78% believe their investment in leadership development gives value for money, many are uncertain if this investment has had an impact. In fact, Fielden (2009) suggests that the need for personal development is not always recognised and that senior university managers either find it hard to clear their diaries or that they believe they can cope without help. Exploring departmental leadership of teaching in research-intensive environments, via case studies, Gibbs et al. (2009) found that, while dispersed leadership was evident in every department, effective leadership of teaching was seen to involve different combinations of leadership activities. Studies by Bolden et al. (2008; 2012) suggest that individual motivations can change over time and often have to operate in tension with one another e.g. motivated by career or management. They make a clear distinction between academic management and academic leadership, the focus being institutional for the former and personal for the latter (Bolden et al., 2012). In their model of academic leadership Bolden et al. (2012) draw attention to the fact that academic leadership is only likely to be seen as important by academics to the extent to which it facilitates their ability to work autonomously. However, the challenge of this finding is a potential lack of teamwork and distributed leadership.

We believe that at the heart of academic leadership are academic values and identities, and the carving out and pursuing a particular line of scholarship rather than direction and control of academic work. This type of leadership could be collegial, with mutual support from staff, consensus decision-making, and debate and discussions with peers, as opposed to a bureaucratic controlling environment or managerialism. Clegg & McAuley (2005) suggest that more discussion is needed on middle managers' roles in higher education so that more productive relationships can be imagined and that universities become more humane places in which to practice. Others (Hyde et al., 2013; O'Connor & White, 2011; Whitechurch & Gordon, 2010; Kolsaker, 2008) concur that juxtaposing collegiality and managerialism is too simplistic and unhelpful and that the collegiate/managerialism debate underplays the inherent complexity of power relations in universities.

Rather than viewing leadership as a gift for one individual, Lumby (2003) advocates that it be created by a group, offering the opportunity for many to contribute. Gosling et al. (2009) suggest that the distributed leadership approach embraces this notion of collegiality and autonomy while also acknowledging the need for management. It also draws attention to the number of people involved in leadership and the importance of organisational processes in shaping their engagements. The idea of academic leaders being open and accessible to others, showing care, empathy and compassion means that the leaders themselves, at all levels, need adequate support. These values can breed an atmosphere of trust and consistency, ultimately having a reassuring effect on staff (Jones, 2011). However, the leadership literature, for the most part, emphasises the development of the individual leader, focusing on skills and early life experiences, suggesting that leaders are isolated from others in the organisation.

Authors	Successful Leadership	Sample
Bolden et al (2012)	Energising Competent Warm Ethical Promoting the group Scholarship	Informal academic leaders
Jones et al (2012)	Trust Respect Recognition Collaboration Commitment to reflective practice	Academic, professional & executive staff
McFarlane (2011)	Role model Mentor Advocate Guardian Acquisitor Ambassador	University Professors
Ngui et al (2010)	Relating to people Leading change Managing process Producing results	Academic staff (all levels) from 20 Malaysian public universities
Gibbs et al (2009)	Establishing personal credibility & trust Identifying problems, turning them into opportunities Articulating a rationale for change Devolving leadership Building a community of practice Rewarding & recognising teaching Setting teaching expectations Marketing the department as a success Supporting change & innovation Involving	Departmental leadership of teaching in Research-intensive environments/
Goodall (2009)	Credibility Expert knowledge Standard bearer (arbiter of quality) Signalling commitment to research excellence on behalf of the institution	Vice Chancellors (research profiles)
Breakwell and Tyherleigh (2008)	Academic credibility Financial awareness Adaptability Confidence Strong persona Sense of mission, strategy and/or vision	Vice Chancellors in UK Universities
Bryman (2007)	Providing direction Creating a structure to support the direction Fostering a supportive and collaborative environment Establishing trustworthiness as a leader Having personal integrity Having credibility to act as a role model Facilitating participation in decision-making; consultation Providing communication about developments Representing the department/institution to advance its cause(s) and networking on its behalf Respecting existing culture while seeking to instill values through a vision for the department/ institution Protecting staff autonomy	Literature review and interviews with 14 leadership researchers about effective academic leadership and departmental level

Authors	Successful Leadership	Sample
Bryman (2007)	A proactive approach to pursuing the university's mission An emphasis on a visionary approach that guides and provides focus for what the leader seeks to achieve for the institution Being internally focused, i.e. in being well connected in the institution, being seen and drawing inspiration from its participants Being externally focused, i.e. networking with a variety of constituencies and reinforcing within those constituencies the direction the university is taking - good understanding of higher education Having personal integrity Introducing changes in a way that entails consultation with others Importance of not sealing leaders off from the university at large Importance of not undermining pre-existing organisational culture Being flexible in approach to leadership Entrepreneurial/risk-taking Influencing the organisational culture and values to support change Designing structures to support change	Literature review in relation to effective leadership at an institutional level.
Spendlove (2007)	Academic credibility Openness Honesty Willingness to consult others Ability to think broadly and strategically Ability to engage with others	Pro-Vice Chancellors in 10 UK Institutions

**Table 1: Key characteristics of successful leadership in higher education.**

### Developing Academic Leadership

The arguments presented, and endorsed by the authors, suggest that leadership can be developed and that this development needs to be deeply embedded and driven by the context and challenges faced collectively by leaders in the organisation (Turnbull James, 2011). Assumptions about leadership and leaders can shape the way that staff perceive and evaluate leadership. A shift to a distributed leadership will require a mindset change in the concept, an understanding of the leaders' tasks at various levels and an understanding of the emotional challenges facing leaders in these settings (Huffington et al., 2004).

Generally, the focus of leadership development starts with the individual and then moves to the organisational context. People will engage enthusiastically at different points in this journey depending on their work situation. For teachers in higher education, this progression can involve leadership of schools or faculties, moving to senior management positions. In this scenario, there can be tensions between leaders as teachers, or, teachers as leaders. Here, the culture of the organisation is paramount in supporting any learning back to practice with the ideal situation being one where activity is underpinned with a learning organisation philosophy. This integration of leadership development with career progression and organisational performance is not an automatic follow through. Kandiko and Blackmore (2010) recommend a review of recognition and rewards, including promotion, to ensure that excellence in teaching and its leadership are recognised appropriately, alongside other aspects of excellence.

The Leadership Foundation UK research generally argues for an integration of leadership development at all levels in the organisation to create a work climate where employees are motivated to perform at their best. This means that leadership development is a top priority for senior management. The scale of integration can correlate with organisational performance, according to Burgoyne's ladder (Burgoyne, 1988) through six stages where Stage 1 has no systematic management to Stage 6 where there is strategic management. However, leadership development in UK Higher Education Institutions is interpreted as largely piecemeal, focusing on a small number of individual staff rather than being a systematic approach (Burgoyne et al., 2009). The expectation is that this will change over the next few years. Our argument, in this regard, is that leaders in formal roles set the tone for providing opportunities for staff to develop and exert their leadership among colleagues, students and collaborators.

Other countries have established units similar to the Leadership Foundation in the UK. In 2008, new agencies emerged in Malaysia (AKEPT) and Australia (LH Martin Institute) with governments here explicitly acknowledging the importance of management development for university leaders. In Pakistan, the reform activities of the Higher Education Commission include the enhancement of management skills of Vice-chancellors, through a series of international programmes for this cohort. Research funds are being protected by agencies such as the American Council on Education, the Leadership Foundation and AKEPT to investigate the competencies and skills required of institutional leaders. A study by Ngui et al. (2010) emerged from AKEPT and highlights leadership behavior underpinning effective leadership in the context of Malaysian public universities (Table 1). The Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) was established in 2005 with a remit to find projects that could provide research evidence of effective leadership in higher education, classifying projects into institutional and disciplinary leadership (ALTC, 2011). The challenges facing Australian universities, according to Coates et al. (2010), are complex, necessitating an increased need to create a stimulating and challenging environment in which academics can continue to thrive in order to contribute to Australian society and to the international academic community.

## Leadership Development in Practice

In its vision for the higher education system in Ireland, the Higher Education Authority (HEA) (Higher Education Authority, 2012) advocates a core of well-qualified and motivated staff who are capable of teaching to the highest standard while pursuing opportunities for scholarship and conducting research. In achieving this vision, there is a need for a system-level approach where each institution must play to its strengths in order to make the biggest impact to the benefit of itself and of Irish society in general. In the HEA strategic plan 2012-2016 (Higher Education Authority, 2012) objective 5, the top three priorities are:

- achievement of excellence in higher education,
- the management of teaching and learning,
- research, innovation and engagement with community and enterprise.

In order to achieve this objective, a system-wide approach to good practice in teaching is a key action. In tandem with this approach, the Higher Education Authority (2012) has recently announced the establishment of a National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education. The National Forum proposes to build

on the strengths and experiences of innovations in teaching and learning which have already been established. In Ireland, significant investment in teaching and learning in higher education has been made over the past twelve years in particular in resourcing pedagogies for enhanced student engagement, including technologies and the professional development of staff. Such investment suggests a support for innovations in higher education and one could argue that implicit in this support is an encouragement to staff to champion new initiatives. One way of keeping leadership at the centre of higher education is to develop academic staff leadership skills, allowing them to be both innovative and creative in the programmes they design and deliver. If leadership is interwoven across these programmes, graduates not only complete their programme with specific knowledge and skills but also with leadership attributes for lifelong learning, thus leaving them well positioned to deal with the fast pace of change in the 21st century. The following section draws on a case study where academic staff from one institution, were offered the opportunity to work collaboratively with another academic institution to develop a bespoke programme for a healthcare organisation. Their remit was to design, develop and deliver a programme in organisational change and leadership development that would address the current and future needs of the healthcare organisation. To this end, academics had the opportunity to work across boundaries, taking a system-level approach where each played to their strengths in order to make the greatest impact and benefit.

### *Case Study*

Senior management staff in the organisation signalled their intent to implement changes designed to position the hospital at the leading edge of medical treatment and care. They were endeavouring to create a culture that embraces change, learning and development. The aspiration for this programme was that it would be at the cutting edge of learning and development and would incorporate innovative and creative practices and methodologies. The willingness of senior management to fund the programme was indicative of the growing importance of change management and leadership development in the healthcare sector. Nineteen senior staff members, from different healthcare professions and disciplines, were funded to undertake the programme. Such a decision, in itself, was visionary, as these staff set off on a journey of leadership development, situated within the context of the organisation in which they worked. Not only were the individuals gaining at a personal level but they were also matching their development with the values and identity of their organisation. The end result was the bringing together of senior staff to develop an understanding of how each of them could operate more effectively in the organisational context in which they are exercising leadership. They were doing this with academic leaders who were championing the programme's aims and outcomes. Thus, while individuals on the programme might have regarded this opportunity as personal development, they were in close proximity to senior leaders in their own organisation, with whom they were about to make significant impact for change, both on their return to practice during the programme and on its completion. This is exactly what happened.

During the programme, participants were required to agree their projects with senior management staff. This was an opportunity for the organisation to plan and implement initiatives which were much needed, and which could be carried out under the guidance of academic facilitators who themselves valued change. During the early part of the programme, participants worked on small initiatives which engaged staff within their own departments and the bigger organisation. For their final projects, participants were required to engage in an organisational development project which linked in with the



organisation's strategy and necessitated them networking within and outside of the organisation. Small groups worked on projects and were guided by an action learning facilitator. In these groups they were able to address personal challenges so that they could work on how their experiences might impact their leadership skills and how they could deal with any barriers.

The CEO of the organisation captures the success of the programme to date:

The change in our staff who are taking this programme is extraordinary. Individuals, who would never have previously stepped up to take the lead in solving problems, are now looking for opportunities to do so. The impact of having a critical mass of mid-line personnel who are undertaking this education, on the organisational development of the hospital cannot be overstated.

In developing a leadership programme such as this one there are opportunities for the organisation to subscribe to distributed leadership. Gaining nineteen leaders back into the organisation must be valued if they are to be supported to take on the authority to lead organisational change. Allowing groups of people in the organisation to come together and create their own perspective on what it is to be a leader is a huge step towards leadership sustainability. For the academics closely involved with the programme, their autonomy and management skills were challenged. At each decision-making step, both academic institutions were consulted. This, in itself, fostered a distributed leadership ethos and was mainly down to academic and healthcare staff recognising values and identities of all concerned.

## Conclusions

In the same way as healthcare organisations are influenced by staff returning to practice after a leadership development programme, academics in higher education have the potential to give support and leadership to colleagues by taking opportunities to be innovative in developing programmes. Attending to context first will support opportunities for change for individuals working within such contexts. Transformational leaders do not accept the context as given, but see elements of the future in the current context and get ahead of the competition by moving to capitalise on what they see before others do. Higher education is changing rapidly, placing increasing demands on academic staff. The time is ripe for a distributed academic leadership. Research evidence indicates that leadership can be developed to some degree. New models of leadership seem particularly relevant for higher education where leadership development is integrated in an organisational context.

Higher education staff members need to view themselves as leaders not because they are exceptional or senior but because they recognise what needs to be done and can work collaboratively to do it. Depending on a small number of people in higher level institutions to carry the leadership flag is no longer an option. Now is the time to encourage staff at all levels to come together to work on real challenges and opportunities. Identifying individuals with leadership potential and supporting their leadership development is a positive solution but it is not the only one and will not sustain leadership in higher education. The future involves working across boundaries with multiple stakeholders dealing with complex bureaucracies and politics. Higher education needs individuals who do not currently identify with being a leader to engage in leadership. It is time to start concentrating on an individual's effectiveness as a leader; only then will we be able to tackle sustainability of academic leadership for the higher education sector.



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## Response to

### Sustaining Academic Leadership in Higher Education

by Hossam Handy, University of Sharjah, United Arab Emirates.

This chapter highlights the importance of developing leaders and leadership in higher education. It emphasizes the need to move from the charismatic and transactional leadership to the new paradigm of transformational leadership. The new paradigm demonstrates the importance of developing current and future potential leaders in higher education who can sustain innovation and quality of education.

The debate about leadership ability - is it innate or can be developed - is important. The genetic influence, upbringing, early educational and life experiences have a definitive role. Other factors which can influence changing leadership behaviour in the workplace, academic or non-academic, are training and practice in own context, and culture. Learning leadership abilities should start early in schools, and continue in university and the workplace; as noted by Follett, 'The most essential work of the leader is to create more leaders' (1942: 3).

It is important to emphasize that leadership development in higher education requires a parallel and integrated development of educational competencies. Many faculty who have a managerial or leadership role in universities may have received little or no training for their educational and teaching responsibilities. Many of them are professionals or researchers and their career paths and promotion depended mainly on their research activities. The potential synthesis between these areas is addressed in educational scholarship and educational scholarly activities as proposed by Boyer and explored by Glassick et al. (Boyer, 1990; Glassick, Huber & Maeroff, 1997). Leadership development programs should not be separate from educational development programs but rather should be integrated in order to emphasize its relevance and context.

Further research is needed on the effectiveness of leadership development programs in higher education and their impact on the quality of higher education. Indicators of performance and quality of leaders in Health Professions Education need to be developed, measured and validated and longitudinal qualitative research following faculty who have been exposed to leadership development programs needs to be pursued. Evaluation of leadership training programs effectiveness is difficult but important. Kirkpatrick's conceptual model for evaluation of educational programs is a good conceptual framework for a research direction.

This chapter is not interesting only to readers in Ireland but it will be relevant to an international context as the principles are transferable. The international experience of the authors led them to refer to reform activities in several countries from the developed and developing world.

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# 7

## **Possibility Portals: building sustainability amongst academics in challenging times.**

Alison Clancy, University College Dublin.

Corresponding author: [alison.clancy@ucd.ie](mailto:alison.clancy@ucd.ie)

### **Introduction**

Academics who work in higher education today find it increasingly difficult to secure space and time to learn, reflect and self-evaluate. The current turbulent economic environment, coupled with the growing emphasis on managerial norms, has been debated in the literature (Archer, 2008). In the last ten years, changes have occurred in higher education that impact greatly on its function, on overall institutional structures and on how higher education is financed (Biggs, 2003). Biggs suggests that academics who are now working in higher level institutions belong to one of two groups: older, more mature academics who no longer recognise the higher level institution in which they work and younger academics who are on short-term contracts and are so fearful of securing their employment that they would not consider attempting anything that may be out of kilter with the organisation's overall strategy.

This chapter suggests that academics need to be provided with space and time in the form of 'possibility portals'. A possibility portal is a protected space which encourages discussion and debate on the difficulties and uncertainties of the nature of academic identity and the changing climate of higher education. This chapter argues for the creation of development opportunities that provide academics with crucial space and time to think and to re-group thus allowing for academic identity to be continuously developed. Possibility portals provide significant learning space and development time for academics to reflect on the professional that they are today as they move towards the academic that they want to or could be tomorrow. Possibility portals are thus spaces where academics remove themselves from normal academic work: time away to think and reflect – conferences and retreats can provide such places in higher education, as can continuing professional development opportunities. This chapter will focus on one such opportunity, a Graduate Diploma in University Teaching and Learning, as a possibility portal.

### **The Changing Nature of Higher Education**

The first decade of the twenty-first century has seen a burgeoning literature on the changing climate of higher education and its impact on academic work (Archer, 2008a, 2008b; Churchman et al., 2009). Scrutiny of the culture and organisation of higher

education has intensified (Clark, 1997; Becher & Trowler, 2001; Smith, 2010; Feather, 2010) and the impact of the changes within the higher educational sector on academic autonomy and freedom is a matter of some debate. As higher level institutions begin to transform and adjust, in response to both national policies and funding directives, there has been an ensuing impact on the role and responsibility of academics. Traditionally, academic staff comprised a 'community of scholars' (Harris, 2005:424) who affiliated more with their discipline than with their institution. Now, as institutions are becoming more commercial and profit-driven, the boundary between academic and institutional identity is less clear. Indeed, it seems that academic practices are changing as multiple roles emerge. As Henkel (1997:139) states:

academics find that they must, for example, not only generate new courses; they must cost, determine and stimulate markets for them, evolve new ways of delivering them and ensure they can stand up to hard external scrutiny. The stress on old assumptions about the nature and organization of work are becoming more difficult to resist across the world.

A consequence of this multi-tasking is that academics in higher education are confused by the numerous identities which they must assume; they may experience difficulties in becoming who they want to be due to the constant pushing and pulling of internal and external responsibilities. Construction of identity for academics within higher education is therefore very challenging.

The 'McDonaldisation' of higher education is the term that some educational writers, such as Ritzer (1993), and later Hayes and Wynyard (2002), have used when they refer to the changes that have occurred, particularly, where an attempt has been made to increase efficiency. Frequently, however, this is at the expense of academics and academic autonomy (Henkel, 2000; Shattock, 2001; Trowler, 2001; Harris, 2005; Winberg, 2008). Shattock states that:

The academic profession is fragmenting and mass higher education has greatly reduced the faculty's political standing but the university system has allowed itself to be downgraded by its own failure to recognize the implications of differentiation and the changed relationship between the state and higher education.

(2001: 27)

Barnett refers to the context where the university must respond to an over-abundance of information in a world of 'Supercomplexity', and suggests that:

Such a world of supercomplexity is characterized by certain features which are captured especially in four concepts, namely contestability, challengeability, uncertainty and unpredictability. These four concepts are surrounded by others such as change, turmoil, turbulence, risk and even chaos. Together, this set of concepts mark out the conceptual geography of our supercomplex age as an age of fragility.

(2000a: 415-416)

One consequence of this supercomplexity is a climate of uncertainty within higher education: 'the individual increasingly stands alone, looking for security in the face of

uncertainty' (Annandale, 1998:19). The changing nature of higher education is a global phenomenon that has impacted on academics in general with a 'weariness and resistance to what is perceived to be externally imposed shifts in the higher education environment' (D'Andrea & Gosling, 2005:15). Academics are faced with increased class sizes, greater student diversity, more short-term contracts and an ever-increasing research agenda (McNay, 2005; Boud, 1999). Academics have experienced so much difficulty in adapting to this rapid change that they are no longer sure what is expected of them (Henkel, 2000; Trowler, 2001; Biggs, 2003; Harris, 2005). The difficulty in adapting to change is further compounded by the increased emphasis on accountability and a perceived lack of institutional support in pursuing necessary change. The imposition of increased demands has led to a sense of powerlessness (Rowland, 2000; Morley, 2003a).

While higher level institutions have attempted to change in response to external influences, their perceived strategic directions have not always developed in alignment with academics' views of their identity. The nature of academic identity is complex but it warrants much attention in the changing culture of higher education and academics must be given a voice to articulate what it means to be an academic and what structures can be put in place to encourage their identities to flourish.

### **What is a Possibility Portal?**

Savin-Baden (2008) argues that the concept of learning spaces within higher education relates to the idea that various forms of space exist within the academic's world in which opportunities to become self-reflective regarding one's position can occur; learning spaces are places where engagement occurs and inchoate ideas come together as academics are released from the pressures of everyday working life. Savin-Baden suggests that spaces for reflecting, thinking and writing are important for the development of academe and the positioning of the academic self within it. Yet, Savin-Baden argues, currently there seems to be a lack of realisation that academics are losing ground because they are losing space.

Space, in this chapter, means actual space, social space and safe space, all of which are essential to maintaining the intellectual health of academics (Clancy, 2010). Actual space is the physical environment: away from an academic's own department, or at least an area that is free from potential interruption. Different spaces often prompt new ways of viewing things and provide greater opportunities for thinking and reflecting (Savin-Baden, 2008). Actual space also signifies an escape from the control of the rhetoric of one's discipline. Social space allows and encourages openness and freedom of expression, where dialogue and debate can naturally occur in an unconstrained way. Safe spaces are created within possibility portals through the fostering of an environment that encourages and permits academics to discuss any personal and professional uncertainties in a protective and protected environment, free from subjective criticisms, but encouraging of logical, objective and judicious professional and personal perspectives. In essence, space provides the opportunity for academics to reconstruct their identities with a clearer awareness of their discipline, their institution's pedagogies and where their own identity potentially sits within the context of these two. I denote spaces such as these 'possibility portals' (Clancy, 2010) and provide an interpretative definition as follows: 'the provision of multidisciplinary space and time in which individuals can rediscover and actualize their potential'.

It is proposed that possibility portals can be developed in collaboration with management and can be embedded within the current structures of higher education



where academics, through multidisciplinary collaboration, are free to grapple with uncertainties in all aspects of their identities and will re-emerge from that process with a different and ideally more enlightened perspective. Possibility portals provide a forum within which issues and concerns can be raised about what it means to be an academic today, how academics perceive their working identity, and how they can manage the shifting needs of higher education and that of their institution. Although the term 'possibility portals' is relatively new, several forms of learning spaces could be deemed possibility portals; the benchmark is that they offer opportunities to re-examine and reconstruct previously held meanings about the nature of the university and those concerns relating to academic identity. Possibility portals are created spaces or sometimes unexpected learning spaces; an example of the latter might be shared common rooms where dialogue and conversations can occur in an informal manner.

The Graduate Diploma in University Teaching and Learning in University College Dublin (UCD) became one such possibility portal: a developmental space; a protected space; a portal free from the criticism and bias of students and colleagues, where academics began to rediscover themselves in a new, exciting but often troublesome way. In addition, and perhaps more significantly, this portal had a joint mission in that it also encouraged academics to embark on a journey of self-discovery through its collaborative nature using the space and time it provided.

### The Case Study

This chapter has its origins in a doctoral study. This study used a classical grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1978, 1992; Strauss and Corbin, 1998). The study population consisted of 27 academic staff in third level education all of whom had undertaken a Graduate Diploma in University Teaching and Learning in University College Dublin (UCD). The length of employment in higher education of these academics ranged from three months to 20 years, with the level of experience ranging from assistant lecturer to associate professor. In the sample, there were 13 female academics and 14 male academics all of whom came from a range of disciplines across the university, including science, business, marketing, medicine, music and geography. The Graduate Diploma, which has been running for the last ten years in UCD, is comprised of a number of different teaching, learning and assessment approaches including seminars, workshops, problem-based learning tutorials, reflective diaries, self-directed study projects and portfolios, and teaching practice exercises.

A possibility portal such as the Graduate Diploma in University Teaching and Learning in this study became a place where academics confronted pre-existing or predisposed academic identities. For the majority of academics, consciously defining one's 'self' may have been a new experience which required the surfacing of an identity formed in the subconscious and reinforced by the organisation or discipline. Clegg (2007:3) argues that 'universities and academic life are becoming more complex and differentiated spaces'. Academics that previously enjoyed a high degree of autonomy and freedom are now experiencing increasing pressures as a result of an emphasis on accountability, quality control measures and the increasing complexity of what it means to be an academic. Thus, constructing academic identity is a difficult process as numerous, often incongruent, definitions of what it means to be an academic now exist. Constructing academic identity is further complicated by the fact that it begins before academics enter into higher education. Academics, in the beginning, construct versions of their academic identity which they believe are acceptable and conform to disciplinary and organisational norms.



One participant in this study, who was working in medicine, clearly articulated this when they suggested:

I think that you are so happy to get into medicine that you kind of just go with the flow and really don't think about changing the status quo.

For the majority of academics, defining one's self within one's profession might not have seemed necessary. Thus, the process of identity formation may have occurred subconsciously. For example, one participant stated:

You know, before now, I didn't put any thought into questioning my professional identity as a lecturer, that happened from day one of the diploma and, you know that's really difficult, the questions that you ask yourself.

The possibility portal that was created as a result of the Graduate Diploma in University Teaching and Learning, aided academics to become reflective with regards what it meant to be an academic within their discipline and within the wider structure of the organisation to which they belonged. This process of academic self-reflection and self-questioning that can occur through professional developmental programmes can be enhanced further where a diversity of professional disciplines are participating in the same programme. This self-reflection is fostered by the continuous questioning about teaching and learning practices and discussing issues that encourage this self-reflection process to occur due to the teaching strategies that were used, e.g. Problem Based Learning. In such an environment, each academic has to defend their discipline specific approaches and legitimise their stances in particular areas. One participant articulated the difficulties and challenges that this can potentially bring:

Although this stage of almost re-discovering can be troublesome, I think that it can also be rewarding.

### **New Opportunities**

Where the world of higher education opens up with new possibilities, an individual's established and carefully constructed academic identity may be challenged and alternative possible selves may emerge; this can be difficult as well as exciting. Embracing these new opportunities involves the individual relinquishing the comfortable understanding of their former academic self/identity. As one individual suggested

The reality is that if you want an academic to have a reconstructed image of themselves they must be supported by the college, there needs to be more acknowledgment and appreciation for what they have done, it is nerve-racking trying to change and we are all desperate for continuous acceptance.

This process can be troublesome, uncertain and disconcerting. In these instances, possibility portals need to be places where academics feel supported and protected and where staff can tackle identity issues collectively. As one participant noted:

Before now, you don't really consider your identity, but when you do, you realise that other academics have exactly the same issues as you do.

Disciplinary identity creates a sense of belonging and safety and entails a strong personal commitment to 'a way of being'. However, conforming can be troublesome when one's beliefs conflict with those of the profession or one's institution. Conforming can be a struggle for academics as they contemplate a new set of beliefs and as they begin to articulate and understand where they have come from and to where they could go, versus a fear of the potential choices that they make. Academics within the context of this case study perceived that they must conform to professional ideas of academia and believed that the consequences for not conforming would be detrimental to their professional standing within their discipline and perhaps within the wider structures of the organization.

### Engaging Academics

Academics within this case study articulated that engaging in the diploma, aside from providing a possibility portal, also served to bring academics together, thereby reducing isolation. The world of higher education can perpetuate a sense of isolation and uncertainty. Academics expressed feelings of isolation and loneliness in all aspects of their working lives and they argued that they work as 'Independent republics'. 'Independent Republics', a term used by the participants themselves, suggests that academics work apart and that collegiality and support, where they exist, do so only in small measure. Though the majority of academics are employees they often work as independent contractors and their sense of isolation is perpetuated as they continually attempt to survive with often little or limited communication with colleagues or the higher level structures. Indeed, within higher education, current structures rarely allow for any mechanism where alternative teaching approaches can be discussed. This is articulated in the words of one participant:

Most of us in third level, as you know, we just close the door in the classroom and it is you and the students, and no one ever sees what you are doing, except the students of course, but no one from a peer perspective, there is no community of practice, so to speak, I mean, we all do our own thing.

There is often little opportunity for academics to share their concerns with colleagues from other disciplines within the institution. This was voiced by an individual in this study who suggested:

I do find that in academia that we are independent republics, independent contractors you know and never the twain shall meet, we never or very rarely come together.

Engaging in the Diploma, particularly given that it was cross-disciplinary in nature, helped academics to realise that the difficulties and isolation they feel are not unique to them. Indeed, encouraging cross-disciplinary participation can result in academics, both individually and collectively, tackling perceived obstacles and dissonance successfully. This can be seen in the words of one participant who stated:

I think however my attitude has changed, I have to say that being together with numerous disciplines - I think that is a very good thing. It is great to see how people teach in different places like French and so on, in that we are different but very similar.

The Diploma, thus, provided academics with an enabling environment in which they could grow and develop. In the higher education field, enabling this environment can help to foster a positive influence that has the potential, for example, to move academics to contribute to the scholarship of teaching and learning and to take on leadership roles in teaching and learning within their departments, amongst their students, with their colleagues or in broader terms within the higher education institution itself. Academics within the context of this case study did suggest that they would become advocates of teaching and learning, however the networks of support, created during the Graduate Diploma, begin to be severed slowly due to the passage of time and the demands of everyday academic life. Thus, the need to create a system of alternative spaces and slow time for sustained, continual development and exchange of ideas (outside formal development programmes) becomes apparent. Consequently, although there are several gains for academics who attend formal possibility portals, there are also some shortcomings especially where sufficient linkages within the subcultures of academic disciplines are not secured. Teaching and learning development programmes are an important step toward fostering enthusiasm in academics in higher level institutions but are insufficient to sustain such momentum without the support of other structures.

### **Situating Possibility Portals**

Possibility portals need to be removed, where feasible, from academics' own departments thus allowing them to focus and be attentive to the issues that the portal addresses rather than the other things that occupy academics' lives. Participants suggested that because the Diploma was located in a different building, this enabled them to remove themselves from their own environments, providing more successful opportunities to take time out of their everyday working lives. However, arguably, academics must also learn to create and maintain such space and time for themselves as part of their working lives. The first step towards this might be taken through formal structures, such as, a teaching and learning developmental programme or through the organisational structures which create less formal cross-disciplinary support groups. Nonetheless, I would argue that in order for the creation of space and time to be sustainable it needs to be instigated primarily by academics and subsequently supported by their organisation and not the other way around. Where the reverse exists it could be interpreted as a perpetuation of the Institution's agenda, which might impact on the freedom and autonomy of the academic and could limit the effectiveness of the intervention.

The ability, however, to find time in academic life is becoming increasingly hard to achieve. Creativity, innovation and motivation have become stifled due to the high speed and lack of time that characterises academic life. Academics within this case study argue that they rarely have the energy to reflect and often experience 'burn out'. This is evidenced in the words of one participant:

You know by the end of the semester, you are too tired and drained to think and therefore, you continue as you have before.

Though there is a lack of slow time in higher education, the need to re-value slow time is emerging as slow time recognises the importance of just being rather than constantly doing. To re-value slow time does not mean to give it more time than it warrants, but to give it the respect that it deserves, and to do so routinely. Without sufficient slow time, reflection becomes more difficult and the process of change is hindered. Academics

within the context of this case study suggest that they have been caught up in a race against time and are too busy to think. They appear to be losing the skill to slow down as they are becoming overwhelmed by an increased level of busyness and are no longer in control of time; rather, time has taken control of them.

## Discussion of Findings

For academics to reach their full potential in the higher education realm, time and space are needed. In this case study, the Graduate Diploma Programme served as a possibility portal. This possibility portal provided a coherent, comprehensive, and sustained professional development process and played a critical role in aiding academics in understanding the practical and realistic issues of teaching and learning. This was done through developing a greater understanding of this issues surrounding innovation in teaching and the challenges that this can potentially bring. However, this programme also exposed academics to various self-reflective exercises about their teaching practices, through the development of teaching plans, reflective diaries and also through peer mentoring systems. As a result, it subsequently offered a way to explore and develop one's identity as an academic.

Possibility portals have the ability to contribute to a 'culture of critical discourse' where the inherent difficulties that academics face in attempting to conform to prescribed identities can be unpacked. Perhaps there might be an argument to suggest that the net of development programmes that currently exist within higher education needs to be cast more widely to include areas of academic life that are ongoing. Within higher education the continuous changes and restructuring, that are occurring on a global scale, have resulted in the compression of time and space and this may well be the most fundamental challenge confronting higher education in its history (Scott, 2000). More time, effort and space need to be made more available and visible within higher education in order to allow the voices of individual academics engaged in the perpetual development of their academic identity to be heard, valued and validated.

Academics suggest that they feel quite isolated in higher education, particularly as schools and colleges within the university structures become more fragmented (Hannon and Sliver, 2000; Zorn, 2005). Rutherford (2004) suggests that academics feel a need to belong to a social network as well as disciplinary network and this is important in the creation of value and commitment to the organisation. Rutherford articulates this perception and argues that as academics:

we desire to experience an individual life as unique and meaningful to ourselves, but we equally feel a need to belong to and define ourselves through broader collectives. It is in our relationship with others in what is constituted as the social - that we attempt to reconcile this paradox and make sense of a self that feels authentic

(2004:14).

There appears to be a genuine feeling of isolation in the world of academia. This phenomenon, while very prevalent now, is not an altogether new one. Shulman (1993) wrote of his disappointment, when he was newly employed in an academic department of a higher level institution, that he did not feel that he belonged to an academic community; rather he found himself in the solitary position of an independent practitioner. Hannan and Sliver, (2000:112) concur with this sentiment and argue that isolation in higher education is related to a changing culture and that:

The increasing lack of collegiality, not just the attitudes of specific colleagues, was identified as an obstacle to innovation. Such a lack intensified the feeling of staff committed to the improvement of teaching and learning that they ran the risk of becoming even more of the loner in a restructured academic universe.

An academic's personal/professional growth and development can be aided from talking about issues and concerns that affect them and prevent them from reaching their potential. Such conversations should occur in ways that are socially engaging, intellectually stimulating, nurturing and supportive. Shulman (2005) argues that:

no setting represents the intellectual and resonant richness of the place [the University of Chicago] more than a space on the first floor of Judd Hall, the Judd Commons rooms. In those rooms we drank coffee or tea each morning and each afternoon. Faculty members and students gathered together and exchanged ideas and gossip, tough criticisms, and good yarns.

(Huber & Hutchings, 2005: 3)

Shulman (2005) argues for the creation of space where individuals can come together with common interests and explore ideas in a productive and nurturing way. Huber and Hutchings (2005:3) also suggest that:

the scholarship of teaching and learning invites faculty from all disciplines and fields to identify and explore those questions in their own teaching—and, especially, their students' learning and to do so in ways that are shared with colleagues who can build on new insights. In this teaching commons, as we call it, communities of educators committed to pedagogical inquiry and innovation come together to exchange ideas about teaching and learning, and use them to meet the challenges of educating students for personal, professional, and civic life in the twenty-first century.

Shulman (2005) and Huber and Hutchings (2005) are calling for the visibility of informal spaces like common rooms which can act as protected spaces where open and honest conversations can occur about the multifarious concerns that face academics within higher education. It is in these spaces that collegiality and the development of communities of practices can occur. Staff common rooms are often treated as safe zones by academics, with the social interaction and networking that occurs. With the structuring and restructuring of many buildings within higher education, space is at a premium and the development of designated social spaces is not seen to have any major significance or financial impact and therefore they have been removed or do not appear on the plans. However, as this study has shown, the lack of such spaces perpetuates a sense of isolation that academics experience.

Academics cite space and time as legitimate obstacles within higher education with regards their inability to reflect. When academics are able to create space and time in a way that is separate and is different to their normal academic environments, they provide themselves with opportunities for reinvention. Possibility portals are spaces that are thus shaped by choice and are supported by the institution. However, for the creation of possibility portals to be successful, time management is necessary where academics can find ways of rescheduling their working day to guarantee such space.

## Conclusion

This chapter has shown the importance and significance of possibility portals as a way to provide protected space and time for academics to reflect on their roles and identities. This in turn affords each academic the ability to become self-reflective, purposeful and strategic. I have examined the Graduate Diploma in University Teaching and Learning as an example of a possibility portal. However, there is a need to consider other forms of possibility portals such as writers' retreats, think-tank days, or common room interactions. This is timely in light of the current economic climate and the publication of the *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* which proposes a deepening and urgent need for developing cohesive teams across higher education. It might be argued that the creation of these unified teams can be structured within possibility portals, where academics not only engage in and debate the complexity of their role and their identity, but also explore the complexities and difficulties of the changing world that they inhabit.

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## Response to

### **Possibility Portals: building sustainability amongst academics in challenging times**

by Robert Kennelly, Visiting HERDSA Fellow at the University of Western Australia.

#### **Introduction**

As I came down the path I could hear the rushing of water, it became stronger and stronger the closer I approached, the aroma of the beautiful summer flowers became overwhelmed by the extraordinary noise of the Niagara falls. I entered the bunker and all became quiet. I moved along a narrow corridor oblivious to the noise and rushing of millions of mega liters of water dropping 169 feet over the falls. I could see it through the glass, but was protected from the force of the water and wind by the Niagara Portal.

#### **Key benefits to readers**

In these days of the commodification of university outputs it is refreshing to be given the opportunity to comment on a chapter which calls for 'slow time' and 'possibility portals' where academics can get out of the wind and rain of their pressured environment and do some quiet reflection and identity checking. Clancy's definition of a possibility portal, 'The provision of multidisciplinary space and time in which individuals can rediscover and actualize their potential', captures a refreshing idea badly sought after by many academics in Ireland and elsewhere. The reader is greatly motivated when the tantalizing uses of 'possibility portals', that show a way out of the multi-pressured claustrophobic environment, are exposed. Not only do the visitors to these portals get a chance to take a breath, to step back, to consider the environment and how it is affecting them, their teaching and their research, but also they have the opportunity to pursue specific development opportunities to further enhance their teaching and their students' learning.

#### **What is of interest to international readers**

The snapshot of Irish Higher Education seen through the portal of the University College Dublin (UCD) Graduate Diploma (GD) in Teaching and Learning gives a picture of academic life which is disconcertingly similar to that which might be observed in other English speaking western universities. All too familiar is the claim by Clancy that 'academics are confused by the numerous identities which they must assume'. As in Australian universities, 'academic autonomy' and real collegiality are at risk where the academic is caught up in work which is neither teaching nor research. In contrast, the 'possibility portal' of the GD in UCD provides academics with regular time out to 'rediscover themselves in a new, exciting but often troublesome way'. In particular, Clancy refers to the problems of multi identity and that without possibility portals there is no way of stepping back and figuring out who I am and what might be considered a next step.

The other positive point of interest for international readers is the continuation of visioning and planning for the future in the Irish Higher Education sector exemplified in the *National Strategy on Higher Education to 2030*. Despite the financial restraints under which the sector now operates, the strategy and Clancy's chapter demonstrate a robust, ongoing, almost stoic perseverance which at its heart has a student learning focus.

### **Areas beyond the parameters of this paper, where further research might be merited**

The chapter enlightens our mind to the possibilities! It leaves open the question of where to after a graduate diploma in teaching and learning. Clancy proposes some ideas around the sustainability of these portals mentioning the casting of a wider net of development programs which ‘... include areas of academic life that are ongoing’. At the University of Canberra small TATAL (Talking About Teaching And Learning) groups have been formed specifically to provide academics with time, space and place to reflect collaboratively about their teaching and their students’ learning (McCormack and Kennelly, 2011). In the Irish context, one wonders which activities, which groups, which triggers and which contexts might operate to provide the motivation (and resources) necessary to sustain ongoing ‘possibility portals’.

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## **Section 3**

Using technology to enhance  
teaching and learning



## 8

## **An Investigation of Students' Experiences of using Virtual Learning Environments: implications for academic professional development**

Angelica Riskey, University of Limerick; Claire McAvinia, Dublin Institute of Technology; Damien Raftery, IT Carlow; Fiona O'Riordan, Griffith College Dublin; Nuala Harding, Athlone Institute of Technology; Robert Cosgrave, independent professional; Theresa Logan-Phelan, Trinity College Dublin; Tom Farrelly, Institute of Technology Tralee

Corresponding author: [Angelica.Riskey@ul.ie](mailto:Angelica.Riskey@ul.ie)

### **Introduction**

Because virtual learning environments (VLEs) are amongst the most widely adopted technologies in higher education, and to justify the widespread investment in VLE technology, it is important to study patterns of actual student VLE use and student satisfaction (Naveh et al., 2010). This chapter presents the work of a multi-institutional group of educational developers who have collaborated since 2008 to gather students' views on the use of VLEs across higher education in Ireland. The project has now developed into a longitudinal study, open to participation by any educational institution, and is currently integrated in the research strategy of the Irish Learning Technology Association (ILTA). Surveys of students have been undertaken since 2008 using a common set of questions. Participating institutions, on condition of anonymity, pooled their results for comparison. The survey data provided each institution with useful information on how VLE uptake and usage patterns compared with other institutions, in a framework which prevented abuse of the findings for marketing or public benchmarking. The institutions who have participated, thus far, represent a diversity of organisational histories and VLE systems, and results to date include the responses of more than 15,000 students. The resulting database constitutes the largest collection of information on student experience related to technology enhanced learning in Ireland. We have presented and published our methods and some of our earlier results (Cosgrave et al., 2008; Cosgrave et al., 2009; Cosgrave et al., 2011). In this chapter, we will give an overview of the research methods and findings, but will focus on the implications for academic professional development and capacity building. We also describe our working processes as a self-sustaining collaborative group. Like other chapters in this publication, where the collective voice influences pedagogical practice, our contribution is driven by the desire to allow the student voice to inform the continuous improvement of their learning experiences.

This chapter demonstrates how a sustainable collaborative project has contributed to

VLE capacity building, through offering insight from lessons learned across institutions. The drivers for change at national level will be discussed first with a brief overview of other existing research on the use of VLEs. Following a summary of research methods, the findings will be presented and discussed. The main themes we are going to explore throughout this chapter are the student experience in using VLEs in HE and the implication of this for academic professional development for lecturers. The results speak to issues of capacity building in the sector, in terms of the relationship between staff and student use of the VLE. We will conclude with plans for future research which include the impact of supporting teaching and learning in higher education.

### **The Role of VLEs in the Changing Landscape of Higher Education**

Technology has certainly changed the ways and means by which all people can potentially be educated; in fact, it has fundamentally changed the sense of where people can be educated. However, one should be careful of accepting at face value the claims that the proponents of e-learning have sometimes made. Instead, we propose to investigate directly the end-users' experiences of using these tools.

In Ireland, the *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* (DES, 2011) has clearly articulated the role which technology should play in the provision of teaching and facilitating the learning experience. It describes a system which must be responsive to the needs of an increasingly diverse student population. The report acknowledges the advances which have occurred in Irish Higher Education in the past decade. Among these are developments in technology-supported learning which include the increasing use of virtual learning environments to support learning (DES, 2011). There is a clear focus in the strategy on the provision of flexible learning options for students including blended and online learning, while acknowledging the requirement for the development of teaching skills and the provision of ongoing opportunities to develop these skills (p.62).

Ambitious targets have been set for the numbers engaging in higher education to 2030. The impact of these projections in a time of reduced resources was outlined in a recent sustainability study 'Aligning Participation, Quality and Funding in Irish Higher Education', prepared by the Higher Education Authority (HEA) for the Minister in Education and Skills in 2011. The report comments on the use of 'options such as flexible and distance learning' providing ways to meet 'projected future demand for higher education more efficiently'; and this study refers to the enhanced use of technology as a means of assisting in such expansion (HEA, 2011).

In addition to considering the local context for this research, we have also considered international research charting the adoption of VLEs elsewhere, and whether similar shared surveys had been undertaken internationally. Initial surveys in the early 2000s already reflected the adoption of the VLE across further and higher education in the UK (Jenkins et al., 2001; Jenkins et al., 2005), and many more followed. However, there were gaps within the literature. Firstly, there was a tendency in the literature towards case studies on the use of the VLE in a particular discipline or with a particular group (Dolle and Enjelvin, 2003; Leese, 2009; McGill and Hobbs, 2008; Stricker et al., 2011). Secondly, there are few studies which focus on the use of the VLE over an extended period of time: we tend to see snapshots and census-like countable data, rather than studies which gave us a picture over a number of years of how a particular technology had been used. Our research therefore allowed us the opportunity to address this gap. We could also explore whether having institutional datasets over a number of years, and an extensive, large and widely representative dataset as a consequence, could contribute to our understanding



of the development of capacity amongst staff and students. The information might also assist us with adopting other technologies and sustaining development in this area.

This was all the more important given the wider discussion we observed within the literature. Researchers who analysed critically the use of the VLE were, by the end of the 2000s, beginning to suggest that its capacity to support innovative and active teaching and learning methods was extremely limited. They indicated that VLEs were supporting and replicating lectures and notes distribution, rather than encouraging educators towards group learning or project-based assessment of students. Blin and Munro (2008) questioned why the VLE had ‘failed to disrupt’ traditional lecturing practices. Kirkup (2005) found that technologies were in general adopted (at least in the first instance) to align with existing practice, and that ‘evolution’ rather than ‘revolution’ could be expected in the adoption of the VLE. We wished to explore these issues and potentially challenge some of these assessments through the dataset. We also reviewed the work of other researchers reflecting on what their own expectations of technology might have been - asking whether these corresponded with those of the users and practitioners in their universities. The use of technologies in campus-based institutions tends to be compared with that of distance institutions. For example, Guri-Rosenblit (2005) questioned whether the impact of technologies is measured in a reasonable way. The author argues, convincingly, that we need to take a different perspective on how online learning fits into a campus-based institution, when face-to-face teaching events comprise a large part of the timetable.

These questions not only encouraged us to continue the research over a period of years, but also to evaluate whether there were some forms of ‘conventional’ VLE use that might well be appropriate to students and lecturers in Irish HE. The next section describes the research methods we used, and the approach to the analysis of the data gathered.

## Research Methods

The project presented here is centred on a survey of student attitudes to and usage of VLEs initially designed for one of the participating universities. After an open invitation to many Irish tertiary institutions through ILTA, five institutions ran the survey and agreed to pool the data at raw level, and a common set of rules was agreed amongst the five institutions to ensure findings could not be used for marketing or advertising. In subsequent years, additional institutions joined the group, which currently includes 12 institutions and operates under the auspices of ILTA. Among the members, the following was agreed: that institutions would not be identifiable from the results; that presentations and publications were to be agreed by all members; that data protection issues were addressed by stripping all individual identifiers out before pooling the data; and that the students were aware of what the data was being used for.

The project was born out of a persistent common need for better information on student perceptions of VLEs. It developed from a grassroots approach amongst a group of educational developers interested in the issue, operating with structures at flexible levels of formality. There is no project leader, different team members contribute at different times, in proportion to their interests and capabilities. The research receives no direct funding, has no fixed costs, and the work is done at the fringes of each team member’s own role. We operate as a peculiarly sustainable group, relying for maintenance on the continued interest of participants. The research has survived ‘in hibernation’ for periods as partner institutions run their internal surveys and gather data using the common survey tool, but it has also moved forward quickly using remote collaboration tools

(Skype, Wikis, Google Docs) to develop and share insights. The project developed a high degree of implicit sustainability, because of its in-built leanness and redundancy (no specific resources were devoted to the project, and it was designed so that participants could drop in and out as per their own requirements), and its ongoing value to the participants. Much of the value of this research is internal to each organisation, as it provides participants with a sense of how their own work and related issues fit into a wider context of their peers. We have learned that we are all facing very similar situations, and that technical and organisational factors are much less important than we thought.

The project draws on data from a student survey instrument, and that like all data sets, comes with specific caveats and biases which must be noted. Surveys were conducted online, with the survey instruments generally disseminated via email to the whole student cohort. In a small number of cases, surveys were conducted through announcements within the VLE system itself, which could have introduced an element of biased response. Response rates varied from institution to institution, from 18% to as low as 4%. As a self-selecting sample, this necessarily creates biases. Students with high digital literacy are more likely to respond; as this is a survey on VLE usage, non-users of the VLE are likely to be underrepresented in the sample. The data have not been weighted in any way, so institutions with large numbers of respondents may be overrepresented. We are mindful of the methodological limitations of this study and hence the results, notably due to the self-selecting nature of the participants and perhaps a will on the part of (some) participants to respond in a positive way to these questions. Nonetheless, we would argue that given the sheer breadth and scale of the data gathered, across the large number of institutions, over a five year period, that the data and resultant discussion have a degree of reliability.

The survey instrument itself consisted of 20 questions, some of which had large numbers of sub-questions. The design incorporated a mix of yes/no and Likert question styles, often addressing similar issues in different ways in different questions to accurately triangulate the students' perspectives, while a mix of positive and negative questions were included to avoid common survey design bias pitfalls. In addition to collecting quantitative data, a number of open-ended questions were included in the instrument to enable the respondents to provide a little more depth to their input. Once coded, these responses provide a very useful qualitative addition and thus offer a greater degree of insight into the students' perceptions and opinions. The chapter draws on a total of 15,385 responses across 12 institutions, collated from 22 survey instances from early 2008 to mid-2012. When surveys have been repeated (as is the case for six of the institutions), some of the discussion compares older data from an earlier survey in 2008/09 ( $n = 4,164$ ) with newer data collected more recently in 2011 and 2012 ( $n = 4,200$ ). We have previously given accounts of our results as a whole (Cosgrave et al., 2008; 2010; 2011), and in the following section we select those most relevant to the themes of this chapter. The results we are going to discuss next are the result of an inductive process of theme identification which was based on a conversational approach. From a broad dataset, we focus in this chapter on the results relevant to the experience of students using a VLE, and the implications of this for the continuing professional development of lecturers.

## Results

### *VLE as a content distribution platform*

Virtual learning environments were used frequently by the respondents: the proportion of students reporting that they accessed their system daily or a few times a week has slightly

increased from 80% in 2008/09 to more than 83% in 2011/12. A substantial majority of students reported that they found the VLE useful for getting course material from the lecturer - either lecture notes/handouts (88% in 2011/12, down from 92%) or other course documents (85% in 2011/12, up from 83%). This supports the perception of the VLE as a content distribution platform, rather than being used for more complex activities like online discussions or quizzes. Despite being substantially more demanding of lecturer time, there seems to be a significant minority using these: in 2011/12 students reported finding the VLE useful for online discussions 33% (down from 35% in 2008/09) and quizzes 42% (up from 33%). Furthermore, the proportion of students who report finding the VLE useful for submitting assignments is substantial and growing, 77% in 2011/12 (up from 52% in 2008/09) and for plagiarism detection/Turnitin 39% (up from 31%, although not all institutions asked this question in the most recent administration of the survey).

The findings suggest a model of VLE usage to solve the problem of disseminating material to students combined with early signs of using it to address the problems of managing and grading submitted work, and serving as an additional communication forum for students. Practices such as using the discussion forums in a constructive way to foster engagement, or using quizzes as formative assessment tools, are more complex and additional to the familiar work cycle of classroom based teaching, and are less widely used. It seems, therefore, that the VLE is used when it solves problems lecturers already have, and less as a framework to do new things. This appears to reinforce some of the conclusions drawn elsewhere in the literature (Kirkup and Kirkwood, 2005).

### *Consistency of Use*

Students did not seem to be seeking out more sophisticated applications like online discussions or quizzes, but mainly sought comprehensive and consistent basic usage that facilitated easier navigation of VLEs. This suggests that ensuring all staff are getting the basics right is a key objective for staff development programmes, and has implications for us as academic developers. Notwithstanding this, 58% of students agreed or strongly agreed that their lecturers made good use of the VLE in 2011/12, compared to 37% in 2008/09. This implies that capacity is gradually being developed in the academic community, with VLE users now being members of a 'late majority' rather than 'early adopters'.

Of the student population who responded to the survey after an open email invitation, only a small number of respondents did not use the VLE (3.7%). Interestingly, technical issues such as system reliability, usability, access, etc. did not represent significant barriers to use, regardless of the choice of VLE in an institution. Instead, lack of use by lecturers (24%) was by far the most common barrier to use identified, and students clearly would like their lecturers to make more use of the VLE (72% agreed or strongly agreed with this statement).

### *Enhancing and sustaining student communication*

An expected outcome of the implementation of VLEs, especially in the pre-social media landscape in which they were first deployed, was in helping the students engage with each other and with their lecturers. Our results confirm this expectation to a good extent: we find that, provided lecturers make use of the system, 64% of students report that the VLE helped to make their lecturers more accessible to them, with a third reporting that they were more likely to communicate with their lecturer using the VLE. The VLE appears to provide a forum for students unwilling or unable to communicate with lecturers in class, or in person, to make contact with them. We would expect this to be a more important issue in larger classes. It is a significant and overlooked benefit of the VLE that it can provide an 'open office door' for students to engage with their lecturers. There may be

distinct advantages to having such a platform to support and maintain dialogue between staff and students in the current higher education landscape. With decreasing numbers of full-time staff in institutions, as well as a growing number of part-time students working at a distance from the campus, VLEs offer a safe space for communication and virtual office hours where needed.

Evidence elsewhere in the literature has suggested that VLEs have not been used to their full potential (Kirkup and Kirkwood, 2005; Blin and Munro, 2008). There is, however, evidence in our data to suggest that, provided the initial resistance is surmounted and academic staff are making use of the system, VLEs are not only used for distribution of content but also for communication and discussion.

However, a much smaller proportion of respondents (29%) felt the VLE increased their access to classmates. While this was always less of an issue for on-campus students (who dominate the sample), the growth of social media tools has taken inter-student engagement away from the management space of the VLE and into spaces like Facebook or Twitter. Anecdotally, many students prefer to put their interactions, even on course discussions, in these spaces as they are often more immediate and ubiquitous, and they are not monitored or moderated by the lecturers. They are more an extension of student corridor or cafeteria conversations than of formal in-class discussions that map to online discussions within the VLE. However, there is also growing evidence that, at least for the present, the 'Facebook' generation wants to keep formal learning space separate from activities in web 2.0 (Brown, 2010; Madge et al., 2009). The chapter 'Supporting First Year Students in their Academic and Social Adjustment to Higher Education' by Diggins et al. explores in more detail the use of social networking sites for student support.

### *Meeting Flexibility Requirements*

Regarding the flexibility of blended and online approaches advocated by the DES (2011: 52), 42% of respondents felt that the VLE changed the hours they could study. This was corroborated by a large proportion of students who reported accessing the VLE from home (89%) and outside of 'normal' working hours (39% accessed the systems after 6pm and before 9am). This increased flexibility of study time and location was a key expected outcome of the use of VLEs and may be particularly significant for part-time, mature and distance learners. In this instance, the remote availability of VLEs is certainly an important feature, enabling students to access the material from home. While this feature is of course useful to all students, it is particularly beneficial to part-time students who may attend the campus on a less regular basis:

Having access to other course material allows for further research into topic areas as I travel a long distance to (university) twice a week.

The reported use of mobile devices has increased substantially, with the flexibility they afford: 24% of 2011/12 respondents reported using a mobile device to access the VLE, compared with 4.1% in 2008/09; also, 52% of new respondents reported accessing the VLE using a laptop on campus, compared with 40% in previous administrations. In future surveys, the questions around the use of mobile devices will be updated to explore this use in greater detail.

### *Good educational design is essential*

Student satisfaction with the VLE is intrinsically linked with the educational design behind the use of the tools. One of the ways that educational design manifests in practice

relates to attendance, which in our experience it is a key issue often raised by lecturers as a reason not to put material on the VLE. The student voice clearly disagrees: only 21% of students felt that having material on the VLE made them less likely to attend lectures, with almost two thirds disagreeing with the statement (62%). Furthermore, the 21% figure reduced to 16% in 2011/12. In future surveys, we may refine the questions to focus on students' attendance at large lectures, where the level of absenteeism can be especially problematic, but in general, the picture is encouraging and suggests the development of educationally sound uses of the VLE by academics. We would suggest that attendance issues need to be examined more broadly, and that the VLE is not in itself responsible for changes in attendance patterns, as in the insight offered by one student:

Sometimes lecturers don't use it to its full potential ... some are reluctant to put lecture notes up in the flawed attempt to make people come to class but if people don't want to be there they just won't come either way.

VLEs are also commonly criticised for serving as a 'mere' information distribution pathway that adds nothing to the in-class work. Students' views seem to disagree and suggest that, in general, the use of a VLE adds value. 71% felt that it clarified what was covered in class, 60% felt it made it easier for them to learn, and 41% felt it helped them to understand how well they were doing. Even when used 'merely' as a content dissemination tool, the VLE can help learners as a reliable, definitive curated repository of course material, providing students with a clear framework for the course. Therefore, while this role might seem to be quite basic in terms of a VLE's functionality, it may facilitate an enhanced student experience. Aside from the need to access missing class material, another advantage noted was that it facilitated the ability to access notes prior to class and thus:

... it just makes the lecture easier to understand when you have it on paper, then in the lecture you can focus on what the lecturer is saying, rather than scribbling the notes down.

In fact, time and again, it is this ability to facilitate prior access to lecture notes that is reported as being one of the most positive effects of using a VLE on student learning. To suggest that the provision of class notes in advance of lectures is merely an exercise in the distribution of material appears to be disingenuous if these quotation are taken as an indication of what VLE usage means to some students. Providing notes online supports students and therefore forms an integral part of a thoughtful teaching method.

However, while the provision of class notes seems to have a beneficial effect on the student learning experience, the data would seem to suggest that the content repository role is very dominant with far less emphasis on the utilisation of the more interactive elements available on VLEs. For example, in the 2011 dataset there were only two references to the use of YouTube as a resource, one of which was negative - '...distracted by other online sites e.g. YouTube'; while the other comment was positive - '...easy to load links to other sources including YouTube videos etc. Easy to share these links with classmates'. Nonetheless, it needs to be acknowledged that some lecturers utilise VLEs in a more proactive and interactive manner incorporating videos, podcasts, links to other resources, supplementary readings, and commentaries and as a communication tool. This may be an area which could be incorporated more specifically in future studies.

We know from anecdotal experience, in working with teaching champions in our own institutions, that VLEs are often being used to facilitate pedagogical approaches

that capitalise on student engagement and teaching innovation. This being said, a quick and obvious conclusion that can be drawn from the data that we have analysed so far is that VLEs tend to be used to facilitate more ground-level pedagogical functions related to access to and delivery of content, and management of class administration and communications. This finding is, however, hardly surprising and aligns with other national evidence (Cosgrave et al., 2011; Donnelly and O'Rourke, 2007) and evidence from elsewhere (Blin and Munro, 2008; McGill and Hobbs, 2008; Selwyn, 2007; Sun et al., 2008). More widely, this has been seen as part of a trend where lecturers tend to make, on average, only incremental changes to their practice when faced with new technology in the form of a VLE (Dutton et al., 2004; Jenkins et al., 2005; Kirkup and Kirkwood, 2005). Naveh et al. (2010) go on to suggest that, 'in fact, instructors can maintain their conservative teaching habits except for posting their course content on the website. From an organisational perspective, this can be done at low cost, yielding relatively high student satisfaction' (p. 132). One could establish parallels between VLEs and one of those sophisticated kitchen do-it-all gadgets: while a minority of cooks will use most of the tools to full capacity, most people only use it as a blender. However, the importance of facilitating greater access to learning resources should not be underestimated, and the views that students have widely expressed in this sense clearly support this point. It is not that long ago that user-friendly, non-technical, flexible and effective distribution of materials was an important barrier for most academics.

However, we have also argued that use of the VLE can lead to improved staff-student communication, assessment and feedback (partially thanks to integrations with other systems such as Turnitin), and other meaningful teaching and learning processes. The widescale implementation of a VLE can serve as a 'Trojan horse' to many other pedagogical developments in unexpected ways, including plagiarism prevention, faculty and peer interaction, greater feedback on learning, and monitoring student engagement and retention. It is difficult not to become overly focused on the views presented in literature, automatically deriving that the VLE has not delivered its promises. Instead, we need to reconcile this with the reality that the VLE is facilitating very effectively other necessary functions and that, through staff support, there is much scope for development. One thing is clear: if the VLEs were to be switched off tomorrow, the level of disruption to the normal functioning of teaching and learning at the grassroots would be huge.

From an institutional perspective, we have a responsibility to facilitate virtual spaces for academic staff and students to work in a controlled learning environment. Indeed, faculty strongly demand password-protected and supported environments that help them protect their own materials, guarantee that learning contents are reused in a lawful manner, and integrate with student registration systems. Some evidence exists that the large majority are still reluctant to engage fully with social networks for teaching and learning purposes because of concerns relating to safety, long term availability and reliability of the sites, and diluted responsibilities for support amongst many other issues (Roblyer et al., 2010). Students quite often feel the same: while making intensive use of social networking for peer to peer communication and social interaction (as dealt with more extensively in the chapter by Diggins et al.), they may prefer their formal learning to happen in a more controlled environment. VLEs provide a stable base, anchor points, and virtual infrastructures that do not necessarily exclude the use of other tools available elsewhere, but instead help to merge them in a one-stop-shop. Much has been forecasted about augmented platforms that increasingly allow for mash-ups (collections of tools under a common platform) and plug-ins to a wide range of inter-operable applications and tools available externally to the VLE on the web, and certainly there will be a growing



demand for such tools over the next few years. In light of the permeability of Web 2.0 and mobile learning, the critical question is: are VLEs here to stay in the future? The answer to this question is probably yes. Management quickly bought into VLE adoption because at the time it was the obvious straightforward e-learning choice, but most importantly, it helped to solve concrete problems. Nowadays, it is more difficult to identify what is the next most effective investment in e-learning, particularly where resources are becoming more scarce.

From our findings, the priority for educational developers is likely to gravitate around good curriculum design and the quality of the learning experience, and efforts and resources need to be invested around building human capacity to make this possible. The challenge involves aligning a 'teacher centred' approach that results in efficiency gains, with a learner/pedagogic centric approach; the chapter by McNutt in this publication deals with this tension in more detail. Renewed and focused energy and direction on the part of educational developers can translate positively to academics using VLEs. Champions of technology-enhanced learning could be targeted, in particular the early adopters or those who initially felt digitally challenged and who are now convinced of the benefits to themselves and their students. While student feedback is a valuable source of information, it is only the starting point and in order to jumpstart the discussion with faculty in relation to available resources, there is a need for specialised support by educational technologists and online content development skills. Some of the most common misconceptions can constitute in themselves an opportunity for continuous professional development, as overcoming these could lead to more meaningful work with academics. For example, discussion could be opened around the following challenges:

- Voluntary or compulsory? It is common that the use of the VLE is avoided in strategic plans and statements, and it is unclear if their use is voluntary or compulsory. What implications does this have for teaching and learning practices?
- Does the VLE determine your teaching style? Arguments have been made that some VLEs are designed with constructivist learning in mind, yet our data suggest that the VLE choice is not as relevant as would be expected, and it would be most useful for faculty to explore how the assumed pedagogical approaches of VLE designers translate into practice.
- Does the use of a VLE impact attendance negatively? Another of the key barriers to use, cited by academics in relation to the VLE, is the concern that students will not attend class if notes and course materials are available online: this has been strongly contradicted by our data. The debate should rather be around how having some useful materials to which to refer may well serve as a welcome safety net for increasingly diverse students struggling to meet the demands of class attendance.
- Is the teacher redundant? Daily, we perceive the fear that the progressive adoption of information and communication technologies threatens the relevance of the teacher as content provider and sage within the learning process. In light of concerns around job stability, intellectual property and growing accountability, this is understandable. However, it would be more productive to raise questions around what constitutes productive use of student time while attending class.

## Conclusions

Consideration must be given to the methodological constraints of the study. Response bias has been a limitation of the work thus far. To transcend this limitation, we believe it is important to draw on system level data captured by the VLE itself, for example, the



proportion of registered students who log in regularly, the proportion of modules with activity and so on. This work strand will draw the project in the direction of learning analytics, and deepen our collective understanding of system data and how it can be used to guide our professional development programmes and improve the overall student learning experience. The initial survey was designed as one element of a much larger piece of work in one of the partner institutions which drew on system data, staff survey data, student focus groups, key informant interviews and random sample staff interviews. While it is not practical to conduct large-scale evaluation projects longitudinally in all our institutions, there is scope to add additional methods to add depth and robustness to the data set.

In relation to our research as an ongoing project, we anticipate that the survey will remain in use indefinitely, with new data added each year for as long as VLEs remain a subject of interest. Review of the survey instrument is now timely: our initial question set focused on the VLE itself, and was implicitly framed around the undergraduate, lecture-centric learning paradigm. There are opportunities to survey non-traditional learners' use of VLEs in order to ascertain how best to build capacity for VLE student usage going forward. The development of VLE technologies is a further prompt to revisit the question set, and to strike a balance between the value of being current, and the need for consistency over time in a longitudinal study. We also envisage running a staff survey in the short term, to capture the perspective of staff users of the VLE. The staff perspective is also very important, and many of the authors have an internal requirement for staff survey instruments to help guide the planning of professional development programmes. As with the student survey, the development and deployment of a common staff survey instrument will enable a broader understanding of the issues.

This chapter has presented our research, including a series of snapshots from our data, and discussion of these, in terms of the VLE as a mature e-learning system in tertiary education in Ireland. On the face of it, e-learning certainly appears to offer ways and means of widening educational participation making education 'life wide'. With the support of education developers, VLEs seem to offer a sustainable and useful platform whereby content, teaching, learning and assessment can be married into one meaningful enhancement that can complement a robust pedagogic learning environment. Beyond its use as an environment regarded as supplemental to traditional learning, the challenge is to make use of these tools as enablers of truly blended learning environments. Online and face-to-face teaching do not exclude each other; on the contrary, they could enhance each other mutually in many creative and powerful ways. The widespread availability and support of an institutional VLE can provide a quick win-win solution that helps to make real the promises of blended learning. However, e-learning platforms exist within a milieu that is reliant on issues such as connectivity, access, lecturer and student experience and abilities, all of which impact on the potential effectiveness of said platforms. Whatever policies, protocols, think tanks, committees, legislation, commissions or memoranda are drawn up, designed or implemented, the reality for most learners and lecturers on the ground is frequently very different from the aspirations of such instruments or bodies. It is quite clear that aspirations and mission statements need to be turned into concrete executive decisions and actions.

**Note 1** We welcome additional participants to join the project team, from Ireland or overseas. If your institution is interested in becoming involved, please contact us.

**Note 2** While Dr Claire McAvinia, one of the authors, now works in Dublin Institute of Technology, the data that she contributed to this chapter is based on her previous work in NUI Maynooth.

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## **Response to**

### **An Investigation of Students' Experiences of using Virtual Learning Environments: implications for academic professional development**

by Gráinne Conole, University of Leicester.

The chapter focuses on the important topic of how students are using Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) and in particular student satisfaction. This is timely given the recent interest in Learning Analytics, i.e. being able to data mine VLE information in order to better understand how students are using the VLE, an insight into their patterns of learning and identification of students who are having problems. The chapter draws on a rich set of empirical data gathered since 2008. The authors provide an overview of the research methods and findings and then focus on the implications for academic professional development and capacity building. The chapter is well written and logically structured. Key arguments are backed up by relevant research literature

The chapter begins by providing an overview of the role of VLEs in Higher Education Institutions. They provide an overview of VLE policy and practice in Ireland and contextualize this with international research literature on the adoption of VLEs. They found that there were few longitudinal studies; hence, the value of their research. They found that VLEs were primarily being used as content repositories, rather than supporting problem-based learning or group work, a finding echoed in other research literature.

The research method used was a survey to assess students' uses of and attitudes towards VLEs. The survey was initially run with five institutions; this later expanded to 12 institutions. The survey consisted of 20 items, some with sub-sections. The authors collected an impressive set of data; 15,385 responses across 12 institutions, collated from 22 survey instances from early 2008 to mid-2012.

Having outlined their research approach, the results are presented. The first key finding was that VLEs were primarily being used as a content distribution platform. The second key finding was around consistency of use; students sought comprehensive and consistent basic usage that facilitated easier navigation of VLEs. The third was the view from students that the VLEs did provide them with good communication tools, to connect with their tutors and peers. The fourth was that use of the VLE changed students' patterns of learning, providing them with more flexible ways of studying. The fifth finding was that student satisfaction with the VLE is intrinsically linked with the educational design behind the use of the tools.

#### **The chapter conclusions:**

VLEs seem to offer a sustainable and useful platform whereby content, teaching, learning and assessment can be married into one meaningful enhancement that can complement a robust pedagogic learning environment. Beyond its use as an environment regarded as supplemental to traditional learning, the challenge is to make use of these tools as enablers of truly blended learning environments. Online and face-to-face teaching do not exclude each other, on the contrary, they could enhance each other mutually in many creative and powerful ways. The widespread availability and support of an institutional VLE can provide a quick win-win solution that helps to make real the promises of blended learning.

The chapter would benefit from inclusion of more data to back up the claims being made, for example inclusion of more quotations. Overall, this is a strong chapter drawing on an extensive body of empirical data. It would be nice to see more in the conclusion on the key contributions to knowledge that this research provides, along with implications for learners, teachers and institutions. It would also be useful to include a little on potential future research.

The key benefit of this chapter is that it provides a longitudinal study of the use of VLEs in 12 Irish institutions. This is important given the centrality of VLEs as core learning tools. Institutions and teachers need to have a better understanding of how learners are using VLEs, along with their perceptions of the value of VLEs for their learning. Internationally this work is important and indeed the authors do draw on international research on the use of VLEs.

## A Critical Discourse on the Role, Motivations and Beliefs of the Educational Technologist in Irish Higher Education

Larry McNutt, Institute of Technology Blanchardstown

Corresponding author: [Larry.McNutt@itb.ie](mailto:Larry.McNutt@itb.ie)

### Introduction

The current discourse on sustainability in Higher Education is often accompanied by an analysis and critique of structures and roles, some of which can be portrayed as archaic and inflexible. In terms of policy in the Irish context, the *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* was published in 2011 (Department of Education and Skills, 2011) and the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education was established in 2012. In the midst of what might be perceived of as rhetoric, there is also a parallel commentary that applauds many of the innovative teaching and learning practices and approaches that have evolved in the higher education scene as evidenced in the National Academy consultation document (Higher Education Authority, 2011:4):

This period has seen a transformation in the resourcing of teaching and learning, with greater availability and uptake of professional development opportunities, the adoption of new forms of pedagogy for enhanced student engagement, extensive usage of technology in Irish higher education and an increasing emphasis on teaching in the tenure and promotion processes for academic staff.

Gosling (2008) argues that the creation of Education Development Units within the United Kingdom has been influenced by the massification of higher education, the reductions in funding per student, the diversification of the student profile, the growth of educational technologies and the funding made available for educational development projects (p.9). In some respects, the Irish experience has lagged behind its UK, European, Australian, and United States counterparts and in effect has skipped a generation in relation to the development of educational technology. It is only recently that sources of formal funding have enabled the clear identification of a need for, and the subsequent establishment of, the role of the educational technologist. Viewing educational technology solely through a technology lens places an emphasis on the tangible, measurable aspects of these developments, for example, the number of learning objects created or the number of courses present on a VLE. However, switching the lens to focus on the practitioner values and beliefs illuminates the ‘off stage’, often unacknowledged, compromises and tensions required in balancing the many competing agendas at the heart of the higher education sector including the learner, the academic, technology and the higher education system.

This chapter will discuss the findings from a two year study, carried out during 2008 and 2009 that investigated and captured the hidden voice of the educational technologist in the landscape of Irish higher education. In the following section, I will briefly explore the background to this study including a description of the research design.

## The Research Design

### *Background*

This research has its origins in the unexpected outcome of a request made to a group of educational technologists in December 2007 at the Irish National Digital Learning Repository (NDLR) symposium. They were asked to choose to view either a video segment describing in detail the underlying architecture of an award winning educational technology solution or alternatively a video clip presenting a narrative of a student's experience who, because of a disability, was unable to attend college, but through technology could attend online. The majority of the group wanted to view the impact on the student; of course, they were also interested in the technology but at that juncture they had a clear preference to view a narrative account of an educational technology intervention. This event had an impact on me because I recognised that a group that would be labelled as 'techno-centric' displayed an emotional response which reflected values and beliefs that receive scant attention within the field of educational technology.

At this time, I was also introduced to the work of Pierre Bourdieu whose concepts of habitus, field and capital resonated with me for reasons. My instinct was that these conceptual tools could explain the inherent contradictions and tensions within the educational technology domain. I wanted to excavate beneath the surface of the emotional response of the aforementioned participants in order to illuminate the views, opinions, beliefs and accounts of their practice. In so doing, I hoped to present a more accurate picture of the field of educational technology and the habitus of the main players within that field. I was also influenced by the realisation that this exploration would require an approach that would encourage self-reflection in order to counteract the criticism that Bourdieu (2000) has levied at research activity which, he suggests, tends to take as given, the values, questions and categories of the field and the society in which it operates:

The agent engaged in practice knows the world... too well, without objectifying distance, takes it for granted, precisely because he is caught up in it, bound up with it; he inhabits it like a garment... he feels at home in the world because the world is also in him, in the form of the habitus (p.142).

The main conceptual challenge posed by this study was how to examine the habitus of these innovators in higher education i.e. the values and beliefs of those who use technology as a means to enhance or transform their approaches to teaching and learning. The decision with regards which research method to adopt was guided by the several published studies that employed Bourdieu's concept of habitus in their research (Hulme, n.d.; Dumais, 2002; Barber, 2002). McNutt (2010: 84) referring to the work of Webb, Schirator and Danagher (2005), outlined how Bourdieu has explored the relationship between people's practices and the context in which these practices occur, whilst noting that academics who are disposed to turn an inquiring gaze on others are often reluctant to turn the gaze onto themselves. The approach of the researcher in attempting to reveal the habitus of an individual(s) is, according to Maton (2008):

...to analyse practices so that the underlying structuring principles of the habitus



are revealed. However, empirically, one does not ‘see’ a habitus but rather the effects of a habitus in the practices and beliefs to which it gives rise. The structure of the habitus must be captured by excavating beneath practices to capture its relational structure as one among a range of possible structures (p. 62).

Visual aids were chosen as the tool to ‘excavate beneath practices’ and to capture beliefs and values. As Mason (2005) notes:








images may be used to prompt research participants to talk about something that may be uncomfortable, something personal such as their family history, or something such as their direct experience of a phenomenon illustrated by the image (p. 331).

This identification of a method was important – there was a sense of a viable approach emerging to give voice to the underlying research questions. I was interested in the underlying conceptual frameworks in terms of educational technologists’ perceptions and views regarding the use of educational technology.

I considered that focus groups would be an appropriate data gathering method for my research question as discussion and conversation would be key to accessing the breadth and depth of information and insights required. Silverman (2010) describes the focus group where the researcher ‘acts more as the facilitator of a group discussion than as a questioner’ (p.110). This approach, coupled with the use of visual imagery informed the design of the six focus groups all of which would begin with a series of the eight reflection points designed to prompt and to initiate dialogue (see Table 1).

### Participant Selection

The focus groups occurred during May, June and July of 2009 in Dublin, Athlone, Belfast, and Galway. Table 2 notes the numbers of people who attended each focus group and whether they represented the university or the Institute of Technology (IoT) sector. The focus groups lasted approximately 2-3 hours in duration. Though all participants had agreed to attend voluntarily, participants had been invited to attend the focus groups by email through a known point of contact in each participating institution. Inviting the participants, in and of itself, uncovered some interesting issues; in some organisations, the role of educational technologist is a formal appointment whilst in other cases it is filled by an academic who may receive support or time in lieu for their efforts. Thus the diversity of the group was already apparent. I facilitated each focus group with reference to guidelines and good practice (Iedema and Braithwaite, 2004; Kitinger, 1995).

Theme 1	Theme 2	Theme 3	Theme 4	Theme 5	Theme 6	Theme 7
<b>Reflection 1</b> Technology or the Learner? 	<b>Reflection 2</b> Profile of Higher Education Today? 	<b>Reflection 3</b> Observations on education 	<b>Reflection 4</b> My current voice in education What do you expect to see? 	<b>Reflection 5</b> My personal vision for education How have you been influenced by...? 	<b>Reflection 6</b> An educational vision for 2020 	<b>Reflection 7</b> Assumptions 
<b>Motivation</b>	<b>Profile of Higher Education</b>	<b>Observations on education</b>	<b>Characteristics of my voice</b>	<b>My influences</b>	<b>Impact – if remove educational technology</b>	<b>My assumptions</b>
Personal view/belief	General observation	General observation	Personal view/belief	Personal view/belief	My opinion	My opinion

**Table 1: Focus Group Reflection Points**

Number	Type of Institution	Location	Number of participants
1	IOT	Rural	7
2	IOT	Urban	5
3	University	Rural	3
4	IOT	Urban	4
5	University	Rural	2
6	University	Urban	2
			23

**Table 2: Profile of Participants**

### *Data Analysis*

The audio recordings of the focus groups were transcribed and submitted to each of the participants for their final comment; very few edits were requested and the individuals were satisfied with these records of the discussions. The transcripts were saved in six individual word documents, each representing the full discussion by each group of all the themes. The next stage involved using *ATLAS.ti*, a qualitative data analysis tool, to assist in the coding and subsequent analysis of the data. The first step involved creating a new Hermeneutic Unit – this is the actual project data and includes the documents, codes, quotations, memos and any other files associated with the work. The range of media that can be incorporated includes images, video, audio, Google maps and various text file formats. The initial approach to analysing the data ‘sliced’ the six transcript files horizontally by theme and stored each ‘slice’ in a separate document – each of these documents was then assigned to a separate Hermeneutic unit. The Hermeneutic Unit (HU) editor is the main window which displays the contents of the documents and provides the tools required for coding and analysis. Gibbs and Taylor (2005:1) have described the coding process as ‘combing the data for themes, ideas and categories and then marking similar passages of text with a code label’.

The end result of this process is a set of documents overlaid with a coding scheme and associated highlighted segment of texts i.e. quotations. All of the codes identified during this process emerged from the data and reflected the essences of the discussion at that point. Gibbs and Taylor (2005) refer to these as grounded codes which ‘emerge from the data because you put aside your prejudices, presuppositions and previous knowledge of the subject area and concentrate instead on finding new themes in your data’ (p.1). Dey (2004) uses the term ‘open coding’ as ‘the process of breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing and categorising data’ (p.84). The process commenced with a set of ‘a priori’ themes to which the focus group discussions were filtered through, yielding a set of code families representing a rich body of commentary captured in a bank of quotations. However the vibrancy and interconnectedness of the discussions could not be adequately contained within the original reflection themes – once these artificial boundaries were removed the data settled into the final four themes which were:

- Theme A: Views on Educational Technology
- Theme B: The Role of the Educational Technologist
- Theme C: Motivations and Philosophy of Educational Technologists
- Theme D: Higher Education Today

In the next section I will discuss these findings by focussing on two of these themes (i) the role of the educational technologist and (ii) their personal motivations and beliefs.

## **The Role of an Educational Technologist**

### ***Tension and balance***

The role of educational technologists in contemporary higher education in Ireland could best be described as a balancing act. Oliver (2002) notes that in educational technologist appointments there can be, ‘... tension between the marginal nature of the posts and their importance in terms of institutional change’ (p.248). Gornall (1999:48) points to the hybrid nature of the role: ‘And what of the ‘new professionals’ themselves? Do they recognise their liminality, the hybrid nature of the role?’

A critical success factor in being an effective educational technologist is the ability to identify technology interventions that support not just the teacher, but also sustain the relationship between the learner and the educator. This capstone belief requires an ability to balance the support required by the stakeholders i.e. the academic or student, with the underlying priority of ensuring the relationship is fostered and encouraged to grow. The tension in the role is captured by the often conflicting motivations of the educational technologist, who is generally learner-centred, and the academic who may be willing to explore the potential of the technology, where the technology may offer more tangible and realised benefits for the academic rather than the learner. For example, functions within a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) that automates the collection and marking of assignments could be viewed as a support primarily for an academic’s administrative duties rather than providing any significant benefit to the learner. This potential conflict was noted by one of the focus group participants:

A very prominent tension in this job is that we are going out from our team with a remit to support staff in enhancing student learning generally, but we have a real double-edged sword there because they may well be looking to us for convenient methods for getting over administrative and other problems they have.

(Focus Group 5)

Promoting the benefits of educational technology for the academic, whilst also maximizing the benefits for the learner, can be mutually exclusive. An additional tension which emerged from the focus groups was the reluctant admission that decisions and initiatives are often technology-led or involve chasing a ‘shiny new gadget’, rather than employing a solution with a clearly demonstrated pedagogic value. One participant indicated this dilemma:

The people who are innovating are maybe slightly more geeky, maybe their focus is a little bit about that how they can, I suppose, display their prowess rather than having maybe more fundamental aims about how they might improve education...

(Focus Group 3)

However, the newness and potential of the technology, while not always an end in itself, could provide the necessary catalyst to spark an interest in an innovative pedagogical solution which incorporated some technology. Engagement with technology also has an

added benefit for staff in that it lessens the risk of being labelled a laggard. The links between personal/academic identity and use of technology are well researched. Yi et al. (2005) note the importance of an individual's propensity to experiment with IT and Roca & Gagne (2007) consider perceived playfulness as an important motivational factor, defined by Davis as 'the extent to which the activity of using a computer is enjoyable in its own right aside from the instrumental value of the technology' (p.1587). Despite some staff enjoying their forays into technology, it is recognised that some academic staff are challenged by the demands placed on them in this regard. Educational technologists recognise this:

I would have a lot of empathy for people who are kind of being, not oppressed by technology but having technology kind of forced upon them.

(Focus Group 3)

This ability to act as a broker between the hard edge of technocentrism and the needs of learners was noted as being integral to the role of the educational technologist. This view is echoed by McCauley Jugovich & Reeves (2006). Describing feedback from academics who had attended an intensive seven day technology workshop presented by them, they refer to one comment made to them:

'You're not like normal IT people.' When asked for clarification, the faculty member said that we (the authors) talk on their terms in non-technie language and that we are committed to their success instead of telling them what they should do or how they should do it (p.60).

### *More than just a technical role*

Gosling (2008) comments that Education Development Units (EDUs), within which many educational technologists are based, have to 'work hard to ensure that they work alongside academic staff, and learning support staff, in a way which is based on conversation and dialogue...' (p 43). A requirement for empathy, balance and dialogue are necessary to allow educational technologists navigate through the various competing agendas that define higher education. Participants in this study identified advocacy, and personal, professional and technical attributes as being important. These included: good communication skills; the ability to be supportive; negotiation skills; technical expertise; and the ability to teach people at all levels. These attributes were seen to be common to both innovative academics, in the educational technology field, and formally appointed educational technologists. This list clearly suggests that educational technologists do not see their role as a solely technical position which simply promotes technology for technology's sake; rather, they seek to continually assess the alignment of the technology with the educational objectives of programmes, the local learning environment and the needs of staff and students:

We show them, we give them examples, we talk to them, we thrash it out with them ... so we're not just saying 'this is pod cast and here's how you do it.' We actually explain ... where you could use it, and where it would be beneficial .... So we're always giving them examples ....

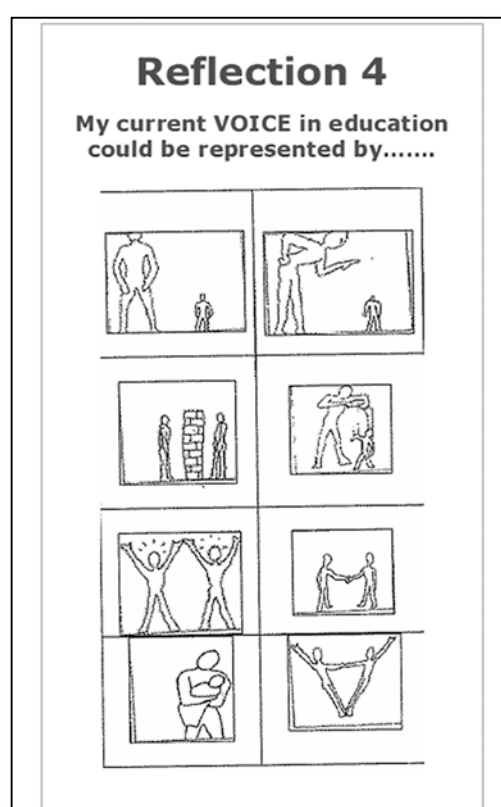
(Focus Group 4)

Participants in this study recognise the importance of staff training and their approach reflects Oliver's assertion that ongoing support is a critical success factor in any innovations within higher education (Oliver, 2002). They noted the challenge of ensuring that training programmes and technology support were presented in a manner that would not alienate an academic or undermine their efforts. Oliver (2002) noted similar insights:

It is important to note that the process is a two way one; in order to teach the collaborator, the learning technologist must first understand their context. This requires the learning technologist to organise their activity and expertise around the needs of the collaborator – a fundamentally learner centred model of professional development (p.247).

### *The hidden voice*

Finding one's voice is key to asserting one's role. In the focus group sessions, Reflection Four (see Figure 1), involved participants selecting a pictogram they felt that would best identify their 'voice'. However, the groups were informed that the selection was purely representative and that they could describe their voice in whatever way, or through whichever medium, they were most comfortable with.



**Figure 1: Perceptions of Educational Technologists**

Only one participant declared an inability to identify with the pictograms:

I'm not sure whether I could identify with any of those pictures there. (Focus Group 1)

This process led to some thought provoking observations on the changing role of academics and the emerging role of educational technologists, and to feelings of isolation:

You can operate within an organisation like this very much on your own. (Focus Group 1)

of one's place in the organization:

I think we're too low down and we're too small, we're just really, really small fish in a very big pond... (Focus Group 3)

and of being silenced:

But as far as communicating our views to management I think I have indicated before it seems to be a one way channel of communication, they're not listening to us but we have to listen to them ... so that is that... muzzled. (Focus Group 1)

Frequently these feelings lead to frustration:

There are things we report upwards, they go through the formal channels, they're reported to the funders, they're reported to the groups internally. But the full meaning of what we're saying, I think, is very hard to get across. (Focus Group 5)

The idea of possessing a 'voice' was met with surprise by the participants. Voiceless educational technologists supporting the work of voiceless academics is the residue of addressing many of the challenges, conflicts and contradictions identified earlier. The sense of frustration, isolation, insignificance and of being 'muzzled' which was strongly expressed by the participants, is often exacerbated by a hierarchical structure that reinforces their perceptions of the situation.

Reasons for the often marginal existence of this role within higher education, which leads to dissatisfaction, has been ascribed to the level at which the roles are appointed and the associated lack of prestige and gravitas (Conole, White & Oliver, 2007); in addition, these roles do not fit neatly into existing organizational structures (Oliver, 2002). The sense of frustration at not being listened to or not being valued, and not being able to bring a project to fruition poses a major challenge for the future development of this role. These positions and groups are also frequently re-organised in an attempt to make them better fit the institution but this process routinely reinforces a sense of marginalisation: the continued threat of re-organisation tends to create a sense of marginalisation and demoralisation among EDU staff (Gosling, 2008:2).

Participants in this study noted that any re-structuring that does not improve the lines of communication is counterproductive. The communication breakdown and the hidden voice of educational technologists bears a remarkable resemblance to the commentary by Riel & Becker (2000:2) in referring to Smyth (1989), who remark that that the isolation and silence of teachers in the discourse of teaching and learning can be seen as a 'protective response to subordination'. If silenced, either deliberately or by default, important messages addressing the issues and concerns facing higher education from educational technologists will fail to reach the necessary quarters; equally they may be drowned out by competing voices As one participant noted:

there were things that we were doing that could be mapped across the whole institution which would be of benefit to so many and it's worth having a listen. But then there are so many other voices, so many other agendas in the institution...

(Focus Group 6)

### Personal Beliefs and Motivations

Motivation was a recurrent theme underlying much of the discussion in the focus groups and the initial comments made in the groups on motivation were often revised as the discussion progressed. It would seem from the data that participants' personal motivations was very much learner centred:

I suppose it was a curiosity to experiment with a new method of getting things across. (Focus Group 1)

I think it's the match and that you use technology based on what you think the learner gets out of it. (Focus Group 2)

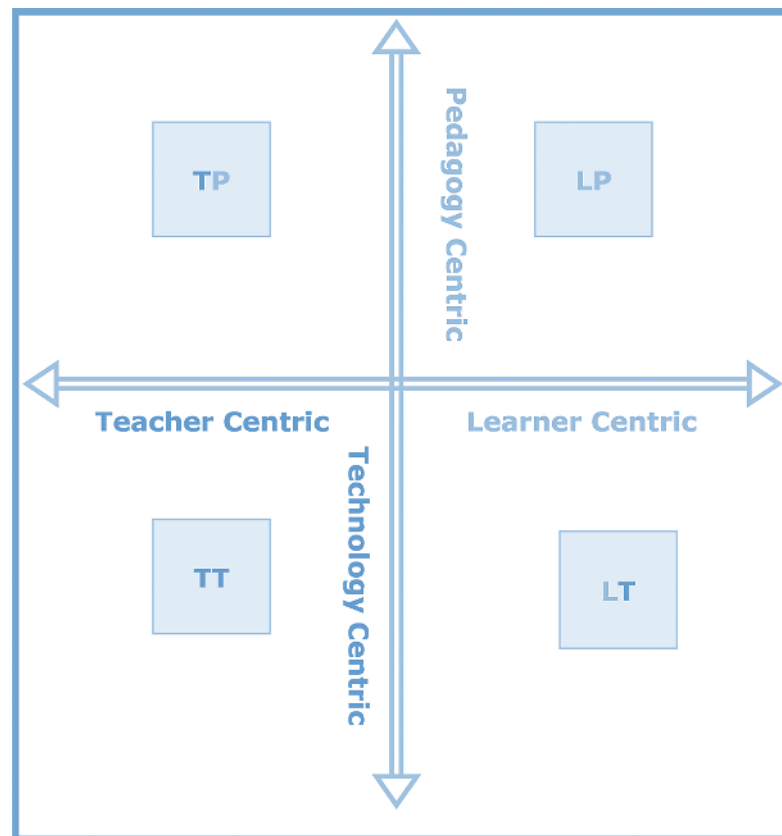
It would be the learner I would be most focused on. (Focus Group 3)

For me it's the learner. Otherwise the technology does nothing. The learner has to be the starting point. (Focus Group 4)

The participants in this study, in general, also offered a positive appraisal of their own educational journey and asserted their belief in the value of education. The data gathered illustrates an inherent contradiction in the role of educational technologists who may well believe in the benefits of a 'learner centred' approach but in order to encourage the adoption of technology by academic staff must promote initially its benefits to the teachers. But, as Foley & Ojeda (2008) report:

...many faculty are reluctant to use technology in their classrooms. This reluctance may stem from different assumptions about teaching and learning that are held by technology specialists and faculty (p.1).

Figure 2 captures four possible scenarios reflecting the potential 'clash' between this study's participants' own beliefs and views and those of the staff they are attempting to influence. The Learner Centric - Pedagogic Centric (LP) quadrant represents a scenario where the underlying beliefs and motives place the learner's needs at the centre and the most appropriate pedagogic approach is adopted without the use of technology. An example would be the use of project-based learning with a group of adult learners. The Teacher Centric – Technology Centric (TT) quadrant would reflect a technology solution that predominately benefits the teacher. For example, academics may convert their course material and assignments for distribution on a VLE which reduces the need to photocopy material and allows for an efficient means of tracking 'participation' and assignment completion. These two combinations represent various positions on a spectrum – the challenge as described in the data is to encourage the shift from a teacher-centered to a learner-centered approach initially and, in parallel, to demonstrate how technology can be deployed to support the learner. The difficulty of this task for educational technologists is compounded by a combination of (i) the sense of marginalisation and (ii) the requirement



**Figure 2: Values and Beliefs on Technology, Learners and Pedagogy**

to follow policy dictates which may be seeking simply to achieve efficiency gains through the use of technology, independent of any improvement in pedagogy:

Policymakers still tend to operate as if educational change is a unidirectional process. They assume teachers will accept and implement innovations such as ICT integration mandated from top down' (Tondeur et al., 2008: 2551).

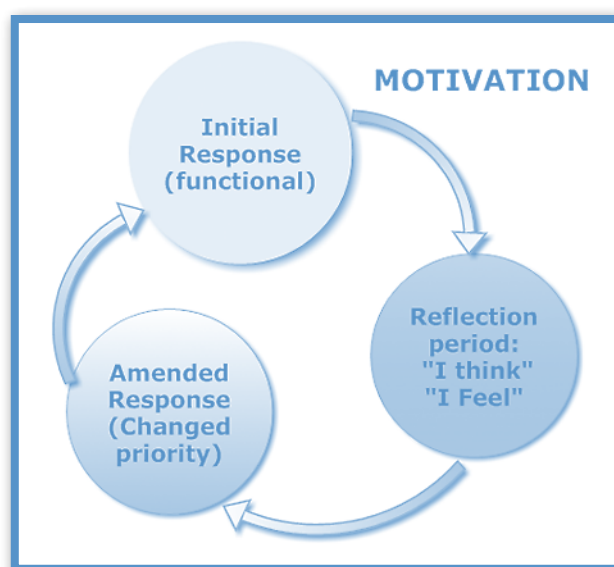
Inadvertently, the risk of supporting a 'teacher-centred' approach, which results in efficiency gains (reduced photocopying, ease of administration of attendance and results) without the concomitant realignment of these 'gains' to support the learner, could well represent a colonisation of the educational technology agenda in higher education. Such an approach would be at odds with the intention of this study's participants where the predominant motivation was to support the needs of the learner. The group also demonstrated a comprehensive knowledge of the challenges facing higher education today and their intent to work to address these. There was no sense of 'throwing in the towel' even though there is a strong undercurrent of criticism of current government policy. They accepted that this is the system we are faced with and that we must endeavour to deploy the resources at our disposal to maximum benefit.

In this study, as participants grappled with the complexity of the teaching/learning situation and their role in it, some earlier contentions on motivation and beliefs, which largely reflected their function as technologists, were amended. Initially, there was a tendency to deal in facts and knowledge which reflected their professional opinion; but as the participants became more at ease with each other, they were comfortable in discussing their own beliefs and values. Memories and influences were recalled and



personal statements emerged which captured ‘submerged’ beliefs on the importance of the learner and the transformative potential of technology. This secondary set of beliefs and values, that were not immediately visible on the surface, were of a more personal nature, perhaps because as the discussion unfolded, the sense of identity was becoming more apparent to the participants. The emergence and subsequent reassessment of the beliefs and motivations of the participants is represented by Figure 3 below.

Although a group consensus did not become evident in this study, there is certainly a level of commonality among the participants with regard to their belief that education is important and that their preferred approach would be learner centred. Similarly, on a



**Figure 3: Beliefs and Motivations of Educational Technologists**

professional level, participants highlighted that the benefits of educational technology for academic staff must take precedence over any personal views that educational technologists might have.

This may reflect a belief that the initial effort at adoption, albeit at times for gains that might be perceived as selfish, could sow the seeds to allow further discussion and reflection on the practice of teaching and learning by the academic staff. This outcome has been reported by Patterson & Norwood (2004) who state that:

Teachers construct their own knowledge based on experiences they had as students and the experiences they have once they become teachers. When teachers have the opportunity to reflect about their pedagogy, they become more aware of their instructional practices and any challenges they experience. Teachers may become motivated to make changes in their constructions, either to accommodate to or assimilate the experience’ (p.10).

This study commenced with an examination of the role of educational technologists and with the desire to ask ‘why we do what we do’, before exploring the actions, characteristics, motivations and beliefs of this group who through their own expertise, energy and enthusiasm have been the enablers of change. The outcomes of these focus groups provide interesting insights into the beliefs and motivations that underpin the participants’ current approaches to their respective roles as educational technologists.

Educational technologists, as relatively recently-established higher education professionals, believe in the potential of technology to transform education in a similar manner to the impact it has had in other domains, for example commerce, communications and entertainment. However, within the education sector, the resistance to change and the reluctance to adopt and adapt is quite prevalent. The role sits at a busy intersection with many opinions, views and stances creating a dynamic mix of debate and, at times, disquiet. Their dilemmas are captured in the data with regards the tensions between their personal motivations and the dictates of their function. In order to balance this tension and frustration, the participants are in constant negotiation with their own beliefs and assumptions regarding their function, which at times may require them to set aside their own beliefs and values in the short term.

## Conclusions

In this chapter, educational technologists articulated their roles, values, beliefs and motivations; in so doing, they gave voice to their work and their thoughts around it. In the study participants were encouraged to draw on their personal stories of encounters and opinions, views and beliefs, assumptions and aspirations. I encountered enthusiasm and openness, tension and frustration, hope and expectation. The array of views, beliefs, values and assumptions of the participants were centred on the four main themes that emerged from the data. However, participants felt that their views and beliefs were constantly challenged within the field of educational technology or were at odds with their institutions or beyond (e.g. quality assurance, senior management, higher education sector and political system). Tension, compromise and balance were a shared and common attribute of their daily practices – the ability to negotiate within the field and interact with social agents in other fields was a pre-requisite for the role.

I commenced this chapter with reference to the changing landscape of Irish higher education. Many such organisations have been asked to review and reflect on their current position within the field of higher education. At the core of this review is recognition of the critical role of the practice of teaching and learning and the need to align all services to ensure that the learners' experience is optimal and engaging. This will necessitate many existing structures with their accompaniment of assorted roles and responsibilities to be recast and reshaped. All actors in the field of higher education strive to provide a professional service – the views of educational technologists captured in this study reflect their professionalism in all that they do and seek to do. The system needs to ensure that any new configuration of higher education supports and nurtures these individuals by addressing some of the issues raised in this study. Educational technologist should be a recognised professional career within higher education – one that sits comfortably in the range of professional services designed to meet the needs of our diverse learner population.

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## Response to

### A Critical Discourse on the Role, Motivations and Beliefs of the Educational Technologist in Irish Higher Education

by Bill Hunter, University of Ontario Institute of Technology.

#### ‘Ideas that inhabit(us)’

Through an examination of data gathered from practising educational technologists in focus groups, McNutt sought to explore the emerging role these professionals are playing in higher education as expressed in their own voices. It is important that readers understand that this role is a moving target or what Conole (2002) called the ‘evolving landscape of learning technology’; therefore, what McNutt has found must be situated in place and time. That said, it is also worth noting that the skill set of educational technologists generally includes some of the following:

Task analysis	Graphic design
Instructional design	Interviewing and consultation skills
Message design	Report writing
Mangement of online environments	Advanced software skills
Materials preparation	Assessment

Much longer lists exist in the literature (e.g., Turner, 2005), some with detailed subsets of the above categories (e.g., flash programming or creating digital video). Interestingly, Turner’s list describes what she believes the 21st century will require of *teachers*, not technology specialists—an example of the ways the target is moving. There would be merit in replicating McNutt’s study in 2015 with samples of both teachers and educational technologists in different jurisdictions and at different levels of the educational system.

An important element of McNutt’s analysis is his use of Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus*. The *habitus* is not just a person’s perceptions but is a complex network of ideas, ways of thinking and behaviours that are formed through the interplay of the person and the social environment (in this case, the work environment). This concept is often used in conjunction with another of Bourdieu’s concepts, ‘cultural capital,’ to provide a way to examine power differences between groups (e.g., Dumais, 2002). While that has not been a part of McNutt’s analysis, one can see an awareness of power differences in quotations from participants who say they perceive their work to be in service to the faculty, what universities often call a ‘support role.’ Of course, this is a recognition of the faculty member’s responsibility for course design and delivery as well as their content expertise, but given the complex set of highly specialised skills in the educational technology ‘tool kit,’ it would also be interesting to learn more about how both faculty and educational technologists view the power relations in their interactions. There was ample opportunity for McNutt’s participants to express concerns about power in response to the cartoon images for ‘Characteristics of my Voice,’ and it was in this area that power-related comments were most common.

It is clear, however, that the *habitus* of educational technologists in McNutt’s sample includes an element we would expect to find in the *habitus* of the faculty members they work with: a commitment to creating a quality educational experience for the students. The work, therefore, suggests that students are another group whose perspective

requires study. In a study of Irish postsecondary students' attitudes toward an online learning experience, Concannon, Flynn & Campbell (2005) conclude, in part:

Students saw e-learning as an expected and integral part of the learning process within higher education. Major benefits noted included the ease of access to resources, given the limited books in the library, and the provision of central area for students to access to find information or comprehensive resources pertaining to each module. Over 70% of the students in the end-of-semester survey commented that they were happy overall with the e-learning aspect of the module.

(p. 511)

Concannon et al. also contrast this to some of the earlier findings in North America, a contrast that affirms the 'moving target' comments made above. Further to this point, Austin & Hunter (2012) examined the attitudes of online postsecondary students in a university in Northern Ireland and, while they found a great deal to suggest that the students enjoyed the experience, they also suggest that some of the cultural conditions of studying in a divided society result in 'cultural inhibitors' that present challenges to the formation of a learning community — a unique aspect of the habitus of learners in that jurisdiction.

In conclusion, it seems fair to say that McNutt's work is part of what Concannon et al. (2005) called for: 'We need to examine the role that educators expect ICT to play in the educational process. It is clear from this research that students consider it a valuable support (p. 512).' It is clear from McNutt's research that the educational technologists he interviewed also regard their work as a form of support for student learning even though their putative clients are faculty.

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## Digital Repositories and their Associated Services: From capacity building to sustainability

Ann Marcus Quinn, University of Limerick

Corresponding author: Ann.Marcus.Quinn@ul.ie

### Introduction

#### *The National Digital Learning Resources Service*

At the time of writing this chapter the Irish National Digital Learning Resources (NDLR) service may be incorporated into the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education. The capacity for a service such as the NDLR has been proven; now it remains to be seen how it can be sustained. The NDLR was established as a collaborative pilot service project in 2004 largely by the University sector with little representation from the Institutes of Technologies. By 2006, the NDLR had grown considerably as 21 of the Irish institutions of higher education became involved. By 2010, many members were registering from organisations outside of the 21 main institutions of higher education in Ireland. These organisations included other educational institutions and bodies in the wider public sector. This chapter will provide an overview of Open Educational Resources (OERs) and the NDLR service in the context of the role that OER services can play in teaching and learning at higher level. It will also explore the legacy of the NDLR and the issues around its sustainability in a changing higher education landscape.

#### **Defining Open Educational Resources and the Need for Such Services.**

There are many definitions of digital learning objects and OERs. An early definition by Wiley (2000) states that digital learning objects are ‘small (relative to the size of an entire course) instructional components that can be reused a number of times in different learning contexts.’ In a later paper, Caws, Friesen and Beaudoin (2006) cite Harman and Koohang’s (2005) definition for learning objects used in education: ‘learning objects are digital resources of any kind that can be similarly combined, shared and repurposed in different educational contexts.’ The notion of OERs is not a new concept. Educators across all sectors have been using multimedia in the classroom for as long as such technologies have been available. Until recently, however, these materials could not be easily shared and could only be accessed in the classroom, greatly reducing the possibility of reuse. In addition, every teacher who wanted to use such materials had to build their own portfolio of resources.



### *Open Content: How and why*

In 1998, David Wiley announced the first open content license. This license was based on the premise that educational content should be freely developed and shared ‘in a spirit similar to that of free and open software’ (Wiley, 2002). The idea that content should be free and openly available became popular quickly. In 2000 Stallman announced the Free Documentation License (GNU FDL) and in 2002, Creative Commons released their first set of copyright licenses that helped content producers license their content for reuse (Creative Commons, 2007a). Since then, the Open Educational Resources movement has gained significant momentum. One notable project in 2001 saw the launch of MIT’s OpenCourseWare, a project where lecture notes, exams and related teaching material from a significant number of MIT courses was made available online. In October 2002, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) began an initiative to make available online, without any subscription fee, all of the educational materials from its undergraduate and postgraduate courses. These materials, including learning objects and lecture content of all lectures were available to anyone. The project was jointly funded by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, and MIT. While MIT was not the first institution to make such resources available without charge to the public, it was significant in terms of its size, comprehensiveness and level of coordination, as well as its free global access. This project is now taken as an example of best practice for the development and sharing of high quality learning objects.

The progress of OERs in the early 2000s notwithstanding, higher education professionals wishing to develop OERs still encounter issues. One fundamental and still long-running controversy is the doubt around whether technology used in education impacts positively on the achievement of learning outcomes or not. This is neatly summarized in Conger (2005). She also makes the point that many media comparison studies (MCS) that examine the question of significant difference are methodologically flawed and lack a theoretical basis. Conger concludes, citing Sener (2004), that ‘Rather than continuing to perform MCS, then, we should move towards developing teaching pedagogies that make best use of current technologies.’ Oblinger and Hawkins (2006, p 14) go so far as to query the usefulness of the question itself: ‘we need to ask: ‘Difference in what?’’. They go on to summarize their vision of learning as follows: ‘Learning occurs as a result of motivation, opportunities, an active process, interaction with others, and the ability to transfer learning to a real-world situation.’ The remainder of their article demonstrates that technology has a positive role in education as a means to a clear pedagogical end and that use of technology is social: ‘Being with others is now multimodal involving face-to-face *and* online communication, often simultaneously’ (Oblinger and Hawkins: 2006, 15). They conclude that it is crucial to exploit the full the range of opportunities afforded by technology in education.

### *The Rationale for Such Services*

An ongoing healthy debate around how learning might best be facilitated and how technology can best contribute to that goal is desirable. In this regard, a growing number of academics believe that OERs are crucial to the effective delivery of educational material (UN Millennium Educational Goals, 2010). In recent years, there has been a large increase in the number of third level courses delivered online where courses are delivered either entirely online or using a blended approach of online and face-to-face learning. This change in delivery has necessitated a change in course materials. Many lecturers facing the challenge of developing materials for online delivery have had to evaluate their own teaching materials and in some cases have either had to design, or develop teaching resources that match this new cohort’s learning expectations and needs. Digital



resources can meet these needs (Mohan, Greer and McCalla, 2003) and Kim and Shih (2004) are among the many practitioners in higher education who believe that one of the greatest challenges for distance learning is the creation of high quality course materials (lecture notes, references, tests, etc). They stress the importance of sharing and reusing well-developed learning objects to 'reduce the load on instructors, and to make them available across a wide variety of platforms' (p 27). International best practice indicates that the successful development of high-quality learning objects is collaborative, where sufficient resources are available in terms of expertise and money and where the objects can easily be shared. James Taylor from the University of Southern Queensland Australia, located in an area with a long history of distance education and consequently an international leader in off-campus education, asserts that the growth in the field of instructional design and technology has led to a marked increase in collaboration. He advocates '...a multi-disciplinary team approach, wherein a wide range of specialist expertise is applied to the generation of training programs' (Taylor, 2008). Taylor states that the necessary level of expertise for the development of technical teaching and learning systems is usually beyond the skill set of individual teachers and appears to demand the deployment of an expert teaching team, with a wide range of specialist skills. These include specialists in instructional design, systems design, electronic information systems, database design, graphic design, student administration, electronic publishing and project management working alongside subject matter experts. Taylor advocates this structured collaborative method of design and development of content in preference to what he terms 'random acts of innovation'. These random acts are the result of many individual lecturers spending time and money developing similar learning objects; if they shared their resources, for example, in a repository, they could see where gaps needed to be filled rather than constantly reinventing the wheel.

Closer to home, 81 Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning in the UK and Northern Ireland were funded from 2005 by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) in Northern Ireland. These centres developed high quality learning objects and made them available online to the wider teaching community. Similarly, the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) is 'funded by the UK HE and FE funding bodies to provide world-class leadership in the innovative use of ICT to support education and research.' Both of these initiatives have access to enviable levels of expertise and money resulting in rapidly-produced high quality learning objects. JISC also funds JORUM, the UK's digital learning repository which was officially launched in 2006. A national digital learning repository here is both more economical and more efficient than the alternative which is each institution funding, hosting and populating its own repository.

Thus, much of the literature on OERs encouraged the development of digital learning objects; there had been real successes and a serious engagement in the issues around OERs. Nevertheless, in tandem with the enthusiasm and growth from 2002 to the present, a number of concerns continued to be discussed which were seen to prevent the academic community from both developing and sharing OERs. These included the following: concern about cost; lack of time; access to expertise; and anxiety about the perceived quality of shared learning objects (Boyle, 2003; Marcus-Quinn and Geraghty, 2009). Concerns about copyright also hampered sharing. While many of these issues still persist it is generally acknowledged that the argument in favour of OERs has been largely won where the appropriate application of OERs is to the benefit of teaching and learning. Now the focus is on how best to deliver the required services as was discussed in depth at the UNESCO World Congress in Paris (Daniels, 2012).

### *What was the NDLR Service?*

In many ways the NDLR itself tracked the later global history of the development of OERs, entering into the frame in 2004. The NDLR was initially established as a repository service which also sought to foster a culture within the academic community in Ireland of sharing materials relating to teaching and learning. The NDLR supported this collaboration through structured and planned activities at institutional and community of practice level and by engaging potential users through workshops, conferences and one-to-one advice. The NDLR recognized that these supporting activities were crucial to the achievement of engagement by academics in the new service. Initially, UK-based world leaders in the area of OER (for example, Boyle and Cook) provided workshops for the NDLR which was established in the first instance as a three-year project (2004-2007). In 2007, funding for the NDLR was extended for a fourth year to allow for further engagement with the repository services and activities. An evaluation was carried out during 2008, with reporting and evaluation continuing into 2009; NDLR has thus been described as having a 'four-year pilot' (NDLR, 2008). By 2010, the NDLR acronym had shifted from National Digital Learning Repository to National Digital Learning Resources service. At this point, for many stakeholders the activities of the NDLR service had become as prominent as the repository.

The overall objectives of the NDLR at the end of 2010 were as follows:

- To support individual, group and community HE sector staff in the sharing of digital learning
- To provide resources and associated teaching practices
- To provide access to storage, search and retrieval facilities for shared resources
- To promote sharing across HE sector through events and training
- To support open access digital rights management.

### **Strengths of the NDLR Service**

#### *The Core Team*

The NDLR service had a team of people in place tasked with implementing the overall objectives and the day-to-day running of the service. These appointments began in 2007 when a project manager was recruited; subsequently, in 2008, a system administrator was appointed. In 2010 the team grew to five with three full-time members and two part-time members. They were:

- A Project Manager (Trinity College Dublin)
- A NDLR Open Educational Resources Advocate (University of Limerick)
- An Educational ICT Policy Advocate (University of Limerick)
- An OER Communities Advocate (University of Limerick)
- A NDLR Training Coordinator (Dublin Institute of Technology)

It is the author's opinion that the core team was crucial to the success of the NDLR service. Members of the NDLR core team had experience in teaching at higher level, and expertise in the design and development of OERs. As part of the work the team engaged in collaboratively developing multimedia resources with staff across the sector. For example, core team members were involved in the design, development and usability of

OERS for Physiotherapy, Languages, Law, Education and History. The range of experience and expertise on offer from the core team encouraged academic staff faculty at many of the participating institutions to collaborate with them. The team also participated in individual projects at a local level which were recognized as having a high quality output and which won awards including a European Language Label (2007) and a People's Choice Award (2012). This active engagement in and contribution to the OER movement by the team helped them to secure the trust of the wider community and academics were confident that their resources were safe within the NDLR. Indeed, academics frequently sought advice on projects from the NDLR team. In addition, the core team was research active and completed projects were presented at international conferences and events and published in peer reviewed research journals and relevant books (see <http://www.ndlr.ie/artefact/file/download.php?file=19196>).

### *Continuity of Funding*

The NDLR was funded from 2004 through the Irish Higher Education Authority. The continuity of funding from 2008 helped NDLR to achieve its objective of building a relationship with the partner institutions, and the Irish Higher Education Authority (HEA) endorsed this project as an effective model of inter-institutional activity (Quinn, 2012). Without the continuity of funding many of the activities including the annual symposium, activities for the Community of Practice (CoP) coordinators, external events, regional events and videoconference events, would not have been possible. These and other NDLR events and workshops were publicized by the Irish HEA and the partner institutions as part of a wider national programme supporting higher education activity. In parallel to the centrally-organized activity, each Community of Practice provided support and a focal point for disciplinary discussion and networking (Pegler, 2012; McAvinia, 2011; Dundon, Diggins and Exton, 2012).

### *Institutional Coordinators*

Many of the 21 institutions of Higher Education involved with the NDLR had an institutional coordinator in place between 2006 and 2012. The role of these coordinators was critical to the success of the NDLR service at local level. These coordinators liaised with the core team to ensure that their institution was aware of all NDLR activity and formed a steering group that meet quarterly at cluster meetings to exchange information and expertise across local learning initiatives. The representatives were university and institute of technology staff (generally located in the teaching and learning centres and research support areas). Their work with the NDLR included coordinating Learning Innovation Projects (LIPs), conducting research in the area of technology enhanced learning, local event/workshop promotion and raising awareness of the NDLR learning resources for development, use and reuse in student programmes. In addition, they performed an advisory role (with the core team) on associated teaching practices. These local NDLR representatives ensured that NDLR was closely aligned with the teaching and learning strategy of the Institutions and provided a link to ensure regular operational feedback to NDLR.

## **Evolution of the NDLR**

### *From Repository to Resources Service*

The initial focus of the NDLR project was on populating the repository. A number of strategies were employed to yield as many OERs as possible. The first of these was to take

*existing* content, populate the repository with it and provide access to existing users. The second was to develop *bespoke* content for intended use by individual users, to provide access to the intended users and to support their intended use. The third was to support the intended communities of users in populating the repository themselves with new (bespoke) and existing resources. The Communities of Practice (CoPs) were central to all of this work (Bruen and Wade, 2008).

Twelve communities of practice (CoPs) of various subject disciplines were established in 2004:

- Applied Social Studies (ASSCoP)
- Bio-Technology (BioTech CoP)
- Chemical and Physical Sciences (CPSCoP)
- Computer Science (CSCoP)
- Education (EDUCoP)
- Library Information Skills
- Mathematics and Statistics Service Teaching in Higher Education (MSHECoP)
- Mechanical Engineering (MECoP)
- Modern Languages (ModLangCoP)
- Nursing and Midwifery (NMCoP)
- Technology Enhanced Learning (TELCoP)
- Veterinary and Bio-Environmental (VETBIOCoP)
- Art & Conflict
- Apprentice-based Learning
- Student Retention

The development of CoPs was based on the theories of Wenger (2002, p11) who described a community of practice as a group ‘who share a concern or a passion about a topic’; these community members are often intrinsically motivated to ‘deepen their knowledge’. The aim of NDLR CoPs was to plan and develop necessary e-learning resources or reusable learning objects (RLOs) for specific subject areas which would be made available through the NDLR for the Irish higher education community. The 2008 evaluation mapped a picture of the CoPs and how they were experienced by those participating in them. A key finding was that the CoPs were instrumental to the primary success of the NDLR project, not least because of the work of the coordinators, and essential to the future sustainable development of the project. However, the report suggested restructuring the communities of practice to become SMART (sustainable, manageable, active, relevant and reflective, targeted) CoPs. As the project progressed, innovation in learning object development within the CoPs was continued through the release of timely funding to them (O’Keeffe, 2009). In addition, the NDLR provided assistance for CoPs by:

- Creating and encouraging collaborative links between academics in other institutions, especially in the early stages of Communities of Practice;
- Organising community events for raising awareness of the benefits of the NDLR service;
- Providing training workshops on using the NDLR;
- Assisting with identification of learning resources that might be of use to the various communities;
- Liaising with the communities and the NDLR board;
- Providing support, guidance & training in the use of technologies by these Communities.

The NDLR CoPs tailored benefits and activities to their communities, emphasising the positive contribution of the *preparing to reuse* process, rather than focusing on reuse itself. For example, leaflets publicising the Biotechnology CoP which were circulated at the 2008 NDLR symposium suggested that engagement with this CoP offered these advantages:

- The chance to discuss your teaching and learning ideas with enthusiastic peers;
- Recognition of the quality of your own resources by others;
- A chance to increase your reach in terms of learning object distribution within the HE sector in Ireland (NDLR Biotechnology CoP, 2008).

These were immediately achievable short term benefits, in contrast to the longer term less certain prospect of time saving, institutional brand building, or cost saving, which have often been suggested as the advantages of reuse activity (Pegler, 2012). The Biotechnology CoP list also related these benefits to the needs of individual educators rather than the institution. Similarly, these were outcomes which were attainable without the requirement from participants to change their teaching practice or to adopt specific technologies. This emphasis on immediate rather than longer term incentives to engage with reuse was designed to appeal to the potential users of the CoPs, who would also become the users of the repository.

As Pegler notes, unlike many similar OER projects where the focus was primarily on the repository, the support, continuity and emphasis on disciplinary community offered by NDLR created a national environment in which sharing and reuse was more likely to occur (Pegler, 2012). The benefits to individuals, and their institutions and disciplinary communities, were not dependent on reuse. Within the NDLR the number of CoPs continued to grow and in 2012 there were 25 established CoPs.

### *International Links*

As noted previously, the NDLR's development could be mapped against global trends in the area. The NDLR was aware of the international OER community and followed best practice as well as contributing to the growing body of literature in the area. Both NDLR and Jorum initially used intraLibrary as the basis for their repository system although both later adopted different systems for open educational resource delivery. As part of a wider evaluation of the service in 2008, experts were also invited to participate in evaluations of a sample of learning objects using the Learning Object Attribute Metric tool (LOAM) developed by the Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) in Reusable Learning Objects (RLOs), RLO-CETL. A keynote speaker at the 2008 NDLR conference was Ahrash Bissell, then Executive Director of ccLearn, part of the US-based Creative Commons organisation. By 2008 NDLR were already moving towards becoming an open repository, a move which Jorum was also considering. During 2009, the NDLR moved to open access using a Creative Commons license. The NDLR also co-hosted a European Thought-workshop aimed at bringing together representatives from the European and wider Teaching and Research repository and data infrastructure communities for the purpose of demonstrating the feasibility and potential benefits of linking research and teaching repositories within Europe. One of the outputs from this workshop, to publish the findings, is ongoing. A draft policy document that will identify and discuss a number of common challenges, and propose a set of policy recommendations to support the further development and potential for more harmonisation or cross-fertilization in an open Research and Higher Education e-infrastructure, will be circulated in 2013/2014.

## Lifetime of Similar Projects

While the area of Open Educational Repository services is still relatively new the movement is growing exponentially. The Commonwealth of Learning in conjunction with UNESCO held a World Open Educational Resources (OER) Congress in Paris on 20-22 June 2012. This event aimed to produce a declaration (referred to as the 'Paris Declaration') that includes a clear definition of open licenses and would be used to encourage governments to support the principle that the products of publicly funded work should carry such licenses. The Paris OER Declaration received approval from the Congress of experts and government representatives on 22 June. This initiative seeks to advance the ideal of making educational resources developed with public funds freely available for reuse and repurposing. This event was a milestone on the route to a further conference on OER and the Millennium Development Goals scheduled for 2015.

It is important that whatever investment has been made over the lifetime of such projects delivers a return. The outputs and structures that have been put in place from existing services should be exploited to their full before any new incarnation of a dissolved project is set up. In the case of the NDLR the elements of the service that were highly successful should be maintained if at all possible.

The following strategic aims set out by a previous UK project (BECTA) are also worth noting for any national service aiming to deliver an effective service to facilitate the sharing of digital material to enhance teaching and learning:

- Improve learning and teaching through the effective and embedded use of ICT
- Increase the number of educational institutions making effective, innovative and sustainable use of ICT
- Improve the availability and use of high quality educational content
- Develop a national coherent, sustainable and dependable ICT infrastructure for education

## Achievements of the NDLR and conclusion

It is the author's opinion that the NDLR will be most remembered for the work that it supported and funded through the following schemes:

- National Learning Innovation Community Support Projects (LInCS)
- Local Innovation Projects (LiPs)

In 2010, building on the early success of the activities of the CoPs, the NDLR service launched the Local Innovation Projects and LInCS projects. Institutions were encouraged to collaboratively apply for funding to generate OERs that would be uploaded to the repository and made available to the wider academic community. This level of inter-institutional collaboration was highly desirable in the higher education landscape and was a very positive outcome of the NDLR service.

In 2011 the Higher Education Authority requested a response from the wider academic community to the establishment of a National Academy for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning. In its submission in December 2011 the NDLR response agreed that this was a positive and timely development. The NDLR Chair and core team suggested that this new body, to be called the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, would be an appropriate body to support and reinforce the successful models which the NDLR had put in place to enhance Teaching and Learning at third and fourth level in

Ireland. These include:

- Collaboration with existing national and international teaching and learning networks
- Communities of Practice (CoPs)
- National Learning Innovation Community Support Projects (LInCS)
- Local Innovation Projects (LiPs)
- Annual showcase of teaching and learning outputs from the Irish academic community.

In the author's opinion these activities are crucial to the success of the National Forum. Participation and trust from stakeholders takes time to foster. The NDLR project was in place for almost a decade and was the first national project in Ireland to enable all 21 higher institutions to work together, to share their existing teaching materials, to create new teaching and learning resources, to collaboratively target and attract funding to create worthwhile teaching materials. The most challenging aspect of such transfers is to try to preserve the successes of such projects. Ideally, there should not be a period of time where the service being wound up is without moderation or the expertise to curate the service. Hopefully, the new National Forum will be able to engage with the activities that the NDLR had championed. However, timing is crucial and if the momentum is lost it may be difficult to reestablish engagement with such a national service.

### **Acknowledgement**

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## Response to

### **Digital Repositories and their Associated Services: From Capacity Building to Sustainability**

by Dermot Brabazon, Dublin City University, Ireland.

This chapter details the development of the National Digital Learning Repository (NDLR), the provision of Open Educational Resources (OER) for third and fourth level and the sustainability of a service such as the NDLR within Ireland. Many countries have gone through similar development processes for national-based educational digital repositories. The fact that 21 Higher Education Institutions were actively engaged with the NDLR and the 12 communities of practice were established to drive forward this cooperation amongst academics across Ireland is a testament to the good work performed by the NDLR management team.

The benefits from such repositories and teaching and learning support networks are clearly indicated within this chapter. These include the sharing of resources developed by lecturers within one Higher Education Institution with the colleagues in another, the joint development of resources, the establishment of subject discipline areas of practice, training sessions on new software or resources tools for academic staff, the support for educational workshops and conferences, and the development of research projects to enhance pedagogical development of learning resources. The development of resources at a national level can be seen as a cost saving exercise where duplication of work to develop the same resources is avoided, as well as an enhancement of teaching and learning practice where the best resources can be selected by a lecturer for a specific concept or range of concepts to be taught. Communities of teaching and learning practice within twelve different discipline areas were established for the first time through the NDLR initiative. These benefits from the NDLR initiative are well highlighted in this book chapter.

Personally I was involved with the establishment of the Engineering Community of practice and chaired it for the last few years. The National Digital Learning Repository enabled the development of a community of Engineering Lectures throughout Ireland to interact, discuss pedagogy, and develop and share for the first time together reusable digital learning resources. Another significant output from the funding provided from the NDLR was the establishment of the International Symposium for Engineering Education which brought hundreds of international engineering lectures to Ireland over the last five years to discuss the latest developments in engineering education. This symposium attracted over one hundred participants at each conference since its initiation in 2007.

The valuable links to enhance international collaboration on this work which were established by the NDLR to UK JORUM and the Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) were presented within this chapter. In the current international context, most countries with digital learning repositories and associated support for third and fourth level teaching are pressing ahead with these initiatives and expanding their resource base and academic staff support and engagement. Examples of such repositories include UK JORUM, MERLOT, National Digital Learning Resource Network, MIT's OpenCourseWare, and OPAL. Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) tapping into resources from such repositories are becoming increasingly common. It is noted in the chapter that there is an increasing trend for resources funded through public funds to be made available for free

to the public and academics that have funded these developments. An example of this is a requirement from some funding bodies for research papers to be made publicly available on open repositories. The Paris Open Educational Resources (OER) Declaration, signed in 2012 at the World Open Educational Resources (OER) Congress noted a clear definition of open licenses to support the principle that the products of publicly-funded work should carry such licenses. Without a National Digital Learning Repository, it may not be possible for the Irish government to meet the requirements of the Paris Declaration.

In summary, this chapter presents a comprehensive overview of the establishment of the NDLR, the provision of Open Educational Resources (OER) for third and fourth level and the sustainability of a service such as the NDLR within Ireland. It was enjoyable to read this well-written chapter as a clear summary of these developments and the current situation within Ireland. In order to provide a high quality education to the next generation of engineering students within Ireland a strategy from the National Forum toward sustainability of such services within Ireland is needed. These resources and supports for provision of education at a high level internationally are critical for Ireland remaining as a location known for its good third level education and well-educated population.





## **Section 4**

Emerging approaches  
and pedagogies



## Promoting Student Engagement by Engaging Staff: implementing a survey of student engagement

Sylvia Huntley-Moore, Trinity College Dublin; Aileen Patterson, Trinity College Dublin; John Panter, Trinity College Dublin.

Corresponding author: shuntley@tcd.ie

### Introduction

The authors of this chapter have considerable experience in fostering the development of teaching evaluation processes in their respective Schools. Yet, in spite of regular evaluations focusing on teachers, modules and programmes of study, the authors were conscious of the lack of systematic evidence about what their students actually do with their time. Given that the literature is fairly clear that certain activities have greater pay off in terms of learning, it was decided to conduct an educational research project 'The Faculty of Health Sciences Survey of Student Engagement' to discover the extent to which undergraduate students were engaging in these activities (Chickering and Gamson, 1987; Kuh, 2003; Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005).

This chapter is divided into two parts. The first part commences with a short review of the literature on student engagement and the origins of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) before outlining the current status of the Irish National Student Survey (Institutes of Technology Ireland, 2012). Part One concludes with a discussion of the educational research project 'The Faculty of Health Sciences Survey of Student Engagement' conducted by the authors in Trinity College, Dublin. The discussion highlights key stages and decisions in the project implementation process including applications of project data. Given the purpose of this chapter, however, and the data access rules agreed with the project stakeholders, it is neither necessary nor appropriate to present the project results in detail. In Part Two, the authors draw on their experience of implementing a modified version of the NSSE to examine a range of issues which readers may wish to consider when implementing this type of survey. The chapter concludes with the authors' reflections on the value and possible applications of the NSSE.

### Part One: Implementing a Survey of Student Engagement in the Faculty of Health Sciences, Trinity College Dublin.

#### *Student Engagement and the Development of the NSSE*

Student engagement is an internationally recognised concept in 21st century higher education (HE). Powerful factors in the widespread adoption of the concept in HE discourse have been: the growing body of empirical evidence reporting a range of

positive educational outcomes related to high level student engagement (Trowler, 2010); the increasing focus on institutional assessment and accountability by governments and policy makers; and the applicability of student engagement as an indicator of institutional quality in relation to teaching, learning and the student experience (Coates, 2005; Gvaramadze, 2008; Salmi, 2009; Shah et al., 2011).

Although there is no single generally agreed definition of student engagement, most definitions tend to stress one of two primary components (Trowler, 2010). The first, focuses on 'the amount of time and effort students put into their studies and other activities that lead to the experiences and outcomes that constitute student success', while the focus of the second category is 'the ways the institution allocates resources and organizes learning opportunities and services to induce students to participate in and benefit from such activities' (Kuh et al. 2005: 9).

Readers interested in the development of the concept of student engagement should consult Kuh (2009). He points out that the basic idea can be found in literature dating back at least seventy years, although some might argue that even earlier discussions of student motivation might be true precursors. Kuh notes the influence of a number of key writers who have developed the concept since the 1930s. They include Tyler (1942, 1949) and Pace (1941) in the early years and, more recently, Astin (1984, 1993), Chickering and Gamson (1987), Tinto (2000), and Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) and, finally, Kuh himself with colleagues. Trowler (2010) offers a more international perspective on the development of the student engagement concept while still acknowledging the major contribution of North American researchers.

In the late 1990s, Newell and colleagues developed a survey of student engagement to provide authentic evidence of student learning and effective educational practices as a challenge to the prevailing North American system of institutional quality ranking by 'resources and reputation' (Kuh, 2009: 7). The resulting National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) was the first of its type although many items had been used in earlier surveys such as the College Student Experiences Questionnaire (Pace, 1884; Kuh et al., 1997). Administered originally in 2000 to undergraduate students in 275 higher education institutions across North America, the survey has been used in over 1,500 higher education institutions. Internationally, the NSSE has been adopted or adapted for use in the Canadian, Australian, New Zealand and South African higher education systems with a pilot study underway in China (ACER, 2012; Strydom and Metz, 2012; Hennock, 2010).

### *The Irish National Context*

In the Republic of Ireland (RoI), the *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* has recommended that 'a national student survey system should be put in place and the results published.' (DES, 2011:17). To facilitate implementation of an Irish National Student Survey a steering group representing the universities, institutes of technology, students and relevant agencies is conducting a pilot online survey across the sector in spring 2013 using a modified version of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), (NAIRTL, 2012).

Whether the Irish Republic follows the lead of countries with similar higher education systems such as Australia and New Zealand, and continues to use a modified version of the NSSE which was originally developed for the North American higher education system, or chooses to develop a unique survey, the resulting data should serve a variety of purposes related to quality assurance and improvement. Survey data, for example, may be used for benchmarking and ranking but just as importantly it should also have potential to engage higher education communities in evidence-based discussions about



a wide range of teaching and learning related issues which could and should lead to improvements in current practices. Slowey and Kozina's 2011 study, *The Voice of Irish Academics: towards a Professional Development Strategy*, has already contributed to such discussions by providing a substantive evidence-base of RoI academics' views on teaching and learning issues including their perspectives on current and previous students' levels of engagement.

### ***The Faculty of Health Sciences Survey of Student Engagement***

In 2010, ethical approval was granted for a study with the aim of determining the level of student engagement in five of the undergraduate degree programmes offered by a range of disciplines in the Faculty of Health Sciences, Trinity College Dublin. The Faculty consists of four Schools, namely: Dental Science; Medicine; Nursing and Midwifery; and Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences. The School of Medicine includes the disciplines of Physiotherapy, Occupational Therapy and Radiation Therapy.

The study objectives were to:

- identify the levels of student engagement in each of five undergraduate programmes offered in the Faculty of Health Sciences;
- compare the levels of student engagement between programmes;
- compare the levels of student engagement in each programme against international benchmarks;
- identify aspects of the undergraduate experience that may be improved through sharing of good practices and expertise between programmes;
- identify aspects of the student experience that may be improved by changing policies and practices at school, faculty and institutional levels.

### ***Factors Supporting Project Implementation***

There were several factors which supported the project from the beginning:

- The Faculty Executive Committee was committed to excellence in professional education and was prepared to commit Faculty resources to the project including the cost of purchasing the rights to use the survey.
- All Schools place a high value on their educational mission, with Nursing and Midwifery and Medicine employing dedicated professional staff whose role is to support and facilitate effective educational practices within their schools.
- There is a history of innovation in undergraduate programmes in the Faculty: Dentistry and Occupational Therapy, for example, pioneered problem based learning in health sciences education in Ireland.
- There are well established internal evaluation cultures in at least two Schools where student feedback is accepted as an integral part of the evaluation of teaching, modules and programmes. One of the primary purposes of evaluation, namely improving teaching and programmes is well understood by staff, most of whom would have first-hand experience of using student feedback to improve their own teaching as well as of membership of various school committees which use student feedback as part of their deliberations on matters relating to quality assurance and improvement of taught programmes and curriculum development.
- Finally, there was a willingness to broaden the scope of evaluation across the Faculty from predominantly teaching and subject focused efforts to seek feedback from students about their learning.

### ***Formative or Summative Evaluation***

Given the project aim and objectives there was no doubt that the focus would be formative rather than summative; that is, the primary purpose was to extend our knowledge of undergraduate student engagement in order, ultimately, to improve student learning. It was very important to the success of the project that colleagues who taught on undergraduate programmes and Heads of Schools were confident that any data from the project would not be used to make summative decisions such as those relating to personnel or funding.

### ***Method***

The authors' search of the literature on student engagement led them to the NSSE website <http://nsse.iub.edu/> with a questionnaire and an accessible and extensive body of associated research data including published results, summary and comparative statistics and scholarly studies.

The NSSE questionnaire consists of approximately 90 questions (depending on the version) with survey users given the option of including up to 20 additional questions to address their specific interests and concerns. The questionnaire collects information under the following five main categories:

1. Student behaviours e.g. student participation in purposeful activities such as time spent studying and reading;
2. Institutional actions and requirements e.g. the amount of reading and writing required of students and the nature of coursework and examinations;
3. Student reactions to college e.g. student perceptions of the features of the college environment associated with achievement, satisfaction and persistence such as the academic supports offered and relationships with staff;
4. Student background information e.g. demographic data that is useful to determine relationships between levels of engagement and educational outcomes for various student groups;
5. Student learning and personal development e.g. students estimate their own growth and development since commencing college in a range of areas including intellectual skills, communication skills, ethical and social development. (Kuh, 2009)

Given the relatively large number of survey questions, interpretation of NSSE data may appear daunting. Many of the questions, however, are subsumed into a framework of five scales or benchmarks of effective educational practice which provide a 'common language ... for discussing and reporting student engagement and institutional performance' (Kuh, 2009:13). These benchmarks and associated activities and conditions are summarised in Table 1 below.

### **Benchmark 1. Level of Academic Challenge**

Challenging intellectual and creative work and high expectations are central to student learning and institutional quality.

#### **Activities and Conditions:**

- Time spent preparing for class (e.g. studying, reading, writing, rehearsing).

- Working hard to meet a lecturer's standards or expectations.
- Number of assigned textbooks, books, or book length packs of course readings.
- Number of written papers or reports.
- Coursework that emphasizes:
  - Analyzing the basic elements of an idea, experience, or theory;
  - Synthesizing and organizing ideas, information, or experiences;
  - Making judgments about the value of information, arguments, or methods;
  - Applying theories or concepts to practical problems or in new situations.
- Campus environment that emphasizes spending significant amounts of time studying and on academic work.

### **Benchmark 2. Active and Collaborative Learning**

Students learn more when they are intensely involved in their education and are asked to think about and apply what they are learning in different settings.

#### **Activities:**

- Asked questions in class or contributed to class discussions.
- Made a class presentation.
- Worked with other students on projects during class.
- Worked with students outside of class to prepare class assignments.
- Tutored or taught other students.
- Participated in a community-based project as part of a module.
- Discussed ideas from their readings or classes with others outside of class (students, family members, co-workers, etc.).

### **Benchmark 3. Student-Faculty Interaction**

Students see first hand how experts think about and solve practical problems by interacting with lecturers inside and outside the classroom. Lecturers become role models, mentors, and guides for continuous, life-long learning.

#### **Activities:**

- Discussed grades or assignments with lecturers.
- Talked about career plans with a lecturer, clinical academics or careers advisor.
- Discussed ideas from their readings or classes with lecturers outside of class.
- Worked with lecturers on activities other than coursework (committees, orientation, student life activities, etc.).
- Received prompt written or oral feedback from lecturers on their academic performance.
- Worked with a lecturer on a research project.

### **Benchmark 4. Supportive Campus Environment**

Students perform better and are more satisfied at colleges that are committed to their success and cultivate positive working and social relations among different groups on campus.

## Conditions:

- Campus environment:
  - provides support you need to help you succeed academically;
  - helps students cope with their non-academic responsibilities (work, family, etc.);
  - provides the support they need to thrive socially.
- Quality of relationships with:
  - other students;
  - lecturers;
  - administrative personnel and offices.

## Benchmark 5. Enriching Educational Experiences

The academic program is augmented by complementary formal and informal learning experiences.

## Activities and Conditions:

- Talking with students with different religious beliefs, political opinions, or values.
- Talking with students of a different ethnicity.
- An institutional climate that encourages contact among students from different economic, social or ethnic backgrounds.
- Using electronic technology to discuss or complete assignments.
- Participating in:
  - Internships or field experiences;
  - Community service or volunteer work;
  - Foreign language coursework;
  - Study abroad;
  - Independent study or self-assigned major;
  - Culminating senior experience;
  - Co-curricular activities;
  - Learning communities.

**Table 1: The five benchmarks and associated activities and conditions (Kuh, 2009:16-18).**

In addition to the five benchmarks, there are also a number of scalelets consisting of groups of questions on topics including active learning, writing, higher order thinking skills and deep learning which are useful for examining specific issues or aspects of student engagement (Pike, 2006).

As the NSSE questionnaire has been subject to extensive testing for validity and reliability (Kuh, 2003) and required only minor amendments relating to nomenclature, it was deemed prudent to use the existing survey rather than develop an instrument *de novo*. Consideration was given to other methods of data collection such as focus groups. Factors such as availability outside class time of student volunteers and limited resources for qualitative data analysis reinforced the decision to use a survey.

Another factor influencing the choice of method was the students' familiarity with both online and paper-based/classroom administered surveys. The NSSE is available in both

formats, each having advantages and disadvantages, which needed to be considered. The authors chose the paper-based/classroom option, primarily to maximise the response rates but also because questionnaires could be printed through the College's student survey service at no cost instead of purchasing them from the NSSE. By using the authors to administer the survey they ensured that ethical standards were upheld and that data collection costs were further minimised.

### *Data Analysis*

The completed surveys were scanned (free of charge) by the College's student survey office using SNAP software to produce individual reports for each year of each programme of study. Individual data files were exported into SPSS for statistical analysis which was provided (free of charge) by the School of Nursing Statistical Service. The NSSE website provides SPSS syntax files to assist in the production of the benchmark data for each cohort; this involved amalgamating the mean for a set of scores to produce each benchmark score. ([http://nsse.iub.edu/html/analysis\\_resources.cfm](http://nsse.iub.edu/html/analysis_resources.cfm))

Separate reports for each year of each programme consisting of responses to each question as percentages were produced. Data for each of the five benchmarks for each discipline were also produced and compared to NSSE benchmarks for North American research universities with the highest level of research activity as defined by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching ranking system (Carnegie Foundation, 2012).

Finally, the NSSE also provided specific benchmarks for nursing which were based on the analysis of NSSE data from schools of nursing in North American research universities with similar research profiles to Trinity.

### *Access to Data from the Study*

Data access was one of the first issues raised by the Faculty Executive Committee when considering whether to support the project. The authors' experiences in managing sensitive evaluative data led them to prepare guidelines for data access in preparation for their meeting with the Faculty Executive. Table 2. below is a simplified view of the levels of access granted to individuals across the Faculty.

Heads of School or Discipline received four reports, the first of which was an individual report with answers to all 90 survey questions for their respective programmes; the Head of Nursing, for example, received a report on the BSc (nursing) programme. The second report received by Heads was the Faculty Benchmarks which were made up of data aggregated from all programmes (nursing, dentistry, medicine, pharmacy, physiotherapy) on the five scales or benchmarks: academic challenge; active and collaborative learning; student-faculty interaction; supportive campus environment and enriching educational experiences. Heads were also in receipt of International Institutional Benchmarks based on NSSE data from institutions similar to Trinity College Dublin. Finally, the Heads received International Benchmarks for their respective disciplines which were also based on NSSE data aggregated to the five scales, for example, the Head of Nursing received benchmarks based on NSSE data from similar schools of nursing in North American universities. The Heads of School were responsible for passing on the Individual Program Report and benchmarks to their respective Directors of Undergraduate Teaching and Learning, who were responsible for disseminating them to relevant staff and students.

Faculty Executive members received three reports: a multiple program report summarising the results for each programme on each of the five scales or benchmarks; Faculty Benchmarks showing data aggregated from all programs on the five scales or

benchmarks; and the International Institutional benchmarks based on NSSE data from similar institutions. It should be noted that there was a clear expectation that reports received by Heads of School as members of the Faculty Executive were to remain confidential to that Committee and were not for dissemination within their respective Schools.

Report Type	Individual Program	Multiple Program	Faculty Benchmarks	International Institutional Benchmarks	International Discipline Benchmarks
<b>Data included</b>	Answers to all questions	Summarising results on the 5 scales for each program	Aggregated data from all programs on 5 scales	NSSE data from similar institutions on 5 scales *	NSSE data from similar disciplines on 5 scales *
<b>Access</b>					
<b>Head of Discipline or School</b>	<b>x</b>		<b>x</b>	<b>x</b>	<b>x</b>
<b>Faculty Executive Committee</b>		<b>x</b>	<b>x</b>	<b>x</b>	

**Table 2: A simplified view of the levels of access to survey data granted to individuals across the Faculty.**

\* The Carnegie Foundation framework for the classification of institutions of higher education is used by the NSSE to produce a range of institutional and discipline benchmarks which reflect the diversity of goals and resources found in higher education systems and allow for more accurate comparisons between institutions and disciplines (Carnegie Foundation, 2012).

### **Research Results and Applications**

As noted previously, given the purpose of this publication and our own rules on data access, it is neither necessary nor appropriate to present the project results in detail. What is offered instead is a broad-brush description of what the various stakeholder groups found most useful and interesting from the data.

The Faculty Executive Committee was primarily interested in comparing the Faculty performance with that of similar institutions: hence, their focus on the institutional benchmarks for each of the five main NSSE benchmarks. There was some concern that the benchmarks would have been more useful for comparative purposes if they had been developed only from faculties of health sciences in research universities with very high research activity instead of from all faculties in such institutions.

Identification of trends signifying good practice across programmes, as well as areas for improvement were also of interest to the Faculty Executive. To a lesser extent, programmes which scored particularly well on any of the five benchmarks were acknowledged with a view to identifying distinguishing features.

Discussion of detailed programme reports occurred in the relevant schools or disciplines through a variety of channels. The report on the nursing programme for example, was a standing item on the agenda of the Curriculum Committee for two terms during which time responses under each of the five scales were considered in detail as part of a process of continuous programme improvement. The Nursing Curriculum Committee was not particularly interested in relating nursing results to those of other programmes in the Faculty or indeed with the institutional benchmarks. They were, however, very keen to make international discipline specific comparisons by benchmarking against schools of

nursing in similar research intensive universities. The NSSE made these figures available at an additional cost. Aspects of the report were also useful in deliberations at School level on topics as diverse as alumni relations, marketing and staff/student relations.

Table 3. below gives a flavour of the range of developments proposed and underway from the analysis of NSSE data. The developments are organised by level (Programme, School or Faculty) and focus (academic, curriculum or organisation). The Faculty-level academic development project ‘Encouraging active learning in classrooms’ for example, will take the form of a series of workshops for academic staff across the Faculty who wish to embed strategies for active student learning in the classroom into their courses. ‘Engaging undergraduate students in the research community’ involved a review of approaches to teaching research in an undergraduate program in order to ensure a more coherent developmental approach linking the School’s research projects with students’ developing research skills and interests. Assessment, in particular feedback quality and timeliness, proved to be an issue for students in most programs. In response, the authors have proposed a Faculty-level review of assessment policy and procedures. The NSSE data on student engagement in educationally beneficial activities outside the classroom was particularly valuable in identifying areas requiring additional resources or development including study abroad programmes and joint social activities for staff and students.

	Programme -level	School- level	Faculty -level
<b>Academic Development</b>			Encouraging active learning in classrooms
<b>Curriculum Development</b>	Engaging undergraduate students in the research community		Review of assessment policy and procedures
	Review of students’ approaches to learning using NSSE data		
<b>Organisation Development</b>	Fostering study abroad	Development of student supports Fostering staff / student social activities	Fostering civic engagement

**Table 3: A summary of some developments based on analysis NSSE data.**

## Part Two: Some Guidelines for Implementing a Survey of Student Engagement

### *Identify a need*

Surveys of student engagement require careful planning and the expenditure of scarce financial and other resources. It is essential that such planning begin with clear ideas about why you want to undertake the project. Motivation may range from a simple desire to rate the levels of your students’ engagement against international benchmarks to developing systematic ways of improving student engagement across the department, faculty or institution. Alternatively, you may be under pressure from the institution, professional body or even the government to demonstrate high quality teaching and

learning for which purpose, surveys of student engagement may provide useful but only partial evidence.

### *Set clear objectives*

These ideas will direct planning and help to avoid the pitfalls associated with surveys which deal with sensitive matters but they need to be translated into clear written objectives to be understood and accepted by participating staff and students.

There has been much written about the nature of objectives in education and of the differences between aims and objectives. We do not wish to enter that debate but merely point out that your objectives should be clear to all stakeholders, specific and achievable within the time frame of the project.

### *Is the research to be formative or summative or both?*

The response to this question will depend of course on your objectives for the project. Formative research, where the primary aim is to use student feedback to improve teaching and learning, is relatively straightforward. A simple focus group with a few students can provide much useful information. Summative research, which can lead to personnel decision making (e.g. promotion) or unit reward or penalty, is rather less so. Quality assurance surveys demanded by external bodies are summative. Stakeholders will rightly demand that the methods used be both valid and reliable. It is very easy to generate resentment if procedures are seen to be vague and/or unfair.

Although the distinction between formative and summative research is clear in principle, it can become blurred in practice. Thus, the results of a survey demanded by say, a professional body as part of a re-accreditation process could and should be used to provide feedback for improvement purposes. A candidate for promotion might use a survey designed for formative use as evidence for promotion.

In general, therefore, good practice suggests that rigorous standards be applied whatever the theoretical purpose of the research (Huntley-Moore & Panter, 2006).

### *Get buy-in from students, departments, faculties and the institution*

The most basic research into student engagement might involve the students of one department or even of one single module. Gaining support from the students might consist only of a discussion with them about the objectives of the project, confidentiality rules and what will be done with the research results. The success of such discussions will depend on the degree of trust which exists between the student and the researcher and teacher(s).

Gaining the confidence of fellow staff members may be more difficult if there are many of them involved and particularly if there is no tradition of student evaluative surveys in the department. Department wide surveys will need the formal agreement of the Head or of a committee with delegated powers.

It is very tempting to conclude that if trust levels are low and fellow staff uncooperative, then the project should not proceed until these matters are rectified. Such a decision, however, might be counter-productive, in that systematic evidence of low student engagement may be just what is needed for the department to address related issues. Generally, though, where there is no or little departmental experience of student surveys, researcher/teachers should consider commencing with their own students before extending the work further.

When research involving student surveys is extended to faculty or institutional levels, emergent issues relating to validity and reliability, and concerns about institutional



league tables, for example, may become apparent. Such issues and concerns need to be addressed and researchers should make themselves familiar with the relevant literature. A good starting point is Benton and Cashin (2012) who provide a comprehensive review of reliability and validity of student surveys of teaching. Colleagues may also be reassured that students completing NSSE are not asked to rate individual teachers.

Fortunately, student surveys are becoming more common in HE and the use to which they are put, more sophisticated. Nevertheless, we would argue that where such a tradition is non-existent or in its infancy, researchers should think very carefully before undertaking this kind of project on a wide scale.

Where the research is at faculty or institutional level, considerable time needs to be spent on publicity and stakeholders must have the opportunity to discuss objectives, methods and the uses to which the research will be put. This work can probably best be undertaken at the department level.

Resourcing is another important aspect of buy-in, particularly for projects at faculty or institutional level. Careful costing of data analysis, as well as survey administration, is vital in order to secure adequate resources to see the project through to conclusion in a timely fashion. Where the time gap between data collection and analysis is wide, the impetus to translate project findings into educational practice may be lost.

### ***Agree access rules***

An essential ingredient in the planning process is the determination of access rules and the agreement of most stakeholders. Access rules should state clearly who can receive specified data. In the best of worlds, all stakeholders should have access to all data but this is rarely possible in large scale research. In the simplest possible situation, where two teachers conduct research into student engagement in their own class, they both should have access to all the data, as should the students who took part in the research.

At faculty or institutional levels, data access is much less clear cut. Each situation is different, and it is impossible to set out strict guidelines. Generally, however, comparisons between departments in a faculty should only be seen by senior staff (e.g., the Faculty Executive Committee) but comparisons between individual departmental results and international benchmarks should be seen by all members of that department (including relevant administrators). In certain faculties, there may be a teaching and learning committee which should also have access to cross department comparisons. Students should be provided with as much information as is politically acceptable.

Even these simple guidelines can be tricky to implement. In our own case, for example, Heads of Schools were invited to share with their staff the material they had received as *Heads* but were prohibited from revealing the detailed information about other programmes they received as *members* of the Faculty Executive Committee.

If you intend to publish the results of your research into student engagement, be careful not to identify individual departments or faculties unless you have obtained approval and the broad agreement of stakeholders. Failure to take this precaution could mean the end of such research in your institution.

### ***Ethical approval***

Ethical approval procedures vary from institution to institution and readers are urged to enquire about their local rules before embarking on any research into student engagement. Where an individual seeks information from students within his/her own classes for the sole purpose of obtaining feedback, ethical approval is *probably* not necessary. But there is always the danger that something really interesting emerges from

the research which you might want to share, which would be difficult, if not impossible, without formal ethical approval.

### **Methods**

Where only one or two classes are involved in the research, the most appropriate method might be focus groups, provided that the facilitators of the groups are trained and experienced. At the faculty or institutional levels, however, the time, effort and resources required are almost certainly beyond reach and recourse will have to be made to some kind of survey.

We recommend the use of the NSSE where possible because it has been tested widely in several countries and because it supplies useful benchmarks (albeit American). Generally, some minor modifications will need to be made; to take a simple and well known example, ‘faculty’ to Americans means ‘academic staff’ while to most of the rest of us it means an academic unit. Such modifications can easily be made within the NSSE framework. In general, we do not believe that developing institutional or national surveys of general student engagement is money well spent. This is not to say that small institutional surveys are of no use when information is sought about institution specific matters, although, as noted previously, the NSSE has scope for including such questions.

Should the surveys be administered online or in the classroom? Both systems are available for the NSSE and both have their advantages and disadvantages. Where appropriate infrastructure exists and where students are accustomed to online surveys, their administration and data collection are extremely efficient. The down side is that response rates may be lower than desirable. Low response rates are usually considered to be a particular problem if non-respondents have a different experience to respondents which is not captured by the survey. In 2001 the Indiana University Center for Survey Research interviewed 553 students who had chosen not to respond to the NSSE and invited them to complete an abridged version of the survey. Overall ‘non-respondents’ scored slightly higher than respondents on a range of items suggesting, counter-intuitively, that students who do not respond to the NSSE may be slightly more educationally engaged than those who chose to respond (Kuh, 2003).

Paper based systems require additional human resources and those who actually administer the surveys need to be trained to ensure, in as far as possible, uniformity of administration conditions. The institution needs a facility to scan the surveys or this activity can be undertaken by NSSE at extra cost. On the up side, response rates are likely to be high in relation to the number actually attending classes.

In general, readers should consult the NSSE website for services available and for costs which vary according to client needs.

### **Conduct a pilot**

Readers who lack experience in the administration of large scale surveys would be well-advised to conduct a pilot project at departmental level where problems are less complicated and staff and student cooperation are likely to be more easily obtained.

## **Value, Applications and Conclusions**

Data from the NSSE has provided a rich source of information about undergraduate student engagement in the Faculty of Health Sciences, Trinity College Dublin. In this chapter, the authors have described the processes involved in using the NSSE for research and development purposes at programme, school and faculty levels. Further

investigations using the NSSE data are ongoing, for example, a postgraduate student is currently investigating nursing students' approaches to learning.

The project has enabled, and continues to promote, conversations about teaching and learning which contribute to the sustainability of an effective environment for teaching and learning. It has shifted the focus from individual teachers and their classrooms to an understanding that creating and sustaining effective learning environments is also a responsibility of the school, faculty and the institution.

Finally, benchmarking the quality of teaching and learning, in particular the ability to compare ourselves with peer disciplines and institutions internationally, is becoming increasingly important. The NSSE provides a useful tool for development of a sustainable approach to both quality assurance and improvement of the learning environment.

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## Response to

### **Promoting Student Engagement by Engaging Staff: implementing a survey of student engagement**

by Amber D. Lambert, Indiana University, Bloomington, United States.

Evaluation is a topic of growing importance to higher education institutions around the globe. Done well, evaluation programs can lead to improved curricula and increased student development, engagement, and satisfaction. Using surveys to evaluate skill development and the quality of collegiate experiences is commonplace. Student surveys are conducted on a variety of topics, from student engagement to use of campus resources to faculty evaluations. This chapter provides some clear and insightful guidelines for implementing institutional, student surveys for quality assurance and improvement. Perhaps the most important of these procedures is to achieve buy-in from students, departments, faculty members, and the institution. Without buy-in, results, no matter how enlightening, are unlikely to be applied to the actual improvement of teaching and learning. In addition to presenting how to get the research accomplished, this chapter gives a glimpse into the process for understanding what data each stakeholder will find most useful when disseminating the survey results. Following these guidelines for administration and methods of distribution of results could aid in effective evaluation.

While not the focus of the chapter, the authors also introduce some actions that their institution's stakeholders are taking as a result of the conducted surveys' findings. Some of the developments proposed and underway are activities that could already have been adopted from other institutions, if a better pipeline for such information existed. For example, many institutions in the United States have teaching and learning centers that instruct faculty members on how to incorporate active learning into their courses. Having survey tools, which can be used nationally and across international lines, and understanding the steps to implement them successfully, allows benchmarking and the ability to identify the most effective parts of programs when improving education globally. While context might require different languages or terminology, developing such an international tool and implementation plan would expand the sharing of expertise and good practices from just between programs in a single institution to all programs worldwide. As discussed in the chapter, some steps have already been taken to adopt different survey tools internationally, such as the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) in numerous countries. In addition to those national sized projects mentioned in the chapter, NSSE has licensed items to smaller multiple or single institution projects all around the globe, including places like South Korea, Jamaica, and Columbia.

This study reports just one specific example of success at one Irish institution when using the chapter's proposed guidelines for implementing a survey to improve teaching and learning, but their universal application seems reasonable. While using NSSE as the tool for the study, this chapter is applicable to more than just those interested in student engagement. Further research should explore the benefits when these guidelines are applied at other institutions and in other international contexts. In the United States, too often we collect evaluation data to use only to satisfy accreditation procedures, but do not take it further to use the results to improve curriculum or make programmatic changes. This chapter does an excellent job of encouraging everyone to move beyond just collecting data and demonstrates how to take the needed steps to continue the conversation on how to achieve effective teaching and learning.

## Threshold Concepts: Informing the curriculum

Bettie Higgs, University College Cork; James Cronin, University College Cork.

Corresponding author: b.higgs@ucc.ie

### Introduction

Threshold concepts are defined by Meyer and Land (2003) as those concepts that are held to be central to the mastery of a discipline; students must grasp these concepts before they can move forward significantly. When a threshold concept is grasped, that is, when understanding is robust, the learner will see, know and behave quite differently within their discipline. To put this work in context, the idea that there are likely to be threshold concepts in all subject areas grew out of a national research project entitled ‘Enhancing Teaching-Learning Environments in Undergraduate Courses’ (ETL) carried out in the UK between 2001 and 2005. The project sought to develop subject-specific conceptual frameworks that would influence the quality of student learning. There was a focus on developing not only generic ways of thinking and practising, but also disciplinary skills, and a focus on concepts and ways of thinking that students find difficult, particularly when they act as thresholds to further learning.

During the past decade, the idea of threshold concepts has led to significant debate that has captured the interest of an ever-growing international community of teachers in higher education. In our experience, it has challenged and drawn in teachers who were not previously engaging in faculty development opportunities in their institutions. The reason for this may lie in the fact that the identification of threshold concepts, and the implications for curriculum design, place the disciplinary experts centre stage.

This chapter will highlight certain common characteristics of threshold concepts and demonstrate how we can use these to inform curriculum design. It looks at what the student must do, and what we as teachers must do, to succeed. The chapter will examine in-depth one case study, which monitors students’ journeys as they are transformed by the grasping of a threshold concept.

### The Nature of Threshold Concepts

Teachers have long known that there are certain concepts that students find difficult but must grasp in order to progress in a subject. Teachers have had their own ways of recognising and dealing with the challenges that this reality poses, but a language to discuss difficulties was not readily accessible. David Perkins, an International Advisor on the ETL project, began to address this issue with his groundbreaking work on barriers to learning, which contributed to the development of a useful vocabulary to help teachers (Perkins, 1999). He argued that there are some concepts that are difficult for



students to grasp owing to their counter-intuitive or complex nature. He refers to these concepts as 'troublesome knowledge'. Included in this work is the useful concept of 'tacit knowledge' which relates to what is known by an expert but not made explicit to others. This work, and his work on breakthrough thinking (Perkins, 2000), offers us critical clues as we consider the bottlenecks and barriers to learning that can act to prevent students grasping a threshold concept.

Meyer and Land (2005, 2006a, 2006b) make use of a powerful metaphor for threshold concepts, referring to them as 'conceptual gateways' or 'portals' leading to a previously inaccessible way of thinking about something. The authors describe a 'liminal space', an essential space that the learner must enter on their journey towards mastery. It can be an uncomfortable and challenging conceptual space, where knowledge may seem counter-intuitive and troublesome (Perkins, 2006). The discomfort can be due to the learner having to leave old understandings, and sometimes misconceptions, behind. Students enter the liminal space in the hope of progressing along the conceptual pathway, but they must take time to play with the knowledge, experiment with it, apply it, and struggle to resolve conflicts in their understandings. Cousin describes the liminal space as 'an unstable space in which the learner may oscillate between old and emergent understandings' (2006a: 4). She adds that to build robust understanding, the learner must be recursive – journeying back and forward across the conceptual terrain. Eventually, after engaging in considerable work, the learner may reach the conceptual gateway.

Drawing on a number of disciplines, Meyer and Land (2003, 2005, 2006a, 2006b) note that grasping a threshold concept, as defined by disciplinary experts, has certain characteristics. These characteristics include:

- the threshold concept is transformative, and allows further learning to proceed;
- the threshold concept is often irreversible. Once understood the learner is unlikely to forget it;
- within a discipline, the threshold concept is likely to have borders with thresholds in new conceptual areas;
- the threshold concept is integrative. It exposes the hidden interrelatedness of phenomenon;
- the threshold concept is likely to involve troublesome, and possibly counter-intuitive, knowledge.

The first two characteristics describe what results when a learner has significantly grasped a threshold concept and this success can be celebrated when achieved. The third characteristic holds out the promise of new and less predictable opportunities at the boundaries between concepts. However, the fourth characteristic clarifies a possible pathway, or process, by which we can help learners to reach the stage of grappling with the threshold concepts in the discipline. Here, much work has been done in the Irish context by Higgs et al. (2010) and is illustrated in the following case study. The fifth characteristic prompts us, as teachers, to ask what causes this troublesome-ness. In the case study which follows, the work of Diaz et al. (2008) in 'decoding the disciplines' has been invoked to encourage beginning teachers to be explicit about ways of thinking and teaching in their discipline.

### Threshold Concepts and Curriculum Design

Significantly for teachers, the idea that there are threshold concepts within each discipline



has implications for curriculum design, pedagogy and assessment. Cousin believes, in contrast to transmitting vast amounts of knowledge which students must absorb and reproduce, 'a focus on threshold concepts enables teachers to make refined decisions about what is fundamental to a grasp of the subject they are teaching. It is a less is more approach to curriculum design' (2006a: 4). If curriculum, pedagogy and assessment are designed to focus on the connections associated with one conceptual gateway, then a threshold concept can be grasped. Building on Cousin's statement, and focusing on the integrative nature of threshold concepts, Higgs believes teachers should be able to make refined decisions on what is 'fundamental to a grasp of the interconnectedness of disciplines and domains' (2007: 97).

### **The Affective and Cognitive Domains**

Cousin (2006a) challenges the assumption that it is always the threshold concept itself that is troublesome. She believes the difficulty of mastery is not separate to the learner and their social and emotional context. She refers to the affective nature of learning and cites difficulties and anxieties students can experience as they undergo conceptual transformations in the liminal space. As in Vygotsky's (1978) 'Zone of Proximal Development', what the teacher does to assist the learner in this space is crucial. The case study that follows illustrates the importance of both the affective and cognitive aspects of moving towards mastery. Most teachers would agree that not only the student's cognitive ability but also his/her attitude to learning is of key importance. Students must be primed to learn – and if not ready, the opportunity may pass them by; they may remain pre-liminal.

More recently, as the debate has evolved, researchers are suggesting that the liminal space is a good place to be. For example, teachers of art say that they want their students to remain in the liminal space, where creativity is rife. It is where the students are most challenged and highly creative work can result (Land, 2011).

### **Building Students' Capacities to be Integrative**

In higher education, discipline experts design learning opportunities, including assessment, in an attempt to reward what is valued in the discipline, and to lead the student through the transformative conceptual gateways. However, we, as teachers, are temporary guides. For this reason, it is important to help the learner to develop capacities to engage and thrive in liminal space, and to succeed in crossing future thresholds without a high level of teacher assistance.

A key capacity for learners is that of integrative thinking and learning. A significant body of work emerged from the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching project 'Opportunities to Connect', reported in a classic paper, published by Huber and Hutchings (2004) and culminating in reports by Huber (2006), Hutchings (2006), Gale (2006) and Miller (2006). This work inspired the Irish Integrative Learning project which encouraged the work of teachers who were intentionally building students' capacities for integrative learning. Their work was documented in an edited collection (Higgs et al., 2010) and informs the work of the case study which follows.

Resulting from these studies, the attributes and habits of mind which characterise the integrative learner have been recognised, and inform the case study. In summary, integrative learners:

- understand something of their own learning processes;
- fit fragmentary information into a 'learning framework';
- ask probing questions to help achieve their learning goals;
- monitor and reflect on their own efforts;
- ask for help when needed.

These are the very attributes needed to survive and thrive in the conceptual liminal space.

### Threshold Concepts in Practice

The detailed case study that follows illustrates the often subtle and complex nature of encouraging learner transformation. In this study, the curriculum is designed to encourage postgraduate students, who tutor undergraduate students, to both grasp and teach the threshold concept of what it is to think like an historian. The intentional teaching for integrative learning, together with a decoding the disciplines approach, allows the tutors to make explicit what is becoming tacit knowledge to them. This in turn allows them freedom to teach in a different way to the way they themselves were taught. The curriculum is designed to encourage connections with neighbouring disciplines, to help both postgraduate tutors and undergraduate students to see the interconnectedness of phenomenon and build capacity to be integrative thinkers and learners. The inclusion in the curriculum of the online discussion, analysed below, provides the evidence of liminality and emerging understanding.

### Case Study: Making historical thinking explicit in the Teaching History Seminars at University College Cork

For many undergraduate students, historical thinking is counter-intuitive as it requires not only the close reading of historical texts and artefacts, but also evaluating judgment based on the acknowledgement of the past on its own terms. These dispositions are crucial to historical thinking. Postgraduate teaching assistants have been primed for their teaching of undergraduate students by past experiences of being a student themselves. In this case study, drawn from a 'blended' (online and face-to-face) *Teaching History Seminars* series at University College Cork, online teacher discussion is selected to expose liminal moments between graduate teaching assistants' 'student' selves and their emerging 'teacher' selves. Online reflections, posted over an academic year (October 2011 to May 2012), by ten postgraduate teaching assistants (tutors), elucidate their contextual use of emerging professional wisdom within their teaching practice. Such intentional awareness, seldom made explicit, is central to the process of becoming a professional historian.

### 'Decoding' historical thinking

Historical thinking broadly constitutes a set of attitudes and practices most pertinent to the working lives of professional historians (Wineburg, 1991; Foster and Yeager, 1993; Epstein, 1994; Foster, 1999; Paxton, 1999; Wineburg, 1999; Barton, 2001; Seixas, 2004; Seixas and Peck, 2004; Simon, 2005; Bryant and Clark, 2006; Yilmaz, 2007; Lévesque, 2008; Endacott 2010; Fischer, 2011; Rantala, 2011; Chinnery, 2012). This concept is best understood as a 'rational reconstruction' of the thoughts of historical agents. It requires recognition that, because individuals are bound by space and time, we cannot fully

understand the motivations of historical agents by applying contemporary standards and attitudes (Bryant and Clark, 2006: 1042).

The composition of historical thinking, as Fischer has recently argued, should, 'allow for a translation between the language of academic history and the language of history pedagogy' (Fischer, 2011: 15). The *History Learning Project*, at the University of Indiana, Bloomington, has pioneered an approach to scaffolding disciplinary knowledge and critical thinking known as 'decoding the discipline' in history education. The rationale for a disciplinary decoding approach can be succinctly expressed as follows: 'When faculty express concern about the inability of students to do the work in a history class, the problem may not be a lack of the component skills, but rather that most of our students do not understand what historians do' (Díaz et al., 2008: 1218). Here, the 'doing' of history is thought of as a set of teaching and learning performances. Ideally, such performances should holistically incorporate cognitive and affective dispositions. Increasingly, the Indiana research group are concerning themselves with the affective domain in history education which has been so little studied to date (Middendorf et al., in press). 'Decoding' underpins the *Teaching History Seminars* at Cork. In Britain, in a similar approach, the *Hidden Histories* project, a joint initiative between University College London and the University of Trier in Germany, explicitly identifies ethical standards and empathetic dispositions as fundamental qualities required to conduct oral history research. It is worth noting that Nyhan et al. (in press) integrate cognitive and affective dispositions in their history research practices.

### **Method: Exposing historical thinking through online teacher discussion**

Fairclough et al., (2003), writing on the discourse of citizenship, stress that a particular text, interview or participatory event is oriented to by its participants not in isolation, but as a part of an intertextual chain or network of texts and events. Any communication people inevitably draw on, anticipate and respond to, particularly social and institutional practices, involves them in an interdiscursive process of creatively drawing on the potential range of established 'Discourses' (ways of representing the world from particular perspectives), 'Genres' (ways of acting and interacting with other people, in speech or writing) and 'Styles/Voices' (ways of identifying, constructing or enunciating the self). 'Recontextualising' principles associated with different fields or networks of practices, such as governmental, academic or public sphere, fundamentally condition how a type of text or event is transformed into others in flows along chains and through networks. In the light of these categories, the value of using discourse analysis, as a research approach, in the context of this case study, is in highlighting how tutors' narratives may only be fully understood within a wider semantic chain of utterances, situating both tutors and students within the curriculum and the educational institution which, in turn, conditions the nature of their respective discursive formation.

In the broadest sense, any analysis of online behaviour that is grounded in empirical, textual observations can be referred to as computer-mediated discourse analysis. The basic methodology of computer-mediated discourse analysis is described by Herring (2004) as language-focused content analysis, supplemented by a 'toolkit' of discourse analysis methods. As in the more general practice of discourse analysis, the methods employed can be quantitative (involving coding and counting) or qualitative (content analysis). The former can resemble classical content analysis, but a broader spectrum of approaches is also included. Herring lays out a five-step process that resembles that for classical content analysis:

1. Articulate research question/s;
2. Select computer-mediated data sample;
3. 'Operationalize' key concept/s in terms of discourse features;
4. Apply method/s of analysis to data sample;
5. Interpret results

(2004)

These criteria guided the method adopted in the present case study.

### Articulating research question/s

An appropriate computer-mediated discourse analysis research question displays four characteristics:

1. It is empirically answerable from the available data;
2. It is non-trivial;
3. It is motivated by a hypothesis;
4. It is open-ended.

The *Teaching History Seminar* at Cork encouraged history tutors to identify a challenge in their teaching that they could reasonably attempt to change through a teaching intervention of their choice. In order to expose historical subjectivity, tutors were initially encouraged to narrate their earliest memories of engaging with history. Throughout the study graduates were asked to reflect on the following decoding questions:

- What do historians do?
- As tutors, can you see connections between your experiences of history and what you are researching now?
- As tutors, can you describe relationships between your research and your teaching of history?
- Has your idea of history changed through your teaching of it?
- What is the role of Public History in engaging interest?
- How can we make students more receptive to thinking historically?

These moderated questions were phrased to promote a constructivist approach to learning and teaching whereby the subject (teacher and student) were acknowledged as comprising a central role in the co-making, adapting and refining of the historical contexts they were encountering through documentary sources. This scaffolding approach is intrinsic to exploring the dimensions of historical thinking which probe for context (motives of historical agents and their access to knowledge). It acknowledges that the passage of time limits the ability to understand historical agents' actions because our access to information about the influences on those actions diminishes over time (Bryant and Clark, 2006: 1044).

### Selecting the data sample

The data sample in this study is drawn from the blog which was part of the project. In the *Teaching History Seminar* blog, 10 postgraduate tutors participated in the blog's online discussion. The research data includes 70 online posts, comprising 11,119 words of text.

The blog was visited 337 times from October 2011 to May 2012. Although the course was blended, is it only the online discussion threads which are subject to analysis here. This seminar discussed four themes:

1. Decoding the discipline of history;
2. Disciplinary identity and selfhood;
3. Professional values of the historian;
4. History in education.

Face-to-face seminars were deliberately positioned at six-week intervals, during the academic teaching periods, in order to encourage tutors to tease out and critique their individual and collective practices through peer online discussions. The purpose of this process was to hold tutors in a liminal space while they developed their emerging disciplinary teaching philosophies (Cousin, 2006a and 2006b; Land, Meyer and Baillie, 2010).

### **‘Operationalize’ key concept/s: time required to process activities**

Through blog postings, a discourse on historical dispositions, grounded by praxis, was given space, over time, to emerge from interactions between the postgraduate tutors. Here, intertextual responses between online posts helped to condition meaning-making. The configuration of concepts, mediated by blog posts, aligned with the observation that the greater the expanse of time and of processing activities between the use of a current text and the use of previously encountered texts, the greater the mediation (Abushihab, 2010: 144).

### **Apply method/s of analysis to data sample**

Disciplinary decoding, adapted from research at the University of Indiana, became the guiding principle of the *Teaching History Seminars* in the School of History at University College Cork. The *History Learning Project* at Indiana, in focusing on a history department’s ‘decoding’ its teachers and students’ understanding of the discipline, has argued that it is only by making explicit the tacit processes of historical performances that disciplinary understanding can be made fully intentional (Díaz et al., 2008).

To develop historical thinking, students require a battery of critical skills such as the ability to weigh past meanings, perspectives, traces, accounts, and interpretations. Such analysis permits creative, inferential thinking to ‘bridge the gaps’ in our fractured knowledge of the past (Bryant and Clark, 2006: 1042). The pioneers of teaching historical empathy, Ashby and Lee stress the importance of peer group interaction (1987: 85-86). Mentoring historical thinking requires sufficient competence in the context before identification exercises. Teachers often rush from one subject to another without giving students the chance to deepen their knowledge, with the help of the peer group, or without giving them a chance to see the past from the perspective of the historical agents. The reason for this may be a crammed curriculum, but also the thinness of the tradition of teaching empathy in formal educational systems (Rantala, 2011: 69).

Historical thinking draws on all available evidence, including competing accounts, to consider alternative, and often contradictory, perspectives. To the novice, primary sources document the ‘facts’ of history and are therefore not subject to analysis or interpretation (Díaz et al., 2008: 1213). Unwillingness to take risks, arising from a lack of confidence, is a significant bottleneck for the novice historian:

Lacking both the experience and the confidence of their instructors, many history students are understandably nervous about claiming to understand the meaning in the words or actions of someone in a very different era.

(Díaz et al., 2008: 1215)

Most first-year students initially hold to a dualistic world-view before transitioning to multiplistic and relativistic thinking (Perry, 1968,1999; Kurfiss, 1988; King and Kitchener, 1994; Baxter Magolda, 2002; Clinchy, 2002; Erickson, Peters and Strommer, 2006). Judicious risk-taking and imagination, essential for holistic historical thinking, are habits of mind intersecting domains of cognition and affect (Díaz et al., 2008: 1215). Lack of experience, in a discipline, is a bottleneck:

Students also must accept that sources are created by human beings and are as complicated as life itself. Faculty expect students to re-create imaginatively the cultural context in which such artefacts were produced and to re-create the meanings and perspectives of the people who produced them.

(Díaz et al., 2008: 1214)

At University College Cork, first-year tutors, teaching medieval history, intentionally encouraged students to make connections between history and disciplines such as archaeology and English literature where artefacts and period literature are studied in their disciplinary contexts. The following representative analysis illustrates how 'doing' of history is performative:

The first textual extract is taken from an early intervention.

### **Text 1**

Posted by postgraduate tutor A at 4:21 pm on Nov 18, 2011

Hi James, On thinking historically in tutorial groups - I tried this week by getting the students to consider three different arguments/interpretations of 'Who was buried at Sutton Hoo?' and I think it worked quite well for some of the students. I showed them slides an Anglo-Saxon map and three different primary sources from the period which I knew had been used in historical debates on this topic. Some of the students came up with interpretations using these - i.e. they used a passage from Bede [first English historian] about King Raedwald [of East Anglia], the location of Sutton-Hoo on the map, evidence of Pagan ship burials from *Beowulf* [Anglo-Saxon epic poem] Pagan artefacts and Christian elements at Sutton Hoo [Anglo-Saxon ship-burial] to suggest it might have been the burial of this particular king. I think (hope!) they could see how different evidence and different disciplines can be used to form a historical argument, and it hopefully helped them to think historically!

Response from forum moderator at 5:00 pm on Nov 18, 2011

J.C. [a postgraduate tutor] raises two valuable considerations in thinking about the learning and teaching of History: 1. The role of teacher as role model -- offering not just information, but an implicit value-system -- what historical values do we model? 2. The value of being a healthy sceptic in the selection

and employment of sources in the construction of an historical argument -- is healthy scepticism valued enough? How is it manifest? -- perhaps in asking, how do we know about a particular past? -- how reliable is the evidence selected? The medieval world is a good example where all sorts of sources need to be used because of the lack of solid evidence in documents alone -- the further back in time we go then the more difficult it gets to reconstruct its particular 'thought world' -- perhaps it is here we need to foster the healthy historical sceptic!

To make 'decoding' visible, the textual extract is coded by discourse type modified through social practice.

Description (Text Analysis)	Interpretation (Discursive Type)	Explanation (Social Practice)
<p><b>Factual:</b> the postgraduate tutor describes an initial introduction of a learning activity introducing novice historians to different types of historical sources. The tutor asks questions to promote a judicious discernment regarding the value of using different sources.</p> <p><b>Confidence:</b> the tutor systematically discusses the chosen teaching intervention in an assured manner.</p> <p><b>Conversational:</b> the tutor's opening salutation to the moderator displays an assured informality respectful to the moderator and peer group.</p>	<p><b>Legitimacy:</b> the postgraduate tutor authoritatively describes the processes involved in setting up the learning intervention and cursively suggests how historical thinking can be worked out through the processes of discussion and dialogue within a group setting.</p> <p><b>Insider language:</b> the tutor's post discusses a medieval history curriculum within a peer-reviewed forum where there is an implicit assumption that contributors will not require explanation. There is a tendency towards abbreviation, subsequently edited through parenthesis.</p>	<p><b>Learning as performance:</b> the tutor structures an initial learning intervention on historical thinking (enfolding <b>historical thinking</b>) around the selection of appropriate source material and suggests how historical knowledge can be mediated through discussion.</p>

**Table 1: Analysis 1**

In this analysis, the interpretation component connects interpretation (discursive types) and description (text genres). The explanation component links interaction to the social action (practices) or the modalities drawn upon during interaction. It is through the explanation, that social practices are unravelled (Ng'ambi, 2008: 35).

The tutor subsequently noticed that many first-year undergraduates, despite being familiar with source material from other disciplines, had difficulty recontextualising these documents as historical sources without the tutor's explicit intervention. This response is paradigmatic of general responses made by the tutor cohort. It aligns with findings from the *History Learning Project*, at the University of Indiana:

students who have been led to see history as the chronicle of elites and of world-altering events have difficulty in conceiving of literary sources, pictures, maps, diaries, or songs as legitimate sources for studying history.

(Díaz et al., 2008: 1214)



The *History Learning Project* team at Indiana have discovered that while professional historical writing is predominantly narrative in form, novices of disciplinary history find difficulty comprehending how historical knowledge is produced and crafted (Shopkow et al., in press). A similar conclusion can be drawn from the experience of the *Teaching History Seminar* series at Cork.

To translate historical thinking, in a classroom context, it is recommended that a teacher pose a puzzling or paradoxical situation to which students may initially respond by sharing opinions and ideas (Foster, 2001: 175). The following representative textual analysis illustrates a tutor's 'decoding' of a disciplinary performance by judiciously guiding students through the labyrinth of intention and argument emerging from a close reading and questioning of a primary historical source in translation.

The second textual extract is taken from a later intervention.

## **Text 2**

Posted by postgraduate tutor B at 4:45 pm on Jan 19, 2012

One approach that I found useful to move the students away from the political narrative was greater analysis of a primary source. In one instance we took a document dealing with Pope Urban II's announcement of the First Crusade in November 1095 [a military expedition by Roman Catholic Europe to regain the Holy Lands taken in the Muslim conquests of the Levant during the seventh century]. Ironically, this unlike other literary sources such as *Beowulf* [Anglo-Saxon epic poem] was very political in nature. Yet, I attempted to bring in elements of cultural and social history and combine them with political history by first asking them why there was a crusade; Jerusalem had fallen to the Muslims. Secondly, why call a crusade in November? What was special about this time of the year in relation to the religious calendar? They answered that it was Advent [in Christianity, a liturgically observed season before Christmas Day celebrated on December 25] and I explained that the Pope was linking the idea of religious war with a time of fasting and prayer. This quickly got a lively discussion going and I think the students could see that there was indeed a cultural side to history, i.e. the belief system that existed in medieval time. Finally, I asked them why call a crusade in November, but not launch it? They quickly answered that it was too cold and so we discussed the social implications of going to war in medieval times, which helped stimulate further debate in the class. I followed this template of linking the various frameworks for studying sources for the next few classes and it seemed to work well.

Similar to the first example, the textual extract is coded by discourse type modified through social practice.



Description (Text Analysis)	Interpretation (Discursive Type)	Explanation (Social Practice)
<p><b>Factual:</b> the postgraduate tutor describes a sustained learning intervention introducing novice historians to critiquing primary historical documents. The tutor asks questions to promote judicious discernment of a document's content and subject matter.</p> <p><b>Confidence:</b> the tutor systematically discusses the chosen teaching intervention in an assured manner.</p>	<p><b>Legitimacy:</b> the postgraduate tutor authoritatively describes the processes involved in setting up the learning intervention and discusses how historical thinking can be worked out through the processes of discussion and dialogue within a group setting.</p> <p><b>Insider language:</b> the tutor's post discusses a medieval history curriculum within a peer-reviewed forum where there is an implicit assumption that contributors will not require explanation. There is a tendency towards abbreviation, subsequently edited through parenthesis.</p>	<p><b>Performing historical empathy:</b> the tutor's guided intervention demonstrates principles intrinsic to historical performance, namely, empathetically mentoring students to interpret the words of historical agents as conditioned by the limits of their particular historical thought-world.</p>

**Table 2: Analysis 2**

### Interpretation of case study results

To become authentic as disciplinary stewards, academic teachers need to experience their chosen discipline holistically not just as a cognitive field, but also one requiring a set of attitudes and beliefs about the discipline and about themselves as emerging academic teachers.

After a year of sustained reflection, postgraduate tutors who participated in the *Teaching History Seminar*, School of History, University College Cork, began to articulate authentic and increasingly nuanced understandings of historical empathy once awareness of their own developing historical identities had been articulated. Online peer review allowed discourse to emerge from the text rather than meaning being externally imposed. Most significantly, tutors' discourse revealed how historical understanding was in the 'doing' of history. Tutors understood debate and discussion as central to the mediation of historical knowledge. History's value system was perceived as involving engagement with research practices and dispositions. Computer-mediated discourse analysis exposed emerging teacher discourse.

At the conclusion of the *Teaching History Seminars* series tutors broadly advocated a research-focused teaching and learning curriculum intervention because of its potential to model authentic performances of historical thinking essential to professional historical studies. We concur with Rantala (2011), historian and teacher educator, University of Helsinki, Finland, who has observed that the planners of future curricula should have the courage to prune back the amount of content to be taught so that teachers might have more time to concentrate on 'the jewel in the curriculum/the threshold concept/skill' - the teaching of historical thinking.

## Discussion and Conclusions

Dissemination, discussion and debate at four international conferences, and in many publications, have critiqued and expanded the original idea of threshold concepts, so that it has increased in sophistication, depth and breadth. Many forums, symposia and conferences have now stimulated academic staff to articulate the key, or threshold, concepts within their own disciplines. Although the work was originally carried out in the disciplines of economics, science and maths, the recognition of potential threshold concepts has spread across the disciplines, with engineering being particularly well represented (Foley, 2008; Quinlan et al., 2012). There are now significant research projects being carried out in Europe, North America and Australia (Flanagan, 2012).

Why have discipline experts, who have been sceptical about staff development initiatives, taken to the idea of threshold concepts? We suggest it is because it puts the ball back in their court where they are the experts. They know what students find difficult to understand. They design the curriculum that intentionally builds student attributes so that they may enter, survive and thrive in the liminal space.

One significant implication of this study is the need for a crucial paradigm shift in how educational institutions construct the notion of ‘the student’. Students inducted into disciplinary study should be regarded as disciplinary novices or apprentices, guided by disciplinary masters, and therefore full participants, from the outset, in the ways of *being* in their respective discipline or profession for the foundation of their studies. Too frequently students are kept outside disciplinary practices until they have earned the right to participate through a staged entry of testing and validation. Learning a new discipline or profession creates ontological shifts in student selfhood. Ideally, this involves entering into new processes of *being* (thinking and acting). To grasp the threshold concepts in a discipline, teachers must model not only the cognitive processes of disciplinary and professional knowledge, but they must also model processes of thinking and behaving in ways which make learning truly holistic. Learning a discipline or profession not only requires acquisition of specialist knowledge and a language in which to express this, but it also conditions approaches to evaluating and questioning how knowledge itself is constituted.

Sceptics have rightly asked ‘is the term Threshold Concepts a fad that will be forgotten in five years time?’ Our answer is this: the idea of threshold concepts is just that, an idea. It does not matter if the term is forgotten. The idea, and the ensuing debate, has deepened our understanding of the learners’ journeys and it has drawn in teachers who had not engaged in teaching and learning theory before. It has allowed some incremental changes in curriculum design that are real and lasting, and it has generated a critical mass of literature that will remain to inform those who wish to delve deeper.

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## Response to

### Threshold Concepts: Informing the curriculum

by David Pace, Professor Emeritus of European History, Indiana University.

Like many of today's critics of higher education, Bettie Higgs and James Cronin argue that college instruction needs to move its focus from the transmission of content to the introduction of students to the fundamental ways of functioning within a discipline. Drawing upon an impressive body of literature on the scholarship of teaching and learning, particularly Threshold Concepts and, to a lesser extent, Decoding the Disciplines, they convincingly articulate a vision of higher education. They advocate a disciplinary apprenticeship that involves not only cognitive learning, but also the incorporation of a new set of attitudes and beliefs. But, more importantly, they provide a path to the realisation of this ideal of academic initiation. The frameworks for postgraduate training that they describe provide a means for installing very different attitudes towards instruction within a new generation of academics. The *Teaching History Seminars* they describe provide a model for re-orientating new instructors' thinking from the conveyance of information to the inspiration of new attitudes towards both teaching and learning. The lessons described in this article are of particular interest to historians, but they can also provide a model for rethinking pedagogical preparation in any discipline.



## **Supporting First Year Students in their Academic and Social Adjustment to Higher Education. A Case study of the First Seven Weeks Programme at the University of Limerick.**

Yvonne Diggins, University of Limerick; Angelica Risquez, University of Limerick; Maura Murphy, University of Limerick.

Corresponding author: [yvonne.diggins@ul.ie](mailto:yvonne.diggins@ul.ie)

### **Introduction**

Transition to university takes place during the first few months of a student entering higher education and is characterised by the new academic, social and personal challenges that the student experiences. At university, students are required to develop competences related to accessing information, participation in university life, facing academic challenges, study, and work abroad (IUQB, 2006; Diggins, Risquez and Murphy et al., 2011; DES, 2011). In Ireland, the *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* (DES, 2011) advises higher education institutions to address identified shortfalls in students' skills during their first year in higher education, by providing induction and preparation courses such as self-directed learning, time management and information literacy. This chapter showcases an example of the practical application of this policy through the *First Seven Weeks* programme at the University of Limerick (UL), a proactive transition programme underpinned by research, which integrates existing on-campus student support services. Using Facebook, a free social networking website, as the main method of communication, the initiative aims to help students find their way around, clarify expectations, and facilitate their academic adjustment and socialisation. The findings show that students of the programme agree that Facebook is useful for university student support initiatives and that the programme is an extremely helpful resource. The programme is sustainable in terms of funding, as the cost-benefit is maximised through engaging with existing student services, staff, faculty and students; it is further sustainable by using Facebook, a free social networking website, as the main communication method with students. However, it is clear that guidance initiatives are intensive from the point of view of coordination and require adequate funding as well as the strategic support of university authorities. The following sections explore the context for the programme and the use of technology within the programme. We then discuss the results collected from two online surveys and conclude by outlining proposed future developments.



## Context

Transition to higher education involves many changes. Whatever their previous contexts, new arrivals to university frequently find the academic culture challenging. Knox (2005) acknowledges that transition to university is a life-changing event for a student, which extends beyond academic adjustments. The shift from the generally controlled environment of school and family, to an environment in which students are expected to accept personal responsibility for both academic and social aspects of their lives, can cause them to experience both stress and anxiety. Attending university involves substantial adjustment in routine and intellectual engagement for most students. For some, it presents challenges that have been described by McInnis et al. (1995) as an 'intimidating leap into the unknown'. Research shows that the first year experience involves the development of many new and complex routines that are not always easy to acquire, and may be particularly challenging for certain groups of students, such as mature students and other non-traditional learners (Risquez et al., 2007-2008). The issues facing students at the start of the academic year are not necessarily the same issues that they encounter throughout the year, though adjustment is often a matter of dealing with the unfamiliar. Lowe and Cook (2003) show that in the United Kingdom, although most students coped adequately with the transition into higher education, there was 'a considerable minority' who had problems, many of whom found university to be a negative experience and who failed to come to terms with the academic and social demands of university life. The results of Lowe and Cook's (2003) study indicate that a substantial proportion of students were poorly prepared for the emotional aspects of separating from their previous situation and adjusting to their new environment at university.

Astin's 'Theory of Involvement' proposes that successful integration of students into the campus environment influences academic success (Astin, 1984; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991). Social adjustment, sense of identity and a feeling of belonging are all important parts of a student's effective transition into university life. However, this sense of belongingness can often be a troublesome goal when we take into consideration how 'tribal' and 'territorial' (Becher, 1989; Becher and Trowler, 2001) universities and academic disciplines themselves can be. Becoming 'socialised into a discipline' (Becher, 1989; Becher and Trowler, 2001) is a challenging process often deemed to be a problem of misinterpretation on the part of the 'novice' learner, but perhaps more correctly conceived of as a 'barrier to entry' created by the mysterious rules and routines of disciplinary practice. Becher and Trowler (2001) conclude that those working in different disciplines could be understood as belonging to different 'tribes', having distinctively different cultures and ways of knowing. This process is further complicated with the widening access to higher education and the attendant danger of isolation (Morley et al., 2004). In Ireland, the *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* highlights the need for a transitional programme as it states that 'a positive first-year student experience is crucial to achieving the goals of higher education; failure to address the challenges encountered by students in their first year contributes to high drop-out and failure rates, with personal and system-wide implications' (2011: 56).

## The First Seven Weeks Programme and the Use of Technology

The national strategy for Higher Education advises that 'higher education institutions should prepare first-year students better for their learning experience, so that they can

engage with it more successfully' (2011: 18). The quality of the student experience is now the cornerstone in the institutional strategy at UL, and in response, practical efforts have been made to move towards a greater degree of centralisation in the guidance strategy at the time of entry to the university. An example of this is evident with the introduction, in September 2010, of the transition initiative *First Seven Weeks* led by the Office of the Associate Vice-President Academic and managed through the Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL). The programme is designed to enhance transition proactively, promoting an open, flexible and systemic approach that coordinates the efforts and resources of multiple student support stakeholders at UL. Its main aim is to support and prepare students in transitioning to higher education and to aid them in adjusting to new routines and intellectual engagement. The initiative was successfully piloted at the beginning of the academic year 2010/11 and was mainstreamed as a learner support in the academic year 2011/2012. The programme is organised around seven weekly themes, which integrate existing student support services that are central to student transition to university and are as follows:

1. Welcome, settling in and finding your way around
2. Study skills and time management
3. Health and wellbeing
4. Meet your advisor
5. Learner support centres
6. Career and civic engagement awareness
7. Critical thinking and longer term planning

A multi-disciplinary, inter-departmental working group is assigned on an ongoing basis to each weekly theme, which involves intensive coordination. These working groups develop and source online materials, for example videos, photos, downloadable documents, maps and panoramas of the UL campus, to be communicated to students along with innovative face-to-face on-campus events. A Facebook page is used as the main method of online communication with the first year students for each weekly theme. Existing student support services, staff, academic staff and the *First Seven Weeks* student guides carry out online and on-campus communication with the first year students. The *First Seven Weeks* newly developed online 'community' of past and current students of the programme also communicate with new students. In 2011, the *First Seven Weeks* 'Hub' was established as a physical presence of the programme on campus in order to support the activity on the Facebook page, enabling a face-to-face connection with first year students through the *First Seven Weeks* guides.

### ***Why use Facebook?***

Anderson (2007: 5) advises that in recent years the Web has both returned to its roots as a read/write tool along with entering a new, more social and participatory phase, which facilitates 'a more socially connected Web where everyone is able to add to and edit the information space'. These trends led to a 'second phase' of the Web - a new, 'improved' Web version 2.0 (O'Reilly, 2005). Anderson (2007) stresses that there has been a lot of discussion within higher education surrounding the use of Web 2.0 and its implications for education. Web 2.0 provides services and applications that enable individual production and user generated content, harness the power of the crowd, and gather data on an epic scale. A number of Web-based services and applications that demonstrate the foundations of the Web 2.0 concept are being used to a certain extent in higher education, with some

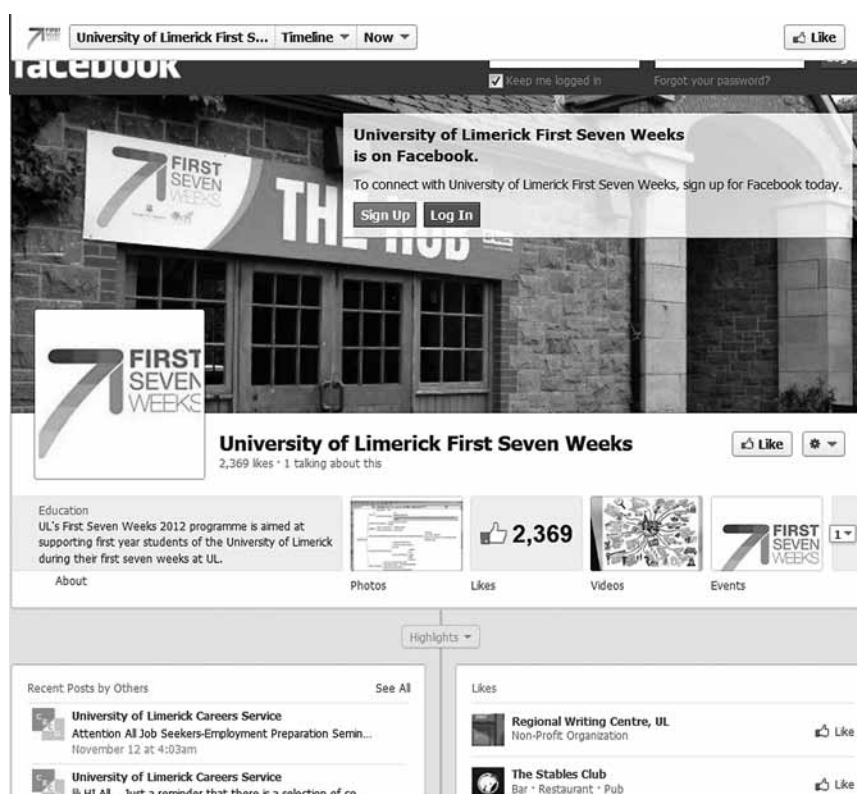
of the most common being: social software; social media; collaboration; sharing content; tagging; social networking (Myspace, Facebook, Ning); blogs; wikis; social bookmarks; podcasting; mash-up; media sharing (through YouTube); RSS; and tag cloud. Educators are realising the potential of social networking tools and are experimenting with them for a variety of reasons including, communication with students, enhancement of the first year student experience, and innovative assessment techniques (O’Keeffe and Igbrude, 2010). ECAR (2009) identifies a major increase in the usage of social networking tools among undergraduate students, where these tools now shape how college students connect to the world and with each other. Eurostat (in Redecker et al., 2010) report that 73% of all Europeans between 16 and 24 years use the Internet to communicate through social media. Furthermore, YouthNet (Hulme, 2009) reports that 82% of those questioned stated that they use the Internet to seek advice or information and 75% of those in this age group state that they cannot live without the Internet.

### ***Taking Action***

Informed by this research, the *First Seven Weeks* Task Force, which included on-campus technology experts, decided to develop an innovative programme, where current technology trends would need to be embraced. Thus, research into various social and online communication methods was carried out. It was important for the Task Force that the chosen method of online communication was safe, sustainable, reliable, low cost, user friendly, open, easily accessible, and had the ability to gather usage data. While the programme would be aimed at first year students (undergraduate and postgraduate) entering UL, it was hoped that the ‘open’ element of the programme, i.e. information and resources, would also attract future potential students interested in studying at UL. The benefits and challenges of three main online communication methods; namely Sulis UL’s Learning Management System (LMS); Ning; and Facebook - two free social networking websites, were discussed by the Task Force. Firstly, UL’s LMS was presented as an option as it was safe (password protected and monitored by an internal member of staff); reliable (an externally hosted solution but with Information Technology Division support); sustainable (use of existing staff members as well as user generated content); low cost (benefiting from the existing LMS infrastructure); and user-friendly (user support documentation was available); and could generate usage data. However, the access restrictions were deemed unsuitable for the project, as the LMS is available only to registered students, so potential future students would not be able to explore or interact with the space.

Secondly, Ning was considered as it was also safe, sustainable, reliable, had no cost associated, was user-friendly, and could gather usage data. Along with these benefits, the Ning site for the programme would also be open and easily accessible. Although students would have to register to ‘join’ the area, registration would not be dependent upon student registration at the university, so effectively the area would also be open to usage by future students. However, after initial piloting it became obvious that a critical mass would not be achieved through the use of Ning as it required students to create accounts in a brand new platform with little adoption in Ireland. The situation was quite the opposite in the case of Facebook in Ireland, which has an audience that is currently reaching 2,110,600 users, roughly half the population of the country. It is estimated that 24% of the audience in Ireland are 18-24 years and 30% 25-34 years, common age-groups for first year higher education students - undergraduate and postgraduate (Facebook, 2011). A Facebook page for the project was agreed by the Task Force as being sustainable, reliable, with no cost associated, user-friendly, open, easily accessible, and could gather

large amounts of usage data. In addition, Facebook provides a customised uniform resource locator (URL) for the Facebook page: [www.facebook.com/first7weeks](http://www.facebook.com/first7weeks), which supports the marketing and promotion of the programme. At this time, Facebook was a popular social networking medium and research studies, such as Roblyer et al. (2010) found evidence of students' openness to the possibility of using Facebook to support learning and other structured activity. The potential use of Facebook however, also raised concerns amongst the Task Force, especially concerning the safety of students on this social networking site. The danger of going 'open' through Facebook enabled students to interact with the programme through the page: all users had to do was to 'Like' the page using their Facebook profiles. This 'openness' resulted in the possibility of the programme being vulnerable to the posting of inappropriate content and information on the page. It was agreed by the Task Force that if Facebook was to be used that the page would have to be monitored at a high level by assigned staff. In addition, it was very important for the Task Force that students were informed about how to stay safe on Facebook, through the use of awareness documentation and videos. Furthermore, in the case of an 'emergency activity' on the page, it was agreed that the page would be taken offline. With such a high level of monitoring by staff for inappropriate behaviour, along with the *First Seven Weeks* online 'community' itself, this has not happened.



**Figure 1:** *First Seven Weeks* Facebook page

## Methods

At the end of the academic years 2011 and 2012, user statistics from the *First Seven Weeks* Facebook page were collected along with data from two (academic year 2010/2011 and 2011/2012) online surveys. The surveys were jointly designed by the multi-disciplinary working team and were based on open-ended questions addressing a range of indicators of successful transition. Both surveys focus on evaluating the seven themes of the programme and the results of both are discussed accordingly. Through the online survey

895 individual responses were gathered in the pilot year 2010/11. These responses comprised of 75% first year undergraduate students and 25% postgraduate students. 892 individual responses were gathered in the second year (2011/2012), and this second version of the survey included specific questions on the use of Facebook. In the second survey, responses recorded an increase in the first year undergraduate student contribution to 92% and a decrease in the postgraduates to 8%. In both surveys, gender distribution and origin of respondents is representative of registration records: 45% male and 55% female; 78% Irish; 10% other EU country and 12% other non-EU country. A response to each survey question was not compulsory, so total responses to questions vary and are noted where relevant. Finally, while the results portray a useful picture of the transition process of respondents to the survey, no absolute cause-effect conclusions can be drawn in relation to the direct impact of the programme.

## Discussion of Results

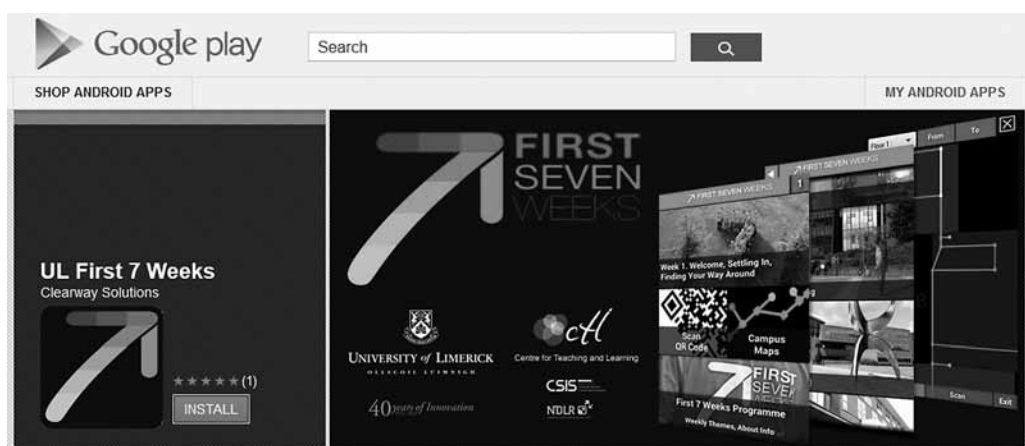
### *Week 1: Welcome, settling in and finding your way around*

Table 1 presents students' responses using a scale from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. Finding your way around a new campus can be a daunting task for new students. Approximately 92% in the 2011 survey and 96% in the 2012 survey stated that at the end of the first seven weeks at university, they could find their way around campus and could locate relevant classrooms. Approximately 57% in the 2011 survey and 63% in the 2012 survey stated that they felt on top of their coursework and able to do the course that they had chosen.

	Survey 1: Evaluation 2010/11					Survey 2: Evaluation 2011/12				
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
<b>I know my way around the campus and can find the classrooms that I need to be in</b>	2.2	1.6	4.3	39.1	<b>52.7</b>	0.4	1.5	2.5	42.9	<b>52.7</b>
<b>I feel on top of my work and able to do the course I have chosen</b>	3.3	10	30.1	<b>46</b>	10.5	2.4	8.7	25.7	<b>51.7</b>	11.6

**Table 1: Finding your way around and course work (as percentage of total)**

To support students in this Week 1 orientation phase, the *First Seven Weeks* student guides are located in each of the main buildings where first year students have lecturers. Through the Facebook page, students are provided with videos and maps of the campus buildings and lecture halls. Students could also drop in to the FSW Hub and ask the student guides about location of buildings, registration queries, or anything related to college life. In 2012, an Android Application was launched, which included indoor maps of the campus; using this application students receive their current location as well as directions to and from on-campus buildings on their mobile phone. Quick Response (QR) codes are displayed on posters throughout the campus, so that students can scan the code and access the application on their mobile phones (Figure 3).



**Figure 2: First Seven Weeks App**

Students can feel very overwhelmed when entering and trying to settle into a new study environment. To welcome students and to support them in ‘settling in’ to the university, the programme launched a ‘Breakfast with your Dean’, which invites students to attend breakfast and meet their Dean, along with other students in their discipline. The initiative encourages student contact with faculty, an important factor for student transition to higher education. In the first survey (Table 2) approximately 50% ‘agree’ and 15% ‘strongly agree’; and in the second survey, 55% ‘agree’ and 18% ‘strongly agree’ that they have had useful contact with faculty. However, there is still a significant number 21% in 2011 and 17% in 2012 that are unsure if they have had useful contact with faculty.

	Survey 1: Evaluation 2010/11					Survey 2: Evaluation 2011/12				
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
<b>I have had useful contact with my teachers/tutors</b>	3.2	11	21.3	<b>49.6</b>	14.9	1.4	8.7	17	<b>54.7</b>	18.1

**Table 2: Student-teacher contact (as percentage of total)**

When asked about the method of contact with faculty (Table 3), in both surveys 85% stated that they had communicated with their teachers/tutors mostly during classroom time. 40% in 2010/2011 and 39% in 2011/2012 stated that they had contacted their teacher/tutor through conversations and work outside class. In the first survey 17% and in the second survey 19% stated that they contacted faculty within small groups outside of class.

Response	2010/11	2011/12
<b>Classroom time</b>	85.0%	84.9%
<b>One to one conversations outside class</b>	40.4%	38.5%
<b>Small group contact outside class</b>	16.7%	18.5%
<b>Email</b>	78.3%	79.0%
<b>Virtual learning environment</b>	38.3%	32.2%
<b>Facebook</b>	1.5%	1.1%

**Table 3: Method of communication**



Online communication appears to be an important medium for faculty-student contact, as 78% in the first survey and 79% in the second survey stated that they had email contact with faculty. In 2010/2011, 38% and 32% in 2011/2012 stated that they had communicated with teachers/tutors through the university virtual learning environment. However, the survey showed that communication with teachers/tutors through social networks such as Facebook was very rare (1.5% in 2010/2011 and 1% in 2011/2012). The results delineated in the chapter by Risquez et al. in this book also support this finding. The virtual learning environment appears to provide a safer forum for students unwilling or unable to communicate with lecturers in class, or in person.

### ***Week 2: Study skills and time management and Week 7: Critical thinking and longer term planning***

Students need guidance and support to acquire new skills to enable them to adapt to study within higher education. The programme organises workshops and events focusing on study skills, critical thinking, planning, time management and Sulis, UL's Learning Management System. These workshops and events are announced through the Facebook page. Along with this, students can download UL's Student Timetable Android Application through the Facebook page. In addition, in the first survey, 35% and in the second survey to 37% of respondents 'agree' that they were aware of new and useful study strategies. However, in both 2011 and 2012 31% stated that they were unsure if they had become aware of new useful study strategies and in 2011, 19% and in 2012, 17% 'disagree' with this statement (Table 4).

	Survey 1: Evaluation 2010/11					Survey 2: Evaluation 2011/12				
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
<b>I have become aware of new and useful study strategies</b>	6.8	19.2	31.4	<b>34.7</b>	7.8	5	17	31	<b>37.4</b>	9.5
<b>I feel confident about managing my time</b>	3	11.1	29.7	<b>45.6</b>	10.5	2	8.9	26.6	<b>50.3</b>	12.1

**Table 4. Study strategies and time management (as percentage of total)**

Furthermore, while in survey one, approximately 46%, and in survey two 50%, of respondents 'agree' that they are confident about managing their time, a significant number of respondents, 30% in 2011 and 27% in 2012, were unsure that they felt confident about their time management (Table 4).

### ***Week 3: Health and wellbeing and Week 5: Learner Support Centres***

There are a number of student and learner support services and centres on campus, which engage with students in week 3 and week 5. These include the following: the counselling service; the contemplative centre and open relaxation rooms; the medical centre; the pastoral centre; the Regional Writing Centre; the Mathematics Learning Centre; the ICT Learning Centre; the Language Centre; and the Science Learning Centre. The aims of Week 3 and Week 5 are to generate an awareness of these services and supports amongst students. For example, the learner support centres have a drop-in facility where students can ask questions and have a look at the supports available to them. In both surveys, 80% of respondents stated that they were aware of the services and centres that were available for them to access on campus.



Figure 4: Health and Wellbeing week poster

#### Week 4: Meet your advisor

On entry to UL, each new student is appointed a faculty advisor. The aim of the *Student Advisor System* is to develop a network of concerned lecturers with adequate resources to deal with the difficulties which students face. Through this system, student-faculty interaction is encouraged and promoted, with a view to contributing significantly to the broader development of students on campus. While reported faculty-student contact is high (Tables 2 & 3), usage of the 'advisor system' by respondents is less encouraging, as in both surveys only 34% of students made contact with their designated faculty advisor at the outset of the programme. Where they had made use of this service, both surveys showed that more than half (58%) found it to be beneficial, but it is interesting to note that a sizeable number (42%) did not appear to find it so.

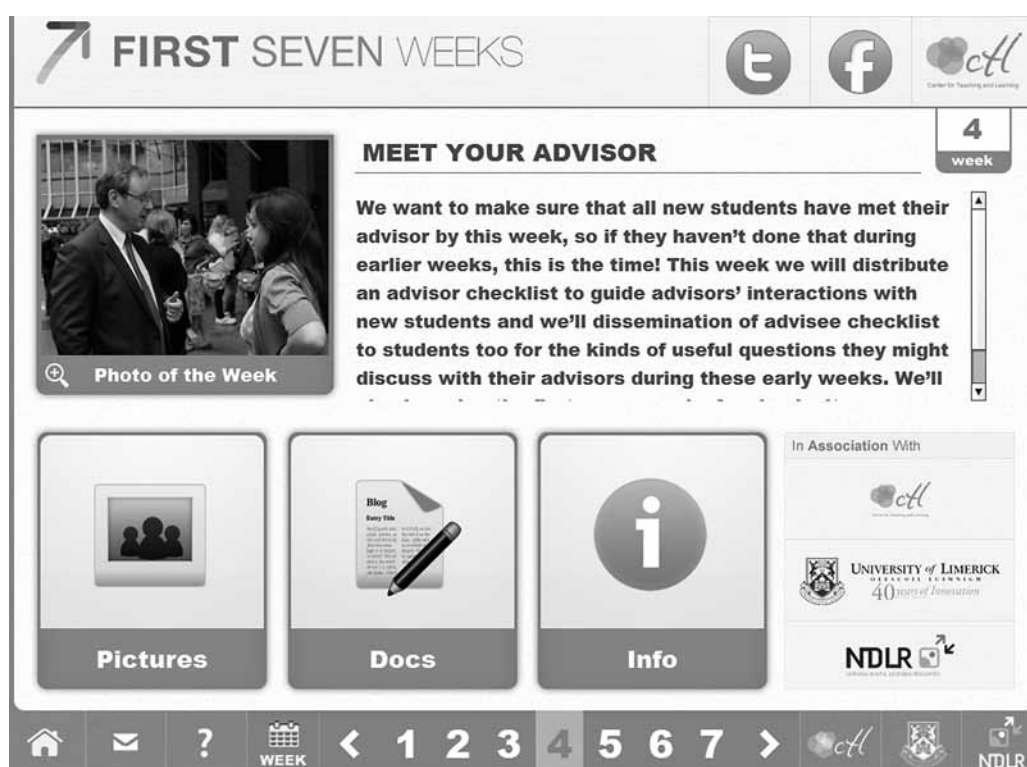


Figure 5: Meet your Advisor Week



### ***Week 6: Career and civic engagement awareness***

During Week 6 a representative from the Co-operative Education and Careers division is present in the Hub to answer student queries. In addition, Week 6 coincides with the careers' fair on campus. First year students are interested in careers particularly with regards to future career choices and cooperative education work placement.

	Survey 1: Evaluation 2010/11					Survey 2: Evaluation 2011/12				
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
<b>I know where I can find advice and information on career choice</b>	6.3	12.5	20.6	44.5	16.1	2.8	13.8	23.6	39.2	20.6

**Table 5: Advice and information (as percentage of total)**

In the first survey, approximately 45% 'agree' and 16% 'strongly agree', and in the second survey 39% 'agree' and 21% 'strongly agree' that they know where to find advice and information on career choice (Table 5). Civic engagement is also considered a very important aspect of the student's transition to higher education and students are made aware of civic engagement opportunities that are available to them. The President's Volunteer Award Ceremony is held in Week 6, where UL student volunteers representing all academic departments are presented with awards by the President for their volunteering commitment to communities. Data were not gathered focusing on civic engagement within the 2011 and 2012 surveys, but this will be added within the 2013 survey.

### ***General use of technology and Facebook***

As Facebook was the main method of online communication used with the students, the 2011/2012 survey, included specific questions pertaining to how students use Facebook. 91% of respondents 'agree' that they are comfortable using computers; 95% stated that they had a Facebook account; 86% 'agree' that Facebook is easy to use; 90% 'agree' that they 'have adequate access to the web outside college'; and 71% thought that 'Facebook is useful for university student support initiatives'. Out of 670 responses, 94% state that they use Facebook on a daily basis, with 5% accessing it on a monthly basis and 1% once every six months. Currently, the audience of the *First Seven Weeks* Facebook page comprises 53% female and 47% male users. 42% of female users and 37% of male users are in the 18-24 age group categories (first years transitioning from second to third level and potential post-graduates/mature learners); and 7% of female users and 5% of male users are in the 25-34 age group categories (potential mature students or first time postgraduate students).

The Facebook page has generated high amounts of views from both 'logged in' Facebook users and the general public which suggests that the open aspect of the Facebook page is thriving. The highest weekly number of people (unique users) who viewed a posting on the Facebook was on the 7th September 2011 (Week 1 – Phase 2) with 34,193 unique views of the page. This number was followed by 33,404 unique views of the page also in Week 1 of the programme. Out of 608 responses, 22% stated that the Facebook page was 'very useful'; 54% stated that it was 'more or less useful'; and 23% stated that it was 'not very useful'. Out of 604 responses the top five resources accessed through the Facebook page were: 45% Events; 34% Useful Links; 24% Photos; 19% Discussions; 17% Videos.

## Conclusion and Future Developments

Results from the evaluation during academic years 2010/2011 and 2011/2012 are encouraging, as they show a high level of satisfaction with different indicators of the early transition process. Open survey responses stated that the programme was ‘well run’, ‘an extremely useful resource’, ‘helpful’ and a ‘great idea’. However, the results also show that there are a number of areas that need consideration for enhancement within the programme. Open suggestions from respondents on how to improve the Facebook page for future first year students includes comments such as ‘More advertising/Greater visibility/More awareness’; ‘More entertaining events/photos/reminders/info’; ‘link it better with other UL initiatives’; ‘more students from the older years to help out’. In light of these suggestions, each of the individual seven weekly themes could be enhanced in order to maximise the level of support and skills provided to first year students during this transition phase. This could be done through increasing the number of induction and preparation courses and by maximising the usage of the Facebook page to include, for example, an online presence for the guides and the tutors in the learning support centres or links to the Facebook groups/pages that promote their services. It would also be useful to link the *First Seven Weeks* Facebook page to Sulis, the UL VLE.

The second area that the authors identify for improvement is that of assessment and evaluation of the programme, potentially through the use of an end of academic year survey that is emailed to first year students. Although the *First Seven Weeks* programme has surveyed first year students for the past two years, a proposed future development would be to survey UL staff, the first seven weeks guides, and the broader UL community (Brown, 2012). The third suggestion for improvement, as noted by students, is in relation to promoting the programme even further and reaching and supporting non-Facebook users, through the ‘Hub’ as well as through the provision of more events and workshops.

Overall, the *First Seven Weeks* programme is sustainable in terms of funding, as the cost-benefit is maximised. The main method of communication, Facebook, is free to use and is currently sustainable due to the year-by-year increases in its users. Updating the Facebook page is done by UL staff, faculty and students, and the online resources used for each of the seven weeks have been developed by UL staff or have been sourced online or through the National Digital Learning Resources (NDLR) service. Nonetheless, in our experience, the advantages of social media may cover up the administrative and support resources required for them to be effective. It is important to note that online facilitated programmes and communication, similar to the use of Facebook within the *First Seven Weeks* programme, are not necessarily a cheaper solution. Indeed, they can be even more intensive from the point of view of coordination as it is expected that frequent communication will be maintained with increasingly large cohorts. Hence, return on investment is essential and best practice should be observed and maintained. In the words of Harris (O’Neill et al., 2002: 9) ‘electronic guidance programmes should never be planned as primarily publicity for the sponsoring organisation, and should only be done when a genuine need is perceived and a realistic plan can be implemented long-term’.

An important factor for the programme was that it was mainstreamed as a learner support in 2011. For as long as the programme has the strategic support of UL, it will continue to exist and to enhance the first year experience, as well as acting as a centralised structure for the provision of existing university student supports and services awareness generation. The programme will continue actively to collaborate on a national, and hopefully at an international level, and aspire to continue to provide a best practice structure.

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## Response to

### **Supporting First Year Students in their Academic and Social Adjustment to Higher Education. A case study of the First Seven Weeks Programme at the University of Limerick.**

by John R. Schermerhorn, Jr., Charles G. O'Brien Professor of Management Emeritus, College of Business, Ohio University.

I was delighted to read this chapter and learn that the University of Limerick had embarked on such a timely and innovative approach to student retention and development. Instead of leaving the processes of on campus socialization to chance, the *First Seven Weeks* program takes control and helps tailor students' early experiences in positive academic and personal directions.

*First Seven Weeks* is efficient as well as substantive and creative. Its use of existing university resources and free social media access is an important advantage in today's trying financial times. The program substance and creativity shows lots of forethought and concrete goals. The authors were systematic to the point of being prepared to handle any security problems that might arise with their use of Facebook. Their careful thinking and empathy with the student experience also shows in the adoption of the seven weekly themes. Each one seems on target and relevant in terms of the early first-year student experience.

I give great credit to the authors for including a solid literature review in this chapter. It sets strong foundations and lends further credibility to the program design. The evaluation is similarly strong and offers many formative ideas and directions. With such a commitment to evaluation I have no doubt the program will stay dynamic in adapting to feedback and future conditions. The strong evaluation component should also give interested readers the confidence to modify and utilize the program with local success.

My final thought relates to the comment made at the end of the chapter about 'strategic support' received from the University of Limerick. This point should not be underestimated in importance. It would be hard to envision *First Seven Weeks* being as successful as it is without strategic support from the highest level. In arranging for this support the project staff obviously did their 'setup' work very well. This is a further standard for other potential adopters to follow.

I congratulate the authors for a fine chapter that makes *First Seven Weeks* visible as an attractive and achievable early socialization tool. I hope some version of it will soon be found on many more campuses.

## Development of a Model for Blended Postgraduate Research Supervision in Irish Higher Education

Roisin Donnelly, Dublin Institute of Technology; Marian Fitzmaurice, Dublin Institute of Technology.

Corresponding author: roisin.donnelly@dit.ie

### Introduction

By tradition, postgraduate supervisors work with their students on an individual basis. However with increasing numbers of part-time and international students, and the current resource challenges being faced by Irish higher education institutions, supervisory relationships are now likely to be conducted in a more collaborative and connected way and new approaches are being developed to cope with the expanding student numbers, and the diminishing ratio of supervisors to students. Indeed, the recent National Strategy in Higher Education to 2030 calls for the sector to innovate and develop if it is to provide flexible opportunities for larger and more diverse student cohorts (DES, 2012). Sustainability is important in this initiative, specifically for continuing to build research capacity on Masters' programmes and to promote the value of the 'cascade' effect of group feedback in the supervision process. This effect of the link between feedforward and feedback amongst fellow students and supervisors will be discussed in more detail in a subsequent section of the chapter.

While collaborative study groups are by no means new to postgraduate supervision, and there are numerous variations of supervisory groups that might be possible, a Blended Group Supervision (BGS) Model used across two programmes – the MSc Applied eLearning and the MA in Higher Education in the Dublin Institute of Technology – is explored in this chapter. Alongside the recognised economic advantages afforded by group supervision, pedagogic reasons for introducing the model centre on overcoming the sense of isolation that can often be a key feature for many postgraduates, even for those based in the same institution as the supervisor. The principles of Connectivism are used to explore group supervision for encouraging the exchange of ideas, and mentoring of students in relation to good practice in the research process and inducting them into the academic community. The introduction of a community of support for students from the outset of the programme has been shown to have an impact on the students' writing processes and facilitated the students' enculturation into the particular discipline. From the supervisors' perspective, group supervision enables the development of supervision skills and overcomes feelings of seclusion which can also be an issue for supervisors, as often the only opportunity research supervisors have to discuss the supervision process is at assessment and moderation stages. The chapter concludes with a proposed model



to support BGS based on evidence with regard to the function group supervision can serve in higher education. It is hoped that this model will encourage other supervisors to interrogate their own supervision in light of the practice of colleagues.

This chapter has emerged from the discourse on sustainability, specifically that Irish higher education needs an alternative model of postgraduate research supervision to sustain the demands for Level 9 and Level 10 programmes from all learners including professional and adult learners. Undoubtedly, the practice of postgraduate research supervision has been developing over the past number of years in Ireland and elsewhere. Indeed, in some of the key higher education journals, recent conversations have been emerging on specific issues such as alternative supervision practices (Dysthe et al., 2006), Masters and Doctoral supervision experiences (Franke and Arvidsson, 2011). Despite this, Petersen (2007) has argued that postgraduate supervision, while heavily researched from an effective practice perspective, remains essentially an under-theorised field.

While much research has focused on doctoral supervision, this chapter aims to explore supervision practices at Masters level for professional learners in a higher education institution in Ireland. Certainly some of the key issues that have emerged in the literature on supervision at doctoral level are relevant to the case of two-year Masters research programmes also. Important factors for the supervisor of both levels include avoiding conflict of interest between themselves and their student, as well as experiencing the possibilities of having heavy workloads which can disrupt the level of supervision. This is especially important as the number of students being supervised is increasing, and due to diminishing available resources, the ability of individual staff to carry out their other duties is becoming more constrained. All this can result in less time being available for supervision of each student and the quality of their supervision experience perhaps suffering.

Postgraduate research student supervision involves a lengthy personal and professional relationship between student and supervisor, where the supervisor must help the students acquire research skills and expertise without interfering with their intellectual and personal development, and even their enthusiasm and interest which brought them to the research in the first place. Within this process, the value of collegiality in postgraduate supervision cannot be underestimated. Traditionally, when one envisages the research supervision process, it is conceived primarily in terms of a one-to-one relationship with a supervisor. In today's busy academic environment, with supervisors having many diverse demands from their practice, less time can be spent on individual postgraduate supervision than is ideally possible. The demanding supervision process is made more complex by the increasing numbers and diversity of today's graduate students. Wisker et al. (2007) argue that with increasing numbers of part-time and international students, supervisory relationships are likely to be conducted at a distance as students study alongside other commitments. Isolation can often be a key feature for postgraduates, whether based in the same institution as the supervisor or not, and more particularly for international students or those studying at a distance. It can also be an issue for their supervisors.

Previously what had been regarded by academics as a private space has moved to welcome the potential of collaboration and, as Hammond and Ryland (2009:17) report, has shifted to 'being more visible, more open for discussion, reflection and negotiation'. With the dramatic increase of learning technologies available in higher education today, what has been described as a lonely endeavour by students and supervisors alike, need not be so. Cullen et al. (1994) argue that supervision should be conceptualised to encompass a broad view of postgraduate education that includes more than the one-to-one interaction of student and supervisor. They believe that there is a need to go beyond individual supervisory interaction and restructure practice to ensure that responsibility for quality is shared and co-ordinated.



Through the use of blended group supervision (BGS), where students can utilize group feedback to develop independence and increased ability to self-assess through virtual peer learning, these supervision issues can be tackled. Specifically from the supervisor perspective, group supervision tutorials can be useful for exploring the ‘teaching’ aspects of supervision (conceptual and theoretical issues, research methods, academic writing formats, genre demands, and quality criteria). This chapter introduces a model of BGS that can create a research community of support both for students and for their supervisors, building upon an effective social and intellectual climate for postgraduate research.

The purpose of this chapter is to offer supervisors guidelines on how to unify the use of relevant learning technologies and group supervision at postgraduate level in order to provide more effective support for students in what has previously been considered a solitary form of study. The chapter begins with an overview of the context of the two Masters programmes, the MSc Applied eLearning and the MA in Higher Education, and is followed by a discussion on the development of a model combining group supervision tutorials, virtual peer learning sets and individual supervision. This model, which has been tested within a professional development context, is built on critical feedback which is available to allow future iterations to develop. We argue that this is one viable approach to meet the challenges of sustainability in research supervision today, and it has potential implications for supervision practice across all disciplines.

### **Context and Rationale**

Research supervision takes place in the second year of both part-time Masters programmes. The students on both programmes are either educators in different disciplines and higher education institutions or consultants/trainers from industry settings. Essentially, these participants were interested in exploring and developing learning, teaching or eLearning within their professional practice. There were different assessed outputs from the second year of each programme – an eLearning project applied to practice, a journal paper and an ePortfolio for the MSc Applied eLearning and a thesis for the MA in Higher Education. There was also a weekly forum in the Blackboard virtual learning environment (VLE) for discussion and critiquing of journal articles and the sharing and highlighting of local, national and international conferences and resources in the fields of learning, eLearning and applied educational research. In future iterations of the programmes, it will be useful to explore the potential of Open Educational Repositories (OER) which are discussed in this book, in the chapter by Ann Marcus-Quinn.

The majority of the participants in this study were new to the field of educational research and the academic research community. There was a sense that they could benefit from increased intellectual support to enable them to think, learn and research in ways that were new to them and to explore puzzling questions and issues within the research culture and the specificity of their own professional practice. It was important that research supervision on the programmes underscored the interconnectedness of the academic and practice realms in higher education. The majority of the supervisors on the programme were experienced at Masters level supervision, each having previously supervised over twenty taught Masters.

At a social level, learning and indeed research involves interacting with other individuals, and increasingly technology. This chapter describes context-specific research on postgraduate supervision, which explores general principles in supervision and also focuses on improving supervision practice in its local settings. Learning and research involve interacting with other individuals. Specifically, this research is concerned with

discovering what, if anything, is transferred during the interactions between two, three or more postgraduate research students and their supervisors in group setting.

### **Development of a Model for Blended Group Supervision: introducing Connectivism**

Group supervision with students at Masters level has been undertaken previously and successfully. Pearson (2000) discusses group supervision as a strategy for reducing isolation, supporting students, encouraging the exchange of ideas, and mentoring students in relation to publishing and job-seeking. Qualitative phenomenological research by Samara (2006) and Dysthe et al. (2006) reveals that supervisor development skills can be enhanced by this approach which also has an impact on the student writing process and their enculturation into the discipline. Group supervision work at the University of Ottawa has proved successful in the context of counsellor professional practice (Paré et al., 2004).

Kandlbinder (1998) examined a group of supervisors at the University of Sydney who undertook training in a variety of methods to improve their supervisory practices. These methods included training supervisors to use Internet resources, involving them in group workshops and holding peer discussion groups and reviews on supervisory practices. This change in supervisory practices was developed in response to the concerns of students that the quality of supervision was inadequate. Arguably, it is also not too far removed from the 'learning circle' strategy employed by Manathunga and Goozée (2007) at the University of Queensland to contend with the concept of private pedagogical space in the context of supervisor training.

Blending the use of technology with face-to-face postgraduate supervision has been developing apace in recent years. Although conducted in the area of distance education for Doctoral students, the work of Rodger and Brown (2000) with a focus on sophisticated ICTs to support informal social networks, is interesting in the context of this present research. Interaction with the students using ICT resources and resultant discourse about these resources is central to learning. Other fields have benefited from supervision being supported with the use of technologies; for example Wright and Griffiths (2010) explored the experience of using both real time and asynchronous communication tools to supervise on a counselling programme at a distance. Technologies are also regularly used to support both on and off-campus research students and there is an expanding literature on advising off-campus students (Manathunga, 2007). The key issues facing such remote students can be summarised as social isolation, difficulties in accessing the research culture (intellectual isolation), lack of access to resources, lack of face-to-face interaction with supervisors, and difficulties in maintaining a balance between work, study and family. These specific challenges can be addressed with the use of appropriate technology and such support needs to be pedagogically sound. Therefore, as a subtle and demanding form of 'teaching', blended group supervision can benefit from exploration theoretically.

Connectivism has been heralded as a theory for the digital age (Siemens, 2004), and was seen as a fresh way of conceptualizing learning in the last decade. It was considered useful to explore the pedagogy of group research supervision in this chapter through the lens of connectivism, where control is shifting from the supervisor to a research student who is becoming more autonomous. Clearly, all forms of teaching and learning, including research supervision, are being impacted though technology. Connectivism recognizes the significant trends in learning contexts that both include informal aspects and the influence of technology on thinking processes.

Key principles of connectivism that inform the process of blended research supervision on the programmes are that:

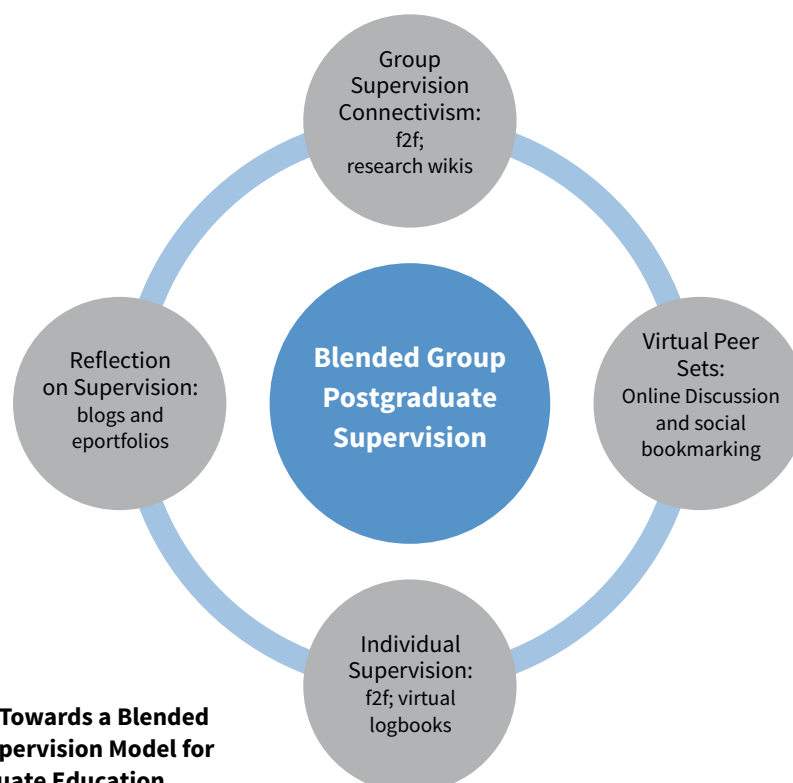
- learning and knowledge rest in diversity of opinions;
- learning is a process of connecting specialized nodes or information sources;
- nurturing and maintaining connections is needed to facilitate continual learning;
- the ability to see connections between fields, ideas, and concepts is a core skill;
- currency (accurate, up-to-date knowledge) is the intent of the group supervision process and activities; and
- decision-making is itself a learning process.

We would argue that the combined principles of connectivism emphasise the capacity of our postgraduate students to be active autonomous learners.

Connectivism could be seen in practice in three stages on the programmes: at individual supervision level, group supervision and in virtual support sets. Siemens (2004) has posited that a connected community is the clustering of similar areas of interest that allows for interaction, sharing, dialoguing, and thinking together. Indeed, Cormier (2008) acknowledges that connectivism enables a community of people (working with learning technologies) to legitimize what they are doing.

To improve the existing research project supervision on the two Masters programmes, a three-layered approach combining individual supervision, face-to-face themed supervision groups and virtual student peer supervision sets was introduced. It was intended that each of the three methods would supplement the others and help participants complete their studies on time.

Figure 1 illustrates the blended supervision model on the programmes including the different stages of the educational research process and the accompanying technologies used to support each stage. This model enables the research and learning to be closely connected throughout the entire supervision process.



**Figure 1: Towards a Blended Group Supervision Model for Postgraduate Education**

### *Individual supervision*

This adhered to institutional regulations and was aimed at providing specific advice on the research project/thesis and supplying the necessary quality assurance. These individual face-to-face (f2f) supervision practices included specific dialogues between the student and the supervisor (institutional routines, the use of resources and repertoires and ways of thinking, talking and acting). Online logbooks were then used to record a basic framework of meetings between the student and supervisor. These were established in the virtual learning environment, Blackboard, as private discussion board topics. Although the use of research online logbooks is far from new as a practice in research supervision, in the context of these programmes, the logbooks proved invaluable for reflecting on the dialogue between the student and supervisor and allowing flexibility through their asynchronous nature.

### *Supervision groups*

Consisting of two or three supervisors and their Masters students meeting face-to-face based upon similar project themes/methodologies (scheduled to meet 2-3 times per semester). These tutorial meetings were focused on the project scope, research process and issues in academic writing common to all students. Their purpose was to provide personal and disciplinary support for the students and enable them to better appreciate their project progress, along with helping them address specific common problems spanning the data collection and analysis phases of a research project/study. Similar to Clancy's chapter in this book where the cross-pollination of ideas is prevalent, the exchange of ideas and perspectives on academic knowledge exposes the students to different intellectual challenges, as well as allowing them see how different supervisors reason, argue and give feedback on the research project. Students could also provide inspiration to each other when needed. During each group tutorial, all students presented their work for feedback; in advance of the tutorial, all work was emailed to the rest of the group, with 2-3 areas highlighted on the key issues on which they wished to receive commentary.

The aim was to provide diversity in feedback and peer review on student work along with what Dysthe et al. (2006) call enculturation into the research discipline. Multiple readers of the presented work provided critical opposition and thus helped develop the students' ability to handle different perspectives in their research project. The process provided opportunities for dynamic, interactive, free-flowing discussion and feedback from each student's own supervisor and at least one other supervisor. As the virtual learning sets and the supervision groups both acted as a first filter for work, the text then handed into the individual supervisor can often be a more polished draft.

Research wikis were established by a number of the students themselves as an organic form of engagement with each other and as a collaborative layer to encourage the participation of other researchers; these were preferred by some of the more technically engaged students over email contact as a way to form communities of interest in their specialist projects and seen as a fertile workspace for their research ideas. In terms of meeting the challenge of sustained wiki engagement i.e. managing to encourage further student update of the research wiki, it is anticipated to use the insights of the active few who began the process and who commented favourably on the time-saving aspects of the technology. These insights focus on the usefulness of research notes taken using the wiki which were immediately available for other group members to view and develop, and which they felt enabled them to spend more time collaborating, and less time managing their collaboration tools.

### *Virtual Peer Supervision Sets*

These included all Masters students in the same small groups as the face-to-face sessions. It was integral to the impact of these sets that investment was made in establishing mutual trust amongst the students as part of the face-to-face programme inductions as it is acknowledged that peer exchange is rooted in existing relationships and a certain degree of reciprocated trust. We established early on that peer exchange necessitates a minimum shared knowledge of the context so as to make sense of what peers have to say about their work and that it requires a will to learn on the part of all the students. That will to learn implies that students need to be able to admit that they do not know all the answers, which, in turn, requires there to be mutual confidence and a relatively non-threatening atmosphere within the virtual peer set.

Studies in the US (Lovitts, 2001) have shown that all research students require both social and academic integration in order to successfully complete their research studies in a timely fashion. Creating opportunities for social and academic interaction with supervisors, with other students, and with the institute's broader research environment is of vital importance. By providing personal support, the virtual peer sets, which were based on openness and personal commitment to one another, helped students develop the ability to combine criticism with support and also served as a first filter for research ideas and shared resources. The emotional side of carrying out and writing a research project is usually privatised and often under-communicated; consequently, in this study, the students were encouraged to exchange experiences and frustrations, and discuss research-related issues. The mutual trust established at this juncture was an important prerequisite for the effective functioning of the group supervision. Emilsson and Johnsson (2007) reported that group supervision sessions were distinguished by an open-hearted manner and communicative frame of mind by all involved, which they interpreted as trust. Similarly, Carroll et al. (2008) see as the crux to engaging learners in an online environment the creation of a place where people feel comfortable, trusted, and valued.

However, technology can present its own challenges to the research supervision process. While the availability of technology can address resource issues, at other times it can be a major source of frustration (Hedberg and Chorrent-Agostinho, 2000; Youngblood et al., 2001). Pearson (2000) argued that in some cases, both supervisors and students have limited training or knowledge of specific software programs needed for their studies. However, in this age of electronic communication, interactions using technology should be at least as robust as many of those conducted face-to-face, and this remains the case to this day.

It is essential from the outset to establish for all supervisors and students, what access they have to the tools and media being proposed. Early on in the blended design for the programmes, it was considered useful to map out what the technological environment would be like. As part of the study, it was important to investigate how well the supervisor and student could exploit the virtual communications available to them. Sussex (2011) argued that the web can mask student characteristics and skew communications. He reported that a combination of media, involving maximum immediacy and personal interaction combined with recording for later review, has been shown in practice to yield the richest and most flexible supervision.

In the collaborative environment provided by the virtual peer learning sets, choices needed to be made amongst the students themselves as to how they would manage time, set their own learning goals, find resources, and try out new tools and make them work. Arguably, while still in relatively early stages of development, technology is permitting new ways of seeing information and impacting interactions. Over a decade

ago, Evans and Pearson (1999) made a case that supervision needs to be delivered in a more flexible manner for part-time students such as those on these programmes. As in this study, de Beer and Mason (2009) utilized the online infrastructure to keep all records and logbooks pertaining to the students online, with the online documentation becoming dynamic evidence of the research process. The use of logbooks in supervision has had a long history. Yeatman (1995) recommends the log to manage the process of negotiation positively without administratively overloading the process. The log entries serve as a basis for clarifying diverse perceptions and clearly setting out what is achieved and agreed upon at each session.

There has been useful research conducted on the disadvantages of fully online supervision. Alterkruse and Brew (2000) listed lack of human contact, limited opportunity to view non-verbal communication, and limited bonding between supervisor and student. McConnell (2005) has produced seminal work on the use of technologies to support communities for learning purposes. While not specifically referring to group supervision, he argues that it is all too easy to include group work in a collaborative learning design, on the assumption that the technology itself will support the work of the group. However, while email and online discussion boards can be helpful, research students also need to be able to bounce ideas off supervisors, reading their verbal and non-verbal reactions as they go and developing extended interactions between one another. Arguably, these dimensions are missing from supervisor-student interactions that do not take place face to face.

As Moriarty et al. (2008) posit, continuing to grow access to the academic research community is another important issue for students. Wright (2003) identifies isolation from the community and the support networks it creates as a major problem for flexible learning for postgraduate students. Although in the related fields of remote supervision and distance education, Hartley et al. (2001) suggest that, when considering the possibility of study, students should create their own support networks with staff and peers to reduce the possibility of isolation. Kabay (2004) discusses a UK university's establishment of an online portal to increase the sense of belonging to an academic community for remote students. Early studies such as Stacey's (1997) identify the establishment of university online discussion forums where students can discuss their research with each other as another useful tool in making students feel a part of the community. Stacey found that both students and staff regarded the online facility as an invaluable resource in helping them to feel motivated to continue with their studies. Similarly, Wisker et al. (2003) reported that students enjoyed using electronic bulletin boards and discussion lists to talk with their fellow students and staff and thus feel part of the academic community. More recent studies such as Jones et al. (2011) and Crossouard (2009) suggest that such uses of technology for supervision are now commonplace with the latter reporting findings on the use of email for tutor's formative assessment in the early stages of postgraduate supervision.

### **Promoting Connectivism within Group Supervision**

Adhering to the principles of connectivism was key for a positive climate of learning within the supervision process. The challenge was to move toward a space that aggregated content and to imagine it as a community, a place where dialogue happens, where students feel comfortable and where interactions and content can be easily accessed and engaged with, a place where the personal meets the social with the specific purpose of learning. However, for this trust to grow, as with any new initiative, promoting the benefit of the approach to those who will be undertaking it is important. This can best happen at the start of the programmes by making clear to the students the value of participating in



all three supervision approaches. To maximize their participation, students were shown how to engage in peer review of the projects, which can provide a systematic way of developing shared knowledge and interest among them for each other's work. Similarly, as the giving and receiving of feedback is core to the process of group supervision, training in feedback strategies was provided in order to give the students the tools they need to comment on each other's work. This is of course integral to the introduction of any new supervisors to the process also.

In addition, at the beginning, and crucial to the climate of the sessions, the team emphasised the importance of personal commitment to all students – especially to their supervision group (mutual obligation, regular attendance and thorough preparation needing to be built in). From a logistical point of view, it was important that clear routines should be established early on – supervision groups require a rigorous framework regarding frequency of meetings, work delivery, type and length of submissions, feedback, and discussion on how best to communicate. Realistic time allocation plays a key role in the three forms of supervision; this is vital in order to avoid overloading students and supervisors. The use of time should be monitored and discussed, the purpose of each forum clearly defined and understood by all in advance and work for discussion on the eLearning projects carefully selected to provide common points of interest for all. Additionally, the value of multiple perspectives needs to be recognized in terms of the advantage of having supervisors who belong to different research traditions coming together in the same group. In this way, divergent voices, multiple perspectives and critical thinking are more likely to occur and students need to be encouraged to see any disagreements as productive.

From a connectivist perspective, the opportunities provided by digital resources can be effectively harnessed to enrich the supervision dialogue, but this requires different thinking about effective supervision practices. Undoubtedly, there will continue to be ongoing challenges with the use of technology in the supervision process. Pearson and Ford (1997) and Pearson (2000) emphasised the importance of supervisory practices changing to suit the varying needs of students studying by flexible learning modes. Having the use of virtual peer supervision does provide clear benefits for dialogue; as far back as 1997, Beattie and James argued that the use of electronic communication where students and staff were required to use technology to talk to each other resulted in some students having more confidence to raise issues and discuss problems than they may otherwise have had in face-to-face situations. However, challenges still persist: Pearson (2000) discussed the difficulties supervisors faced in adapting to using new technology to communicate with students in flexible modes of learning, and argued that successful supervision in flexible learning still involves some traditional methods such as occasional face-to-face meetings. She argued that a mix of traditional and newer supervisory methods must be used for the best kind of supervision to occur. More recently Mason (2011) explored student engagement with an online discussion forum and reported negative findings. Students understood the benefits of the task, but did not participate due to time pressures and lack of motivation. The reasons for this were found to be inadequate explanation and encouragement to do the task, and insufficient moderator participation.

### **Key Issues for Supporting Group Supervision**

In each of the three approaches, it is important to find a balance between free dialogue and systematic and prepared feedback. In our discussion boards in Blackboard, there

was a tendency for most students to share their learning and work with each other; honesty was core to this (there were instances of students posting 'I don't understand' to each other, without a sense of awkwardness or embarrassment). Peers encouraged each other to reformulate ideas, ask questions, and build confidence in their applied research. All this pointed towards the virtual space being seen as a sanctuary for their work. However, in the face-to-face group supervision tutorials, there was, to an extent, a sense of anxiety of sharing unfinished work. To counter this, at the beginning of each tutorial, supervisors found it useful to introduce some models for feedback such as peer response strategies. This was complemented by a balancing of support and critique by peers and supervisors alike, with many suggestions and new ideas for research being discussed. Finally, supervisor feedback in individual supervision sessions focused on the regulations, the end product of the modules, the overall structure of the project and on all levels therein, on revision within the confines of thesis writing, and on when the project\thesis had reached postgraduate level.

As Brew and Peseta (2004) have observed, supervisory styles are often based on the supervisor's own experiences of being supervised. This can work in either direction, with them using it as a model for their own supervision or as something against which to react. Further work is needed on the programmes in helping everyone involved more fully to understand that a range of supervision strategies can be important and that forms of co-supervision can be helpful if the roles are clearly allocated.

Making direct use of several supervisors in a group setting enabled the nurturing and maintaining of connections for the students. This was very important for facilitating continual learning. Although supervisors made their own connections between ideas and provided current knowledge in the field in the individual sessions, it was the potential of being able to capitalise on the multiple supervisors' ability to see connections between fields, ideas, and concepts as well as provision of currency (accurate, up-to-date knowledge) which was the added value of the group supervision process and activities. A direct advantage was that students learned more about the nature and structure of their own and each other's project at its various key stages.

Diverse opinions were typically expressed through discourses and clarified, contested, and refined through critical dialogue in the supervision tutorials. Often, sense making was performed through continuous discourses that co-constructed and negotiated meaning on a project idea. While the students reported the benefits accrued from positive peer feedback on their projects, when looked at within a connectivist framework, learning and knowledge emerge from diversity of opinions. This diversity was most easily recognised by the modelling of critical thinking on the topic by the supervisors in the group tutorials. Through exposure to the supervisors' expertise and experience, the students claimed to have learnt to think more critically. This manifested itself in their changed understanding of the knowledge base on their research topic, and in developing the ability better to contextualise and evaluate information from the variety of sources that they were drawing upon for their projects.

Peer learning in the context of research supervision has featured explicitly in postgraduate supervision for some time. Boud and Lee (2005) argue that peers can and do learn from each other while supervisors learn with and from students, through such processes as learning by being challenged, becoming aware of new literature and resources, and through exposure to new data.

However, one of the remaining challenges of blended supervision from the supervisor perspective is the cost-effectiveness of the practices. There are examples of claims that group supervision is more cost-effective than one-to-one supervision, with de Beer



and Mason (2009) viewing blended learning in a postgraduate supervision context as a possible solution to the supervisor resource problem. They report on using a blended approach to facilitate postgraduate supervision with the intention of reducing research supervisors' workloads and improving the quality and success of Masters and Doctoral students' research output. Their findings suggest that the supervision process was improved with a blended approach, the administrative workload of the supervisor was reduced, and a dynamic record of the supervision process was created. They argue that the results to date imply that traditional supervision practice needs to be revisited and modified to include digital procedures. We would argue that in the future, there is a need to discuss in advance the distinct advantages of group supervision that are not offered by having one supervisor alone; this has not always been clear to supervisors. We would also emphasise that while the connections made between ideas in the provision of specialist knowledge by one supervisor alone are important, the group tutorials allow this to be further developed.

## 6 Ps: Recommendations for Introducing Group Supervision

The following section offers guidance for introducing group supervision to a programme drawing on the lessons learnt from the research.

Attribute	How to support the introduction of group supervision
<b>Positive Climate</b>	Essential to cultivate a positive climate of learning within the supervision process: think 'community', a place where dialogue happens, where students feel comfortable and where interactions and content can be easily accessed and engaged with.
<b>Promote Trust</b>	To grow a sense of trust (as with any new initiative) it is important to promote the benefit of the approach to those who will be undertaking it. This can best happen at the start of the programme by making clear to the students the value of participating in all three supervision approaches.
<b>Peer Participation</b>	To maximize their participation, students need to be brought through how to engage in peer review, which can provide a systematic way of developing shared knowledge and interest among them for each other's work. Similarly, as the giving and receiving of feedback is core to the process of group supervision, it is useful to provide training in feedback strategies in order to give the students the tools they need and how to comment on each other's work. This is also integral to the introduction of any new supervisors to the process.
<b>Personal Commitment</b>	At the beginning, and crucial to the climate of the sessions, it is useful to emphasize the importance of personal commitment to all students – especially to their supervision group (mutual obligation, regular attendance and thorough preparation needing to be built in).
<b>Perspectives</b>	The value of multiple perspectives needs to be recognized – the advantage of having supervisors who belong to different research traditions coming together in the same group. In that way, divergent voices, multiple perspectives and critical thinking are more likely to occur. Within this, students should be helped to see any disagreements as productive and not threatening.

Attribute	How to support the introduction of group supervision
<b>Practices made explicit</b>	From a logistical point of view, clear practices and routines should be established early on – supervision groups require a rigorous framework regarding frequency of meetings, work delivery, type and length of submissions, feedback, and discussion on how best to communicate. Realistic time allocation plays a key role in the three forms of supervision; this is integral for avoiding overloading students and supervisors, and the use of time should be monitored and discussed, the purpose of each forum clearly defined and understood by all in advance and work for discussion on the students' work carefully selected to provide common points of interest for all.

## Conclusion

This chapter seeks both to promote further discussion about blended postgraduate supervision and offer the practitioner a foundation on which to facilitate a connected supervision experience. The primary goal in working with postgraduate supervisors and their students is to support an intellectual process of close examination of the connections between supervisory strategies and actions, and the technology being used to support them. Key to this is making explicit the rationale and intentionality underlying those connections. In a world increasingly shaped by socially-driven online interactions, postgraduate supervisors have a vital role to play in building and maintaining supervision communities in which students are both supportive of and feel supported by their supervisor and their peers. Such initiatives have the potential to make them feel a valued part of the community and enable them to make contacts with a larger community within the scholarly world and the world of practice. There is scope for future research on this topic, specifically exploring the impact of blended supervision in specific academic disciplines and on its role in supporting students' timely completion of their postgraduate studies.

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## Response to

### **Development of a Model for Blended Postgraduate Research Supervision in Irish Higher Education**

by Gina Wisker, University of Brighton.

Postgraduate supervision is a constantly evolving field; as the numbers grow and the demography changes, the expectations of students and the practices of supervisors also change. To enable effective change and sustainability, colleagues in institutions share good practice in supervision, using a mixture of experience and theory to inform effective developments. This chapter offers useful and theory based practices which should resonate with the needs of anyone supervising postgraduates part time and at a distance and wanting to build effective community and peer learning. These are issues which extend beyond Ireland into the more remote parts of the world such as Africa, Saudi Arabia and India where group supervision might help alleviate problems caused by numbers of students and scarcity of supervisors. In such contexts the distance blended support explored here might be the only supervision and peer learning available, so building processes and practices which truly address the needs of a diversity of students and contexts is a necessity.

This chapter moves beyond any 'quick fix' or temporary solution and considers such developments in the context of sustainability. It concentrates on the challenges posed by Masters level professional learners and by distance and part time postgraduate students, considering the development of methods of supervision which are sustainable given pressures of numbers and time, in a changing context. The chapter builds on the work of Pearson and Ford (1997) and Pearson (2000) who 'emphasised the importance of supervisory practices changing to suit the varying needs of students studying by flexible learning modes' and emphasises the importance of 'collaborative and connected' practices of supervision including group supervision, offering very effective strategies. The chapter therefore both makes a contribution to the growing body of literature in the field and offers useful guides and examples for anyone seeking ways to work with students at a distance, part time and on professionally oriented courses. Blended learning, communities and support processes all contribute to the effective practices explored here.

Donnelly and Fitzmaurice use current theory and practice to explore specific concerns and offer a solution to issues of supervision in terms of distance, overload, and the need to ensure a positive, nurturing, intellectual postgraduate development offer, sharing their effective use of 'blended group supervision (BGS), where students can utilize group feedback to develop independence and increased ability to self-assess through virtual peer learning'.

The postgraduate student group focused on in this chapter are educators and consultant trainers interested in exploring learning, teaching and e-learning, so the course and assessment formats developed and the VLE based activities suit their development needs in several ways: e-learning in modules; their need for forms of distance-based; collegial interaction with supervisors and other students; and a stated learning process. There is a structure to the course using a 'three-layered approach combining individual supervision, face-to-face themed supervision groups and virtual student peer supervision sets'. The use of online activities and assessment which prompt reading, discussion and

engagement is clearly effective. The course uses a range of formats to engage students and allow them to express their learning and research development in different ways including a weekly forum in Blackboard (VLE) enabling discussion and critiquing journal articles, sharing information on local, national and international conferences and resources in the fields of learning, eLearning and applied educational research. The assessed outputs from the second year of each programme (MA and Msc) are also varied, including a practice related eLearning project, a journal paper, an ePortfolio for the MSc Applied eLearning and a thesis for the MA in Higher Education.

The theorised practice explored here builds on literature focussing on e and blended learning and that of off campus supervision (Manathunga 2007), using theories of connectivism (Cormier 2008) arguing that connectivism enables communities who work with learning technologies. The chapter claims and shows how the variety of blended learning and assessment used on this Masters programme can address issues of social isolation, while being both technologically and pedagogically sound. The mix of group supervisions which enable cross pollination of ideas, involving students as critical friends through being readers of early drafts, and online support leads to more developed writing, reflecting, engagement in the discipline and the research processes. This is supplemented by virtual research supervision sets and a body of shared work built up in the research wikis. There is sound research and experience shared here on all the different formats and practices used, from electronic bulletin boards to online communities and the importance of face-to-face meetings for supervisor student group interactions to support the blended mix.

The supervision grid will be useful for anyone adapting their supervisory practice to distance or part time students. It emphasises both personal commitment and careful time and work management elements in the peer to peer learning group supervision and online communities.

This chapter takes us further in the discussion of communities and peer learning and the integration of blended learning approaches to supervision and postgraduate student learning using theories of connectivism and some effective everyday practices. It ends suggesting further work and particularly that relating to disciplinary differences.

Further research might also consider *doctoral* student communities and the importance of culturally different contexts. It might also consider access for both Masters and doctoral students to the resources offered through blended and e-learning which offer sustainable, effective supervision support, researcher development and community building for culturally and geographically diverse international communities.

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## Curriculum Development for Sustainable Civic Engagement

Josephine A. Boland, National University of Ireland Galway.

Corresponding author: josephine.boland@nuigalway.ie

### Introduction

Capacity building – both for students and for community partners – is an explicit goal for one particular teaching and learning innovation in Irish higher education. In addition to offering the opportunity to apply discipline-specific knowledge and skills, community-engaged learning (or service learning) aims to develop students' capacity for autonomy, insight and active citizenship while meeting community needs and building community capacity. A central role of the academic should be to plan a curriculum for civic engagement – a process which includes attending to values, outcomes, pedagogy, assessment and evaluation – which captures the diverse goals of the pedagogy, while meeting the requirements of a credit-based framework and related quality assurance systems. Academics have demonstrated considerable ingenuity in their ability to do this, often with the benefit of collaboration with educational developers who have supported these initiatives.

This chapter focuses on the process by which academics design/redesign curricula to embed a civic dimension with the potential for capacity building for all partners to the process – and the inherent tensions in that endeavour. A range of strategies which have been deployed in practice will be outlined and a typology of approaches to curriculum design for the pedagogy described. The implications of different curricular designs for the sustainability of the pedagogy are also examined, especially within the challenging and demanding milieu of contemporary higher education. This chapter draws on selected findings from a doctoral study (Boland, 2008) and is informed by my experience as a practitioner (Boland, 2010) and by the ongoing process of engaging with aspiring practitioners of the pedagogy. The chapter offers a descriptive rather than normative model of curriculum design for civic engagement that reflects current practice in Ireland. Rather than attempt to showcase best practice, the chapter will explore the complexities of the process and point to ways to enhance the sustainability of this critical pedagogy in challenging times.

The chapter commences with an elaboration of key concepts and I explore how community-engaged learning can be positioned within the broad church of civic engagement. Models of curriculum development are revisited with particular attention to the significance of values and beliefs in that process. I provide a brief overview of the methodology for the multi-site case study which informs this paper. Some key findings pertinent to the curriculum design process are offered, with a typology of models and potential progression pathways through stages of embeddedness. The potential relationship between embeddedness and sustainability is critically examined.

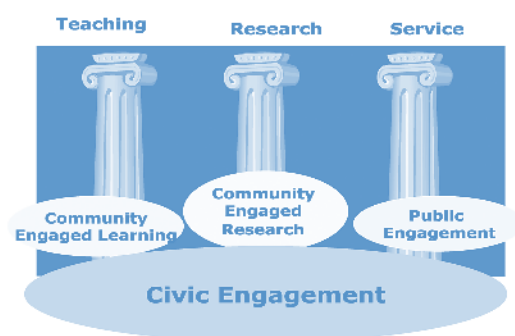
Conclusions highlight the significance of rationale and the need to recognise the central role of academics in the development of a civically engaged pedagogy. I point to the potential for enhanced partnership with community in designing and enacting a community engaged curriculum as part of a strategic approach to civic engagement.

## Engagement

### *Civic engagement*

Interest in the process of embedding civic engagement within the curriculum has intensified since engagement was confirmed as a key role of higher education in the national strategy for the sector (Higher Education Strategy Group, 2011). Community engaged learning (referred to variously as ‘community based learning’, ‘community engaged learning’, or ‘service learning’) is but one in a range of strategies which contribute to how higher education fulfils its social responsibilities, while preparing graduates in the skills of active and critical citizenship. The results of a national survey by Campus Engage – a network for the promotion of civic engagement activities in Irish higher education – suggest a growing appetite in Ireland for civic engagement, and a desire that it be formally adopted and recognised across the sector (Campus Engage, 2011). It is reported that considerable progress has been made in this direction, albeit with few resources and uneven manifestations of strategic vision. In this challenging context, issues of sustainability are of particular concern.

Civic engagement is a broad church that eludes absolute definition. It is inextricably concerned with the purpose of higher education and encompasses a wide range of activities. Campus Engage (2011), for example, defines it as a mutually beneficial knowledge-based collaboration between the higher education institution, its staff and students, with the wider community. Engagement, now identified as a core mission of Irish higher education, is described as ‘taking on civic responsibilities and cooperation with the needs of the community that sustains higher education, including business, the wider education system and the community and voluntary sectors’ (Higher Education Strategy Group, 2011:74). The inherent tensions, however, between the competing goals and purposes of civic/community engagement are universal (Winter et al., 2006) and different approaches can be discerned. Civic engagement as an ‘orientation’ is just one of three approaches to civic engagement identified by Wynne (2009), the others being as ‘mission’ or as ‘project’. If we conceive of civic engagement as an informing purpose, then community engaged learning (or research or public engagement) can be positioned as a way of doing higher education which is underpinned with the values of engagement, partnership, reciprocity and commitment to the achievement of the wider goals of higher education in society (Boland, 2011a).



**Figure 1: Community Engaged Learning as One Aspect of Civic Engagement**

### Community engaged learning

Terminology is a perennial issue and agreement on the meaning of service-learning also eludes. I have adopted, for the purpose of this discussion, the term *community-engaged learning* to capture the principles and practice of a pedagogy which is now established within a range of disciplines in higher education, including in Ireland. The defining features of the pedagogy are as follows:

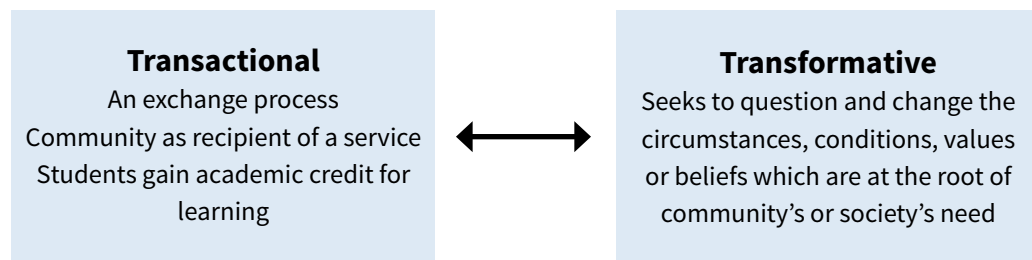
- It is a credit-bearing element of an academic module/programme;
- Students engage with the community, commonly providing a ‘service’ to the not-for-profit/voluntary/community sector, in response to a need identified by the community partner;
- Citizenship and engagement feature as core values and organising principles;
- It involves the application of discipline-specific knowledge and skills and the integration of theory and practice;
- The pedagogy is based on the principles of experiential learning where reflection features as a key element in the learning and assessment process;
- Reciprocity and partnership characterise the relationships between parties to the engagement.

Some Examples of Community Engaged Learning:
<b>Optometry undergraduates</b> carry out vision screening, under supervision, for primary school pupils who would ordinarily have to wait up to 18 months for a hospital appointment. The goals include developing their professional skills and raising students’ awareness of the inequities in the Irish healthcare system.
<b>Teacher education</b> students tutor in settings (other than schools) which are characterised by diversity and/or disadvantage. The goals are to enhance their pedagogy skills, meet needs of a community partner and to prompt them to reflect critically on their own practice and broader issues of diversity and disadvantage.
<b>Psychology</b> students volunteer in community organisations to engage more critically with the concept of altruism. They apply their understanding of classic and emerging social psychological theories and research to a deeper understanding of real world context while gaining interpersonal and intrapersonal benefits.
<b>Engineering</b> students engage and liaise with a community partner to design and build a prototype system for use and evaluation by clients. The goals are to enhance students engineering and technical skills and to increase their awareness of inclusiveness when designing systems and to develop a commitment to making a contribution to their community.
Campus Engage <a href="http://www.campusengage.ie/case_studies/case_study/28/">http://www.campusengage.ie/case_studies/case_study/28/</a>

**Figure 2: Examples of Community Engaged Learning**

Community engaged learning is distinguishable from volunteering by the emphasis on academic credit for demonstrated learning. It is distinguishable from workplace learning by the commitment to civic values. In practice, instances of the pedagogy vary in the extent to which they exhibit these key features and in the extent to which are distinguishable

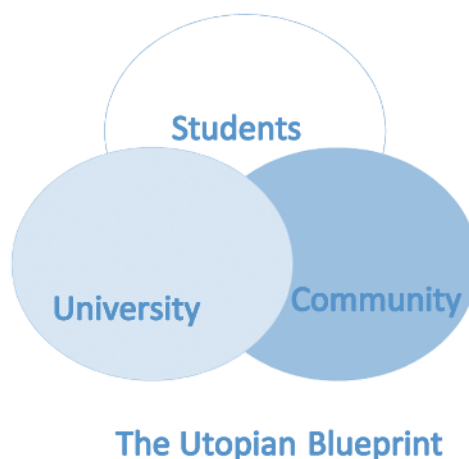
from other forms of experiential learning. Most significantly, perhaps, initiatives can be positioned on a continuum in terms of their fundamental purpose (transactional or transformative), the features of which are depicted in Fig 3 below.



**Figure 3: Models of Community Engaged (or Service) Learning, adapted from Welch (2006)**

A further factor which distinguishes initiatives is the level of reciprocity in the relationship with community partners. Optimally, this process is enacted as a partnership between academics/the university, community partners and community, each with a contribution to make to the design of the curriculum.

## Partners within the Learning Triad



**Figure 4: The Utopian Blueprint for a Learning Triad within PfCE (Boland and Mc Ilrath, 2005)**

## Curriculum

### *Curriculum development processes*

Curriculum is yet another key term in education which defies definition. Stenhouse (1975) claims it is fundamentally an attempt to communicate the essential principles and features of an educational proposal in such a form that it is open to critical scrutiny and capable of translation into practice. Harden's more concrete conception of curriculum may appeal to many:

The curriculum is a sophisticated blend of educational strategies, course content, learning outcomes, educational experiences, assessment, the educational

environment and the individual student's learning styles, personal timetable and programme of work.

(Harden, 2001:123)

It seems that as conceptions of curriculum become more student-centred, less attention is paid to the role, agency and values of academics in this process. The significance of beliefs and values, however, is brought into sharp focus wherever academics attempt to introduce a curriculum innovation such as a community engaged learning.

The processes of curriculum design, innovation and change are central to higher education; this is also true when embedding civic engagement within the curriculum. Theoretical models of curriculum design are typically normative in nature, describing how the curriculum *should* be designed, often paying little attention to *how* it is actually designed and *why* so designed. The oft-cited model of constructive alignment (Biggs and Tang, 2007), for example, does not attend to the source of learning outcomes or the values that underpin them. In presenting a theoretically and empirically informed argument for an engaged curriculum, Barnett and Coate (2006) do not claim to address the practicalities involved in developing one.

Two models attempt to capture the dynamic and iterative processes of curriculum development (Walker, 1971; Jackson and Shaw, 2002). Based on empirical analysis and his professional experience (in school-based curriculum development), Walker (1971) concludes that a deliberative, naturalistic process of curriculum planning does not commence with a values neutral 'blank slate', but with a set of conceptions and beliefs. He illustrates the process as bottom-up from (i) a platform of conceptions and beliefs, to (ii) deliberation, to finally (iii) design, while acknowledging that these steps are more likely to be random and chaotic. Jackson and Straw's (2002) model derives from their experience facilitating the curriculum development process in higher education and shares with Walker's a focus on the centrality of conceptions, philosophy and rationale.

In practice, curriculum revision is often a more practical option for innovators. This is especially true in the case where lengthy (and often cumbersome) accreditation processes prevail. O'Neill's (2010) work offers insight into the curriculum development practices of academics as well as educational developers, in this context. In this study most participants reported that curriculum revision was rarely a solitary activity, that a team approach was vital and that the head of department was a key player in successful change. Educational developers drew on an eclectic range of theories, resources and strategies to support the process, leading O'Neill to conclude that the approach used cannot be rigidly planned and that successful implementation of a programme requires ongoing monitoring and review.

The affective domain is of particular relevance in the context of curriculum planning for civic engagement. Lamenting what he refers to as 'the atrophy of the affect' in higher education, Cowan (2005: 160) states that the affective domain refers to those 'learning activities, objectives and outcomes which centre upon feelings, emotions, desires or, as an amplification of the last of these, 'values'. Notwithstanding the existence of Kaplan's (1978) taxonomy of the affective domain, Beard et al. (2007) claim that this domain is under-researched and under-theorised in higher education. Barnett and Coate's (2006) theoretical model of the engaged curriculum addresses this lacuna to some extent. This affective domain features explicitly (or implicitly) in the goals of community engaged learning. The experience offers students opportunities to explore and interrogate their own values and preconceived ideas about the nature of the social world. The affective domain and the 'insight' dimension within the National Qualifications Framework share some attributes. The competence of insight has been described by the NQAI, as:

... the ability to engage in increasingly complex understanding and consciousness, both internally and externally, through the process of reflection on experience. Insight involves the integration of the other strands of knowledge, skill and competence with the learner's attitudes, motivation, values, beliefs, cognitive style and personality. This integration is made clear in the learner's mode of interaction with social and cultural structures of his/her community and society, while also being an individual cognitive phenomenon. (National Qualifications Authority of Ireland, 2003)

Descriptors of this dimension are provided for programme developers, by the NQAI, for all ten levels of the framework. The inclusion of this dimension in the framework could be construed as an attempt to make provision for 'being' (Barnett and Coate, 2005), or for the concept of 'capability' (Stephenson, 1998) or to address the development of the affective domain (Krathwohl et al., 1964; Kaplan, 1978; Cowan, 2005). As with concepts such as 'being', 'capability', or 'affect', however, it is often difficult to find evidence of how 'insight' is consciously and explicitly planned for in curriculum design processes, even in the case of pedagogy with an explicit civic engagement focus (Boland, 2008).

### *The role of beliefs and values in the curriculum design process*

The construction of curriculum as a 'value-neutral' text is a well-established convention – or fiction – in higher education. The inherently political nature of the education project is re-asserted by Simon (1994). The role of values and beliefs in the curriculum process is one of the most neglected aspects of curriculum enquiry. In the context of higher education, Toohey (1999) was one of the first to attend to the significance of beliefs, values and ideologies in course design. Values surface in the language used to describe educational goals and in the choices made about what is to be taught and assessed, and how. Toohey identifies a range of philosophical approaches to curriculum including (i) Traditional/discipline specific (ii) Performance/systems-based (iii) Cognitive (iv) Experiential and (v) Socially critical. Each approach carries implicit assumptions about how learning occurs, with implications for how the learning process is organised, how the goals of learning are expressed, how content is organised, the purpose of assessment and the respective roles of teachers and students. In the context of community engaged learning, this potentially extends to include a role for the community partner.

The experiential and socially critical models are of potential relevance in this context. An experiential curriculum is organised around life situations, and is characterised by authentic assessment and a belief in the importance of personal relevance and learning from experience. Socially critical models seek to develop a critical consciousness so that students become more aware of social ills in society and are motivated to alleviate them. Content is drawn from significant social problems of the day and the curriculum is characterised by collaborative group projects; thus manifesting many of the features of Welch's (1996) concept of a transformative model of community engaged learning. The sustainability of innovative – and potentially transformative – curricula in higher education is under researched.

### **Methodology**

Research questions for my doctoral study centred on the rationale for civic engagement in higher education, how a civic engagement dimension was conceived of, interpreted and operationalised within the higher education curriculum and the factors influencing

academics' willingness and capacity to embed the pedagogy in a sustainable way. I have already reported on findings in relation to conceptions of civic engagement (Boland, 2011b) and the significance of academics' orientation to civic engagement for sustainability of the pedagogy (Boland, 2012). This chapter is concerned primarily with the process of curriculum development – how a civic engagement dimension is operationalised within the curriculum, with attention to embeddedness and sustainability.

A multi-site case study was conducted in the spirit of naturalistic enquiry and within the interpretative paradigm (Boland, 2008). Using an approach which combined purposeful sampling and theoretical replication, projects were selected in four different institutions which provided a basis for comparison and contrast in terms of potentially relevant features. Participants (31) were selected on the basis of their relationship to the community-engaged learning (CEL) module within the institution (i.e. embedders, co-operating-colleagues, facilitators, enablers, link persons and strategists) and external actors from the national or international policy context. The central actor in each case was the embedder i.e. the member of academic staff responsible for the curriculum process. Unstructured interviews (41) and documents served as the main sources of primary data. The process of data analysis, using Nvivo7, led to the development of a thematic framework focused on three themes (i) underpinning rationale (ii) the process of embedding a civic dimension within the curriculum and (iii) factors influencing academics' willingness and capacity to embed a civic dimension within the curriculum. The query tools of Nvivo7 facilitated the generation of further analytical categories and the testing of a series of emerging propositional statements, including the relationship between curriculum design, embeddedness and sustainability.

### **The process of curriculum development for community engaged learning**

The origins of community engaged learning (CEL) initiatives within Irish higher education are wide ranging and diverse. In the main they developed organically, from the bottom-up, on the initiative of an individual academic. The metaphor of 'journey' characterises the discourse of those associated with implementing CEL and the image of birthing was invoked more than once – most strikingly in the case of a collaborative multidisciplinary project. As a practice, CEL was generally associated with a pioneering individual who had a keen sense of being an innovator or even a 'naive enthusiast'. Each of the case studies was in the early stages from a marginal, sometimes invisible, position outside the mainstream academic processes towards a position of enhanced recognition and legitimacy within the institution.

### ***Planning for civic engagement – models***

Curriculum planning for community engaged learning is characterised by an organic, incremental and bottom-up approach where academics ('embedders') generally take the initiative, sometimes with the help of colleagues with a defined role in facilitating and/or managing civic engagement in the institution. These 'facilitators' usually work from within teaching and learning centres, student services or a dedicated civic engagement unit. At this nascent stage in the development of civic engagement in Ireland, initiation of projects by community partners is less common – this is changing with advances in the provision of resources (human, fiscal and physical) devoted to community engagement. How best to 'fit' a community engaged learning experience within an overloaded curriculum is one of the many practical issues which exercise aspiring and experienced embedders of civic engagement:

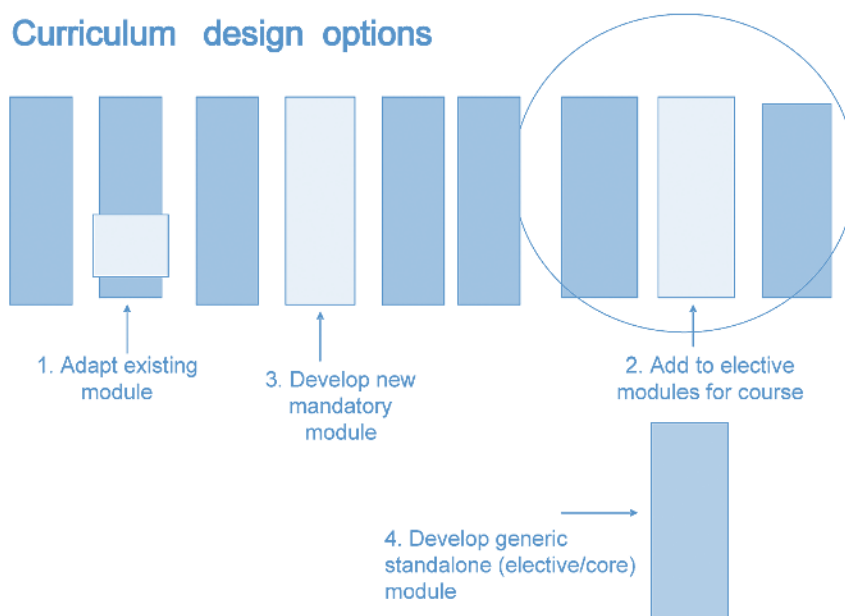


If something goes in, something goes out... [but] nobody wants to give in. Everybody wants to keep loading up the curriculum, but nobody wants to take anything out (Academic leader).

In the high-stakes trading game of programme review, ceding territory to the unproven is rare. One attractive starting point is to adapt an existing module (Option 1 in Fig 5 below). In doing so, academics circumvent the need to submit for validation:

We were changing the content of one module to include something else. So it wasn't a big change. It was done so, I just typed up something and I sent it to the faculty and that's it. And nobody really noticed...except the students, right? But when it was done, everybody noticed (Embedder).

Adaptation strategies include amending the site of learning (to a community setting), the mode of assessment (the project brief) or changing the assessment criteria (to ensure that outcomes related to civic learning are rewarded). Such changes can often be accommodated within an existing module – especially where light-touch quality assurance processes are in place. In some cases, such initiatives remain ‘below the radar’ for some time with the tacit cooperation of enablers such as programme directors. They may not even be explicitly identified as ‘community-engaged’ or as ‘service learning’, especially if the discourse and practice of civic engagement is not well established in the institution. This is what embedders describe as a ‘suck it and see’ approach – a low risk option.



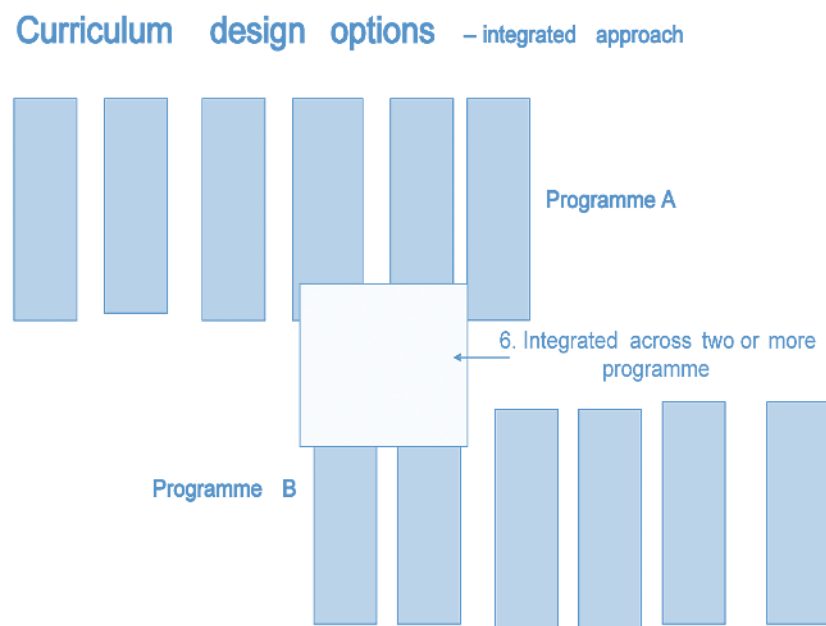
**Figure 5. Curriculum Design Options: 1. Standalone, 2. Elective, 3. Mandatory, 4. Generic**

The development of explicitly identified community engaged modules – as either elective or mandatory – has become a more common feature of Irish higher education in recent years. Whether participation in community engaged learning is optional or mandatory for students is a key decision. Philosophical arguments and logistical considerations are both critical in making such a determination. The decision about student choice also speaks to the issue of rationale and the individual academic's personal conviction regarding the importance of civic, professional and personal outcomes.

The paradox of mandatory participation in a community engaged learning module (which involves activities which are often associated, in the minds of students, with volunteering) was recognised by academics who adopted it. There was a risk of being potentially counter-productive in terms of student responses in community settings. Issues also arose where participation was elective. CEL can prove to be a far more demanding mode of learning with some students gaining lower marks for work completed in more challenging circumstances than their peers assessed by more conventional projects on traditional modules.

The development of a standalone generic module, available to students across the institution is another design option (4), where it can feature as a credit bearing component on a range of different programmes. Standalone generic modules are often closely associated with fostering students' personal and professional development and promoting generic skills such as leadership, planning and communication skills associated with employability as well as citizenship. The generic nature of the module can present some challenges in promoting discipline-specific learning, which can be key to ensuring its legitimacy (in the eyes of students, and academics and managers) and its sustainability within the institution.

With a growing emphasis on multi-disciplinary learning and calls for courses that encourage co-operative learning, CEL offers unparalleled opportunities. CEL opportunities are designed, in partnership with community, to combine the knowledge and skills of students (and staff) from more than one discipline with local community knowledge. While inevitably more challenging to organise, the rewards can be substantial for all concerned.



**Figure 6: Curriculum Design Options: Multidisciplinary across Programmes**

Practical issues, such as the lack of synchronicity between potential modules, sometimes makes it difficult to achieve the goal of interdisciplinarity. Differences in module credits can create other difficulties, when attempting to ensure appropriate credit for the level of demand of the community project work. The challenges associated with collaboration across disciplines and with a number of community organisations, however, are perhaps the most critical.

### Organisational arrangements

A key decision in the curriculum planning process relates to how a learning experience is to be organised and managed. It was possible to identify some key dimensions upon which the approach to organising CEL differed amongst the case study sites:

- (i) The level of internal collaboration
  - Solo: devised and implemented by one academic
  - Collaborative: designed and implemented by two or more academics as a team e.g. on an interdisciplinary theme
- (ii) The nature of the external link with community
  - Unilateral: where student projects/placements were sourced primarily by students, singly or in small groups
  - Bi-lateral: where student projects/placements were sourced and organised in partnership with community agencies.

Where the learning experience was organised by academic staff, in collaboration with community partners, there was much a greater chance (or even an expectation) that links would be maintained from year to year; continuity was much less likely where students selected sites of learning. It was then possible to devise a composite measure of ‘complexity’ of projects by combining the values for internal and external organisation. Collaborative/bi-lateral projects were at the upper end and solo/unilateral at the lower end of a complexity continuum.

External organisation	Internal organisation	
	Solo One academic	Collaborative Team
Unilateral Students source own project	Least complex	
Bilateral Partnership with community agencies		Most complex

**Organisation (Internal and External)**

**Figure 7: Complexity as a Function of Internal and External Organisation**

### Partnering with community

Within the literature, community engaged learning is regarded primarily as a pedagogy and this view is reinforced by most academics engaged in the practice. The imbalance in terms of benefits accruing to students and to community partner/s is widely acknowledged as are potential ethical issues involved in the nature of the ‘partnership’. Metaphors used included ‘parachuting into the community’ (Strategist), and ‘using the community like paint’ (Embedder). Some taken-for-granted assumptions and practices in the conduct of research were exposed, including unforeseen issues in relation to intellectual property, for example. Difficulties arose primarily as a result of lack of clarity of expectations between students, the institution and community partners.

### ***Assessment of reflection***

Assessment is an essential element of the curriculum planning process. The identification of assessment criteria for discipline-specific outcomes proved relatively unproblematic. Assessment of ‘capacity to reflect’ however, – a defining feature of the pedagogy – proved to be the most challenging aspect of the assessment process.

I personally struggled a bit with judging or marking reflection (Key agent).

If it’s not assessed it’s not valued. And if we continue to assess reflection, it might be nice to have a tighter framework (Embedder).

I gave students a rubric that I had gotten from Jenny Moon. Now I’m waiting to see what happens (Embedder).

These difficulties often result in the gradual marginalisation or elimination of this aspect from the formal assessment process. The primacy of discipline-specific outcomes was, at times, reinforced by revisions to the assessment methodology in successive iterations of the project. The experience of the sustainable projects in this study lends support to claims that the redesign of the pedagogy – with an emphasis on measurable, cognitive outcomes – has diminished its ability to pursue legitimately the less traditional outcomes which are associated with civic engagement (Lounsbury and Pollack, 2001; Eyler and Giles, 1999).

### **Embeddedness and sustainability**

The term ‘embed’ implies a degree of permanency and resilience. One conception of embeddedness for a civically engaged pedagogy is that it would be invisible, by virtue of being ‘woven into the fabric’ of the institution. For others, sustainability meant the practice should be able to survive independently of individual academics. Embeddedness can be apparent at both curriculum and institutional level. Proxies for the level of ‘embeddedness’ on two dimensions could be identified as follows:

- (i) Embeddedness within the curriculum: This measure is based on indicators such as the extent to which community engaged learning is established as a defined element of an academic programme and/or how established it has become as an integral/core/mandatory element of an individual module.
- (ii) Embeddedness within the institution: This measure is based on indicators such as the existence of an explicit policy on civic engagement, the provision, position and location of a dedicated unit to support and promote CEL throughout the institution and the prevalence of other examples of CEL within the institution.

For each of the cases studied it was possible to rate the level of curricular and institutional ‘embeddedness’. By combining the level of curricular and institutional embeddedness, it was possible to rank the projects in terms of composite embeddedness, in notional terms, from low to high. Not surprisingly, the more embedded CEL was, the more likely it was to be sustainable. A number of other factors, however, proved important, not least of which was the academic’s orientation to civic engagement (Boland, 2012). The impact of concerns about ‘time and workload’, combined with low levels of ‘recognition’, is at its most acute where academics feel the pressure of a wide range of responsibilities,

including research. The combined impact of these factors tends to be greatest for more complex and challenging projects and in more research-intensive institutions. Exceptions to this generalisation may be explained by reference to orientation of an individual's motivation and/or the centrality of civic values to the discipline of the parent programme.

Of particular interest was the finding that issues related to teaching, learning and assessments were low on the list of identified challenges. Significantly, such issues did not feature in the decision to continue or discontinue. A strong disciplinary focus – which served both as a rationale and as a strategy – was a good indicator for sustainability. Embeddedness within the curriculum, in such cases, was often achieved at the expense of some civic engagement goals.

The fact that it is possible to infuse a pre-existing module with a community engaged learning element is testament to the adaptability (or calculated lack of specificity) of existing curricula and to the capacity of academic staff to work creatively around limitations. A certain reticence was detectable, amongst both embedders and academic managers, about committing to community engaged learning as a methodology in a curriculum document which had a defined lifetime, or for a course which may need to be transferable to other staff, if circumstances warranted. The challenge of articulating intended outcomes for an experiential and experimental curriculum is not to be underestimated. Collectively, these factors engendered tentativeness in the design of the curriculum, primarily in the interest of flexibility. This strategy contributed to the uncertainty and invisibility of community engaged learning in some cases, with consequences for its embeddedness within the curriculum and, by extension, within the institution. This situation is changing as more and more institutions commit to the engagement agenda, devote resources to support embedding it within the curriculum and provide assistance to academics seeking to develop community engaged curricula.

The prominence which Walker (1971) and Jackson and Shaw (2002) afford to beliefs and values in the curriculum process was confirmed by the influence of embedders' beliefs about education on their conception of civic engagement. These beliefs were more tacit than explicit, in both their discourse and their practice, and were rarely reflected in curriculum documents. This phenomenon is not unique. In two of the four cases, the actual mode of teaching and learning (as community engaged) was not stated within the curriculum document. More significantly, however, the civic-oriented goals and learning outcomes were rarely made explicit. Problems arose where assessment methods and/or marking criteria were ill-suited to ensuring appropriate recognition of students' achievement of deeper (and at times unexpected) outcomes arising from their engagement.

## Conclusion

Curriculum development, when embedding civic engagement, is generally organic, incremental, bottom-up and often characterised by a certain tentativeness. It is a highly localised and individualised, with the beliefs and values – orientations – of curriculum developers impacting on choices made. A range of more 'practical' organisational considerations impact significantly; all of these have implications for the sustainability of the practice. Community engaged learning – in terms of its goals and principles – represents an exception to the atrophy of the affect in higher education and the promotion of students' 'capability' remains the overt focus. The experience of practitioners confirms the challenge which the affective domain poses in the process of curriculum development and implementation, with the attendant risk of marginalisation of assessment of civic as

well as personal learning. Many of these issues of curriculum design are inextricably tied to fundamental, unresolved issues of rationale and speak to the need to develop more robust tools for assessing such outcomes.

Community engaged learning has proven to be a valuable learning experience for students and an effective vehicle for providing beneficial ‘service’ to community partners, which meets identified need. The ‘service’ and the ‘learning’ aspects are generally both well provided for. As a pedagogy, it also offers opportunities to question the circumstances, conditions, values or beliefs at the root of community’s or society’s needs. The extent to which this happens will be largely reliant on the curriculum intentionality of the relevant academics in collaboration with community partners. In such cases, the experience has the potential to prove transformative for students; the impact of our efforts is realised long after our students have moved on in the world.



**Figure 8: A Strategic Approach to Sustainable Civic Engagement**

In Ireland, the pedagogy can be found in an ever expanding range of higher education institutions, under the specific label of ‘community engaged’ or ‘service’ learning. One of the persistent issues however, is the extent to which community engaged learning is often perceived as something students do, without sufficient recognition of the important role academics play as agents of civic engagement, as manifest in curriculum development practice. The role of community partners remains underdeveloped. Moreover, the potential for a transformative effect for community is, perhaps, doubtful. I make the case that, on its own, the pedagogy has limited scope for enhancing the capacity of a community to change the circumstances, conditions and values which are at the roots of their needs. The chances of so doing are, however, greatly enhanced by engaging with community partners in a strategic way across all the domains of higher education, over a sustained period of time, with all the resources of the institution – not just students. Moreover, capacity is greatly enhanced by an approach to partnership which is founded on reciprocity and equality, including but not exclusively, in the development of curricula for civic engagement.

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## **Response 1 to**

### **Curriculum Development for Sustainable Civic Engagement**

by Robert G. Bringle, Appalachian State University, Boone, North Carolina.

#### **A Guide for Curricular Development**

Although experiential education and community-based education (e.g., internships, clinical training) are not new types of pedagogies in higher education, there are some new developments in these arenas that present unfamiliar challenges that warrant attention, examination, explanation, support, guidance, and development. Community-engaged learning is one of them. This has been borne out in the experience of American higher education during the past twenty years with many institutional, state, regional, and national initiatives that continue to provide assistance to individual faculty members, departments, disciplines, and institutions to develop community-engaged learning ('service learning' in America) initiatives in particular, and civic engagement more generally. There are other examples of infrastructure to support civic engagement around the world. The Tailloires Network is an international organization of colleges and universities devoted to strengthening the civic roles and social responsibilities of its members. In Asia, the United Board for Christian Higher Education, Service-Learning Asia Network, and the Asian Network of Engaged Campuses offer conferences and forums. The Ma'an Arab University Alliance for Civic Engagement supports universities in the Arab world. Australia (Australian Universities Community Engagement Alliance), South America (Centro Latinoamericano de Aprendizaje y Servicio Solidario), Canada (Canadian Alliance for Service-Learning) and South Africa (South African Higher Education Community Engagement Forum) are examples of parallel developments.

Campus Engage has established leadership for Ireland and more broadly. It offers workshops and conferences that convene practitioners and researchers, produces resources and scholarship to advance the field as well as develop capacity, and envisions change within higher education. Boland has been integral to these activities in Ireland and she has contributed internationally as well. This chapter provides an additional significant contribution to the corpus of intellectual and scholarly work by focusing on curricular development, the core of civic engagement. Consistent with other approaches to the topic (e.g., Bringle & Clayton, 2012; MacLabhrainn & McIlrath, 2007), she begins with the troublesome topic of nomenclature, differentiates the unique qualities of community-engaged learning (i.e. civic values) from other forms of community-based instruction, adeptly outlines pedagogical design options, and then uses case studies and inductive methods to offer recommendations and guidelines for developing and implementing community-engaged learning modules. This analysis allows her to deal with some of the details of course design and implementation (e.g. structure and revision of an existing course, reflection, community placements and partnerships) as well as broader issues that this pedagogical approach implicates (e.g. social values embedded in reciprocal relationships with the community, civic values, institutional embeddedness and sustainability of the work, interdisciplinarity). Correctly, Boland also acknowledges the degree to which colleagues in the community need to play an enhanced role as co-designers, co-educators, and co-assessors in community-engaged learning, much more so than has been the case to date or than typically may occur with other forms of community-based learning.

As community-engaged learning and community-engaged research become more prevalent in Ireland, Boland's research provides an example for the type of versatile research and scholarship that can contribute to an enhanced understanding of what is occurring across institutions. As instances of community-engaged learning expand, they will provide the opportunity for other scholars and researchers to broaden the sampling base and conduct additional research studies in the future. Much will be gained through a better understanding of this new pedagogical approach when research begins to also test and refine theory-based research questions that contribute to a broad knowledge base that attends to issues associated with students, faculty, community partners, institutions, and partnerships associated with community-engaged learning (Clayton, Bringle, & Hatcher, 2012a; Clayton, Bringle, & Hatcher 2012b).

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## Response 2 to

### Curriculum Development for Sustainable Civic Engagement

by Juliet Millican, Deputy Director (Academic) The Community University Partnership Programme (CUPP), University of Brighton.

Boland's article 'Curriculum Development for Sustainable Civic Engagement' provides a valuable analysis of the processes through which curricula can be designed or adapted to incorporate critical pedagogies and reflection. She gives a comprehensive introduction to the range of service/community engaged learning programmes that exist in Ireland and elsewhere, the terminology used to describe them and their importance in the development of students' values. While publications concerning engaged and community based learning are frequent within the US, material from other parts of the world is patchy and this article has relevance outside of the context in which it was written. Boland contributes to the wider debate by taking the reader systematically through the curriculum design process and using models to illustrate 'how best to fit engaged learning into an already overloaded curriculum'. As such it is of interest both nationally to Irish institutions who are actively working to share their own experiences of engagement, and institutions internationally who may be just beginning to consider how to approach this.

Of particular interest is Boland's acknowledgement of the demise of affective learning within higher education – 'the atrophy of the affect' (Cowan 2006 p 160) – and how this remains under-theorised. She comments on how 'an emphasis on measurable, cognitive outcomes, (in Higher Education currently) – has diminished its ability to pursue legitimately the less traditional outcomes which are associated with civic engagement (Lounsbury and Pollack, 2001; Eyler and Giles, 1999), and this is broadly true. Many academics shy away from dealing with the more personal or emotional aspects of learning, despite emotional intelligence becoming an increasingly important area in professional development. Bourner's 'Bridges and Towers, Action Learning and Personal Development in HE' (Bourner, 1998) makes a useful distinction between the 'domains' of higher education (knowledge about the world and skills of how to exist in the world; knowledge about self and skills in how to manage self) and is a rare voice in defending the legitimacy of affective and personal learning within the higher education curriculum. Boland's useful illustrations of how engaged curricula might be introduced within already overloaded university programmes, tied to discipline specific and measurable learning outcomes, would be of interest to academics in many parts of the world.

Boland also touches on the importance of reciprocity and the impact of community engaged learning on the community itself. She mentions the value of community involvement in curriculum design and this is an area that could have been explored more fully. Stoeker's work (Stoeker and Tyron, 2009; Stoeker, 2003) identifies a typology of approaches to working with communities and outlines the dangers of a charity or service delivery model where students become involved in welfare provision without being encouraged to question issues of social justice. Boland's article could have benefitted from a more rigorous analysis of the potential and actual role of community organisations in the development and delivery of engaged curricula, and perhaps this could be an interesting area for further research.

Like many articles on community engaged learning she also makes many claims regarding its contribution to active and critical citizenship and student employability and

yet there are few studies to document this. A key area for further research would be some kind of comparative investigation looking at longer term outcomes for students who have and have not benefitted from engaged learning programmes. A small research project by Bournier and Millican (2011) made some steps in this direction but their findings were inconclusive. A larger scale study that sought to compare and document how students reacted after graduating, their involvement in their communities, their choices for work and their attitudes towards inequality may go some way to evidencing to what extent some of these claims might actually be true.

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## Reader's Response

### ***Emerging Issues in Higher Education III: From capacity building to sustainability.***

### **A Reflective Response: What have we learned and what must we now do?**

Saranne Magennis, National University of Ireland Maynooth.

Corresponding author: [sp.magennis@nuim.ie](mailto:sp.magennis@nuim.ie)

The period between the publication of the first volume of *Emerging Issues* in 2005 and the current volume in 2013 has been characterized by a rapidly changing landscape, requiring flexibility, adaptability and creativity in higher education. This experience in the past ten years has not been unique to Ireland, nor indeed is the experience of change limited to the recent past. It is well documented in the literature. Barnett, for example, has explored, and continues to investigate, our changing understandings of the university, and of higher education more broadly, from a critical and social philosophy standpoint (Barnett, 2010, 2012; Barnett and Di Napoli, 2008), and Reed et al. offer interesting perspectives on the management of higher education (Reed, Hillyard and Deem, 2007). Fostering positive change, change that is transformative, is a challenge that requires us to reflect on what we are seeking to achieve, as well as on the strategies that can lead to the accomplishment of these goals. Reflection on successes and the steps that were taken to facilitate individuals, teams and groups of colleagues to transform their practice is a crucial stage in the process of developing higher education. In this volume, *Emerging Issues in Higher Education III: From capacity building to sustainability*, we have a wealth of such reflection.

The purpose of this closing chapter is to offer a reflective response to the work encompassed in the book from the perspective of a reader and a learner. The chapter is structured around two questions, coming essentially from an education policy viewpoint, rather than the perspective of a practitioner in the area of teaching and learning development within higher education. These questions are best thought of as dialogue rather than interrogation, while they are permeated by the author's perspective, that perspective is not seen as central or dominant and the questions are asked as though in conversation with the texts: what have I learned from this book and what directions does it signpost for the future in higher education?

A core difficulty with being an excellent teacher or in facilitating change in a department or an institution lies in the fact that we cannot see clearly what is to come. We spend our lives reversing into the future, judging and choosing on the basis of the present experience and the past as we have lived or observed it. This is often coupled with a tendency to deal with issues that are important at present – urgent tasks like marking, setting exams, teaching, and reacting to changes that seem to come out of nowhere. This is not to suggest

that we are running blindly into the future; Renfro and Morrison (1983) remark:

Although changes may seem to come upon us without warning, experience shows this is rarely the case. Unfortunately we often disregard or misinterpret the signals of change. We tend to spend our time on issues we perceive to be most important right now; we fail to scan our surroundings for changes that are in the early stages of development. The flood of problems that forces us into crisis management makes concern for emerging issues to appear to be a luxury. It is not. It is a necessity. (p.1)

The current book, like its predecessors, is a broadly based and insightful engagement with the 'emerging issues' as they develop today. It reflects the range of collaborative and co-operative projects and programmes that have been a feature of the teaching and learning community in EDIN and in its precursors. It does not situate these in a vacuum, rather, understanding the need to know the past and present in order to lead into the future, the book explores the history and development of EDIN and the circumstances that led to its establishment. This connectedness with the past and present as a foundation for change, and the necessary leadership to implement change, is noted by Watson in the his conclusion to his Epilogue to Kubler and Sayers *Higher Education Futures: Key Themes And Implications For Leadership And Management* published in 2010 by the Leadership Foundation (Kubler and Sayers, 2010). Speaking about the leadership roles of the senior management teams in universities he says that 'managing the future' involves:

- Understanding the present and the past condition of your institution.
- Getting the resources right, so that there is a zone of freedom of action in which to operate.
- Understanding the terms of trade of the business, especially its peculiar competitively cooperative nature.
- Helping to identify a positive direction of travel for the institution.
- Engaging progressively with that direction of travel (through what Peter Singer describes as an 'ethical journey'. (p.248)
- Optimistically trusting the instincts of the academic community (of students as well as staff) operating at its best. (p.47)

Working with others, rather than alone, offers significant benefits in addressing the limitations visited upon us by our inability to see directly into the future. Collaborative working gives a broader, more multifaceted view of past and present and supports a more surefooted navigation into the unknown future. The gathering of different perspectives supports the identification, interpretation and discussion of the inklings of what may be to come. *Emerging Issues in Higher Education III: From capacity building to sustainability* is shot through with this focus on collaborative effort as a core means of engaging with the point where the present meets the future and the potential for creative action at its greatest.

This leads me to another striking feature of the volume; many of the chapters are collaboratively written and they include international responses. The collaborative nature of the approach seems to me to embody what Lee Harvey has also called for (Harvey, 2005: 274), namely, 'an integrated process of trust that prioritises improvement of learning.' This process of trust is visible in the manner in which the papers are collaboratively written, in the adoption of international responses as a enriching form of dialogue and in the referencing by the authors to other papers in the volume which demonstrates the team



based approach to the writing that has been chosen by EDIN.

One of the most marked changes in teaching and learning in the past decade or so must surely be the manner in which the digital world and the educational space have become intermeshed. For readers of a certain age, who predate the photocopier, remember cassette recorders as an innovation and think of clouds as a meteorological phenomenon (white puffy things in the sky), the brave new world of acronyms like VLE, MOODLE, OER, MOOC and NDLR speaks of a dramatic change. The chapters that examine the pervasiveness of technology in the world of higher education teaching and learning are particularly useful. They map the territory of a significant shift in teaching and learning, but they also promote a reflection on the impact and value of the digital world for both teaching and learning. Whether an in-house VLE or a national and shared repository, these technologies must be seen as tools and enablers for creative engagement if they are to move beyond the earlier understanding of their role as an effective way of sharing content.

A further benefit of this volume is that it presents a number of studies that are based on significant data sets, in many cases with potential for ongoing longitudinal work. In an area such as teaching and learning development, that is often characterized as 'soft', it is good to see a challenge to that characterization. Without any loss in terms of the innovative qualitative work that has been associated with teaching and learning developers, a growing emphasis on the quantitative tools that are available and that can add to our understanding of the area is a clear indication of capacity building. Whether this is applied to measuring student engagement, to the impact of technologically mediated learning or the staff views on a range of issues relevant to them, it adds powerfully to our means of understanding the landscape of higher education and, where needed, changing that landscape.

Higher education, though perhaps less so than other elements of the public service world, has been the subject of negative attention that has emphasized the cost, rather than the contribution that it has made to society, and more narrowly, to the economy. The criticism sometimes seems to imply that higher education policy operates on the basis of autopilot, pretty much continuing on a preset course with little or no human intervention for much of the time. It is worthwhile in these circumstances to set out the evidence of considerable development in response to changing times and circumstances. *Emerging Issues in Higher Education III: From capacity building to sustainability* demonstrates the significant changes that have been accomplished in the area of teaching and learning development, in growing the individual and collaborative capacities of practitioners in the sector and in embracing new pedagogies, new technologies and new ways of listening to the voices of students and colleagues through quantitative and qualitative research.

The answer to the second of my questions – what directions does the publication signpost for the future of higher education – is difficult to summarize. The clichés of constant change are clichés precisely because they reflect our experience. They are not new – from the great image of the river in Heraclitus to the wisdom of Schulz's Charlie Brown who sums it up in the weary observation that 'That's the secret of life ... replace one worry with another' (Schulz, 1981). The core lessons would seem to be that all those engaged in the work of teaching and learning development are on a difficult journey, and that journeying is best undertaken together. The investigations and initiatives described and evaluated here will be of great value to colleagues who continue to grapple with change, especially in this persistent period of austerity. The achievements, successes and insights will, I think, bring a renewed sense of hope and energy to the development of teaching and learning in higher education as an endeavour and to the reader as an individual practitioner.

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## Contributors

**Susan Bergin** is a lecturer at the Department of Computer Science, National University of Ireland, Maynooth. She holds a Masters and PhD in Computer Science and a Postgraduate Diploma in Higher Education. Her research interests are in Computer Science Education, with a focus on: early tertiary learners; self-efficacy and self-regulation in learning; collaborative learning approaches; novel teaching strategies; and using methods for assessment that are authentic, transparent and student-focused. In 2009, Susan won a national award in recognition of her Excellence in Teaching, given by the National Academy for Integration of Research, Teaching and Learning (NAIRTL) and presented by President of Ireland Mary McAleese. Prior to joining NUIM, Susan worked as a Research Scientist at Bell Labs Ireland, Alcatel Lucent. Her work there included generating solutions to telecommunication problems using statistics and machine learning and also project management of software development projects.

**Josephine Boland** is Senior Lecturer in Education in the School of Medicine, National University of Ireland Galway, specialising in the field of curriculum and assessment, including in the context of medical education. She leads a curriculum mapping research and development project in the School, serves as director of the Masters in Clinical Education and leads an undergraduate module in Digital Literacy for Tomorrow's Doctors. Her research interests, activity and publications centre on civic and community engagement. From her doctoral research – which focused on embedding civic engagement within the curriculum – she has extended her scholarship and practice to include community engaged research. As a founding member of a community of practitioners in community engaged research in NUI Galway she has supported and undertaken collaborative research projects with community partners, using participatory research methods. Drawing on her research and her professional experience she provides continuing professional development on embedding civic engagement within the higher education curriculum, in Ireland and internationally, most recently in Lebanon. Josephine served as a member of the board of Campus Engage, is secretary of the Education Studies Association of Ireland (ESAI), a member of the Irish Network of Community Engaged Research and Learning (INCERL) and of Educational Developers in Ireland Network (EDIN).

**Kevin Casey** is a lecturer in the School of Computing at Dublin City University. Before his current position, he served as senior lecturer at Griffith College Dublin for 9 years. Having completed a BSc and MSc in Computer Science at University College, Dublin, he began lecturing at GCD in 1994. He left in 2002 to take up a position as a researcher in the School of Computer Science and Statistics at Trinity College, Dublin. This work culminated in the award of a PhD in Computer Science from TCD in 2005. Having since returned to lecturing, he continues his research in the areas of virtual machines, compiler optimisation, web-development, and cloud computing. Kevin is a member of the steering committee of the International Committee in Engaging Pedagogy (ICEP) and is an active member of the teaching and learning community.

**Alison Clancy** works in the School of Nursing, Midwifery and Health Systems University College Dublin. She teaches within both the Undergraduate and Postgraduate programmes there. Her interests lie in all areas of higher education, particularly teaching and learning innovations such as problem based learning, enquiry based learning and cooperative learning approaches. She is also interested in the area of academic identity, learning spaces and slow time within higher education. Her clinical experience is within

the area of diabetes, where she has been innovative in the development of diabetes programmes for nurses at postgraduate level.

**Robert Cosgrave** is an eLearning and Evaluation consultant who specializes in Evaluation and Technology Assisted Learning projects. Robert's career began with a PhD from University College Cork, and then work in Dublin in the IT and eLearning fields. In 2002, Robert moved to Wellington, New Zealand, where he spent five years working on, and eventually managing large, public sector evaluation projects in the Education and Social Development areas. In 2007, Robert moved back to Ireland and since then has worked on a variety of projects, including providing elearning expertise to Universities, and conducting evaluations of training programme, particularly Skillnets and NAIRTL. While working in UCC, Robert initiated the VLE national research project.

**James Cronin** teaches in the School of History and in the Centre for Adult Continuing Education, as well as providing courses for the general public. He is particularly interested in the decoding the disciplines approach in the professional development of History graduates who tutor undergraduate students. James and Bettie Higgs have worked on several courses and projects together. In particular they run interdisciplinary modules for postgraduate students who teach. These run over 6 month periods to allow for enquiry and reflection, by both students and staff.

**Yvonne Diggins** is an educational developer at the University of Limerick with over ten years development experience and over six years higher education teaching experience. Through her role, Yvonne designs and develops digital teaching and learning resources; provides EICT support, services and training to academics; and actively measures the impact of technologies within the classroom. In 2011, Yvonne was co-winner of the NDLR's National Award for Exemplar Innovation in Teaching and Learning in conjunction with the HEA. Yvonne's work has been published extensively on both a national and international basis. Yvonne is currently in the final stages of PhD research in the area of EICT policy for higher education teaching and learning in Ireland. Yvonne is a member of Educational Developers Network in Ireland (EDIN), Irish Learning Technology Association (ILTA) and Digital Curator Vocational Education Europe.

**Roisin Donnelly** is Programme Chair of the MSc Applied eLearning and the MA in Higher Education in the Dublin Institute of Technology. For over 10 years she has been supervising MSc and MA students to completion and is currently co-supervising a PhD student in Computing. She is a fellow of the UK Higher Education Academy and delivers consultancies in learning and teaching development. She has a wide range of publications to date reflecting her specialist teaching/research interests, including supporting undergraduate and postgraduate supervision, virtual and blended learning communities, curriculum design and ePortfolios/teaching portfolios. <http://www.dit.ie/lrtc/aboutthelrtc/staff/roisinsdonnellyspage/#d.en.28760>

**Alison Farrell** is Teaching Development Officer in the Centre for Teaching and Learning, National University of Ireland Maynooth where she also manages the University's Writing Centre. She has been directly involved in Education since 1994 and has worked in a wide range of pedagogical areas at all levels. She is a founding member and co-chair of 'Facilitate' (the Irish Enquiry and Problem Based Learning Network), a co-founder and

member of the Executive of EDIN (Education Developers of Ireland Network), chair of the National Undergraduate Research Conference steering committee, and a member of the Executive Committee of AISHE (the All Ireland Society for Higher Education). Her research interests include literacy, academic writing, collaboration and institutional policy and power in higher education. She holds a PhD in English.

**Tom Farrelly** is a Social Science Lecturer at IT Tralee, with a strong interest in technology enhanced learning and blended learning. He works as an occasional Lecturer in TCD and has previously taught at Mary Immaculate College (UL) and on the Grad Dip/MEd in Adult Education Programme at the Open University. He has recently published a chapter in *The Digital Learning Revolution in Ireland: Case Studies from the National Learning Resources Service* titled 'Incorporating real-time student feedback into the design of digital resources', published by Cambridge Scholars Publishing in 2012. Tom has collaborated with the VLE national research project from the outset.

**Marian Fitzmaurice** is a lecturer on the MA in Teaching and Learning in the Institute of Technology, Carlow and works with other colleges as a consultant on learning and teaching issues in higher education. She has a range of publications reflecting her teaching and research interests, including teaching in higher education, undergraduate and postgraduate supervision, academic writing and publishing, narrative research and professional identity.

**Mary Fitzpatrick** is the Regional Teaching and Learning Advocate in the Centre for Teaching and Learning in UL. Her key area of expertise is supporting the professional development of teaching and learning among academics. Her main areas of responsibility include supporting faculty through key initiatives which help academic development such as, teaching portfolios, peer observation and teaching awards. She is course director for the Specialist Diploma in Teaching, Learning and Assessment, and teaches modules on peer observation of teaching and learning, and reflective practice. She is currently leading the Regional Teaching Award project for the Shannon Consortium and has worked in industry as a management consultant bringing this expertise to her teaching at the Kemmy Business School. She completed her PhD in the area of learning and inter-organisational networks and her research interests are broad and include professional development, academic identity and classroom innovations.

**Nuala Harding** is the Learning and Teaching Co-ordinator in the Athlone Institute of Technology. She is a member of the Learning and Teaching Unit which works collaboratively in the support and advancement of learning and teaching in the institute. Nuala is programme co-ordinator for the Postgraduate Diploma in Learning, Teaching and Assessment. Her current educational research, teaching and publishing interests include the development of academic practice, student engagement and technology enhanced learning. She holds a Bachelor of Education (Hons) and an MA in Third Level Learning and Teaching. Nuala is currently Chair of the Educational Developers of Ireland Network (EDIN), Chair of the Learning Innovation Network (LIN) Postgraduate Diploma Sub-group and is a member of the Irish Learning Technology Association, (ILTA).

**Bettie Higgs** teaches Geoscience in University College Cork, and is Co-Director of The Teaching and Learning Centre. She is particularly interested in aspects of curriculum

design that build students' capacities to be integrative thinkers and learners and has aligned this with the idea that there are disciplinary and interdisciplinary threshold concepts. This work includes assessment strategies, pedagogy and staff development for integrative learning.

**Sylvia Huntley-Moore** is Director of Staff Education and Development in the School of Nursing and Midwifery, Trinity College Dublin. Her professional responsibilities include promoting good practice and innovation in teaching, learning and assessment, curriculum design and evaluation. Her current research interests are approaches to learning and teaching development in research intensive universities.

**Pauline Joyce** is a Senior Lecturer and Director of Academic Affairs at the Institute of Leadership, Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland. Her role includes overseeing planning and implementation of programmes across the Institute and its campuses, having knowledge of the international higher education scene. She is also a Programme Director for the MSc in Leadership in Health Professions' Education and an action learning facilitator for students undertaking dissertations. With a professional background in nursing, Pauline completed a nurse tutor's degree, a Masters in Education and Training Management, a Fellowship in Nursing and Midwifery and a Doctorate in Education. She has wide experience in curriculum development and education of healthcare professionals. Pauline's doctorate research focused on learning approaches of postgraduate healthcare professionals in an outcomes-based curriculum. She has an active interest in leadership and education and has published and presented internationally on these topics.

**Ekaterina Kozina** is a postdoctoral researcher in Higher Education Research Centre (HERC) in DCU, in Higher Education and Lifelong Learning Research. She received her PhD from the School of Education, Trinity College Dublin in 2010 for her research into Early Professional Socialisation of beginning teachers in Ireland. In the past two years in HERC, Ekaterina was the main researcher on the SIF-funded large scale survey of the professional development and interests of academic staff across 8 higher institutions of Dublin Region Higher Education Alliance (DRHEA). In 2011 Ekaterina was awarded a SAGE prize for her research paper at ECER – annual European Conference on Education Research in Berlin.

**Theresa Logan-Phelan** is currently the manager of the eLearning group in Trinity College Dublin, working to promote, facilitate and support the use of new technologies in quality teaching while enhancing student learning. Theresa's work involves the administration and support of the College VLE Blackboard Learn. She also contributes and advises on issues of policy and innovations in technology enhanced learning (TEL) within the College. Theresa was awarded MSc IT Education in 2002. Her area of interest and research is the use of technologies to support communication and speech disorders. In recent years, she has lectured on 'Critical Reflection & e-Portfolios using Web 2.0' on the Trinity Higher Diploma/Masters in Higher Education.

**Saranne Magennis** is the Director, Higher Education Policy Unit at National University of Ireland, Maynooth. The Unit's primary focus at present is the development of collaborative projects in the University with agencies serving people with intellectual disabilities. Saranne is the current Editor of the All Ireland Journal of Teaching and



Learning in Higher Education (AISHE-J). In this role she seeks to encourage new writers on teaching and learning in higher education and promote a culture of sharing of experience and expertise through the journal. She is a founder member and a former President (2008-2011) of AISHE. In her former role as Director of Quality at NUI Maynooth she established and developed a range of University services including quality assurance, staff development and training, educational development and institutional research. Prior to joining NUI Maynooth, she worked in the Queens University of Belfast and the University of Ulster. In her early career, she taught Philosophy in a number of tertiary education settings in Ireland.

**Ann Marcus-Quinn** is a researcher at the University of Limerick and worked with the National Digital Learning Repository (NDLR) from 2006 until 2012, at the Centre for Teaching and Learning, University of Limerick. Her research interests include Open Educational Resources (OERs), usability, instructional design and the use of ICT at post-primary level.

**Claire McAvinia** is Learning Development Officer in the Learning, Teaching and Technology Centre (LTTTC) at Dublin Institute of Technology. She is Coordinator of the Postgraduate Diploma in Third Level Learning and Teaching, and contributes to the MSc Applied eLearning as well as workshops and other programmes offered by the LTTTC. She was previously Learning Technologist at NUI Maynooth, mainstreaming the adoption of a virtual learning environment (Moodle) across the university, and also managing a wide range of projects in teaching development and e-learning. She has taught at undergraduate and postgraduate levels, and supervised students at Masters level. She holds a BA and PhD from Trinity College Dublin, an MA from the University of Kent, and postgraduate certificates in learning and teaching from University College London and the Open University. Her current research interests are in educational technology generally, Activity Theory, and the development of digital literacies amongst staff and students at third level.

**Larry McNutt** is the Head of School of Informatics and Engineering at the Institute of Technology Blanchardstown, Dublin. Prior to joining ITB, Larry was Senior Lecturer at the Institute of Technology Tallaght, Dublin and has held lecturing positions in Southern Cross University Australia, Letterkenny Institute of Technology, Dublin City University and Capella University. A Fellow of the Irish Computer Society, his research interests and publications include information technology, distance education, educational technology, instructional design and computer science education. Larry studied computer science in University College Dublin (UCD), holds a Masters degree in Education from the University of New England, Australia and a Doctorate in Education from the National University of Ireland Maynooth.

**Maura Murphy** is the Manager of the Centre for Teaching and Learning and in her role works closely with faculty members, heads of departments and other key groups to champion and support excellence, innovation and enhancements in teaching and learning activities within UL and throughout the sector. She is dedicated to heightening the profile and value of teaching activities, by providing support and recognising and facilitating all those involved in teaching and learning in UL. Among her key areas of expertise are learning preferences analysis, student coaching and essay writing. She is a qualified MBTI and Firo-B Practitioner and regularly presents learning styles, active

learning and critical thinking workshops to students across the Shannon Consortium. She is co-author of 'How to be a Student', and The Ultimate Study Skills Handbook both published by the Open University Press.

**Ciarán O'Boyle** is Director of the RCSI Institute of Leadership and is Professor of Psychology. He established the first Department of Psychology in an Irish Medical School in 1985. He has been a Visiting Professor at the School of Dental Science at Trinity College Dublin, Vice Dean of the RCSI Faculty of Medicine and a member of the RCSI Senior Management Team. He is the National Educator for the RCSI Advanced Trauma and Life Support Programme. Before joining RCSI, he was a senior research psychologist at the UCD Department of Psychiatry at St James's Hospital in Dublin. He holds a BSc and a PhD, both from UCD, a Diploma in Theology from the Milltown Institute of Theology & Philosophy and a Diploma in Organisational Leadership from the University of Oxford. He lectures extensively in Ireland and internationally and he has published over 70 peer-reviewed papers, two books and numerous book chapters.

**Ciara O'Farrell** is the Senior Academic Developer in Trinity College Dublin where she also lectures in the CAPSL/School of Education Higher Diploma/M.Ed in Higher Education and leads modules on curriculum, assessment and supervision, and reflecting on practice in learning and teaching. In addition to co-editing this volume, in 2013 Ciara also published on professional development for academic developers; supporting academics to write for publication; the role of teaching and learning in Ireland; and developing an institutional framework for supporting supervisors of research students. Her current research interests include: promoting and supporting pedagogical research in higher education; academic integrity in the FYE; supporting student writing in higher education; reflective practice and SoLT for academics; teaching awards; and teaching philosophy statements. Ciara holds a PhD in English.

**Fiona O'Riordan**, in her capacity as Head of the Centre for Promoting Academic Excellence, in Griffith College, works with lecturers on all aspects of curriculum design and exploring engaging pedagogy. In addition, Fiona is programme director for the Postgraduate Diploma in Training and Education, and lead tutor on four of the modules. Since co-founding ICEP (International Conference for Engaging Pedagogy) in 2008, Fiona has worked as an active member of the conference committee and is the 2013 Conference Co-Chair. She completed her M.Ed in 2008 and is now pursuing an Ed.D in QUB; her research area is engaging the educator in curriculum design discourse. Prior to her role in education Fiona completed a BABS and MBS, and worked as Human Resource Manager for Parfums Yves Saint Laurent for over ten years.

**John Panter** was associate professor and Head of the Centre for Staff Development at the University of Wollongong until 1998 when he moved to Trinity College Dublin. He is now a freelance educational consultant. He is a life member and senior fellow of the All Ireland Society for Higher Education. His primary research interest is currently the role of academic development in the modern university.

**Aileen Patterson** is Lecturer in Medical Education and Curriculum Advisor in the School of Medicine, Trinity College Dublin. Her interests include curriculum development, novel teaching and learning methodologies, evaluation practices and staff development.

**Damien Raftery** is a Lecturer in the Department of Business at the Institute of Technology Carlow, where he teaches mathematics and statistics. A graduate of University College Dublin (MSc in Mathematical Science), he was awarded an MA in Management in Education from Waterford Institute of Technology in 2003. Currently Damien is partially seconded to IT Carlow's Teaching and Learning Centre as eLearning Development Officer, where he promotes and supports technology-enhanced learning including the use of the Institute's virtual learning environment. He has been actively involved with the Irish Learning Technology Association and the National Digital Learning Repository. Damien is working on his doctorate and his research interests include quantitative literacy, learning and teaching in higher education, and elearning. A book chapter he has written on the educational use of screencasts has been published.

**Angelica Risquez** is an educational developer at the Centre for Teaching and Learning at the University of Limerick, with a PhD in Educational Technology and ten years of experience in the field of educational development. Angelica's work has been published extensively in high impact journals, and she is a co-author of a book in the field of teaching scholarship. She is a SEDA Fellow, secretary of the Educational Developers of Ireland Network (EDIN) and a member of the Irish Learning Technology Association steering committee. This is supported by her current role where she champions and influences teaching, learning and scholarship with a special emphasis in technology enhanced learning. She is responsible for the implementation and promotion of the learning management system and plagiarism prevention software at her institution, and manages the online student evaluation of teaching process.

**Maria Slowey** is Professor and Director of the Higher Education Research Centre (HERC) in Dublin City University (DCU) where, from 2004 to 2009, she was also Vice-President for Learning Innovation and Registrar. She is currently Chair of DCU's Age Friendly University (AFU) initiative. Maria has published widely on issues relating to widening access, innovation in higher education and comparative analysis. She has been a consultant to the major international agencies, including: UNESCO, the EC, the ETF and the OECD, where she is a member of the Advisory Board for IHERD (Innovation in Higher Education and Research for Development). She was previously Professor and Director of Adult and Continuing Education, Founding Director of CRADALL (Centre for Research and Development in Adult and Lifelong Learning) and Vice-Dean Research in the University of Glasgow. She is active in learned societies and, in 2009, was elected Academician of the British Academy of Social Sciences.

**Elaine Vaughan** has worked in English language teaching for over fifteen years, in Poland, México, Ireland and the UK, and currently lectures in TESOL and Linguistics at the School of Languages, Literature, Culture and Communication in UL. She also worked on the Shannon Consortium regional teaching and learning enhancement strategy as teaching and learning advocate for Mary Immaculate College (2007-2010), as well as Research Fellow in Teaching and Learning (2010-2011). She still maintains a fruitful working relationship with the CTL at UL with key areas of interest such as using teaching portfolios and peer observation of teaching as tools for pedagogical reflection, and active engagement in learning for all teaching contexts, from the one-to-one consultation to large group teaching. Her research interests are broad, and include investigating the discourses of teaching and learning, corpus-based discourse analysis and the pragmatics of Irish English.

**About EDIN:** The Education Developers in Ireland Network (EDIN) is the network of educational developers or teaching and learning professionals in Irish universities, institutes of technology and other higher education institutions. The network supports and enables members to share experience and expertise. EDIN's mission is to support, enhance and influence the field of academic development and practice. EDIN achieves this by informing policy and practice in teaching and learning in Higher Education, and by collaborating in research and the development and dissemination of resources. This is the third publication in the Emerging Issues series.

**About this publication:** *Emerging Issues III in Higher Education: from capacity building to sustainability* is a collection of 16 chapters from 32 authors, representing 12 Irish Higher Education Institutions; it also contains 15 international commentaries. The book is evidence of the valuable work currently being undertaken in teaching and learning in Irish Higher Education and a celebration of these achievements. This publication reflects the situated reality of teaching and learning in higher education in Ireland today, encompasses the hopes and ambitions for the area in the future and captures the mood or zeitgeist which both supports and constrains it.

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