

## **Deepening the circle: what does it mean to lead learning?**

**Presentation to Post-Graduate Diploma in Educational Leadership (PDEL)  
group in UCC**

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I would like to thank Finn for giving me this opportunity to talk with you this morning, and for allowing ample time for a professional conversation with you as a group.

For if you take only one point away with you today, it is how vital it is that we make the space and choose the time to talk to teach other, to students and parents, on a regular basis about our profession. We all know that it is not as easy as it sounds. Neither is it as simple.

What do I mean by this somewhat cryptic opening? Well, take a look at this short clip from one of David Attenborough's programmes for the BBC:

<https://prezi.com/dwl13ugs9yhw>

This clip encapsulates the fundamental challenges to unlocking the full potential of professional leadership in the profession. On the one hand, we have this creation of exquisite beauty, a circle of patterns, of expression by an individual - who has laboured night and day to achieve his goal. So on initial reflection we applaud what the fish has done and wonder in amazement at the diversity of nature. But then we step back a bit and ask ourselves - how have we come to see this? The answer is through the collaboration of a vast number of individuals, with a great diversity of professional skill sets, who have enabled David Attenborough to weave his magical narrative around this.

So on the one hand, we have a circle that represents individual identity in a unique way that still resonates with their peers; this circle is something amazing, incredible and creative. Over the longer term, however, we know that this is not sustainable.

On the other we see and hear the power of collaborative diversity to unlock learning for vast numbers of people. There are learnings in this for our understanding of teachers' professionalism, of leading learning.

In terms of the title I have chosen for today, we each of us need to have our own circles, our own safe spaces that we can return to throughout our lives. This is an essential element of well-being and sustainable living. However, life being what it is, we need and want to interact with our fellow human beings. Therefore, those circles inevitably overlap with those of others as we go about our lives, personal and professional. This can lead to confusion and chaos where nothing connects with nothing; or it can lead to ever increasing patterns of beauty that sustain us as communities. For this to happen, we need to help each other to deepen our respective circles, together, through both individual and collaborative reflective practice. Once we do that, we will be in a much better position to answer for ourselves and the learners in our care what it means to lead learning - together.

In that light, I could compare myself to the puffer fish - I have worked hard at crafting this presentation for you this morning. But it will count for little or nothing if it does not resonate with you at some deeper level, if it does not make you think or talk. And the only way that will happen is if we have a good professional conversation about the thoughts I put before you today.

There are a number of threads emerging from this that I will try and weave throughout what I have to say and what I would like to discuss with you:

- **The relationship between the internal and the external; the individual and the wider community** - the journey from the heroic individual effort to the collaborative, and back again! This is very much in the space of the overlapping zones or intersections between our respective circles. But note of course that how we view any one of those circles is inevitably shaped by the others that now overlap with it. In other words, our own sense of our identity, and how others view it, are both shaped by the process of relating to others. If you have come across the areas of distributed leadership, or instructional leadership, you will have a sense of what I'm getting at here. In this context, deepening the circle works at a number of iterative levels - deepening your own circle; that of your school community; that of your profession; that of wider society.
- **Professional leadership of diversity** - the Council's structure is predicated on the idea that teachers should lead conversations about teaching and learning - in partnership with a wide diversity of stakeholders, including parents and learners. That's the national policy framework. How can you iterate that in your daily practice? I'll come to that later.
- **An openness to always learn.** This comes through in every word that David Attenborough utters in any of his programmes. He has been making these for the best part of 50 years, and yet he still seems to retain a wonderful and inspiring openness to learning, an infectious

enthusiasm for what he does. He is feted as a global expert in his field - yet he openly acknowledges that he could not do what he does without a huge and diverse team behind him. I remember on one series how he returned to Madagascar where he had made his first ever nature programme, after a gap of some 40 years, to see what he had wished to see back then - the pygmy chameleon - and his childlike sense of awe looking at this tiny creature.

Jamie Cullum, the singer, is in the same zone. He is famous around the world for his musical performances, and he has sold countless albums. Yet he recently launched a series of videos on YouTube under the heading of the Song Society whose *raison d'être* is “learn, learn, learn.” Even though both David and Jamie, despite their age difference, could happily retire on the strength of their achievements, they choose not to – they choose to continue learning to deepen their circles.

- **Foster our collaborative strength for the future** - This is a learning from watching and reflecting on the video that I will come to later. But the innovations that many teachers are pioneering - as evidenced by FÉILTE, the Instructional Leadership programme, the Learning Schools project - need to be shared and talked about by all those who care about teaching and learning. And we need to embed this dynamic for connecting teaching and sharing learning on a systemic scale as a matter of urgency. The stakes are too high to countenance any undue delay.
- **Reflective practice** - on the surface, this is just a short video clip about the efforts the puffer fish goes to attract a mate. Given an opportunity to focus and reflect, and the right context to do that, it becomes an

opportunity to grow professionally and learn. I hope it will be clear to you as I speak how vital reflective practice is to professional leadership for the future.

So we have the individual and the wider community; professional leadership of diversity; always learning so we can always teach; collaboration and reflective practice.

And I would like to use these threads to weave the following patches together:

1. What kind of challenges are facing us in the here and now? What kinds of challenges are likely to face us in the future?
2. What does it mean to lead? What does it mean to lead learning?
3. How can talking about learning, together, help us make that meaning?
4. Are there any examples where we are trying to draw these strands together at a national level?

### **What kinds of challenges are facing us now?**

I think that it is quite logical, before considering what may be an ideal model or concept of leadership, to tease out some of the challenges that leadership will have to address. Based on conversations with teachers over the past few years, there are at least 3 significant challenges that I think are facing the teaching profession over the next 10-15 years.

1. Initiative overload
2. The relationship between the self and the other
3. Understanding and view of teaching as a profession - how complex is it?

### *Initiative overload*

Many teachers talk of their sense that there is too much change going on, that we need to pause and dial it down. Others feel that we need to be alert to the opportunities around us, and to actively work together to shape the unknowable future. Both extremes, taken to their ultimate conclusion, have the potential to stifle if not completely extinguish innovation and sustainable leadership. The world is changing every day, societies are constantly evolving - so we cannot push the pause button indefinitely.

On the other hand, constant innovation, without any pause, will either lead to burnout and breakdown, or to the mindless implementation of some attractive idea without thinking through all the consequences.

Is there a lot happening? Yes. Is there too much? Well, that depends on our presentations and perceptions. I have acknowledged on a number of occasions that there is an ongoing challenge for organisations such as the Teaching Council to join the dots between the various changes that are happening, to make explicit the implicit links and overlaps between them. And if, as Paul Brady tells us, the world is what we make it, there is an opportunity for the profession and the Council to work ever more closely together in realising these implicit links in the daily reality of teaching and learning. The only sustainable way of doing this is through systemic collaboration.

In a nutshell, our common goal is to demonstrate clearly at every level of the system that teachers can continue to be trusted, not only to teach in the here and now, but to be trusted to lead how that process of teaching will change to help us all adapt for the wider challenges of the future. And that leadership, in order to be sustainable, will have to be exercised in partnership with parents, students and all members of the wider school community.

Which brings us nicely to the challenge of the Self, the Other and how they relate to each other.

### *The Self and the Other*

Whatever your views on the reforms currently taking place, it seems to me that a lot of the debate and argument is rooted in the tensions between the self and the other, the internal and the external, and the extent to which standards and confidence can be maintained in a balance between the two poles. Indeed, the debate seems to centre around what that balance should be, and how it might evolve over time.

Given the pace of change that I have just alluded to, I don't think that any one answer at a given point in time is going to give us the guidance and support we will all need into the future. One way or the other, answers will emerge in the near to medium term future. But beyond that horizon, what will happen? Some may say that we should cross that bridge when we come to it. I think that would be unwise and would run the risk of leaving us ill-prepared for whatever challenges await us.

I think for that reason we need to come back to that idea of systemic facilitation of professional conversations that will enable us to adapt that balance in an appropriate and professional way from time to time.

Bound up with this tension is the concept of collective professional confidence. At a conference earlier this year, I was asked about the most recent global trends about accountability. The questioner said it seemed to equate to accountancy, and he stated that many teachers had a fear that this would become the norm in Ireland.

There are some international trends that we would not want to see replicated here in Ireland in terms of teaching and learning – no requirement for qualified teachers in some countries; the removal of teacher majorities on their professional standards bodies.

But what struck me the most about this question, and the fear underlying it, was the lack of confidence it seemed to imply that some teachers have in their own professional voice – the idea that simply because other people and other countries think, say or do a certain thing, it will automatically become the case here.

This concern finds echoes in the call for external validation of what teachers do, motivated by a sincere professional desire to make sure that standards are maintained. And I think that we need to be clear at a national level as to how a flexible but robust standards framework will clarify how the internal and the external will work together to enhance teaching and learning, in a way that empowers continued innovation in the profession, by the profession, in the context of the wider school community.



This of course begs questions such as – what does each of us mean when we talk about teachers’ professionalism? And do we all understand what the other person means? And how often do we talk about that?

### *Understanding of teaching as a profession*

This may strike some of you as an odd challenge to mention. "*What's the problem,*" you may be asking, "*teaching is highly valued in Irish society, we are the second most trusted profession in Ireland.*"

This is true. But if you step back and listen to some of the debates around education in Ireland, and teaching and learning in an international context, I think we need to reflect on how we both maintain that trusted status into the future, and how we re-imagine what that trust will mean into the future, and its purpose. Parents and the wider public are taking an ever increasing interest in what happens in teaching and learning - this is a reflection of the education they have received in the past. This ever increasing interest is leading to ever more searching questions. As a profession, teachers need to reflect on how they would like to engage with the conversations that can and should result.

Some countries like Ireland believe that because teaching is so complex and so important for the well-being and prosperity of society, you must allow sufficient time and ensure high quality preparation for teacher education – 2 or 4 years now in Ireland.

Other countries however, think that you can become a teacher in 6 weeks! This latter view displays a shocking level of ignorance of the complexity of teaching, and worse, it does a huge dis-service to the sustainable future of the most vulnerable learners in our society.

There is a balance to be struck here however. We don't want to mystify teaching, for fear that we will fall into the trap described by George Bernard Shaw, who said that the professions are conspiracies against the laity. We need to safeguard the standards of our profession, but to do that properly, we need to engage with parents and others who are not teachers.

Is there an opportunity in addressing this challenge? I believe that there is.

It's in the creation by teachers of their own collaborative communities of practice, where they explain in accessible language just how complex teaching is. There's also the establishment of an embedded culture of research in teaching, so that all teachers have easy access to learning that will give them the confidence and knowledge to articulate their professional voice together. In this way, research can help teachers to support conversations about teaching and learning that include parents and learners. And it can do so in a way that will enable all people taking part in the conversations to do so in a spirit of what Philippa Cordingley calls "reciprocal vulnerability."

Some people may be a little suspicious of statements such as these. They may be concerned that the understanding of leadership in them, particularly professional leadership, is quite fluid. So we should now reflect on what each of us means by leading learning, and where we go from there.

### **What do we mean by leading learning?**

Let's start by exploring what we might mean by the core concept of leading.

I recently finished a book, "Leadership 2030 : The Six Megatrends You Need to Understand to Lead Your Company into the Future" by Georg Vielmetter and Yvonne Sell. In it the authors talk about the six most significant megatrends in social and economic development until 2030 and what they mean for our understanding of leadership in a variety of contexts.

Intriguingly, in light of the point about professional confidence, the authors talk of how very few job titles if any carry the word "leader", no matter how high you may go in a hierarchical structure. We talk of manager, director, CEO, president. To me, this speaks to a fear of the responsibility of leadership - few if any of us want that explicit or sole responsibility. Even the word "príomhoide" is rooted in the idea of the leader as "primus inter pares."

But if this is an accurate reading, why do we hear so much evidence of principals under severe stress? Of principals returning to the classroom after a relatively short period of time in post? What does that say about the actual practice of leadership as opposed to the vision I have just outlined? We might discuss that in the Q and A to follow. What I think we can say based on this insight from the authors of Megatrends is that properly understood, leadership needs to flow through the entire group; that to be fully leveraged, it must be seen for what it is, hidden in plain sight - a deeply distributed concept. Note for example the recent commentary on Ireland's performance against Argentina in the Rugby World Cup, and how much of our loss was ascribed to the loss of leaders in the group e.g. Sexton, O'Connell.

Seen as a hierarchical, even heroic concept, the anecdotal evidence is suggesting that school leadership as it is currently enacted is not sustainable. It appears to be foundering on the perception that teaching and leadership are two distinct concepts with no overlap. In large schools, the perception may be that *the principal leads, and we teach*. Teaching principals of course, face this challenge of leading and teaching in a particularly challenging way every day.

This of course begs the question - What does it mean to be a follower? To me, it means much the same thing it does to be a leader – to listen; to share; to have the courage to take the next step, in spite of your fears, or because of your hopes, or both. Many hold to the view that a leader must be followed, and by implication, that the leader must show others where they think they should be. When I asked teachers earlier this year for their views on what leadership should be, there was a strong consensus that authentic leadership is more distributed than that. In my first year or so in this job, I held the view that leadership was about empowering others to have the courage to shape their own future. And that still holds for how the Council wishes to work with the profession.

But in my preparation for a seminar on leadership organised by NUIM, RCSI and DCU earlier this year, I came to realise at both a personal and professional level that leadership is about enabling and empowering the voices of others; but **also** about connecting with those who have come before us and who come after us, so that we ALL shape our future, together.

This idea of leaders passing on the flame of something particularly important is a powerful one that resonates down the ages in the stories we read and tell of heroic feats, of great sacrifices for the greater good, of statues on plinths to wonderful individuals who did great things.

But as Brian points out in the Life of Brian, we're all individuals, we **all** do great things.

And as Conor McGregor states so clearly, even in the most individualistic of sports and achievements, all success is the fruit of collaboration.

*"I honestly believe there is no such thing as self-made. I believe that is a term that does not exist. For me it certainly doesn't. The people who have been around for my whole career have helped shape this moment. This night and this moment is for them." Conor McGregor after UFC 189 fight*

So what really distinguishes a follower from a leader? The authors of Megatrends argue that over time, the relationship will become far more fluid than it is now - or at the very least, it will need to. For me, the distinction is rooted in space and time - your position in the group; your responsibility; your experience, but only if you have reflected on that experience.

The Council's Strategic Plan echoes this with the 3 R's of professionalism - research; reflective practice; relationships. In any given moment, the leaders are the ones who understand that the quality of your relationships with others both supports your resilience in the face of adversity and enhances your collective impact as a leader.

Of course, for an organisation to function, for decisions to be made, some one person does need to take responsibility for making the final call, particularly when there are differing or opposing viewpoints amongst the team as to what should be done. But in my experience, the sustainability of those decisions will rest on the quality of engagement that leads up to them, and on the quality of

the flow of communications and relationships between all members of the team.

So that's what leading is about. What about leading learning?

These are the pictures that some of you sent me to represent your understanding of what it means to lead learning:

<https://prezi.com/dwl13ugs9yhw>

If you look for common threads through the images, I think that the following themes can be identified:

- A number of distinctive parts integrating to create a similar but different whole. This speaks to the concepts of collaboration and integration, where each part retains its distinct identity but also makes up part of the bigger picture.
- The idea of leading learning as empowering learners to make new choices in a safe and flexible framework. This would be consistent with the Council's policy thinking.
- The idea of teachers working as recognised professionals with professionals from other fields to bring learning alive
- Care – that we are all people at the end of the day, and a good leader always remembers that. One of you used the phrase in your submission, *“Taking an interest”*. Atul Gawande (2007) talks of asking the unscripted question. Interestingly, this same person talked of the importance of “trust” – of how a good principal, and indeed leader, starts with the assumption that you are doing a good job.

- Teachers as learners. One of you has a sign on your desk to remind you that the best leaders are always learning.

- The fear perhaps of excessive external scrutiny and the pressures of time

For me, to learn is to change; to learn in the 21st century is to have the freedom to choose the change you make. In a collaborative culture focused on sustainability, the freedom to choose the change you make must be tempered by our responsibility to each other in the here and now, and to the generations to follow. And that's where the paradox of leading learning comes in - it involves empowering learners to embrace the unknowable future by understanding more about what surrounds them now, and what has come before them. It's about enabling a choice that is both freely exercised and tempered by collaboration, to be informed and inspiring.

*Fine, you may say, all this talk about unknowable futures and paradoxes may get us thinking, we may even buy the fact that it's more about how we relate to each other than it is about a definitive answer to any of the questions that perplex us. But bring us back to earth. What should be we be doing more of, that we are we not doing at the moment, in order to lead into the future?*

Believe it or not, I think that the answer to that question is deceptively simple - talking about teaching and learning.

**We need to talk....**

*Surely you can't be serious, you say - we talk about education and our jobs all the time. To be honest, we're sick of talking about it!*

In response, I would ask you to step back and reflect on the conversations you have had in the last week with your colleagues in staff rooms. And ask yourself, how many of them were explicitly about teaching and learning? And how many of them had such an impact on you that they got you to thinking about your practice, and wanting to experiment with some new resource or methodology or piece of research? How many colleagues did you have those conversations with over the last seven days? How many conversations have you had with your students and their parents in the last seven days about the complexity and nuance of what you do?

I don't know what the optimum number is in each of those questions. There is such a thing as too many! But if you are struggling to answer any of them, or if the answers are in low single digits, or worse, then we need to reflect on why that is, and what we want to do about it.

I think that we talk endlessly about resources, buildings, iPads, prefabs etc. And don't get me wrong - all of these issues are important in supporting teaching and learning. But that's precisely my point - they are there to support teaching and learning, not supplant them. Our conversations need to start with how we think teaching and learning should look, feel and sound, and then critically examine all the offerings out there as to how they align with that collective vision for an innovative future for teaching and learning.



Atul Gawande, author of “Better – A Surgeon’s Notes on Performance”, has an interesting take on professional agency and the power of human relationships to effect systemic change.

Gawande's belief is that we are not leveraging our current store of knowledge and learning sufficiently well to enhance the impact of our practice. The cutting edge breakthrough is all fine and well, it will grab the headlines - but have we made full use of the countless other cutting edge breakthroughs that have been made down the years? This of course is bound up with the interface between research, policy and practice.

If you read only one book between now and Christmas, read this one by Gawande. He closes with five pointers for unlocking our own professional potential to make real progress into the future (Gawande):

1. Ask an unscripted question.
2. Don't complain.
3. Count something
4. Write something
5. Change

The only "change" I would make to his list would be to the last step - I would say "Talk, change, talk".

In fairness to Gawande, the very last line of his book is (Gawande, 208) –

*See if you can keep the conversation going.*

Talk about the answers you get to your unscripted and scripted questions. Talk about what you count. Talk about what you write. Talk about why you count and reflect on those things. Reflect on what you hear and what you think. And then ask more questions, count something else, write a little more, and then try something new. Make a change. I can't predict what will happen, and chances are, neither can you. But you will have a hunch. In that cycle of asking, counting, writing, thinking and talking, you will be giving yourself every chance to identify what is working, and what is not, and to lead learning in partnership with parents and students in ways that you can imagine, together.

### **Can we do this?**

Even if you are bought into this contingent, ambiguous re-imagining of leadership, you may rightly be looking for some evidence that this can be done; that it is possible to maintain and enhance standards, to unlock innovation, by embracing a new model and understanding of leadership. On the face of it, this model seems to demand a massive leap of faith, and runs counter to the more traditional understandings of how organisations work, including schools.

If you look at Droichead, our new pilot model of induction, at FÉILTE, the annual Festival of Education in Learning and Teaching Excellence, at the Teachmeet movement around the country, at Research Alive!, at the engagement by teachers in the consultation process in Cosán, the draft framework for teachers' learning, you will see that time and again, teachers not only are capable of embracing this model of distributed, fluid leadership -

they are doing it already. Based on our experience, they will embrace and lead in this manner when the following conditions are satisfied:

1. You need to make space and time to have an open conversation with them about what you are planning to do, and most importantly why.
2. Ideally, these initial conversations should take place in the context of a blank sheet i.e. before you commit your thoughts to paper, explore with them what you have in mind, why, how etc.
3. Allow time for them to reflect on that and to tease out their questions with you, to realise the meaning of what is proposed, together.
4. Reassure and show them that supports and resources will be in place to help them make this meaning with you.
5. But take every opportunity to help them rediscover what they themselves are capable of as professionals.
6. Reassure and demonstrate your commitment to them to seeing what you create together through to full realisation. Show them that you are going to help them deepen their own circles and those of their neighbours in the school community over time. And then as a leader at a particular point in time, step back, but not out, and reflect on what has been created, and facilitate conversations about that.

## **Conclusion**

It can be easy to dismiss all of this and say - *it ain't broke, so we don't need to fix it*. You can even turn my argument on its head and say that because so

many good things are happening, we don't need to do any more, or think any differently, just keep doing what we're doing. It will all be fine in the end.

But then I think of Vartan Gregorian who once quoted Dante (Gardner, 45):

*Hell is a place where nothing connects to nothing.*

If the road to hell is paved with good intentions, it's probably because that lots of well-intentioned people are doing lots of good things, without joining the dots. We are left with lots of good things that leave us feeling better about ourselves for a little while, but not entirely sure as to why, or to how it will help us to make progress at a systemic level.

Given the challenges I outlined at the beginning, and I'm sure others that you can think of, this scenario is not a sustainable approach to the future. It will serve us well as long as things continue to be "fine". But as we know from our recent history, things will not always be "fine". And if we are to avoid repeating the mistakes of the past, we need to be prepared to change how we think, talk and act.

I have outlined one model for how those new ways of thinking, talking and acting might look and feel; and have shown how they will be as ambiguous and uncertain as the unknowable future we so often worry about. For this reason alone, leading learning into the future needs to be rooted in a rigorous, ongoing commitment to reflective practice, and to a deeply collaborative professional culture.

Duncan Watts, author of "Six Degrees: The New Science of Networks", has said that (Watts, 2003, Location 2354):

*In science, just as in life, one cannot simply fast-forward the tape to see what the ending looks like, because the ending is written only in the process of getting there. And like a successful Hollywood movie, the end, even when it brings a certain sense of resolution, is merely a prologue to the sequel.*

Andy Hargreaves and Henry Braun, in reviewing a project on behalf of the Council of Ontario Directors of Education (CODE), have spoken of how (107)

*Leading for all cannot be undertaken by a few on behalf of everyone else. Leading must also entail leading by and with all...*

Drawing these two statements together to sum up, it seems to me that leading learning needs to be about the how as much as the what. It needs to acknowledge that it will be an ongoing, endless process. And to avoid the sense of burnout that threatens in that scenario, it needs to involve everybody who cares about teaching and learning, across space and time.

The key questions now is - how will you make sense of this? How will you work with your colleagues and learners to realise this vision of leading learning? I look forward to discussing your thoughts with you now.

**Tomás Ó Ruairc**

**Stiúrthóir / Director**

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