

Annual General Meeting of Carrick-on-Shannon Education Centre

Professional Opportunities and Challenges for the Future

Address by Teaching Council Director, Tomás Ó Ruairc

11 March 2015

Good evening. I am delighted to be here this evening to mark the AGM of Carrick-on-Shannon Education Centre.

Professional opportunities and challenges for the future – I am reminded of the quote by William Ward about stones where he said:

We can throw stones, complain about them, stumble on them, climb over them, or build with them.

What I take from this is that the future is very much what we make of it. While the future is unpredictable, it is very much within our control. Any cursory study of history will show clearly how the decisions our ancestors have made, and how they have played out, have shaped the world we see, hear and feel today. So it will be for the decisions that we make, how we make them, and the impact they will have on those who have yet to come.

To quote Paul Brady, the world is what you make it! So although it may be impossible to define the future, we can state with a large degree of certainty that it will be our future. At the same time, it is important to bear in mind the impact we hope to have on the professionals of the future.

All this thinking about the future and our impact can bring any number of reactions – some of us will strain at the leash to get stuck in and work with others to shape that future for what we believe will be the better. Some of us may decide to accept each day as it unfolds and simply make the best of it. Others may quake at the prospect of all of our fears being realised.

And some of us may be overwhelmed by the awesome power and responsibility that comes with the realisation that the world is what you make it. In that case, we tend to crave an external force or agent to do the greater shaping of the future, and leave us to get on with living and creating our own world within that reality. There is a certain comfort that comes with that, for better and for worse. If things go well, we can carry on as we are, heedless of the external force. If things go wrong, we can blame someone else.

In this light, the professional opportunities and challenges for our future that I will discuss this evening all pivot around this core dynamic – relationships between the internal and the external - between you and yourself (reflective practice); you and the other – professional colleagues, leaders, Inspectorate, parents; the internal and the external – between the school and the wider community; the school and other schools; the school and the “system” – however you define that. How you view this dynamic and these relationships will determine how you view the challenges and opportunities that I will discuss this evening.

Me, I view this dynamic, and these relationships, as a myriad of opportunities to learn, develop and grow. This resonates with the Council’s understanding of professionalism as a rigorous pursuit of ongoing improvement, led, guided and supported by people with a particular set of knowledge, skills, attitudes and dispositions - teachers.

Given that view, and that context, an opportunity is anything that enables us as communities of practice to learn and also to help others to learn, in a spirit of collaboration; challenges are those things that make us stop, think, reflect and therefore learn; or they can be things that make that learning more difficult than it needs to be.

The final crucial piece before I come to concrete examples is to clarify that learning happens best when there are strong healthy relationships between those who are teaching and those who are learning; so to come at this another way, professional opportunities support and enable good relationships; professional challenges can hamper good relationships. If however, they are approached in the right spirit of reflective practice, they can ultimately lead to better relationships. The key is that everyone has to be committed to learning and to ongoing improvement.

Ground zero

So having established what future we are talking about, and how we can recognise professional opportunities and challenges, where are we starting from? Are we starting from ground zero, trying to establish professional collaboration? The great news is that we are not. Take a look at this picture from a BBC clip on YouTube.

This shape has been created by a puffer fish working 24 hours a day for 7 days to entice a mate. He needs to work at this rate to counter the effects of ocean currents. When I saw this and learned how it is made, I was amazed. Here is the most amazing discovery that has been going on beneath our feet for eons, yet only now are we learning about it, thanks to the amazing team that the

BBC has to make programmes like this, along with the unique magic that David Attenborough brings to bear.

As the puffer fish and BBC both show in vastly different ways, and as we all know in teaching and learning, the simplest and most beautiful things are often the most complex. And they therefore take a huge amount of work. The video shows that much of what we are seeking to realise in terms of teachers' professionalism is going on behind classroom doors as we speak. What we need to do is to make explicit what has been implicit for far too long. We need to empower teachers to shape a new language to describe what they do; and we need to facilitate them in talking to each other and to the wider community to bring learning alive.

So I am here to give you a sense of what lies behind the classroom door, both to celebrate it for its own sake, and also to help give you as people who care about teaching and learning the courage and confidence to keep going; to paraphrase George Bernard Shaw, to connect, connect again, connect better. At the end I hope that it will be clear that there are wonderful things happening out there, led by teachers in co-operation with others; that there are still many challenges to be overcome, especially in terms of leadership; and perhaps leave us with some questions that might guide our reflection as we seek to build on our achievements in addressing those challenges.

Challenges

As you can tell, I have a somewhat optimistic view of challenges – they are opportunities to learn and improve. So what I intend to do is to touch on the challenges that appear to me to be the most significant, and then identify the

trends in teacher professionalism that I think are best placed to address these challenges.

1. Initiative overload

Many of us and our colleagues have this sense that there is too much change going on, that we need to pause and dial it down. It has to be acknowledged that there is a truth to this reality – perception is reality as my father has so often reminded me! Some of us have a sense that the pace of change is if anything going to increase. As I saw on a poster one time, *we live in an era where the only constant is change.*

In so far as this is a reality for many teachers, we need to acknowledge that and reflect on how we can best address it.

Firstly, national organisations such as the Teaching Council need to be more explicit in clarifying the linkages and overlap between the various changes in train – Droichead, SSE, Junior Cycle Reform. In a nutshell, we are saying that those closest to the site of teaching and learning are best placed to mediate public policy in that space, within a clear, robust but flexible framework of standards. It is all predicated on the notion that teachers can be trusted to lead the process of enhancing their own standards.

By focusing on the well-being of teachers, and by working with others to support deep reflective practice, we can help counter the stress that comes from this sense of initiative overload.

2. Lack of confidence in self; wrong type of relationship with the other (excessive reliance) –

At a recent conference 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.

What is needed to counter or make the most of this challenge?

Again, a clear focus on **reflective practice**, so that teachers have a clear idea of what is really in the best interests of the students they teach; **an emphasis on well-being**, that will enable teachers to find the headspace and confidence to engage in professional conversations with each other and with the external other, all in the best interests of the teaching and learning experience of their pupils.

3. Different views of the importance and complexity of teaching –

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, with reconceptualised programmes.

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.

Where is the opportunity in addressing this challenge?

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. The best part is that we know this is happening already, as I will show in a moment.

The other point to note here, and that I hope will be clear in the examples that I mention, is that the key to realising the full potential of what the Council's work means for teaching and learning lies in the hearts of teachers; it lies in what they do, day in, day out.

So let's now look at concrete examples of the opportunities I have mentioned for teaching professionalism:

Vibrant communities of practice

Droichead

Droichead is the name of our new proposed model of induction and probation for newly qualified teachers (NQTs). The two main points to note here are:

1. This is about re-imagining how NQTs are inducted into the profession of teaching. It's about the process, more than the outcome or sign-off. It's about better ongoing support and guidance for NQTs – so that their teaching can be the best it possibly can be for the children in their care.
2. Droichead is about this richer, deeper process of learning being led by teachers themselves, as they know best the context in which learning occurs in the schools in which they work.

Droichead has grown from 52 schools across primary and post-primary last year to 150 this year, with a waiting list now forming. On 29 April we will be hosting a Shared Learning Day for schools who are interested in taking part. If you want to know more, please get an expression of interest form from the NIPT or send an email to the Teaching Council.

It is fair to acknowledge that the process to date has not been without its challenges and difficult moments. Some teachers made it clear to us that they would never engage in such a process. Others were interested but were unsure about how or where to begin. And others took the brave first steps with us last

year, so that they could learn, so that they could help shape the process, and so that they could teach their fellow professionals.

Probably the best example I can give of the promise this process holds for us all, in terms of the potential of teachers' professional leadership, was on the issue of quality assurance. The Council had originally envisaged that the Inspectorate would engage with a sample of NQTs who had completed the Droichead process and verify that the same standards applied. When this was explained to the primary schools in year 1 of the pilot, there was what I can only describe in the best possible terms as a professional revolt. Every single teacher in the pilot said that they would not accept this, and their rationale was grounded in their own confidence about their professional judgement. Essentially they were saying – you trust us to run the Droichead process; we can see the potential in it; why are you second-guessing our judgement? Such was the strength of reaction that within 24 hours, we had changed the quality assurance process.

Research

There are some great promising developments to note in the area of research for teaching and learning. These are of vital importance.

I think that the embedding of a culture of research in the profession is the single most important strategic challenge facing it this century.

And there is evidence to indicate that teachers are coming to this view as well. Some months ago, for another presentation, I put out a call on twitter, asking teachers to tell me what research meant to them and why it mattered – with the hashtags #researchmeans and #research matters. Please tweet your own

thoughts now and we might get a conversation going. But what I saw to date from teachers included the following:

Research means...

- Having the confidence to keep going or try something new.
- Looking at why we do things in the manner in which we do and asking if we could do better.
- Exploring a topic critically, systematically, ethically and reflecting on the findings' implications for educational practice.
- Finding new and better ways to facilitate teaching and learning, constantly innovating new ways to engage students.
- Critical Reflection + Rational Inquiry + Honest evaluation = Constructive and Informed Iteration.
- Critical thinking about what we are doing in ed and why we do it.
- Questioning, experimenting and sharing knowledge to inspire and aid progression.
- Researchers should be gathering practical experiences and adding to body of knowledge for now and future teachers.
- Critical reflection to improve or enhance our practice.
- The ability to see if other perspectives from around the world are working and what we can learn from them.
- First and foremost access to research that already exists for teachers.

- Encouraging teachers to read, discuss and implement (try) ideas and share outcomes with colleagues and students.
- Action research Plan / Act / Observe / reflect as groups of teachers involving students – making explicit.
- A global community of reflective practitioners sharing knowledge to improve practice.

Such a diverse and wide range of definitions of what research means to teachers. But if you step back and look at them again, I think the following underpinning strands are clear in all of them:

Research in teaching and learning is:

- About access and accessibility!
- Tentative / contingent / uncertain – asking; having confidence; questioning; to see if x is working;
- Reflective – asking [ourselves] if we could do better; critical thinking
- Collegial / collaborative – including students! – global community of reflective practitioners; why WE do things the way we do; sharing learning
- About improving / making a difference

For my part, expressed in twitterese – Research means thinking, exploring and talking to learn something new about something now, and teaching it to others. Note that from the Council’s point of view, research is intimately bound up with the act of teaching, of sharing, of learning. While learning for its own sake should always be a joy, research in, of and for teaching and learning must

have an impact so that learning can be a joy for all learners, not just those who happen to succeed by a particular understanding of “research”. So, a “systematic culture of research embedded in the profession” does not mean that every teacher does a Masters, or Ph D – it means a culture where teaching and learning are brought alive, fired by the energy unleashed when great research and great practice support and inform each other. This supporting and informing happens when researchers and teachers talk to each other in a way that acknowledges the professional standing of both, the learning opportunities for both, and the responsibility they all have towards learners.

Research Alive!

In May of last year, in collaboration with the NCCA (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment) and CES (Centre for Effective Services), we hosted a conference on the theme of Research Alive!

This is an initiative where we wanted to find out how teachers were engaging with research in the here and now, and to explore new ways of encouraging and facilitating that engagement. We brought teachers, researchers and HEIs together and deliberately mixed them up in groups to discuss the relevant issues. The conversations were incredible, and on the day we had a clear sense of another good professional revolt!

Teachers said that they wanted access to research, and most importantly, critical engagement with that research.

The first question we answered in September 2013, with the introduction of free access for all registered teachers to the EBSCO Education Source.

We have just renewed that for another year, and are expanding the service to include leadership. Over 6,000 unique IP addresses have used the service to date.

The second, as you might expect, is taking a bit longer. We have been working at it ever since, but it is taking time. As part of our learning from the conference, the NCCA, the CES and ourselves committed to reflecting and sketching our thoughts as to where we would go next. The insights that I gleaned from the conference included the following:

- Teachers who are interested in research are beginning to find their voice in questioning the discourse of research at third level. Not in an arrogant way, but at the same time, interrogating the rationale for what currently counts as educational research, and wondering why it does not seem to be more focused on impact in the classroom, where it really matters for teachers.
- Diversity of community seems to be essential to the dynamic of Research Alive! We made a conscious effort to have a mix of teachers, HEI staff members, researchers and stakeholders at the conference, both in plenary session and in each of the small groups. This facilitated a rich and engaging discourse.
- There was a clear sense from the teachers that research should not just be about improving practice. It should also seek to enthuse / affirm / reaffirm / motivate teachers in what they do.
- One teacher said that Research keeps teachers alive!

Mol Feasa

On foot of this feedback from teachers, the Council, NCCA and CES have decided to create a new online space to help teachers and researchers articulate their professional voices in a way that helps each other. This website we have called molfeasa.ie – from mol feasa, the Irish for hub of learning or wisdom.

What kind of a hub would we like to see?

1. A hub that connects.
2. A hub that facilitates learning.
3. A hub in which teachers lead.

4. A hub that facilitates and supports teachers in:
 - a. Identifying
 - b. Discussing
 - c. Defining
 - d. Explaining
 - e. Describing
 - f. Summarising Good research so that it empowers them to enhance teaching and learning in the classroom.

A key point with MolFeasa has been our own journey of research and learning as a Council, in collaboration with others – CES and NCCA. We took a good few months to reflect on what teachers said to us last year, and to work out our thinking as to where we should go next.

The challenge is how to embed all of this as the norm of the culture of teaching. This will be done not by grandiose gestures nor blunt decisions, but through the gentle persistence of the prevailing wind of teachers' professional voice.

Well-being

In a nutshell, well-being is about caring for professionals, to sustain caring by professionals.

As Conor Cusack has said, speaking of himself and Bressie,

We both recognise the vital role our teachers have to fulfil in supporting our students to be true and real to themselves. For that to happen though, we need to support through opportunities for self-reflection and growth for our teachers to be real and true to themselves. A teacher can only ever bring a student to the same level of maturity they have attained themselves. Reflection is the sine qua non for maturity and true inner progress.

Some of us talk about our "happy place" from time to time – especially in moments of acute stress and pressure. Freddie Wood, President of the Medical Council, has said that if you're not going there at least once a week, there is something wrong. I would go so far as to say that you should be going there every day – even if it's only 30 seconds, or two minutes – you need to make the space and time every day to step back, but not out, of the rush of day, and recharge your batteries. I have had principals say to me that they don't have time to eat a lunch, or if they do, they do so while they are working on something else. I have heard of teachers who are racked with guilt at the end of the day because they only got 10 boxes ticked out of 100.

This madness has got to stop. It's not always clear to me if people are stating their lunch habits as a mark of pride – *I am so busy and important that I can't afford to stop and eat*. Or it could be that they are working out some sense of fear or guilt – *if I don't say and do this, people will think that I am not working hard enough as the leader of the school* – or is it a warning sign that they are not coping. I am sure we have all met each of these situations in our careers to date. We have a strong tendency as a race to accept the world and our ways of working as they are, as if they have always been that way. They have not. We know that the future is unpredictable, but we also know from our history that we can shape and change that future for ourselves.

So if you are that principal or consultant who does not make time for themselves as people every day, or if you are the teacher who lives in fear of the inspector, or is racked with guilt over only ticking so many boxes, I would plead with you to stop, think about your ways of working, and make one small, practical change next Monday that will give you that time, that head space to build your own professional confidence in collaboration with others.

And if you already have created that headspace for yourself, please look out for those who have not yet, and find some appropriate way of guiding them to where they can be their best. For if we don't care for ourselves as communities of professionals, how can we expect those whom we serve to care?

This is all fine and well, but...

Great, some of you might be saying, you lead us up the garden path, you paint this lovely picture of an idyllic future for research in teaching and learning. But we all know that even with these very positive, energising developments, the

process of change rarely proceeds smoothly. There sometimes appear to be competing agendas for change. Or even when there seem to be agreed goals, there is not always a consensus as to the best approach to pursue them. Some favour a blunt, top down approach. Others appear to bend over backwards in trying to accommodate the full range of concerns and anxieties.

Coming at this from a more metaphorical, even spiritual, perspective, there is an increasing sense across very different genres of writing that we need to develop a more nuanced, more patient, understanding of effective change that works for the greater good. The most eloquent description of this type of change dynamic is best expressed by John O'Donohue. In one of his last publications, *Benedictus*, he had this to say about time and change:

The beauty of nature insists on taking its time. Everything is prepared. Nothing is rushed. The rhythm of emergence is a gradual, slow beat; always inching its way forward, change remains faithful to itself until the new unfolds in the full confidence of true arrival. Because nothing is abrupt, the beginning of Spring nearly always catches us unawares. It is there before we see it; and then we can look nowhere without seeing it. Change arrives in nature when time has ripened. There are no jagged transitions or crude discontinuities. This accounts for the sureness with which one season succeeds another. It is as though they were moving forward in a rhythm set from within a continuum.

I am by no means an avid gardener, but I do prune my rose bushes from time to time. The growth of the culture of research will have to be nurtured patiently, persistently, but not micromanaged. We all know the basic conditions for growth of plants – soil, water, temperature, periodic check-in. We don't, indeed cannot, prescribe every turn that every shoot takes as it

sprouts and grows. And yet, notwithstanding that lack of micromanagement, when we step back and take a look at the result , we can see how it all comes together in the end, after taking its time.

FÉILTE

FÉILTE – Festival of Education in Learning and Teaching excellence – offers a great example of how this organic growth can happen. It is first and foremost a celebration of teaching. It is quite simple a concept. We created the space – Royal Hospital Kilmainham or RDS – and others, especially teachers, made the time to come to that space to tell others about what they are doing to innovate and bring learning alive. And in that telling, in that talking, teachers are empowering each other to unleash the full potential of their collaborative learning, and to harness the energy that results to lead us all into more exciting and fruitful innovations. And they are also reassuring and energising the public, including parents, about the quality of their children’s learning experiences.

We have had a nurture room created at FÉILTE. We have seen children turned into magic pianos. We have seen Ryan Tubridy walk blindfold in a PE exercise!

Two years ago, we had our first lecture to mark World Teachers’ Day, given by Anne Looney, with an audience of around 150. Around that we have built FÉILTE – in 2013, around 300 attended, with another 100 on line; in 2014, 600 attended with another 400 online. And I am delighted to report that the applications for this year’s FÉILTE for showcases is up 42%!

What we are learning through FÉILTE, Droichead and research is that once teachers are given the space, support and time, they will run a marathon of teaching and learning, as long as they truly know that you are prepared to run it with them.

Conclusion

It would be dangerously easy to get carried away with excitement. But we need to maintain a measured pace. We need an ongoing steady balance. We cannot rush any of this, nor can we allow for undue delay – the future of all of our children’s learning is at stake.

The best quote that I have seen that squares this circle comes from an article by Mariano Sigman and colleagues, writing about the relatively young discipline of MBE science [Mind, Brain and Education]. They are talking about trying to build new connections across very disparate academic disciplines – neuroscience, psychology, education – but what they are saying could easily be applied to everything we are trying to do to enhance teaching and learning this century, and why we are doing it. They say that:

Now is the time to be both practical and brave...

What I take from this is that the greatest professional opportunity of the future is the chance to work together as professionals – be practical. The greatest challenge is the understandable fears and anxieties that go with that – what if they think I am doing a bad job? Or don’t agree with my method of class control? What if they judge me? Hence the need to be brave – to feel and acknowledge those fears and still collaborate; the chance to make the most of the autonomy that all this work in teacher professionalism offers us. To bridge the gap between this challenge and this opportunity, we will need to give space, time and support for that collaboration to happen; we will all need to choose the time for our own reflective practice. Which means that all else being equal, the most powerful agent for realising the opportunities of the future is each and every one of you. In closing, I would like to note the

thoughts of Dylan Wiliam on what we can achieve together if we do seize these opportunities:

If we create a culture where every teacher believes they need to improve, not because they are not good enough, but because they can be even better, there is no limit to what we can achieve.

Thank you for listening.

Tomás Ó Ruairc

11 March 2015