

Talking about learning: Leading teaching throughout the continuum

Keynote presentation by Tomás Ó Ruairc, Director of the Teaching Council, to the National Conference on Instructional Leadership, Tullow, Co. Carlow.

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We'd love to talk.....

In preparing for this address this evening, I took a look at your website. I came across these closing lines from one of the schools who took part in the first wave:

Instructional Leadership makes classrooms come alive. If you'd like more information we'd love to talk to you.

Deirdre Murphy, Natalie O'Neill, Breda Sunderland.

A couple of things worth noting about these lines: Firstly, it is signed by three teachers. Secondly, they make the extraordinary claim that this *new thing* “makes classrooms come alive”. Here we have the authentication of professionals that this programme *does* transform the way teachers do things for the better, and that it can be done. But for me the best part is the last line – the open invitation to talk – “we'd love to talk to you”. Not *feel free to drop us a line, or please email info@office.com* – they really want to talk to others about what they have done.

Based on this example, you may be tempted to ask – *so what's the big deal? Let's talk about teaching.* It appears, however, that examples such as these are

unfortunately all too rare – where teachers openly invite others to come and talk to them about what they do, how they do it, and why they do it. There are indications that this is changing. Note the example above. Note the celebration that we held to mark World Teachers’ Day last Saturday called FÉILTE – Festival of Education in Learning and Teaching Excellence. Note also the example cited by Anne Looney during her address to the PDA last year, where on JC 2.0, a teacher posted a video of himself teaching and invited feedback. Note also of course the fact that you are all here this evening, for this conference on instructional leadership.

So on the one hand, we have an instinctive sense that “it’s good to talk.” And yet, we have this gut feeling that it’s hard to do it, or at least to do it properly. So in talking about learning, and talking about leading, I would like to explore the idea of the reflective practitioner with you; I would like to discuss what the continuum of teacher education is, and all the opportunities that it offers; and I would like to crystallise the power of a community of learners, using their social capital, to make the most of all those opportunities for the sake of the students in their care. In a nutshell, we need to do a lot more talking about **teachers’** learning, rather than just about their teaching; we need to create more space and time for reflective practice, to help teachers unlock that learning; and we need to empower each other as professionals to lead teaching and learning, in partnership with other stakeholders, to all the places that they can possibly go, so that our children and young people can go to places where they have never been.

Who? Why? What is a continuum?

Great, you might say, so what next? You may well be confused by the title of the presentation. There are clearly a number of deliberate ambiguities stitched into the title for this keynote.

*Who exactly **is** doing the talking? Why aren't we talking about teaching first? Who is leading teaching? Should the word "teacher" or "teachers" not be there **somewhere**? And can someone **please** tell me what is a continuum?*

Why aren't we talking about teaching?

It might seem odd for the Director of the Teaching Council to come to a gathering of teachers, and talk about learning first, rather than teaching. After all, everyone has something to say about teaching and teachers. A lot of people do say a lot of things about teaching that have little or no basis in evidence or experience, or if they do, it is in their own individual experience. But if we are to be honest with ourselves, I think we do need to reflect on how we as a profession talk about teaching and learning. We are all aware of the common defence of – *You cannot reduce teaching to a science or metrics!! It is a human endeavour!* Einstein said: *all that can be measured doesn't count...* But in fact, there **is** a science to teaching – we call it pedagogy. We do ourselves, as professionals, a great disservice if we deny that fact. Of course, there is a lot more to teaching than just pedagogy – that is why it is one of the most complex and important professions in society.

Education is as infinitely complex as the soul of each person who engages in teaching and learning; it is intensely personal and professional; and it is therefore as energising as the dynamics that flow when each of those people interact with each other, day in, day out. We have 85,000 teachers on the

register, and there are approximately 1.5 million pupils, parents and grandparents who have an interest in teaching and learning, every day. That's a lot of people! People say that the problem with teaching is that unlike almost any other profession, everyone has an opinion on it, whether they are a teacher or not. That in fact is one of the reasons why teaching is the most important profession in society - because it touches the lives of every single person in a way that no other profession does. With doctors or nurses, yes, I have yet to meet a person who hasn't gone through life without visiting a GP or hospital at least once in their lives. But teachers teach children and young people from age 4 to 18. That's 14 years of a person's life, in the presence of teachers. It's no wonder that so many people talk about teaching - we always have, and I hope that we always will. I don't want that to change at all. But what I would like to see change, and have seen changing through the Instructional Leadership programme, is the tone and content of those conversations; there is a new language emerging that will enable us all to have conversations with each other, with parents and with pupils, that will enable all of us to realise just how complex and enriching a process teaching is.

So the challenge seems to be not so much that we don't talk about teaching – we do, a lot! The challenge is **how** we talk about teaching. Take for example the case of the teacher on twitter who talked about the many copies that she corrects each night, as a testament to her commitment to her professionalism. Hard to fault her for that. But then another teacher replied – *you don't just correct copies. You assess the students' learning, you give written feedback on that learning, you plan oral feedback for the following day's lesson, you differentiate your teaching the following day to take account of that assessment.* There was nothing incorrect or “wrong” about what the first

teacher said. The issue was all the opportunities she missed to display the complexity of teaching.

Language

Why was that? What was the difference between the two tweets? Language. It's something previous cohorts have consistently said about the Instructional Leadership (IL) programme. It gives teachers a whole new language to talk about teaching, to explore and explain its full complexity through professional conversations. *Fine, so why are we talking about learning?* Because at the heart of the acquisition of this new language about teaching is learning – not just learning new pedagogy in the here and now, although that is part of it. The IL process, as this conference's theme clearly shows, is about viewing the programme as a life-long enabler; it's about viewing the programme as an exemplar of learning how to learn, so that we will be open to, and capable of, learning throughout our lives. And the key to unlocking that learning is exemplified in the group work that happens with every cohort, and something which I had the privilege of taking part in last year – reciprocal vulnerability. Everyone approaching the learning in the same spirit of mutual openness. No airs and graces. The research is quite clear on this. Ongoing learning is most effective amongst teachers when they work together in that spirit of reciprocal vulnerability. Or in layperson's terms, no-one comes to the table thinking they know it all!

So talking about learning is about clarity of language and of understanding; it is also about professional conversations where each person approaches the engagement in a spirit of reciprocal vulnerability. And by implication, talking about learning should be about enhancing learning. Why? Firstly, none of us wants to make things worse. Secondly, if it was just more of the same, why

would we bother? So we take it that we all want to learn, develop and do things better. Ongoing talking leading to ongoing learning leading to ongoing improvement. That has to be our aim in all of this.

The X-factor – reflective practitioner

But wait – that sounds kind of exhausting doesn't it? Non-stop talking? Where is the time to pause, reflect, learn and then change? If we look at the title again, there does appear to be a gap. On one side, we have talking about learning. On the other, we have “Leading Teaching throughout the continuum”. The link between the two endeavours is the reflective practitioner – the pause, the moment to rest, the “tent of thought where I shelter”, to quote John O’Donohue (O’Donohue, 2007: 27). Jamie Cullum, the singer, has another way of talking about that reflective space – “I’m all at sea / Where no-one can bother me.” (Cullum, 2004) That’s the X-factor, the magic ingredient that enables talking about learning to translate into something meaningful so that teachers can lead each other.

Reflection for all

Perhaps that reference to the X-factor is a poor metaphor. It might give the impression that only the select few are capable of reflection, or only a few need to. When I talk about teachers leading each other, I am talking about all teachers. I have referred to this in previous presentations, which are available on our website – the notion of a common standard of excellence in education which is applicable to all. It can be found in concepts such as “whole system reform” – which means what it says on the tin. Hargreaves and Fullan (2012: 18) talk about how initiatives that focus on *rewarding* the top 10% of teachers, or on *punishing* the bottom 10%, are doomed to failure, because they

completely miss the point. We are about maintaining and enhancing the quality of learning for all of our pupils, not just those taught by the top 10% or the bottom 10%. Zubin Austin from the Ontario College of Pharmacists talked about this at a conference earlier this year (CLEAR, Edinburgh, June 2013), where he said that the opposite of competency is not incompetency, but disengagement. He put it another way, where he said that Fitness to Practice processes will deal with the clear cut incompetent cases. But those are fairly easy to identify, and amount to 1% of the registrant population. He posed the question – what about the other 99%? An exclusive focus on competency, while well intentioned and understandable, would miss them entirely.

So let's take it from these points that we need to engage with the whole profession to effect whole system reform. Let's take it that teaching needs to be led throughout teachers' careers, that lifelong learning is important. Who will lead that teaching and learning? As Harold Hislop has said before, other countries have chosen to lead it in a particular way – highly centralised, driven from the top down, where the powers that be not only dictate *what* should be taught, but also *how* it should be taught. He has pointed out that here in Ireland, we have made a different choice. That is a choice grounded in the belief that those at the core know best how to mediate policy in their own context – teachers, pupils and parents. They are not the only ones who know – other stakeholders, including us in the Council and obviously the Department, have a role in formulating policy. But when it comes to determining how that policy will transact in classrooms and schools around the country, the only ones who **can** deliver on that, are the teachers. It seems like stating the obvious. But the implications are profound, and offer an unprecedented opportunity for the profession. The opportunity is to not only shape the change occurring now, but to be in a position to lead how change unfolds in

the unknowable future. That's why leading teaching is such a profound concept. The responsibility can seem overwhelming – to be in the driving seat of change of teaching and learning. And that is why the reflective practitioner is so essential. If you haven't got your own head around what's involved, what's at stake - how can you engage with your fellow professionals in a meaningful way that makes good use of your time?

That's why teachers leading each other is not just a fuzzy, warm idea. It is essential if we are to make learning all that it could be for young people in a way that we know best.

But it can be difficult to talk....

Ok, so far we have the ideas that we need to talk more about learning and not just about teaching; we need to be clear and accurate in what we say; we need a new language to have those conversations; all of us need to take part in those conversations; and we need to think before we talk. If we have all of that, it should be easy, shouldn't it? Yet very often, when we come to those moments, it gets kind of awkward. It may be good to talk, but it can also be difficult. This doesn't seem to fit with the stereotype of Irish culture. We love to tell stories, we love to have a good old "barney". When I reflect on this question, I am reminded of the quote from John O'Donohue (2007)

What is nearest to the heart is often farthest from the word. (15)

We may tell good stories as a nation, but I don't think that we do honest conversations very well. We don't do honest conversations where there is

praise and commendation for the individual or group, nor challenging conversations where we attempt to discuss shortcomings or areas for improvement. As teachers, we either recoil from accepting the praise for ourselves and put the student in the spotlight, or we bristle at the criticism from those who cannot possibly understand what it is like to teach young people in the Ireland of today.

Talking about teaching, in the sense that our ancestors understood it, would be relatively easy. That sense of the teacher would equate to that of the expert, the master, the one from whom we receive knowledge. In this light, we could talk about timetabling, about our classes, about covering the textbook, about preparing the exam class, about Junior Cycle reform, about staff meetings that go on for ever because someone has a bee in their bonnet about the state of the noticeboard....I could, we could all, and sometimes we do, go on.

But talking about learning? Talking about our own learning? Talking about leading teaching? Suddenly the conversation can run dry very quickly. That's a whole different ball game. Many of our colleagues might say – *I did my learning in college; I paid good fees to study hard, I got my qualification – that's it.* I myself remember when I did my H.Dip. and did my last exam. I closed the script and swore that I would never do an exam again as long as I live. A promise which I broke!

Ok, so it's difficult to talk – where do we begin? We have to start somewhere – but where? We start where you are all now – we create communities of learning. Essentially, there is no secret to creating these communities, it ain't rocket science. We create space and time for each other to come together and learn together. Fundamentally, we all make the time for ourselves to do this, we make a choice. And why are communities of learning so important?

Because communities, as Charles Duhigg points out, create belief. And belief is the difference between going through the motions in a state of accidental adequacy on the one hand, and empowering others to fulfil their potential through aspirational excellence on the other.

Duhigg is quite clear about this (2012):

There's something really powerful about groups and shared experiences. People might be skeptical about their ability to change if they're by themselves, but a group will convince them to suspend disbelief. A community creates belief... (85)

When people join groups where change seems possible, the potential for that change to occur becomes more real. For most people who overhaul their lives, there are no seminal moments or life-altering disasters. There are simply communities - sometimes of just one other person - who make change believable.

Belief is easier when it occurs within a community. (88)

This all sounds fine, you may say, but it isn't fit for the cut and thrust of teaching, or medicine, where life and death are at stake! What about when mistakes are made or problems occur? Where is the "belief" then?! A number of authors: Duhigg, Hargreaves and Fullan, Marilyn Cochran Smith - are all of one mind when it comes to dealing with mistakes and failure in the professions – they regard them as opportunities to ask questions and to learn; and the most conducive environment for realising this potential is that of a community of professionals. If a teacher makes a mistake on their own, and does not talk about it, more often than not, the impact of the harm can be long lasting. They

may not be aware that they made a mistake; or if they are, they may be embarrassed or afraid to admit their weakness in front of their pupils, and so they keep going and hope that no-one notices. Neither scenario is good for the pupils nor the teacher, in terms of life-long learning.

That may be, you say, but you don't know the colleagues back in my staffroom. If I went back to them on Monday morning, and talked about how liberating it can be to talk about mistakes, how it can improve their practice, I would be laughed out of the staffroom.

I think the first thing to be said would be that you are perfectly correct, that to talk about learning in the way we mean at this conference would be difficult in the beginning. But the second thing I would say is that doctors have been here before, it has taken time, but it has been done. In that book by Charles Duhigg, a doctor is quoted as follows:

"It's excruciating to admit a mistake publicly," said Dr. Donald Moorman ... "Twenty years ago, doctors wouldn't do it. But a real sense of panic has spread through hospitals now, and even the best surgeons are willing to talk about how close they came to a big error. The culture of medicine is changing." (177)

This talking about learning is a core point in Duhigg's book. He recounts how an entire culture in a large organisation was changed. In the course of the change management, an employee made an error and was fired. Why? Not because he made a mistake, but because he didn't talk about it! (Duhigg, 2012)

"..... he didn't report the incident, and so no one else had the opportunity to learn from it. Not sharing an opportunity to learn is a cardinal sin." (124)

Earlier in the book, Duhigg recounts how a surgeon made a fatal error conducting brain surgery on an elderly person, despite the clear warnings from the nurse on duty, because in that hospital, there was a culture where surgeons “didn’t make mistakes”; they certainly could not be challenged even if they did. There were no honest conversations. There was no talking about learning.

Ok, the doctors may do it now, but they deal with life and death. It’s not necessary for us. But it is! In fact, it is even more necessary for teachers than for doctors or surgeons. They deal with one person at a time, who is fairly docile, co-operative, and on an operating table, cannot move. You deal with 5 or 6 different groups of young, boisterous people a day, five days a week; each of them with their own moods, feelings, thoughts, personalities; who often seem to be on the move, active, can talk back. Doctors and nurses may save your life, but teachers enable you to live that life to the full.

In endeavouring to ensure that you are there for your students in the ways that they need through teaching, in a sustainable way, you need the support and advice of colleagues. The best part of this is that you know this in your hearts already. And it may happen to varying degrees in schools up and down the country. But if none of us wants to stand still – if we want to make sure that we are the best we possibly can be – the key to unlocking that answer is to be found first and foremost in our fellow teachers. Not in iPads, apps, whiteboards, or whatever the latest edition of a textbook may be. Each of those resources, used appropriately with professional judgement, is helpful.

But the most important resources in any school, the ones with the greatest potential to have the most positive impact, are the teachers. In leading each other through professional conversations, they can, in fact, change the world.

As Robert and Edward Skidelsky put in their book “How much is enough: Money and the Good Life?” (2012):

For a social species such as ours, the good life is essentially a life in common with others. Its home is not in the brains of individuals but in groups of people doing things together.... Collective participation is essential to all but the most solitary visions of human fulfilment. (92)

They go on to make an important distinction however:

...such groupings depend for their continuing vitality on the recognition of the surrounding culture; without it, they are liable to implode in mistrust and resentment. (93)

That word “recognition” – it keeps on cropping up in conversations with teachers. Prof. John Coolahan spoke about it in very moving terms at the PDA conference last year, talking about the many teachers he had met over the years who had done CPD in their own time, at their own expense, and what they craved was recognition. Not just financial recognition, but at a human level, a more authentic kind. “Recognition [of teaching] by the surrounding culture” is a fancy way of saying that there should be more talking about learning between the profession and parents and the broader public.

There is more to this statement than meets the eye. For what it means in effect is that we should pay as much attention to how we talk to those who are **not** teachers about teaching as we do to those who are teachers. Evelyn O’Connor, a teacher who is a regular online education blogger, touched on this

point recently. One of her recent blogs generated a lot of commentary and discussion. And in response to one of the comments, she wrote (O'Connor, 2013):

Thanks for your comments. I just hope it's not only the teachers who are listening...

Here is an explicit acknowledgement by a teacher that we need to engage the wider community in all that we are saying. In fact, this is the only way we can give that recognition to sustain and enhance a profession that is in the privileged position of being held in high regard historically by our nation.

So it may be awkward or difficult to start conversations around learning in teaching. It may even be awkward to come together in groups and talk about our learning. But these things are essential if teaching is to thrive in the way that we know it can. I think that if we step back, and reflect on those moments in our lives when we made a particular breakthrough, when we learned something new about ourselves as people and professionals, I would wager that each of those moments stemmed from an open and honest engagement with someone else. This goes to the heart of current trends in teacher professionalism – open, honest, professional conversations where each of the parties approaches the process in a spirit of reciprocal vulnerability. George Bernard Shaw has a nice quote which encapsulates this sense of reassuring partnership between teachers:

I'm not a teacher: only a fellow traveller of whom you asked the way. I pointed ahead – ahead of myself as well as you. [Sourced from first NIPT cluster meeting on Droichead in Dublin West Education Centre – 30 September 2013.]

Leading teaching throughout the continuum

So now we have the idea that talking about learning is the key to leading teaching, and that nurturing reflective practice is the keystone in that. Where does the continuum come into it? And what exactly is a continuum?

The continuum of teacher education simply means that teachers are always learning. Whether you are 4 years or 40 years teaching, the concept of professionalism that we seek to espouse on behalf of the profession is that teachers will always learn so that they can always teach.

Where it links with the continuum can be seen in this extract from your website:

Why investigate Instructional Intelligence?

He [Barrie Bennett] cites David Perkins: "It is an everyday observation that often people do not develop robust intelligent behaviours in areas where they have a great deal of experience. We do not automatically learn from experience, even extended experiences. For instance, people play chess or bridge for years without ever getting better at it". Bennett characterises as a "tragic flaw" the notion that our deep knowledge and passion for our subject is all that we need to foster effective learning.

Essentially, what Professor Bennett seems to be saying here is that to boast of 30 or 40 years' experience in any profession is not enough. If you have not been learning and updating your professional repertoire in that time, his response seems to be – *Big deal!* If we want to foster effective, enthusiastic learning, we need, as teachers, to learn. Failure to learn, as well as failure to

share that learning, are the two cardinal sins of professionalism. Embracing the journey of learning inherent in the continuum of teacher education will enable all of us to avoid those mistakes, together.

As a Cork man said to me once – *English that for me!* When many of you hear the term “teacher education”, your first thought may be the H. Dip, or PDE, or a 4 year degree. Our policy on the continuum, grounded in the concept of the profession leading its own learning, puts forward the idea that teacher education does not stop with the last exam of the H. Dip, or any other qualification. If we really subscribe to the notion of lifelong learning, always learning so that we can always teach, it follows that teacher education takes place wherever we as teachers learn – the staffroom, CPD from the DES, Instructional leadership, even twitter! So the concept of a continuum is another example of making explicit what has been implicit.

How can the continuum be realised most effectively? In our policy document, we talk about three concepts that underpin the continuum throughout a teachers’ career - integration, innovation, improvement. If you reflect on these, there is a sense of a spiral dynamic running through the continuum, with the reflective practitioner at the heart of each spiral. Integration – of generations of teachers, of subjects, of each phase of the continuum. Note that integration is not synthesis or assimilation. It’s where each element becomes part of a greater whole without losing its unique identity. Innovation has been described as trying to make a new difference with new knowledge. I think that in terms of teaching, it’s about enabling each other to make an old difference with new learning i.e. make inroads into seemingly intractable problems by thinking and talking about them in a different way.

And improvement – always asking ourselves the question – how could we do it better?

The link between these strands of our continuum policy – integration, innovation, and improvement – and the reflective practitioner is probably best described by John O’Donohue in his blessing “For a leader” (2007):

*May you treasure the gifts of the mind
Through reading and creative thinking
So that you continue as a servant of the frontier
Where the new will draw its enrichment from the old,
And you never become a functionary. (166)*

In many ways, none of this is new. We are simply asking the profession to do unto themselves what they already do unto others. Take this blog from Philippa Cordingley, Head of CUREE, Centre for the Use of Research and Evidence in Education, on teacher professionalism – (9 August 2013)

The evidence suggests, among other things, that we are making the same mistake we were making 10 years ago with regard to pupil learning – i.e. we are concentrating too much on the teaching (in this case, of teachers) and not enough on the nature of professional learning and the detailed underpinning processes that [make a difference](#). If we know we need to plan with care for pupils’ learning and stand ready to

adapt to meet individual needs - why would the same not be true for teachers?

Perhaps, when our best teachers are positioned to learn about our biggest challenges in helping vulnerable pupils, on our behalf, the profession as a whole can move forward at a deeper level? Instead of relying on our best teachers to teach us, let's rely on them to model the deepest possible professional learning and build our own "learning how to learn" skills by working alongside them. This self-sustaining model of professional learning involves teachers pulling learning through from each other rather than waiting for best practice to be spread.

The profession moving forward, a self-sustaining model – these phrases can come across as rushed, out of touch with reality. But it is worth repeating that the core mission that we are all about in education has not changed – we teach so that others can become themselves throughout their lives. If we aspire to enable others to become themselves throughout their lives, then we as teachers should not feel ashamed for wishing the same for ourselves. The core vision has not changed, but our understanding of its importance for us has. For us to realise that importance, we must work together. To quote Duhigg (2012):

For an idea to grow beyond a community, it must become self-propelling. And the surest way to achieve that is to give people new habits that help them figure out where to go on their own. (238)

Conclusion

By this stage, I hope that you can see how the continuum, learning teaching, leading that learning and talking about learning are all connected, and how

they are connected by the core concept of the reflective practitioner. But leading teaching. Do we really have to do that? What does it look like? The reluctance of some teachers to lead their peers is understandable. Firstly, recalling my earlier comments about Irish culture, you often get a sense of a fear of hubris, of arrogance – *I don't want to lead because I don't know it all*. Some teachers express a concern around dilution of standards – that teachers leading each other will be tantamount to a closed shop, and that external leaders are required to maintain and enhance standards. And many teachers want to lead, but are unsure of how to go about it in the most effective way.

Behind these concerns about leading teaching is a lack of clarity around what leading teaching looks and feels like. They seem to rest on the assumption that leading teaching is about an individual teacher grabbing the mantle and leading the profession into greener pastures. It is easy to understand how many people would have such an assumption. But leading teaching in the 21st century is a far richer, more complex and more democratic enterprise than that. Or it has the potential to be so, if teachers seize the opportunities before them.

I spoke back in February on the theme of teacher education and curricular reform. During that address, I explored the point I raised earlier tonight – how teacher education is expanding beyond the colleges and universities into schools, of how teachers from the past and teachers of the present are working together to become teachers for the future (Ó Ruairc, 2013). What this means in practical terms, is that all of you here this evening can shape the teaching professional of the future, and become that teaching professional at the same time. That's what leading teaching in the widest sense of the phrase

means. That in working with teachers, no matter how many or how few years we have been teaching, we can all become better teachers.

At the end of the day, if you are thinking that a lot of what I say is common sense, or is stating the obvious, or resonates very strongly with your experience of IL, then perhaps I have achieved what I set out to do. Not so much to give you incredible new insights as to the complexity of teaching, but to remind you of what you understand about it yourself, and to prompt you to have even more conversations with even more colleagues about that – to talk a lot more about your own learning though, and not just about your teaching. It ain't rocket science – it is in fact, far more important than that. And it is far more enriching than that. I would like to close with another passage from John O'Donohue, or more accurately, a passage from his book which I have adapted for tonight's purposes. He is talking about the importance of blessing. Here I have substituted "professional conversation" for "blessing" and adapted the text to fit around this. I appreciate that this may strike some of you as a bit corny or precious. But please bear with me. Teaching is both an intensely personal and intensely professional endeavour. And in talking about learning, in leading each other as professionals, we can tap into the deep well of our own experiences to help each other learn and grow, to make an old difference with new learning: (O'Donohue, 2007)

In the parched deserts of post-modernity a professional conversation can be like the discovery of a fresh well. It would be lovely if we could rediscover our power to have a professional conversation with each other. I believe each of us can have a professional conversation. When a professional conversation is invoked, it changes the atmosphere. Some of

the plenitude flows into our hearts from the invisible neighbourhood of loving / kindness. In the light and reverence of a professional conversation a person or situation becomes illuminated in a completely new way.

*In a dead wall a new window opens; in dense darkness a path starts to glimmer and into a broken heart healing falls like morning dew. It is ironic that so often we continue to live like paupers though our inheritance of spirit is so vast. The quiet eternal that dwells in our souls is silent and subtle; in the activity of a professional conversation it emerges to embrace and nurture us. Let us begin to learn how to have a professional conversation with each other. Whenever you give a professional conversation, a professional conversation returns to enfold you. (Adapted from pages 15-16 of *Benedictus*)*

I really enjoy occasions like these. In talking to others about why teaching is so important, why it is the most important profession in society, and why it is so essential for us teachers to talk to each other, occasions like this give me great opportunities to reflect, to learn and to have professional conversations with fellow professionals. So thank you for listening.

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