

Thinking and talking about learning: Exploring the nexus between research and teacher professionalism

Presentation by Tomás Ó Ruairc, Director, Teaching Council Ireland, to ResearchED second annual conference

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Firstly I would like to congratulate Tom and all his colleagues for organising the second national ResearchED conference, and to thank him for allowing me to both speak here and to have a chance to listen to you all. Put simply, but not simplistically, conferences like this are about talking, listening and learning – be it keynotes, workshops, seminars, exhibition stands – we all come to events like this to talk, listen and learn. The common element linking those actions of talking, listening and learning is voice – and here today, the voice of the teaching profession. This is a concept that I will return to later in my presentation.

By way of introduction, my name is Tomás Ó Ruairc, I am the Director or CEO of the Teaching Council in Ireland. The Teaching Council is the professional standards body for teaching in Ireland. This means that we promote and regulate the profession of teaching. We are a statutory body. In terms of our remit, it covers a lot of what happens after the moment you say “I want to be a teacher”.

This includes reviewing and accrediting programmes of Initial Teacher Education, advising on the standards of entry to those programmes, establishing the procedures for induction and probation of newly qualified teachers, CPD, research and Fitness to Teach.

I followed last year's event with great interest on twitter, and interacted with a number of participants. I could sense the buzz through my iPad back home in Dublin on a Saturday morning! Today, as then, our discussions are rooted in teaching, learning and research. These are very natural bedfellows.

Teaching is about learning. Learning depends on research. Research requires reflective practice. Reflective practice is core to teaching and learning.

Teaching is as much about learning as it is about teaching, if not more so. In fact, we don't know that teaching has occurred until we know that students have learned something.

Learning by definition depends on research. In order to learn about something, you have to go looking for information, commentary, opinion.

But research is much more than mere search and retrieval. It also involves reflective practice – you think about what you have found, and show that you have learned something as a result.

And now we have a virtuous spiral of teaching being about learning; learning depending on research; research requiring reflective practice; and reflective practice is core to teaching and learning. Tracey Tokuhama-Espinosa (2014, P51) says:

Good relationships help learning; bad relationships impede learning – it's as simple as that.

This of course refers to relationships between people (teachers and researchers) and between teaching, learning, research and reflective practice. The people and the processes must connect with each other.

Simon Fitzmaurice, author of “It’s Not Yet Dark”, puts it most eloquently when he says (2014, location 381 [Kindle]):

We are orphans of the Universe. Our species is defined by asking questions, out into the dark, without anyone to guide us except each other.

When we only have each other, and when we are surrounded by a vast scale of mysteries and questions, it seems obvious to say that we should connect with each other. The Teaching Council in Ireland has been established to enhance and develop those connections, between people and between processes. We are a professional standards body, with a majority of teachers. This means that teachers lead the conversations on teaching and learning, but in partnership with others. Very much as happens in schools.

Preview

So, we’re interested in dynamics or processes, and we’re also interested in connections. The connections between research, teaching and learning are probably the most important issue facing the teaching profession now. Tom Bennett spoke earlier this year (Blog, 19/5/14) about the power of an idea, the power of imagining something new. Today, I would like to discuss, explore and imagine with you:

1. Why the connection between research, teaching and learning is the single most important strategic challenge facing the teaching profession this century.
2. What the future might look like for teaching and learning if we make the most of those opportunities.
3. How we might create that future, together.

This is important!

The single most important strategic issue this century?! Are you for real?!

In fact I am. In a blog post on 20 June 2014, Erik Solheim, Chair of the OECD Development Assistance Committee, wrote:

Research and policy papers should make a difference in the real world and improve people's lives.

He went on to mention a survey conducted by the World Bank that “shocked” the policy world where the Bank discovered that one-third of their policy reports on economic sector work or technical assistance had never been downloaded, and almost 87% were never cited! If you scratch beneath the surface of any thread in social media on research, teaching and learning, you will find a loud chorus of people arguing passionately for making a difference. That’s why I joined teaching, that’s why I work in the public sector – to make a difference. It’s completely “for real” therefore for teachers to demand that anything that claims to help them clearly makes a difference.

Exploring the nexus....

Fine, connections between research, teaching and learning are really important; but the most important issue facing the teaching profession this century? Is that not overstating the case somewhat?

Let’s come at this from another perspective, or indeed, frontier. Those of you who spent many happy hours of your youth following Star Trek will recall the seventh film in the series, and the first to feature Captain Jean-Luc Picard. For those of you who spent your youth far more sensibly, the plot of the film centred on the pursuit by an “evil scientist” of the elusive Nexus – a band of

energy which if you could enter it would guarantee you eternal, timeless bliss. It travelled through the Universe, could not be directly approached on pain of destruction and death, and could only be diverted towards you by blowing up suns and their surrounding systems. Not a bad day's work.

This concept of a nexus as something mythical, elusive yet with the potential to reveal untold secrets is not all that removed from how the link or space between research, policy and practice seems to be perceived in the here and now. Teachers do all sorts of research – there is plenty of evidence to support this statement. There is the research of a Masters or a Ph D. But equally, teachers do research when they identify the learning needs of a child, or when they adapt curriculum to their school context. The fact that this work may not be widely viewed as research is an issue that I will return to in a few moments. Policy makers and developers also do research.

What is missing in each of the previous statements are qualifiers such as “some” or if we wish to be optimistic “many” e.g. “some teachers do research...”, many teachers change their practice etc. There is plenty of evidence which indicates that for all the research that is done on education, we seem to be punching below our weight as a profession in terms of leading the conversations on teaching and learning, for the want of support from practitioner-led research. We do not have a systematic culture of research embedded in the profession that could radically change the nature and impact of the conversations we have about teaching and learning for the better. And this culture, were we to create it, would in turn support a self-sustaining dynamic of and for teaching and learning, led by teachers in partnership with others, that would enable us all to face and shape the future.

To be clear – it's not that we don't have enough conversations about education – we do – plenty! Some say that the problem with teaching is that everyone has an opinion on it. The issue is at least two-fold – we don't have enough conversations about teaching and learning, as opposed to “education”; and we don't have enough conversations informed / challenged / supported by practitioner research.

The resulting vacuum has been filled by the likes of PISA and TALIS. As I have said to teachers previously, if you don't talk more about what you do, in a way that engages and invites the participation of parents and the wider community, others will. And they may well do so in a way that is not as well-informed as it should be by your voice. The choice AND voice, therefore, are yours.

What do I mean by “practitioner research” and a “systematic culture of research embedded in the profession”? I spoke a few moments ago about the broader definitions of research in teaching. Before I come to my own answer to that, I'd like to give you a flavour of what teachers think research means. I put out the call on twitter a few weeks ago – 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.

Put simply, a systematic culture of research is about story. We all know that one of the most effective ways we have to share information and learning is story. If you browse any thread on social media about teaching and learning, you will find that the most popular ones are where teachers talk about research through the story of their own experiences. Researchers and teachers need to tell their stories to each other. Good storytellers know that they must adapt their language to their audience.

Prevailing winds

So, connections between research, teaching and learning are of vital strategic importance if we are to help others shape and create the future. In teaching, research has to be about sharing; it is about honest conversations and stories between professionals based on mutual respect and vulnerability – they have something to teach and to tell each other. These conversations need to happen, otherwise others will fill the space. And while this vision may seem elusive, almost ethereal, we need to make a concerted, co-ordinated effort to get there.

So where do we start? On one level, we could say, and I have, that this is not rocket science. We connect more, and we connect more effectively – through events like this. *Great, I hear you say sarcastically, it's not like we haven't been doing CPD and going to conferences for years already! We need a different answer.*

My hunch is that we need a prevailing wind, a consistency or steadiness of the professional voice, to gently but firmly guide the discourse and policy making

towards the goals we all share. Storms, tornados will come and go, but look at any landscape and you will see that it is the prevailing winds that make the ultimate, most long lasting, difference. Tom Bennett (2014) spoke about the importance of voice in a blog-post earlier this year, where he complained about the fact that *“there isn’t any kind of formal, or informal mechanism to express teacher voice in this game.”*

This voice, in order to be heard most effectively in the spaces where it matters the most, needs to focus on a small number of core concepts that are the bedrock for every other endeavour in education. For me, these concepts are research, reflective practice and relationships. A voice that does nothing but shout is a voice that is ultimately ignored; a voice that is silent is not heard at all. A voice that speaks clearly, cogently, consistently, is a voice, like the prevailing winds, that has the most impact.

We need to carefully reflect on how we want to tell our story so that it captures hearts and minds, and we need to gently, but persistently, tell that story every chance we get. And of course, in preparing our story, we need to do authentic research!

As Chris Mooney said,

Given the power of our prior beliefs to skew how we respond to new information, one thing is becoming clear: If you want someone to accept new evidence, make sure to present it to them in a context that doesn’t trigger a defensive, emotional reaction.

(18 June 2013, writing for Mother Jones)

One of my aims in coming to ResearchED this year, and in giving this presentation, is to talk to as many people as possible, especially teachers, to try and learn more about how we might get to where we need to get to. Make no mistake about it – this is the single most important strategic question for the profession of teaching this century – the link between research, practice and policy. If we get this right, future generations will enjoy the benefits of a virtuous cycle of integration, innovation and improvement between policy, research and practice. Such a cycle will result in a self-sustaining culture of teaching and learning that constantly seeks to improve, question and challenge. And it will be a culture where the professional voice of teachers leads the conversations on teaching and learning in partnership with all others.

Exploring the nexus

So we want to create a self-sustaining, virtuous, culture where research, teaching and learning connect with and inform each other. We need to reflect carefully on what we think that culture will look and feel like, and we need to be careful, yet persistent, in how we go about creating it.

But is this all just more utopian mumbo jumbo? Is there nothing now to encourage us?

Lest we get too pessimistic, there are plenty of good things happening in teaching and learning that are working assiduously towards this systematic culture of research in teaching. This conference is a fantastic example.

Are there any other shoots of growth that presage this new future? I believe that there are.

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 a good professional revolt! Teachers said that they wanted access to research, and most importantly, critical engagement with that research. The first question we answered last September, 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. 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 that prevailing wind I referred to earlier.

Teacher professionalism - we want answers!

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, and then you leave us with no clear guidance as to how to get there!

This is an understandable frustration – the likes of me appearing to do nothing more than pontificate about a vision, new ways of thinking, new ways of working, but no practical answers. Two points worth considering here:

(a) Teacher professional leadership

- a. Our Teaching Council has a professional majority on it. Some say that this is untenable in the modern era, that no one grouping can be trusted to regulate themselves. Such a view is based on a narrow view of what a Teaching Council is all about. We are not

just a regulator, we are a professional standards body. What does that mean? It means that we seek to encourage, support and empower the profession to lead the enhancement of its own standards, in partnership with all other stakeholders in education, especially parents and pupils.

- b. What this means for those who want answers is that we are seeking to create the space and time in which teachers as professionals develop the answers themselves, informed by research, supported by parents and pupils, and open to learning from others. I could give all sorts of possible solutions to exploring the nexus between teaching and research, but (a) they would be off the cuff, which would be more than ironic given the topic here this morning and (b) they could not possibly take account of the myriad complexities of the contexts in which each of you – and your colleagues – teach. The only sustainable solution to self-sustaining, high quality change in teaching and learning is authentic professional leadership of integrity. This leadership acknowledges and always learns about the landscape in which it is happening .
- c. 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. Paul Ormerod has written about this in his book “Positive Linking” where he explores the possible benefits of network theory to policy development and implementation. Robert and Edward Skidelsky have approached the same point

from a more focused economics viewpoint in “How much is enough? Money and the Good Life.” For me, however, the most eloquent description of this type of change dynamic is best expressed by John O’Donohue (2007). Many of you may not have heard of him. He can be described as an Irish spiritualist who passed away a few years ago, and wrote a series of books which captured the hearts and minds of many. In one of his last publications, *Benedictus*, he had this to say about time and change (P64):

- i. *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.*
- ii. 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.

Closing comments

So where are we after all that? By now I hope that the following is clear:

1. Research matters. Teaching and learning matter. And they are all of vital importance to each other. If we get the connections right between all three, we can empower teachers and pupils alike to take teaching and learning to places we can hardly imagine today.
2. Teachers want to bring this vision to fruition. They are beginning to work together to do so. They need to work with the school community as well – including parents and pupils. Bodies like the Teaching Council need to do everything we can to encourage, support and guide them all in this journey. This will make a reality of teacher professional leadership working in partnership with others.
3. Research is about exploring, thinking, talking about and sharing learning. It is highly uncertain. The understandable fear and anxiety which result from such uncertainty are most effectively addressed through a spirit of collegiality and collaboration.
4. In this way teachers can lead the writing of stories about research in a way that enables them to lead all learners in learning, give the most support to those in greatest need, and therefore nurture a sustainable approach to teaching for the duration of their careers.

Some of you may think that this is oversimplifying language – there are so many nuances missing in this summary. The language is simple, but it is not simplistic. Richard Gerver has spoken about how we tend to make things in teaching and learning a lot more complicated than they need to be, especially when it comes to talking about them in the context of research. Note here that he refers to “complicated”, not complex. In other words, we all know that teaching and learning are insanely complex – that’s why it has taken research so long to catch up with it! “Complex” for me denotes something that is deep, rich, requires effort to understand, but is not impossible. “Complicated” on the other hand denotes little more than confusion – we often dismiss queries from others with the statement of “You would not understand – it’s complicated!”

As a profession, we cannot afford to adopt that stance when it comes to challenges or queries from others – parents, pupils, politicians etc. George Bernard Shaw dismissed professionalism as a conspiracy against the laity. Through the use of simple, but not simplistic, language, we can shatter that myth. We can begin to discover the riches of teaching and learning, as they apply to the children in our care, in partnership with parents and the wider community. We can do this to develop their understanding and our own of what happens when teaching and learning occur; we can use these conversations to reassure parents that we are doing the best for their children. For that is what they want to know the most about – how do I know that you are fit and qualified to teach my children and meet their particular needs? If anything, we need to help parents rephrase that question as – what are you prepared to do to learn about my child so that you can teach them? If the nirvana of academic research is to come up with the definitive question, as opposed to answer, then we are on the right track here. And of course, the

answer must be rooted in research that is accessible to all, in the widest sense of that word.

For me this is all summarised most effectively by one Jane Coombs (29 June 2014) who tweeted back in June:

I love research.

I love people more.

I love using research to help people most.

Me, I love teaching, learning, research, and talking about them, and learning about them. And like Jane Coombs, I love talking to other people about them. What I love most of all is the hope that in so doing, we can, and do, make a real difference in the lives of those in greatest need. As Tom said last year in his closing comments, days like today won't change everything, but they will change something. If in Ireland, 87,000 teachers change something, even one thing, for the better in their practice as a result of research, that's an awful lot of powerful change.

For those reasons, and more, it is great to be here, and to have this opportunity to talk with you. Thank you!

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