

Reflection on themes and concerns at the heart of practice:

towards Cultivating Student Learning - stories of professional development in action.

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Much education talk at the moment is taken up with how to develop our schools to become learning organizations and how to generally improve teaching and learning in our classrooms. In the past the good teacher was well versed in their subject area, gave clear instruction and was fair and firm with students. The collective mission of the school community was to outwit examiners writing the state tests. This proved to be relatively easy given that questions mostly asked for long tracts of rote learning. A modern version of P.H. Pearse's *murder machine* - photocopied notes, handouts, intensive study skills courses and grinds - emerged to assist this process. In this input-output model of teaching all that was required was the teacher to actively transmit and the largely passive student to receive. Freire (1970) referred to this process as the *banking concept* of knowledge construction. In a rather ironic twist of events, in terms of the economic times we now live in, the *banking concept* is no longer popular and educationalists are struggling with newer models to describe how we construct

knowledge and elicit student learning. In this context Hoban (2005, p.1) argues that teaching is more complex than it has ever been before with teachers needing to be very knowledgeable on the different ways of knowing displayed by their students:

We need teachers who are reflective, flexible, technology literate, knowledgeable, imaginative, resourceful, enthusiastic, team players and who are conscious of student differences and ways of learning.

Research in the last decade has begun to more fully explore the role of emotional intelligence, motivation, trust, social interaction, dialogue and relevance in the learning process. Stoll, Fink and Earl (2003, p.24) argue that learning is complex and has many dimensions:

Learning is intellectual, social and emotional. It is linear and erratic. It happens by design and by chance.

From this it appears that rationalists have only part of the answer and that learning involves a fuller experience that draws from mind, body and spirit while involving relationship with another. Mark Patrick Hederman, now Abbott of Glenstal Abbey, reminded us at a public lecture, addressing us as Teaching Practice Tutors in 2007, that teaching is a relationship of learning, *an imaginative relationship of learning*. Policy documents espouse teaching students how to learn and national reports confirm our intentions in this regard (Byrne Report 2002). This conception of the school as a self-improving and learning organization, with teachers as professional learners with a focus on student learning has fired much of the educational research literature (Darling Hammond and Bransford 2005). While traditional inherited practices may be necessary for good instruction they are clearly not sufficient to elicit student learning. This editorial explores the extent to which teachers are making 'the big switch' from teacher-centred and subject-centred approaches to newer models of cultivating student learning.

The reader is presented with the voice of teachers speaking about the everyday reality of their classroom interactions. Many supports and scaffolds are in evidence and some key barriers and constraints are identified that have yet to be overcome in order to develop the learning classroom. As Lang et al (2007) argue, learning for teachers needs to happen at the school site. The teacher as learner, identified as one of the codes of the Teaching Council (2007), is depicted as a reflective practitioner, a lifelong learner and collaborator within a school community. The collective teacher voice in this journal is concerned with releasing each student's learning potential, mostly through formative learning approaches. This stance of *assessment for learning* (AfL) is supported by the work of Black et al (2002). Many AfL classroom strategies are explored in efforts made to create this type

of learning environment including: *wait time, peer assessment, pair work, traffic lights, self-assessment, comment only marking, two stars and a wish, and group work.*

Laura Fox in Mayfield Community School in Cork city engaged with the DES initiative *The Learning School to experiment with assessment for learning (AfL)* tools and strategies in a second year classroom. The project ran for eighteen months and was supported by two formal meetings per term with the support services - SLSS and SDPI. The project is interesting for a number of reasons: it tapped into student voice right from the start, through questionnaire and interviews, it involved teachers in formal planning teams with the external agencies, management facilitated these formal teacher meetings during school-time and it included a reporting mechanism to staff and parents. The value of giving students the test question and taking them through the marking scheme in seen tests worked very well. It reminds me of similar open-book learning experiments being done in Norway by Eilertsen and Valdermo (2000). These approaches focus on working in open and democratic partnership with students while motivating them to take more responsibility for their learning.

A second article explores efforts made in St. Joseph's Secondary School in Drogheda by a number of teachers piloting a number of AfL strategies to improve student learning. The Principal, Mary Adamson, speaks of the need for improved learning strategies given the diversity of student capacities. Good practice in this project includes sharing with neighbouring schools, sharing between the five teachers on the project and sharing within the school through two staff in-service seminars. These staff seminars were jointly facilitated by teachers on the staff and members of the support service, the SLSS. One teacher noted the need to develop more of an experimental approach to teaching:

as teachers we are so afraid of doing things wrong or making mistakes but I think we should be willing to try things once and if it does not work then try something else. Not all the strategies I used will work for every teacher nor will they work in all classes but if they are willing to adapt, our students will benefit along with ourselves.

Pauline Kelly is team leader of the *English as an Additional Language support service (EaL)* and SLSS regional development officer. Pauline charts the changes in Ireland necessitating the EaL support service and the broader need for all teachers to perceive themselves as teachers of language. She observed that 10% of students at primary school and 8% of students in post-primary school are newcomers, representing 180 nationalities and over 200 languages. This presents an enormous challenge for dealing with cultural and language diversity. Teachers

and management were offered a number of seminars in six SLSS regions. These seminars explored a range of formative assessment approaches to creating an inclusive classroom for enhanced student learning. The research work of Professor Cummings, University of Toronto guided the project. While most teachers were teachers of English other teachers were from across the curriculum. Improving language learning for newcomer students will assist the development of all students:

The aim is to facilitate engagement and participation by students with limited English, and to create an environment in which all learners are encouraged to speak, to contribute and to work together.

The significance of the work of this team is it offers scaffolding to teachers to improve social interaction and generate inclusive classrooms. These are two of the four main pillars of the *productive pedagogies* research movement in Australia. The research, recounted by Moles (2009), identifies *the four pillars of good teaching* as: each lesson has some intellectual content, this content is made relevant and the teacher creates social connectedness and respect for diversity among students.

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Mags Almond's article on *Assessment is Learning* charts the efforts made in Crana College in Bunclra, Co. Donegal in using AfL approaches. Both the Principal, Liam Galbraith, and the Deputy Principal, Fiona Temple, offer the insightful observation that continuing professional development, CPD, at the school site needs to include sharing a dialogue of teaching and learning. This article shows that strong pedagogical leadership from management is a *sine qua non* of developing this type of shared continuing professional learning among teachers. *Learning Anew*, by Hogan et al (2007) reminds us that the teaching force is one of the country's greatest national assets in a knowledge society. If renewal of the teaching force will be centred mostly on learning at the school site into the future, this will need, among other things, the willingness of teachers to collaborate on a dialogue of teaching and learning. Much of the prescribed literature on the mentoring programme in the University of Limerick speaks of the need to build mentoring teams of teachers at all stages in their career trajectory, experienced teachers, student teachers and newly qualified teachers, with the expressed purpose of building an ongoing dialogue on improving student learning, Mooney Simmie and Moles (in press).

Rita Meagher shares her professional inquiry into her role as Guidance Counsellor with the purpose of seeking to improve congruence between her espoused values and her daily activities. This article is an extract from her action research dissertation. It is a reflexive and reflective account in order to illuminate the complexity of the teacher as a public educator. Rita challenges the conformity and control that often surrounds the concept of the

teacher as a functionary of the system. She challenges the neo-liberal agenda of outcomes and market driven forces that have entered the world of education leaving many teachers and students stressful, lost and at risk. Her study enabled a small group of students to fully explore their inner landscape in egalitarian and reflective ways. Rita's interest is in spirituality, authentic relating and community spirit. She draws on the literature of Kessler (2000) and Palmer (1998) while using McNiff and Whitehead's (2002) living educational theory as a guide in becoming a teacher-researcher.

Rita Meagher's article offers a number of important insights to the debate on learning. To change the focus of the classroom from teacher activity to student learning requires that teachers become willing to engage, both individually and collaboratively, in systematic reflection about their practice. If teachers are willing to do this work they will also want to inspire their students to engage in a similar process. Many of the AfL strategies discussed so far capture the need for this heightened self-awareness and the type of deliberative time and reflective space required to create critical learning moments within egalitarian relationships of learning. For example, the simple strategy of *wait time* suggests an unhurried and calmer approach to questioning and recognises the need for thinking time. This extract from Rita Meagher's thesis makes this tacit understanding explicit and offers a scholarly lens from which to view formative assessment for learning.

The need for thinking time, reflection and an egalitarian and democratic approach to learning is being recognized in many EU funded programmes at present. In the Comenius project, *Gender, Innovation and Mentoring in Mathematics and Science* (GIMMS 2006-2009) teachers developed innovative pedagogical practices in their classrooms in six countries, including Ireland, Denmark, Germany, Austria, Spain and the Czech Republic. The teachers and teacher educators in the project engaged in a discourse on teaching and learning using reflective, egalitarian and collaborative mentoring models to elicit student learning. Results were mixed but show that teacher learning and student learning are inextricably linked and that experienced teachers are more often convinced of using a reflective approach to teaching and learning when it is first designed for use with their students in the classroom setting.

Brendan Keenan's case study tracks the use of co-operative learning in a Leaving Certificate Business class with pupils of differing levels of commitment to school-based learning. His professional inquiry was guided by Johnson et al (1998). He began the planning process with the syllabus and NCCA teacher guidelines and reconsidered the NCCA Key Skills 2009 identified for effective learning: *creative and critical thinking, information processing, communicating, working well with others and developing personal effectiveness*. He researched his process as a

case study, using the guidance of Yin (2003), including eliciting student voice through questionnaire and interview. Insights revealed the success of this approach and the time constraints from attempting this approach with a senior examination class. The valuable contribution this article makes to this journal is that teaching for student formation (formative assessment) AND teaching 'to the test' (summative assessment) are not mutually exclusive.

William O'Brien is Principal in C.B.S. James Street, Dublin. His article tells the story, through case study research methods, of two boys, David and Christopher, sent to the school's specialist *Behaviour Support Classroom* (BSC). This support classroom is a facility for schools with a high intake of behavioural difficulties among students. We are reminded in this article of the lonely, harsh and troubled lives many young people of all ages around Ireland face on a daily basis through various forms of neglect, bullying and other forms of ill treatment. These can manifest themselves as cries for help inside the school, which is often the only safe place in which to rebel and draw negative attention through behavioural acting out. The insights emerging point to a range of newer approaches in dealing with student disruption generally that can assist improving student learning in all schools. What is this article telling us? That there are often harrowing personal stories behind chronic poor behaviour patterns, that giving the student some additional personal attention often helps to have needs met, and that person-centred approaches can have the best success rate.

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Carmel Nic Eoin's article informs the reader about a learning initiative, started in 2009, and conducted with Irish teachers from eight schools in the Co. Kerry VEC region, working alongside the SLSS, to develop the skills of teaching oral Irish. This project coincides with the change at national level in the oral Irish component in the junior and senior cycle examinations (now 40%). The project aimed to empower teachers to develop a range of imaginative teaching and learning methods, including ICT-enhanced methods, to assist pupils in their learning of spoken Irish. The academic advisor to this project is Dr. Muiris Ó Laoire. Early approaches used a collaborative planning approach with teachers to gain ownership and to ascertain requirements, needs and resources. Results indicate the value of thematic planning, the need for baseline tests for students and the requirement to develop a range of assessment approaches.

Feicimid ó alt Charmel Nic Eoin go n-eascaíonn an fonn chun athruithe a dhéanamh ar mhodhanna teagaisc sa rangsheomra ó chinneadh náisiúnta polasaí formáid na meastóireachta a athrú. Tá spreagadh tugtha do mhúinteoirí chun oibriú i gcomhar le chéile d'fonn cleachtais nua a fhorbairt san idirghníomhaíocht idir iad féin agus na daltaí sa rangsheomra. Ar ndóigh, ní coincheap nua é an comhoibriú-tá stair fhada ag coincheap na meithle in Éirinn-ach is léir go bhfuil gá leis anois chun áisitheoireacht a dhéanamh ar phróiseas foghlama daltaí.

Is trí chomhoibriú den chineál seo le comhleacaithe agus gníomhaireachtaí seachtracha is fearr is féidir le scoileanna a bheith ina gcomhphobail chleachtóirí isteach sa todhchaí. Ní neart go cur le chéile!

Caroline O'Brien's article tells the story of her professional inquiry into cooperative learning with her first year mathematics class. Similar to Brendan Keenan's study she uses the five guiding principles of Johnson et al (1998) to frame this eleven week action research study. In her role as facilitator of learning Caroline not only teaches mathematical subject knowledge but is also knowledgeable about group process skills of social interaction. Students are taught how to collaborate, to appreciate each other's contribution, to engage in peer assessment and take part in a weekly group process reflection. This teacher is not only teaching students' subject knowledge but also teaching them how to learn and interact socially.

The SLSS development officers place some of the projects within a model of continuing professional development through four interlocking means: enabling the development of a critical pool of evidence specific to the Irish context leading to the generation of living educational theory and action learning possibilities (McNiff et al 2002); making the professional learning narratives of teachers public (Stenhouse 1978); building the capacity for school-based learning communities of professional practice (Wenger 2002) and giving opportunities for teachers to lead their own professional development.

In summary then, the 'the big switch' being considered in this volume of the SLSS journal is the movement of the spotlight in the classroom away from the teacher and onto the student. The voice of the teacher shows that student learning is elicited by a proactive teacher who facilitates learning through designing and evaluating a range of classroom interactions - AfL strategies, co-operative learning, self-reflective journals - to challenge levels of understanding and thinking skills. Brookfield (1995) recommends four lenses to arrive at a deeper understanding including self-evaluation, evaluation with a critical friend, evaluation with students and comparison with the literature. These lenses draw out the teacher from being insular and inward looking and bring a broader perspective. From all these articles it is clear that broader perspectives are needed if learning and teacher professionalism are to be at the heart of the school's mission.

International research studies are now considering a new type of *public space* for teachers to engage in this type of dialogue and be supported through connection with teacher educators, researchers and policymakers. For example, the EU Comenius project Crossnet 2006-2009 considered the change in professional practice for teachers who crossed a range of boundaries, such as subject boundaries and boundaries between schools and

other agencies. In these articles we have many examples of cross-curricular collaborations. It is at these boundaries that increased possibilities for innovation are made possible. Mooney Simmie and Power (in press), as partners in Crossnet 2006-2009, explored one such boundary crossing, a school-university partnership, and concluded that the university served as a critical friend and repository of research expertise in assisting schools become learning organizations.

Articles in this journal offer evidence of a range of scaffolds and supports to assist teachers in developing student learning:

- Time-tabled formal meeting time during the school day were in evidence.
- Collaborative dialogue on teaching and learning was part of each project.
- Use being made of some aspect of the literature in all projects.
- The pivotal role of leadership among school management was in evidence.
- The role of external agents in championing each initiative was in evidence.
- A range of diagnostics were used to listen to student voices.
- A rich variety of approaches were taken by teachers to improve learning and inclusion.

A number of barriers and constraints were also in evidence which, if not tended to, will stand in the way of developing the learning school into the future:

- All projects were only being supported by state agencies for limited time-periods.
- There was no obligation for formal teacher meetings during the school day.
- There was no formal obligation for teachers to dialogue on teaching and learning.
- The lens of the literature was not fully exploited leaving the capacity for all these projects to become action research projects underdeveloped in most instances.

Internationally these developments in learning, assessment and inclusion are no longer perceived as tinkering at the edge of the school curriculum. Across the globe they are viewed as vital for the development of an innovative thinking people with the resilience required to build a more democratic and resourceful nation. In a recent research visit to Norway I observed that leading a learning culture in schools was perceived as the most important aim of the schooling system right through from kindergarten to upper secondary education. In 1999 this resulted in teacher contracts being renegotiated to include formal planning time during the school day and national

educational reforms, mostly offered as school-university action research experimental projects, supported the development of the teacher and student working together as planning partners. National policies in this regard were all accompanied with significant funding for schools to make the structural and pedagogical reforms necessary to become learning organisations.

In conclusion, this edition of the journal offers a rich variety of stories of teachers' efforts to cultivate student learning in the everyday reality of classroom practice. All changes of professional practice involved considerable efforts at pre-planning and collaborative reflection. However, the creation of this type of learning environment left teachers in all cases with an improved relationship of learning with their students and a deeper sense of professional satisfaction. This is well summarised by Catherine O'Brien who states in her article on cooperative student learning:

The benefits of cooperative learning more than compensate for the difficulties that must be overcome to implement it. Teachers who implement cooperative learning principles will reap their rewards in more and deeper student learning and more positive student attitudes toward their subjects and toward themselves. It may take an effort to get there, but it is an effort worth making.

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