EDIN: Leadership in Academic and Educational Development

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"Wisdom begins in wonder" (Socrates)

Socrates, recognised as probably the first to attempt to put a structure and value on education and learning, began by simply posing questions. The notion of wonder was a first step to wisdom. Questions did not necessarily lead to specific answers but to a process of debate and a desire to find meaning. Outcomes and answers lead to more questions. This paper is a brief attempt to raise questions and challenges that the current higher education landscape presents to us as practitioners and in so doing open an essential debate on the most appropriate direction that we as educators might consider.

Today the debate about the purpose of education, its function in society and its expression within the higher education sector has never been more diverse. Interest groups, policy makers, teachers, researchers and international organisations are constantly offering views and research findings on how best to educate and inform learners and practitioners at every level. Amid all this noise and print, it can be difficult as education developers to navigate a path that is consistent and remains true to a core set of educational principles that have existed for centuries. Education developers traverse a challenging bridge; they are both teachers and are simultaneously demonstrating good practice and principles of teaching and learning; they are also attempting to nurture and inspire a real genuine interest in teaching and learning in a higher education environment that has not traditionally prioritised this domain. This requires commitment, resources and academic and educational leadership.

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Effective leadership, particularly in the higher education arena, presents many challenges. Traditional hierarchical models of governance, teaching demands, resource constraints, research requirements and publication pressure on academic staff all contribute to what might be called a leadership deficit structure. The result is a managerial model throughout the sector that is designed (historically at least) to maintain a *status quo* rather than a visionary model of educational leadership that focuses primarily on the classroom and student learning. Leadership theory and practice has however developed numerous theoretical frameworks and models in recent decades. From trait theories to instrumental, situational and distributive models as outlined in a recent study by Schedlitzki and Edwards (2014), all of these models are seen as either psychologically or sociologically driven.   Three elements emerge as common across these models from this work; a core set of values or beliefs, a leadership vision defined mostly by these values and a particular personality type that functions very well within a specific leadership model that is appropriate to the context and environment where it exists. This is hugely important in the education sphere as the emphasis should be primarily on the teacher learner relationship and less on outcomes or product. As a result the teacher personality drives practice and engagement, is underscored by teaching values and will ideally be delivered through a methodological process that is vision focused.   The question then is how to bring these elements to the higher education classroom given the challenges raised above?

The academic and education developer could play a central role in addressing this question. There are a number of factors to support this view.   Firstly, many of the country's Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have established Teaching and Learning Centres to support and develop best practice.   These centres are generally financed internally and while the centres vary in size and staffing levels in different colleges, their existence is a clear recognition of the need to support teaching and learning. Secondly, many colleges are providing accredited qualifications for academic staff in teaching and learning up to PhD level. These can be achieved internally within the home college or with external institutes. Within the Institute of Technology (IoT) sector, along with these programmes the Learning Innovation Network (LIN)

accreditation programme provides a series of modules that can be completed online or directly over a period of time and accumulated credits can lead to a level 9 qualification in teaching and learning. These are excellent developments indicating a growth in awareness and a desire among many academics to address their classroom practice. The third significant factor has been the establishment of the Education Developers of Ireland Network (EDIN).

As Harding notes, in O'Farrell and Farrell (2013), EDIN was established in 2002. In the network's 2008 constitution it identifies clear mission:

> *to support, enhance and influence the field of academic development and practice through informing policy and practice in teaching and learning in higher education andcollaborating research and dissemination of resources. EDIN values creative critical collaboration and professional approaches to support teaching and learning.*

The initial founders were very clear in their intention to give a voice and opportunity to academic staff who were committed to engaging with their classroom practice. As there is no mandatory requirement to have a specific teaching qualification in the higher education sector, EDIN helped give a name, identity and status to teaching and learning. The objectives of the network reflect this also;

- Provide opportunities to facilitate discussion and exchange of expertise for professional development.
- Support ongoing professional development with respect to international and national good practice.
- Inform policy and practice in teaching and learning in Higher Education through collaborative expertise.
- Promote relevant research and its dissemination in educational development within Higher Education.
- Foster creative approaches to teaching and learning.

- Continue to develop a culture of reflective and critical practice as educational developers.
- Work with other organisations in developing teaching and learning in Higher Education

While Membership of EDIN is confined to staff who have a specific remit to engage with academic and educational development, since 2008 there has been a significant increase in awareness and participation in teaching and learning programmes within many colleges throughout the country. Membership (currently over 120) has also created the opportunity to;

- Access the collective experience and support of the Educational Developers in Ireland Network
- Attend and access EDIN seminars and information on other educational and academic development events in Ireland
- The opportunity to influence decisions in the field of learning development through exercising your right to vote on EDIN issues (edin.ie).

Over the last 7 years, EDIN has engaged in training, providing workshops on teaching pedagogy, building and developing contacts throughout colleges in Ireland and has increased the profile and status of those working tirelessly as education developers. In addition EDIN has sponsored a number of publications, most notably the *Emerging Issues Series* which has contributed very significantly to the body of knowledge in the area of teaching and learning and best practice.   As EDIN has grown and evolved, it has begun to take on the role of leading change in the area of education development and also that of advocate for greater support and resourcing teaching and learning in higher education.

These roles of advocacy and leadership are vital to the future sustainability of educational development and the promotion of best practice in the classroom at all times. This role has developed in a number of ways, including, firstly through active engagement with other networks. There is a natural overlap in certain areas between networks involved in teaching

and learning and this manifests itself in joint activities and ventures. Indeed this opportunity to have access to the AISHE – J Journal to promote EDIN's work is just one example. As Chair of EDIN, we are very grateful to AISHE but even more importantly it also recognises the value in sharing resources and building joint platforms that will reach a wider audience and give greater credibility to the work of both networks.   Secondly in relation to EDIN's stated objectives of promoting relevant research and creativity in teaching and learning practice, members are engaged with a number of networks that share this vision from different perspectives. This helps to create a core of interested professionals willing to advocate good practice and encourage greater participation in professional development and enhancing their own teaching and the student learning experience. Thirdly, since its establishment in 2013, the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning has been working to consolidate this and embed it implicitly within the higher education sector.

The National Forum, set up by the Minister of Education and Skills and funded by the HEA is the first of its kind in Ireland with a national remit specifically for higher education. It is underpinned by the McAleese Report on Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (2013) which attempts to redress the balance between teaching and research in the sector by promoting and supporting structures to enhance teaching and learning at every level.   The report makes clear that:

> *Teaching and learning in higher education is a shared process, with responsibilities on both student and teacher to contribute to their success. Within this shared process, higher education must engage students in questioning their preconceived ideas and their models of how the world works, so that they can reach a higher level of understanding"* (2013:18)*.* Furthermore the report states that there is an obligation on the sector to give equal parity to teaching that will enhance the student experience*; "A first step is to create the conditions in which the higher education sector gives parity of esteem to both teaching and research, so that the higher education teacher knows that he or she has to invest not simply in a command of his or her discipline, whether it is*

law, literature or science, but must invest in being a good teacher and will be rewarded appropriately for doing so" (2013: 19)*.*

The Forum sets out to engage with a number of activities:

- Championing all those who contribute to great teaching and learning in third level education

- Inspiring great practice, by celebrating examples of teaching that have a strong and positive impact on learning

- Developing teachers and learners

- Benchmarking best practice in professional development

- Building e-learning capacity

- Key enhancement themes

- Enabling innovation in a fast-changing educational environment (www. teachingandlearning.ie/priority – themes/enhancement theme/)

All of these activities are built around a series of strategies that are currently being implemented ranging from supporting learning transitions for students to enhancing digital capacity across the sector to developing and improving the professional teaching skills of academic staff. In addition to this work the Forum has also engaged with the education networks to support their work, provide funding for their activities and create a framework for consultation and internetwork research projects. While this is at an early stage and challenging problems exist with the process, the possibility of creating a new, innovative teaching and learning landscape in higher education is very encouraging. With this changing environment comes the need to build clear leadership and advocacy structures that will secure the future of teaching and learning in the sector.

Leadership therefore is not just about personality, values and vision, it is also about timing and opportunity. The arrival of the National Forum along with the support of the McAleese Report and the growth of the education networks has created a focus and distillation of ideas and

resources that must be harnessed. Recession brings stagnation but often leads to a regeneration at a later stage. That stage seems to have arrived. Fran Rees (1991) in his work on leading teams uses the word *lead* as a pneumonic. Leadership is about leading with a clear purpose, empowering people to participate, aiming for consensus and directing the process. In the context of the current educational environment, this model offers potential as a framework for internetwork activity with the Forum. Consensus and empowerment are the two key elements that need to be added to the strategic vision outlined in this reflective piece. As a network that traverses pedagogy as both teachers and education developers, EDIN is well placed to act as a conduit for practitioners to support innovation, develop best practice and act as a facilitator of change with the Nation Forum.

The final concept that needs to be put in place is a commitment to advocacy and ensuring that the teaching process remains at the forefront of higher education into the future.   The remaining elements of leadership that supports advocacy is authenticity and integrity in pursuing change and empowering educators within their teaching and learning space. Authentic leaders breathe the life force into the workplace and keep people feeling energised and focused. As stewards and guides they build people and their self-esteem. They derive their credibility from personal integrity and 'walking' their values.   If teachers in higher education are to continue to be committed to making a difference in the learning lives of their students through skilful teaching combined with the ethics of 'care, justice, and inclusiveness' then effective [leaders] may themselves be justifiably expected to demonstrate these qualities through the kind of leadership they exercise, (Day et al., 2012).

In conclusion therefore, the current structure of higher education in Ireland offers both possibilities and challenges.   Hopefully as we move into a post-recession period, the constraints that have obstructed development and innovation will be assessed and re-evaluated. If change is to take place, new models and practices in education need to be implemented and a different type of leadership that is driven by values, vision and authenticity is required. As Chair of EDIN and having been engaged in education for over thirty years, I am

as always optimistic.   Higher education in Ireland is a complex and relentless struggle for resources, creativity and openness to change.   However as Dewey (1916) points out, like Socrates, it is the quality of the mental process and not the production of correct answers that is the real measure of educative growth. When this is fully grasped, then real educational change may be possible. To wonder may then lead to wisdom.

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