

Reframing Higher Education the Wild Atlantic Way

A Personal Reflection*

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Abstract

Our Higher Education system has been invited to change – in response to the many challenges that impinge on our economy and society. The Institute of Technology Blanchardstown is a partner in the TU4D Alliance with the DIT and the ITT Dublin in an endeavour to create a Technological University for Dublin. As a member of the TU4D Support team I am constantly reminded of the enormous potential of this project. On a personal and professional level as I reflect on my own educational journey – I would like to share with you some of my reflections as I unpack and critique my own preconceived notions regarding the essential characteristics of our Higher Education system. These observations cover the full gamut of a learning journey, from choosing a course; our models of teaching and learning; a competitive system of higher education and, finally, the benefits of regional collaboration and cooperation.

Keywords: Higher education, leadership, collaboration, cooperation.

* URL: <http://ojs.aishe.org/index.php/aishe-j/article/view/224>

Introduction

I graduated in 1981 – emerging from the cosseted world of UCD into an Ireland of mass emigration, long dole queues, the H Block Hunger strikes, and a political landscape dominated by Charlie Haughey and Garret Fitzgerald. I had no expectations of getting a job - well certainly not a full time permanent pensionable one. I only hoped that my degree would increase my chances of getting something, anything, and anywhere! I found myself reflecting on my initial learning journey and experiences recently when I met Brendan Smith at a CoderDojo event and he described his involvement with the Computer and Communications Museum of Irelandⁱ. As I browsed through the online catalogue of Ireland's Computer Museum – I realised that the practices and their associated equipment embedded in the curriculum of my computer science degree were now museum artefacts - curiosities to be examined and explored with a degree of wonder and awe, as you recalled how a bundle of punched cards was at times your most prized possession.

The practices and technologies underpinning the ITC industry continue to evolve at an accelerated pace – and have been central to many of the transformations we witness in our daily personal and professional lives. Change in all its guises and disguises has become a constant companion in many fields of endeavour, including Higher Education – the home of my accidental profession.

A field that is currently situated in the midst of a change forcefield (Gallagher, 2001) – where our Higher Education Institutes are being asked to respond to this array of individual forces including rising social expectations, diversification of demand and supply, fiscal capacity limits and the impact of information and communications technologies. Off course, I only have to look out my office window to realise that the community that the Institute of Technology Blanchardstown (ITB) serves has changed dramatically – from a population of 3,000 in the 1970's to an urban area which now has a population of 101,032 (Census, 2011) – where over twenty five percent of the population comes from abroad. It is a community that is larger than the population in many of our cities such as Limerick, Cork and Galway. In response to the challenges and opportunities in addressing the needs of our growing community, ITB is a partner in the Technological University for Dublin Alliance (TU4Dublin)ⁱⁱ with DIT and the ITT Dublin. On a personal and professional level it represents a new journey for me as an educator – but like all journeys it commenced with a sense of excitement, trepidation and hope- an educational voyage of discovery.

A New Educational Journey

That first step for many involved in the TU4Dublin project has been to meet with the staff in each of the respective Institutions – coming together to share and discuss their current practice – often underpinned with an overarching theme of *why do we do what we are doing?* Review and critique is a healthy exercise –and encourages us to guard against of the perennial human condition of assuming that everything is “OK”. It also recognises the complex web of relationships that are required both internally and externally – to sustain and nurture a responsive learning environment. Some are well established relationships with mechanisms to capture the ongoing dialogue e.g. course boards, academic council, committees – whilst other are less formal but just as critical – from casual conversations with students to interactions with companies and organisations.

These engagements are the foundations that will enable a new community to emerge – bringing with them their collective best practices. Our strategic intent in this endeavour must be visionary and not simply revisionary – the question we need to continually ask – is whose needs do we serve?

It is in this context that I am constantly reminded of the true potential of this project. I would like to share a series of encounters that I have had recently which allowed me to discover and unpack some of my own preconceived notions of the essential characteristics of our Higher Education system. They cover the full gamut of a learning journey – from how students decide on which course and which college; the teaching and learning model they encounter in their first year; why we perpetuate a competitive system of higher education and, finally, the benefits of regional collaboration and cooperation.

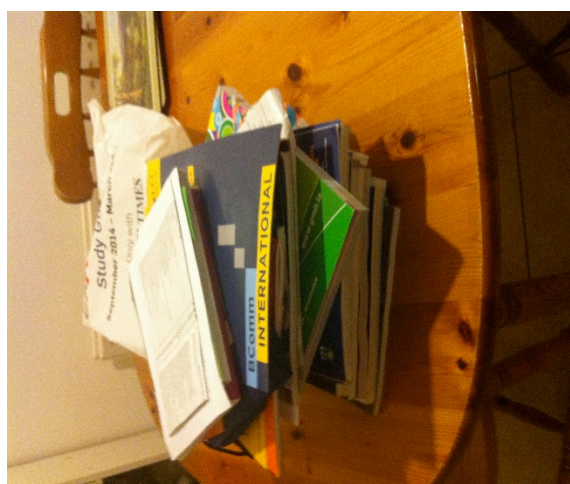
The first assumption I questioned i.e. how students select and choose their college was prompted when I discovered the website College-Match LLC a company created by Heidi Price – who was motivated by the challenges encountered by students seeking a college place in the US. One of the testimonials struck a chord with me:

“The process helped us gain perspective on choosing a school that 'matched' our student, not 'packaging' our student to fit the school.”

This flipped approach – that seeks to match the profile of the learner with the best educational environment for them is a powerful tool encompassing a recognition that the learning experiences we create on our campuses are different and that our ambition should be to ensure that the learner’s needs are the main priority. may not represent a radically novel idea – but for me it is values that underpinned its creation that are critical - a realisation that bundles of prospectuses do not answer the fundamental question – which college will provide the optimal environment for the

learner? A global opportunity exists for the the Irish Higher Education sector experience to be recognised as a collective and cooperative endeavour that prioritises the needs of all our learners.

Figure 1: Finding the “needle” in the Prospectus Haystack



A chance visit to the National Gallery (Figure 2) also prompted a response as I came face to face with a 1663 scene painted by Jan Steen. course our education system has changed since Steen painted this scene circa 1663. Most notably perhaps is the absence of physical violence. A distant memory (for the current generation of students – or is it – perhaps we have simply replaced the “ruler” – with a more subtle form of symbolic violence.

Our Higher Education system is based on a premise that must deem some as failures so others may have their talents and abilities vaunted – grades, league tables, points. Assessment regimes that leave no time for feedback (or feed forward) and learners who quickly learn the “rules of the game” – serve to encourage a process where effort is aligned to the available marks. Systems can vindictate a deficit model of learners and build programmes that “lock” students in educational journeys where they are continually asked to face their “failed” module time after time.

Even though down the proverbial corridor there is a module on photography which they would love to take, but we advise them for good sound academic reasons it is not on the prescribed course schedule, as this is an accredited programme and such dalliances are not valued or encouraged.

Figure 2: Education in 1663

Our conversations within the context of the TU4Dublin has captured a collective vision of the educational journey for our learners – recognising that the transition phase to higher education is the key to a successful learning journey if we can allow each individual choice and flexibility to play to their strengths and personal circumstances (See Figure 3).

Figure 3: TU4D Model of Learning Differentiationⁱⁱⁱ

At the heart of the conversation is a critique of the current model of the Higher Education experience that at times resembles a competitive, individualistic, “winner takes all” race to enter, progress and exit. Ivan Fernandez Anaya (Figure 4) has demonstrated how a little compassion and a true sense of fair play can challenge the values and perceptions and the heart of our most competitive endeavors – in the sporting arena.

Figure 4: A new model for success...



“He was running second, some distance behind race leader Abel Mutai -- bronze medalist in the 3,000-meter steeplechase at the London Olympics. As they entered the finishing straight, he saw the Kenyan runner -- the certain winner of the race -- mistakenly pull up about 10 meters before the finish, thinking he had already crossed the line.

Fernandez Anaya quickly caught up with him, but instead of exploiting Mutai's mistake to speed past and claim an unlikely victory, he stayed behind and, using gestures, guided the Kenyan to the line and let him cross first.^{iv}

This sporting incident for me represented how one individual allowed his humanity to emerge even in the throes of competition –he prioritised fair-play and support and his actions have since resonated well beyond the confines of this sporting fixture. In that instant he allowed me to view this sporting occasion through a very different lens. There are other sporting fixtures that also provide alternative models – worth of consideration in a education context. In October each year approximately 15,000 runners participate in the Dublin marathon – unfortunately there are 14,999 losers, but that is not how we view (or how they view) these individual achievements. We recognise that each runner in the Dublin marathon competes within their own limits – and seeks to improve on an individual basis – for which their efforts are acknowledged and rewarded. Each started from a very different base – but all shared a desire to improve. Charles Handy (1999) – suggested that the marathon would in time be seen as one of the great social inventions of our time – perhaps it is also time to embrace the concept in an Irish Higher Education model – where the pace and place of their learning should be a real choice for students.

This leads me to my final discovery - the Wild Atlantic Way - or more importantly asking myself why has it been such a success? A wonderful set of landmarks have been repackaged into one unique experience – reframing how we now view them.

Figure 5: The Wild Atlantic Way



It is no longer the Cliffs of Moher in County Clare versus Slieve League in County Donegal—they now combine to provide an even greater experience. What they share is more potent than their perceived regional differences. A view of our western seaboard is presented as a journey that offers challenge, excitement, choice and flexibility. Their togetherness is a much more impressive vista than isolated competing entities—their totality tells a much more invigorating story than slices or dices of an Irish landscape—a cooperative model has opened a reality where complementarity, collaboration and creativity provide for a better experience than competition. Now there is a vision for a Higher Education experience that could “... *catch the heart off guard and blow it open.*”^v

Off course, change is never easy – and change in Higher Education requires a clear sense of direction and passion from all involved. We become so immersed in our own practices that we fail to see why we should change or indeed how we could. David Foster Wallace captured this beautifully in his commencement address at Kenyon College in 2005^{vi}:

“There are these two young fish swimming along, and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says, “Morning, boys, how’s the water?” And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes, “What the hell is water?””^{vi}

He further elaborated on this beautiful analogy by explaining that the point of the story “*is that the most obvious, ubiquitous, important realities are often the ones that are the hardest to see and talk about.*”

Change and Higher Education

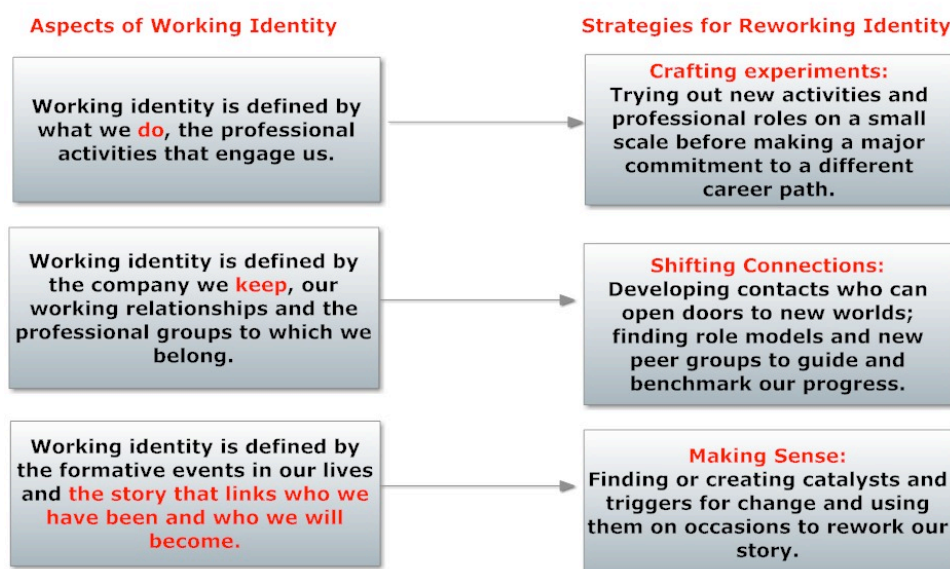
Coping with changing circumstances presents both personal and professional challenges – some colleagues will relish the new emerging opportunities but for others the uncertainty may engender fear and anxiety. Change in Higher Education is never an easy path to follow – we are wedded to our professional identities which for many of us represent our reason for doing and being and our workplace provides us with a sense of continuity, community and direction. However there are many examples of innovative practices that have been championed and supported by educational technologists and developers – in many respects they are the change agents of an organisation. Through their collaboration with educators in many disciplines, innovative approaches have been adopted in the design and delivery of education programmes.

Technology has been exploited from modest subject based innovations to campus wide eLearning infrastructures, the pros and cons of each technology innovation often prompting discussion and debate with various events and opportunities to share their experiences with colleagues. Ibarra (03) describes a series of actions that have been shown to promote successful change (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Actions that promote successful change

Identities in Practice

Actions That Promote Successful Change



The strategies identified (i) crafting experiments (ii) shifting connections and (iii) making sense have been the hallmark of the work of educational developers and technologists. Their experiences and skills will be critical in encouraging and sustaining an environment that will welcome and encourage innovation. Within this context these roles need to continue to evolve and develop – I described elsewhere (McNutt,p.118) how the role of the educational technologist in higher education at times occupies a marginal position that struggles to have its voice heard within the wider higher education sector. Ambiguous reporting structures contribute to the overall sense of isolation and at times powerlessness. As the key advocates for technology as a force for change the ability to persuade and influence others is a core competency in the role. These are the capabilities that we will need to nurture and encourage – if our strategic intent in this endeavour is to be visionary and not simply revisionary.

Conclusions

I find myself immersed in a unique journey – where I am constantly reminded to ask the question whose needs do we serve? Our greatest brand – one that cannot be achieved anywhere else - is to provide an Irish Technological University experience, one that clearly resonates with the 1916 proclamation which guaranteed:

.....religious and civil liberty, equal rights and equal opportunities to all its citizens, and declares its resolve to pursue the happiness and prosperity of the whole nation and of all its parts, cherishing all of the children of the nation equally, and oblivious of the differences carefully fostered by an alien Government, which have divided a minority from the majority in the past.

As an educator the greatest gift would be to contribute to the creation an educational experience were at its heart we endeavour to cherish all of our learners. Our quest for a new higher education landscape that will be recognised as a voyage of the heart and not of the mind – as Marcel Proust in his novel "*À la recherche du temps perdu*" (In Search of Lost Time) wrote:

"The only real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes; in seeing the universe through the eyes of another, one hundred others - in seeing the hundred universes that each of them sees."

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i <http://computermuseumireland.com/Default.aspx>

ii For further information: www.tu4dublin.ie

iii This model was developed by Jen Harvey, Rose Cooper and Larry McNutt as part of the preparation process for the Stage 2 submission to the HEA. Full submission available on the TU4Dublin website.

iv (<http://www.usatoday.com/story/gameon/2013/01/19/ivan-fernandez-anaya-runner-loses-on-purpose/1847999/>)

v From Seamus Heaney- Postscript (The Spirit Level, 1996)

And some time make the time to drive out west
Into County Clare, along the Flaggy Shore,
In September or October, when the wind
And the light are working off each other
So that the ocean on one side is wild
With foam and glitter, and inland among stones
The surface of a slate-grey lake is lit
By the earthed lightning of a flock of swans,
Their feathers roughed and ruffling, white on white,
Their fully grown headstrong-looking heads
Tucked or cresting or busy underwater.
Useless to think you'll park and capture it
More thoroughly. You are neither here nor there,
A hurry through which known and strange things pass
As big soft buffetings come at the car sideways
And catch the heart off guard and blow it open.

vi <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8CrOL-ydFMI>