

## Introduction to the Issue

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### Editor

The summer issue of the *All Ireland Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education* is one of those described as a general issue. We produce two general issues each year. Reflecting of the content of the current issue, it strikes me that while the papers published here are on a range of issues, the themes are in many cases far from general. The issue offers insights into specific challenges that are facing the academic community, issues which speak to changes at individual, institutional and sectoral level, that are having an impact on colleagues and students in their academic lives.

We open this issue with an invited contribution from David Coghlan of the Business School in Trinity College Dublin. His contribution, entitled “Integrating Ethical Challenges in Practitioner Research” is based on seminar, which he led on the topic as part of the AISHE programme of events in 2015. The seminar itself was the outcome of discussions in the Society concerning the central importance of ethical considerations in teaching and learning development and, more specifically, in the case of practitioners wishing to undertake research based on their own practice. As the Journal offers a natural home for research of this nature, with its emphasis on teaching and learning in higher education, it was agreed that the theme should be addressed formally, both in the seminar and for the wider audience through publication of a paper in this issue. We would like publicly to convey our appreciation to David Coghlan for his work on our behalf

The author explains that his approach to the topic of ethical challenges in practitioner research is from a perspective of the philosophy of research, but that approach is located within a philosophy of “practical knowing”, an aspect of thought and endeavour that has been neglected and even excluded from some philosophies of science. In language that is both precise – which it needs to

be - and accessible, the paper gives practical and theoretical insights that will be of value to our readers and, it is to be hoped, to our potential writers as they engage in practitioner research.

It is a useful coincidence that in this issue we have a number of papers from the discipline of education, where both ethical considerations and practitioner research are of great significance. In addition, the majority of the contributions are based on research and reflection in a classroom context. It is also interesting to note that the practitioner focus is reflected in papers that are geographically as well as disciplinarily diverse.

In "Circle Time as an Inclusive Learning Space: Exploring Student Teachers' Prior School Experiences" Collins and Kavanagh critically assess the extent to which the practice of circle time reflects its inclusive theoretical underpinnings in light of research findings, and highlight some implications for teacher educators who wish to promote inclusion in their courses.

In a paper entitled "What Undergraduate Early Childhood Education and Care Students Find 'Troublesome' During the Early Period of Practice Placements" Taylor looks at the challenging learning journey students undertake through professional placements. Employing the education theory of 'Threshold Concepts' (Meyer & Land, 2003), Taylor explores the 'troublesome' aspects of learning during practice placements for Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) students. This is a qualitative piece in which the voices of the students interviewed are heard strongly, giving a welcome basis in practice for the findings.

In "A Novel Smart Device Student Response System for Supporting High Quality Active Learning in the Engineering and Science Disciplines" McLoone, Villing and O'Keeffe have contributed a paper that presents a unique smart device student response system (SDSRS) that allows for a more flexible input than existing classroom response systems, such as clickers. The system allows the lecturer to obtain pertinent information in real-time within the classroom environment. The proposed system consists of three main elements, namely a student sketch application, a lecturer view-and-edit application and a central cloud-based service to co-ordinate the exchange of information between the two applications. Evaluation data, from two different engineering classrooms, including details of the process used, are presented in the paper.

Another contribution from Engineering is entitled “Factors which Influence the Academic Performance of Level 7 Engineering Students” by McCool, Kelly, Maguire, Clarke and Loughran. This paper examines the influence of a number of factors on academic performance among Level 7 Engineering students in Dundalk Institute of Technology over a four year period. Statistical evaluations, based on a sample set of 1263, identified that mature students, students with positive levels of attendance and modules with high levels of continuous assessment marks appear to result in better performance.

Cathal McCosker’s paper, “The Effects of Digital Game Based Learning on the Classroom Dynamic”, introduces an e-learning game called ‘Furious Frogs’ and talks about its effects on the classroom dynamic in an ESL teaching context. The paper reflects on whether practical barriers exist when implementing it in a classroom, and whether such barriers can be overcome. The game design of one particular game, Furious Frogs, is critiqued and suggestions are made about how the game could be improved. This paper shows that an important strength of DGBL lies in the improvement of the students’ attention and motivation.

Barry Ryan reflects on a broader theme, but one that is highly relevant in every institution in the current context of higher education – the role of postgraduate research students whom he characterizes as ‘transient researchers [who] play two key roles: full-time researchers and novice educators.’ Ryan calls not just for celebrating the research skills of this ‘forgotten tribe’ but for appropriate pedagogic training and an integration of these trained and supported teaching postgraduates which can benefit many key stakeholders; the undergraduate, the postgraduate and the institution.

The issue includes reviews of two recently published books that readers will find useful. The first is a review by Linda Carey of *Reflective Teaching in Higher Education* by Paul Ashwin, David Boud, Kelly Coate et al, Bloomsbury, 2015. This is a useful book that contains a theoretical framework, case studies from higher education and short key reading sections that point to further reading.

The second book reviewed, by Delma Byrne, is *Irish Higher Education: A Comparative Perspective*, by Patrick Clancy, Dublin, Institute of Public Administration, 2015. Any book by Patrick Clancy will have considerable weight in the Irish higher education and will be of international interest because of its framing of Irish HE policy alongside wider European and International developments. It offers

a strong critique of current Higher Education policy in Ireland including the changing relationship between universities, other higher education institutions and the state.

Also included in this issue are the abstracts of the 9th Annual Irish Workshop on Mathematics Learning Support, which took place in May of this year. This is an event organized by the Irish Mathematics Learning Support Network (IMLSN), and it makes an important contribution to supporting student learning in mathematics across the island of Ireland and further afield. This year, the workshop looked at ways of maximizing the impact of digital supports in mathematics learning and support in higher education. We are very pleased to be able to publish the abstracts and thereby play a small role in this important work.

I would like to remind all our readers that the next issue, scheduled for 31st October, will be a another general issue that will welcome contributions on a diverse range of topics. I encourage you to continue to submit your papers and contribute to the dynamic higher education higher dialogue that is a mark of our AISHE-J community of practice.

All that remains is for me to thank all of our contributors, editors and reviewers who together have made the issue possible and, with great pleasure, bring you AISHE-J Volume 7: Number 2.

Saranne Magennis, 30<sup>th</sup> June, 2015.