






# ***Building learning partnerships for innovation and transformation in education: An example from a creative and innovative programme for educators at a leading Irish university.***

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## **Abstract.**

The need to engage students and staff effectively as partners in learning and teaching has been consistently emphasised in academic research and pedagogical practice. This article responds to this need by discussing the partnerships which were built in a creative education programme for educators from varied backgrounds, disciplines and institutions around the world at a leading Irish university. We discuss the different types of learning partnerships which are promoted during, outside and beyond the 'Educators Programme' and examine the pedagogical structures and processes which supported the development of partnership relationships. More specifically, we explain how the use of a Design Thinking methodology facilitated the formation of partnerships between programme facilitators and student-educators and also among student-educators, engaging them in i) collaborative learning ii) experiential learning, and iii) reflective practice. These processes were found to create an optimal environment for partnerships to grow. Psychological safety is presented as an essential foundational component for all of the above. Community of Practice is discussed as a positive outcome which naturally emerged from successful learning partnerships.

Overall, it is argued that the successful learning partnerships built through the programme offered student-educators transformative learning experiences which empowered them to lead innovation and effect change in their teaching practice. This reflective case study contributes to discussions of the processes of building engagement and partnership between students and teachers and offers inspiration and practical ideas which can be applied in other local and international educational contexts.

**Keywords:** Co-creation of learning; Community of practice; Design thinking; Experiential learning; Psychological safety; Reflective practice; Student engagement; Student-teacher partnership.

## 1. Introduction.

Engaging students as partners in learning and teaching is one of the most important issues facing higher education in the 21st century (Bovill, Cook-Sather, Felten, Millard & Moore-Cherry, 2016; Felten, Cook-Sather, Bovill, 2014; Brown, 2019; Ford, 2018; Price, 2020). Several research studies have demonstrated the positive learning experiences and outcomes for both educators and students (e.g. Cook-Sather, Bovill & Felten, 2014; Crawford, Horsley, Hagyard & Derricott, 2015; Pauli, Raymond-Barker & Worrell, 2016). Students as partners is a concept which interweaves through many other debates, including assessment and feedback, employability and linking teaching and research. Partnership is not simply about a will to change existing practices and structures, important as this is. It is also about a change in mindset and attitude to the nature of learning itself, understood as an experiential process of reflection and transformation in relation to oneself and with others. It is about embracing the often-disorientating complexity of the contemporary world while maintaining the curiosity, and indeed the courage, to find out what is not already and cannot be known in advance (Healey, Flint & Harrington, 2016).

This reflective case study discusses the learning partnerships which were built in a creative education programme for educators (Professional Certificate and Diploma in Creativity and Innovation in Education; henceforth, the '*Educators Programme*') at a leading Irish university and examines the pedagogical processes which were conducive to the formation of partnership relationships.

The aim of the Educators Programme is to help educational professionals to reimagine education and introduce change and innovation in their teaching practice<sup>1</sup>. Educators from varied backgrounds, disciplines and institutions around the world are brought together in an experiential environment where they develop their creativity, explore new ideas and entrepreneurial initiatives in education and develop their leadership for effecting change, while

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<sup>1</sup> For further information on the structure of the Educators Programme referred to in this article, please click the URL below. Please note that by following this link, it opens a new browser tab and sends you to an external website managed by the authors outside of AISHE-J for which the journal is not responsible for the content or associated privacy policy.  
[https://docs.google.com/document/d/1pK\\_7i1FU2V27W2nlsZGC097M3yukxcTvWGZcAzn3uHo/edit?usp=sharing](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1pK_7i1FU2V27W2nlsZGC097M3yukxcTvWGZcAzn3uHo/edit?usp=sharing)

working in partnership. The programme focuses on bringing student-educators outside of their comfort zone through creative and innovative team and individual challenges using methodologies such as Design Thinking, Inversion Thinking, Effectuation and Entrepreneurial Thinking, among others. The learning outcomes are linked to creativity; learning and enabling learning; teamwork and collaboration; leadership; and self-care and resilience, all of which are fundamental competencies for educators.

The co-creation of learning through student-teacher partnerships is an important cornerstone of the programme and a contributory factor to its success. Motivated by the need to offer an understanding of how successful learning partnerships can be built, this article presents the approach that is employed in this programme.

This case study is divided into two main parts. The first part briefly discusses the types of partnerships which are built during, outside and beyond the programme. The second part examines the pedagogical processes and methodologies used to foster partnerships between programme facilitators and student-educators and among other stakeholders. Creating a space of psychological safety is presented as the starting point. Design Thinking is discussed as a methodology which facilitates the formation of partnerships among student-educators participating in the programme. This methodology systematically engages educators in i) collaborative learning, ii) experiential learning, and iii) reflective practice. These three processes create an optimal environment for partnership relationships to grow. A positive outcome emerging from successful partnerships is Community of Practice, extending outside and beyond the formal course. Some considerations for replicating this approach to developing partnerships in other educational contexts are also presented.

## **2. The Ripple Effect: Partnerships built during, outside and beyond the Educators Programme.**

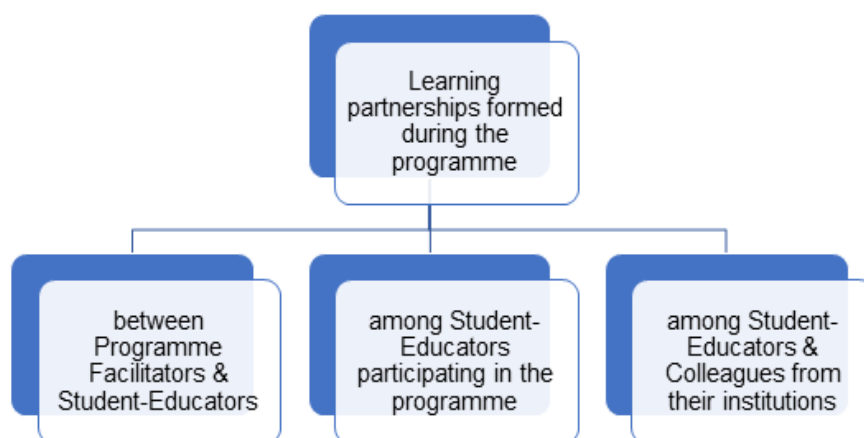
### **2.1 Development of learning partnerships.**

The Educators Programme promotes the co-creation of learning through partnerships. Although the concept of partnership can be interpreted in different ways, it is understood here as a process of '*staff and students learning and working together to foster engaged student learning and engaging learning and teaching enhancement*' (Healey, Flint & Harrington, 2014, p.15). In this sense, partnership does not refer to a product but rather to a process which

involves *'joint ownership and decision-making over the process and outcome'*, the assumption being that a partnership is *'a relationship in which all...[participants] are actively engaged with and stand to gain from the process of learning and working together'* (Healey et al., 2014, p.12). In the Educators Programme, partnership relationships are fostered through the use of a Design Thinking methodology which facilitates the formation of partnerships and triggers three interacting and mutually-supportive pedagogical processes, i.e. collaborative learning, experiential learning, and reflective practice; these processes create favourable conditions for partnership relationships to grow (see Section 3).

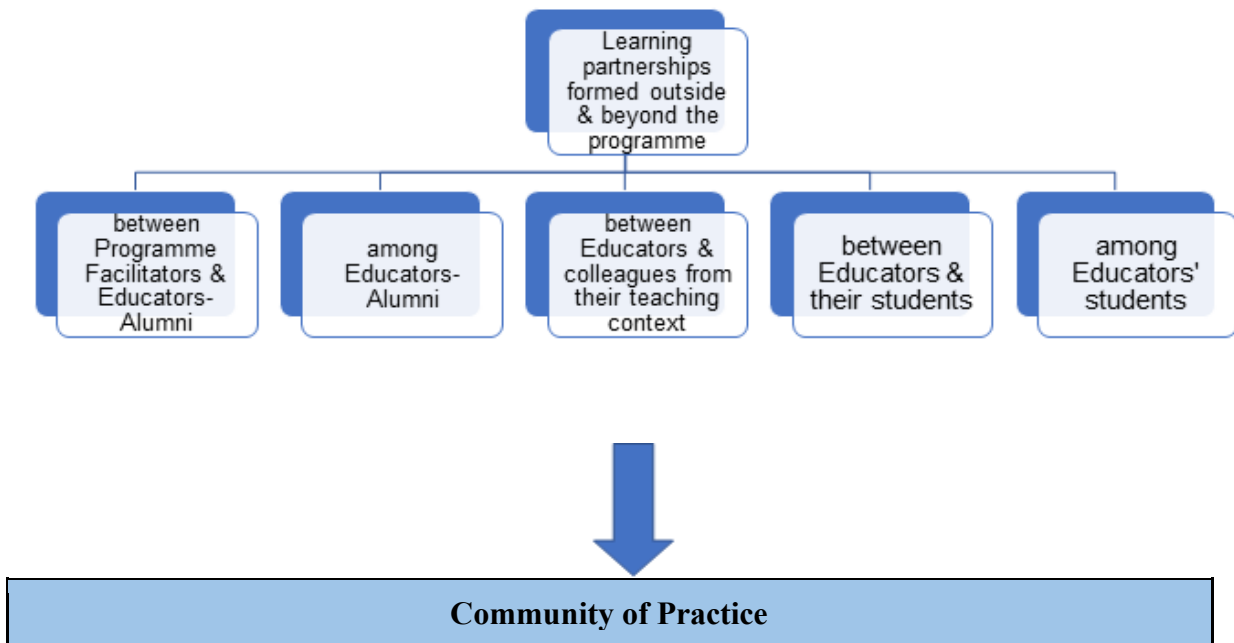
Figures 1 and 2 illustrate the different partnerships promoted by the Educators Programme. A distinctive feature of these partnerships is the wide diversity of their participating members who represent varied backgrounds, levels of education, disciplines and institutions around the world.

**Figure 1. Learning partnerships developed during the Educators Programme.**



During the course, student-educators enter into learning partnerships with the programme facilitators and their fellow student-educators. Contribution to both types of partnership is required for effective participation in the modules and achievement of learning outcomes. It is important to note here that student-educators are viewed as equal partners in their relationship with programme facilitators and learning is a two-way process. Programme facilitators expose student-educators to alternative ways of thinking and learning whilst developing new insights from the multiple perspectives and contributions of their students. This is in contrast with the model of education as knowledge transmission and the *'sage on the stage'* teaching method (King, 1993).

**Figure 2. Learning partnerships formed outside and beyond the lifespan of the Educators Programme.**



What is perhaps more important is that partnerships formed during the course may extend outside and beyond the formal course (Figure 2). Some educators continue to collaborate with colleagues and/or facilitators from the programme after the course and they may also enter into new partnerships with colleagues from their professional context to introduce new initiatives, applying what they have learned. Forming partnerships with their own students and promoting learning partnerships among their students, modelling the teaching and learning approach they experienced as students on the Educators Programme is also possible.

## **2.2 Learning partnerships in action.**

The learning partnership approach and the value of collaboration are very often reflected in the Action Learning Projects undertaken by student-educators in the Diploma component of the Programme. Three recent examples are outlined below (and refer to Figure 3):

### **2.2.1 The Summer School for the Skills of The Future.**

This initiative was developed by two academics who would not have crossed paths except for their participation in the programme. This project developed and implemented an accredited

Summer School for PhD students (5 ECTS) to assist them in developing durable skills for their future, specifically addressing the need to raise social awareness and develop social responsibility in postgraduate research students. One of the main strengths is its interdisciplinarity; bringing together students from different disciplines and backgrounds in group projects is key to its success.

### **2.2.2 Empower Me.**

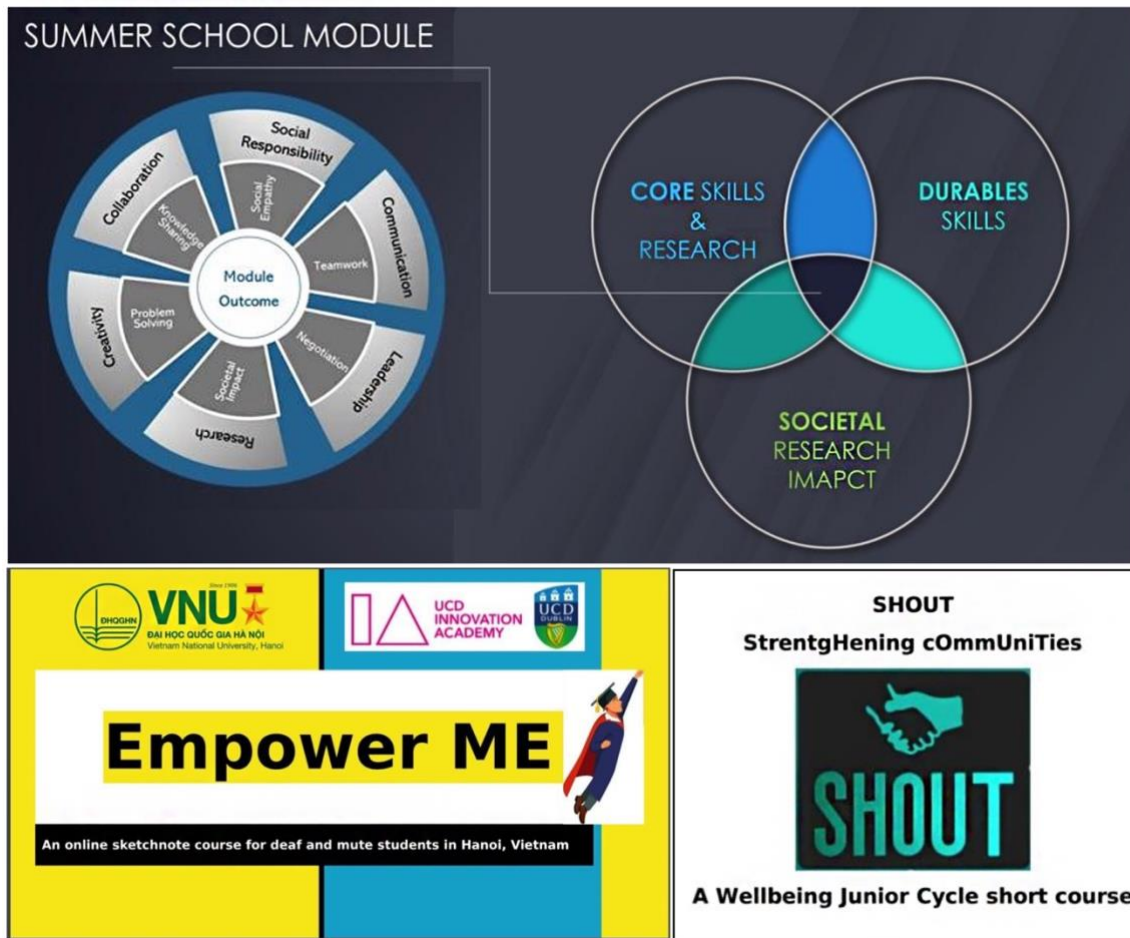
This is an example of student-educators collaborating on a project for the betterment of society. This group of academics from The National University of Vietnam in Hanoi participated in the Educators Programme in June 2021 where they developed an idea that could help school children from disadvantaged backgrounds in Hanoi. Following completion of the taught programme, these four academics, all from different disciplines, implemented this project as their Action Learning Project, following a Design Thinking process, in a school for deaf mute children in Hanoi. This involved visiting a school, delivering content and the development of an online Sketchnote course with 12 short videos of instruction for the students. This course encourages students to engage in an extra-curricular activity which involves collaborating with peers. Helping students to overcome communication barriers, the project has the potential to have a profound effect on these children and their families.

### **2.2.3 The SHOUT project.**

The SHOUT project was born from a '*Festival of Education*' team project and was subsequently developed by one of the team members for their Action Learning Project. SHOUT, an acronym for StrengtHening cOmmUniTies, was implemented by a secondary school teacher in Dublin. The aim of the project was to improve students' wellbeing and sense of belonging and have a positive impact on their local community while teaching them essential skills for the post-COVID world. Students were expected to connect with their local community and offer volunteering work.

This included home volunteering, local area volunteering, school volunteering, and school community volunteering. Students were awarded digital badges for all their endeavours in these volunteering roles. The outcome of this SHOUT programme has given the students first-hand experience of community volunteering and at the same time the school has connected in a collaborative way with the local community.

**Figure 3. Three examples of successful action learning projects.**



### 3. Methods and processes of building and maintaining partnerships.

Having briefly examined the multiple learning partnerships that were developed through the Educators Programme, the question naturally arises: how were these partnerships built? The approach to building and maintaining partnerships in the programme involves the use of a Design Thinking methodology, which requires students to work in partnership, and a combination of three pedagogical processes which are fundamental to the growth of partnership relationships: collaborative learning, experiential learning, and reflective practice. Before examining these in detail, the importance of psychological safety is discussed, as this is recognised as an essential prerequisite for the effective implementation of the above processes.

### **3.1 Creating psychological safety: Laying the foundations.**

The Educators Programme takes student-educators outside of their comfort zone into a learning zone (Senninger, 2000) and creates the opportunity to work with others to create a better model for education. But this move into the learning zone cannot be achieved without the establishment of a psychologically safe place for educators to retreat from the traditional role of practitioners to learners and co-creators of education.

The Educators Programme (when delivered in-person) begins with an open invitation to literally ‘*step over*’ a threshold as students in a co-located space are invited to physically step over a rope on the floor - a psychological move forward into a new, challenging and shared learning space. Every session is prefaced with the reminder that if anyone is uncomfortable with anything in the session that they do not have to participate, and there is no penalty or negative connotation to anyone stepping out. Although the idea of the classroom as a “*safe space*” is not universally accepted (Barrett, 2010), it is an overt paradigm utilised throughout this programme to encourage participants to try new and challenging ways of thinking and doing.

### **3.2 Design Thinking: A methodology which facilitates the formation of partnerships.**

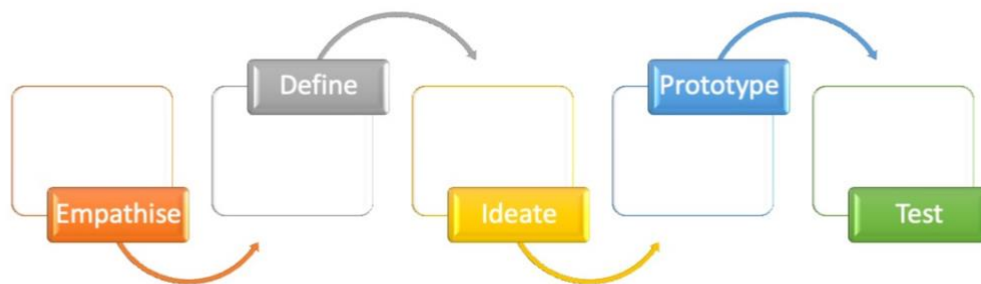
Design Thinking is a term introduced by Rowe (1987) to discuss the process of designing in architecture and urban planning. In recent years, it has gained popularity in various sectors, including education, as a method to facilitate and encourage creative approaches to identifying and solving challenges (Vaugh, Finnegan-Kessie, Donnellan & Oswald, 2020). According to Panke (2019), Design Thinking comprises a variety of creative strategies for stewarding projects with multiple stakeholders or fostering organisational innovation. The IDEO Design Thinking approach (“*IDEO Design Thinking*,” n.d.) is the one utilised in the Educators programme as the basis for student-educators to think about effecting change by devising alternative ideas informed by the needs of the end user (a process called empathy mapping).

There are five classic stages of Design Thinking: Empathise, Define, Ideate, Prototype and Test (Figure 4). Partnership and collaboration are at the heart of this approach as both the Empathy and Definition stages are about finding out what the potential end user actually needs and building ideas around this. Ideation, Prototyping and Testing are further iterative



processes all built around cycles of 'try - do - review' with the voice of the end user at the heart of the process (Griffin & Hauser, 1993). According to Lee (2018), incorporating Design Thinking into the classroom can help students approach problems and tasks in an innovative and effective manner that can be valuable for any future endeavour.

**Figure 4. The 5 classic stages of Design Thinking**



In one activity, student-educators engage in a “*Team Based Design Thinking Sprint*” project held over a day and a half. This involves groups of people from different backgrounds and disciplines working on a complex real-world problem to ultimately formulate a solution; it demands that diverse teams work together in a collaborative way. It is the collaborative nature of Design Thinking which acts as a ‘*partnership cementing tool*’. Students often refer back to their Design Thinking project during the remaining modules and often use their newly formed partnerships in subsequent tasks.

Lee (2018) refers to Wagner’s ‘The Global Achievement Gap’ (Wagner, 2014) and states that using Design Thinking opens up the opportunity for students to develop the creative process called ‘The Seven Survival Skills’ (Wagner, 2010), one of which is ‘*Collaboration across networks and learning by influence*’. This collaboration reflects one of the main learning themes of the programme - Building a Community of Practice - this collaborative community building approach threads right through the programme and often leads to teams coming together to work on Action Learning Projects at a later stage in the journey. These team projects can often have a lasting influence on pedagogy.

The use of a Design Thinking methodology triggers three main pedagogical processes which create favourable conditions for student-teacher and student-student partnerships to grow. These processes are discussed below.

### **3.3 Processes supporting partnership relationships.**

#### **3.3.1 Collaborative learning.**

The multiple partnerships which can emerge highlight the ripple effect of the successful partnership model developed through the programme. This can extend well beyond the course and these partnerships can naturally evolve into Communities of Practice, i.e. '*groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly*' (Lave and Wenger, 1991; see Section 3.4). While there has been a concerted effort to introduce more teamwork into educational settings in recent years, some educational systems still stress individual effort over collaboration (Cox & Bobrowski, 2004). Groups are smart (Frey, Fisher & Everlove, 2009) and there is richness in diversity of experience (Mannix & Neale, 2005), but this is not always a concept which students are familiar with or have experienced. Three key elements which contribute to student satisfaction when collaborating are team dynamics, team acquaintance and instructor support (Ku, Tseng, & Akarasriworn, 2013) - all of which are supported and actively developed in the Educators Programme.

One of the highlights of the programme is the '*Festival of Education*' (FoE). The FoE brings diverse educators together, from different disciplines and backgrounds, to work on a project in reimagining education. This event offers student-educators the opportunity to celebrate the value of collaborative learning by showcasing their innovative and creative ideas. With the online delivery of the programme, the Summer Festival of Education developed a global reach with over 150 attendees in June 2021. This webinar attracted an international panel of expert academics in the field of educational change.

#### **3.3.2 Experiential learning.**

The value of experiential learning can be easily demonstrated by the phrase often attributed to Confucius '*I hear and I forget. I see and I remember. I do and I understand*'. Each student's learning journey is unique as they draw upon their own experiences as a foundation to engage with the new. In educators' professional development, it is suggested that this approach can motivate educators to try new practices and make desired changes to the curriculum a practical reality (Girvan, Conneely & Tangney, 2016). Experiential learning is most effective when students are provided with tools and guidance on how to make the most of working in this practically-oriented space (Cox & Bobrowski, 2004). Here, learning by doing takes place

from the students' first day through active participation in a wide range of tasks and activities, both as individuals and in teams, with the view to developing creativity, innovative thinking. Students are immersed into an experiential learning environment which can be conducive to developing new possibilities for their own teaching environments.

### 3.3.3 Reflective practice.

All educators are inherently reflective practitioners as we utilise our past experiences to inform our future practices oftentimes without realising (Kinsella, 2010). The emphasis of the Educators Programme on the importance of being a conscious reflective practitioner encourages participants to communicate their widely varied experiences as educators, thus creating a community of reflective partners. Reflection is embedded in every session. After each team task, a reflection is encouraged, with sharing of observations in either the team or the wider class. Personal and group reflections and insights are captured by the use of either physical or digital noticeboards and serve as a valuable shared resource.

The three processes discussed above are used repeatedly, creating multiple opportunities for student-educators to develop learning partnerships:

- I. The collaborative stage of the process is designed in the first instance by the facilitators as they deliberately create teams with educators from different disciplines and indeed different countries. This rich mix of backgrounds and cultures adds a real dynamism to the collaborative teamwork during the Design Thinking process which naturally creates an inquisitive partnership environment.
- II. The experiential element comes into focus at the start of the Design Thinking process as the student-educators must '*empathise*' with their subject to define the actual problem being addressed. This experiential approach using the tools of ideation and prototyping naturally brings the team together and often forms breakaway partnerships within the team as well as the whole team collaboration. With this experiential approach the programme has continually produced successful partnerships with educators collaborating on Action Learning Projects, institutional projects of change and academic publications.
- III. Design Thinking is an iterative process. It is not an approach to problem solving that is a '*once off*'. Design Thinking encourages a test and fail approach, often

referred to as '*fail early - fail fast*'. This approach requires constant reflection and pivoting in an iterative fashion. Therefore, the reflective process that Design Thinking requires naturally drives the student-educators into a reflective mind space that helps them enhance and develop their own reflective practice both during and after the programme.

### **3.4 Community of Practice: A positive outcome of successful partnerships.**

A positive outcome of partnerships formed is the development of Community of Practice. Building on Lave and Wenger's (1991) definition of these groups (see section 3.3.1), they also point out that the practice of a community '*involves learning on the part of everyone*'. United by their passion for innovation and change in education, some programme alumni develop a long-term relationship of practice sharing and collaboration (Yang, O'Reilly & Houghton, 2020). The seeds of these relationships are planted early in the Educators Programme, they develop via partnerships, and they subsequently evolve into Community of Practice. Pyrko and colleagues (2017) argue that it is '*the collaborative learning process of "thinking together" which brings Communities of Practice to life*'; this is understood as a process '*where people mutually guide each other through their understandings of the same problems in their area of mutual interest, and this way indirectly share tacit knowledge*' (Pyrko, Dörfler & Eden, 2017).

One example of a Community of Practice which emerged from the Educators Programme can be found in Vietnam, where the course has been delivered for lecturers in different fields from the Vietnam National University Hanoi (VNU Hanoi) under the scheme Vietnam Ireland Bilateral Education Exchange (VIBE) since 2018. This has led to the formation of an active community of alumni - the VIBERs - who have designed and performed many collaborative projects focused not only on teaching and research but also on community service. The work of this Community of Practice includes the development of new courses designed for students (e.g. Design thinking, Innovation and Creativity, Introduction to Startup, Startup Management, Design your Life) and modules for lecturers (inside and outside VNU Hanoi) and enterprises (e.g. Innovation and Entrepreneurship for Educators, Teaching Method Innovation, Applied Design Thinking), in which teams of varied sizes from different majors are formed for co-teaching or publishing joint papers and reports. The VIBERs have also organised a community project for a village in Da Bac, Hoa Binh province, Vietnam in 2021 to support the local tourism businesses and build a free library for children. The Action Learning Projects of some

VIBERs have been supported strongly by other members, becoming the living projects of the whole community.

Another example of work developed through a Community of Practice is the genesis of the present paper. Co-authored by the programme director and programme alumni, this reflective case study represents an example of collaborative work produced by educators who share their need to document their positive learning experience of working in partnership and offer inspiration and practical ideas which can be applied in other local and international educational contexts.

Post-course collaborative thinking and communication among members of Communities of Practice are promoted through the Educators' WhatsApp groups and a LinkedIn alumni group. In December 2020, the introduction of a Fellowship programme was offered to alumni of the Educators Programme offering an opportunity for those awarded, to spend a semester working on some aspect of creative/innovative teaching practice. A number of the authors of this collaborative paper have been a part of the Fellowship programme. As a Fellow, they take a sabbatical away from the intense schedules of their own regular teaching role and join the team for a trimester where they work in collaboration with facilitators to explore an experiential approach to learning. This Fellowship initiative serves as another example of a collaborative partnership approach to teaching and learning.

## **4. Conclusion.**

Learning partnerships in education can be developed in different ways and in different forms. The aim of this paper was to demonstrate one possible approach to building partnerships in the context of an innovative and creative programme for educators at a leading Irish university. It was specifically argued that creating a space of psychological safety is important for laying strong foundations for partnerships to be formed; Design Thinking offers a structure for partnerships to operate; and a combination of collaborative learning, experiential learning, and reflective practice, all activated by Design Thinking, can create optimal conditions for partnership relationships to flourish. Added value comes from Communities of Practice, which can naturally emerge from successful partnerships.

The sustainable impact of partnerships is evidenced by the continuing and vibrant Community of Practice between alumni and programme facilitators, which has a lasting value for all stakeholders. This Community of Practice brings the educator-student relationship to the next

level through collaboration on projects for the improvement of pedagogical delivery which this collaborative approach to writing an academic paper demonstrates.

Although the practices employed in the Educators Programme are not presented here as a recipe for success, it is argued that similar models of partnership and processes for student engagement and the co-creation of learning can be applied in other contexts. Changes in response to the needs of the specific context would be essential for effective implementation. Educators who wish to adopt some of the practices discussed here would need to ensure that these are integrated into a model of a learner-centred pedagogy which engages students as responsible decision-makers and active participants in all pedagogical processes. Assessment would be another important factor to be considered. Indeed, the absence of high stakes assessment (graded summative assignments and examinations) from the Educators Programme might have influenced the degree of success of working in partnership. Future studies might examine the impact of institutionalised assessment on the quality and outcomes of learning partnerships and stimulate discussions of alternative methods of assessment which engage students as partners in feedback and assessment.

Overall, it is hoped that this case study offers inspiration and some practical ideas for partnership implementation and development in other educational contexts across different levels in Ireland and beyond.

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