

Droichead Shared Learning Day for mentors

11 November 2015

Keadeen Hotel, Dublin

Opening remarks by Tomás Ó Ruairc, Teaching Council Director

Stripping it back - why?

This is a picture of an archaeological dig from the Orkneys in Scotland.

<https://prezi.com/0xxxf-kwvcmnd>

The head of the dig has said that people think that archaeologists are digging for fragments, for bits and pieces of the story of the people who lived there.

We're not, he says,

We're looking for the whole story.

If you take only one message from what I have to say this morning about Droichead, this is it. Droichead is about the whole story of teaching. Like the village that is being uncovered in this picture, Droichead is about the community – the community of professional practice. It is about making explicit what has been implicit for far too long – the rich network of relationships that await an NQT when they embark on their journey of becoming a teacher.

It is about the profession being given the recognition it has sought for so long for the professional learning that it has been leading for years. Mentoring is the exemplar of this authentic professional leadership.

But as one experienced mentor pointed out to us recently, there is a hidden risk in this latter statement, for it risks putting mentors on a pedestal where it can be quite lonely. Giving support and guidance to a newly qualified colleague can be engaging, enriching, rewarding as you see this new member of your profession blossom and grow. But even where there are no difficulties, it requires emotional investment of you as a person and as a professional. And this experienced mentor reflected her sense that in Droichead, the Council's core value of shared professional responsibility is being realised. She is not on her own anymore. She is still mentoring, but in partnership with her fellow professionals. This would be in keeping with the more nuanced understanding that many teachers have of professional leadership.

Professional leadership

Earlier this year, I spoke to teachers on the Tóraíocht programme for leadership run by NUIM. Last Saturday, I spoke to teachers who are pursuing a Postgraduate Diploma in Educational Leadership in UCC. In both cases, I asked teachers to give me a sense, in images or words, of what they understood professional leadership to mean – in the case of NUIM, sustainable leadership, and in the case of UCC, leadership of learning.

Here are some of the images which they sent: <https://prezi.com/0xxxf-kwvcmd>

Overall, across two cohorts of teachers in two different spaces and times, there is a resounding consensus that sustainable leadership of learning will have to be far more distributed and collaborative than it has been to date. Droichead is the best professional opportunity to respond to this insight of teachers.

Professional leadership

As mentors, of course, you instinctively know this – that is a huge part of the journey you travel with the NQTs – the mutual learning that you engage in with each other. Where is this notion of learning and professional leadership at the Council level?

I'll take leadership first. The Teaching Council is the only statutory professional standards body with a professional majority on it. No other profession has been given this unique position of trust. It means that teachers are trusted to lead the enhancement of their own standards in a spirit of partnership with others – parents, HEIs (colleges), unions, management etc.

So when people ask why the fourth year of the B. Ed. cannot double-up for probation, this is the reason why - because professional leadership at a Council level means that for those beginning to become teachers, there comes a point where **fellow teachers** formally welcome their newly qualified colleagues into the most important profession in society. This opportunity is richly deserved and necessary. The NQTs deserve the support and guidance of their experienced colleagues; those colleagues deserve the space and time to share their learning with each other and the NQTs; and pupils deserve to benefit from that learning. And you all deserve the recognition and acknowledgment of the statutory professional standards body for that work. The Council intends to provide for that through Cosán, the forthcoming framework for teachers' learning.

What about the Council's learning though? This is summed up in the question we are often asked – is the Council listening?

Are we listening? Yes, we are!

There are many examples I could give of how the Council has listened to teachers in the Droichead process, and how we have learned, and continue to learn. Kathryn will list some of these later.

The best example I could give of learning in real time stems back to the first Shared Learning Day we had for primary schools in January 2013. It was a challenging time for the process. That day was a huge step forward for the schools and for us. I remember listening to the NQTs talk about their professional journey in Droichead, and being completely humbled at the calibre of person coming into our profession.

But the learning went deeper than that. Later in the day, when the schools were informed that the Inspectorate would be visiting NQTs who had completed Droichead in their second year of work, as a quality assurance measure, there was an outright professional revolt. Every single teacher in the room made it quite clear that this was a non-starter. And why? Because they felt that such a process would effectively state that their professional judgement could not be trusted. Within 24 hours, we had confirmed that we would change the quality assurance mechanism in direct response to their concerns. We had to – because they were pointing out the inconsistencies of our own policy provision! And because they were demonstrating very clearly how they were ready to embrace the model of collaborative leadership that Droichead offers – in order to maintain and enhance standards.

Paying it forward

This immense professional pride in exercising your judgement to guide, support, advise and care is echoed in a conversation I had with a mentor in her mid-fifties in Cork about two years ago. If I remember correctly, she had only

recently completed her preparation to begin mentoring. I asked her why she had gone for mentoring, and why she had gone for it now. She was clear that she had no interest in becoming a principal. Her reasoning was crystal clear – she wanted to give newly qualified teachers the kind of support that she did **not** receive when she was in their shoes.

We all know the impact that informal support and guidance can give us – the listening ear, the empathetic face, a kind word, a comfortable silence. And you may well be sitting there and wondering – fine, if this informal approach works so well, why are we trying to formalise it? And my response is this – precisely because the personal, supportive approach of mentoring works so well, we want to ensure that every NQT receives the benefit of it, and not just those who happen to secure employment in a school which happens to have a mentor. We know from teachers that for this support and guidance to be sustainable, it must be done collaboratively – hence the Professional Support Teams. Your work in supporting your colleagues has been a resounding success. It is time for it to receive the recognition it deserves. And it is time for all NQTs to be guaranteed such support as a matter of course. It is simply too important to leave to chance.

Some people may hear such talk and say that it's all too happy clappy to be sustainable in the real world of schools.

But as John Hurley, a teacher based in Cork once said,

Schools are places full of humanity...

And an NQT at the Shared Learning Day in April, in response to this, noted that from his experience:

Droichead is a more humane process.

We should all be proud of the fact, therefore, that through Droichead we are giving as much space as possible for that humanity to relate to, guide and support each other, through professional conversations and relationships.

Is the Council listening?

Some teachers continue to say that the Council is not listening, that we are not taking on board the fact that some teachers have said that they do not want this.

In nearly all such cases, when we engage in further conversations with them about what Droichead involves, it often transpires that they have not had the time to read the full documentation, and are not aware of some of the key provisions. We find that when we explain these to them, many of them come around. Those who don't tend to be convinced that their worst fears will be realised. The greatest one of all is relationships – relationships will be damaged, they believe, because those who have historically been colleagues, are now going to, as they perceive it, evaluate each other.

We now have two years' experience of working with 150 schools, which as of now is over 300, and all I can say is that these fears have not been realised.

Relationships are being changed alright – they have been transformed for the better. Principals speak of a positive impact on their entire staff because for the first time, they have sat down and talked about what good teaching and learning looks like in their school.

Why is this? My hunch is because once teachers come in to the process, they quickly discover that Droichead is not about evaluation. It is about support,

guidance and advice; it is about formal acknowledgement of the quality of connections that are formed when fellow professionals talk to each other about what they do. Yes, there is a form that completes the process. But in that form, the other members of the Professional Support Teams are being asked to recommend that NQT is ready for full membership of the profession, based on the quality of their engagement with you as people and as professionals. And this recommendation is on foot of an open and transparent process where the NQT's voice has a great influence on it, and where there are no surprises.

Closing – an invitation to reflect – to think and talk

And that's what today is all about – teachers supporting each other to have professional conversations about how to make the best use of the professional opportunities that Droichead offers.

The best part of this is that teachers in Droichead realise this already.

An NQT speaking of Droichead said

That's the professional I want to be.

An experienced teacher said

That's the space I want to be in.

And a member of our principal's working group said of course that's the space we want to be in

because everybody learns in it.

Three statements by three professionals, each in a different place and different time, summarising together far more eloquently than I ever could the freedom

that the profession is creating for itself to support and sustain itself through Droichead, all rooted in learning, for everybody, teachers and pupils. These three statements in different places and times, and around the one core message, show how we can get a proper professional balance between us and the other, between verifying standards and supporting deep professional learning.

Thank you for listening.

Tomás Ó Ruairc

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