

## **Making space for the person in the professional: Leading and talking about learning**

*Keynote address by Tomás Ó Ruairc, Teaching Council Director to Tóraíocht Symposium, Maynooth University*

*18 March 2017*

It may seem odd for the Director of the Teaching Council to commence a keynote address to an esteemed audience of teachers and doctors by referring to orangutans – but that is exactly what I am going to do!

Cheryl Knott is a supervisor of research into orangutans in their natural habitat in Indonesia. In a recent article in National Geographic, she closed by saying:

*"As a scientist you're supposed to be objective. But you're also human, and that connection is why I'm here."*

Here we have a niche specialist in a particular area of science who has studied this area for the best part of 20 years – and even at this stage in her career, she is very much aware of the human dynamics that are at the heart of her completing her work – and of why she has pursued it so passionately for so long. It is not stated explicitly, but to me she is clearly saying that she is where she is, doing what she does, because at some deeper, instinctive level, she cares.

So my question to you for openers here this morning is – why are **you** \*here\*? Some of you may state that you have to be here, it's a requirement of the programme. But my sister often reminds me that nobody forces you to do anything, you always have choices. Yes, you are here because you have to be – but why did you take up the course? What brought you to submit the application form? What choice started the journey that led you to sit in this hall this morning?

I sent this question out to you, and reading across the answers that I received, the following themes emerged:

- Enhance your chances for promotion
- Further professional learning – deeper understanding of the role of principal and deputy principal
- Engage with my own personal values
- Grow in knowledge and understanding of leadership roles
- Disillusioned with the negativity around me
- Equip me with language to engage confidently in professional dialogue

- I enjoy learning
- Explore outside the classroom
- Another challenge; to challenge myself; stimulate my mind; question my current practice and step outside the box a little
- Empower me to become a more active member of my staff
- Create and nurture other leaders in the school
- Meet with and listen to other educational leaders
- Clear vision and values
- Focus on teaching and learning
- Examining myself as leader, teacher and person; self-awareness at a personal and professional level

And then I got an email from a participant on the course. And this email made me sit up and think – in a good and humbling way. The teacher recounted how they came to assume a formal leadership position in their school, and then encountered a significant challenge. And what struck me the most about the email was the lack of anger or bitterness. Clearly the challenge had not been an easy one to grapple with – but the email reflects a mind still working through what happened, what the causes may have been – and a distinct lack of certainty with which the teacher appears to be remarkably comfortable:

***Perhaps I wasn't as prepared as I needed to be in order to excel in a school leadership position. Perhaps I didn't have a sound enough grounding with the theory of leadership. Perhaps I could have done certain things differently.***

And they come to the conclusion that:

*...how we react to disappointment is entirely in our control.*

The teacher goes on to quote Benjamin Barber, a political theorist who said (**Dweck, 2006**):

***I don't divide the world into the successes and the failures.....I divide the world into the learners and non-learners (20).***

The whole email conveys the strong sense of reflective practice that underpins this openness to learning that Barber is extolling.

And I think that in this email, the teacher sums up the overall reason you are here – to reflect, to learn, and to act on those processes, and share the insights you gain with your peers through enhanced, distributed leadership.

### **Why am I here?**

I am here for many reasons – but fundamentally they all come back to this personal statement – I am here because I care. I care about the community and society in which I live; I care about my children and the quality of teaching and learning they experience every day; I care about the professionals who teach them every day – because they are my greatest reason for hope. In a time when we talk of “post-truths” and “alternative facts”, when the rights that we have come to take for granted seem under constant attack, my greatest hope is the people who teach and learn every day. The more authentic and human these engagements are the more reason we all have to hope.

I choose these words carefully, and they lie behind the title I have chosen for today - *Making space for the person in the professional – Leading and talking about learning*. In Ireland, like in many countries, we talk a lot about syllabus, curriculum, PTR’s, computers, broadband – how often do we talk about the magic and science that happens when one person helps another person to learn? A recent edition of the Economist noted, in the context of machine translation and voice recognition technology, that “linking information to language is hard.” Yet that is exactly what teachers do every day, 5 days a week, with up to 6 or 7 different groups of young people, from September to May or June. I read in an article about wellbeing that teachers make on average 20-30 decisions per hour. Thomas Guskey, the international expert on professional learning, said in a recent webinar of the Council’s that teachers have on average 200-300 interactions per hour! And we are lucky that it is as little as that. If there are any mathematicians in the audience, the number of ways in which 30 people can be grouped and interact with each other cannot be accommodated on your standard calculator.

So teaching is incredibly complex, amazing, and extremely important for our social and economic progress – and it all comes down to people helping people to learn. That is why we must make space for the person in the professional. And that is why we have to talk more and more about teaching and learning. Because otherwise we risk forgetting about the people, including all of you, and we risk forgetting about why we got into this profession in the first place. Because with little exaggeration, your path to today started when you first said – *I want to be a teacher*. I said that when I was aged 7 because of the way I felt in Mrs. Kenna’s classroom in Graiguecullen BNS.

So a key part of what I would like to talk to you today will be all about relationships, wellbeing and the humanity that is at the core of why we are all here today. As Plato said, all learning has an emotional base.

My goal this morning is not to give you all the answers, as I don't have those. My goal is firstly to remind you of the importance of caring of self as leader, so that you are able to care for others; to remember the importance and impact of emotions on all that we do. And secondly, to try and persuade you that notwithstanding our national and international turbulence, how the whole world seems to be in a state of chaos, there is a cycle or a pattern that you can adapt to your own circumstances that will help you work out over time what kind of leader you aspire to be – and to grow that self-understanding over time.

To paraphrase Beckett, we need to connect, connect again, and connect better. We need to connect to talk more about learning, and thereby help each other to lead that process. These processes of connecting and talking are best encapsulated in the stories that we tell ourselves and each other. In order to form those stories, and get the most from them, we need to be clear as to what we believe and why.

By that point in my presentation, you may well be scratching your head and wondering where the leader is in all of this. So I will present you with one way of viewing that question that hopefully will help you refine your thinking somewhat.

### **Caring of self to care for others – relationships and wellbeing**

To some of you here today, talk of “care of self” might seem a little self-centred – tantamount to navel gazing. *Care of self is all well and good, you might say, but in a given moment, my number one priority is the class of students in room F3. I don't have time to think about myself, never mind care!*

There is a growing body of research that shows clearly that this approach is not sustainable. Like the analogy of the airplane, where you must put on your own mask before attending to others, including children, care of self is essential in order to care for others.

But even beyond that, this singular focus on the needs of the other, even in a spirit of utter selflessness, does not capture for me the way in which we live our lives. It can find expression in phrases such as “our children are our future”, “handing on the torch to the next generation.” But it may ultimately backfire if we burn out, and are therefore no longer able to care for others at all.

I don't know about you, but today, I intend to make the most of this conference, go home to my family, have a real Saturday night dinner, and wake up tomorrow morning. I intend to go to work on

Monday in passionate pursuit of what I believe to be good and true – not just for my children, but for my own family, for my wife, for me! Simply put, we are all our own future – and therefore we must get better at collaborating with each other to make tomorrow the best day it possibly can be.

Life is all about flow – it is not about a sudden and abrupt changing of the guard from one generation to the next. As I said two years ago, at this same event:

*In its living, life is not about handing on the torch or the flame - in its living, life is about keeping the fire lighting, together. It always has been. Eventually, those who have come before us will step quietly away into the dark. But we always know in a given moment who is standing beside us at the fire, be they older or younger than us. We work together for as long as we are together.*

Simon Fitzmaurice, author of “It’s Not Yet Dark”, reminds us that:

*We are orphans of the Universe. Our species is defined by asking questions, out into the dark, without anyone to guide us except each other.*

## **Story**

So thus far we have the fact that we need to look after ourselves, so that we can look after each other. All of us need to work together to address the very complex challenges that the future holds in store.

Of course, as any history teacher will tell you, those who do not study the past are condemned to repeat its mistakes. In other words, we should seek to understand the past, how we got here; better so that we can have the best chance of learning and addressing the challenges that face us now.

This comes down to linking past and present, so as to write the future, and doing so together.

So how do we do this – how do we link the past and present in a way that helps us write the future? One of the most time-honoured ways is that of story – narrative. For all of our ingenuity and scholarship, we can say little with absolute certainty about how we began, how we came to be – nor how we will end. What really links us as groups, and gives us a sense of space and time in the here and now, are the stories we tell each other. And stories can be very powerful.

I met Joe Rabbitte at my daughter’s camogie match recently where his club from Athenry played us off the pitch! And over a few sandwiches and coffee, he recounted to me that when he was growing as a hurling player, all everyone talked about was the great Kilkenny team of 1975. That was the story everyone in **Galway** told each other. His point was – where were the stories about the great

Galway teams and clubs? He reminded me of that saying – the words you speak become the house you live in. And we know from sports psychology how powerful the stories we tell ourselves can be.

Or take the case of Mary Berry from the Great British Bake Off. When asked what the most memorable moment in the 2016 series was for her, she said it was Candice's gingerbread recreation of the pub where she grew up. And why? Because of all the stories that lay behind it.

Let's bring this back now closer to the professional space. Rana L. Awdish, a consultant, wrote a very moving blog on 5 January this year on her first experience as a patient in a hospital in the States. Having worked as a consultant for years, her experience of being on the other side was, by her own account, traumatic. And when you read her blog, what comes through is her anger at the lack of human recognition she received from many of her professional peers. There is a happy ending to this. When she recovered, and empowered by her experience, she drove forward many subtle but important changes to how patients were treated in that hospital. And she concludes her blog by stating:

*The stories we tell do more than restore faith in ourselves. They have the power to transform.*

## **Belief**

So we need to look after ourselves to look after each other. We need to work together to address the many complex challenges that we face. And in order to enhance the cohesion of that co-operation, we need to be mindful of the stories we tell each other, of the words that we speak, so as to build the house we want to live in.

So what drives the stories that we tend to listen to? Or the stories that we tell?

The success of Facebook's algorithms in placing ads and other posts before us is premised on the understanding that as humans, we tend to gravitate towards things and people that we like, that resonate with our world view, with what we believe. A network theory study of political blogs in the USA has shown a similar and very marked tendency for people to cling to groups that confirm them in the beliefs that they already hold.

So belief is a very powerful force, in the real world and in the virtual world.

Máirín Ní Chéileachair is head of the National Induction Programme for Teachers (NIPT). Some time ago, she was asked by the Froebel Department in this very university to supervise two student teachers on their action research project. Máirín sat down with them, and it was clear to her that they were having great difficulties with the section or chapter on the philosophical approach they

planned to take to their research. Máirín asked them to put aside the notes and devices, and asked them a very direct question:

*What do you believe?*

Her own belief was that once they had worked this out for themselves, in their own minds, they would then be in a better position to identify the philosophical approach that worked for them. So much so, that the philosophy of education lecturer made a point of complimenting her on the quality of the students' work.

Since you are here this morning, the chances are that in some shape or form, you have been reflecting on what you believe, on what is important.

A recent graduate of this programme, Pauline Keane, in a research report on a new approach to homework, outlined some of her own beliefs as follows:

*Being in charge of my own emotions and challenging my underlying insecurities has been crucial in freeing me up to be a truly curious and reflective practitioner, willing to be seen to make mistakes and able to demonstrate that this is all part of continuing improvement.*

Authenticity (truly), curiosity, reflective practice, explicit vulnerability, demonstration of impact, ongoing learning – so many strong beliefs and values in such a brief statement. The one word I would like to tease out a bit more here is *improvement*. At this stage in my life, I believe that improvement, enhancement is not a linear process – in fact it is almost three-dimensional. I have come to prefer the word “growth” in its most natural sense – for we know from the plant kingdom that growth happens both up and down – and wide – all at the same time. And we know how it is about renewal within an overall sustainable framework, rather than consistent, upward, linear “improvement”.

The other health warning that we must remind ourselves with belief is highlighted by Pauline – that it cannot be a closed concept – it cannot be held so strongly that we refuse to learn for fear that our beliefs may evolve or prove to be wrong. That would not be a professional stance. So I worry some times when I see the heated debates on line about knowledge vs. skills – in the sense of the “horse / mule” face-off we see in *Fiddler on the Roof*. What unites both sides, somewhat paradoxically, is the inherent assumption that it can only be one or the other. Yet they are symbiotically linked.

Knowledge is only known through conscious acts or skills – listening, memorising, reflecting, recalling, synthesising. Knowledge is not known without someone doing something to know it!

Like so many heated debates, this discourse runs the risk of missing the bigger picture. Wrapped around the pedagogical dynamic of teaching, is the reason we are all here, and why we will all be working on Monday – we care, we care about others. Nell Noddings, educationalist and philosopher, has described it very well when she says:

*My contention is first, that we should want more than adequate academic achievement and second, that we will not achieve even that meager success unless our children believe that they themselves are cared for and learn to care for others.*

## **Why?**

Belief, in other words, is closely linked to the concept of values – and these drive you in why you do certain things as a person and a professional – and why you don't do others.

At least, that's the theory. But in the absence of real opportunities to think and talk about what we do, we can find ourselves deeply embedded in cultural and professional practices that if we only stopped to look at them properly, we would discover that they are not consistent with our values at all.

Harvard Education on Twitter put out the following, somewhat provocative, statement:

*We spend an enormous amount of time preparing people for work, but do nothing to prepare them for love.*

I don't think that this captures the full truth of our situation here in Ireland – but it is a salutary warning. If we really believe that deep learning and professional practice in teaching are really important, and that managing emotions is a key dynamic in supporting them, to what extent do we make sure that the whole environment and culture of the school are supportive of these processes?

This is a contested space. For some teachers, talk of preparing students to “love” is all a bit too touchy feely. *By all means, teach them facts – but leave the emotional rearing of them to the parents – we have enough to be doing.*

I saw something similar in reaction to a tweet which contained the quote from Rita Pierson about children never learning anything from teachers they don't like. Hence the following exchange:

*Tom Bennett - and yet they do, all the time. Might as well say no one ever got better from a doctor they didn't like.*

*Nancy - speaking as someone who sees a LOT of doctors, liking them and getting on well is kind of important too.*



And then recall Rana L. Awdish's article on her experience as a patient in a very traumatic situation, and the difference that human care made when it happened. And let's not forget the strong body of research and evidence on the impact of love on the neurological development of children in the first 2-3 years of their lives.

No more than the close bond between knowledge and skills, teaching and learning are completely bound up with emotions. I don't think that it is as simple as everyone liking everybody else – but self-understanding, emotional awareness, emotional intelligence – these are vital factors in effective, sustained teaching and learning.

Pauline Keane put it well in her research when she stated:

*Two themes seem to be recurrent over the course of my research: genuine engagement, and managing emotions.*

### **Connections – bringing it all together**

So now we have the fact that we need to look after ourselves, so that we can look after each other. All of us need to work together to address the very complex challenges that the future holds in store. We seek to understand the past, how we got here; better so that we can have the best chance of learning and addressing the challenges that face us now. Our stories are a powerful tool for helping us to do that. And we need to reflect on our values and beliefs in choosing the stories that we tell – as well as the stories that we choose to listen to. This is bound up with teaching and learning, because stories are vessels for emotional journeys – and emotional awareness and understanding are important for sustained, effective teaching and learning.

And then you have some people loudly and passionately declaring that children don't learn anything from people they don't like. And you have other people equally loudly and equally passionately declaring that teaching is about facts and knowledge and that we are not babysitters!

So where are you in all of this?

Firstly, you are teachers. The Irish for principal is quite instructive here – príomhoide – principal teacher – primus inter pares. And ultimately you have to work out in your own mind what you think about the relationship between emotions, teaching and learning. You will hear and read all sorts of material across the spectrum of this debate. But if it helps in answering the question, I would really encourage you to close your eyes at some stage, go back to that time when you decided to be a

teacher, and look at how closely the story of your practice since then adheres to what you set out to achieve. And also of course, how well it meets the needs of the students in your care now.

But of course, you are all here because you want to be leaders of learning in a different way – more formal, structured, and explicit. Yet we seem to be trying to paste any one of a number of formal leadership models on to a context or environment heaving with emotional turbulence and heated debates every hour of every day.

It seems to me that there is a continuum between two poles of understanding about leadership.

One pole I will call the He-Man pole. If like me you are a child of the 80's, you will remember the cartoon – He-Man and the Masters of the Universe. In his case, yes, there was a team, he did not act alone – that team was the Masters of the Universe. But when all was said and done, when the chips were down, everyone knew, both inside the team and outside it that He-Man would come to the rescue when all hope seemed to be lost. You could bank on it. He-Man never seemed to tire, he was always there.

The other pole I call the “Where’s Wally” approach to leadership. I’ve coined this as I have reflected on the criticism that is levelled at the growing emphasis on distributed leadership and collaboration. Critics of this model wonder where the leader is in all of it – at the end of the day, most organisations have a hierarchical structure where one person is the boss. So all this rosy talk of the leader stepping back and allowing people to feel they have achieved things themselves – where the leader is everywhere but invisible – is simply not real.

If we are to be honest with ourselves, we all understand that life is rarely that simple, and that neither of these poles fully encapsulates all the situations that we face as leaders.

I have read and reflected on many models of leadership to date. And models are certainly useful in so far as they give you an opportunity to reflect on what you are doing, and whether it is working, and why. In other words, models should support and inform reflective practice. But they should not dictate it. One size, one model, does not fit all situations, or indeed all people, where leadership is involved.

The overall approach and attitude that you adapt to leadership, the emotions that you bring to bear as a leader and your own reflective practice is what will make all the difference. This will have to be sustainable, so that you can sustain yourself, in order to support others.

This can all seem very daunting and unrealistic. When life seems so contested and turbulent, our most natural instinct is to lock down, drop anchor, do something clear cut that shows others that we

know exactly what to do and how to do it. Here am I saying that we have to be flexible, and adapt our leadership style in some unfathomable way to be true to ourselves, yet meeting the competing needs and expectations and demands of our colleagues, students, parents and wider society. Some may argue that this is simply not realistic!

But it is if we always remember that we too are learners, and as Pauline Keane reminds us, not to be ashamed of that – in fact to be proud of it. The wonderful idea that to ask a question is not to expose ourselves to ridicule or accusations of ignorance, but rather to unlock learning not only for others, but ourselves as well.

If we are to be honest with ourselves, this is the only sustainable way. I have four daughters at home, the eldest of whom is 13 and the youngest is 4. I have so much to learn from them and my wife. But they have taught me two very important lessons thus far – life is messy – indeed it can be very messy; but it is also beautiful – and how I view and reflect on life, and my own ways of living and working make all the difference in bridging the gap from the messiness to the beauty. And I have had to learn and adapt as a parent to four very different personalities – and I still don't have it cracked! Now replicate that to 30 young people, six times a day, five days a week. In addition to 30-60 adults. Exponentially more challenging, but the fundamental lesson is the same – it's not about perfection, it's about progression. I think that I am a better parent than I was 13 years ago – but I know that I can be better again. And I know that I have to be – because my children are growing and developing and changing every day.

Fullan and Hargreaves capture this idea of navigating chaos and complexity well when they say:

*There will be worldwide turbulence in 2017 and beyond — in education and in all sectors.  
Become part of these developments as a learner and leader in equal measure.*

And lest we become too worried about the world around us and the future that we have yet to write together, make the time to remind yourself and your colleagues of all that you have achieved. We are not starting from ground zero. The epitaph for Christopher Wren, architect of St. Paul's Cathedral, states –

*If you are looking for a monument, look around you.*

Presumably the intention is to get the reader to stop, and think, and admire the building in which they stand. I would urge you to look beyond and within the walls of your classrooms and schools – and take a moment to reflect on the difference you all make in the lives of young people day in, day out.

## **Close**

It can be easy to be tempted to step back from this complexity, the emotional rollercoasters of human relationships, and stick to teaching the facts. It can be understandably easy to be overwhelmed by the scale of what is happening internationally, and to despair at our ability to make any difference. At a fundamental human level, that is eminently understandable.

But above almost any other profession, teaching is vital to helping us to write a new future. That is the great paradox of the profession – it is tremendously exciting and terrifying all at the same time. Exciting, because as my English teacher, Louise Williamson, told me last October, you can help students find their voice – and be the first person to hear it. Terrifying, because of the awesome responsibility we assume when we decide to lead the learning experiences of others, and the impact on their future that we can have.

As a nation, as a global community, we have faced far worse crises and challenges, at times when the voice and status of the teaching profession were not what they are now. The one thing I would say to you is what the likes of Top Gear would say to their fans – don't try this on your own! As John O'Donohue reminds us, we are never alone as we think we are.

I will leave you with the words of Abraham Lincoln from his famous Gettysburg address, who summed up this sense of awesome challenge and determined hope very well. Gettysburg was the scene of one of the major battles in the American Civil War, where many soldiers fell. Standing in that field, fully cognisant of the horrific violence and death that had seeped into the soil on which he stood, Lincoln focused his audience on the here and now, and sought to raise their eyes to the future:

*"It is for us, the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here, have, thus far, so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us..."*

By your presence here today, you have demonstrated clearly your dedication to the great tasks before you in your schools and before us all as a society. For that, I thank you and look forward to talking and working with you to lead learning for all.

**Tomás Ó Ruairc**

**Director**

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