

Droichead Shared Learning Day

29 April 2015

CityWest 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. 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.

I closed my opening remarks last year by talking about the whole story of Droichead, how you were the ones who are writing it, day in, day out. Thank you for all the work you have done in writing the story of Droichead so far. Today is the next chapter in the story. The key difference today is that you will not just be writing this chapter – you will be telling and creating it. And you won't be doing it on your own, nor in your own school - you will be creating and telling the next chapter with hundreds of other teachers. So make the most of every minute today – to tell your story, to listen to others, and to begin to work out what the next chapter will look like.

The bigger picture

There is the story of Droichead that has been told and will continue to be told in these myriad ways, which in turn is part of a much bigger story of teachers'

leadership and autonomy in Ireland. Firstly, you are showing that teachers can continue to be trusted to uphold the highest of standards in our profession.

You are leading the evolution of a new spirit of collaboration in the teaching profession, which will lead to enhanced teaching and learning, and nurture teachers' well-being. You are showing that when given space and time, teachers' voices can shape education policy in this country for the better. You are therefore leading the emergence of a new model of policy development in education.

This is truly innovative on a global scale. Make no mistake about it, there are people at home and abroad who believe that teachers should do what others tell them to do. They don't believe that teachers can be trusted to lead the enhancement of their own professional standards. We are aware of cases where teacher majorities have been taken away from other Councils and professional standards bodies. Such people don't believe that teachers should be given the space and time to collaborate and reflect, together. They're of the view that teachers should get on with their "job" as they see it and just teach.

It is important that we continue to emphasize, and indeed champion, that learning does not take place solely in the classroom.

Professional leadership

In Ireland, we hold a different view. The Teaching Council is the only professional standards body with a professional majority on it. This means that teachers lead the enhancement of their own standards in a spirit of partnership with others.

This means that there comes a point where **teachers** formally welcome their newly qualified colleagues into the most important profession in society. You

all deserve that opportunity – 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.

This is what Droichead is all about.

It is a systemic welcome by professionals into the most important profession in society. It is about welcome, support and guidance; and it is about professionals exercising their professional judgement, based on their learning, experience and expertise, to formally state – yes, this person is now ready for full membership of our profession.

In other words, Droichead is about you. Whether you are an NQT, or a more experienced teacher, it is about you having the freedom and scope for creativity to be the professional you want to be – to be the best you can be for the children and young people in your care.

The Simple Things

Cast your mind back to the first day where you started working as a qualified professional. Whether you are a recently qualified teacher, or are more experienced, we have all had that day – the anxiety, the nerves, meeting new people, finding your locker, and walking in the door of your first class of students. What was that like? How did other teachers engage with you? Chances are, and this was my experience, they all helped out in different ways – a listening ear, a word to the wise, sharing some resources, showing you around the school etc. We remember so much of these informal, personal gestures because they meant so much, and because they made a huge

difference. We don't remember the textbooks the school had chosen, we might not remember all the paperwork and roll books we had to wade through – but we do remember the people, and the relationships we had with them. As I said last year, if you reflect on them long enough, you will realise that those relationships have been of critical importance in shaping the professional you are today. I know that they have been for me.

That support of teachers, by teachers, deserves to be recognised for what it is – professional practice of the highest standard. That is what Droichead is doing – or more accurately, what you are doing through Droichead.

That's the professional I want to be

John O'Donohue has a nice insight about this thirst for freedom and creativity that we all share, regardless of when we first became a teacher –

There is within each heart a hidden voice that calls out for freedom and creativity.. if lived truthfully and generously, it will always guide us towards the real pastures.

Droichead is about empowering the profession to listen to and answer its own inner voice.

This is the voice we answered when we heard in our mind's ear - *I want to be a teacher*. Do you remember the kind of teacher you dreamed of being?

Droichead is about giving the maximum scope for that freedom and creativity to be that teacher, within a robust and flexible framework of quality professional standards.

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 firstly, as John Hurley said on Twitter last week –

Schools are places full of humanity...

We should not apologise therefore for giving as much space as possible for that humanity to relate to, guide and support each other, through professional conversations and relationships.

Thresholds

But people will sometimes still reply, in the interests of protecting those relationships, and ask:

“Why can’t the fourth year of the B. Ed. cover this off?”

I think that those of you who are still involved in the process can answer that far better than I can. From my own point of view, Droichead is about the welcome by experienced, practising teachers. Secondly, if we are to give your professional practice the recognition it deserves, then we need to understand the context in which it is happening. That point where a student teacher becomes a qualified teacher is a unique point in time – it is a threshold.

John O'Donohue had an interesting insight into the concept of thresholds - points in time where we make a significant step on our journey of life and learning. He described the threshold as an

intense frontier that divides a world of feeling from another.

We have all been there. Even with school placement, there is a world of difference between the feeling in a classroom on the B. Ed. or PME on the one hand and the full responsibility of your own class on the other. I remember

when I was on school placement and always being conscious of my status as a student teacher - the students knew it, the teachers knew it. And you were inevitably constrained in much of what you might say or do by the knowledge that others were there to grade you. When I started working in Athlone Community College, I was very conscious of the threshold I was crossing. I was full of joy of knowing that I was now a qualified teacher. I had followed my heart - it felt different, and it felt great. I remember driving in my clapped out Fiat Uno late on a Sunday night from Carlow to Athlone full of excitement and apprehension as I realised that I was starting teaching the following day.

Droichead seeks to mark that threshold, to give the NQTs all the support and guidance they need to cross it, and to help all teachers learn through the process.

John O'Donohue goes on to bemoan the loss of much ritual and rites of passage in our culture - that we don't make the space and choose the time to mark thresholds in our lives and of those we love. This is a pity, he says, because:

A threshold is a significant frontier where experience banks up; there is intense concrescence. It is a place of great transformation./...And on each side there is a different geography of feeling, thinking and being. The crossing of a threshold is in effect a rite of passage.

Teaching is the most important profession in society. That point in time where someone becomes a qualified, registered teacher deserves to be marked by the profession itself - not by someone outside it. Teachers often evaluate the

credibility of someone who speaks about them on the basis of their experience and status as a teacher. It is entirely consistent with this to embrace Droichead.

Strengths

The great thing is that you get this – you have an instinctive sense of the incredible professional opportunity that Droichead is offering the teaching profession. We have a clear sense from what you have told us that you understand what the strengths of Droichead are. They include:

1. Droichead is not another change initiative - it's a whole new way of working that builds on the good practice already being shown by you in how you support NQTs.
2. It has enabled principals to move from the Ph D approach (Plumbing, Heating, Discipline) to a greater focus on teaching and learning.
3. Droichead has value for the whole school, not just NQTs.
4. It builds capacity in a school.
5. Droichead is about “using our network to the max.”
6. Droichead gives space for the sharing of thoughts with other teachers.
7. You have been reassured from the Shared Learning Day last year that you know that other NQTs have gone through the same process.

We're listening – here's what we've learned so far

Of course, many of you will be saying – this all sounds fine and well, but there are real challenges and issues you know, it's not all roses in the garden.

We understand that. I am aware from talking with many of you, from attending cluster meetings, from hearing and reading reports, that some of the main issues include:

1. Time - time for the process itself; time for training. The key challenge here is to make sure that all the release time that is allocated is used up. It appears as if that's not the case which weakens our position in arguing for more time. We also know that you feel that the 50 days is insufficient to conduct the process. That's perfectly understandable. We want to give as much time as possible to the support and guidance that NQTs deserve.
2. Teaching principals – there are practical challenges around clustering with other schools, and also with time to collaborate with other teachers in a two teacher school. As one principal told me, one or the other has to be out on yard duty - they can't be in the staffroom at the same time!
3. The OLCS system and greater flexibility around claiming release time

We know that there is precedent for this in the area of special education, whereby primary schools can draw down release time in blocks of hours. But there are a number of questions to be teased out before we can resolve this one. Some people feel there is a risk that by allowing more scope for release time in hours that it will lead to further fragmentation of time for NQTs who are seeking employment. We also understand that the resolution of this issue will have to be found in the IR (Industrial Relations) space. What we are doing as a Council is

establishing a working group to report by mid-June to look at what we can do to make the best use of the time that we have.

4. Sustainable growth - How can we grow Droichead in a sustainable way? Here we are seeking a delicate balance between realism and aspiration. On the one hand, as I have said, Droichead is about the profession showing that it can be trusted, and has the knowledge and expertise, to induct fellow professionals. But we also need to be realistic. We know that schools need a lot of support in embedding the Droichead process, especially in these early stages.

Portfolio

And then there is the big P – portfolio. This has been raised as a concern from the very beginning of the process. What is it? What should it look and feel like? What should be in it? Who do I show it to?

Like time and workload, we need to move the conversation on. And I'm glad to let you know that we have been listening carefully to what the NQTs from year 1 had to say. They were recording an eBook for us and I sat down to have a chat with them about the portfolio. They told us a lot. Throughout the discussion, they said that the portfolio, based on their experience, was essentially an Aladdin's Cave, a treasure trove of their own in which they collected the best examples of their work and learning.

They could then select from this collection of items to show to others depending on the context – sharing learning with fellow professionals; professional conversations with the inspectorate or with principals.

The key things to note here are:

- The portfolio is not a folder.
- It is your space to organise and collect your learning.
- You hold the keys to that space.
- You choose what you select from that space to support professional conversations with others.

Last year, the NQTs told us that the portfolio needed a name, a title to move our thinking beyond the idea of folder. We have been thinking ever since.

When we had the conversation with the NQTs about Aladdin's cave, we looked to the Irish language, and thought of the word "Taisce". It means trove or store. Your *Taisce* would be your space. It would be the space from which you share your insights into teaching and learning, share your innovations. It could also be the reflective space to which you would return when you feel the need to.

To give you a concrete example of this process, here is an Easter card that my third daughter, Síomha, made for me, but only gave to me two weeks ago. I was heading out the door to work, I had the front door open, and out of nowhere, she produced this, and told me it was for me.

What I saw was that she can now write her own name. Those of you who are parents, or who have taught infants, will know what a special moment this is. It is as concrete a sign of learning, and the impact of good teaching, as you are ever likely to get. And she selected this example herself to show me an exemplar of her learning.

There are countless others – but she chose this one to show me. I'm pretty sure it didn't come from a folder – I don't want to think about where it was!

But I can definitely say that it came from her space, her *Taisce*. I believe that a similar type of process can apply to teachers saving and sharing their learning.

I do want to emphasise that this is a suggested, working title. We really would like to hear your thoughts on it; we are open to other suggestions. We are putting this word out there to get conversations going.

Closing – an invitation to reflect – to think and talk

And that's what today is all about – continuing the professional conversations you have had throughout the year, but on a much bigger, national, scale.

There is always the risk on days like this of talking too much about certain things, or at least overcomplicating them.

When you strip it all back, we become teachers to do something meaningful, to **make a difference**, to help improve things. We want to **know** we are making that difference.

This is all caught up in the Fr. Ted Cow Conundrum – where the toy cow is very near, but the “other cows” are far away!

Knowing we are making a difference is rooted in space and time. We would much rather see the spark of insight in a pupil's eye when they get something that they didn't get before, before us, now; rather than wait for it to happen for someone else in another place and another time.

In terms of helping to make things better, that's the standards part of the Council's work in Droichead – the standards are the quality assurance part. The knowing, in the here and now, rather than there and then, is one element of the essence of the human condition. Whether we realise it or not, we only live

our life in the now. Droichead is seeking to empower the profession to have that opportunity to know in the here and now.

That's about being real, now.

There is of course the aspiration – the professional drive to work towards something better. We want to improve things, for we are who we are because those who went before us worked hard to improve things as they were for them.

Droichead is about closing this loop, and opening it into a spiral of future learning, at the same time. It is fundamentally about knowing that we are supporting standards in the profession now, all in pursuit of a different and better quality of teaching, and of learning for our young people, for a better future.

As Tristram Hunt said in a publication I read recently, “Licensed to Create”:

Therefore it is not just that the teaching profession is changing – the truth is in fact far more profound. It is that the teaching profession is learning how to change itself.

In that same publication, I read that less than 10% of Irish teachers believe that they would receive any recognition or acknowledgement if they did something creative or innovative. So we have a clear vision, we know what we can do, but we are also aware of the challenges. That’s how it should be. FÉILTE and Droichead are both clear examples of the professional energy that is unleashed when teachers are given the space and time to give that recognition to each other. The more we do this, the stronger the case we have for asking for that recognition from others, including parents and the wider public.

The best part of this is that you realise this yourselves 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 through Droichead, all rooted in learning, for everybody, teacher and pupil. 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.

There are real issues and challenges to be addressed – but let's always remember the prize that is within our grasp as a profession, in the pursuit of a better future for each other and those we serve. As we said recently on Twitter, we know as a Council that once teachers know that they have the space and time to shape things, they give generously of their professional energy to enhance learning for all. I look forward to seeing and hearing more of that professional energy in this space and time today, to enhance learning for all of us.

Thank you for listening.

Tomás Ó Ruairc

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