

Conference on Integrating Research, Teaching and Learning

Hibernia College, Dublin

Opening remarks by Director, Tomás Ó Ruairc before panel discussion

5 March 2015

Simon Fitzmaurice, the author of “It’s Not Yet Dark”, has a beautiful line on our place in the Universe:

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.

From that poetic eloquence, I draw three learnings for today:

1. Research is essential to learning and progress – we have an instinctive need to ask questions and find answers. We ask these questions in order to learn and grow.
2. Research is uncertain and contingent – we have been asking questions into the dark for as long as we can remember, and some of the most fundamental ones remain unanswered.
3. Research is best conducted collaboratively – we only have each other. This may seem like the most inane common sense, but it’s not clear to me that the various communities of professionals we represent work on

this basis. We can extend this to note that research is for everyone – all teachers. Note that not all research is for all teachers, but research of one kind or another is. Teachers engage in action research every day as they seek to learn more about their students. For real collaboration to occur, teachers and researchers must approach their professional conversations in a spirit of “reciprocal vulnerability” i.e. nobody pretends that they have all the answers! Teaching, learning and research need each other to combat the “tyranny of common sense” – (Philippa Cordingley) – teaching is far too complex to be left to common sense!

I have come to the conclusion that an embedded culture of research in teaching is the single most important strategic challenge facing the profession this century. For, to answer the first question we have been asked, teachers’ learning is driving the research agenda in the Teaching Council’s policy. Teachers’ learning is not valued to the extent that it should be by wider society. Teachers have told us that they want easier access to research, and space and time for critical engagement with it. They want these things to learn more to help them refine and update their practice. They want to learn so that they can help their students learn better.

We know this from multiple sources of evidence. We saw it at a conference on the theme of Research Alive! organised in May 2013 in co-operation with the NCCA and CES. We have seen it at FÉILTE, the Festival of Education in Learning and Teaching Excellence. We have seen it in the uptake of the free access to EBSCO which all registered teachers now have – over 6,000 unique users to date and growing. The evidence is also seen in the status accorded to doctors and nurses in the discourse around public health – their word carries so much weight arguably because it’s assumed that their view is informed by the latest

research. We know from Ben Goldacre that they only got to this position as a profession just under 40 years ago.

To be clear, we are not looking for teaching to be calcified on some rarefied pedestal, so that teachers' word is the first and last on any issue. We believe, based on this evidence and much else, that the conversations around teaching and learning, between teachers, parents, pupils and others will be transformed for the better through better connections with better research. Teachers, parents and others will have more confidence, empathy and understanding for those they engage with, they will be able to communicate more clearly with each other, if we can make research more accessible and connected.

We are not seeking to import any other model unchanged into Ireland on this matter. In co-operation with the NCCA and CES, we have looked at all sorts of websites from around the world. We have learned much from them in terms of research repositories, summaries of good research etc. But what we have not come across yet is a website or project that has a singular focus on connecting the **people** so that they can connect their learning in a better way. Teaching and learning are all about people – teaching happens when others learn. For all the decades and centuries of research that predate us, it is safe to say that research, policy and practice in education are not impacting on each other as effectively as possible. We have just gone to tender on a new website, MolFeasa.ie, which we want to have that singular focus.

Dr. Carol Campbell's warning about the messiness of research and policy is well made (AERA Educational Change Special Interest Group – Issue No. 41: August 2014):

Discussions of evidence informed policy and practice in education often assume a rational, linear process in which research evidence informs policy at the outset, policy is made, and then it is implemented. This is not how it happens in reality!

So in striving for better teaching and learning as a result of better connections between teaching, learning and research, we need to be clear as to why we teach and learn. We need to understand the role of teachers as leading professionals in this process. As stated by those in the area of Mind, Brain and Education Science, all professionals need to approach each other in a spirit of mutual respect and openness to learning. As teachers themselves have told me, research in teaching and learning ultimately has to be about improving – about making a difference. I get the sense that's equally important for researchers too. And it's about making a difference in the lives of nearly a million individuals in what can be a very pressurised context. As my children have taught me, life is messy, and life is beautiful – and we need to be equally cognisant of both these facts as we hold our discussions today. That way, we will be both realistic and aspirational – and somewhere in between lies the next steps we should take, together.

As Jane Coombs (@ResearchPics) said on twitter last year:

I love research.

I love people more.

I love using research to help people most.

I look forward to hearing your thoughts and questions that will help us realise this vision.

Tomás Ó Ruairc

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