

## Understanding the role of the professional in leading change

*Presentation by Tomás Ó Ruairc, Director of the Teaching Council, to the 3U Symposium on Leadership in the Professions, NUIM, Maynooth*

*2 March 2013*

I have a confession to make – I do not fully understand the role of the professional in leading change. If anybody else in the audience feels the same, but has been afraid to say so out loud, I have clear evidence that we are not alone. Take this quote from a book review by Jonathan Rée from the Guardian, Saturday 12 January 2013, where he opens with the line:

*“I think I can safely say that nobody understands quantum mechanics,”  
said Nobel prizewinning physicist Richard Feynman in 1964.*

A Nobel prize winning scientist saying that no-one understands quantum mechanics! So a lack of understanding of a core concept, even by a Nobel prizewinning expert, is nothing to be ashamed of. But perhaps, thankfully, the title of this morning’s symposium is acknowledging that very point. By the use

of the verbal noun as a verb rather than a noun, “understanding” clearly indicates that leadership in any context, including that of the professional, is a lifelong journey, a process of learning. What I propose to do this morning is to pose a number of questions, and in the process of thinking about and discussing these questions, we may inform our understanding of the role of the professional in leading change.

If we don’t understand leadership in professionalism, what questions can we ask? We can ask-

- What does it mean to be a professional?
- Why - why have you chosen to become a professional?
- What are you doing? And explore the language that this engenders.
- What are you thinking?

And as we explore these questions over the next 15 minutes or so, we can try to build up a sense of how leadership and professionalism might work together.

### **What does it mean to be a professional?**

Many of you will be aware of the clichés used to refer to the teacher - the sage on the stage, the guide on the side. I much prefer to think in terms of the “seer on the pier” – helping pupils, students and learners of all ages to build their

own boat, and head out into uncharted waters. Professionalism in teaching has been described as a commitment to the immeasurable. We have also heard a number of commentators, including our Minister for Education and Skills, point out that teachers are preparing our learners for a world that we can scarcely imagine, and certainly cannot know. So we can extend that statement about professionalism in teaching to say that it is a commitment to the immeasurable so that others can face the unknowable. How might we respond now when we hear that statement as it might apply to our respective professions? Are there any opportunities or challenges in it?

But from this, I think we can take the notion that professionalism is about exercising informed judgement in a maelstrom of uncertainty.

### **Why?**

We have the concepts of “professional” and “change”, and we have the verbs of “understanding” and “leading”. One fundamental question that forms the apex of this pyramid base is “Why?” This is both an intensely personal and professional question that we can only answer on an individual level. Why did you choose to be a teacher? Why did you choose to be a doctor, or nurse, or mid-wife? Think back to that moment when you first thought “I want to be a....” how you felt, and why you felt and thought that way. For the Master of the National Maternity Hospital, that first moment was when she got her first

Fisher Price doctor's kit for Christmas. And then trace in your mind, over the time that has elapsed, the moments when that question and answer were tried and tested- when we may have had serious doubts, when we may have felt elated at a particular breakthrough, when we may have felt devastated at a particular failure. Why did we persist? Why are we here today? Because, just like an inverted pyramid, the why is both a constant, and something that is under constant pressure, if you choose to look at it like that. Place the pyramid the right way up, and the "why" is actually our ultimate goal, our higher calling, what brings "professional", "change", "understanding" and "leading" together. So from this, we can take the idea that professionalism is about working with a clear sense of your values, informed equally by both personal experience and the context in which you must work.

Thus far, we have informed judgement in uncertainty, clear values informed by the personal and the professional. What next?

### **What are you doing?**

The tone of this question depends very much on the audience. How does it change for you - To your children at home! To a colleague in frustration. To a pupil in frustration. To a patient who will not heed your advice. What about when an anxious parent asks you as teacher – *What are you doing in class*

*when you teach my child?* What about when a relative of a sick or dying patient asks you as a doctor or nurse – *What are you doing? English that for me.* But what tone do we adopt when we put that question to ourselves? When we really, honestly, directly, put that question to ourselves. It can be asked one way after a particularly difficult lesson or session with a patient where you felt you made no headway at all – “What am I doing?” Or it can be asked when you feel that you are beginning to make progress but are not entirely sure why – “What am I doing?” Both cases are equally important to your professional development. This is a question that is fundamentally about language, and about thinking out loud. It is also a question that may really benefit from a conversation between teachers and between all medical professionals. For if you ask a teacher what they are doing, what they do, they will say “I am teaching / I teach”. Now imagine what a doctor or nurse might say. “I am doctoring / I doctor?” “I am nursing / I nurse?” I would imagine they would use a lot more language to talk about what they do – I operate / I listen / I administer medication / I conduct tests / I communicate with patients...

There is a whole register of language that unlocks the “secrets” or “mysteries” of professionalism, and we need it to answer that question in its most authentic spirit – “what am I doing” – using judgement under pressure, using

judgement informed by both formal training and experience, differentiating the learning experience for 30 or more individual minds, up to 5 times a day.

Professionalism in teaching is at a crossroads where we are trying to make explicit what has been implicit for far too long. The conversation and discourse that will deliver this result is happening. Language is being acquired and used and developed, but we need to accelerate that process. We need to accelerate that process if we are to achieve our goal of delivering the best learning experience possible for all our learners and if we are to ensure whole system reform. That is a challenge, I would argue, for all the professionals in this hall today in terms of leading change. We don't want to focus just on the top 20% or the bottom 20% of teachers, or doctors, or nurses, or learners, or patients. We want to improve the experiences of *all* patients and learners – nothing less will do. And if we are serious about leading the creation of a new Ireland, that is what that means - a new Ireland for all. And from a teaching perspective, the minds that will create that unknowable Ireland will be sitting in your classrooms next Monday. We must think of the future, but we lead the change here and now.

So from this, we can take it that professionalism is about language, about clear communication to the learner / patient. It is about an honest and open process of self-reflection, and about using language to articulate that and to act on it.

## All professionals as leaders

Thus far, in total, we have informed judgement in uncertainty, clear values informed by the personal and the professional, language, clear communication, self-reflection, using language to change. Many of you may be asking the question – could these words not describe the attributes of a good leader? The short answer is yes, they could. This should show you that professionalism and leadership are virtually synonymous. Each of you, in the myriad of moments in which you engage with pupils or patients, are leaders for those people, whether you realise it or not. In a moment of acute distress, when you are telling a relative some devastating news, whether you realise it or not, you are their best chance for leadership in that moment. When you are telling a student’s parents about their child’s prospects of success, whether you realise it or not, in that moment, you are their best hope for leadership. If leadership is about setting the right tone at the crucial moment, then I would submit that leadership and professionalism are synonymous.

This reminds me of one quote from the survey feedback that I read - *“The teachers’ lack of perception of themselves as leaders, despite their clear engagement in leadership roles, was an interesting discovery.”*

Leadership is not the preserve of an elite few. It is the responsibility of us all.

## What are you thinking?

What will you be thinking as you meet your pupils or patients next Monday?

The feedback that you gave to the survey on leadership has been very instructive in this regard, in terms of giving a flavour of where your thinking is now.

Key concepts / words which emerged for me from that feedback were:

*Space, time, fear, trust, language, conflict, contradiction, multiple roles, vastness [of knowledge], depth [of understanding], courage [to act in the service of others], openness [to new knowledge and new learning], fearlessness [in defending what you know to be right], conviction [in dealing with and resolving that which you know to be wrong]*

I have read a lot of articles about leadership which attempt to define it. Many of these models do contain a grain of truth. But their real value lies in the extent to which they get us thinking as professionals and as leaders, and to draw our own conclusions. Each of them is a prism which is slightly out of phase with the other. And as you view the concepts of leadership and professionalism through these prisms, a whole spectrum of possibilities opens up.

*Ralph Waldo Emerson, quoted in A General Theory of Love:*

*Dream delivers us to dream, and there is no end to illusion. Life is a train of moods like a string of beads, and, as we pass through them, they prove to be many-colored lenses which paint the world their own hue... Temperament is the iron wire on which the beads are strung.*

The word “temperament” for me resonates with the words which you all used in your feedback, such as trust, courage, openness, fearlessness, conviction.

What other words did you use in that survey which could be applied to professionalism and leadership? To take a representative sample:

1. Time!!! – Many respondents talked about the need for space and time for professionals to reflect, to talk to each other, and to lead each other. “Finding time to meet these teachers...”
2. High level of emotional self-awareness. This is probably the most critical, most essential skill of all for effective leadership at any level. Some of the comments spoke directly to this concept of Self as leader – “Resilience, self-belief, self-questioning, support structures, down-time, optimism”. Note how the pendulum swings from “self-belief” to “self-

questioning”; note also the reference to the importance of down time.

This clearly demonstrates emotional self-awareness, and how important it is to know your limits, physical and emotional. Emotional self-awareness is perhaps the godparent of the reflective practitioner. I say godparent because there is not always a direct, sequential link between the two, but emotional self-awareness certainly does add a lot to the process of reflection. Note this comment from another respondent:

“Particular attention needs to be given to teachers’ concept and belief in themselves as leaders by encouraging reflection on their leadership capacity.”

3. A collegial, collaborative culture is vital to leadership in professionalism.

One person said that *“Getting along with people is key to success in leadership.”* This is true, but it is about much more than that. Paul Black at the NCCA Conference on Junior Cycle last October said:

*Put an idea to a teacher and you will get a response. Put an idea to a group of teachers and it will explode.*

This can also be described as the Pebbles in the Pool approach – As one participant in the survey said, “Teachers need to be encouraged to start small and to review and evaluate work regularly.” To bring out system-wide change, this seems to be the best approach – start small, allow it to develop momentum, and then let it “explode”! What is happening in schools around the country is the groundswell of a collaborative or co-operative culture, collective professional confidence and shared professional responsibility. Hargreaves and Fullan are very strong on the impact of such developments. They list a number of examples of teacher leadership that prompt teacher renewal. They go on to say (2012):

*If these things are done by teachers, for teachers, and with teachers, then most people’s teaching career will end in a bang, not a whimper.... Our book, by contrast, is about making professional capital the core of a whole new profession. It is about a transformation of the system that affects all teachers – every one of them. It will help if the career patterns of teachers provide more built-in opportunities for leadership. (67-68)*

## Professionalism and leadership

Where professionalism and leadership really intertwine is in those words of “fearlessness” and “courage”. Courage and critical thought are central to the education of any professional, and they are central to what teachers do with their students. I heard once that a history teacher’s primary aim was to make sure that his students trusted nothing that they read. And this would apply to himself and his fellow teachers as well. One respondent to the survey talked about how *“analysing data and using evidence-based analysis is an excellent stimulus for professional dialogue towards school improvement.”* Note the clear sub-text that we are not talking about blind acceptance of the conclusions, but a genuine and open discourse about the evidence and what can be learned from it to improve practice in their particular school.

Hargreaves and Fullan (2012), in talking about best practice and next practice, say:

*In other words, let’s deliberately have more learning, fewer lessons – just as we now have less surgery that tears open the body in favor of microsurgery instead. And most of all do keep looking at the evidence and judging the evidence, remaining open to what it teaches, but do also stay professionally shrewd and watchful about the limitations of that evidence. (54)*

## **Closing**

Courage and critical thought in the professional and by the professional and whole system reform - these concepts that I have just discussed, touch on the importance of our proceedings this morning for Irish society as a whole. The last 5 years have been traumatic for us as a society. We are living through the formation of a new Ireland. And to hark back to one of my opening questions, in this new Ireland, it's not what we have we hold, it's what we do we are. And what we do, we must do together. We all of us have stories in our families of ancestors who struggled and strove precisely to make sure that our parents and us would have a better, more comfortable life than they did. They sacrificed what little they had so that we would have so much more. And they knew education to be critical to that. And we tell this story now because of what they did. What they did, they are to us now. What stories will our children and our grandchildren tell of us in years to come? What will we be to them? As leaders in areas of the public service which are deemed to be so important by the public, you are in a pivotal position to help others frame their own answers to these questions. The forming of the answers to these questions, if it has not done so already for a lot of you, starts today.

I opened by confessing that I do not understand. But I have a fairly good idea of how I feel. I would like to close with the best evidence I have for that, which is this piece called “For a leader” by John O’Donohue (2007: 165-166):

*May you have the grace and wisdom*

*To act kindly, learning*

*To distinguish between what is*

*Personal and what is not.*

*May you be hospitable to criticism.*

*May you never put yourself at the centre of things.*

*May you act not from arrogance but out of service.*

*May you work on yourself,*

*Building up and refining the ways of your mind.*

*May those who work for you know*

*You see and respect them.*

*May you learn to cultivate the art of presence*

*In order to engage with those who meet you.*

*When someone fails or disappoints you,*

*May the graciousness with which you engage*

*Be their stairway to renewal and refinement.*

*May you treasure the gifts of the mind*

*Through reading and creative thinking*

*So that you continue as a servant of the frontier*

*Where the new will draw its enrichment from the old,*

*And you never become a functionary.*

*May you know the wisdom of deep listening,*

*The healing of wholesome words,*

*The encouragement of the appreciative gaze,*

*The decorum of held dignity,*

*The springtime edge of the bleak question.*

*May you have a mind that loves frontiers*

*So that you can evoke the bright fields*

*That lie beyond the view of the regular eye.*

*May you have good friends*

*To mirror your blind spots.*

*May leadership be for you*

*A true adventure of growth.*

Tomás Ó Ruairc

Director, Teaching Council

2 March 2013 – NUIM

**References:**

1. Hargreaves, A. and Fullan, M. (2012) *Professional Capital – Transforming Teaching in Every School*. New York : Routledge
2. O'Donohue, J. (2007) *Benedictus*, Suffolk : Bantam Books