

Pride in the Profession

Keynote address on the occasion of the launch of REEL (Research for the Empowerment of Educational Leadership)

5 November 2015

St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra

Good evening to you all. I am delighted to formally launch the reconceptualised REEL by way of keynote address tonight, and would like to thank Verity and Jackie for the invitation.

Duncan Watts, author of *Six Degrees: The New Science of Networks*, says early in the opening (Watts, 2003, Location 174):

My mother, meanwhile, not only taught me how to write but also impressed on me at an early age that ideas only realize their power when people understand them.

As it is for ideas, so it is for research – since great ideas stem from research of one kind or another. Research, at least in the context of teaching and learning, only matters when people know about it, understand it, and then work with others to see how it can help them in their professional practice. For this translation to happen in an authentic and sustainable way, it all needs to be rooted in the science and art of professional conversations.

Which is why I am delighted to be here this evening launching the reconceptualised REEL - research for the empowerment of educational leadership. After 20 years as the Society for the Management of Education in Ireland, they reviewed themselves as an organisation, and had the professional

courage to re-imagine themselves in a way that retained the best of what they were, while at the same time seeking to create a dynamic that would be more appropriate to the myriad challenges facing Irish education, and indeed, wider society.

And interestingly, they chose to focus not just on a what - leadership – but on the how, on research - how will we choose the questions to ask? How will we ask them? How will we gather the answers in a way that is helpful and meaningful to practitioners as well as policy-makers?

And even more intriguingly, they have placed this endeavour at the service, if you like, at the empowerment of that concept of leadership. Note, however, that they speak of the empowerment of educational leadership, not leaders. This is an important and helpful distinction, for it resonates with a more authentically distributed notion of leadership.

So in launching REEL by way of this keynote, I would like to explore with you what we mean when we talk of research; what do we mean when we talk of leadership, and indeed educational leadership; and how we might use our enhanced understanding of the link between research and leadership so that we all unleash the full potential of research, teaching and learning to support and enhance each other.

Pride!

I'd like to start, however, by taking a moment to dwell on the dangerously seductive nature of this concept of "empowerment", the Dark Side of the Force if you will. This is also hinted at in the title for this evening's presentation - *pride in the profession*.

To paraphrase what we say about beauty, pride is in the eye of the holder. Viewed in a benign and selfless light, pride can give us the courage and confidence we need to take risks, to experiment - to research! On the other hand, taken to extremes, pride can lead to a self-indulgent, defensive form of confidence, such that we see no need to take risks, because everything is working fine, *it ain't broke so don't fix it*; therefore we see no need to experiment, and therefore no need for research. Indeed, this form of pride can lead to a well-intentioned if not misguided defence of our children's learning experiences against those who would have the “temerity” to take a chance with them. Hyperbole aside, this point does speak to some serious considerations around the ethics of educational research, which are reflected in the heated debate we see about randomized control trials for teaching and learning. And in so far as these concerns about the very idea of conducting research are sincerely held, we need to reflect on them and consider what they mean for the future of research, and the leadership of teaching and learning, in Ireland.

So pride in the profession, like the world according to Paul Brady, is what we make of it. It can speak to an empowering sense of collegiality and collaboration, an empowerment that enables us to maintain and enhance standards. Or, taken to extremes, it can lead to a defensive mind-set shared by a closed collective, which views the maintenance of standards as a maximum to be reached, rather than a minimum to surpass. The choice is ours.

If pride is what we make of it, then that meaning-making process, if it is to have any hope of a helpful outcome, will need to be clear what we are talking about before it goes any further. We need to be clear about what we mean by research, what we mean by leadership. And we need to be mindful of any

tendency to inflate that understanding of leadership to a point where it becomes more hierarchical than distributed.

What do we mean by research?

Simon Fitzmaurice, author of *It's Not Yet Dark*, sets the context very nicely for discussing this question (Fitzmaurice, 2014, location 389):

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 this, I draw two learnings for informing our understanding of research:

1. 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.
2. 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.

So if that's our context, what's our answer? What do we mean when we talk about “research”? Let's look at the link between research, teaching and learning. And then let's see what teachers have to say about it, before we come to suggesting a definition.

Research, teaching and learning

For the Teaching Council, research cannot be defined in isolation from teaching and learning. Teaching is about learning. Learning depends on research.

Research requires reflective practice. Reflective practice is core to teaching and learning.

Teaching is as much about learning as it is about teaching, if not more so. In fact, we don't know that teaching has occurred until we know that students have learned something.

Learning by definition depends on research. In order to learn about something, you have to go looking for information, commentary, opinion.

But research is much more than mere search and retrieval. It also involves reflective practice – you think about what you have found, and show that you have learned something as a result.

This explicit focus on teaching and learning may seem to be stating the blindingly obvious. Ironically, I don't think that we talk enough about teaching and learning in the Irish education discourse - not in the wider sense at least. And as a result, I think that we don't have enough conversations informed / challenged / supported by practitioner research.

It's not that practitioner research is not happening. It is. Every day, teachers reflect on their practice in an effort to refine, adapt or enhance it for the students in their care. The conundrum, especially in light of the emphasis on pride, is that they do not see this as research - nor do many others. In other words, because of their assumptions about research, some teachers are missing a great opportunity to enhance the collective pride in their profession. And as a result, multiple opportunities for capturing and sharing the whole

story of teaching, the professional learning that occurs every day, are being lost.

Since the whole story of teaching is not being told, at least as much as it should, the resulting vacuum has been filled by the likes of PISA and TALIS. As I have said to teachers previously, if you don't talk more about what you do, in a way that engages and invites the participation of parents and the wider community, others will. And they may well do so in a way that is not as well-informed as it should be by their professional voice.

Teachers on research

So what is their professional voice saying?

I put out the call on twitter last year – with the hashtags #researchmeans and #research matters. The following is a flavour of what they said:

Research means...

- Having the confidence to keep going or try something new.
- Looking at why we do things in the manner in which we do and asking if we could do better.
- Exploring a topic critically, systematically, ethically and reflecting on the findings' implications for educational practice.
- Finding new and better ways to facilitate teaching and learning, constantly innovating new ways to engage students.

- Critical Reflection + Rational Inquiry + Honest evaluation = Constructive and Informed Iteration.
- Critical thinking about what we are doing in ed and why we do it.
- Questioning, experimenting and sharing knowledge to inspire and aid progression.
- Researchers should be gathering practical experiences and adding to body of knowledge for now and future teachers.
- Critical reflection to improve or enhance our practice.
- The ability to see if other perspectives from around the world are working and what we can learn from them.
- First and foremost access to research that already exists for teachers.
- Encouraging teachers to read, discuss and implement (try) ideas and share outcomes with colleagues and students.
- Action research Plan / Act / Observe / reflect as groups of teachers involving students – making explicit.
- A global community of reflective practitioners sharing knowledge to improve practice.

Such a diverse and wide range of definitions of what research means to teachers. But if you step back and look at them again, I think the following underpinning strands are clear in all of them:

Research in teaching and learning is:

- About access and accessibility!

- Tentative / contingent / uncertain – asking; having confidence; questioning; to see if x is working;
- Reflective – asking [ourselves] if we could do better; critical thinking
- Collegial / collaborative – including students! – global community of reflective practitioners; why WE do things the way we do; sharing learning
- About improving / making a difference

For my part, expressed in twitterese – *Research means thinking, exploring and talking to learn something new about something now, and teaching it to others.*

Note that from the Council’s point of view, research is intimately bound up with the act of teaching, of sharing, of learning. While learning for its own sake should always be a joy, research in, of and for teaching and learning must have an impact so that learning can be a joy for all learners, not just those who happen to succeed by a particular understanding of “research”. So, a “systematic culture of research embedded in the profession” does not mean that every teacher does a Masters, or Ph D – it means a culture where teaching and learning are brought alive, fired by the energy unleashed when great research and great practice support and inform each other. This supporting and informing happens when researchers and teachers talk to each other in a way that acknowledges the professional standing of both, the learning opportunities for both, and the responsibility they all have towards learners.

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!

In this context, 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. And the main reason I have come to that conclusion is that I see the concept of research-informed practice as vital to empowering professional leadership of teaching and learning, in an authentic, distributed sense.

Leadership

But what do we mean when we talk of leadership?

I recently finished a book, "Leadership 2030 : The Six Megatrends You Need to Understand to Lead Your Company into the Future" by Georg Vielmetter and Yvonne Sell. In it the authors talk about the six most significant megatrends in social and economic development until 2030 and what they mean for our understanding of leadership in a variety of contexts.

Intriguingly, in light of the point about pride in the profession, the authors talk of how very few job titles if any carry the word "leader", no matter how high you may go in a hierarchical structure. We talk of manager, director, CEO, president. To me, this speaks to a fear of the responsibility of leadership - few if any of us want that explicit or sole responsibility. Even the word "príomhoide" is rooted in this idea of the leader as "primus inter pares."

But if this is an accurate reading, why do we hear so much evidence of principals under severe stress? Of principals returning to the classroom after a relatively short period of time in post? What does that say about the actual

practice of leadership as opposed to the vision of distributed, collegial leadership I assume we all share? We might discuss that in the Q and A to follow. What I think we can say based on this insight from the authors of Megatrends is that properly understood, leadership needs to flow through the entire group; that to be fully leveraged, it must be seen for what it is, hidden in plain sight - a deeply distributed concept. Note for example the recent commentary on Ireland's performance against Argentina in the Rugby World Cup, and how much of our loss was ascribed to the loss of leaders in the group e.g. Sexton, O'Connell.

Seen as a hierarchical, even heroic concept, the anecdotal evidence is suggesting that school leadership as it is currently enacted is not sustainable. It appears to be foundering on the perception that teaching and leadership are two distinct concepts with no overlap. In large schools, the perception may be that the principal leads, and we teach. Teaching principals of course, face this challenge of leading and teaching in a particularly challenging way every day.

This perception of teaching and leadership would seem to echo the perceived dichotomy that many would feel applies to the relationship between teaching and learning on one hand, and research on the other. In this world view, they are two distinct activities, conducted by two distinct groups of people, who occasionally interact with each other. I don't think this is sustainable, but it reflects the reality as perceived by many education professionals, including teachers.

This of course begs two questions. The first I have already touched on - what should the relationship be between teaching, learning and research?

The second, in the context of the leadership issue is - What does it mean to be a follower? To me, it means much the same thing it does to be a leader – to listen; to share; to have the courage to take the next step, in spite of your fears, or because of your hopes, or both.

Many hold to the view that a leader must be followed, and by implication, that the leader must show others where they think they should be. When I asked teachers earlier this year for their views on what leadership should be, there was a strong consensus that authentic leadership is more distributed than that. In my first year or so in this job, I held the view that leadership was about empowering others to have the courage to shape their own future. And that still holds for how the Council wishes to work with the profession.

But in my preparation for a seminar on leadership organised by NUIM, RCSI and DCU earlier this year, I came to realise at both a personal and professional level that leadership may well be about enabling and empowering the voices of others; but it is **also** about connecting with those who have come before us and who come after us, so that we ALL shape our future, together.

The idea of leaders passing on the flame of something particularly important is a powerful one that resonates down the ages in the stories we read and tell of heroic feats, of great sacrifices for the greater good, of statues on plinths to wonderful individuals who did great things.

But as Brian points out in the Life of Brian, we're all individuals, we **all** do great things. We all lead, we all learn, we all conduct research of one kind or another.

And as Conor McGregor states so clearly, even in the most individualistic of sports and achievements, all success is the fruit of collaboration.

I honestly believe there is no such thing as self-made. I believe that is a term that does not exist. For me it certainly doesn't. The people who have been around for my whole career have helped shape this moment. This night and this moment is for them. (after UFC 189 fight)

So what really distinguishes a follower from a leader? The authors of Megatrends argue that over time, the relationship will become far more fluid than it is now - or at the very least, it will need to. For me, the distinction is rooted in space and time - your position in the group; your responsibility; your experience, but only if you have reflected on that experience.

The Council's Strategic Plan echoes this with the 3 R's of professionalism - research; reflective practice; relationships. In any given moment, the leaders are the ones who understand that the quality of your relationships with others both supports your resilience in the face of adversity and enhances your collective impact as a leader.

Of course, for an organisation to function, for decisions to be made, some one person does need to take responsibility for making the final call, particularly when there are differing or opposing viewpoints amongst the team as to what should be done. But in my experience, the sustainability of those decisions will rest on the quality of engagement that leads up to them, on the quality of the flow of communications and relationships between all members of the team.

So that's what leading is about. What about leading learning?

To learn is to change; to learn in the 21st century is to have the freedom to choose the change you make. In a collaborative culture focused on

sustainability, the freedom to choose the change you make must be tempered by our responsibility to each other in the here and now, and to the generations to follow. And that's where the paradox of leading learning comes in - it involves empowering learners to embrace the unknowable future by understanding more about what surrounds them now, and what has come before them. It's about enabling a choice that is both freely exercised and tempered by collaboration, to be informed and inspiring.

So if we have this sense that leadership will need to be a far more flexible and fluid concept in the future than it has been to date, how can we support, if not empower, all those who care about teaching and learning to take those leaps of faith, to be comfortable with the fluidity of roles? I think that an essential factor in this will be nurturing an embedded culture of research at a strategic level within the profession. Informed by sound, accessible research, teachers will not have definitive answers - but they will have clearer questions to guide their own reflection and thereby their professional leadership of the enhancement of teaching and learning.

How do we even begin to nurture this culture?

To paraphrase Samuel Beckett - connect; connect again; connect better.

Research empowering leadership

Atul Gawande, author of "Better" says of the relationship between research and medicine (2007, 186):

...we have not effectively used all the abilities science has already given us. And we have not made remotely adequate efforts to change that.

Later on he states equally trenchantly that (2007, 194):

New laboratory science is not the key to saving lives. The infant science of improving performance - of implementing our existing know-how - is.

His core point here is quite simple, but far from simplistic - he believes that in the case of medicine, far too much effort is being spent on chasing the next cutting-edge breakthrough, driven arguably by the systems of incentives as they are currently constructed. He believes that we are not spending enough time on leveraging what we have already discovered through research to make systemic improvements in professional practice. In other words, we are not investing enough time, whatever about money, in joining the dots.

I suspect that the same is true of much of the research on teaching and learning. There is no shortage of it. If you browse educational websites from around the world, you will find a significant number that either host research repositories and / or synthesize some of that research for different audiences. And yet we have this instinctive sense that teaching is not as well-informed by research as it could be. Take a look at the paper that Ben Goldacre published somewhat controversially on this very point, where he looked at how the medical profession has only relatively recently (about a generation ago) made the leap from assumed authority to research-informed practice. Gawande's book shows that all is not roses in the garden for the medical profession, but it

does appear to be one conceptual step ahead of teaching in the context of research. At the very least, it is **perceived** as such.

Making this breakthrough in the case of teaching will be especially challenging, as Carol Campbell's observation on the relationship between research and policy shows: (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!

In other words, to put it mildly if somewhat crudely, evidence informed practice will be quite messy. Because as my own children have taught me, life may be beautiful, but it is often quite messy. And the sooner we accept and acknowledge this basic truth, the greater the progress we will make on enhancing the connections between teaching, learning and research. Indeed, we may even enjoy the process!

If this is our starting point, do we have any examples of this? Yes, we do!

Research Alive!

In May 2013, in collaboration with the NCCA (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment) and CES (Centre for Effective Services), we hosted a conference on the theme of *Research Alive!* This is an initiative where we wanted to find out how teachers were engaging with research in the here and

now, and to explore new ways of encouraging and facilitating that engagement. We brought teachers, researchers and HEIs together and deliberately mixed them up in groups to discuss the relevant issues – echoing the fluidity of roles that Leadership 2030 talks about in terms of leaders and followers. The conversations were incredible, and on the day we had a clear sense of a good professional revolt! (Professional pride if you like!)

Teachers said that they wanted access to research, and most importantly, critical engagement with that research. The first request, access to research, we answered in September of that year, with the introduction of free access for all registered teachers to the EBSCO Education Source.

The second request, critical engagement with research, as you might expect, is taking a bit longer. We have been working at it ever since, but it is taking time. As part of our learning from the conference, the NCCA, the CES and ourselves committed to reflecting and sketching our thoughts as to where we would go next. The insights that I gleaned from the conference included the following:

- Teachers who are interested in research are beginning to find their voice in questioning the discourse of research at third level. Not in an arrogant way, but at the same time, interrogating the rationale for what currently counts as educational research, and wondering why it does not seem to be more focused on impact in the classroom, where it really matters for teachers.
- Diversity of community seems to be essential to the dynamic of *Research Alive!* We made a conscious effort to have a mix of teachers, HEI staff members, researchers and stakeholders at the conference, both in plenary session and in each of the small groups. This facilitated a rich and engaging discourse.

- There was a clear sense from the teachers that research should not just be about improving practice. It should also seek to enthuse / affirm / reaffirm / motivate teachers in what they do.
- One teacher said that “Research keeps teachers alive!”

#molfeasa

The next step in the journey of *Research Alive!* was supposed to be about the development of a website between the three organisations, molfeasa.ie, which would be a hub with a rigorous focus on enhancing connections between teachers and researchers, and thereby would facilitate more and deeper conversations on teaching, learning and research. This would be so that professional practice could be reflected upon and enhanced in an authentic, meaningful and sustainable way. Unfortunately, despite two Invitations to Tender and engagement with a number of stakeholders, we were unable to identify suitable bidders to take this exciting initiative forward.

In the interim, we have decided to park the website name for now, but are keen to maintain momentum.

To that end, the Council recently launched the hashtag #molfeasa, for twitter, at the first ever Researchmeet at FÉILTE. The Researchmeet was where 4 teachers gave nano-presentations on different areas of postgraduate research in a way that would be accessible to their fellow professionals and the wider public.

The purpose of the #molfeasa is to give what is a very vibrant online professional community of teachers a hook on which to hang the conversations they already have, and the research articles they already share, in a more coherent way. It is an experiment, and its success is in the hands of the profession. In that sense, it both epitomises the idea of research empowering professional leadership, but also contains a significant challenge to the profession to make the most of this and the other opportunities that are available to enhance evidence-informed practice.

EBSCO

Since September 2013, all registered teachers have free access to the EBSCO Education Source collection of research journals through their log-in on the Council website. This includes 1,700 journals, over 200 ebooks, abstracts etc. The latest figures for usage are very encouraging, and would suggest that EBSCO is continuing to grow in popularity. In the two years from September 2013, more than 100,000 searches have been carried out, averaging at 45 minutes per session. Records indicate that almost 9,000 teachers have accessed this resource. Pretty impressive figures, when you consider it's such a new resource. So please spread the good news to your colleagues! We have created this connection so that teachers and educators can read more, write more and can talk more about their practice with each other, and thereby nurture an appropriate pride in their profession, both from themselves and the wider public.

Research Engagement Group

We are also in the process of forming a Research Engagement Group to advise and support us on enhancing the connections between teaching, research and learning. We already have almost 15 teachers who have travelled from Cork, Donegal and Galway, among other places, to help us put this together. The intention is to have practising teachers as well as researchers from third level working together to make research more accessible, in the widest sense of that term, to all teachers – indeed, to everybody who cares about teaching and learning.

For our goal is to empower the profession to build its own research-informed culture. Note the careful distinction here - research-informed, not research-based. The difference? Context (space and time) and judgement. Research-informed means that teachers will be able to access the latest research on a topic of importance and relevance to their learners' learning. It means that they can reflect on it, discuss it with their peers, and exercise their professional judgement in applying that research to the context of their learners' and their learning environment – be that the classroom, the school, or further afield.

Talking about research - connecting

This point about the nuanced balance to be struck in understanding the relationship between research and practice brings me back to my opening

comments about pride in the profession - what it means for each one of us; what we think it should mean.

If the road to hell is paved with good intentions, the road to authentic learning is riddled with ambiguities. No one of us can traverse such a landscape on our own. We need to talk to, and listen to, each other to enhance our respective understandings of research; to broaden that understanding and to share that learning. We need to adopt an equally rigorous, open, even humble approach to the concept of educational leadership. And we need to then carefully construct the bridge between the two, research and leadership, brick by brick, with the profession leading the process.

If we are going to facilitate research in empowering professional leadership, we all need to make the space and choose the time to enable teachers to talk about research, with their fellow professionals, and how they might adapt it for their various contexts.

At the end of his book, Atul Gawande gives five practical pointers for leveraging existing knowledge and learning to improve practice:

- Ask an unscripted question (relationships).
- Don't complain (agency informed by research.)
- Count something (action research).
- Write something. (reflective practice)
- Change.

The only "change" I would make to his list would be to the last step - I would say "Talk, change, talk...".

And in fairness to him, the very last line of his book is "See if you can keep the conversation going". To teachers, to all of us, I would say - Talk about the answers you get to your unscripted and scripted questions. Talk about what you count. Talk about what you write. Reflect on what you hear and what you think. And then ask more questions, count something else, write a little more, and then try something new. Make a change. I can't predict what will happen, and chances are, neither can you. But you will have a hunch, and in that cycle of asking, counting, writing, thinking and talking, you will be giving yourself every chance to identify what is working, and what is not, for the learners in your care, and continue to adjust course as a result. In other words, you will be researching to teach and learn.

And that is the point about asking what it means to lead learning - as Duncan Watts has pointed out, the meaning will be made in the making. Our collective challenge is to be as alert and aware as we can be to that meaning as we shape it, and to make sure that we capture it and share it in a way that helps us to share teaching, and connect learning, well into the future. On this note, I will close with these wonderful lines from Jane Coombs where she said on twitter:

I love research.

I love people more.

I love using research to help people most.

Tomás Ó Ruairc

5 November 2015

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