

# How Do I Support Practitioner-Researchers Through Online Dialogue: Creating a 'Pedagogy of the Unique' within a 'Web of Betweenness'

Margaret Farren  
Education Studies  
Dublin City University  
[Margaret.farren@dcu.ie](mailto:Margaret.farren@dcu.ie)

## Abstract

The focus of this paper is on the growth of my educational knowledge as higher education educator as I develop my 'pedagogy of the unique' and co-create a curriculum in cooperation with participants on an MSc in ICT in Education and Training at Dublin City University. Participants on the course come from different educational and training contexts; primary, post-primary, further, adult and higher education, nurse education, business and community work. In the presentation, I will show how the growth of one's own educational knowledge occurs in relationship to the development of the knowledge base of others and how we are able to share this educational knowledge through use of ICT.

## Introduction

The paper contributes to a new scholarship of educational enquiry in that it involves creating and testing one's own 'living educational theory'. Living educational theory involves descriptions and explanations of one's own learning with respect to how one is improving practice. 'Pedagogy of the unique' (2004) refers to the unique contribution that each person has to make to the knowledge base of practice. It also recognises that each practitioner has his/her own unique values that they bring to educational practice. The 'web of betweenness' in the context of ICT is a useful metaphor in that it also relates to the possibility that the internet offers us to share our research based professional with others. Thus I recognise that each practitioner has a unique contribution to make in the creation of knowledge that is derived from his/her practice, and that at another level our learning is enhanced through collaboration with others. Through the programme, I involve other specialists from education, industry and the arts, who are able to bring their knowledge and expertise to the programme. This involved classroom based workshops and was also facilitated through online discussion forums. This approach catered for the unique context of each practitioner.

At this point, I would like to show two video clips of myself with a group of Master the group during a validation meeting in 2004. The purpose of the validation meetings is to provide the opportunity for each individual to describe and explain their learning within a peer group-learning environment, and to help with suggestions with regard to how they can move their learning forward. I hope you will see the relational form of the validation meeting, in which they are providing an engaged and appreciative response through the 'web of betweenness'.

Boyer (1990), the past President of the Carnegie Foundation of Teaching and Learning, based at Stanford University, put forward the following four types of Scholarship for the university:

- 1) Scholarship of Discovery research
- 2) Scholarship of Integration
- 3) Scholarship of Application
- 4) Scholarship of Teaching.

'Discovery' is defined as the disciplined search for and verification of knowledge; 'interpretation', as the synthesis of knowledge; 'application', as the uses of knowledge in addressing issues and practical problems in a rigorous way; and 'teaching' as the communication and transformation of knowledge through the mutual engagement of teachers and students. Concerning these, Boyer believes that the scholarship of teaching is an academic activity in its own right, alongside the other forms of academic scholarship, some of which move into the pure research bracket. This is interesting as it points to the importance of placing a scholarship of teaching alongside other forms of scholarships within the university. Evans (2001) is of the view that it would be easy enough to assess subject up-to-dateness of an individual academic, but that it would be difficult to assess the effectiveness of the individual's teaching. This suggests that external criteria and standards are not adequate, in and of themselves, to assess effective teaching. Thus in my research-based practice I focus on developing a scholarship of educational enquiry which emphasises the importance of each practitioner creating his/her own educational theory and providing evidence of how they are improving practice.

Lee Shulman, current President of the Carnegie Foundation of Teaching outlines the characteristics of a 'scholarship of teaching'. He believes that a scholarship should be public, susceptible to critical review and evaluation, and accessible for exchange and use by other members of one's scholarly community. Another attribute of a scholarship of teaching is that it involves question asking, inquiry, and investigation, particularly around issues of student learning (Hutchings and Shulman, 1999).

In this paper, I show how I am contributing to a scholarship of educational enquiry with a focus on how ICT can allow us to share our pedagogical practice with others.

### **Methodology**

In defining action research as;

*The fundamental aim of action research is to improve practice rather than to produce knowledge. The production and utilisation of knowledge is subordinate to, and conditioned by, this fundamental aim.* (Elliott, 1999)

Elliott claims that by defining action research in this way, he was attempting to place importance in the primacy of the practical standpoint as a context for knowledge generation (2004). However he now sees that this definition could be viewed as a way of stating that practice has a greater privilege over theory. Elliott challenges us to review our notion of theory as exclusively referring to generalisable representations of events. Some would claim that theory is only produced when it is separate from the agents who wish to affect the change in practical situations. Elliott claims that small-scale studies cannot only improve practical situations, but can also lead to the generation of theory

The accounts of learning within a living educational theory methodology involves expressing concerns when educational values are not lived in practice, imagining a way forward, gathering data, evaluating practice on effectiveness of actions, modifying plans in light of the evaluation, and submitting accounts of learning to a validation group in order to strengthen the validity of the account of practitioner learning. I referred earlier to the importance of a 'web of betweenness' in my educational practice. This refers to the importance that I place on how we learn in relation to each other. The cycles and validation meetings allows each person to clarify the values as they emerge in their practice and to show how they are transformed into epistemological standards of judgement which can be used to evaluate the validity of the accounts of practitioner learning. Whitehead (204) claims that a new epistemology for a new scholarship may come from the process of creating living standards of judgement from the embodied values of humanity we express in our educational practice. I see the epistemological significance of my research based practice in terms of the process of generating living educational standards of judgement from the ontological values embodied in my practice. The values of

co-operation, openness, and inclusiveness are present through the creation of a mutually interactive and dialogic online learning environment. Through ICT, we can openly share our pedagogical practice with peers.

### **Online Learning Dialogues**

During the Collaborative Online Learning module we made use of the WebCT conferencing system. WebCT allows messages to be kept in a central location. As it is asynchronous, one can read a message and respond to it at a time convenient to them.

Participants made use of online journal writing, during the Online Learning Environments module of the MSc in ICT in Education and Training Management in 2003. This module was of 12-week duration. The purpose of online journal writing was to provide them with the space to articulate their own learning as they developed ICT artefacts for use in teaching. This provided them with the opportunity to document their own educational development and engage with their peers, and hopefully that this would foster collaborative learning. The development of ICT artefacts involved the production of an end product. However, the design and development also involved an independent cognitive and social interactive process. I aim to provide a learning environment that encourages deep learning, where teacher-participants would have the opportunity to reflect on their practice in a shared collaborative space and to work towards improving practice and sharing their practice with others.

In the presentation, I will focus on the educational significance of these online dialogues. An example of part of a threaded discussion that took place within WebCT is shown below in figure 1. Due to the limited space in this paper, I can only present two short extracts from the online dialogue. It is intended to show the typical pattern of postings by members of the group, including myself, in the context of Darragh Power's learning. I hope that what I show helps in some way to address Winter's (2002) question, "How do we converse 'harmoniously' and in a climate of 'mutual helpfulness' when we live so much of our life in settings where competition and conflict are normal?"

#### **Politics 168**

- e 168. [Darragh Christopher Patrick Power \(powerd3\)](#) (Sat Nov 22, 2003 14:20)
- e 171. [Fionnbarra Seamus Hallissey \(hallisf2\)](#) (Sat Nov 22, 2003 15:36)
- e 174. [Darragh Christopher Patrick Power \(powerd3\)](#) (Mon Nov 24, 2003 09:15)
- e 176. [Trudy Corrigan \(corrigt3\)](#) (Mon Nov 24, 2003 10:26)
- e 180. [Margaret Farren \(es572\)](#) (Mon Nov 24, 2003 12:26)
- e 185. [Darragh Christopher Patrick Power \(powerd3\)](#) (Mon Nov 24, 2003 14:57)
- e 191. [Margaret Farren \(es572\)](#) (Mon Nov 24, 2003 16:59)
- e 192. [Darragh Christopher Patrick Power \(powerd3\)](#) (Tue Nov 25, 2003 08:56)
- e 194. [Trudy Corrigan \(corrigt3\)](#) (Tue Nov 25, 2003 11:30)
- e 195. [Darragh Christopher Patrick Power \(powerd3\)](#) (Tue Nov 25, 2003 12:23)
- 205. [Realtan Nileannain \(leannai\\_n\)](#) (Wed Nov 26, 2003 18:18)

Figure 1

#### **Extracts from Online dialogues**

**Posted by Darragh Christopher Patrick Power (powerd3)  
Sat Nov 22, 2003 14:20**

Following on my polemic this morning, the aspect that concerns me in relation to the combination of a collaborative social approach with the use of ICT is the politics of the way this approach is perceived.

My personal values as a practitioner of Training and Development are part of what Lincoln and Guba would call the post-positivist paradigm. i.e. everyone has a contribution to make and collaboratively we achieve more than we could competitively.....My role is an informal one in that I am a training mentor - there is no job description for this and as a result I am always fighting the battle for more space in which to allow development activities to emerge. Positive outcomes such as a colleague becoming more confident in task needs to be explained in the language of, we are reducing error in the output generated by the team. There are two differing languages at work here. The financial operational one and the educational development one. I sometimes feel the need for a translator!!! This is bringing me towards the question how do we as a group achieve a collaborative approach, valuing diversity and differing opinions, while collaborating on differing goals, and how can I affect this through my practice.

It's all very confusing!!!

Darragh

**Posted by Trudy Corrigan (corrigt3)**

**Mon Nov 24, 2003 10:26**

Hi Darragh,

I will use my own previous experience as an example to hopefully help you with your current situation. I have through my studies on the MSc programme and my experience of teaching adults within the VEC found that the collaborative approach is best practice since it brings together a diversity of experience, talents, ability and expertise.

Then I found myself in a work environment which did not subscribe to this theory at organisational level i.e. each staff member had their own role to play but not in a collaborative way. It was a very difficult lesson for me to learn at a personal level but a hugely beneficial one that you may not be able to change an organisation in its thinking on this but you can change the environment around you i.e. being collaborative with your fellow colleagues and other staff, students etc. Sometimes the greatest lesson to be learned for "reflective practitioners" is that you cannot change an organisation but you can provide them with an opportunity to reflect on your practice of collaboration.

This collaborative approach has been reaffirmed for me in this Master's programme but I also have a better understanding of what I can and cannot change within an organisation/school environment.

Hope this is of some help

Trudy

**Posted by Margaret Farren (es572)**

**Mon Nov 24, 2003 12:26**

Hi Darragh,

Just responding to some of your points.....

Darragh - You say:

*"There is a debate in action research about "victory narratives" (See McNiff and Whitehead 2000 action research in Organisations for the reference) - i.e. - Action Researchers can sometimes say - This is what I do in my practice, and hide the struggle they have gone through and in particular the struggle with power (not me!!)."*

On Thursday evening last, Jean Mc Niff did point to the need for the researcher to be truthful. This would answer your question re: hiding the struggle. Certainly within a 'living educational theory' approach, you cannot gloss over the conflicts. These are integral to the approach and central to the creation of your own 'living educational theory'. Gadotti points out that dialogue cannot exclude conflict. Indeed conflict is at the heart of all pedagogy. "There is always conflict and rupture with something, with, prejudices, habits, types of behaviours and the like. It is only in taking on the risk that we become educators." (Will send the Gadotti reference).

My PhD research uses a 'living educational theory' approach and it does include dialogue with conflicting values. I want to bring to the fore the idea of a 'Pedagogy of the unique', to highlight the differences and not just the equality. I do think that it is up to the individual in the end. And yet, how do we hold to our own values while engaging with people who hold conflicting values? How do we engage with the other person and not undermine the values they subscribe to? To do this comes close to a value called empathy or what I am coming close to understanding in my own educational practice as an empathetic connectivity. And yet we are faced with - which knowledge forms part of the 'cultural arbitrary' (Bourdieu) or the cultural preference of the dominant group. Trudy highlighted the fact that you can change your own small space. I think Gramsci or Gadotti also recognised that it was the small changes that made the difference. Your challenge may be one of 'creative compliance' (John Elliot), how to you engage with the values of the company in a way that still allows you to realise your own educational values and goals within the company. You have made a start and now for the dialogue.  
Margaret

**Posted by Darragh Christopher Patrick Power (powerd3)**  
**Mon Nov 24, 2003 14:57**

*Margaret said: "There is always conflict and rupture with something, with, prejudices, habits, types of behaviours and the like. It is only in taking on the risk that we become educators." Gadotti*

Herein lies the crux of the issue for me. I have a recognition about the parameters of my own practice, where the acceptable boundaries of the discourse I can engage in are drawn. I absolutely agree with Trudy in the sense of it being a development of a collaborative approach in my own practice I can effect change in my immediate surroundings. This is a perfectly reasonable expectation and a reasonable 'risk' to take.

As a person, a living "I" to borrow Whitehead's term, I can influence and effect the situation I am in for all. I agree with the principle of Elliot's of 'creative compliance' and am trying in my practice to move the debate away from an us vs them conflict perspective, where everyone guards their territory fiercely.....

As I do not have an official role as a trainer, but rather the job of a mentor, with no job description, in addition to my operational workload, my own practice as an educator / trainer (though not as a person) is limited in terms of resources and time, and also in terms of credibility. I think the idea of 'rupturing habits' is an interesting one, .... ..

Thanks for the responses!!  
Darragh

**Message no. 205 Posted by Realtan Nileannain (leannai\_n)**  
**Wed Nov 26, 2003 18:18**

Hi all,  
I have just read through this thread. I think that collaborative work amongst educators is one area of education where Wenger's 'Community of Practice' works! CoP is the premise first mooted in the business world that collaboration and problem-solving on an informal or formal level among members of a common interest group generally leads to a sum of all the members put together, in terms of creativity and productivity. Sorry for the right-wing capitalistic jargon folks, but that's where it came from! It has since spread into education by the back door and is abused daily in this context. Anyone wants more details, I'll post them.  
Realtan

### **Conclusion**

In the first posting, Darragh grapples with how he can achieve a collaborative approach within a competitive culture. He articulates the perceived struggle between the financial and educational goals within a company. Through online dialogue, we are able to help him to move from this state to an understanding that research is not about hiding conflict, but that it is about how to work through tensions and to resolve them, in a limited way, in one's own practice. He articulates his value of the wish to offer people "the opportunity to be involved.....to defend and work the process for myself and those who want to participate in it, through provision of evidence etc." Trudy Corrigan, offers

support by referring to literature in this context and Realtan Ní Leannain observes that his thinking may relate to Wenger's idea of a 'community of practice' that was originally developed in a training context. This is an area that Darragh decided to explore further. Trudy Corrigan, another participant on the programme, contributed to the forum by providing her adult education work experience knowledge to help Darragh. I recognise the creativity/originality of mind and critical judgement of the other in mediating between what they do and what they learn in the web of betweenness through my pedagogy of the unique.

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