

## Five Nations Conference

### Citizenship Education; present challenges and future directions

#### An idea about interaction

I want to begin in another conference, in Ireland two years ago, when I was asked to address a gathering of people who worked in the arts and creative industries about the importance of the arts in educational innovation. The other speaker was Paul Collard – I expect he is known to colleagues from the UK – a leader of the Creative Schools project. I arrived in the conference venue as Paul was speaking with a very cool power point presentation full of examples of the work of creative schools. But I soon realised that no one was looking at the stage. Instead, they all seemed to be working on their lap tops or texting with their smart phones. I thought it was very rude! But the average age of the audience was in the 20-30 age group, and so, with all my middle aged prejudice, I just assumed that this was how they were.

But then I realised something... Paul Collard was not just looking at his own presentation on the screen and computer, he was watching another screen in front of him where all the participants twitter comments were appearing. And they were appearing not just on that screen – but in public, open to anyone on twitter. He was talking, they were listening, but commenting AT THE SAME TIME. And the presenter was interacting with their comments. And then I realised the really terrifying thing. I was next!!!

I had to begin my address by explaining that as a teacher I believed that if they weren't looking at me, they weren't listening, and that I would be happy to take any comments or questions – but after I had finished. They laughed at my discomfort, and generously listened to my speech, and held their comments until the end. But I have thought a lot about that event since. About the difference between my expectation and theirs, about my preferred style of speaking, and their preferred style of listening. I had used technology in my presentation – but a means to add strength to my points, to

illustrate what I wanted to say and summarise my key points. They used technology in their listening, but not to record or note down my key points – but to challenge or comment on mine and make *their own* key points. And I began to reflect on the implications of this for education, and for the experience of schooling in particular which, although making more and better use of the opportunities offered by new technologies, tends to confine its use to giving teachers better tools to present content and to access content from across the world, to motivate students or to assess their progress. Imagine my anxiety had I known then, as I do now, that their comments were not just appearing on the screen in front of the speaker, but in the public virtual space....!!!

Those students of the generation who increasingly expect to interact with teachers and with others as part of their learning are beginning to make interesting demands on our schools. Let's think about our school students for a moment, and about where they fit in the debates about educational change.. In Ireland, in the last number of years we have made a significant attempt to include consultation with students – including the very youngest children – about changes to curriculum and assessment. We have just announced a major programme of reform at lower secondary education. Not alone did engagement with students help shape the reforms, but the Minister announced that the new qualification at the end of compulsory education would have a new name – decided on by the students. The best the imagination of the adults could come up with was the Certificate of Junior Cycle Education. I hope the students can do better than this! I know that elsewhere, including student voice has become the norm in the shaping of reforms. But there is some way to go yet before they are given the space, or the tools, or the permission to lead or to take action. And yet we now know that citizenship is currently being reshaped by three new means of engagement in different kinds of public spaces.

First – grassroots movements like those in Iceland, and the We the Citizens processes in Ireland – people coming together in physical spaces in informal re enactment of what has been seen of formal political action. My local shop – badly punctuated sign...

Second – virtual spaces – as evidenced by the Arab Spring movement, and others where the virtual was used to generate actual change

Third – the Occupy movement – which is now beginning to generate some interesting commentary from within and without. I read a piece about the Occupy Wall Street campaign about how as all the homeless of Manhattan have drifted down towards the park they have been fed, given shelter, offered rehab and support. One homeless man was reported in the NYT as saying it was the best time of his life! One of the leaders of the daily assembly (if you haven't been to one, it's a must do) spoke about modelling civic action that meant change for all.

What we find is that the three strands are also showing up in more official places – when the Minister for Education in England had to abandon his speech in the face of the call and response techniques developed by the grassroots and occupy movements.

Think of these three strands and schools – we have always remarked on the challenge of teaching democratic citizenship in schools which are often run along quite undemocratic lines. But now consider just how these three strands are completely at odds with school cultures.

Virtual engagement is strictly controlled in schools. Grassroots movement are not encouraged. And Occupy may only happen between 1 and 2 in designated places...

I don't know what the lessons are yet, I don't know what to make of it all... but it would be remiss to speak about the future of citizenship education without reference to these phenomena. One thing I am certain of is that the next generation are taking the lead in ways we have not even thought about.

#### **The nature of educational innovation**

Are we ready for that challenge? This may seem obvious in a room full of people already engaging in innovation. But being ready to give the lead to students is a big ask. (Mention e twinning conference here) All educational change is informed in equal measure by three things –

- excitement over the future
- nostalgia for the past
- anxiety about the present.

We know about the first one. We can identify with this future orientation. After all, education as a process is oriented towards the future as young people grow towards adulthood. We know that the future is elusive and hard to pin down, that it is full of uncertainties and that learning how to live with uncertainty will be one of the defining challenges of our current educational project. We have lots of future sounding rhetoric... all that 21<sup>st</sup> century rhetoric... Imbued with that future orientation, we would expect education and school systems them to be ever changing, radically re-shaping themselves, and yet they don't. To some they seem impervious to reform, old-fashioned, based on an industrial model of knowledge that has little impact anywhere other than schools. Why is that the case? Because the other force on the education system – the pull of nostalgia – holds education back. Nostalgia gives us a very powerful image of a 'good school' and a 'good education'. For many, this is the image of 30 silent students, big text books, one speaking adult, and plenty of hard tests and examination. Despite what research might tell us, or what the future looks like and requires, there are many who long for this kind of school, and who believe that all this sitting around in groups will get us nowhere! What's even stronger than educational nostalgia, is a sort of cultural nostalgia – that longs for a golden age of the past, that existed only in the mind, but believes that if only schools were like what they used to be, society would be too! This is a naïve assumption – schools and culture are not separate entities. Children come from families and towns and villages and cities and bring culture to school and to classrooms where it is shaped and informed in turn.

So we have a pull towards a future we don't know, and a push back towards a past as we would like it to have been. And in the middle we have education. This balance might work quite well, keeping education from rushing into hasty changes for example, if it were not for the third force – anxiety about the present. It was the American educational Historian Larry Cuban who gave us the great phrase.. If society has an itch, schools get scratched. As an educator, it drives me crazy that whatever the latest anxiety of the adult population – there is an assumption that the solution is to start in schools. So not alone must we insist that children learn about heart disease, litter; tooth care, arthritis, smoking, diabetes, drugs, alcohol, safe driving and the importance of green vegetables – in

short, anything ADULTS are anxious about. I am not suggesting that children don't learn about these things. They should! The problems arise when the anxiety we might be feeling is transferred to children and young people and we make them afraid, and cautious, when they should be bold and willing to take risks. Technology is a source of anxiety for many adults. Because it can be difficult to 'patrol' we can over regulate, and over control and spend more money blocking inappropriate material than on teaching students the critical skills and digital literacy and cyber safety they need to use their technologies well.

In such a context of anxiety and fear, the idea that students and young people might have greater control over the learning and over their own projects, is seen negatively. As something they could not manage effectively. I wonder how this is communicated to students. In Ireland, as in many other developed countries we are wondering about our recent drop in PISA test scores. Of course we are concerned with drops in literacy and numeracy, although we performed well on electronic reading. What really worried me was that were top of the list for unfinished items – 15 year olds who just gave up and abandoned questions, who responded to the challenge by just leaving it there! Without a teacher's intervention, they were lost! We have lots of teachers who say that in their schools, they are working harder and harder with students who seem to be working less and less. Someone once said that schools are places that students come to watch teachers work. It is true that students do not come to school to learn. They come to be with their friends. Work that you support in citizenship education projects actions collaborations... they build on that powerful motivation, they harness student energy – not just teacher energy and are getting closer and closer to having students lead the innovation. Perhaps our anxieties about the present, and our need to protect and cocoon students has over-protected them from their responsibilities as learners and as the source of energy within a school. We need to move some way in that direction; to give them greater responsibility in educational innovation, especially where technology is concerned.

**From facilitator to curator**

. This concept of curator in education is an interesting one. Just as *facilitator* does not replace *instructor*, but moves alongside it, curator joins these words as role descriptions for teachers in 21<sup>st</sup> century. The concept, drawn from the world of museums and galleries is increasingly used in digital content, and in collections such as TED talks. Applied to education the teacher gathers, displays, presents, and the student experiences, connects and makes meaning of what is presented. The student is active, connected, but making their own meaning in their own voices. The student in turn curates his or her own collection, or does so in collaboration with others. Meaning is created, meaning is shared. It's an interesting concept and one we will hear more about in the coming years as education makes more use the virtual as well as the factual.

I hope that in your deliberations together, you can curate a collection of experiences and ideas that inspire you and those with whom you work in real and virtual worlds!