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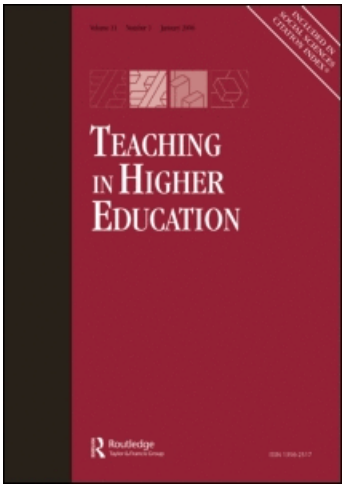

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The Galway symposium on design for learning: curriculum and assessment in higher education

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REVIEW ESSAY

The Galway symposium on design for learning: curriculum and assessment in higher education

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The higher education (HE) system in Ireland, in common with many systems around the world, is facing a period of uncertainty. In the current economic climate, the seven universities in Ireland – plus the approximately 20 other HE institutions – are coming under much scrutiny. Echoing some of the attacks that Margaret Thatcher's government made on UK HE in the 1980s, the Irish government is raising questions around efficiency and accountability while at the same time cutting budgets. The pared down system that will emerge after this economic downturn may precipitate a somewhat gloomy period for academic staff. Before that happens, we would like to use this occasion to review some of the developments in teaching and learning in Ireland which we think call for some recognition.

In June 2009, the Centre for Excellence in Learning and Teaching (CELT) at NUI Galway hosted a two-day Symposium entitled 'Design for Learning: Curriculum and Assessment in Higher Education'. This event continued a seven-year tradition of providing an annual event on teaching and learning mainly for academic staff in Ireland. The 2009 Symposium attracted nearly 200 participants, most of whom are not actively engaged in the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) but who are teaching across a range of subject areas in the universities and Institutes of Technology (IoTs) in Ireland.

These events aim to bring academic staff from a range of disciplines together to listen, think about and discuss topics of relevance to teaching in HE and the wider policy context. This is not a 'staff development' event as such. Indeed, although the format often resembles what we encounter at conferences focused on the SoTL, the key difference here is that we are appealing to an academic audience who may have never heard of SoTL, and some may primarily identify themselves as researchers (or even administrators) rather than teachers.

Why do these academics take the time to come? Given that both of us are relatively new to CELT (Kelly joined as a lecturer in February 2007 and Michelle as an educational developer in October 2008), we feel we are in a position to blow a few trumpets about its success because it is not of our own making. Firstly, and possibly foremost, the event is strongly supported by the university, and has become widely viewed to be an important event in the academic calendar. This commitment from the university management to funding CELT and supporting its activities is notable.

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Given that we have watched how central support services for teaching in UK institutions have developed (and indeed, Kelly worked in the UK prior to coming to Galway), we are strongly aware of the importance of institutional support in terms of driving home the message that teaching is taken seriously.

Secondly, much care is taken in the choice of topic each year, and the subsequent invitations to plenary speakers are issued only after long deliberations. This year, for a variety of reasons we will go on to discuss, the topic of 'curriculum and assessment' was chosen. In previous years, we have looked at such topics as learning technologies in HE; diversity and widening participation; problem-based learning; and the role of universities in contemporary society (see Coate 2010; Coate and Mac Labhrainn 2009; MacIlrath and Mac Labhrainn 2007). The keynote speakers attract some participants already familiar with their work; inevitably (and enjoyably), however, we are introducing some of the key people in the field to academics who had not encountered them previously.

Thirdly, we encourage critical debate. We hope to open up a space in which to learn about the contemporary teaching landscape and to discuss with each other the issues and challenges we face. Each year, we receive the type of feedback that any event organiser would like to hear. Mostly, the positive feedback comes from those academic staff who are just winding up a busy year teaching hundreds of undergraduates and who have appreciated the debates and the time to reflect on what they do. One academic, for example, said to us after the June 2009 Symposium that CELT activities were the only thing keeping her sane at the moment. We especially appreciate this comment in the current climate in which academics may perceive some of the recent pressures on HE, which we will elucidate later, as bordering on the irrational.

This event seems to signify for us that there are ways of supporting teaching in universities that are based on collegial and critical approaches, in the same way we would want to encourage collegiality and criticality in academic practices across the spectrum of our activities in universities. Rather than separating off SoTL as a distinct sphere of activity in which only those willing to learn the lingo can join in, we believe we can support colleagues in thinking critically about their teaching by opening up spaces for debate and dialogue. This is a model we have successfully promoted within our postgraduate courses in teaching in HE, and we are now in the happy position of running an over-subscribed, non-compulsory PG Certificate on Teaching and Learning in HE within CELT. The annual Symposium is an abbreviated version of this approach.

We feel it is important to share this experience because we have read with increasing dismay some of the criticisms of developments in learning and teaching elsewhere, particularly in the UK. PG Certificates which are compulsory, accredited, monitored as part of probation and so on, seem to have set the wrong tone for a number of academics who increasingly voice their opinions about the worthlessness of learning how to teach (e.g. Magueijo 2009). Unfortunately, it is the SoTL which is being impugned by these attacks, and this is creating a sub-culture of academic and/or educational developers who are in danger of being cut off from precisely those who might benefit the most from the opportunity to reflect on the challenges they face as teachers. Our recent experience here suggests we can create spaces for academics to reflect on their teaching practices, and we will turn now to some of the contemporary trends in Irish HE that are changing the teaching landscape.

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Curriculum and assessment: drivers of change

We chose the topics of curriculum and assessment because there are some fundamental changes occurring in the ways in which academics are designing curricula and assessing their courses. It is probably fair to say that university teaching in Ireland remained fairly traditional as the system expanded throughout the past few decades. Large lecture courses are typically assessed by end of semester examinations. Non-attendance at lectures and intensive cramming before the exams are common complaints about student behaviour.

Yet we have seen in the past decade or so a new emphasis on teaching, innovation and consideration of the student experience. Teaching support centres, such as CELT, have been springing up in various forms in the universities and IoTs, along with modules and certificated programmes for academic staff on teaching and learning. What have been the drivers of these changes?

Undoubtedly, Irish academics have been influenced by changes in the UK HE system. The establishment of the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) and the Higher Education Academy, UK have generated much activity around teaching and learning which have been influential here. There are also connections with work going on in Australia and North America. The general emergence of the SoTL has therefore had a significant effect.

As we might expect, developments in the Irish system have been shaped by national agendas and priorities in funding mechanisms. One important source of support was the Strategic Innovations Fund (SIF), which encouraged cross-institutional collaboration around projects that supported staff engaged in teaching enhancement activities. Since 2006, SIF contributed about €45m to the universities and IoTs for projects related to the enhancement of teaching, but the government has recently stopped any further SIF expenditure and will likely terminate the funding stream altogether. It is not clear from where, in the absence of SIF, money might become available for similar, teaching-related activities.

Another important aspect of Irish HE that is worth emphasising is that there is no direct equivalent of the UK's main quality assurance regimes as developed by the QAA or through the Research Excellence Framework. Universities conduct their own internal quality reviews on departments and programmes, based on a framework which was mutually developed in the sector and is facilitated under the auspices of institutional Quality Offices and the Irish Universities' Quality Board. For the IoTs the system is structured through the HE & Training Awards Council. However, the relative 'light touch' and more holistic quality assurance mechanisms developed within the university sector have been beneficial in facilitating and opening the space for teaching innovation. Those academics who wished to research some aspect of their teaching, or learn more about teaching issues, or try out a teaching innovation, have often been able to find support for training or even a small amount of funding in order to pursue their interests. These activities were not compulsory or even particularly perceived to be bound up in a narrow system of external accountability or as part of a micromanaged, targeted approach, and were perhaps all the more rewarding as a result.

Unfortunately, the motivation to undertake such activities because they are intrinsically rewarding is being replaced by a perception that they will lead to tangible rewards: typically promotion or better career prospects. Does this matter? In

our (limited) experience, the answer would be 'yes', it does, but not yet in a way that damages the collegial approach we have tried to foster locally. It certainly brings the critical voices more to the fore, and encourages a low-level disquiet about the value of focusing and individual's efforts on teaching, but we feel we offer an important space in which to air these concerns. Perhaps more importantly, for many academics the new focus on teaching practice validates their own sense that teaching should be valued as much as research.

The final driver of change we need to note is the Bologna Process. Bologna was a major topic of discussion at the Symposium in June Ireland's HE system is already recognised as being largely compliant with Bolgna, so some of the Bologna-related activities that are currently being undertaken go well beyond the 'headlines' of the process, such as the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS), $3+2+3$ degree structures and diploma supplements. With much of that work already done, attention is being turned to an even greater detailed working through of Bologna-inspired reforms such as learning outcomes, generic competencies, national frameworks of qualifications and European-wide quality assurance mechanisms.

We can therefore see that, to some extent, academics in Irish HE have been influenced by initiatives and developments elsewhere as they have turned attention to teaching and learning in their own institutions. However, there is no reason to suggest that other systems cannot be informed by the developments within Ireland. There is much to be learned from the Irish experience, which is partly a motivation in writing this essay, but also of course for organising the Symposium. In bringing people to Ireland and in generating discussions about the Irish context, we hope that learning extends beyond borders in more than one direction.

Curriculum and assessment: the Galway symposium

We opened the Symposium with a plenary[1] by one of the authors (Kelly) on thinking about the design of the HE curriculum as a process of carving out a particular time and space which we invite students to enter. If curricula are imagined as an opening or possibility for new forms of student engagement, how might we design curricula in order to encourage students to actively engage? In a sense, the keynote was an argument against designing curricula through a 'technical' approach based solely on producing learning outcomes using 'approved' verbs; or through compliance to national qualifications frameworks using only dedicated descriptors, for instance. Of course, the technical aspects of curricula design can be hugely helpful in giving academics some guidance in thinking through what they intend to do in particular courses. However, there is a danger that we could come to foreground these somewhat prescriptive approaches at the expense of more creative approaches to curriculum design. A balance needs to be struck.

The Symposium was opened in this way – by asking big questions and perhaps posing some challenges – because it seems to us that these discussions are meaningful in the Irish context. As Irish HE has not yet gone down the route of excessive managerialism through punitive quality assurance regimes or constant surveillance of practices, there is much more room for manoeuvre. In our experience, the lack of overly-bureaucratised approaches to developing curricula has the advantage of encouraging creative approaches without the perceptions of risk that might be felt in a system more subject to surveillance.

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The following keynote, delivered by Professor Katherine Isaacs from the University of Pisa, provided an overview of the Tuning Process and some of its successes. Tuning was initiated in 2000 and driven by university academics as a project that supports the changes occurring in HE primarily due to the Bologna process. More specifically, Tuning focuses on competencies, the ECTS, approaches to learning, teaching and assessment and quality assurance in HE within specific subject areas. That the project started at the same time as the Bologna process is no coincidence and their goals are entwined. However, Tuning delves deeper into specific disciplines and its success has resulted in its introduction and implementation in countries and continents far removed from the Bologna process. In Ireland, it is fair to say that Tuning has not received the same amount of attention as Bologna, given that participation within the process has been limited to a number of enthusiastic individuals (although its outputs are freely available to all). The keynote from Professor Isaacs was therefore valuable in terms of highlighting the extent to which Tuning has received international attention.

Bologna is topical in Irish HE at the moment with the deadline of 2010 for Bologna compliance generating much activity amongst those who have prioritised its goals (mainly at senior levels within universities and within organisations at national level). As mentioned above, Ireland is largely seen to be compliant with Bologna. It was the first European country, for example, to verify the compatibility of its own National Framework of Qualifications with the Bologna Framework (Stengel 2009). On the ground, for programme or course leaders, the current focus is largely around learning outcomes, competencies and ECTS. Although ECTS have been in use in Irish HE for some years now, their purpose has not always been well understood. This would be true as well of using learning outcomes to align teaching and assessment activities: a way of thinking about effective curricular design which is starting to become more embedded in practice.

Ireland has no equivalent to the UK QAA subject benchmark statements, although professionally accredited programmes will have prescribed outcomes, and the Bologna requirements for programme (and module) learning outcomes have helped fill the gaps in non-professional subject areas. The responsibility for programme/subject outcomes lies with each individual university and therefore with each School or College, more likely than not meaning it lies with the academics who co-ordinate or teach the programmes. Accountability and quality assurance still lies (mostly) with the individual academics, although there are perceptions that this autonomy is being eroded: a point to which we will return in our conclusion.

The ways in which Bologna has influenced HE systems within Europe has varied widely, with the UK being a founding signatory of the Bologna Process but then largely ignoring some of its main action points, whereas some countries on the Continent have used Bologna as a lever for reforming degree structures and implementing quality assurance regimes. Ireland has taken a more benign approach, possibly reflecting the general pre-disposition in academia towards the benefits of collaborating with Europe (particularly in terms of obtaining research funding from the European Commission); but also because the system did not require major restructuring and was therefore more easily adjusted in terms of the detail.

One area of SoTL, however, in which developments in the UK appear to be far ahead of Ireland in terms of innovation is that of assessment. We therefore invited two keynote speakers from the UK who are at the forefront of changing assessment

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practices: Professor Liz McDowell from the University of Northumbria, and Professor Phil Race, formerly of Leeds Metropolitan University. Both speakers addressed the topic of assessment through the idea of promoting assessment *for* learning, which is a way of thinking about assessment (along with alignment with learning outcomes) that could help overcome the reliance on the examination system here. The question is really whether Irish academics are willing to begin moving away from traditional, end-of-semester, unseen, written examinations. From our experience it seems that this shift is slowly happening and that there is an attitude of openness towards change, despite the fact that some traditions can seem very durable. That the symposium featured two very well-attended plenary sessions on assessment is a reflection of the interest that academics have in this topic.

Liz McDowell and Phil Race highlighted the importance of ensuring that assessment practices engage students in their learning, the challenge of avoiding the 'assessment monster' and the importance of interrogating our own practices. While these are not necessarily new discussions in Irish HE, issues around assessment are becoming more acute as we face into a period of budget cuts, increasing class sizes and decreasing resources. In discussing issues of assessment, we are unfortunately never very far away from the topic of resources, and it is this topic which is causing the most uncertainty in Ireland at the moment.

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Uncertainties in the policy environment

We are aware that we are writing this at a time of potentially radical change in Irish HE. The academics with whom we work on a daily basis are open to innovations, change and enhancing teaching and learning however they can. The wider policy environment, however, is in a state of transition which may have quite a profound impact on the system itself. This period of uncertainty has partly been a result of the economic crisis now facing Ireland, but also due to the current government's focus on the 'inefficiencies' of the Irish HE sector.

We therefore invited a final keynote speaker who has a public voice within the current debates on the future of Irish HE. Professor Ferdinand von Prondzynski, the President of Dublin City University, has been one of the few high-profile speakers on Irish HE who consistently has urged us to reconsider (and reassert) the purpose of universities and to be clear in the strategies needed to achieve those purposes. His keynote talk concluded our Symposium by once again posing some big questions. His insistence that universities retain their autonomy was a strong take-home point and something that at present appears to be in jeopardy in Irish HE.

The uncertainty we face here in Ireland will (possibly) be partly addressed by the outcomes of the deliberations of a review group producing a National Strategy for HE in Ireland. This group was appointed early in 2009 by the Minister for HE, Batt O'Keeffe, to consider the role of HE in Ireland. The terms of reference for the group are brief, and a clue to the likely outcome is provided in the fourth and final point in these terms, which encourages the group to:

> identify the operational framework of the higher education system including the number and roles of institutions within it which will enable it to deliver on these policy objectives; [. . .] look at the effectiveness of use of current resources, identify any potential for rationalisation or change to maximise the use of those resources [. . .]

> having particular regard to the difficult budgetary and economic climate that is in prospect in the medium term.[2]

The focus on rationalisation and efficiency is causing some concern, particularly given that the Chair of the group is from the financial rather than the HE sector. The report of this group is due shortly, and whether or not their recommendations for the sector are adopted in full will probably be a matter of protracted political negotiations.

However, it is clear that the current government perceives the public sector to be 'bloated', despite evidence to the contrary in international comparisons. The ramifications of this new focus on 'inefficiencies' in the HE sector are already being felt on the ground. All public sector employees have had substantial reductions in take-home pay this year (up to 10% for the highest earners, with further cuts on the way). In addition, the Department of Finance, in March 2009, imposed an Employment Control Framework on the HE sector which places a moratorium on recruitment and promotions. In effect, no new posts can be advertised, no temporary contracts can be renewed, and no promotions can be awarded without the exceptional permission of the Minister for Finance.

These 'emergency' economic measures are making a real and immediate impact on teaching and learning in Irish HE. As we might expect during a recession, enrolments on degree programmes increased by about 6% in 2009 (Donnelly 2009). Student numbers are rising but staff numbers are falling, and the morale of academics has been damaged as a result. More importantly, perhaps, the 'Employment Control Framework' is a serious breach of the autonomy of the universities, with worrying implications for the future.

The current situation is unfortunate given that in the past 10 years or so Irish HE entered an era of increasing interest in curricular reform and the enhancement of quality of teaching and learning. These interests were not by and large muted by funding problems, government interference or resourcing issues and resulted in an increased focus on teaching practices; a greater emphasis on teaching excellence within promotion criteria; the establishment of various teaching awards schemes; the implement of Learning, Teaching and Assessment strategies within institutions; and the establishment of learning and teaching centres across the country.

The challenges that lie ahead now threaten the development of these interests. With the recruitment embargo has come oversubscribed lectures, reduced teaching resources and over-stretched support services. Will these returning pressures slowly stamp out the enthusiasm for innovation, foster resentment for processes such as Bologna by focusing on the process rather than the vision? Will future government decisions remove much of the autonomy universities currently enjoy? We have seen that in other contexts the loss of autonomy has resulted in negative backwash against some of these initiatives, and we need to (continue to) carve our own path and lead ourselves through the fog of economic uncertainty.

Not wishing to end on a note of despair, it is well worth mentioning that our experiences in the CELT this year are that the collegial and critical approach to teaching and learning we are trying to foster is still going strong. We have 35 enthusiastic participants on our PG Certificate this year; some with decades of teaching experience. We have established an exciting new 'Creative Curriculum' group (academics from a range of disciplines with an interest in creativity) in order to

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continue exploring ways of finding spaces for innovation and creativity in teaching and learning activities. Part of the remit of the Creative Curriculum group is to feed into our next Galway Symposium in June 2010. We are anticipating the need to reassert our creative energies by that time and will be holding the Symposium on the theme of Creativity in HE. We hope you will be able to join us.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all of our colleagues in CELT who helped organise this event, particularly Iain Mac Labhrainn (Director of CELT), as well as acknowledge the National Academy for the Integration of Research, Teaching and Learning (http://www.nairtl.ie/) for their support.

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Notes

1. Kelly's keynote, along with several others from the Symposium, can be viewed online at http://www.nuigalway.ie/celt/teaching_and_learning/webcasts.html
2. These terms of reference were downloaded from the website of the Higher Education Authority (the funding council for Irish HE) at http://www.hea.ie/en/strategy-for-higher-education

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