Developing a culture of professional practice learning in an FET context

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Table of Contents

Declaration

I declare that the work presented in this thesis is original and my own work, except as otherwise indicated in the text. The material in this thesis has not been submitted, in part or whole, for a degree at this or any other university.

Sorcha O'Toole
September 2018

List of Figures

List of Tables

List of Acronyms

AfL	Assessment for Learning
AR	Action Research
BERA	British Educational Research Association
BTEI	Back to Education Initiative
CPD	Continuous Professional Development
DES	Department of Education and Skills
ESOL	English Spoken as an Other Language
ESRI	Economic Social and Research Institute
ETB	Education and Training Board
FÁS	Foras Áiseánna Saothair
FE	Further Education
FESS	Further Education Support Service
FET	Further Education and Training
FETAC	Further Education and Training Awards Council
GRETB	Galway and Roscommon Education and Training Board
HETAC	Higher Education and Training Awards Council
IEM	International Education Mark
IUQB	Irish Universities Qualifications Board
LOs	Learning Outcomes
NQAI	National Qualifications Authority of Ireland
NALA	National Adult Literacy Agency
NFQ	National Framework of Qualifications
NUIG	National University of Ireland, Galway
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development
PD	Professional Development
PLC	Post Leaving Certificate
SOLAS	Seirbhísí Oideachais Leanunaigh agus Scileanna
QQI	Quality and Qualifications Ireland
VEC	Vocational Education Committee
VET	Vocational Education and Training
VTOS	Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme

Abstract

This research explored ways of promoting a professional learning community (PLC) in the further education and training (FET) context. There was limited evidence related to teacher learning within the FET case study institution and so began a project of looking at ways to embed a practice of learning within the institution's educational context.

This research took an accepted and established theory of teaching and learning [effective feedback] (Wiliam, 2011) and used this as a platform from which to engage FET teachers as professional practice learners. The research approach for this study drew on the spirit of, and was informed by, the critical theory approach. The constructivist nature of the research, using action research methodology, allowed ways to empower FET teachers to engage in a professional practice learning community in their FET context.

Over a period of two academic years, the six participating teachers in this study implemented four planned feedback strategies into their practice. Teacher discussion group sessions were organised at strategic times so teachers could engage in discourse on the strategies and their effectiveness in the classroom.

The key findings from this research are that, as a result of implementing a teaching and learning intervention into practice and of giving the participating teachers a forum and an opportunity to engage in dialogue on its implementation, effectiveness and their overall practices, changes took place in teacher practices, teacher-student relationships and within the whole centre. Teachers began to think about their practice in a new way, leading to a deepening of knowledge, understanding and engagement within practices. A feature of this new way of doing was a sense of empowerment, care and an enriched learning environment for all.

This thesis has documented the research study and process. What emerged was that the defining features of the Professional Learning Community (PLC) - shared values, collaborative practice, deprivatising of practice, focus on student learning and reflective dialogue were beginning to naturally and organically develop among the teacher participants, which was the beginning of a dynamic process that could leave a lasting mark on the teachers involved.

Acknowledgements

I am extremely grateful to the six FET teachers who were involved in this study. They were all very open in their responses and very willing to help me as a teaching colleague. I particularly want to thank them for their trust and their honesty and for getting involved in the project in such a positive and engaging way.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Chapter One Introduction

1.1 Background to the Study

This dissertation aimed to explore ways in which FET teachers' professional capacity can be developed within the further education and training (FET) sector in Ireland. The dissertation's purpose is to investigate and analyse ways of promoting a professional learning community (PLC) in the FET context. A PLC is characterised as when teachers commit themselves to talking collaboratively about teaching and learning and then take action that will improve learning for all (Thompson *et al* 2004). Dufour and Eaker (1998) state that the phrase 'professional learning community' has been carefully chosen. A professional is someone with expertise and advanced training in their field but who is also 'expected to remain current' in their field. The word learning suggests '…ongoing action and perpetual curiosity' in an environment or community that '…fosters mutual cooperation, emotional support, personal growth as they work together to achieve what they cannot accomplish alone' (Dufour and Eaker 1998, pp. xi-xii). Prior to undertaking this research as part of the PhD qualification, a constant observation of mine was that within the centre where I work and hold a management position, there was very little discourse between the teachers about teaching and learning – the core focus of their professional practice. My observations were that there was very little discourse about how our students learn, how we can improve the climate for learning, or how as teachers we can support and learn from each other. Motivation among FET learners can be very low (Zepke and Leach, 2006) and so at the time my thinking was that there was a need to intervene in some way to address this issue in our institution as I felt valuable sharing of knowledge and professional learning was being missed. It was my guiding premise that by encouraging teachers to engage in professional dialogue, real and valuable learning can take place for teachers on ways to address learner needs and teacher needs, and thereby develop professional practice whilst also ensuring a more valuable teaching and learning experience for all.

The six teachers involved in the research all had different entry routes into their FET teaching career. The fact that the teachers came from varying educational and work backgrounds-some were from industry, some were from third level and others were from second level teaching-added an extra dimension to the research. As the leader and manager of the centre, I wanted to explore ways of developing practices that would enable teachers to talk about their everyday practices-teaching and learning-in the classroom. Initially, my main challenge was how to engage the teachers in this process. Where does one start to do this? Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) discuss teaching like a 'pro' and state it is '…about improving as an individual, raising the performance of the team, and increasing quality across the whole profession' (p.23). This is what I desired for the teachers – that they 'teach like a pro'. The authors describe this practice as involving continuous inquiry into and actions to improve one's own teaching, whilst taking responsibility for this. This practice requires planning teaching, improving teaching and moving away from isolated silos of teaching to being part of 'a high-performance team' (p.22). 'Teaching like a pro is not about yet another more individual accountability, but about powerful collective responsibility' (p.23). Professional teaching means being part of the teaching profession and making an informed and valued contribution to its development (Hargreaves and Fullan 2012). This may be asking a lot as some teachers working in FET in Ireland have very precarious teaching stability within the context. Teachers work on part-time casual hours, in several centres of education across a wide geographical area and with no guarantee of hours from one academic year to the next.

How could I engage these (often part-time) teachers to participate in planned professional dialogue about teaching and learning? After in-depth reading of the literature on teaching and learning, and having explored the theory of Assessment for Learning (AfL) for my Masters degree, I decided to look at using an accepted practice of effective feedback as a foundation to start the process of collaborative dialogue among teachers working in an FET centre. The delivery of feedback to our students is something that every teacher engages in and feedback has long been accepted within the

literature as being at the heart of all learning (Black and Wiliam 1998; Brookfield 2010; Brookhart 2008, 2011; Clark 2012; Hattie and Timperley 2007; Hattie 2010; Sadler 2010; Shute 2008; Wiliam 2008, 2011). I felt that we could engage in the practice of feedback through adapting the work of Wiliam (2011) and have it as our focus as an intervention to promote professional learning communities that the instance of the research was trying to achieve. The feedback-based intervention was highly relevant to teachers working in the sector, as it is a practical teaching tool with which teachers are familiar and so at the time, I was confident the teachers would be open to improving on this area of their practice. Therefore, due to its accessibility, perceived ease of application and overall relevance, I felt that the engagement from participating teachers would be positive.

The FET Strategy (DES/SOLAS 2014-2019) has quality provision as one of its five strategic goals (p.33). The Strategy aims to provide high quality education and training programmes that will meet appropriate national and international quality standards (p.122). It hopes that the achievement of this goal of quality provision will respond to the needs of learners and ensure excellence in FET programme development. Qualification standards in the sector will be developed and as a result effective pathways for FET learners to higher levels on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) will be achievable (p.122). The rationale for carrying out this research was to generate empirical research in the FET sector in Ireland in relation to the enhancement of teaching and learning practices and processes. Now is a critical time in the history of FET in Ireland for the creation of such empirical research as it will help deepen understanding and knowledge of quality teaching and learning processes within the sector.

The research was carried out using an action research approach within the case study methodology, involving experienced teachers within one single FET institution. The objective of the research project were to answer the following key question-how do I promote a PLC as a platform to developing professional learning in the FET context. What happens when a planned

and focused teaching and learning intervention is introduced into practice in the FET institution;

- What experiences unfold for individuals in the action research project?
- What happens to the professional engagement of the FET teacher?
- What happens to students' engagement with their learning?
- What experiences unfold for me the research practitioner leading the project?

The literature review in advance of the research study focused on the theoretical areas of professional teacher learning, learning and teaching processes and teacher discourse. Literature was also read in the area of assessment for learning, (Torrance 2007; Black and Wiliam 2012; Gardner 2012), change processes and conditions for teachers' professional practice (Battersby and Verdi 2014, Burbules 1993; Hargreaves and Fullan 2012; Heywood 2009; Rosenberg 2011; Learning Policy Institute 2017; Vescio *et al* 2008). While feedback strategies were the focus of the project for the research participants, for the researcher, the outcomes related to change in all aspects of the teachers' practices, including their development as reflective practitioners. The dissertation will demonstrate that through their involvement with the initiative, the teachers began to 'think' beyond their subjective teaching habits and became more creative in the ways and approaches they adopted to giving feedback to learners and addressing their individual needs. The teachers began to engage in collaborative sharing on practice that had student learning as its focus. The teachers engaged in learning on their practice through dialogue and reflection, thereby enhancing relationships with colleagues and students. The teachers and others in the centre began to open up about their practice. In essence, teachers in the research moved away from isolated silos of practice towards more open, teaching strategies to enhance learning for FET learners.

This next section of this chapter presents an overview of the further education and training sector in Ireland and its current provision in the country. Characteristics of the FET learner and the FET teacher are highlighted. Reference is made to recent legislation relevant to the sector as well as to the accreditation system employed. The next section

describes my background as the researcher, and also includes a description and review of my beliefs and values that underpin the guiding ontology that informed the research development. Following on from this, the research design is also documented detailing the approach I took to the literature review, the planned intervention, and the methodology and concludes by giving an outline of the remaining chapters in the thesis.

1.2 Overview of FET Sector in Ireland

Government reform of the public sector in Ireland has been ongoing for a number of years and the Further Education and Training (FET) sector is part of this change process. In relation to the FET sector, this reform has involved change at structural level, as well as planning, prioritizing, funding and providing a diverse range of FET programmes and services (FET Strategy 2014). In preparation for the development of the FET Strategy the Economic Social and Research Institute (ESRI) was engaged to carry out a study on the sector in Ireland. This research resulted in the report *Further Education and Training in Ireland: Past, Present and Future (2014)*. This report was greatly welcomed given that there has been very little existing evidence or research on the sector prior to that. The report highlighted that the sector has developed organically and is '…shaped from a combination of education policies and by the prevailing workforce development strategies' (FET Strategy 2014, p.36). Over time, different government departments had different responsibilities for key players in the sector-the former VECs and FAS-which further caused an overall lack of coherence within the sector. In response to this new evidence on the sector, the Government established a new authority, SOLAS, referred to as the Further Education and Training Authority, tasked with strategically coordinating and funding the FET sector in Ireland. This new authority was created under the aegis of the Department of Education and Skills in 2013 (FET Strategy 2014, p.18).

The FET sector in Ireland is one of four distinct sectors in the Irish educational framework; primary, secondary and third level. The sector offers and provides a wide range of programmes to a diverse range of individuals over the age of 16. It offers and provides opportunities for

individuals to re-skill and up-skill, and so is an activation method for individuals who are unemployed or who do not fully participate in society. It is also a form of 'second chance' education for individuals who did not complete upper second level education and, in addition, persons who may not have otherwise gained entry, can progress to higher education. The sector is '…serving a uniquely diverse cohort of learners…' (p.20) and is focused on the learning outcomes at levels 1 to 6 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ).

The Further Education and Training Strategy (2014-2019) was published in 2014. The purpose of the Strategy is to '…give direction to and guide transformation of the FET sector for the next five years' (p.18). The Strategy refers to the sector allowing individuals and the communities that they live in to achieve their '…developmental, personal, social, career and employment…' (p.20), ambitions that have a very positive impact on the individuals and their communities. The Strategy emphasises that the sector not only provides education and training to this diverse cohort of learners but also provides them with the related supports they need in order to be successful in progressing their education through the sector. The strategy notes that FET in Ireland '…plays an important role in helping people to lead fulfilling lives, supporting some hard-to-reach individuals and groups to achieve their potential and reducing the costs to society of exclusion' (p.21). The sector is accessible to everyone and is often considered an alternative path to education and to work. The strategy outlines that a key characteristic of the sector is its facilitative approach to learning. 'It is both learner centered and participative in its pedagogical approach' (p.22). The diagram below positions the FET sector within the overall Irish education system.

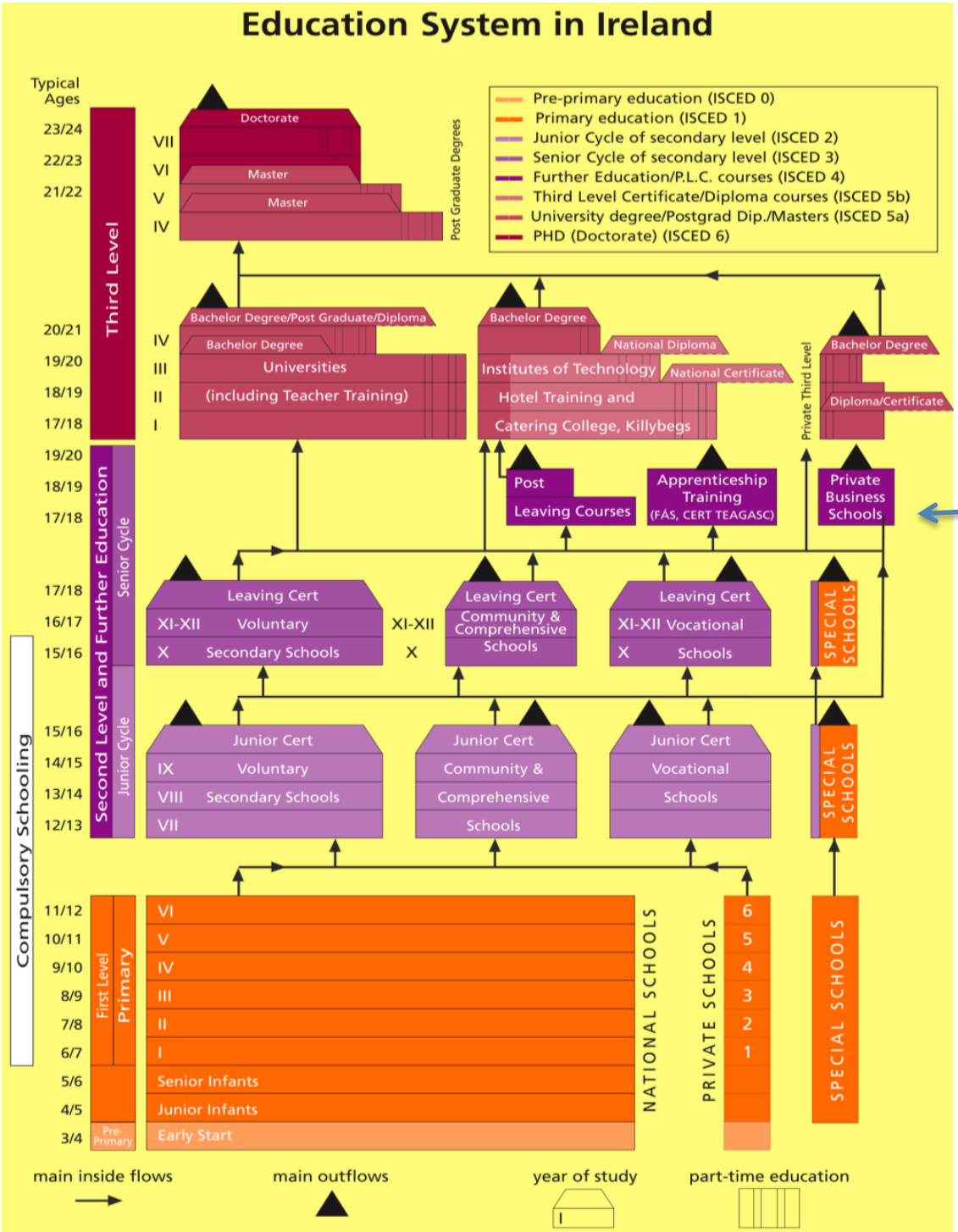


Figure 1 Education System in Ireland

The next section gives an overview of further education and training provision in Ireland today.

1.2.1 Overview of FET provision

The Education and Training Boards (ETBs), eight in total, are the main providers of FET provision in the country. There are also a number of private providers that offer programmes across a variety of disciplines.

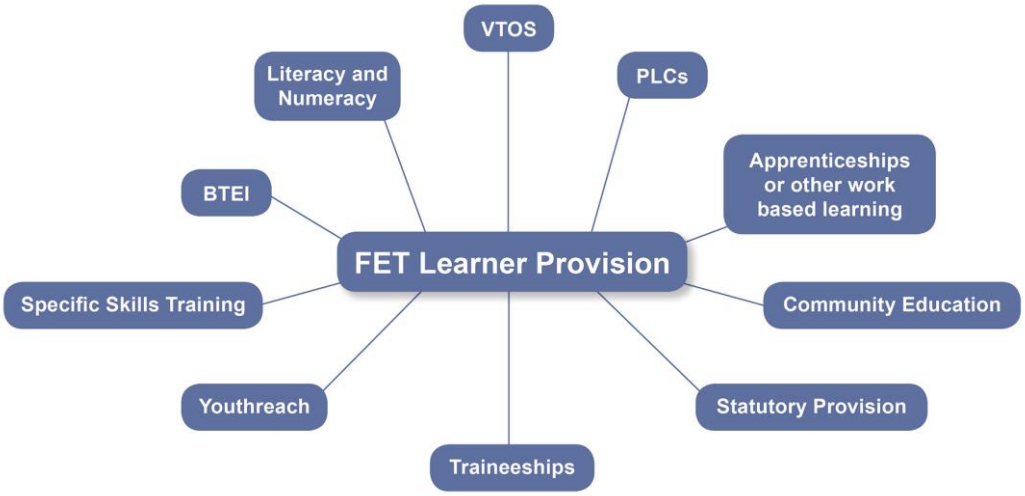


Figure 2 Main Types of FET Provision

There are three full-time FET programmes under the ETBs remit-PLC (Post Leaving Certificate), VTOS (Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme) and Youthreach. The PLC programme, according to the FET Strategy, is a programme 'designed to provide specific vocational skills to those who have completed senior cycle at second level, adults returning to education deemed to have the necessary competencies' (FET Strategy 2014, p.45). The VTOS programme is an educational and training opportunities scheme for unemployed persons with its main focus being on employability or further opportunities leading to employment. The Youthreach programme is directed at unemployed early school leavers aged 15-20 and provides the opportunity to identify viable options within adult life and acquire certification (FET Strategy, p.143). It is acknowledged that young people enrolled on Youthreach programmes often suffer from economic and social disadvantage as well as educational disadvantage, and so are a unique cohort of learners.

There are many part-time educational opportunities available within the sector. They include the BTEI (Back to Education Initiative), community education, adult literacy, and classes for individuals where English is not

their first language (ESOL) and work based learning (ITABE). The BTEI programme targets the over 16s who have left the education system for a number of years, focusing on individuals who have less than upper second level education. Community education targets individuals '…who are distant from education' (p.46) and has an ethos of '…justice, equality, social inclusion and citizenship'. These courses are often not accredited and are considered pre-educational work, where teachers are working with individuals to prepare them to engage more purposefully in education. The Adult Literacy service focuses on the literacy and numeracy teaching for early school leavers in low-skilled employment within the family and work based scenarios. This section of the service also caters for individuals wishing to improve their English language literacy to develop speaking and listening skills for living in Ireland today. These programmes are often accredited between levels 1 and 3 on the NFQ. Other provision includes traineeships and apprenticeships that are focused on the trade and skills industry in Ireland offering learners a level 6 qualification on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ).

1.2.2 The FET Learner in Ireland

Adult education is defined in the Learning for Life: White Paper on Adult Education as '...systematic learning by adults who return to learning having concluded initial education or training' (Department of Education and Skills 2000, p.27). This definition was to encapsulate re-entry by adults to further and higher education. However, the underlying theme of the definition was on the adult learners' 're-engagement' with the system, having exited at an earlier stage in life. The Department of Education and Skills (DES) has a dedicated FET section whose role is to promote and coordinate the development of programmes for young people and adults who have left school early.

It is not easy to define early school leaving (Byrne and Smyth 2010). The authors suggest a number of definitions ranging from those who leave school with no formal qualification to those who leave before the compulsory minimum school-leaving age (p.3). The authors also state that

early school leavers '...experience disadvantages in relation to access to further education/training, employment chances, employment quality and broader social outcomes' (p.16). Byrne and Smyth (2010) cite Byrne *et al* in 2009, highlighting the 'one way' nature of the Irish educational system, stating that access to further and higher education is often restricted to people who have completed the Leaving Certificate examination. The broad diversity of age group, previous educational background, needs and aspirations and personal circumstances of learners, pose a serious challenge for FET provision and its teachers. The FET teacher needs to be highly skilled and competent to deal with a diverse cohort of learners in one classroom, with a range of positive and negative educational experiences and backgrounds. The FET section in the DES aspires to give adult learners an opportunity to gain access to further education and training to enhance their employment prospects and to enable them to progress on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ).

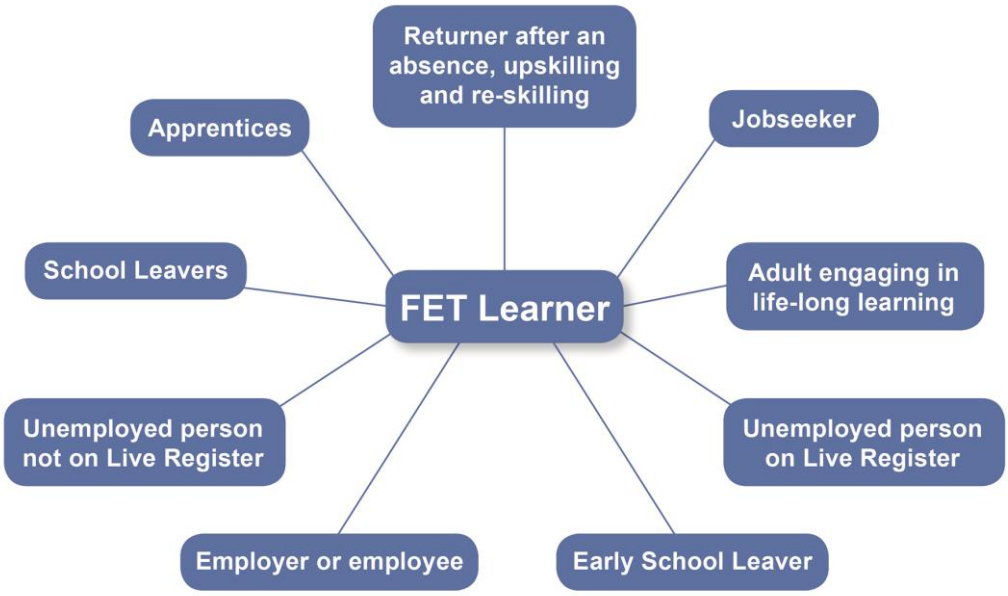


Figure 3 Entry Routes to FET

The above diagram shows the many entry routes to the FET sector for would-be FET learners. The FET learner could be someone returning to education after a long absence and who needs to up and re-skill themselves in order to gain entry to the labour market. They could be a job seeker or an unemployed person on the live register. They could also

be an unemployed person not on the live register. They could be an adult engaging in life-long learning or they could be a school leaver with or without the leaving certificate. Often employers will encourage their employees to engage in further education and training opportunities. Those involved in apprenticeships also make up part of this sector. One can see the very complex and myriad of backgrounds of FET learners and so the FET sector and the teachers who work within it have to be prepared for this unique teaching and learning dynamic, context and environment.

1.2.3 The FET Teacher in Ireland

Teachers employed in the sector '…have been recruited on the basis of a second-level teaching qualification or a trade or business qualification' (White Paper on Adult Education 2000, p.152). One of the challenges outlined in the Learning for Jobs: OECD Reviews of Vocational Education and Training - Ireland (2010) is that there is a weakness in pedagogical preparation of some trainers, instructors and workplace training supervisors in the FET sector in Ireland. The OECD report looked at a variety of teachers, trainers and instructors teaching education and vocational training under a range of course options. For the purpose of this research, I was concerned with what the report refers to as vocational education and training (VET). The report states that VET teachers typically have to be registered with the Teaching Council as post-primary teachers. 'According to Teaching Council requirements, VET teachers are required to complete a Postgraduate Diploma in Education or equivalent' (OECD 2010, p.44) and since 2014 this now includes a Professional Masters in Education [1]. However, the report advises that a person needs both pedagogical and vocational skills to be an effective teacher in the sector, a view also expressed in the more recent FET Professional Development Strategy (2017). Vocational skills include skills exercised in specific occupations in industry or business requiring a combination of relevant technical training and work experience. It is widely accepted by teachers

[1] Professional Masters in Education is now recognized by the Teaching Council as the Post Graduate requirement

and employers in the sector that work experience is important to ensure familiarity with the competence needs and working methods of real workplaces. Although empirical evidence on this issue is scarce, a review of evidence in the United States (Lynch 1998) suggests that having relevant work experience is helpful to FET teachers, since it provides them with a context and increases their confidence in teaching for their occupation (OECD 2010, p.44).

The White Paper on Adult Education (2000) highlighted the need for a review of the '...management, organisational, administrative, technical and ancillary support for post-leaving certificate provision' (DES, 2000, p.86). This review resulted in the McIver report (2003). The McIver Report sought to establish FET as a distinctive sector, separate from the secondary sector and with appropriate vision, structures and staffing. Data was collated from questionnaires distributed to staff and students in all post leaving certificate colleges and made 15 detailed study visits to a representative spread of large and small, urban and rural colleges around the country. The study also carried out comparative study visits to Northern Ireland, Scotland, Denmark and the Netherlands (NALA 2009, p.23) to examine FET practice in those regions. The Report highlighted that the role of the FET teacher is similar to that of teachers in the post-primary sector. However, there are a few significant and relevant differences (McIver 2003, p.viii):

1. Rate of student turnover
2. Framework of assessment
3. Content development and change

Unlike second level education where teachers are engaging with students for 5 to 6 years, the report noted that the rate of study duration in FET from one to two years does not give enough time for teachers to develop the various support services for students or to build strong teacher learner relationships. Because of this short timeframe, there is a critical need for teachers to collaborate and share good practice in order for the learner to gain the best learning experience that the teacher can afford them.

Most FET qualifications are accredited under Quality and Qualifications

Ireland (QQI), which requires FET teachers to devise and mark course work in accordance with the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). An external authenticator then validates the quality and standard of the learners' work. FET focuses on industry needs and on providing vocational training to allow graduates from the sector to enter employment. Hence, the content of courses needs to be industry led resulting in learners have the necessary skills for working in Ireland's economic society. Initial teacher training is discipline-orientated with existing teaching materials that cover subject specific areas predominantly. Course material for industry is less available and it is often left to teachers to design and devise their own resources and course content, as there are very few textbooks available for the sector. The pace of change of industry is a very big factor to be considered in planning FET courses, as the following quote demonstrates; '...demands of high level of investment of teacher time in pre-planning, dialogue with industry, cross-curricular consultation and liaison with other providers' (McIver 2003, p.viii). The McIver report clearly outlined that teaching in the sector is different to teaching at primary and second level education in Ireland and FET teachers need an opportunity to collaborate and share their professional practices to give them the support that they need to work effectively and appropriately in this diverse sector.

It is within this context that a professional development strategy for FET in Ireland has been published.

1.2.4 SOLAS FET Professional Development Strategy 2017 - 2019

The FET Strategy (2017-2019) set down guidelines for the development of a professional development strategy for the FET sector. This culminated in the *SOLAS FET Professional Development Strategy 2017-2019.* The strategy

> '…reflects the strong link between professional development within the sector and the quality of the education and training provided. It also reflects National and European policy, which places the professional competence of the workforce central to the ability of FET to respond to the changing needs of employers and learners' (p.3).

SOLAS embarked on a skills profile of the persons working in the sector

during late 2015 and early 2016. This process involved collaboration between SOLAS, Education and Training Board Ireland (ETBI), representatives from ETBs, the Further Education Support Service (FESS) and research consultants. The findings from the skills profile, based on data collected from 4,400 FET personnel (*nearly half of the entire estimated FET workforce in 2015*) working in the sector include some of the following:

- Just over half (54%) work full-time, 38% work part-time and 8% work sessional or occasional
- 74% of respondents are female and 26% are male
- The workforce is characterized as being very experienced with many having worked for many years in the sector
- 67% of respondents are qualified to level 8 or level 9 on the NFQ
- Respondents feel confident in their work in relation to soft skills but are less confident in terms of quality assurance, using technology and dealing with challenging behavior (p.3-4)

The skills profile carried out by SOLAS resulted in a lot of new empirical evidence to help shape its CPD strategy. The age profile of the workforce in the sector is concentrated in the older age categories. The study highlighted that only one in ten FET teachers is under 35 years of age while nearly a quarter of the workforce is over 55 years of age. The gender profile that is highlighted above is relatively typical of other education sectors across Ireland and Europe. An interesting finding from the research was the evidence of the working patterns of the sector. The evidence shows that a large proportion of the workforce (46%) works part-time or on a sessional basis. This will have, according to the SOLAS Strategy, '…substantial implications for the organisation of professional development' (p.22). Respondents to the survey discuss the difficulties they experienced in accessing professional development support as a result of their contracts of employment. The qualifications profile of the workforce was quite positive showing that seven out of ten teacher practitioners currently hold a teaching/training qualification and a further 3% of respondents were working towards a relevant qualification (p.23). What was also interesting is that irrespective of their qualifications respondents reported low levels of confidence in certain areas related to teaching. They reported being less confident in managing challenging

behaviours and dealing with diverse learner groups, and this was irrespective of whether or not they held a teaching qualification. The Strategy concludes this point by stating that there are developmental needs over and above initial teacher training and advising that professional development is fundamental to preparing FET teachers for the changing role requirements of the sector–labour market and social inclusion agendas (FET Strategy 2014, p.37) by improving the conditions in which people participate in society, especially those that are marginalized and disadvantaged..

The Strategy discusses FET teachers' current experience of professional development and states that they place a high value on professional development activities that allow them to access 'latest thinking' on their practice and an opportunity to 'share and exchange ideas'. FET teachers '…seek increased access to development opportunities through formal networks and local groupings of shared interest – on both a formal and *ad hoc* basis' (p.26). Respondents highlighted a number of barriers they experience in accessing and attending professional development activities. In the first instance, cost is a factor-as there is limited funding available within ETBs-teachers have to self-finance this type of activity. Location is another barrier to accessing professional development opportunities as they are often not available locally and require travelling to city locations throughout the country. This is particularly challenging for rural ETBs. The work patterns of part-time and occasional teachers are not conducive to easy participation by teachers in professional development work. Some teachers stated that often the availability and relevance of professional development opportunities on offer are limiting and often there is a '…mismatch between professional development on offer and the career stage of the practitioner, or a need for more subject, or course-specific interventions' (p.27).

Over the three-year lifespan of the Strategy, three strategic goals have been set: to create the infrastructure and delivery systems for high quality professional development, to increase FET sector capability through

relevant targeted professional development and to provide sustainable funding and resourcing of professional development (pp.4-5). It is possible that the findings from this research will add to the knowledge of what works within a local setting in terms of professional development.

In relation to the FET context it is important to highlight the methods of assessment and accreditation operating in the sector. Assessment and accreditation in FET differ from those at second level and FETs teachers often need support in devising course/assessment material, generating marking schemes and marking assessment material to the required standard and level on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). The next section will outline the functions and responsibilities of Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI).

1.2.5 Assessment and Accreditation in the FET Sector

Established in November 2012, QQI amalgamated into one integrated body of all the accrediting bodies in Ireland: Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC), Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC), National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) and Irish Universities Qualifications Board (IUQB). QQI is now responsible for the external quality assurance of further and higher education in Ireland (FET Strategy, p.40). It is the awarding body that is responsible for the FET and HE providers in Ireland. The body also has legislative responsibilities around international education as well as the development of the NFQ. According to the QQI website, QQI is responsible for maintaining the ten-level NFQ. It is the awarding body and sets standards for awards made in the NFQ. It validates education and training programmes. It provides awards in higher education-mainly to learners in private providers. It provides advice and information on recognition of foreign qualifications in Ireland and on the recognition of Irish qualifications abroad. As a new function of QQI, it publishes a directory of providers and awards in the NFQ. In the area of quality assurance, QQI is responsible for reviewing the effectiveness of quality assurance in further and higher education and training providers in Ireland, which includes the Universities, Institutes of

Technology, Education and Training Boards and providers in the private further and higher education and training sectors. Another new function of QQI is to authorise the use of an International Education Mark (IEM) for providers. This will be awarded to providers of education and training who have demonstrated compliance with a statutory code of practice in the provision of education and training to international students (QQI 2017).

The FET sector has very specific sectoral characteristics and so is unique in relation to the research problem; how do I promote a professional learning community in the FET context? As stated earlier, FET learners come from a variety of backgrounds and situations (figure 3) and so the FET teacher has to respond to a myriad of individual needs. The teacher teaching in the sector may have weaknesses in their pedagogical preparation (OECD 2010), and so this poses an issue for teachers who need to teach learners both academically and vocationally (FET Professional Development Strategy 2017). The PD strategy (2017) found that 67% of their research respondents are qualified to level 8 or level 9 on the NFQ, which highlights that a significant minority of teachers in the sector is not fully qualified. Accreditation and assessment in the sector is unique in that there is no centralized accreditation and assessment as for secondary level teaching – FET teachers have to design, implement and correct their learners' assessment material in order for learners to achieve the QQI certificate. Often teachers need support with this. This further informs the instance of this research project, as it is felt that teachers working in the sector, as in any sector, will greatly benefit and learn from engaging in dialogue about their practice and ways to improve learning for all and this is the contextual basis for this research project.

1.3 The Genesis of a Research Journey

In order to successfully embark on academic research, the researcher needs to have a passion for the particular subject and topic; a number of people said this to me when I decided to apply for a PhD programme. So I asked myself, what am I passionate about that has led me to undertake this large volume of work. The answer is simple-I love teaching. I love reading through syllabus material and shaping it into a lesson plan. I love

creating class notes out of the lesson plan. I love getting the class started and observing how students react to the class that I have prepared for them that day. I love watching the learning unfold before my eyes. I love that I have played a part, albeit small, in their learning. I love when new learning takes place outside the prescribed curriculum. I also question why a particular class or day did not go well. Ultimately, the reason for undertaking this body of work is that I wanted to start a 'conversation' about teaching and learning with my teaching colleagues on a more regular basis. I wanted to learn more about teaching and learning from teachers themselves and through these discourses and listening I envisioned being part of an exciting journey of professional practice learning in a rural FET centre. However, I was not naïve about this just *happening* within the centre. I was aware that it would require 'initiation, mobilization, or adoption' (Fullan 2007) in order to establish the '…process that leads up to and includes a decision to adopt or proceed with a change' (Fullan 2007, p.65).

I started my teaching career as a VTOS Coordinator with the local county Vocational Educational Committee (VEC). Previous to this position I was a Community Development Worker with a Rural Development Company organising education and training courses for community organisations and voluntary groups. I had completed a Masters Degree in Rural Development and so was an eligible candidate to become a VTOS Coordinator. I soon realised that I loved teaching. I am 16 years in my current post of VTOS Coordinator, which involves teaching and coordinating duties. At the start of my career in education, I always felt the need to get an official teaching qualification as I felt it was very necessary. I wanted to be the professional teacher described by Hargreaves and Fullan (2012), 'Being professional is about what you do, how you behave. It's about being impartial and upholding high standards of conduct and performance' (p.80). As teachers, we are dealing with human beings on a daily basis and can have an enormous impact on our students' lives (Sotto 2007). In this regard, I believe I have a moral and social obligation to do the very best I can for each individual in my classroom. In order to achieve

this goal I believe I need to become sufficiently educated in my discipline and to engage in a process of continued learning throughout my teaching career. While I held a level 9 qualification in a related discipline (MSc in Rural Development), and teaching subjects (English and Sociology) from my primary degree, I did not feel it prepared me sufficiently for teaching in the FET sector. I embarked on a learning journey that started with a certificate in Integrating Literacy, a Higher Diploma in Leadership and Management in Education and a Masters Degree in Education where my research project was in the area of teaching and learning in the FET context. This further learning enhanced my appreciation of the particular dynamics of teaching within the sector and more importantly within my own classroom. While attending these courses and furthering my own professional development I became even more excited about learning about teaching; I enjoyed talking to fellow teachers about pedagogy and learning. It was interesting and encouraging to discuss pedagogical approaches and methodologies that other teachers were involved in and to also experience my own deepening of learning through this sharing of practice, despite the fact that many of the teachers were often from the primary or secondary sector and it was a very rare occurrence to meet a fellow FET teacher. I always felt more of a 'professional teacher' coming away from these sessions. Therefore, I knew that the action research project within my institution had to incorporate a significant element of professional dialogue and learning. The next section will describe the approach taken as I embarked on this research project.

1.4 Research Approach

The ultimate aim of this research project was to explore ways of promoting a professional learning community in the FET institution where I work. The literature on effective teaching and learning supports elements of teacher sharing and reflective practice in the realisation of this aim (MacBeath 1999; Cranton and Carusetta 2004; Brookfield 1995; Hillier 2005; Zepke and Leach 2006; Hattie 2012; Sotto 2007; Black and Wiliam 1998; Wiliam 2011). Teaching in twenty-first century schools and centres of education also requires sophisticated forms of teaching (Learning Policy Institute

2017) and so in turn there is a need for '…effective professional development to help teachers learn and refine the pedagogies required to teach' (p.1). The Learning Policy Institute (2017) offered several shared features of effective professional development. The Institute identified effective teacher professional development as being content focused, active learning in nature and featuring teacher collaboration with coaching and expert support that includes feedback and reflection. When planning the research project these features were central to the design and approach.

The implementation of the initiative and the research project took place over two academic years, 2014-2015 and 2015-2016, in one single FET institution involving six qualified teachers working in the FET sector in Ireland. All participants in the research are registered teachers with the Teaching Council of Ireland. As the project was over two academic years there was a big commitment requested from participating teachers. In the beginning, I was concerned that this would be a challenge, to firstly get teachers involved and then sustain that involvement for two years. To my delight this was not a problem.

> *Delighted with the response from teachers today. They appeared interested, keen and willing to get involved in the project. I was anxious about this setting out on this research journey. This was a positive observation for me at this early stage in the research (Research Journal, 27 August 2014)*

I will now explain the planned classroom level intervention at the centre of this research project.

1.5 The Planned Intervention

Participating teachers in this project were asked to examine and reflect on how they give feedback to their students. The guiding questions I gave the participating teachers were how often did they give feedback, was it written or oral, what were students' comments/thoughts on that feedback, did their students understand the feedback, was direction for future action given (Black and Wiliam 1998; 2001; 2009; 2012; Black *et al* 2004; Wiliam 2011).

Four feedback strategies, adapted from the work of Wiliam (2011) were introduced to participating teachers: time in class, focusing on what's next, focusing on the task versus the self, and asking three questions of the students. Research respondents were asked to focus on the impact of using such strategies for teaching and learning in their practice. The participating teachers agreed that they would implement two strategies each academic year; two in 2014-2015 and two in 2015-2016. The first feedback strategy, time in class, asked teachers to give specific planned time in their class for giving feedback to students. Teachers were encouraged to use whatever method suited them in doing this, for example, it could be individual feedback or group feedback, given once a week or more often. Teachers were told it was okay to find out what worked best for them and their subject content and more importantly the learners in their class. Strategy number two, focusing on what's next, asked teachers to always give learners an instruction on what they had to do next in a specific task or whole subject in order to move forward and improve in their learning. The third strategy required teachers to be highly cognisant of giving feedback to the task in hand and to avoid personal feedback to the learner. Lastly, in implementing the fourth strategy teachers questioned the learners on their work in order to gain further insight into the learners' thinking and to encourage dialogue in the class on their learning.

Feedback Strategies			
Strategy 1	***Strategy 2***	***Strategy 3***	***Strategy 4***
Time in class to discuss feedback	Focusing on what's next	Focused feedback - self vs. task	Ask 3 questions for students to respond to

Table 1 Feedback Strategies

As a start it was very positive that teachers were willing to get involved and that they agreed to be interviewed, in one to one interviews and in discussion groups, on their experiences of the initiative. As stated previously, in the first academic year (2014-2015) teachers implemented two planned feedback strategies into their practice; one between September and December 2014 (Strategy No. 1, *Time in class*) and the

second one between January and June 2015 (Strategy No. 2, *Focusing on what's next*). Each participating teacher was then interviewed for approximately 20 minutes. During the interviews, the teachers explored their feelings, thoughts and responses to the individual strategies (See appendix 1 for interview questions). Once individual interviews were completed we came together as a group for discussion group sessions. These sessions became the cornerstone of the research process and data collection, as during these sessions conversations developed and often the discussion broadened to include many other teaching and learning and classroom issues. Reflecting on this, I now know that it was the start of having the 'conversation' about our practice as a group. For me this was the most exciting element of the research project. As the researcher I felt teachers really opened up, voicing their frustrations as well as all the positive outcomes of the teaching and learning intervention. Essentially, the group were talking about the practice of teaching, something that had not happened before. The following quote from one of the group sessions highlights this point:

> Good support and a good focus because we don't spend time doing that either and if we have a meeting we are just going through an agenda so it was good time out to just focus on that [teaching] which we probably would not have done otherwise. It was constructive as well: I think everyone got something out of it (Una, Teacher session 4 p.8 282-286)

In the second academic year of the study (2015 – 2016) a similar data collection process took place. Strategy no. 3, *Feedback to the task rather than the person*, and strategy no.4, *Asking three questions*, were implemented in each half of the academic year. Teachers were again interviewed individually on each strategy and came together in two more discussion group sessions to discuss the strategies as a group and talk about their experience and practice. Also during this period a number of additional teacher-led sessions happened, which included more colleagues from the centre. These sessions were outside of the formal research data collection process but were a direct outcome from the intervention and the study. This resulted in additional teachers who were not part of the study group getting involved, which for me was evidence of

the impact of the study extending out to the whole centre. The focus of these teacher led sessions was very practical and relevant - the layout of assignment briefs for the whole centre, the content and language used in these briefs and a project on learner outcomes with students. A more detailed description of these additional activities is outlined in chapter five when the Action Research cycles are described.

The teachers' involvement in this study was equally as committing as it was for me, the researcher. Continuously there was evidence of their focusing on and thinking about AfL feedback – the subject of the intervention - during the two-year lifetime of the study. While we had the formal conversations about the practice in the individual interviews and the teacher discussion group sessions, there were many moments of informal conversations about feedback and their practice generally. According to Wells and Claxton (2002), 'As a result of a succession of such momentary encounters, both person and culture are changed' (p.25). I noted in my own research journal the following;

> *She also discussed the relevance (of the project) and that she really wants to improve how she gives feedback. She asked for clarification on what exactly she needs to do for me. All of these are positive engaging signs (Research Journal, 9 September 2014)*

1.6 Personal Involvement

At all times during this research project, I was conscious of my positionality in relation to the project and my relationship with the study participants. My involvement in the study was focused and concentrated. What I mean by that is that I was carrying out the research in my place of work. I was working closely with colleagues with whom I have worked for many years. I was inviting them to participate in my research with me. I knew that this was a big ask; no one wants to let their colleague down. I knew it would be hard for them to say no. However, I felt that our existing working relationships that were already based on trust and respect would encourage them to get involved. Following the first briefing session, I noted in my journal:

> *Overall it was very encouraging. They realised that it was benefiting me for my study but that they will also benefit. It was a very positive first start (Research Journal, 28 August 2014)*

I was very mindful throughout the planning stage of the data collection of how to make this research as seamless as possible for the participating teachers. I didn't want them to feel that this was an extra piece of work. The nature of FET institutions in Ireland is that teachers are often part-time and working in different centres of education. Teachers did not need an extra stressful situation to have to deal with, and I was highly cognisant of this. I planned sessions and interviews around their work schedules as much as possible; however, this was a challenge and I struggled as the facilitator in the project to arrange these. Individual interviews took place immediately before or after their timetabled classes so they were not coming in at additional times. The group sessions were harder to organise. However, I managed this by planning most of the sessions around our routine teacher meetings.

Part of the research involved one to one interviews, which by their nature are 'extended conversations'. We get to know people through conversation; we learn about their experiences, feelings, hopes, desires (Kvale 2007). The research interview goes beyond the everyday conversation and '...becomes a careful questioning and listening approach with the purpose of obtaining thoroughly tested knowledge' (Kvale 2007, p.7). The research process itself was very reflective and so as a result was demanding to teachers at the individual level. The project was asking teachers to recall thinking and feelings about the initiative and its effect in the classroom. Brookfield (1995) promotes the concept that as teachers we need to be 'critically aware' of our teaching methodologies and to be reflective in our practice. The emphasis for me as the researcher and the research participants was the implementation of new teaching interventions whilst at the same time reflecting on their impact in our classrooms. This required a reflective process as described, the gathering of relevant evidence and continuous observation and tracking of learning within their classroom. This type of activity can bring lots of emotions to the fore and impact on research participants and as their colleague I was mindful of this. The underlying premise for this research from the outset was to promote a good, positive, safe environment for all participants

involved in the research. This ideal concurs with Denzin (1989) who declares that ‘our primary obligation in research is to the participant and not the study to be conducted’ (p.83). With this focus ethical issues and concerns were always at the forefront of my thinking and planning at all stages of the research from the early stages of developing the theme and designing the research questions, right through to the final stages of analysis and reporting (BERA 2018).

1.7 Case Study Institution

The case study institution where this research took place is very typical of a small rural FET centre in Ireland. It was established in 2002 under the old VEC system. The centre was initially established to be a 20-place VTOS centre. Because of the dispersed low rural population in the region the VEC decided to offer a Level 5 programme in Business Administration. It was felt at the time that this was a general award suitable for the local needs of learners. It provided an entry route for candidates to progress to HE and it also provided learners with basic skills to gain employment in the area. Learners who joined the programme in 2002 were diverse in their academic achievements; some were early school leavers with only primary and junior/group certificates, some were leaving certificate holders with no previous work experience and some were individuals who had worked all their lives. This is typical of the diverse cohort of learners for whom the sector caters. In 2003 the centre started the BTEI programme that offered a range of part-time options for people. Disciplines included childcare, basic IT skills and tourism related programmes. These programmes have changed over the years in order to cater for the local needs of learners presenting to the centre. The current programmes on offer in 2018 include the following;

- Business (Level 5)
- Healthcare Support (Level 5)
- Agriculture (Level 5) and Farm Administration (Level 6)
- Information and Communications Technology Skills (Level 4)
- Catering Support (Level 4)
- Horticulture (Level 4)

The centre has remained as the 20-place VTOS classification and has filled those places annually. The BTEI numbers have fluctuated much more greatly mainly due to economic and employment opportunities in the region impacted by developments nationally during this period. The teaching staff in the centre has remained very constant since the centre opened. At the time of the start of this research there were 9 teaching staff including the coordinator. They were all invited to participate in the study; 6 opted to do so. The centre has since taken on extra teaching staff to cover the range of disciplines outlined above.

The research participants are very well qualified within their discipline areas: one has a Doctorate degree in Education, three have Masters degrees in Education, Design Technology and Information Technology Systems, one has a degree with a teaching qualification in Art and one has an Arts degree. This suggests that the teachers place value on being highly qualified in their profession. More detail on their practice and professional activity prior to the research is documented in chapter four, Research Methodology and Methods. With the exception of one, all of the participating teachers are teaching in the centre for over a decade. They are very experienced with industry backgrounds in their relevant subject areas. This is a significant detail and probably the reason for their willingness to get involved in the project and to remain so committed throughout the research period.

1.8 Research Contribution

The aim of the research is to investigate ways of promoting a professional learning community in the FET context. A review of the related literature inspired the idea that a designed teaching and learning intervention may be a way of doing this within the contextual space. As the FET centre is typical of ETB FET centres across the sector, it seems likely that the findings of the research will be generalizable to some extent to all similar situations and will provide insights and knowledge in a critical time of change and development that the FET sector sees itself in. This research was aiming for depth rather than breadth of application so to inform future

professional development strategies within similar FET centres that are relevant and appropriate to the context. Most FET centres are small, independent and sometimes isolated 'silos' of practice with little or no inter-institution contact. They often have their own individual characteristics and unique structures. Therefore, the potential to support future teacher professional development interventions led by the research findings of this study exists. The Learning Policy Institute (2017) found that teachers desire professional development that focuses on teaching strategies that are very specific to curriculum content, incorporates active learning and has an emphasis on teacher collaboration and peer support. In addition, professional development should offer teachers an opportunity to receive and give feedback and to reflect on their learning. This research project in various ways incorporated many of these features and so it is hoped that it will inform future research and activity in the sector, a sector that has limited existing research completed to date. The aim of this project was to provide insight into what works in terms of ways to promote a professional learning community within a FET centre and how it works within this particular setting.

1.9 Thesis Structure

This introduction chapter describes the rationale for embarking on this area of research. I believe that teaching should be a 'learning profession' (Wiliam 2011). It is here that the research problem was revealed and why this is an important topic for me. The chapter includes an overview of the FET sector in Ireland as well as a brief introduction to the assessment and accreditation system within FET as well as an insight into the case study institution. The chapter concludes with a problem statement on how does one promote a culture of professional practice learning in the FET context in Ireland.

The second chapter will examine literature pertaining to the practice of professional teaching learning that highlights the centrality of change and 'movements' in the teaching profession. The chapter documents and reviews the concepts of change, collaboration, sharing and trust. The

reading of theories in relation to learning gives a solid and deep understanding of learning processes. This was to critically inform the research on ways of promoting a PLC within the case study institution. The chapter documents learning theories, both traditional and modern, such as experiential learning and the approach of social constructivism and the positive impact these methodologies have on learning. The chapter explores the area of teaching, its characteristics and what it means to be an effective teacher. This section has a specific focus on teacher learning given the context of this study. This in-depth reading of the literature formed a framework for the development of the project, highlighting areas that are pertinent to the problem of promoting a PLC in the sector.

Chapter three provides the platform from which the project takes place. The chapter describes the preparatory phase of the research and introduces the six FET teachers who were involved and participated in the study. It is within this chapter that there is description of how the research project was introduced to the case study institution. This chapter explores assessment for learning theory and the work of Black and Wiliam (1998) in particular is examined as it was an adaptation of the work of Wiliam (2011) [effective feedback] that was used to embark on introducing a teaching and learning intervention into practice in the case study institution.

Chapter four is a description and justification of the methodological approach and design of the research study. The chapter discusses the research approach adopted for the study and the guiding influence of critical theory. Critical theory can be described as an approach that is characterised by empowerment of individuals and professionals in society. It is emancipatory and is epitomised by care and hope (Denzin and Lincoln 1994). The chapter continues to document the research strategy that was adopted for this study, that being action research within a case study framework. A detailed account is given of the research instruments employed and the justifications for their use. The chapter describes the data analysis process as well as considerations given to ethical issues associated with the research design and process.

Chapter five is a presentation of findings from the teacher group discussions and individual interviews over the two-year life of the study and the three phases in the study. The chapter documents what unfolded for each of these phases and asks the following questions: what happens to learning, what happens to the professional engagement of the FET teacher, how did the teaching and learning intervention influence the practice of participating teachers and what experiences unfolded for me as the research practitioner leading the project.

Finally, chapter six offers an overview of the study and its key findings and offers responses to the research questions posed at the beginning of this project. This chapter documents the influence this study can have in adding insightful knowledge to professional learning and development in the FET sector in Ireland. Finally, the chapter outlines potential areas for future work in the area.

Chapter 2

Review of the Literature

Chapter Two Review of the Literature

2.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to present a review of the literature in the following areas: professional teacher learning, learning and teaching processes, and teacher learning discourse. These areas are explored so as to identify their contribution to teaching and learning in FET in the 21st century. The relevant literature on the complex relationship between teaching and learning within the adult learning context is reviewed together with the specific elements of motivation and the climate for learning (Richardson 2011; Purdie, Hattie and Douglas 1996; Sotto 2007; Hattie 2012: Prosser *et al* 2003). Professional practice learning processes of the FET teacher is central to this thesis. Therefore, the literature review also includes relevant learning theories as they apply to the development of a PLC in this context and process.

The rationale for including these theme areas was to address the research problem that informed the instance of this project. This research was aimed at FET teachers' professional learning and exploring ways by which it can be developed and enhanced within the sector in Ireland through the framework of the PLC. The project aimed to examine ways of encouraging a habit of sharing among the teaching group in the case study institution. The aim was to explore ways of equipping the group to critically interrogate (Stoll *et al 2006)* their practice and their colleagues in a collaborative and supportive way and to encourage reflective practice among the study group. The chapter begins by looking at professional teacher learning.

2.2 Professional Teacher Learning

Demirkasimoglu (2010) synthesizes several definitions of professionalism among teachers as a '…multi-dimensional structure consisting of one's work behaviours and attitudes to perform the highest standards and improve the service quality' (p.2). This project was looking at ways to embed a practice of learning and sharing within the case study institution. According to Boud (2000) professional practitioners require a high degree of individual autonomy for effective practice. Eraut (1994) discusses the learning professional and highlights that professionals '…continually learn

on the job, because their work entails engagement in a succession of cases, problems or projects which they have to learn about' (p. 10). He suggests a framework for promoting and facilitating professional learning under five headings; an appropriate combination of learning settings, time for study, consultation and reflection, availability of suitable learning resources, people who are prepared to give appropriate support and the learner's own capacity to learn and take advantage of the opportunities available (p.13). This would be a new activity within the case study institution and so a change in ethos and approach to teaching and learning was necessary. Heywood (2009) refers to this as a culture and states that '…one way to change a culture is to generate a spirit of inquiry' (p.309). He discusses giving teachers an opportunity to inquire about their practice. Heywood discusses professionalism within teaching and how it is often a restricted profession. Teaching is very much controlled by the government; it controls our entry into initial teacher education by controlling entry to teacher training colleges, what we get paid and the curriculum we teach. This, according to Heywood, is leading to a de-professionalisation of teaching (p.293). This professional context and situation are not readily allowing teachers an opportunity to look at their practice in a meaningful way. Heywood (2009) introduces the idea of restricted versus extended professionality within teaching (p.297).

Restricted Professionality	Extended Professionality
Skills derived from experience	Skills derived from a mediation between experience and theory
Perspective limited to the immediate time and place	Perspective embracing the broader social context of education
Classroom events perceived in isolation	Classroom events perceived in relation to institutions policies and goals
Introspective with regard to methods	Methods compared with those of colleague and with reports of practice
Value placed on autonomy	Value placed on professional collaboration
Limited involvement in non-teaching professional activities	High involvement in non-teaching professional activities
Infrequent reading of professional literature	Regular reading of professional literature
Involvement in in-service work limited and confined to practical courses	Involvement in in-service work considerable and includes courses of a theoretical nature
Teaching seen as an intuitive activity	Teaching seen as a rational activity

Table 2 Restricted and Extended Professionality

As the researcher in this study, I believe the above characteristics of extended professionality are what we are trying to achieve for teaching which requires teaching to '…develop student competencies, such as deep mastery of challenging content, critical thinking, complex problem solving, effective communication and collaboration, and self direction' (Learning Policy Institute 2017 p. v). Heywood asks us to reflect on a number of questions: are we truly accountable, are we willing to train new entrants to the profession; are we reflective practitioners, are we self-accountable. These are all characteristics of a professional learning community and this research is attempting to develop these characteristcis within the case study institution. Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) discuss the profession of teaching and refer to 'Professional Capital' as elemental to transforming teaching in every school. They acknowledge that change is necessary and express that it is a 'movement' rather than a specific change that is required. The authors refer to Rosenberg's (2011) remarks on successful social movements and that they '...persuade people to act in support of a shared common cause in the future, even though the immediate steps are psychologically difficult or dangerous in the beginning' (p.151). Rosenberg

(2011) explains that shared experiences, good working relationships based on trust, and people taking personal and social responsibility for their actions as well as being transparent, will all support the cause of a movement in education reform taking place (p.151). This perspective informed this research study in that we sought ways to share and collaborate in our practice, to develop trusting relationships and to be as transparent and autonomous as possible. Hargreaves and Fullan (2012 p.154) offer ten core guidelines for change.

1. Become a true pro (years of study and practice, honing your skills throughout your career, connecting with the latest research evidence, an investment in yourself and the students you teach)
2. Start with yourself: examine your own experience
3. Be a mindful teacher (are you an authentic teacher, are you a reflective teacher)
4. Build your human capital through your social capital (look at your strengths and weaknesses as a teacher, discuss these with your peers, build the capability of yourself and your colleagues)
5. Push and pull your peers (develop trust among your peers and bring them with you, good and bad)
6. Invest in and accumulate your decisional capital (improve instruction, develop teaching methods, get feedback on your practice and reflect on this)
7. Manage up: help your leaders be the best they can (collaboration, partnership)
8. Take the first step (no point in waiting for change)
9. Surprise yourself (seek out variety)
10. Connect everything back to your students (The purpose of teaching like a pro is to improve what you can do for your students. This needs to be kept front and centre all the time)

All of the above link coherently with Heywood's idea of the Inquiry Oriented School. Heywood cites Cohn and Kottkamp's (1993) definition of an inquiry oriented school as one where 'teachers and other stakeholders might (1) collaboratively identify problems or questions that are critical for today's and tomorrow's concerns, (2) study past efforts of others to solve school problems and bring about structural change, (3) create and study new approaches and structure toward the end of successful reform' (pp.311-312). Teachers and schools that work on this premise will become the extended professional so fervently advocated by Heywood (2009). The Learning Policy Institute conducts and communicates independent high-quality research to improve education policy and practice. The Institute works with all the stakeholders to advance evidence-based policies that support empowering and equitable learning for all (2018). They state that

learning for the 21st century requires 'sophisticated forms of teaching' and in turn there is a need for effective professional development (PD), as many previous forms of PD appeared '…ineffective in supporting changes in teachers' practices and student learning' (p.v). So, what is effective professional teacher learning? The Institute offers seven features of effective PD having reviewed studies in this area (2017, p.1).

Effective Professional Development	
Content focused	PD that is focused on teaching strategies that are curriculum and classroom specific
Incorporates active learning	Active learning engaged teachers directly in designing teaching tools that they will use themselves. It is authentic. Not like traditional methods of CPD
Supports collaboration	Creates a space for teachers to share ideas and collaborate on their learning in context specific spaces. This will positively change the culture
Uses models of effective practice	Clear vision of what is best practice
Provides coaching and expert support	Focus on teachers' individual needs
Offers feedback and reflection	A need to think about and receive feedback on their practice to make changes. This will result in a move towards expert practice
Is of sustained duration	Need for adequate time to learn, practice, implement and reflect upon new strategies that facilitate change

Table 3 Effective Professional Development

The above table on effective PD states that it needs to be content specific and involve active learning for the teachers involved. There needs to be an emphasis on collaboration and providing a space for teachers to share and engage in dialogue on teaching and learning. Freire (1970) advocates developing opportunities for people to engage in dialogue with peers that are trustworthy and open. This leads to enhanced relationships between the people involved. Dialogue is not fundamentally a form of question and answer communication, but an engaging social relationship (Burbules 1993), with emotional as well as communicative aspects.

> The emotional factors in dialogue include concern, trust, respect, appreciation and hope. The communicative virtues are dispositions, qualities and practices that support these relations. They include tolerance, patience, openness to criticism and inclination to admit mistakes; a desire to render one' s concerns in a way comprehensible to others; self- restraint during others' turn at talk; willingness to re-examine pre-suppositions and to become less dogmatic; listening carefully, considering alternative viewpoints, tolerating disagreement or criticism, and expressing self straightforwardly and reasonably (p.19)

Teachers need guidance and expertise in this area with opportunities for feedback and reflection. Critically, there is also a need for sustained duration, where any initiative is given time to become embedded in practice.

There are many definitions of the professional learning community (PLC) and they present themselves in many distinctive and diverse contexts (Stoll *et al* 2006). Stoll *et al* suggest a PLC is a group of people '…sharing and critically interrogating their practice in an ongoing, reflective, collaborative, inclusive, learning-orientated, growth-promoting way' (p.223). The ideal behind the effective PLC is that those involved are willing to share in their practice with their colleagues and other stakeholders. They need to be willing and capable of 'critically interrogating' their own practice at all times in their profession, using reflective and collaborative approaches to this. What is of particular significance here is that members of the PLC use this approach as a 'learning-orientated' opportunity to change or alter their practice for the better and ultimately to result in improved practice that benefits the teacher and learners involved. Professional Learning Communities offer teachers an opportunity to engage in discourse on pedagogy specifically related to their discipline and/or context (Battersby and Verdi 2014). Vescio *et al* (2008) promote the idea of giving teachers an opportunity to share in their practice, as there is a focus on student learning and how to improve student learning for all. This requires engagement in reflective dialogue among peers and colleagues and a deprivatising of practice. This in turn puts a focus on teacher collaboration (Brookfield 1987). Stoll *et al* discuss the PLC as being a community, having shared beliefs and understanding in which there is interaction between

members and active participation. According to Stoll *et al* there is a sense of care and concern for the members involved and for all minority views (p.225).

Hord (2004) offers five characteristics of the effective PLC: shared values and vision, collective responsibility, reflective professional inquiry, collaboration, and group and individual learning are promoted. Earlier Hord (1997) discussed the PLC needing shared and supported leadership in order to be successful. There is a need for collective creativity and that there are supportive as well as physical conditions available in order for the PLC to be successful. Hord also highlighted people's capacities in this arena. Talbert and McLaughlin (1994) also promote teacher communities and networks, stating that they 'engage teachers in discourse about the technology of teaching, exposing them to new content and conceptions of pedagogy and providing the supporting context essential to serious change' (p.130). Thompson *et al* (2004) define the PLC as when teachers commit themselves to talking collaboratively about teaching and learning and then take action that will improve learning for all. The Annenberg Institute for School Reform (2004) define the PLC as comprising of groups of educators who collectively examine and improve their own professional practice. They state that typically, groups are small and meet regularly over a significant period of time (p.2). It was all these characteristic of the PLC that I wanted to promote in the case study institution where I work and manage a team of teachers. All of the commentators on the PLC, teacher learning and professional development are appropriate to this research project on ways to promote a PLC in the FET specific context.

2.3 Learning Processes

This research project explores ways of embedding an ethos of teacher learning within an FET centre through a PLC framework and so it is important to explore the different theories of learning. This section of the review explores a summary of traditional learning theories, as well as some new contributions from empirical research on modern learning theory. Literature specifically relating to the professional adult learner is explored as well as literature in the area of adult educator.

2.3.1 Learning Theories

Learning theories may be described as mental models that help us understand the process and outcomes of learning - how people receive information as knowledge, how they process it and store the information as knowledge for future use and learning. There are many influences on how people learn; their cognitive awareness, their emotional well-being, the physical environment they are in and their previous experiences of learning and life. For this section of the review on learning theories, I am highlighting the work of Jarvis (2010) as giving a good overview of the theories relevant to this research project. Jarvis (2010) citing Merriam and Cafarella (1991) acknowledges that there are four main learning theories; behaviourist, humanist, cognitive, and social constructivist that are currently accepted and referred to in the literature.

The behaviourist approach to understanding learning originated with the work of Ivan Pavlov, the Russian physiologist and his theory of classical conditioning. According to Bourassa and Mednick (2008) learning happens when a natural reflex responds to a stimulus (p.6). They give the example of Pavlov's observation that dogs salivate when they eat or see food founded on the assumption that '...animals and people are biologically 'wired' so that a certain stimulus will produce a specific response' (p.6). Jarvis (2010) observes that there are '...behavioural changes as a result of learning; only that learning is the change process, not the behavioural outcome' (p.71). The behaviourist approach is concerned with how the environment influences learning. This was identifiable for this project. The teachers in this project were working together for many years and so were shaped by the environment in the case study institution and its activities.

The humanist theory of learning is concerned with the welfare of learners and is humane; it is idealistic (Jarvis 2010, p.41). Abraham Maslow (1908-1970) and Carl Rogers (1902-1987) are theorists associated with this learning theory. Maslow's seminal hierarchy of needs theory displays key stages that people have to reach in order to achieve personal growth (physiological, safety, love, self-esteem and self). According to Jarvis (2010) Maslow felt that 'knowledge' can be ambiguous and that most

people want to know but also have a fear about knowing. He states that this fear of knowing could be linked to an individual's social and personal experiences up to that point in their lives. However, he argues there is an inherent drive in all individuals of the need to learn even if that learning can be fearful or dangerous. Carl Rogers argued that the goal of education is to develop a '...fully functioning person' (Jarvis, 2010 p.115). All adult learners, including teacher learners, engage more in education if they have 'control' over what they are learning. This project was cognisant of the welfare of its learners; in this case the participating teachers. As the research facilitator in the project I was conscious of the different stages that the individual teachers may engage in and develop throughout the life of the project.

The cognitive theory of learning '...views learning as a process whereby our sensory perceptions are given meanings by our minds, and then these mental representations are used to construct mental models of memory' (Stephens 2012, p.604). Learning takes place when people add new concepts to their mental models or create new connections linking different concepts (Stephens 2012). This results in better understanding and an in-depth evaluation of the learning. Learners find it difficult to memorise what they have learned but when there is real meaning attached to learning they will remember it and use the learning in new situations and experiences. This theory was very pertinent in this project as new meanings developed as a result of the teachers participating in the project. They added to their already existing knowledge on teaching and learning and this gave them a deeper understanding of their practice.

Constructivist learning is described as being when learners draw on their existing learning experiences and merge them with new learning within the learner's existing repertoire of knowledge. Constructivist learning is where there is an emphasis on active involvement of the learners constructing the knowledge themselves, and adding to that knowledge all the time throughout their education. 'Therefore, learners may express what they have learned in different ways, even if they have shared the same learning processes' (Phillips 2000 as cited in Kocadere and Ozgen 2012). Wilson

(1996) defines the constructivist learning environment as a place where learners work together, supporting each other as they use a variety of tools and information in their guided pursuit of learning goals and problem-solving activities (Kocadere and Ozgen 2012, p.116). Adams (2006) discusses constructivist learning approaches being when teachers are seeking ways to understand how learners '…create their knowledge constructs and what these mean for understanding influences on thought processes' (p. 245). He states that there is a need for teachers to adopt the view that each learner will construct knowledge differently and that teachers need to be cognisant of this (p.245).

Social constructivism emphasises the collaborative nature of learning and the integration of learning into pre-existing and new knowledge. The theory is based on the premise that learning is a collaborative process (Sullivan-Palincsar 1998; Adam 2006; Andrews 2012). A number of principles around this collaborative process have been put forward (Hein 1991; Tam 2000) for this teaching approach. They suggest that there is a focus on learning and not performance, and that learners are viewed as the active co-constructors of meaning and knowledge. The aforementioned authors suggest establishing relationships built on the notion of guidance and not instruction, always seeking to engage learners so they feel the 'implicit worth' of the learning. Finally, they promote assessment as an active process of uncovering and acknowledging shared understanding (Adams 2006, p.247).

Of the learning theories discussed above, social constructivist learning theory is most relevant and forms the foundation for this project. Teachers were actively involved in the project through the use of the intervention [feedback]. Teachers were working together and sharing their practice in a collaborative way.

This project was about exploring ways of promoting a professional learning community in the FET context. Social constructivist learning theory played a critical role in the success of trying to promote this type of learning community in the sector. Schon (1984) discusses the notion that 'rigorous professional knowledge does not consist only in the application of science

to practice'. He discusses 'knowing in practice' where 'people have in their doing a tacit kind of knowing' (p. 3). This requires reflection where there is a transformation of 'knowing-in-action into knowledge-in-action' (Eraut 1994, p.15). Eraut discusses the important distinction between awareness of tacit knowledge where it should be subject to critical scrutiny and then being able to articulate it within ones own context; it concerns theoretical and practical understanding (p.15). This study was trying to develop the knowledge-in-action that Eraut is referring to and to develop theoretical and practical understanding among the study participants in the case study institution.

Experiential learning theory also plays a role here, as it is evident that we learn from our experiences (Kolb 1984). Below is Kolb's experiential learning cycle, where he and Fry (1975) claim that the learning cycle can begin at any stage and learners can engage in the learning cycle from entering it at any point (Jarvis 2010, p.76).

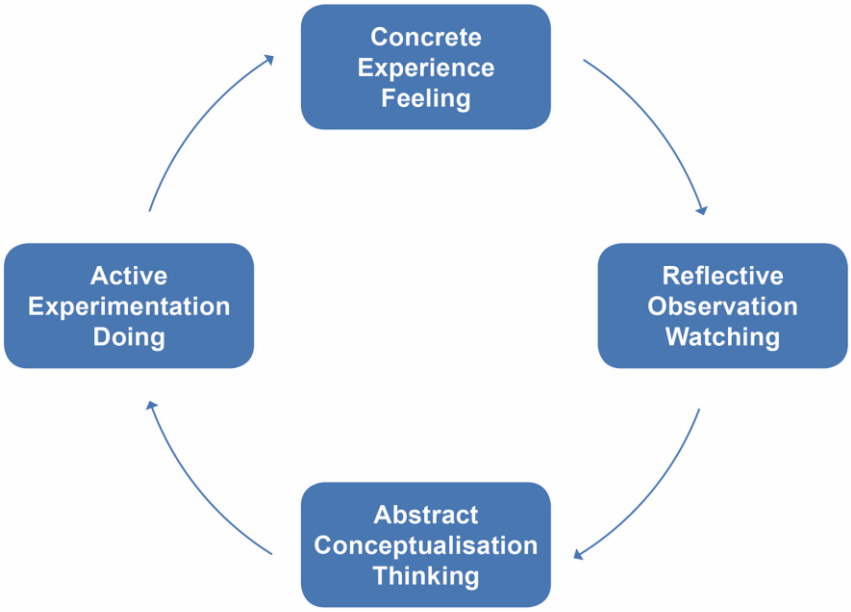


Figure 4 Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle

An informed definition of experiential learning is cited in Jarvis (2010 p.79) from Weil and McGill (1989);

> Experiential learning is the process whereby people, individually and in association with others, engage in direct encounter and then purposely reflect upon, validate and transform, give personal and social meaning to and seek to

> integrate the outcomes of these processes into new ways of knowing, being, acting and interacting in relation to their world

To unpack Weil and McGill's definition, not all adult learners engage in 'direct encounter'. As with all learners, teacher learners often have to be taught how to reflect, validate and transform their learning. This is an important point for this study as the participating teachers in the project were going to be engaging in reflective activities around their practice. They were going to be validating their actions in the classroom and in the whole centre. It is envisaged that there would be a transformation in their own learning about their practice and their profession. However, I feel the ultimate learning process has been achieved when they can use the learning in 'new ways of knowing' to apply to other elements of learning in their learning career (Crossan *et al* 2003). This is complex and often learners have to 'learn' again about the learning process, what it means to gain knowledge and apply that knowledge with understanding. This project aimed to promote a professional learning community in the case study institution where the participating teachers are *learning* about their practice in a new and different way. They engage with their colleagues about their practice with an emphasis on learning and gaining new knowledge but also adding to their existing knowledge and sharing that with their peers.

The literature in summary identified that learning experiences and processes for individuals encompass many features. Learning is a natural response in human beings. Learning is concerned with the personal welfare of human beings, including their physiological and psychological well-being. Learning is about being capable of becoming a functioning person in society by adding to already existing repertoires of knowledge. Deep learning is about finding meaning in what is learnt to move to better and in-depth understanding. Learning is about collaboration and active involvement with a focus on developing skills for problem solving. Learning is about identifying our concrete experiences and reflecting on them so that one can think about these experiences in a new abstract way.

This research project is to explore ways of promoting a professional learning community in the FET context. Ultimately, the teachers involved

in the project were *learning* and so it was important to identify with learning theory and for them to be cognisant of how learning theory is critical to this and also interrelated. Social constructivist learning theory is a guiding framework for this research because there was a focus on the learning of the teachers involved. There was a focus on learning from each other as co-constructors of old and new knowledge. There was a focus on building already existing relationships to concentrate on sharing and support amongst the participating teachers. There was a focus on building up the value of this type of practice in the case study institution. Constructivist learning theory fitted solidly with the ethos of professional learning communities and what they stand for; shared values, focus on student learning, reflective dialogue, openness about practice and a focus on collaboration (Vescio *et al* 2008).

2.3.2 Life-long Learning and the Professional Adult Learner

Merriam (2008) has observed and commented on the complexity of adult learning: 'The variety of settings in which adult education occurs, the range of curricula, and the diversity of the students have caused the field to be a sprawling – some would say incoherent – entity, united in the one common goal of facilitating adult learning (p.190). Merriam also argues that the variety of locations in which adult learning takes place, the range of courses and disciplines available and the diversity of learners all add to the complexity, and flexibility, of what constitutes adult learning. Like all learning it is multi-faceted. A common message within the literature is that there are certainly no definitive methods or approaches to teaching adults, professional or otherwise, only that teachers have to be acutely aware of prior experiences and learning of their students, and to be flexible in the way they approach teaching the cohort (Zepke and Leach 2006). However, adult learning can offer people resources that they can use to make changes to their lives (Field, 2011).

The professional adult learner is specific to this research. In many ways, the professional adult learner has similar characteristics to the adult learner; wanting to get involved, personal motivation, learning how to learn

and valuing the peer interaction (Crossan *et al* 2003, DoE 2000, Currie 2008, Stephens 2012, Knowles, 1980). As the researcher, I observed that the teachers in this project required an opportunity to explore their understanding of teaching and learning with their peers. They were given the opportunity to experiment, reflect, discuss and assess their efforts as part of their daily routine (Sturko and Gregson 2009). The authors suggest that this type of professional development '…expands the role of teacher into a teacher-learner who participates in a collaborative environment with other professionals' (p.37).

Andragogy is the term often used to describe the teaching of adults, or as Henscke (2011) describes as the art and science of helping, facilitating, supporting adults to learn. Andragogy is associated with Malcolm Knowles and in 1970 Knowles defined his theory of andragogy as '...acknowledging that learners as self-directed and autonomous and that the teacher is a facilitator of learning rather than a presenter of content' (Henschke, 2011:34). Currie (2008) refers to Knowles' (1980) work having shaped the practice of adult education. Knowles' model highlights the process in which adults learn which is '...characterised by a mutually respectful, informal, collaborative style of teacher/student relationship which uses experiential techniques...'(p.220).

Knowles (1980) refers to adults being 'adult psychologically' when they think of themselves as being responsible for their own lives (p.96) and that others perceive them in this way too. He refers to adult learners coming to education with years of 'conditioning' from their previous education of being taught in a didactic manner. 'Consequently, although they may be self-directed in every other role in their lives…the minute they walk through a door labelled "education" or "training" they put on their *dunce* hat of dependency, sit back, fold their arms, and say, "OK, teach me." (p.96). He stresses the need for supporting adults to make the 'transition' from the role of learner being a dependent one to being a self-directed one. He discusses releasing learners so they can find their way in the world of self-directed learning (Knowles 1980). Knowles believes adult learners' orientation to learning is often life-centred, they draw on their past

experiences as a resource for their learning. Knowles's work clearly outlines a facilitative teaching style, where adult learning embraces the process of teaching and learning together in a facilitative climate '…in which participants see themselves as mutual helpers…in which there is mutual trust – among the learners and between the learners and the trainer/facilitator, in which people feel safe and supportive rather than threatened and rivalrous, and in which everyone feels respected' (p.99).

Brookfield (1987) cited by Currie (2008) states that effective practice in adult learning is characterised by voluntary participation in the learning, mutual respect among the stakeholders involved, collaboration, a continual process of reflection and evaluation and the empowerment of learners to develop their self-direction skills in learning. This research project aimed to explore ways and methods of doing this among teacher learners. Adult learners want the learning experience to be aligned with reality, to be active and individual. 'One of the assumptions underlying andragogy is that an adult has an independent self-concept and that with maturity he or she becomes increasingly self-directed' (Merriam 2008, p.205). In 1980 Knowles asks the question, do people really want to be self-directed? His answer is a resounding 'yes'. He states that adults are self-directed when they undertake to learn something on their own; it is a normal activity among adults. Kitchenham (2008) cites the Transformative Learning Centre (2004) that transformative learning is '...a deep, structural shift in basic premises of thought, feelings and actions' (p104). Freire and, later Mezirow are widely associated with transformative learning becoming an integral part of adult learning theory. Change takes place in our perspective towards life and the '...lens through which we make sense of the world...' is a key characteristic of transformational learning (Merriam 2008, p.207). Mezirow (1998) states, cited in Kitchenham (2008, p.118), that '...learning to think for oneself involves becoming critically reflective of assumptions and participating in discourse to validate beliefs, intentions, values and feelings'. This is a very complex experience for adult learners, as being reflective and engaging in discourse beliefs is challenging (Cranton and Carusetta 2004, Brookfield 1995, Hillier 2005). The purpose

of this research was to develop the learning capacity of the FET teacher in terms of promoting a professional learning community within the case study institution. In designing and developing the research approach it was critical for me as the facilitator and driver of the project to allow the research to explore the following areas in a focused way; the learning environment, teacher relationships, developing learner autonomy and developing the skills of teacher reflection.

2.4 The Adult Educator

This project explored ways of promoting a professional learning community within an FET setting. Teachers may feel that they are teaching in a facilitative way but in fact their teaching style may often be communicating something more didactic (Jarvis 2010, p.134). Teachers often think they have informed discussions in their classes but who is leading the discussion – the teacher or the students? Facilitative teaching should foster questions from the students to the teacher and to their peers (Wiliam 2011). There is a need to develop teacher/learner relationships in order for learners to succeed and fully engage (Zepke and Leach 2006). It is clear that the adult educator needs to be capable of tapping into their 'toolbox' of skills in order to engage with adult learners in a meaningful way. It is not enough to have content knowledge and skills to teach your subject area, referred to by Shulman (1986) as subject pedagogical knowledge, meaning that FET teachers require teaching expertise in their subject matter. Adult educators also need to be aware of learner needs, both educationally and personally (Zepke and Leach 2006). Shulman's (1986) knowledge growth in teaching comes to mind here. He stated that policy in education had changed its focus. 'The emphasis is on how teachers manage their classrooms, organise activities, allocate time and turns, structure assignments, ascribe praise and blame, formulate the levels of their questions, plan lessons and judge general student understanding. What we miss are questions about the content of the lessons taught, the questions asked, and the explanations offered' (p.8). He asks the questions, where do teacher explanations come from? How do teachers decide what to teach, how to represent the subject material, how to

question students about it and how to deal with problems of misunderstanding? These are critical questions that teachers in a PLC could discuss and focus on in their practice. Positive learner outcomes can be achieved when the correct pedagogy is applied to meet the social, emotional and learning needs of adult learners (Zepke and Leach 2006, p.510). In essence, adult educators are encouraged to acknowledge student differences and strive to ensure that learners feel safe in this type of environment.

Crowther, Maclachlan and Tett (2010) suggest that particular pedagogic practices can enhance the learning experience for adults and increase the likelihood of sustained participation. These practices include working in pairs and small groups, the provision of immediate feedback and peer teaching. The professional FET teacher needs to engage in discourse on these pedagogic practices to which Crowther *et al* (2010) refer. There is potential to do this through the promotion of a professional learning community. Discussions should take place on how people learn and teachers should try to establish pedagogic practice to suit learners' individual learning characteristics through differentiated teaching (Hattie 2010). Another important pedagogic practice is that teachers see the student as an active partner in the teaching-learning process (Black and Wiliam 1998, Wiliam 2011). Learners need to feel valued, with their issues and concerns openly discussed and acknowledged (Black and Wiliam 1998, Wiliam 2011). Jarvis (2010) refers to Brookfield's analysis of moral relationships stating that '...teaching is a human project and in order to be good teachers we have to know ourselves and understand our strengths and seek to overcome our weaknesses' (p.184). Brookfield highlighted that we need to be 'critically aware' of our teaching methodologies and to be reflective in our practice. A professional learning community in the FET setting is a possible forum to start this dialogue among FET teachers about their practice and their students' learning and so develop critical awareness of the impact on teacher practice.

2.5 Motivation for Learning

Motivation is understood be people acting towards their own wishes and desires to perform a specific purpose (Turabik and Baskin 2015). The authors cite Eren (2004) stating that motivation is about a 'sum of efforts to induce one or more people progressively towards activation, in a certain direction' (p.1056). Abraham Maslow (1908-1970) was associated with the theory of motivation. Maslow's seminal hierarchy of needs, displays five key stages that people have to reach in order to achieve personal growth; physiological, safety, love and belonging, self-esteem and self-actualisation (Jarvis 2010). According to Jarvis (2010) Maslow felt that 'knowledge' can be ambiguous and that most people want to know but also have a fear about knowing. He states that this fear of knowing could be linked to an individual's social and personal experiences up to that point in their lives. However, there is an inherent drive in all individuals of the need to learn even if that learning can be fearful or dangerous. Harlen (2011) believes that an individual's motivation for learning has an essential impact on their learning within any context. Sotto (2007) states that learning will take place if there is a 'collaborative' atmosphere fostered within our students and by being collaborative, teachers are less likely to 'inhibit students' motivation to learn' (p.24). There are many ways according to Sotto (2007) to encourage motivation of students: more dialogue in the classroom, students and teachers need to be actively engaged, learning material being relevant to a learner's 'real' world. As classroom teachers one must take great care, through teacher discussion and discourse, to foster the already existing motivation within our learners and, more importantly, to be aware of what inhibits motivation among our learners (Sotto 2007). Jonker (2005) states that for some people their previous educational experience could '...saddle one for life with the feeling that one is doomed to fail' (Jonker in Crowther *et al* 2010, p.655) and will present with low motivation tendencies. Teachers should not underestimate the pervasive impact that previous educational experience may have on learners' motivation. Wiliam (2011) cites the work of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990) who reveals that motivation can be as a

consequence of achievement. He discusses the match between one's capability and the challenge of the task.

> When the level of challenge is low and the level of capability is high, the result is often boredom. When the level of challenge is high and the level of capability is low, the result is generally anxiety. When both are low, the result is apathy. However, when both capability and challenge are high, the result is 'flow' leading to engagement with the learning' (p.150)

Wiliam (2011) wants us to look at motivation more as an outcome rather than a cause – lack of motivation can be a signal that the teacher and learner need to work differently. Wiliam (2011) discusses the work of Monique Boekaerts (1993) where she offers a dual-processing model concerning metacognition and motivation, which is to activate the growth pattern of learning (p.152). A number of options are offered to work towards this goal;

- Share learning goals with students
- Promoting the belief that ability is incremental rather than fixed
- Reduce opportunities for learners to compare themselves with others
- Feedback that contains future action
- Using every possible opportunity to transfer control of learning to the student

Harlen (2011, p. 175) highlights six components that influence motivation around learning. See table below.

Components of motivation for learning	
Interest	Refers to the pleasure in undertaking an activity. It leads to learning that is connected with goal orientation and with the type of feedback received.
Goal Orientation	Relates to how learners see the goals of engaging in a learning task and determines the direction in which effort will be made and how they will organise and prioritise time spent for learning. There is a difference between learning goals and performance goals; • Learning goals apply effort in acquiring new skills, seeking to understand what is involved • Performance goals seek the easiest way to meet requirements and achieve the goals, compare themselves with others, and consider ability to be more important than effort.
Locus of control	Refers to whether learners perceive the cause of their success or failure to be under their control (internal locus) or to be controlled by others (external locus).
Self-esteem	Refers to how people value themselves both as people and as learners. It shows in confidence that the person feels in being able to learn.
Self-efficacy	Linked to self-esteem and locus of control but is more directed at specific tasks for subjects. It refers to how capable the learner feels in succeeding in a particular task or type of task.

Table 4 Components of Motivation for Learning

Roderick and Engel (2001) cited in Harlen (2011) discuss school support and motivating learners. 'High support meant creating an environment of social and educational support, working hard to increase students' sense of self-efficacy, focusing on learning-related goals, making goals explicit, using assessment to help students succeed and creating cognitive maps which made progress evident' (p.177). Critical to achieving high levels of motivation in our learners is for learners knowing how to learn. The aim of this research was to explore ways of embracing practices that will consider motivation for learning and knowing how to learn through the promotion of dialogue on issues within a PLC.

2.6 Teaching Processes

Working mostly from the school level context, MacBeath (1999) examined the 'Good Teacher' from a product perspective in terms of overall school effectiveness. Critical for MacBeath is the personal and interpersonal skills

of the teacher and how they relate to their learners in order for the latter to be engaged with their education. Cranton and Carusetta (2004) identify effective teachers as being highly self-aware in terms of their own values and beliefs and bringing those values into their teaching. The critically reflective practitioner is a key element of effective teaching, and so the inherent characteristics of the reflective teacher are presented through the work of key contributors in this area: Brookfield (1995); McQueen and Webber (2009); Hillier (2005).

This section of the review will examine some of the key processes of teaching with a view to gaining an in-depth understanding of what effective teaching is. The attributes of the effective teacher will be explored as well as what it means to be authentic in practice. Finally, this section will critically review the many claims of the reflective practitioner and how it is critical for all teachers to reflect on their teaching in an effort to improve their professional practice.

Teachers need to consider varied teaching processes in their daily work. Didactic teaching methods are sometimes required at initial stages of a new learning activity (Jarvis 2010). Socratic teaching asks teachers to nurture a culture of questioning and dialogue, an exchange of knowledge and information. Facilitative teaching is based on the premise of developing a learning culture and environment that is open and free for students (Wiliam 2011, Knowles 1980). Finally, experiential teaching and learning have as their focus the need to build in suitable experiential practice into the teaching process (Kolb and Kolb 2009). What should be borne in mind here is that a mix of these teaching processes should be applied and will be more stimulating for the learner and the teacher (Jarvis 2010, p.148) resulting in effective teaching with students' learning at its core. However, teachers need support to engage in and develop this practice through the support of leadership and their teaching colleagues (Learning Policy Institute 2017).

2.6.1 Attributes of the effective FET teacher

Jephcote *et al* (2008, p.163) state there is '...relatively little research into becoming and being a teacher in further education' as compared with other sectors of the educational system. A possible reason for this is the history of the development of the FET sector without any recognisable identity within the education system. Teaching in the FET sector is diverse: it is often referred to as the 'Cinderella' sector (Jephcote *et al* 2008), known for the delivery of lifelong learning and also to provide a path for learners to contribute to economic growth, social cohesion and social justice (p.164). According to Field (2011) '…adult education is all too easily overlooked by many public agencies whose remit is not directly educational' (p.13). FET teaching is often working off a 'deficit model of provision' addressing the needs of those who have 'fallen through the cracks' of the education system. The FET sector compensates for gaps in learners previous formal education by providing learning with basic and vocational skills. Within this sector learning is often aligned to skills needed by the economy (Jephcote *et al* 2008, p.165) and priority is often given to learners who want to improve their skills, both basic and vocational and are financially supported to do this (p.165). Jephcote *et al's* study found that the identities of teachers in the sector are constantly changing, are shaped by past and current experiences of teaching, and are a response to external management structures and policies and also a response to their knowledge of and interactions with learners (p.165). FET teachers often join the teaching profession after having a career in other disciplines and indeed a lot of FET teachers are 'late developers'. The study highlighted that their own employment history made them 'powerful role models for their students' (Jephcote *et al'* 2008, p.166). Personal experiences of learning for FET teachers have a large role to play: 'Our work with teachers pointed to the importance of their own personal experiences of learning that often strongly influenced the conceptions they had about learning and teaching' (p.166). The effective teacher in FET places huge importance on 'the wider benefits of learning' which is described as '...gaining confidence, an increased awareness of work future, space for students to meet and take more control over their lives, and to developing greater self-awareness' (Jephcote *et al*

2008, p.166). Field (2011) argues that adult learning has a 'public value' (p.15) and refers to an AONTAS report highlighting the value '…investing in adult learning can help reduce state spending in other policy areas, and partly because it confirms the role of adult learning in promoting participation, democracy and equity' (p.15). This is building the capacity within learners to be more self-directed and in developing learner autonomy.

Effective teachers within FET develop 'relationships' with their learners and see this role as part of their job; intervening, offering help, arranging counselling and medical referrals (p.166). The FET teacher often deals with the personal and emotional feelings of their learners, some of them 'horrendous' personal situations and is not always equipped or more importantly qualified to deal with these challenging situations. FET teachers also often deal with challenging behaviour of learners. This kind of interaction is described by Hochschild (1983), cited by Jephcote *et al*. (2008), as 'emotional labour' which is where teachers are '...faking, enhancing and/or suppressing emotions to modify one's emotional expressions' (p.166). The effective teacher in the FET sector displays a huge degree of tolerance. Another key finding from this study was the high level of activity of one-to-one teaching interaction (inside and outside the timetable) that takes place between FET teachers and learners.

While MacBeath's (1999) research is focused on second level education and school-self evaluation, I feel the FET teacher and the FET sector can learn from his work. MacBeath (1999) states that research in the area of school effectiveness has been 'edging' towards the discovery that the most important element or 'ingredient' of the good school is the good teacher (p.59). MacBeath's study asked students to identify good teachers and to describe their behaviours and qualities. They analysed three main attributes of the good teacher;

1. Personal qualities
2. Interpersonal skills
3. Professional characteristics (p.59)

He expanded these three points by giving further descriptions of the attributes listed, which are displayed in the table below.

Personal Qualities	Interpersonal Skills	Professional Characteristics
Kindness, generosity of spirit, honesty, humour.	Listening, not shouting, keeping confidences, emphasising the positive.	Explaining things, noticing when you are stuck, helping you to understand, helping you to like what teachers are teaching.

Table 5 Attributes of the 'Good' Teacher

From my experience the FET teacher portrays many of the above qualities and characteristics, as the teaching approach is often facilitative rather than didactic with an emphasis on listening and emphasising their positive points. FET teachers are cognisant of the fact that they are teaching adults who have a lot of life experience and prior knowledge. FET teachers seek out the learners' needs and nuances in a non-threatening way in order to support the FET learner in their return to education (MacBeath 1999).

According to MacBeath (1999) the personal qualities listed above are attributes that are hard to learn or to teach and he suggests that they are perhaps all the more important for that reason. He feels that the interpersonal skills highlighted are skills that can be developed within individuals and improved on within one's teaching career. The professional characteristics outlined are what teachers are taught and learn in college and teacher training. MacBeath highlights that effective, quality teachers and effective, quality students do not exist in some kind of 'idealised vacuum' (1999, p.60) but are actually an outcome of one another's expectations and behaviour. Have we ever thought of this before? The study concludes that the essential quality of the good teacher is the teacher that is 'there for you' and 'has faith in you', 'make you feel clever' and 'really care for your opinion' (p.60). However, the author also warns against being too caring and that stronger interpersonal qualities promote high expectations that are motivating and challenging learners to do better (p.61). The professional teacher has many characteristics. Their personal

qualities are important to teaching as they bring the 'caring' element to the profession. How they interact with learners through interpersonal skills also plays a critical role in how effective they are in their teaching and the impact they have on learning. As professional teachers in our practice we need to be able to explain course material in a meaningful and interesting way; we need to be able to move our learners forward in their learning in order for them to progress through the learning material at an acceptable rate and level. We need to be able to ensure that they understand material being covered and not to be afraid when they don't, knowing that they will learn concepts in time and with patience (MacBeath 1999).

Jarvis (2010) cites work from Knowles in 1980 where he sets out seven principles to the process of teaching adults:

1. setting a climate for learning
2. establishing a structure for mutual planning
3. diagnosing learning needs
4. formulating directions for learning
5. designing a pattern of learning experiences
6. managing the execution of the learning experiences
7. evaluating the results and re-diagnosing learning needs (*Jarvis 2010, p.193)*

In the above seven stages Knowles is referring to the environment in which learning takes place, both physical and emotional, being extremely important for the learners' engagement. Knowles highlights the importance of learner and teacher relationships in order to move forward together as a unit, as equal partners in the process of learning. It is when the relationship is solid and developed that a diagnosis of learning needs can be established and paths laid out for the direction of the learning. Knowles advocates that the learners themselves need to design their pattern of learning and that it is the teacher's role to execute that learning, as a resource or coach by providing the necessary materials and possible techniques needed to complete the learning cycle. At the end of the learning cycle teachers and learners together need to reflect and evaluate the results and re-examine the learning needs for the next learning cycle. All this highlights the complexity of teaching and learning with adults.

2.6.2 Authenticity in Teaching

Cranton and Carusetta (2004) define authenticity in teaching as '...a cluster of values related to self-awareness and bringing that self into teaching, understanding of learners and our relationships with them, a positioning of ourselves within a context and taking stances on issues and norms in the workplace and in our social world, and finally, engaging in critical reflection on each of these components' (p. 288). The authors go on to describe that it is not just about being genuine and open but it is also about your teaching being '*socially situated'*. Authenticity in teaching portrays a social constructivist perspective on learning. If we are to be authentic teachers we have to be conscious of ourselves, of others, of relationships and of the context of teaching through critical reflection and as the authors state it is a '...journey of transformation and individuation' (p.288). Mezirow (2000), cited in Cranton and Carusetta (2004), states that transformative learning takes place when we begin to question our assumptions, beliefs, values and perspectives and as a result we become more open and better validated in our own minds. If you are transformative in your learning you will begin to make meaning from your experiences. The authors give the example of new teachers when they start their teaching career, will '...teach the way they experienced teaching in their past' (p.288). But through time and through experience of teaching they will come up against unexpected occurrences and will begin to question their previously held assumptions about teaching. Teachers may then revise these previously held assumptions and change their ways of teaching to being more authentic: teaching and learning is very much a journey for teachers as well as learners. 'Critical reflection need not be linear, but it is a rational process of coming to question habits of mind that have become too narrow and too limiting. Critical reflection played a primary role in the way participants talked about developing authenticity' (p.289). Cranton and Carusetta (2004) state that if we are to keep our 'self' in our teaching, as in becoming individuals who teach rather than follow mindless social expectations, we need to concentrate on becoming more conscious. What is emerging from the literature is that authenticity in teaching is when teachers critically reflect on their practice and make necessary changes in their practice to

improve learning for themselves and learners. They are cognitively aware of what learning 'is' and means for learners and the impact of learning on learners. They are confident that they do not have to follow the existing 'social expectations' of teaching and that they can challenge colleagues and learners respectively.

The research question in this project relates to promoting professional learning communities in the FET context. Authenticity in teaching, as described by Cranton and Carusetta, may be argued as a solid foundation for teachers to be engaged with in order to participate in professional learning. As indicated above, this will also require teachers to immerse themselves in reflective practice. The next section of this review will explore further the critically reflective teacher.

2.6.3 Reflective Practice

Stephen Brookfield is a highly regarded theorist associated with reflective teaching. In the opening chapter of his seminal publication, *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher* (1995) he states we '...teach to change the world' (p.1). Our vision as teachers is that through our teaching we will teach our learners to act towards each other and the environment in which they live with compassion, understanding, and fairness (p.1). However, Brookfield warns us that, 'One of the hardest things teachers have to learn is that the sincerity of their intentions does not guarantee the purity of their practice' (p.1). But we cannot be expected to take personal responsibility for this, a point also highlighted by McQueen and Webber (2009). We cannot take the blame for resistance to learning from our learners: we cannot look only at our own practice to explain these problems. We need to start looking at our teaching from a '...variety of viewpoints' (p.7). Yvonne Hillier (2005) asks: why should we reflect critically on our daily practice. What can it achieve? According to Brookfield, 'Critically reflective teachers can stand outside their practice and see what they do in a wider perspective' (p.16), that their practice is not all about teaching. Critically reflective teachers know that they cannot get the 'perfect ten' score from their teaching and learner's experiences of it and that they cannot meet

everyone's needs. Brookfield (1995) shows us some compelling reasons as to why we should look at becoming more critically aware in our teaching:

- It helps us to take informed actions
- It helps us to develop a rationale for practice
- It helps us to avoid self-laceration
- It grounds us emotionally
- It enlivens our classrooms
- It increases democratic trust

However, overall critical reflection is the essence of urging '...us to create conditions under which each person is respected, valued, and heard' (p.27). Hillier (2005) adds to Brookfield's analysis and states that if we begin to reflect as teachers we begin to challenge our previous held assumptions and experiences. Hillier (2005) suggests using Brookfield's four critically reflective lenses; our own viewpoint (autobiographical lens), our colleagues, our learners viewpoint and theoretical literature for our reflections. These are elaborated on in the table below.

Critical Reflection Process	
Our Students' Eyes Seeing ourselves as the learners' see us. This will confirm and challenge our assumptions. Are learners taking from our practice what we want them to?	***Theory*** Relevant literature can provide us with a wealth of knowledge and insight into familiar teaching practices and situations. The theory will help us understand our experiences of practice.
Autobiography We see our practice from the 'other side'. We connect with what our students are experiencing. What frames our practice? What is important to us? When we know where we are placed in this process we can begin to ask our colleagues, students and look at theory to define it more.	***Colleagues' Experiences*** We will become aware of practice by engaging with our colleagues in a reflective way. We will look at our practice in a new light.

Table 6 Brookfield's Four Critically Reflective Lenses

Collaboration with colleagues and embedding critical reflective practice into the whole school system are essential together with constant engagement with our learners to make sure they are closing the learning gap and moving forward with their learning (Brookfield 1995). Excellent

teachers are always trying to shape teaching and learning environments into democratic spaces of knowledge exchange (Miller 2010, p.1).

This section of the review discussed the processes of teaching and the attributes of the 'effective' teacher with regard to informing the research on ways to promote a professional learning community in the FET context. The section discussed authenticity in teaching and what it means to be reflective teachers, which are necessary qualities for teachers willing to engage in a culture of learning on their practice. Teaching is about learning and is at the core of what we do as teachers everyday. The next section will examine teacher learning discourse and its importance in relation to being a professional teacher.

2.7 Teacher Learning Discourse

Teaching and learning is the process of developing sufficient knowledge to then move to deep or conceptual understanding (Hattie 2012, p.26) for all students at all levels of achievement. There is a need for teachers to have learning at the 'forefront' and that they '...consider teaching primarily in terms of its impact on student learning' (Hattie 2012, p.1).

Learning is not spontaneous. 'It is via deliberate practice and concentration that learning is fostered...' (Hattie 2012, p.122). Too often the educational professions talk about teaching and not enough about learning (Hattie 2012, p.185). Prosser *et al*. (2003) mirrored these thoughts by stating that teachers need to understand that 'conceptual change and development' do not occur through accumulation of information but by supporting and engaging students to see that information in light of their own experiences - learning. The authors state that this requires a student-focused approach to teaching where the focus is '...students' experiences of learning - not the teachers' experiences of teaching' (p.47). Hattie demands of us to debate how students learn, how do we know when our students are learning, how do students learn differently? 'Learning is premised on understanding what the students begin with, then acquiring a balance of surface and deep understanding, and finally helping students to take more control over their

learning' (Hattie 2012, p.108). Teachers should 'see learning through the eyes of the students' (p.112). For Sotto (2007) 'real learning is much more a matter of seeing a question than acquiring an answer' (p.5). I would ask the question, are we talking enough about learning? In Ireland, the framework for Teachers Learning, *Cosán*, is being developed. The framework states that it is the hallmark of the teaching profession that it continues to learn so that it can continue to teach effectively (The Teaching Council 2016). The Council state that teachers involved in collaboration are working towards shared professional learning goals. They will have identified personal learning pathways towards those learning goals. These pathways will inevitably overlap and it is at these points of intersection that teachers can strike an appropriate balance between enhancement of their own practice as individuals and the creation of a responsive and dynamic community of practice on the other (The Teaching Council 2016 p.12).

How learners see themselves as 'learners' has a big influence on their engagement with learning (Richardson 2011, p.290) as does the environment in which learning occurs (Purdie, Hattie and Douglas 1996). Learners need to 'experience' what they are being taught. How learners are exposed to different experiences can make a vital difference. Sotto (2007) discusses setting up learning climates so learners get an opportunity to 'experience' and ultimately foster a climate of learning (p.123). Different learners will approach this learning climate in different ways. But learners will not have an experience of something if they are 'told' about it – they need to experience it. MacBeath (1999) refers to this as the 'climate of learning' and recommends the following;

- As a group of teachers you should discuss the way you view students in the school
- Time and space should be made, experiment with different approaches to teaching and learning and discussion of what makes for 'good' teaching and learning (p.36).

2.7.1 Collaborative Learning

Cultures in schools build social and professional capital in a school's community (Hargreaves and Fullan 2012, p.114). The authors discuss what it means to transform a culture and feel the answer lies '…in bringing

into the open the connection between what people believe and who believes it, and thereby making it necessary for people to examine their own culture and its impact' (p.103). Rosenholtz (1991) highlighted the 'moving' school culture whereby teachers always sought and continued to learn to teach more effectively (Hargreaves and Fullan 2010, p.111). A collaborative learning culture in schools is about getting support from and communicating with colleagues, which result in greater confidence and certainty about teaching. This certainty is situational arising out of trust, advice, and shared expertise. 'Teachers who work in professional cultures of collaboration tend to perform better than teachers who work alone' (Hargreaves and Fullan 2010, pp.111-112). Elmore (2000) states that when there is a culture for learning in the relevant school context it can be very positive.

> Experimentation and discovery can be harnessed to social learning by connecting people with new ideas to each other in an environment in which the ideas are subjected to scrutiny, measured against collective purposes of the organisation, and tested by the history of what has already been learned and is known (p.25).

Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002) consider communities of practice being made up of members who share a concern, a set of problems, an enthusiasm for a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise by interacting on an ongoing basis (Ní Shúilleabháin 2012, p.31). According to Ní Shúilleabháin these interactions that take place in communities of practice '…become defined and refined on an ongoing basis through the collaboration of members and thus develop into practices of the community' (p.31). An atmosphere and culture of collaboration between teachers, and between teachers and students, is a solid foundation for effective and progressive learning to take place.

Double-loop learning comes to mind here. Argyris (1976) discusses double-loop learning and how by changing the governing values and changing actions, errors can be corrected. 'In collaborative cultures, failures and uncertainty are not protected and defended, but instead are shared and discussed with a view to gaining help and support' (Hargreaves and Fullan, 2010, p.113). Argyris discussed the governing values of

collaborative cultures being valid information, free and informed choice and internal commitment among a team or group of people. The end result should be increased effectiveness in decision making or policy making, in the monitoring of the decisions and policies and in the probabilities that errors and failures would be communicated openly and that actors would learn from the feedback (p. 369). Hargreaves and Fullan (2010) concur with this point. 'In collaborative cultures, failures and uncertainty are not protected and defended, but instead are shared and discussed with a view to gaining help and support' (p.113).

This research project explored ways of promoting a professional learning community within the case study institution. The review of the literature above indicated that as professional learning teachers, we need to engage in collaborative discourse to learn about learner engagement and how to keep learners engaged in their learning in a positive and progressive way. Learning is the ability to learn in new situations, where skills can be adapted to suit the requirements of new tasks (Baartman and deBrujin 2011, p.128). The authors refer to 'integration processes' whereby relationships are built between items of knowledge, skills and attitudes. John Hattie (2013) offers seven fundamental principles of learning.

1. Learning involves time, energy, deliberate teaching and effort
2. Structure and relations
3. Limitations of the mind
4. Learning from others
5. Confidence is a multiplier
6. Maintenance and feedback
7. Learning strategies (p.26)

It is relevant to discuss these learning principles in relation to the professional learning on which this project is focused. Investment of time, energy, and effort is required to develop '...mastery in all knowledge domains' (p.26). Hattie warns that it is not the amount of time devoted but the '...particular uses of time and timing': he refers to engaged time. There needs to be a deliberate effort on the part of the learner to improve performance such as giving specific teaching to the skill, making the success criteria explicit or giving feedback to reduce the gap between

where the student is at with their learning and the success criteria. It is what he calls 'deliberate practice' (p.27). Teachers who have a high impact on student learning are highly proficient and effective in moving their students from surface to deep knowledge (p.30). Hattie suggests showing learners exemplars of work and clearly identifying success criteria with learners. Hattie also discusses the learning that is gained from our peers as, 'We learn from social examples; watching, doing deliberative instruction and feedback from others' (p.31) and so Hattie wants us to create opportunities for learners to learn from each other. The aim of assessment should be to help teachers understand how the student is progressing and how far they need to go to meet the success criteria, or to close the learning gap and Hattie (2013) has an optimal model; it is '...when teachers have high-level skills in diagnosing where on the learning progression a student is, having multiple interventions in their tool kit then to optimise the best teaching relative to that diagnosis, and constantly evaluating their (the teacher's) impact on the learning and where needed to alter their behaviour, their interventions and their materials to optimise student learning' (p.33). Hattie also highlights the distinction between feedback given and feedback received – how do we know that our students understand the feedback we give them? Hattie (2013) discusses the 'mind frames' of teachers. His primary message is that '...enhancing teacher quality is one of the keys-and the way in which to achieve this is through ensuring that every teacher in the school has the mind frame that leads to the greatest positive effect on student learning and achievement (p.191). He asks teachers to 'know thy impact'. It is hoped that by exploring ways of promoting a professional learning community among teachers, that is the instance of this project, will ignite the frame of reference of teachers that will lead to a focus on student learning for all.

2.8 Conclusion

This chapter has presented a review of professional teacher learning, learning and teaching processes and teacher-learner discourse in order to inform the instance of this project that is looking at ways to promote a professional learning community in the FET context. The literature

examined professional teacher learning, including collaborative learning. Traditional learning theories as well as empirical research associated with adult learning and its teaching approaches were included. The review examined teaching, with a focus on being an 'effective teacher', being authentic and reflective within the adult learning context. Hattie (2013) states that teachers need to look more deeply at how their students learn. He observes there is not enough discourse happening on learning and what it looks like. There is a need to look for evidence that our students are learning and he states that engaging students is our responsibility as teachers. Sotto (2007) advocates a collaborative emphasis in the teaching environment and the need for teachers to foster the existing motivation of learners. This is a complex and significant challenge; it is a social process (Schaap *et al* 2012, p.109).

This project was exploring ways to promote a PLC in the FET context and so from the in-depth reading of the literature I developed a framework (fig: 5) from which to embark on this process within the case study institution.

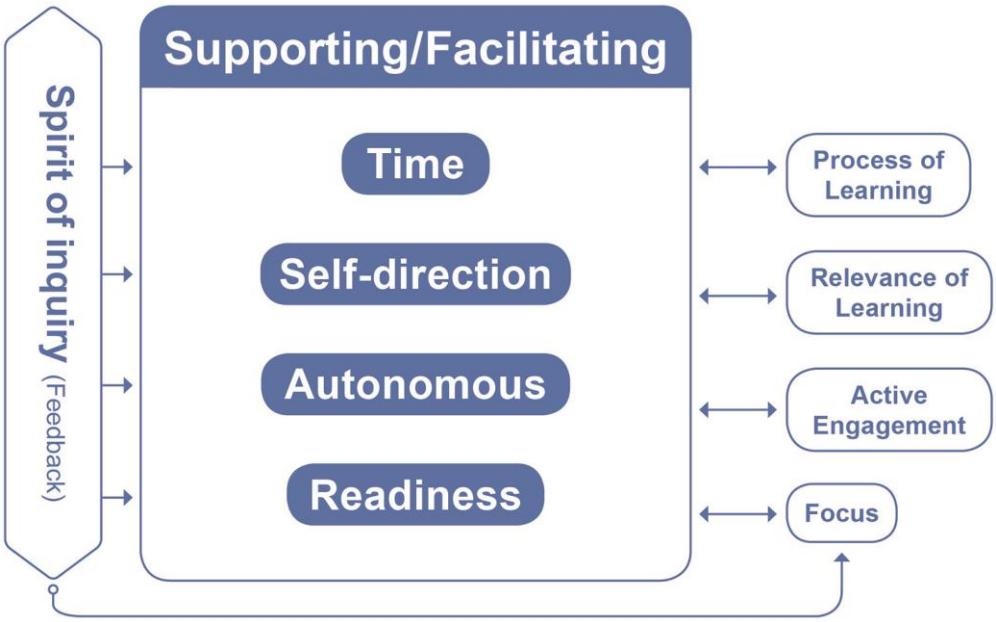


Figure 5 Framework for the Research Design Project

From the extensive reading on the topic of teaching and learning, I discovered the complexity of the situation. I learned the value and benefit of encouraging teacher collaboration in a community within the FET centre. I began by generating a spirit of inquiry (Heywood 2009) through

establishing a focus on an element of practice [feedback] by implementing this teaching and learning intervention into the case study institution in a planned way. The focus on feedback allowed this spirit of inquiry to develop and evolve organically in the setting. This activity was supported and facilitated at all stages of the project. The instance of the project had a number of defining characteristics. Time was allocated for teachers to come together to engage in discourse and collaboration about their practice on feedback. Teachers involved in the project were allowed the freedom and space to drive the project in a way that suited them in their classrooms. This allowed the teachers to be autonomous in the project but also in their practice on feedback throughout the life of the study. However, this all depended on the readiness of the teachers to get involved: being both psychologically and behaviourally prepared to take action.

The next chapter will present the context of this study with a particular emphasis on the readiness of the participants. It will document the preparatory phase of the project. The chapter includes an examination of assessment for learning (AfL) theory and its five core strategies that was the teaching and learning framework that the project adapted to engage FET teachers in a professional learning community.

Chapter 3

The Context of the Research

Chapter Three The Context of the Research

3.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the context in which this research project took place. The chapter will describe the FET teachers that participated in the research over the life of the study. It describes the initial workshops that took place with the research participants within the case study institution, which resulted in the preparatory phase of the project. It documents the developments that took place following the initial workshops and the learning that took place for me as the researcher. The chapter discusses assessment for learning theory that played a pivotal role in the focus of the study and the intervention employed.

The preparatory phase for this project took place between August and December 2014. Following the detailed examination of the aforementioned literature, including literature on assessment for learning, the idea for the research study was formed; I took an accepted and established theory of teaching and learning, AfL [feedback] and used this as a platform from which to engage FET teachers as practitioners in exploring their practice through collaboration, conversations and sharing.

> *I am amazed at how my research has evolved over the year. While I set out with AfL being the focus, I realise now that this study is more about teaching and learning and that AfL is just the platform/framework/intervention that I am using to talk about teaching and learning in our centre (Research Journal, 25 August, 2014)*

From this juncture, in the institution we began a process of implementing a planned teaching and learning intervention into our practice and started a conversation about its overall influence on our teaching, our students' learning and on the whole case study centre.

3.2 FET Teachers

The teachers invited to participate in this study are qualified FET teachers working in the case study institution for over 10 years. The participants were recruited on the basis that they were teaching in the centre during the academic years 2014/2015, 2015/2016 and 2016/2017. It was also a prerequisite that the participants were fully qualified and registered teachers with the Teaching Council. Once ethical approval was granted

from National University of Ireland Galway, the Board of the Galway and Roscommon Education and Training Board (GRETB) were contacted to seek permission to invite teachers to participate in the study. This contact gave background information on the research purpose and design.

I felt it was important to communicate as much information as possible to the research participants at this early stage on the research process and project and this proved very valuable, as the research participants were fully informed in advance of committing to the project.

Anonymity for the participants is a crucial issue (Flick 2007) and is difficult to maintain in small-scale qualitative research. In order to ensure anonymity, the participants in this research were given random pseudonyms, which were selected with no specific rationale in mind. The location of the case study institution was also anonymous. The participants' pseudonyms are as follows: Kevin, Mary, Susan, Una, Breda and Seán. Kevin began his teaching career after many years running his own business. He returned to education and obtained a Level 9 qualification in Education. Mary began her professional career as a nurse and also returned to education and received a Level 8 qualification in Education. Susan started her professional career in industry but always held a teaching qualification in Art and Design. She has been teaching since 2002. Una has been teaching all throughout her career and holds education qualifications on the national framework of qualifications up to level 10. Breda's teaching career began when she completed her Level 8 qualification having returned to education after many years. She then also completed a Level 9 qualification as she began teaching in the GRETB. Seán has been teaching in the third level sector since the beginning of his teaching career and holds a level 9 qualification. All six were well qualified and experienced in their subject disciplines.

Their commitment to the research was evident as they fully engaged with the project from the very start. A possible reason for this is that they are all committed to lifelong learning in their careers and that aided and

supported this research greatly. They valued the activity and were therefore committed to it and the end result. As the leader in the FET unit my working relationship with the participants outside of the research project has always been very positive and this possibly influenced their decision to get involved as well. They looked for direction from me on the intervention being implemented as they would in other everyday occurrences in the centre. The fact that I already had an established facilitative and leadership relationship with the research participants also may have supported the success of the project during the early stages of the research. I spoke to them all individually to invite them along to the induction workshop so that I could explain the study to them personally. Looking back, this was a good approach, as they knew then what to expect from the study.

Ethical 'dilemmas' are an intrinsic part of action research (Banegas and Villacanas de Castro, 2015) because of its collaborative nature. All involved hold different motivations, perspectives and 'institutional roles' that raise power and control issues. The authors recommend anticipating these issues if you are embarking on research and to be prepared to '…handle them through sincere and respectful dialogue' (p.58). At all times during this research project I aimed to keep the teachers informed of the research and all its elements. There were no barriers or inhibitions present among the teachers involved. In particular, there was a lot of interest in the intervention element to the research. Action research as a research strategy states that when the enquiry is shared with others, and they wish to become involved, possibly by critiquing, or by deciding to do something similar, or by offering ideas for new enquiries, then it becomes an appraisal and professional assessment and a context for collaborative learning in the workplace (McNiff 2002). The teachers were interested in feedback as they felt it would be useful for their everyday practice.

Looking back, I remember that I was anxious about embarking on this project with my work colleagues of over ten years. I felt that I was putting myself on 'display' but also was hoping that they would get involved as I

felt that this type of activity (meeting to discuss our practice) in the centre would really improve our professional practice and encourage a culture of professional learning.

> *But I just want to get them 'thinking' about feedback. I am a little nervous as I am putting myself 'out there' a little but I am excited too to see how it all goes (Researcher Journal, 25 August, 2014)*

3.2.1 Initial Workshop with FET teachers

I met with the teachers on the 27th of August 2014. I asked them to come in an hour early before a routine teacher-planning meeting that we always have at the beginning of each academic year. This decision was made in an effort to embed the project with the least amount of disruption and deliberate effort for the teachers.

Induction Workshop 1 - August 27th 2014	
10.00 – 10.15am	Get teachers into a group to get their current knowledge of feedback and to brainstorm this area. Will ask them to produce a mind map.
10.15 – 10.30am	Feedback from group, add to their knowledge, look at what has not being mentioned.
10.30 – 10.45am	Overview of AfL and the study. Present an article that gives a good overview of AfL (Wiliam, 2010)
10.45 – 11am	Introduce the 4 effective feedback strategies that I am proposing them to introduce into practice and also an article on feedback.

Table 7 Induction Workshop with Teachers

From the very start of the workshop there was an immediate positive engagement and openness. The group explored the term feedback and what it meant to them as practicing teachers.

> *There was very little hesitation. There is one teacher who is very skilled and she took the notes and 'coordinated' the session. However, the other three were very vocal and all contributed equally (Research Journal, 28 August 2014)*

As the group were working on their mind map of feedback I did not want my presence to distract them. I decided to leave the room, which is a

teaching strategy from Sotto (2010) about '…leaving your class to get on with it'. I allowed them 15 minutes to carry out this task, following which we had an informed discussion, most notably about the difficulties around engaging in and giving feedback to learners. The image below (figure 6) is a photo of the mind map that was created from that session. It was clear that their current knowledge of feedback was very good: however, the dialogue on feedback laid the emphasis on '…giving feedback on finished work'. There was a need for me as the researcher and facilitator in this project to explain to the teachers that feedback is also about embedding it into the delivery of course material right throughout their subject material.

Figure 6 Mind-map from Initial Workshop with FET Teachers

Following this I gave a short presentation outlining the background to the theory of assessment for learning (AfL) highlighting in particular the work of Dylan Wiliam and Paul Black (Black and Wiliam 1998; Black and Wiliam 2001; Black and Wiliam 2009; Black and Wiliam 2012; Black *et al* 2004; Wiliam 2004; Wiliam 2006; Wiliam 2008; Wiliam 2011). This was followed by a discussion. During the discussion, I explained the basis for AfL implementation in classrooms; there is a need for teacher involvement,

there needs to be an ethos of dialogue in the classroom and teachers must be willing to engage in a change in practice. I presented one slide in more detail on feedback, the contents of which are below (figure 7). The slide was used to explore with the group their practice of feedback and to consider the questions in the slide around their current feedback actions within their classrooms. How much feedback do you give, is it written or oral, when do you give it, do your learners understand it? This triggered an engaged and learning discussion among the group on their current practices with feedback.

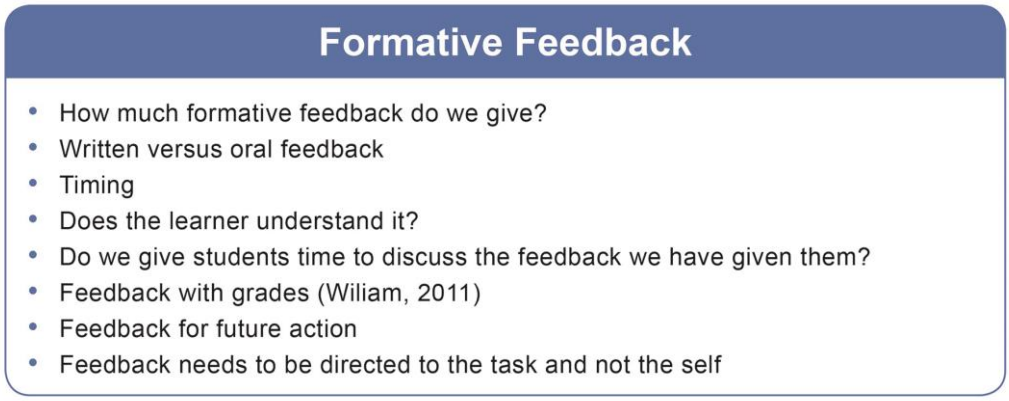


Figure 7 Feedback Slide

Also in the presentation, I outlined the research design and data collection plan over the two academic years (2014-2015 and 2015-2016) and the data collection methods that I planned to use; interviews, teacher discussion group sessions, researcher journal, teacher notes, other documents. In the workshop, we agreed on four AfL feedback strategies, which I had adapted to suit the FET sector as the majority of Wiliam's (2011) work has been carried out in secondary and third level sectors of education (Gardner 2012).

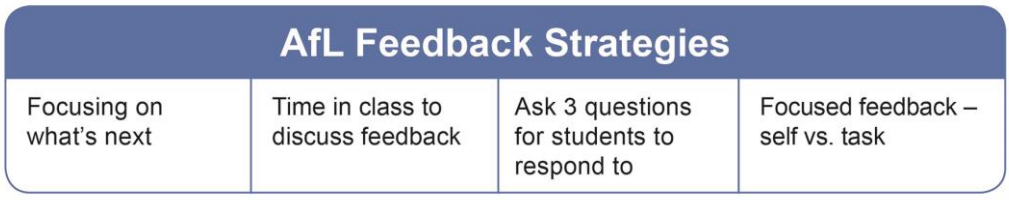


Figure 8 Feedback Strategies

Once the group had discussed the feedback strategies their reaction was positive:

> *They could see that it was 'planned' [feedback] as opposed to being ad hoc, which is what they were doing in practice. Another revealing point was that sometimes we have to tell the learners that we are giving them feedback…sometimes they don't know' (Researcher Journal, 28 August 2014)*

I was very encouraged by this first workshop. I felt it was a very positive start. *'Overall it was very encouraging, they realised that … they will also benefit (in their practice). It was a very positive first start'* (*Researcher Journal, 28 August 2014*). Coming away from the workshop I was confident that the teachers were enthusiastic about the project as there was a very engaged, open discussion and my research journal reflects the same. 'It was a very honest discussion – they opened up and highlighted the difficulties of giving feedback' (*Research Journal, 28 August 2014*). It was agreed that they would 'think' about feedback in a more focused way over the next eight weeks and would try to use the four strategies identified. There was no emphasis put on one strategy over another; I wanted the teachers to 'try' them out, play around with them to get a 'feel' for this new focused activity on feedback in their practice.

Following this session, I officially wrote to the teachers inviting them to participate in the study. I prepared the necessary documents: letter to invite participants and research consent form (see appendix 3 and 5). There were many occasions during this preparatory phase where informal chats and conversations took place between me and the participating teachers and also between the teachers themselves. These informal groupings often yielded rich data on how teachers were thinking and engaging with the proposed intervention. It revealed to me that there was an interest and teachers felt happy to be engaged in improving their practice. In particular during this period I had many conversations with Una about the project.

> *She [Una] said it was a good exercise to focus us all at the beginning of the year and to get back into it. She also felt that the group size was good as if there were more teachers it can be hard to focus it. She really felt the relevance of it [feedback] and the practicality of it, as we have to be so conscious of feedback all the time (Researcher Journal, 8 September 2014)*

In early November, eight weeks since the initial meeting, I met with two of the participating teachers to re-focus on feedback. Susan highlighted during this meeting that it is was very difficult to actually carry out the feedback in a planned way at the beginning of the term, as you are trying to get classes and groups up and running. She reported that attendance and start-ups were also impacting on when and how you deliver feedback. Often at the start of academic years in the FET sector you are recruiting right up to the November mid-term break trying to get a full cohort of learners for a class. This is very challenging for FET teachers, as they often have to repeat a lot of course material several times during this period for new learners in the class. Susan stated that she felt that now her classes are settled she would start to concentrate a little more on implementing a planned feedback strategy. Susan, Una and I discussed the four feedback strategies that we were implementing into practice. It was agreed that the best way forward with the strategies in order to really get a feel for each one was for the team of participating teachers to implement each strategy for a period of time and then to meet in our teacher discussion group to discuss how it went for each of the participating teachers. It was agreed to try the feedback strategy *time in class* in the academic term January to March 2015. I noted in my journal;

> *I was very happy with this decision that the participating teachers came up with this approach to the strategies themselves having discussed it. I wanted them to come up with how we should do this and how they can engage in this type of activity without me as the study researcher directing how it should all unfold (Researcher Journal 2014)*

This was very positive as it meant that they were taking ownership of engaging with the intervention and they also felt that this is how it can work for them in their practice, under their working patterns and conditions.

> *I felt the teachers were very engaged and the fact that it was something [feedback] practical that they can engage in. It's very exciting (Researcher Journal 7 November 2014)*

Two of the teachers could not attend the first meeting and so that presented a challenge for the future development of the project and something I needed to control as the study progressed.

There was a realisation amongst the participants that it is difficult to integrate planned feedback into class delivery. Teachers felt that they had always given feedback but there was a new realisation that it may not have been *effective* feedback and that they now needed to work on getting it more planned and focused in their class.

> *I think this phase has been invaluable and timely now for data collection as they've [the teachers] had a breaking-in period. They can see how long and difficult it takes to implement this [feedback]' (Researcher Journal, 27 November, 2014)*

Researcher Learning from Preparatory Phase of Study

My observations from this period were that teachers were willing to get involved in the project. The practical element, the AfL feedback intervention, was a positive way to approach this idea of promoting a professional learning community within the case study institution. Two teachers, Susan and Una, met me on a few occasions during this period to discuss the feedback intervention. The reason for the difficulty in meeting the other participating teachers was the fact that there was no time allocated within the existing timetable. The two people also work in other places and find it a barrier to meet outside of class time. Overall, I felt it was a good 'breaking in' period for the study, for me as the researcher and for the group involved. The teachers and I were getting accustomed to the idea of working collaboratively on a teaching and learning intervention in the case study institution. The teachers were trying all the strategies but felt this did not work very well and so when I met with Susan and Una in November there was a decision that we would focus on one first and then come together in the teacher discussion group session and discuss its influence in the classroom. This decision came from the group themselves. The following is a diagram outlining the actions that took place within this phase.

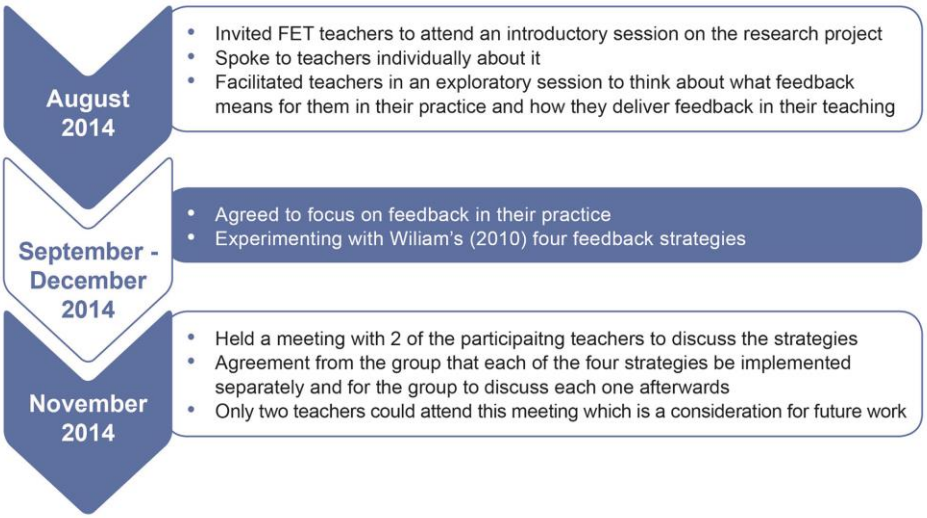


Figure 9 Actions During Preparatory Phase

John Gardner (2012) acknowledges that the majority of research looking at Assessment for Learning (AfL) has taken place mainly in the compulsory phases of education (primary, lower and upper secondary). The focus of this research project is to explore ways of promoting a professional learning community among teachers in an FET context through using an adaptation of an AfL strategy [feedback] as a conduit and enabler of the process. Black and Wiliam (1998) define assessment for learning as, '...encompassing all those activities undertaken by teachers, and/or by their students, which provide information to be used as feedback to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged' (Black and Wiliam 1998, pp.7-8). Assessment becomes formative when the evidence is used to adapt the teaching methodologies to improve learning. As I explored the AfL theory and literature in advance of this research project, this for me was the central attraction, when teachers use class activities to change, alter or leave the same teaching practices to improve the learning for students. Derrick and Ecclestone (2008) point out that, '...many teachers, students and designers of qualifications and summative tests equate formative assessment with continuous or modular assessment, which merely comprises summative tasks broken up into interim ones' (2008 p.11). Assessment for learning is a time-consuming teaching practice that uses assessment in class to assist learners to move to the next step in their learning. The Assessment Reform Group's (2002) definition of assessment for learning is '...the process of seeking and

interpreting evidence for use by learners and their teachers, to identify where the learners are in their learning, where they need to go and how best to get there' (p.3). What is critical in this definition is that AfL is a 'process' rather than an event; it is a strategy that is built into teaching and should occur seamlessly. Teachers fully engaging in AfL pedagogies will need to plan the learning environment and the activities/tasks they set for their learners. Teachers will need to be aware of and assess the learners' understanding as they are learning. The final step in this process is teachers needing support in channelling learners to enable them to reach the final piece in the jigsaw of their learning (Gardner 2012).

The knowledge and skill base of the teacher is paramount for AfL to take place functionally in a classroom (Shepard, 2005). Teachers need to have an in-depth knowledge of their subject area to deliver this type of classroom activity. Swaffield (2011) highlighted the point that expertise needs to be recognised in colleagues and this expertise needs to be nurtured and shared among colleagues. Often the required expertise can be among a collective group of teaching staff in a work setting. This is a further reason for promoting teachers collaboration and sharing on practice in this project. It is the researcher's opinion that this will be a new experience for FET teachers working in Ireland. It is generally accepted and stems from traditional classroom practice that we are not used to working collaboratively on our teaching methodologies and strategies.

3.3 Assessment for Learning Strategies

Wiliam (2011) outlined five 'non-negotiable' strategies of effective AfL: identify and clarify the successful standard, effective classroom dialogue, formative feedback, encourage students to engage in peer assessment and activate students as owners of their own learning.

3.3.1 Standards and Criteria

Surprisingly, sharing learning intentions with second level students is a recent phenomenon (Wiliam 2011) in the UK. Several UK districts have instructed schools to 'post' a learning objective at the beginning of each and every class (p.56). However, Wiliam (2011) states that this has often

led to 'tokenism' and is not what he had intended by the strategy of clarifying, sharing and understanding learning intentions and success criteria. Students need to be cognisant of the standards criteria for the learning that is taking place (Wiliam, 2008). Boud (2000) further develops this point when he points out that students need to be able to identify the standards criteria in order to take responsibility for their own learning. Students need to learn how to keep track of their progress in order for them to become independent learners in an independent society (Black *et al* 2004, Boud 2000). 'But the real value may lie in students internalising the standards expected so that they can supervise themselves and improve the quality of their own assignments prior to submitting them' (Gibbs and Simpson 2004-5, p.20). Providing examples of material that illustrates the difference between grades or the difference between analysing and describing something often makes the point more powerful (Specialist Schools and Academies Trust, 2008). Engaging learners in the design of the curriculum is also recommended by Srinivasan (1977) and Wiliam (2011). This resonates with the cognitive theory of learning in that the learner needs to find 'meaning' in what they are being taught. Learners need to have control of what they are learning. Once students and teachers are cognitively aware of where they are going in their learning, the next stage in the learning process is to know if they are 'on track' with their learning. One way of doing this is through the medium of effective classroom dialogue and high order questioning.

3.3.2 Effective Classroom Dialogue and Questioning

The second non-negotiable strategy identified by Wiliam (2011) is the practice of dialogue and questioning in classrooms. From the Working Inside the Black Box study (Black *et al* 2004), the authors discovered that teachers do not really plan or think about devising questions for their classes. They suggest that more effort be put into framing the questions to allow for deeper understanding of a topic. The follow up activities of this type of questioning will facilitate greater learning and understanding. The authors suggest a role-change in the teacher, '...the teachers also shift in their role, from presenters of content to leaders of an exploration and

development of ideas in which all students are involved' (Black *et al* 2004, p.13). Marsh (2007) agrees that high-order questioning and problem-solving techniques should be used in the classroom and that a 'repertoire' of questioning techniques needs to be developed and teachers need to share these with colleagues (Derrick and Ecclestone 2008) through learning and sharing opportunities among teachers. Wiliam (2011) also makes this point that '...teacher collaboration will help to build a stock of good questions' (p.78). According to Wiliam (2011), 'Questions that provide a window into students' thinking are not easy to generate, but they are crucially important if we are to improve the quality of students' learning' (p.77). There are two reasons to ask questions: to cause thinking to take place and to provide information for the teacher about what should occur next in the lesson (Wiliam 2011, p.79). The outcomes of using dialogue in the classroom are that '...people learn, remember, approach problems, and evaluate their learning, as well as appropriate subject knowledge and formal assessment criteria' (Derrick and Ecclestone 2008, p.71). Effective feedback was the planned AfL intervention that was implemented for the purposes of this project to provide a framework to promote a professional learning community in the FET case study institution.

3.3.3 Formative Feedback

There is a strong suggestion in the literature that feedback, written or oral is one of the major tools of AfL (Hattie and Timperley 2007; Shute 2008; Sadler 1998; Bloxham and West 2007; Harlem 2012; Carless 2003, 2006; Cramp 2012; Brookhart 2011). Students engage more productively in improving their work when they receive comment only feedback (Black *et al* 2004). What is essential, however, is the quality of comments: the feedback needs to identify what still needs to be learned. As the authors say, '...feedback should cause thinking to take place' and lead towards '...a distinctive step in the process of learning' (Black *et a*l 2004, p.14). When attention is brought towards the excellence and problems of a task it helps to develop the learners' own understanding of quality and how to distinguish quality in their work (Derrick and Ecclestone 2008).

Often feedback is not read and not even understood. That is why the 'language' of feedback is critical, '...any feedback must be expressed by the teacher in language that is already known and understood by the learner' (Sadler 1998, p.82). Brookhart (2011) also makes this point that the most important characteristic of feedback is that students understand it and use it (p.34). 'The tone of feedback, whether written or oral, should convey your confidence in the student as a learner' (Brookhart 2011, p.35). Immediate feedback improves student performance. 'If students do not receive feedback fast enough then they will have moved on to new content and the feedback is irrelevant to their ongoing studies...' (Gibbs and Simpson 2004-5, p.19). Brookhart (2011) also comments on the timing of feedback, 'For any student work, feedback needs to come while students still remember what the assignment was and why they were doing it' (p.34). The way feedback is delivered can be differentially effective (Hattie and Timperley, 2007). The instruction and feedback need to be 'melting' together according to the authors. 'Feedback has its greatest effect when a learner expects a response to be correct and it turns out to be wrong' (Hattie and Timperley 2007, p.95). The authors argue that the learner will be motivated to try and get it correct the next time. There is great concern when the student does not understand the feedback given; little or no learning takes place if this happens. Looking for help is also a positive sign (Hattie and Timperley 2007) as it shows that students are working towards self-regulation. However, a 'safe' classroom environment is vital for this to occur. Feedback should not only state what is wrong but in order for it to become formative and effective, it must provide a strategy as to what has to be carried out next in order to complete the task successfully. There is also a danger of giving too much written feedback and Wiliam advises that feedback needs to be short and focused.

The table below describes possible responses to feedback. There are eight things that can happen and six of them are not effective (Wiliam 2011, p.115).

Response type	Feedback indicates performance exceeds goal	Feedback indicates performance falls short of goal
Change behaviour	Exert less effort	***Increase effort***
Change goal	***Increase aspiration***	Reduce aspiration
Abandon goal	Decide goal is too easy	Decide goal is too hard
Reject feedback	Ignore feedback	Ignore feedback

Table 8 Possible Responses to Feedback

Only two of the eight responses above (those in italics and bold) will have a positive effect on student performance. The other six will have no effect and in fact could lower performance and contribute to low retention rates in classes. Wiliam (2011) concludes that the whole purpose of feedback should be to increase the students' ability to develop ownership of their own learning - that is learner autonomy. In order for students to improve their performance and really achieve, they have to 'wrap their minds around concepts and ideas so that they truly 'own' them (Brookhart 2011, p.34). The intervention in this research project was the introduction and delivery of effective feedback into an FET context.

3.3.4 Peer Assessment

Black *et al* (2004) highlight a number of interesting points about peer-assessment;

- students may respond to critical feedback from peers more quickly than their teacher
- students will use a language that is understood by their peers
- peer assessment puts the work in the 'hands' of the students, and teachers can be free to observe this activity and use it to adjust teaching

Gibbs and Simpson (2004-05) make the point in relation to feedback and peer-assessment in that it is better to get poor quality feedback from a peer than to get high quality feedback from the teacher weeks after the task in hand. Wiliam (2011) has reviewed the evidence around collaborative learning and he reveals that it is '...one of the greatest success stories in the history of educational research' (p.133). He presents four main factors as to why this is the case (pp.133–134);

1. Motivation – it is often in the student's own interest to make an effort to support peers
2. Social cohesion – they care about their peer group, which leads to increased effort
3. Personalisation – students learn more because their more-able peers can engage with the particular difficulties a student is having
4. Cognitive elaboration – those who provide help in group settings are forced to think through the ideas more clearly

It is clear that the above factors are also relevant for professional practice learning among teachers. One reason for this more 'effective learning' is because of the change in power relationships (Wiliam 2011). Wiliam identifies two core elements for effective peer learning to occur; there must be group goals and there must be individual accountability. Wiliam warns, however, that peer assessment needs to be promoted in a way that it is geared toward improvement rather than evaluation - this can be particularly powerful as students can often be more direct with each other than a teacher can or dares to be. Peer assessment is also very valuable for the learner that is giving the help because they are '...forced to internalise the learning intentions and success criteria but in the context of someone else's work' (p.144). When students master the technique of peer assessment they are building up the necessary learning skills to become owners of their own learning through self-assessment.

3.3.5 Self-Assessment

Student self-assessment is concerned with whether students can develop sufficient insights into their own learning in order to improve it. In 1994 Fontana and Fernandes carried out a study that demonstrated the potential of student self-assessment in raising achievement (Wiliam 2011). When students are engaged in assessing themselves they become self-regulated learners. Boekaerts (2006), cited in Wiliam (2011), states that self-regulated learning is when the learner is able to coordinate cognitive resources, emotions, and actions in the service of his learning goals (p.147). However, self-assessment does not happen easily. In order for self-assessment to take place students need to develop the skills in this area, especially low achieving students. The literature states that transparency is vital for students to know exactly what it is they have to do.

They need to see exemplars of work and what the standard is they are working towards. Boud (2000) highlights that learners need to have a self-belief in their own capacity and then they develop skills in self-assessment and self-evaluation. Derrick and Ecclestone (2008 p.74) highlighted that self-assessment needs to be part of formal learning and '...is integrally related to the task of teaching of a curriculum, whether imposed or negotiated with learners'. Rushton (2005 p. 509) cites Biggs in 1998 that '...the effectiveness of formative assessment is dependent upon the student's accurate perception of the gap, as well as their motivation to address it'. The 'gap' is referring to the understanding level of what they currently understand and what they next need to understand. This is a highly complex skill and a difficult one to teach to students, especially low achieving students.

3.3.6 Critiques of Assessment for Learning

Shavelson (2008) referred to his experiences of formative assessment after working on it for several years, '...our euphoria devolved into a reality that formative assessment, like so many other education reforms, has a long way to go before it can be wielded masterfully by a majority of teachers to positive ends' (p.294). Bennett (2011) highlights a number of critical issues with the theory. In his opinion the term 'formative assessment' does not yet form a theory of action and there is a need for 'concrete instantiations' or components to be in place in order to implement it and study it. Bennett also feels that the benefits of AfL will vary greatly in kind and size depending on the students and the teachers involved. With AfL we are trying to make inferences about what our students know and understand. Bennett warns, however, that these inferences are '...by their very nature...uncertain and also subject to unintentional biases' (p.18). Bennett (2011) feels that these inferences we make on our students are, in fact, assessment and that relevant measurement principles should be attached to it. According to Bennett the basic definition of educational measurement amounts to four activities; gathering evidence, collecting evidence, interpreting evidence and acting on evidence (p.16). He feels that too little emphasis is placed on interpreting the evidence. He repeats

at length that AfL is an 'inferential process' because we cannot know with absolute certainty what 'conceptual understanding' (Hattie 2012) has been achieved by any one learner. It is a question of validity. There is a fear among AfL advocates that if measurement is associated with AfL in order to show its worth, the validity of the theory will be affected. He concludes that AfL is a 'work-in-progress' and that we should be conservative in our claims for it and our expectations of it (p.20).

3.3.7 Summary of AfL Theory

Swaffield (2011) states that the process of AfL is being applied to both the professionals and the learners within the teaching environment. Teachers need to begin to see themselves as learners again in this process. They need to devise rich, high order questions and begin to collaborate with colleagues on their success and failures. The ethos within the learning environment is changing to becoming more self-evaluative and using feedback as a very valuable tool to aid learning and improve performance. She states that teachers and learners need to change '...their views about what is important in learning, deciding how best to take forward developing insights and working together to realise them' (p.441). This is what this research is trying to achieve in this project by introducing authentic AfL strategies into an FET setting and working with practitioners on its successes and failures. This required a space for teachers to engage in dialogue about their practice, a space for professional learning to be discussed and to occur. It was envisaged that the use of the focused intervention in this research would develop a collaborative environment for teachers to learn from AfL theory and practice and become enhanced practitioners as a result. Swaffield concludes that as a result of 'authentic' AfL enactments, meaning they are true to form and not tokenism (Wiliam 2011), students' learning improves, '...their engagement with learning, their attainment as measured by tests, and most importantly their growth in becoming more self-regulating, autonomous learners' (p.447).

Therefore, in this research study, a lot of time was given to the implementation of each feedback strategy - four strategies over two

academic years - and allowed the teachers to embed the teaching and learning intervention into their practice in a genuine and real way. Swaffield states that teachers' motivation and practice are enhanced as a result of AfL practices. Relationships between teachers and learners are transformed and placed on a more equal footing, and the culture in the classroom is dramatically transformed. The central aim of this research was to provide a space and opportunity for FET teachers themselves to enhance learning in relation to their practice through sharing their experiences of the implementation of the AfL feedback strategy in their classrooms.

However, it was important that the teachers were 'ready' to engage in such a project. Weiner (2009) suggests that organisations whose readiness and commitment to change is based on wanting to display cooperative and championing behaviours by promoting the value of change to others rather than having to or ought to by management and leaders in their work context. I felt at this stage in the research that there was a readiness (Weiner 2009) present from the participating teachers. The teachers were critically examining and thinking about the design of the project and how it would successfully be implemented in relation to their own practice and classrooms.

3.4 Conclusion

To embark on this research, a teaching and learning related intervention was identified for implementation by the teachers in their classroom. A 'spirit of inquiry' approach (Heywood 2009, p.309) was promoted by the researcher and the corresponding responses, interpersonal dynamics and objects of engagement with the intervention formed the focus of the research. The main purpose of the preparatory phase was to satisfy the need for relevance and determine if people were willing to get involved. The framework for the research design project (fig: 5), that was established having read extensively on the subject of teaching and learning, was the foundation for this process of inquiry that we were aiming to embark on: how best to promote a PLC in the FET context. There was a depth and a

wide scope of thinking that took place from this extensive reading and the developing of the model of framework informed the study in a deep and progressive way. It was expected that this would support the teachers and the researcher to understand how best to implement a PLC within this context. The methodological approach, design, methods and processes of the project are reviewed and discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter 4

Research Methodology and Methods

Chapter Four Research Methodology and Methods

4.1 Introduction

This research explored ways of promoting a professional learning community within a FET unit in Ireland. At the outset of this research process, I observed that a culture of discourse on practice was mostly absent in the case study centre given that there was little or no in-depth dialogue on teaching and learning actively happening amongst us as a teaching staff. From reading the relevant literature I identified a guiding idea for the research project: that an intervention directly related to teachers' practice in the FET classroom might help to initiate the development of a professional learning community within the FET centre. The researcher aimed to interrogate the different phases of the research to answer the question how can I promote a PLC in the FET setting. A starting point for this must be teacher interaction, which is the basis of a PLC as premised in the literature (Vescio *et al* 2008).

4.2 The FET Case Study Centre

The case study institution is a small rural FET centre in the west of Ireland. The centre is operated by the local ETB. It offers programmes under the DoE funded initiatives of VTOS (Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme) and BTEI (Back to Education Initiative). The centre also caters for literacy and community education. VTOS is a full-time programme offering a range of programmes at QQI levels 4 and 5. It is aimed at early school leavers and the long-term unemployed. The BTEI programmes offer similar programmes at QQI levels 4 and 5 in a part-time mode to allow greater access for those who cannot commit to full-time education. Under the BTEI scheme there is an emphasis on engaging people to return to education that may already be in employment and who want to up-skill or reskill in a particular discipline. The centre offers programmes that are in line with demands of the local economy, which vary from year to year depending on uptake of programmes. Programmes include Business, Healthcare Support, General Learning, Horticulture, Catering Support and Agriculture. The centre has one full-time staff coordinator and nine part-

time teachers. The centre has 20 full-time students and on average 60 part-time students on an annual basis.

The research questions aimed to investigate and analyse what happens when a teaching and learning focused intervention was introduced directly into the FET classroom and the influence this has on promoting a professional learning community within the FET centre. The intervention was an adaptation from the theory of assessment for learning (AfL) where FET teachers were invited to introduce planned feedback strategies into their teaching practice. The impact for them, as professional FET teachers, and for overall learning within the classrooms was the focus of the research. The research was carried out using an action research approach within a case study, involving experienced FET teachers from one FET institution. The objectives of the research were to answer the following key question and associated sub-questions:

How can I promote a professional learning community in a rural FET centre in Ireland? In an effort to explore ways of promoting the PLC the study involved teachers introducing a planned teaching and learning focused intervention into practice and sub-questions asked:

- What experiences unfold for individuals in the action research project?
- What happens to the professional engagement of the FET teacher?
- What happens to students' engagement with their learning?
- What experiences unfold for me, the research practitioner leading the project?

In this chapter a rationale for the methodological approach used is presented. Arguments are made for choosing a qualitative approach to the research, through applying an action research strategy within a case study. The main data-collection methods employed for the research were semi-structured exploratory interviews and teacher discussion groups. A critical element of data collection was also my involvement as participant and researcher and so my own reflective researcher journal was a key item of data collection for the research project. This process is set out with information on developing the themes for interviews, designing the questions in preparation for interview, then carrying out the subject

interviews, analysing the data, and finally presenting conclusions in a report for this dissertation. How the participatory research sample was decided upon, as well as the steps taken to ensure validity, reliability and authenticity of data are also documented. The pertinent ethical issues are offered and related actions set out.

The overall aim of the research project was to discover ways to promote a professional learning community among teachers in an FET context. When you are working in an educational institution, it is not effective to work singly; the institutions need all teachers teaching in a similar way and with similar core values and interests (Grundy 2011). This research follows on from a small-scale study that asked FET teachers about their knowledge and practice of AfL in their classrooms[2]. I decided to expand and develop the research further – to set about exploring and analysing what happens when we introduce AfL-adopted teaching interventions into the FET classroom. A single case study research design was employed for several reasons: it was most appropriate to examine a social phenomenon, a real-life event, and a variety of evidence was collected and collated to produce key findings from the research (Yin 1994; VanWynsberghe and Khan 2007). The action research approach involved a practical activity on feedback that included a number of FET teachers and the researcher.

Six experienced FET teachers participated in the study and all of these implemented the designed teaching intervention into their practice. The research took place over two academic years where data was gathered through a variety of methods; interviews, teacher-discussion groups, documents and researcher journal. The FET teachers were interviewed following the implementation of the intervention. The teachers also engaged in teacher-discussion groups where they discussed the teaching interventions and their effectiveness. Kitzinger (1995) noted that '...group discussions can generate more critical comments than interviews (p.311) and so it was hoped that a combination of these data collection techniques,

[2] Masters in Education 2012

including my reflective researcher journal, would generate rich, insightful data for the research study.

4.3 Research Paradigm

A paradigm is a set of beliefs (Guba and Lincoln 1994). 'It represents a worldview that defines, for its holder, the nature of the 'world,' the individual's place in it, and the range of possible relationships to that world and its parts...'(p.107). The research paradigm adopted for this project is constructivist in nature, as it arises from the aim of gaining a better in-depth understanding of the worldview of FET teachers' professional learning practice. In constructivism, the inquirer is seen as the 'orchestrator' or 'facilitator' (Guba and Lincoln 1994, p.114) of the inquiry taking place. The researcher is dealing with human beings and their emotions and feelings as well as their epistemological stance, and this will all play a role in the research relationship. Constructivism is an appropriate paradigm for this research because the inclusion of participants' values is extremely important for the inquiry as the participant and inquirer work together towards a greater, more sophisticated understanding of a phenomenon of teaching within an FET context. The research explores ways to promote a professional learning community among teachers an FET centre. Interactions among study participants and researcher play a pivotal role within constructivist research. Creswell (2007) states that research within this paradigm relies upon research participants' views of the situation or phenomenon under investigation, leading the researcher to look for wide and varied complexities in creating meanings from the research rather than seeking findings that are narrowly categorised. This research relied on the teachers' views of their teaching and their practices in FET in order for me as the researcher to identify and analyse potential ways of promoting a professional learning community within an FET setting.

4.4 Research Methodology

Qualitative research is difficult to describe as it encompasses a multiplicity of approaches (Flick 2007) but there are common features that are identifiable:

> Qualitative research is intended to approach the world 'out there' (not in specialised research settings such as laboratories) and to understand, describe and sometimes explain social phenomena 'from the inside' in a number of different ways. (p. x)

Flick (2007) explains that qualitative research analyses the experiences of individuals or groups and these experiences can be related to their personal or professional lives. Qualitative researchers must '…concentrate on reflexively applying their own subjectivities in ways that make it possible to understand the tacit motives and assumptions of their participants' (Hatch 2002, p.9). As Creswell (2007) concurs, qualitative researchers must acknowledge that their personal backgrounds and experiences shape their interpretations of the data being studied. It is for these reasons that it is imperative that the researcher is very 'present' and involved with the participants and the phenomenon being studied (Hatch 2002) and that the researcher should '…spend extended periods of time interviewing participants…' (p.15). This research project spent extended periods of time interviewing research participants but also spent valuable time with the teachers in teacher discussion group sessions which added great insight into the teachers' thinking, interpersonal dynamics and the impact of the intervention in the classroom.

For the purpose of this project qualitative research was determined as the most appropriate methodology to employ in order to gather the necessary data to help answer the research aims and questions. The objective of the research design was to get an in-depth understanding of what happens when a teaching and learning focused intervention is introduced into the FET classroom. What happens to the learning dynamic for both teachers and students? How does learning unfold in the classroom, and how do teachers and learners respond to this intervention?

To use Flick's (2007) phrase, I, as researcher, was 'unpicking' how teachers create their meaning of the world around them. To 'pick' at a person's experiences around a particular issue gathers very rich data for analysing social phenomena. The design and approach to this research was given deep consideration from the outset of the project. Having read

extensively in the areas of teaching and learning, with a particular focus on adult teacher learning, the research design and approach was decided on. The participating teachers and the researcher agreed to adopt the principles of the theory of assessment for learning (AfL) of Dylan Wiliam (2011) to suit the FET context in which the research was taking place. Wiliam's work was carried out at second and third levels of education and so it was necessary to adopt his theory accordingly to become relevant for the participating teachers and their learners in this project. What resulted from this were the four specific feedback strategies that would be implemented into practice during the life of the project:

1. Time in class
2. Focusing on what's next
3. Feedback to the task
4. Asking questions

Participating teachers had their own unique and specific method of implementing each strategy, which added to the deep insight that was achieved from the instance of the research. For consistency it was agreed that each strategy would be implemented for a specific time frame in the two years and that teachers would then collaborate to discuss that particular strategy and engage in dialogue and discussion during teacher discussion groups on adjustments and the next steps in the project. This cyclical-process approach, involving the constant and consistent participation of the teachers, added a solid method for the research and worked extremely well in practice (McNiff 2002).

Robson (2011, p.399) outlines seven steps that should be kept to the fore when carrying out data collection. I found these guiding principles very useful to keep me as the researcher as it prepared me to be focused and organised in planning, conducting and analysing my research design and data collection.

Robson's Seven Steps to Data Collection
1. Know what you are doing before starting the data collection. Research aims, questions, methods and procedures
2. Negotiating access
3. Get yourself organised – devising a schedule for interviewing
4. Pilot if at all possible. It is important to have a trial run
5. Work on your relationships
6. Don't just disappear at the end
7. Don't expect it to work out as you planned. Not everything will run smoothly, be flexible and take note.

Table 9 Robson's Seven Steps to Data Collection

Research Approach – Influence of Critical Theory

The research approach for this study draws on the spirit of and is informed by the critical theory method. This constructivist-based research intended to gain a deeper understanding of the worldview of FET teachers' professional practice. It explores ways to empower FET teachers to engage in a professional learning community in their FET setting. Critical theory is understood in the context of the empowerment of individuals (Denzin and Lincoln 1994), empowerment to keep alive the hope that things can change (Brookfield 2005). According to Denzin and Lincoln (1994) this research approach is a discussion of participants as critical researchers. As they explore their work they begin to see themselves in relation to the world around them. Taking a critical theory approach encourages and allows practitioners to challenge their positionality in relation to praxis. As the research study progressed I observed the teacher participants develop as critical researchers as they explored their teaching practice in a focused and in-depth way; they challenged their existing practices in relation to the world around them.

> *I've been carrying out the one to one interviews over the last couple of weeks. The teachers have been very willing to engage with this process. Points they have raised include: discussion in class, giving confidence to weak learners, teachers have a better sense of knowing, it has led to reflective practice, formalising feedback in the class, teachers getting feedback from their learners. I am observing that teachers are thinking about their practice in a focused way. (Researcher Journal, 8 May 2015)*

I was confident then that the seeds were sown for an ethos of professional learning. Through their new informed knowledge, practitioners began to see the similarities and differences in their cognitive structures and started to use this knowledge to improve and change practice; they were learning from their own practice and from their peers. Teachers had new ways of doing things and honed their existing skills, which promoted 'individual freedom' (Cohen 2007). Teachers were allowed to 'think' of other possibilities (How 2003). Denzin and Lincoln (1994) emphasise the work of Patti Lather (1991) in catalytic validity which points to the degree to which research 'moves' those it studies to understand the world and the way it is shaped in order for them to transform, a point also documented by Cohen *et al* (2007), resulting in practitioners gaining self-understanding and self-direction. Blake and Masschelein (2003) define critical theory whereby the involvement and engagement in the reality under investigation is not an obstacle to, but a prerequisite of, their objectivity. There is an emphasis on communication and interaction within this research, a dialogue back and forth leading to a better state of knowledge (How 2003). Blake and Masschelein's (2003) pivotal point with critical theory is '...not that it envisages a 'positive utopia', but that it is informed by a sharpened experience of the actual' (p.55). The teachers in this research experienced a sharpened knowledge and involvement of the delivery of effective feedback in their practice.

Cohen *et al* (2007) discuss ideology critique and they draw on the work of Habermas (1972) and discuss his four stages of ideology critique: to describe and interpret the existing situation, to reflect on why it has evolved in this way, to set about altering or changing the situation, and to evaluate the outcome (pp.28-29). McLaren and Giarelli (1995) put forward the concept that critical theory is leading the 'effort' for teachers to '...join empirical investigation, the task of interpretation and a critique of this reality' (p.2). This in their opinion results in improved human existence by viewing new knowledge for its emancipating or repressive potential. Critical theory allows teachers to become self-critical, to have a 'sceptical eye' on our own tentative conclusions (Brookfield 2005).

Denzin and Lincoln (1994) put forward a seven-step framework for critical theory and I am arguing for an alignment of this research with that framework and so within critical theory.

Critical Theory Denzin and Lincoln (1994)	This Study
1. Production of more useful and relevant research on work	This study is contributing to useful and relevant research on work by encouraging and allowing the time and space for teachers who are working together to collaborate on their practice.
2. Legitimizing worker knowledge	There is an abundance of expertise already in existence among our teaching practitioners. This research is recognising that expertise and knowledge.
3. Empowerment of workers	Teachers are empowered as they are engaged in change within their own practice, something that is not directed from external management or the Department.
4. Forced reorganisation of the workplace	While I believe the term 'forced' is a strong way of describing this, there is definitely a reorganisation of the workplace in that teachers are now reorganising themselves to collaborate with colleagues.
5. Inspiration of the democratization of science	When teachers are taking part in research and legitimise their own knowledge they are in a better space to take on wider educational research.
6. Undermining of technical rationality	The teachers are carrying out the research themselves, as they are well-trained workers in their field.
7. Promotion of an awareness of worker cognition	This study is aiming to develop an expertise within teachers to learn to teach themselves. Learning in the workplace is becoming a way of life, a pivotal part of the job.

Table 10 Critical Theory Matrix

In summary, critical theory is supportive of the concept of teachers locating their work in a transformative praxis. The theory encourages dedicated space and time for teachers to collaborate on their practice, which recognises the existing expertise among the participants involved. This leads to empowerment of the people. There was a focus on teachers learning to teach themselves. Critical theory research involves taking part in a process of critical world making, guided by the shadowed outline of a

dream of a world less conditioned by suffering. The approach is guided by hope.

4.5 Case Study Research

Case study research asks 'how' and 'why' questions (Yin 2004). Often the researcher has limited control over how events unfold and the focus of the study is on a 'contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context' (Yin 2004, p.1). Cousin (2006) states that it is important that the research focus is within a 'naturalistic setting' to gain insightful understandings of the case under scrutiny in its own habitat (p.423). This project asked FET teachers to implement planned teaching interventions into their practice and to examine its influence on teaching and learning. What influence does this have on the professional learning within the case study institution? According to Yin (1994), the case study '...contributes uniquely to our knowledge of individual, organisational, social, and political phenomena'; there is an innate desire to '...understand complex social phenomena', and they allow investigations to '...retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events' (pp.2-3). The case study organiser wants to give readers of the research the explicit experience of '...being there so that they can share in the interpretation of the case, adjudicating its worth alongside the researcher' (Cousin 2006, p.424). This research asked teachers to implement planned teaching strategies into their practice; it is set in a real-life setting. Teaching and learning are complex phenomena – it is challenging to understand them. The case study method has the potential to generate insight into this area of research, and as the researcher I was trying to understand the very complex social phenomena of teaching and learning and what it 'looks' like. I wanted to explore what happens to the professional engagement of the participating teachers and the case study institution when we worked with the intervention in an intensive way. Case studies allow the researcher to explore in depth a program, an event, an activity, a process, or one or more individuals (Creswell 2003). Often the cases are bounded by time and investigators collect detailed data using a variety of methods over a sustained period of time (Stake 1995). Cohen *et al* (2011) cite Hitchcock and Hughes (1995)

who highlight several hallmarks of case study research; rich and vivid descriptions of events, chronological narrative of events, it focuses on individual actor(s) or groups to understand their perceptions of events and highlights specific events that are relevant to the case, the researcher is integrally involved and the write up of the report tries to portray the richness of findings that were found and the findings are allowed to 'speak for themselves' (p.290). Case studies provide '...unique examples of real people in real situations, enabling readers to understand ideas more clearly than simply by presenting them with abstract theories or principles' (Cohen *et al* 2011, p.289). This project involved real teachers in real classrooms, and the teachers' stories portray a true reflection of what happened during this research project. As the researcher, it was important for me that participating teachers did not think they had to do 'extra work'; I wanted it to be seamless and valuable for them as teaching practitioners.

VanWynsberghe and Khan (2007) offer a prototype view of case study research that allows for variability (p.4). They present seven common features in a prototypical case study. This prototype provided guiding principles to align this research within the case study research strategy.

Feature	Explanation	This Study
Small	The case study calls for an intensive and in-depth focus on the specific unit of analysis and requires a small sample size	This study took place in one FET centre. Six experienced FET teachers were engaged.
Contextual Details	Case studies aim to give the reader a sense of 'being there' by providing a highly detailed, contextualised analysis of 'an instance in action'. The researcher carefully delineates the 'instance' defining it in general terms and teasing out its particularities	This study reveals genuine examples of practice and the reader can read about 'actions' in class.
Natural Setting	Case study researchers choose to systematically study situations where there is little control over behaviour, organisation or events. Case study is uniquely suitable for research in complex situations because it advances the concept that complex settings cannot be reduced to single cause and effect relationships	This study did not control classroom events and the interaction between the learners and their teacher unfolded naturally without interventions from the researcher. The study took place in the natural setting of the FET classroom and centre.
Boundedness	Case studies provide a detailed description of a specific temporal and spatial boundary. Attending to place and time brings context to the structures and relationships that are of interest.	The study took place in one FET centre over a three-year period.
Working Hypotheses and lessons learned	Researchers can generate working hypotheses and learn new lessons based on what is uncovered or constructed during data collection and analysis in the case study. The entity under study emerges throughout the course of the study and it is this surfacing that can bring the study to a natural conclusion.	The teacher-group sessions continuously contributed to the 'working hypotheses' of the theory and a lot of new learning took place during these sessions.
Multiple data sources	Case study routinely uses multiple sources of data, which develops converging lines of inquiry, which facilitates triangulation and offers findings that are likely to be much more convincing and accurate.	Multiple sources of data were used for this study; semi-structured interviews, teacher-group sessions, documents, researcher journal.
Extendability	Case studies can enrich and potentially transform a reader's understanding of a phenomenon by extending the reader's experience. The case study researcher seeks to articulate relationships in context often with the hope that the context and relationships may resonate with the reader.	This study took place in an FET setting and should extend to other similar sized FET educational institutions.

Table 11 Prototypical Case Study

According to Yin (1984), there are three types of case study: exploratory, which acts as a pilot to other studies, descriptive, which presents a narrative account of events and explanatory, which is testing theories. This case study falls under the descriptive realm, as I give a descriptive narrative account of how FET teachers implemented a planned teaching and learning intervention into their classroom. The research question asks how can I promote a professional learning community in the FET case study institution. When we introduce a teaching and learning intervention, what happens to learning in the centre as a result, and what happens to students' engagement with and understanding of their learning? What influences, if any, does this activity have in relation to promoting the PLC in the case study institution?

4.5.1 Prejudices against the Case Study Strategy

There has been disregard for the case study as a research strategy. It has been viewed as a 'less desirable' form of inquiry. Yin (1994) offers valuable insights into this view. Yin argues that too often rigor in designing and implementing case study research has not been adhered to. Researchers have been 'sloppy' and have allowed biased views to influence findings and outcomes. As the researcher in this project, I was highly cognisant of these views on case study research and kept them to the fore at all times. I collected and stored data meticulously with interview transcripts transcribed by the researcher verbatim. I planned and implemented the data collection as per outlined with research participants and this plan was never deviated from. There were no delays at any stage in the data collection process, and teachers commented that the time involved in the research had passed quickly. Every item of data was taken from transcripts or from teachers' notes given to the researcher, and so I, as the researcher, was avoiding bias by using a rigorous approach. Another reason for concern is that case study research does not offer broad generalisation. How do we know that the outcomes from this research will be the same or similar to other identical or similar cases? Yin (1994) offers a reason for this in that '...case studies, like experiments, are generalizable to theoretical propositions and not to population or universe' (p.10). A third

complaint of the case study is that they take too long and that they produce very large amounts of documentation. Nisbet and Watt (1984) identify the weaknesses of case study research in that they are not easily open to crosschecking and may be selective, biased and subjective and are prone to issues of observer bias (p.293). Because of this, researchers using the case study research method need to be integrally mindful of these issues and to constantly check in this regard. The authors (Nisbet and Watt 1984), cited in Cohen *et al* (2011) do highlight however, that case studies can '...embrace and build in unanticipated events and uncontrollable variables' which can all add to insightful data from qualitative research. Yin (1994) reassures us that this is not necessary in case study research, that careful planning and meticulous collation of data can counter balance these issues. Cohen *et al* (2011) recognise that case study research has particular advantages to educational researchers (p.292). They cite Adelman *et al* (1980) in that case study data is very 'strong in reality' and that they provide a natural basis for generalisation. The authors feel that their strength lies in the '...attention to the subtlety and complexity of the case' (p.292). Case study research often recognises the complexity of social truths and is very mindful of that when collecting and analysing data. They are a 'step in action' - insights from case study research can be interpreted directly and put to use. Case study research often presents empirical research in a very 'publicly accessible' format and is capable of serving multiple audiences and makes the research 'accessible'. 'At its best, they allow readers to judge the implications of a study for themselves' (Cohen *et al* 2011, p.292). Stake (1995) states that the function of research is not necessarily to map and conquer the world but to 'sophisticate' the beholding of it (p.426).

At all stages in the research I was very mindful of the prejudices that are outlined in relation to case study research. I was extremely conscious of bias in this research, particularly because I am a work colleague of the study participants. To ensure that bias was not present at all times, as the researcher, I was meticulous about the planning and data collection as the researcher. From the very start of the research I informed the teachers

that we would be carrying out the research for two academic years, and they were informed of the necessary commitment in terms of one to one and group interviews that would take place. This careful preplanning and communication of participant demands also ensured that time did not become an issue. During typing of the interview and teacher discussion group transcripts, the researcher crosschecked that they were accurate by listening to the recording against the typed transcript. This researcher wanted to recognise the 'complexity of social truths' of the FET teachers' responses involved and so allowed the research to be accessible (Adelman *et al* 1980). Transcripts were shared with the interviewees. During each teacher discussion group session, I shared my emerging findings from the research at various intervals with the participants, who fed back their responses to the group, and this further validated the data findings. To improve validity further, data transcribing was performed immediately in order to keep up to date and to control the large amounts of documentation collation that is required in case study research.

4.6 Action Research within a Case Study

I will now explain the rationale behind my decision to use an action research approach. Action research has quite distinct defining characteristics: it has a practical nature that involves change in a cyclical process and includes participation (Denscombe 2010). Further, it involves an enquiry into your own work, conducted by the self, into the self (McNiff 2002). In this case study it was others and myself in the institution. Action research is open ended; it does not begin with a fixed hypothesis but with an idea that you develop (McNiff 2002). The research process is the developmental process of following through the idea, seeing how it goes, and continually checking whether it is in line with what you wish to happen. It is a form of self-evaluation. Action research always contains a 'social intent' (McNiff 2002), an intention that one person improves their work for their own benefit and the benefit of others. If one can improve and understand what they are doing better, there is the potential to influence the situation one is working in (Carr and Kemmis 1986). McKensie *et al* (2012) discuss action research becoming participatory action research

depending on who is involved in each of the AR stages. 'At its most participatory, researchers engage with participants as collaborators who can inform project design, propose methods, facilitate some of the project activities, and importantly review and evaluate the process as a whole' (McKensie *et al* p.12). For this research I engaged the participants as collaborators who certainly contributed to the project design and facilitiated the project activities of implementing the planned teaching and learning intervention. The participants also supported me as the researcher in the review and evaluation of that process. The authors highlight the work of Clark (1972) stating that a planned and structured intervention is executed as part of the action phase, with clearly defined roles for the participants and the researchers. During this research project I was guided by the work of Jack Whitehead (2006) and his action plan framework. He asks anyone engaging in an action research project a number of questions, two of which I focused on in particular; what issue am I interested in researching, and why do I want to research this issue? As previously noted, my objective was to consider ways to promote a professional learning community within the FET teaching profession. I saw that there were very little opportunities for teachers to get involved in dialogue around their practice within the case study institution. I noted that there was a wealth of insightful knowledge present among the teaching team and so I set about exploring opportunities to share that knowledge among the whole centre. Time was not being made for this type of activity. I sought to share my values regarding the benefits of teachers talking and sharing practice ideas and examining opportunities to collaborate. I wanted to take a practical and validated teaching and learning intervention (feedback) and work with this as the focus for the research project. The aim was to explore what happens to teacher learning when we introduce a planned teaching and learning intervention to the FET classroom. What happens to learning and professional engagement within the case study institution? To continue with Whitehead's questions, why did I want to research this issue? Because I have a very solid belief in AfL theory and considered it was a very practical, suitable and progressive teaching and learning methodology. The planned teaching and learning intervention in this

project was feedback, which is a pivotal element of AfL theory. The practical, everyday use of the intervention was a positive way to engage teachers in the research and the use of the intervention and the project itself would provide opportunities for the research participants to develop a new focus on teaching and learning. Whitehead and McNiff (2006) discuss 'experiencing oneself as a living contradiction' in that they 'experience a tension of holding together the values that constitute their humanity and the experience of their denial in practice' but that this often stimulates action or change that often 'enable the value to be lived more fully in practice' (p.4). My 'living contradiction' was that I wanted to engage more in AfL theory in my practice than what I was currently doing, and I wanted to engage with the theory more with my colleagues.

4.6.1 Critical Perspective on Action Research Strategy

Action research involves partnership relationships and subsequently makes research matters ambiguous. Denscombe (2010) asks who is in charge, who calls the shots, who decides on appropriate action and who owns the data. These are imperative questions that need clear, sensitive discussion between all partners in the research from the start. In August 2014, I invited teachers to an initial session about the research. I clearly outlined the plan of the project in that I was inviting teachers to participate in a two-year research project where teachers would implement a teaching and learning focused intervention into their practice. I stated that one-to-one as well as discussion group interviews would be carried as a method of data collection. While I pointed out that as the researcher in the project, would give guidance on appropriate action, it was also stated that as research participants they could get involved in the action elements of the project throughout its lifetime, to shape the research so that it suited them in their context. My objective in this was to encourage the research participants to get deeply engaged and involved so they had ownership and that they approached the study with a 'spirit of inquiry' (Heywood 2009). It has been argued that ownership of the research process can be contestable within the framework of the partnership relationship between practitioner and researcher (Denscombe 2010), however, for this project it

was encouraged. Participating teachers were informed that data collection would form the basis of an educational dissertation. Grundy (2009) in discussing quality educational reform states that action research '…provides a set of principles for procedure' (p.35) and that one of these principles is participation. She discusses how change is dependent upon ownership of the change, which depends on participation in the decision that led to that change by those most affected (p.35). Other criticisms of the action research methodology are scope and scale where the work-site approach affects the representativeness of the findings and limits generalisation (Denscombe 2010). The author also points out control and workload being a disadvantage of the method. Impartiality is a key factor in carrying out action research as it is challenging to detach oneself and be impartial in your approach to the research. From the outset of this project I was cognisant of these critical factors and continuously checked that these factors were not influencing the research in any way. The action research cycles are discussed in detail in chapter five. The diagram below outlines in brief the three cycles as they were designed.

Phase 1 (Jan-May 2015)	Phase 2 (Sep 15-Jan 16)	Phase 3 (Feb-June 16)
• Implemented 2 feedback strategies (Time in class and Focusing on what's next) • 2 Teacher group sessions • First round of one to one interviews	• Implemented 3rd feedback strategy • (Feedback to the task) • Teacher group session • Second round of one to one interviews • 2 Whole centre activities	• Implemented 4th feedback strategy (Asking questions) • LO Project • Final teacher group session • Third round of one to one interviews • Whole centre activity

Table 12 Action Research Cycles

Grundy (2009) assures us not to be concerned with teachers naming themselves as action researchers and states that 'quality educational reform is not dependent on any particular methodology' (p.35). This was the guiding ethos adopted for this research. In essence, participation in the research was to bring about responsibility and to allow autonomy to develop.

4.7 Data Collection Methods

According to Cohen *et al* (2011) case studies often have many elements operating within the single case study and as a result there are many data collection methods and many sources of evidence recommended. This study used a variety of data collection tools: semi-structured interviews, teacher group discussions, researcher journal, and participant notes in the form of a teacher notebook and documents.

4.7.1 The Research Interview

Kvale (2007) asks 'If you want to know how people understand their world and their lives, why not talk with them?' (p.1). The human conversation is a basic method of interaction that we use every day in our lives. We get to know people through conversation; we learn about their experiences, feelings, hopes, desires (Kvale 2007). The research interview goes beyond the everyday conversation and '...becomes a careful questioning and listening approach with the purpose of obtaining thoroughly tested knowledge' (Kvale 2007, p.7). Also, the interviewer plays a more passive role in the conversation than one would in a normal conversational interaction (Loxley *et al* 2010, p.4). In the research interview a stage is being set up where the interviewer is in 'charge' of the production; he is the director of the performance as 'The research interview is an inter-view where knowledge is constructed in the inter-action between the interviewer and the interviewee' (Kvale 2007, p.1). The sample was a non-probability purposive sample, with interviewees being selected because they had a specific contribution to make and because they have 'unique insight' (Denscombe 2010) into the phenomena under investigation.

4.7.2 Why Interviewing for this Research?

Loxley *et al* (2010) point out that if you want to understand the personal and subjective experiences of your respondents, their perceptions and emotions around a particular topic, and if you want to explore in more detail a particular answer to a particular question, then the research interview will provide the answer to these needs. Meanings and issues can be explored, ambiguity is reduced and answers can be probed and compared, which leads to more sophisticated interpretations of the data. People in general

find it easier to express themselves orally rather than in writing (Loxley *et al* 2010, p.6). As the researcher in this study it was necessary for me to gather the personal and subjective experiences of the teachers and hear what it meant for them to be engaged in the research project. I wanted to gather data that would enable me to explore the professional learning as a result of the teachers working collaboratively and what experiences unfold as a result of their engagement and responses with the intervention. For the purposes of this research individual interviews with participating teachers took place at particular intervals in the life of the project. It was agreed with the teachers and the researcher that interviews would take place on completion of implementing each of the four feedback strategies.

Timeline of Interview Schedule

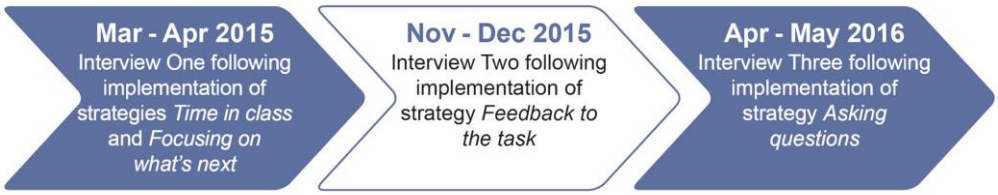


Figure 10 Timeline of Interview Schedule

Teachers were aware that an interview would follow once the feedback strategy was implemented for the specified timeframe. It was important to facilitate research participants to attend at times that were suitable to their schedule and other work patterns and this required planning and preparation (Denscombe 2010). An interview schedule was designed using a two-column table with one column stating the prescribed research questions and the next column rewriting those questions using more interview style language (See appendix 1). This was important as it gave the researcher the opportunity to ask several questions in order to gain as much insightful data as possible from the teachers. The interview schedule also helped the interview run smoothly and keep to time. In particular, I, as the research interviewer, aimed to decipher the thoughts and feelings of the teachers involved on this focus on feedback in their practice. As the interviewer I was actively following up on the participants' answers, and was seeking to 'clarify and extend the interview statements' (Kvale 2007, p.4) to gain further depth of knowledge from the teachers.

4.7.3 Teacher Discussion Groups

Focus group interviewing can be described as an informal discussion among a group of selected individuals about a particular topic (Wilkinson 2004). The aim of focus groups is to describe and understand meanings and interpretations about a specific topic from the perspective of the participants in the group. Kitzinger (1995) highlighted that in focus group discussions people are encouraged to talk to one another, to ask questions, exchange anecdotes and stories and gaining access to such variety of communication is useful because people's knowledge and attitudes are not entirely encapsulated in reasoned responses to direct questions (Kitzinger 1995, p.299). While focus groups were not employed in their strictest method for this research project, the setting up of the teacher discussion groups were informed by focus group data collection methodology.

Using the teacher discussion groups as a method of data collection was a very important factor in this research; it was an opportunity for teachers to discuss the planned intervention and how it is working and to encourage the teacher learning and engagement that was being promoted by the instance of this project. Kitzinger (1995) noted that '...group discussions can generate more critical comments than interviews' (p.311), and so I as the researcher was confident that a combination of individual interviews and the teacher discussion groups would generate rich, insightful data for the study. Throughout the period of the research a number of teacher discussion group sessions took place and these sessions were arranged around the work patterns of the participating teachers. Before data collection began a number of teacher discussion group sessions took place during the preparatory phase of the study. This allowed for informal discussion among the research participants on the particular topic (feedback) to occur (Wilkinson 2004). Looking back at these sessions, I realised that they allowed for interpersonal familiarity and encouraged a range of responses to gain insight into '…understanding of attitudes, behaviours, opinions and perceptions' of the teachers involved in the

project (Kitzinger 1995). Once ethical approval was granted in January 2015 it paved the way for the commencement of data collection.

Timeline of Teacher Discussion Group Session Interviews

Figure 11 Timeline of Teacher Discussion Group Sessions

4.8 Triangulation, Validity and Reliability

The concept of triangulation requires researchers to go 'beyond' or extend the activities in their research to include several data collection methodologies (Flick 2007). Triangulation enhances the quality of the data in qualitative research, '...triangulation should produce knowledge at different levels, which means they go beyond the knowledge made possible by one approach and this contributes to promoting quality in research' (Flick 2007, p.41). Flick (2007) uses Denzin's definition of triangulation as '...the combination of methodologies in the study of the same phenomena' (Denzin 1970, p.297). According to Flick (2007), Denzin's critics would argue that triangulation is as much about getting a more comprehensive and grounded grasp of the phenomena under investigation as the validation of outcomes from the research (Fielding and Fielding 1986; Silverman 1985).

For the purpose of this research, four data collection methods were employed: one-to-one interviews, teacher discussion group sessions, documents from teachers and researcher journal of observations and reflections. In using these methods as researcher, I was aiming to view happenings from more than one perspective (Denscombe 2010). However, there are steps that the researcher can take to show that the data was interpreted and analysed with rigour at each juncture of the data collection stages. I wanted to gain a deep understanding of what was happening and to explore data from different perspectives or situations. Once an individual strategy was implemented a one-to-one interview was carried out with participating teachers in the study. In order to explore responses further a

teacher discussion group session was scheduled with all participating teachers in the research. Right throughout the life of study I kept a detailed researcher journal that documented observations and responses from interviews, group sessions and other moments of discussion during the data collection phase. Documents such as lesson plans, feedback templates and evaluation sheets from teachers (see appendix 6) were discussed and examined throughout the data collection period (August 2014 to June 2016). The benefits of all the data collection methods and the associated triangulation allowed me to get a *fuller picture* that focused '…on producing complementary data that enhances the completeness of the findings' (Denscombe 2010, p.348) and thus added confidence in the research data and findings. This in turn validated the data for me as the researcher.

Case Study Data Collection	
Individual interviews	One to one interviews with each of the participating teachers took place following the implementation of each feedback strategy
Teacher Discussion Group Sessions	A teacher group session took place with all participating teachers following one-to-one interviews to discuss the strategy and teachers responses on how it worked in the class. *See appendix 3 for guiding questions.*
Documents	Participating teachers were involved in designing teaching tools throughout the life of the study as well additional projects on learning outcomes of modules
Researcher Journal	A detailed researcher journal was taken throughout the data collection period on observations during individual and focus group sessions as well as other moments and developments in the timeframe of the study

Table 13 Triangulation and Data Collection Methods

Researchers often struggle with issues that compromise the trustworthiness of qualitative research findings (Elo *et al* 2014) and so Elo *et al* state that trustworthiness of qualitative content '…is often presented by using terms such as credibility, dependability, conformability, transferability, and authenticity' (p.1). The authors discuss trustworthiness being part of all stages of a research project from data collection to reporting of results, and they argue that it is critical to scrutinize

trustworthiness at each phase with great attention. Throughout this project's data collection period every effort was made to validate the data and ensure validity and reliability. This meant also specific strategies to eliminate bias by using the same schedule of questioning with each research participant and employing the same amount of interview time with each participant. According to Oppenheim (1992) as cited in Cohen *et al* (2011) there are several causes of bias in interviewing: poor rapport between interviewee and interviewer, changes to question wording, poor prompting and biased probing, alteration to sequence of questions, inconsistent coding of responses, poor handling of difficult interview (p.205). To reduce biased responses Cohen *et al* (2011) suggest 'careful formulation' of questions so that the meaning is crystal clear and thorough training of interviewer so that an interviewer is more aware of the possible problems (p.205) and so in preparing the interview schedule I was cognisant of how questions were created and that they related to the AfL strategy that was being implemented.

During data collection my guiding principle was that the data was reasonably 'accurate and appropriate' (Denscombe 2010). At all times I was aware of the need to ensure that the data collected was '…produced and checked in accord with good practice' (p.299). I achieved this by ensuring transcripts were labelled in named folders so it was clear and easy to access the data at later stages in the research process. This research was 'grounded extensively in fieldwork and empirical data' (Denscombe 2010, p.299) as the research project took place over two academic years and extended periods of time were spent on location which built a 'detailed scrutiny' of what was happened during the project. This adds credibility to the research (p.299). That said, I was an integral part of the research in three ways that needed to be carefully managed: I was facilitating the research in the centre, I was a teaching colleague of the research participants and more critically, I was the leader in the centre. This situation can raise the issue of reliability and questions if the research would translate the same or similar if the same instruments were used by different researchers. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985) there is a way

of working towards reliability in qualitative research and that is dependability, which they state, 'Principally, these revolve around the demonstration that their research reflects procedures and decisions that other researchers can 'see' and evaluate in terms of how far they constitute *reputable and reasonable decisions*' (p.300). In order to achieve reliability in this research I gave an explicit account of the methods used, and the analysis approach. Further, all areas of decision making are documented which is demonstrating in as much detail as possible the lines of enquiry that led to the particular conclusions (Seale *et al* 1999, cited in Denscombe 2010). Lincoln and Guba (1985) discuss transferability and ask the qualitative researcher to what extent *could* the findings from your research be transferred to other instances (Denscombe 2010, p.301). This was a guiding focus for me as the researcher – how can this focused activity on feedback in our centre be transferred to others centres of FET.

4.9 Ethical Issues and Considerations

Dealing with ethical related actions needs to be incorporated into the research from the early stages of developing the theme and designing the research questions, right through to the final phases of analysis and reporting. The integrity of the researcher is brought into question as the researcher may only hear what they want to hear and ignore other elements of the phenomena being investigated. I have worked with the research participants for over 10 years and as Kvale (2007) points out if the researcher knows the respondents too well it will be difficult for a professional distance to be maintained, '…the role of the interviewer can involve a tension between a professional distance and a personal friendship' (Kvale 2007, p.29). In order to avoid the 'tension' highlighted by Kvale above, for the purposes of this research it was vitally important to firmly outline the framework of the relationship between the researcher and the participants from the very beginning of the study where the researcher stressed that the relationships developed in relation to this research were based on professional teacher-to-teacher interactions. I have always been a teaching colleague with the members of the group as well as the leader in the centre. I feel our existing teacher-to-teacher interactions were based

on trust and mutual respect and so posed no tensions in relation to the project. The resulting research was collaborative in nature rather than a 'researcher-participant' framework. Another challenge, according to Kvale (2007) is how to act 'neutrally' while being the researcher, '...which means not to advantage some members in the field and disadvantage others or not to become party to a conflict between members in the field' (p.126). The nature of this study was reflective, as the study participants implemented new teaching interventions and reflected on their practice. This type of activity can bring many emotions to the participants. However, as the participants are experienced FET teachers working together for over a decade, I was confident that exposure to discomfort and distress was limited. Ethical considerations focus on three areas: securing consent from the participants of the interview process, ensuring the right to and protection of privacy (anonymity) and seeing that the respondents need to be protected from harm (Fontana and Frey 2005). For this research, teachers were invited to participate in the project and a particular effort was made informing them of their voluntary engagement in the research. The participant consent form (See appendix 5) was clear and succinct and teachers were aware of their obligations in the research but were also aware of their rights as a participant in that they can withdraw from the project at any time and their data will be omitted from the final dissertation. BERA's Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (2018) guided the data protection protocols and research ethics applied in this study. Every effort was made to inform participating teachers of my obligations as a researcher to protect their privacy and anonymity, and in the case of the latter I used pseudonyms throughout the written thesis. I informed the participants that it was also my duty to protect them from harm (Fontana and Frey 2005). To embark on this research, it was necessary to gain ethical approval from the National University of Ireland, Galway. The committee did query how I, as the researcher, would deal with the power relations that will exist in this project. To address this issue, I was cognisant of how power relations are linked to pre-established roles, positions and relationships (Banegas and Villacanas de Castro 2015). As the manager and leader of the research participants and having a

managerial role in the case study institution, at all times I was vigilant about not abusing the power relationships that already exist and in this regard, not to cross any ethical boundaries. As the teacher leader in the case study institution there was potential for a natural conflict of interest to arise. However, I was very aware and mindful of this and planned all events of data collection to suit the participating teachers. Moore (2012) discusses being an 'insider' and having to deal with the 'duality of my role'. She discusses recruitment dilemmas and whether she was '…selecting people who were likely to agree' (p.13). For this research, I invited all teachers working in the centre during the academic years 2014 – 2015 and 2015 – 2016 to participate in the project. I did not know who was going to get involved and I recall that I was surprised at the uptake. I discussed with the participants about the collaborative nature of the research and the influences my roles (teaching colleague, researcher and leader) within the centre will have on the project. However, I had a desire to '…identify and understand the power dynamics at work' and so I was aware that power is '…linked to maintaining confidentiality' (Banegas and Villacanas de Castro, 2015). As a working unit, we already had a very 'comfortable' (Bonner and Tolhurst 2002) relationship with each other that was characterised by mutual respect. At the induction workshop of the project, I highlighted to the teachers that the benefits to us in our practice would be positive. However, I also highlighted that the benefits to me personally were that I was going to achieve a PhD qualification. My guiding premise in relation to my positionality within the research project was that this project should be '…memorable, engaging, and meaningful, it must be based on respect, honesty, teachers and leaners' interests, and constant awareness of ethical dilemmas around agents' actions and decisions' (Banegas and Villacanas de Castro 2015, p.64). I felt that I could offer particular knowledge and expertise that will support this project group. However, I was hoping that at different times other members of the group would take the lead in relation to different elements of the action being undertaken (Kemmis and McTaggart 2005) and this did happen in relation to additional projects that evolved within the centre; whole centre activities around assessment and a learning outcomes project.

During the data collection period, teachers were encouraged to bring their ideas to the project and I encouraged them to decide how the study should unfold for them individually and as a group. This happened quite early in the project during the preparatory phase when teachers decided on how to implement the AfL intervention into their classroom and how it would develop within the research project. As a result, the participating teachers had ownership of the research project and there was a continuous emphasis on shared planning.

Privacy in data management is a critical element of research methodology and so research design needs to include stringent controls of data storage. All data gathered from interview and teacher discussion group sessions were recorded. Following each recording they were transferred to a password protected computer belonging to the researcher, which was backed up on a regular basis. The researcher transcribed all recordings, and thus provided further anonymity for the research participants. The researcher journal was kept safely and data storage was handled with the utmost care and attention, by keeping text files and recordings in password protected computer devices, throughout the life of the research so that none was lost or tampered with.

4.10 Data Collection Schedule and Processes

During data collection, I carefully planned and meticulously collated the data (Yin 1994). I was highly aware of this issue and so set about having a strict schedule of data collection events based on the academic year. From the start of this research project I was cognisant that I was asking my teaching colleagues to '*help me out*' with my research. Given my own experience as an FET teacher I felt in order to start an initiative in an FET centre it is best to do this at the beginning of the terms in the academic calendar. The data collection schedule was designed accordingly.

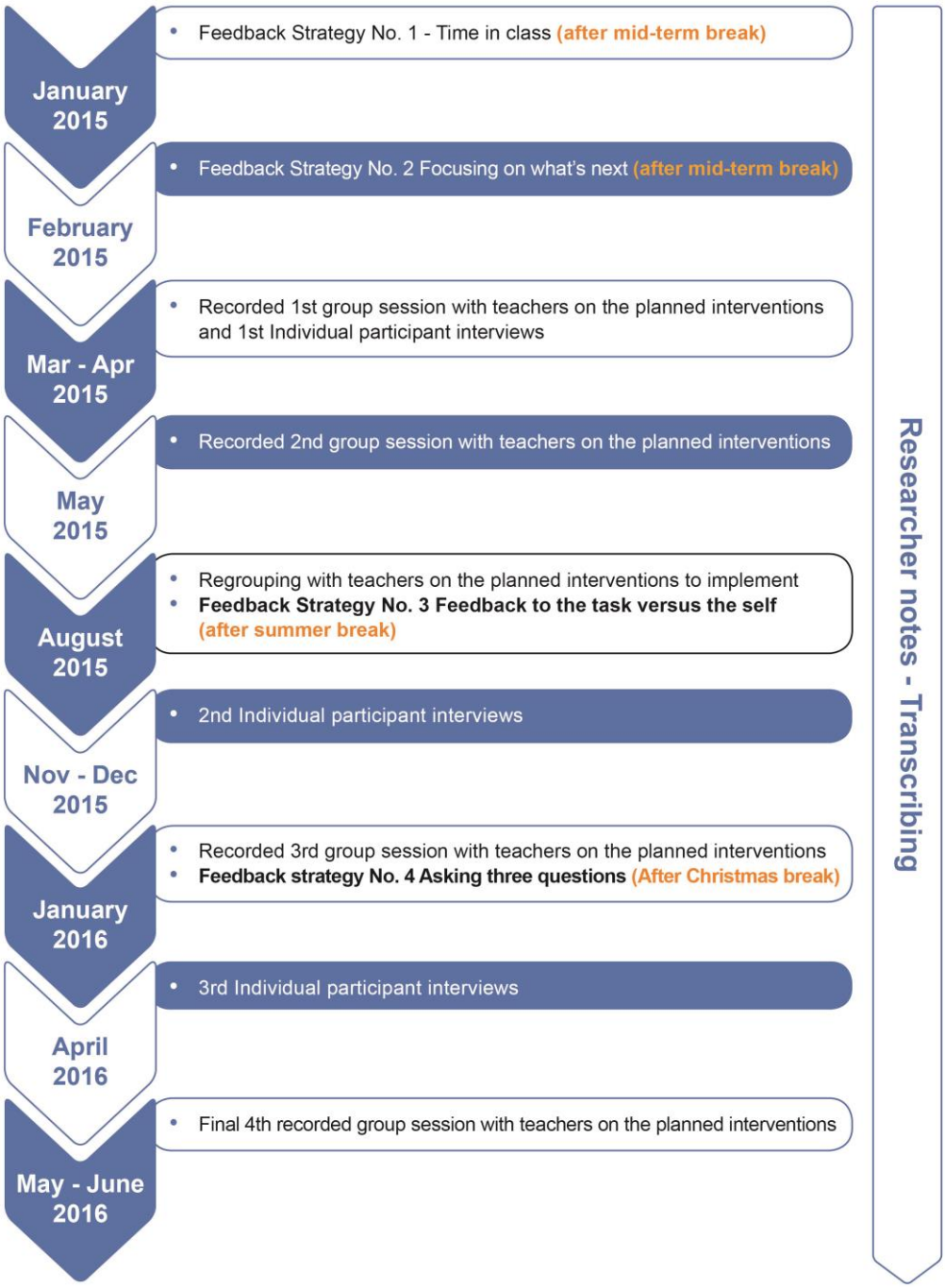


Figure 12 Data Collection Schedule

This timing worked very well within the FET context. Teachers are often planning the delivery of their modules around identified terms in the academic year (highlighted in figure 12) and so it was a positive method of knowing when to introduce the planned intervention. This further validates this research as it shows that this kind of activity in an FET centre needs to be planned and not sprung on the teachers mid-term when they are

already in the flow of teaching for that term. Johnson and Smith (2008) discussed implementing an intervention and carried out evaluations at key times of the academic year, what they referred to as 'tiered models of service delivery' (p.47), which allowed them to determine the effectiveness of instruction. This allowed the teachers involved in that study to adjust and make changes at key times in the academic year in order for the student to progress successfully. I gave the participating teachers control over the project and this allowed them to dictate it in many ways to suit their own practice. Carl Rogers (2002) discusses the facilitation of learning being about permitting individuals to go 'charging' off in new directions directed by their own interests. Rogers also advocates the unleashing a sense of inquiry, opening everything out to questioning and exploration. He argues that out of such a context 'arise true students, real learners, creative scientists and scholars, and practitioners, the kind of individuals who can live in a delicate and ever-changing balance between what is presently known and the flowing, moving, altering problems and facts of the future' (p.26). This is what I wanted to achieve in this project: I wanted the participating teachers to unleash a sense of inquiry in how they deliver feedback in their practice. The aim was to facilitate them to do this in a way that best suited them in their practice. This was important for me as the researcher in the project, that the teachers would generate the spirit of inquiry themselves, from themselves in their practice. I wanted them to have ownership of their own changes in their practice.

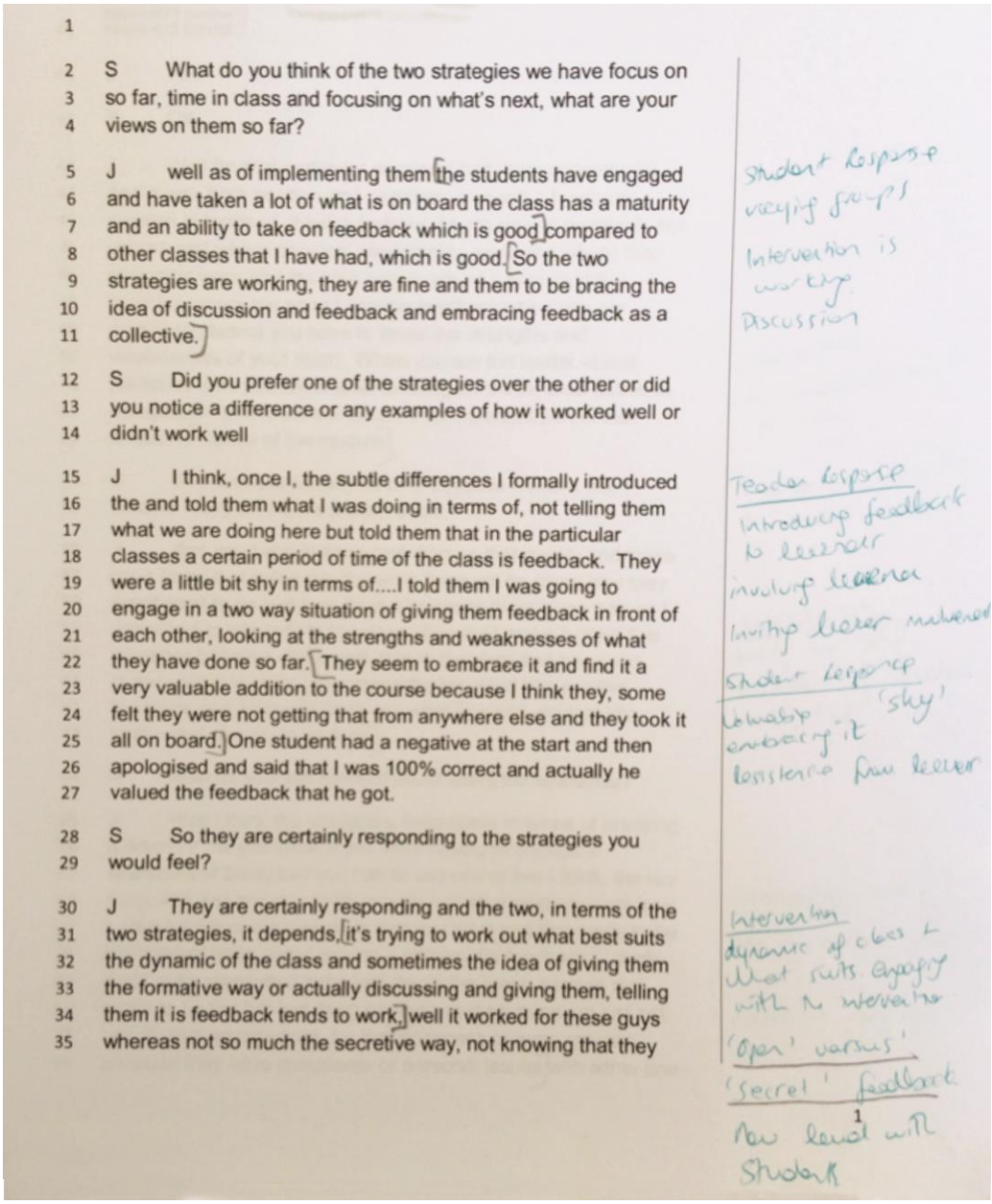
4.11 Data Analysis

In qualitative research, the researcher is often left with pages and pages of written text. The generally accepted approach is that the researcher codes, categorises and makes sense of that written text (Loxley *et al* 2010). Approaching the data analysis for this research was a lengthy and rigorous process. It was a continuous interactive process, which began in earnest when interviews and teacher discussion group sessions were taking place, and also when interview recording were being transcribed. Researchers who carry out their own interview transcriptions can continue to add hidden, rich detail to the data, which will contribute to the later stage of analysing

(Kvale 2007). As the researcher I could remember the social cues of the respondents during the recorded sessions. Over time, I reflected I was getting a real feel for what the respondent was saying and doing as evidenced in my journal in March:

> *Teachers can see the benefit of collaborative teaching. It is not easy and it takes time but as one teacher noted in the group session this will get easier as we progress with it. The collaborative tasks allowed them to gain deep meaning and understanding in their practice, an opportunity that they did not have before (Researcher Journal, 7 March 2016)*

Data analysis for this research involved a three-step process: reading transcripts to identify and organise the data into codes, collation of those codes in a suitable format for analysis for writing the thesis at a later stage and narrowing down the codes into themes. In order to organise the data into codes I read the transcripts numerous times in order to get an in-depth understanding of what the data was telling me. This involved several readings of the transcripts and taking notes in the form of key phrases or actions on the extended right-hand margin, where a large space was available for taking notes.



S What do you think of the two strategies we have focus on so far, time in class and focusing on what's next, what are your views on them so far?

J well as of implementing them the students have engaged and have taken a lot of what is on board the class has a maturity and an ability to take on feedback which is good compared to other classes that I have had, which is good. So the two strategies are working, they are fine and them to be bracing the idea of discussion and feedback and embracing feedback as a collective.

S Did you prefer one of the strategies over the other or did you notice a difference or any examples of how it worked well or didn't work well

J I think, once I, the subtle differences I formally introduced the and told them what I was doing in terms of, not telling them what we are doing here but told them that in the particular classes a certain period of time of the class is feedback. They were a little bit shy in terms of....I told them I was going to engage in a two way situation of giving them feedback in front of each other, looking at the strengths and weaknesses of what they have done so far. They seem to embrace it and find it a very valuable addition to the course because I think they, some felt they were not getting that from anywhere else and they took it all on board. One student had a negative at the start and then apologised and said that I was 100% correct and actually he valued the feedback that he got.

S So they are certainly responding to the strategies you would feel?

J They are certainly responding and the two, in terms of the two strategies, it depends, it's trying to work out what best suits the dynamic of the class and sometimes the idea of giving them the formative way or actually discussing and giving them, telling them it is feedback tends to work, well it worked for these guys whereas not so much the secretive way, not knowing that they

Figure 13 Interview Transcript

The transcripts were read again to ensure that no key elements were omitted from the data. This is defined in the literature as coding and it '…is how you define what the data you are analysing are about' (Gibbs 2007, p.38). According to Gibbs (2007) it '…involves identifying and recording one or more passages of text or other data items such as parts of pictures that, in some sense, exemplify the same theoretical or descriptive idea' (p.38). Codes started to develop and appear, telling me a story of what happened in this research. The codes that emerged from the data of all

the interviews and group sessions from the six participating teachers, from my perspective, are as follows:

Codes					
Sharing	Pursuing new knowledge	More focus	Honing skills	Investment	Thinking about practice
Changing	Student involvement	Frustrations	Awareness	Mindful	Opportunities
Outside influences	Movement	Reflection	Broadening perspectives	Collaboration	Openness
Relationship building	Leadership	Intervention	Enrichment	Dialogue and discourse on learning	Planning

Table 14 Initial Research Codes

The next step in processing the data was to categorise the coded data (Gibbs 2007) – quotes from the teacher and teacher discussion group interviews. This was a very complex and lengthy procedure of setting up spreadsheet documents for each interview and having individual worksheets within the workbook for each individual teacher.

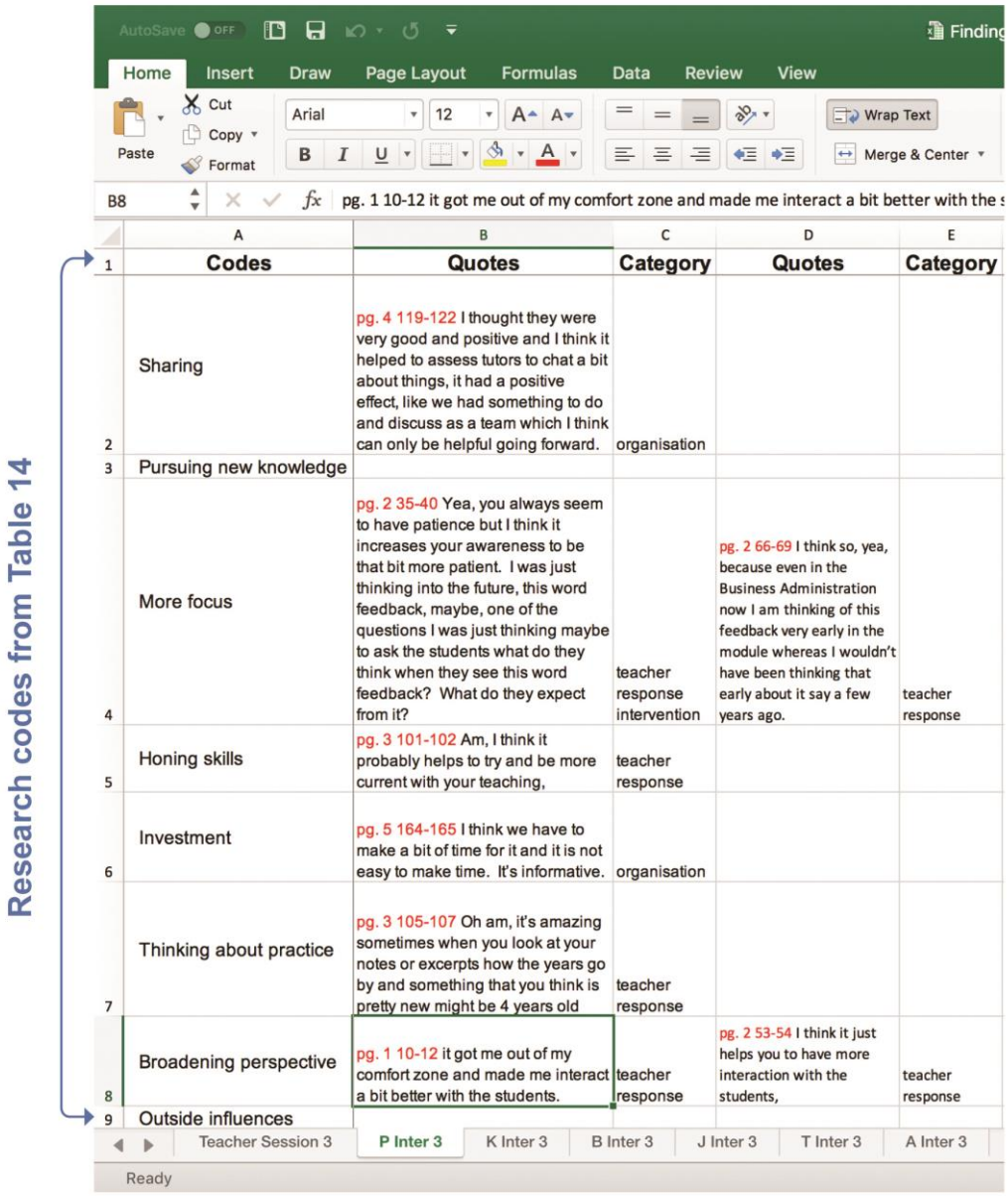


Figure 14 Collation of Coded Data

Quotes were then taken from the interview transcripts representing the codes identified. While this iterative process was lengthy it was necessary: it helped organise the data so as to make sense of what the teachers were saying. On closer examination of the coding I found there was a lot of overlap in the codes so I needed to '…categorise the text in order to establish a framework of thematic ideas' (Gibbs 2007, p.38). This is described as data-driven coding, also known as open coding. The ethos behind this method is that you have an open-mind when you are looking at

the data; you are waiting to see what the data tells you. But Gibbs (2007) warns that we need to review the data without any preconceived ideas of what we are going to find. This I found challenging as the researcher as you are so immersed in the data all along and you are trying to have an objective perspective of what the research participants are telling you. He advises that we '…start by reading the texts and trying to tease out what is happening' (p.45). Wisker (2008) draws on the work of Robson's (1993) ideas for drawing conclusions from qualitative data. Robson suggests to '…recognise and develop patterns so that you can draw differing responses together because of their similarity and frequency, cluster them and bring them together because of their relation to a limited number of factors' (p.320). So, while I had already identified broad codes there was a need now to arrange these codes in a more organised way. This is where I developed a categorization of codes: they needed to be 'arranged' into a more meaningful system. 'Codes that are similar kinds of things or that are about the same thing are gathered together under the same branch of the hierarchy…'(Gibbs 2007, p.73). There was a need to group the 24 codes in table 14 into larger, 'parent' codes or emerging themes and so again I had to look at what the data was telling me. The end result of this was a categorization of codes that were reflective of the data.

As this project was deeply focused on the participating teachers in the study a teacher practice related code emerged as a parent code. Participating teachers talked a lot about students and their involvement in the study and in their learning in general. The learning environment related code features new collaboration activities between students and teachers and about feedback in practice. The third parent code was the context and change related code. This code highlights data from the text that identifies teachers broadening their engagement with teaching and seeking opportunities for collaboration and change. Gibbs (2007) identifies many benefits of developing a categorization of codes: it keeps things tidy, it can constitute an analysis of the data in itself, it prevents the duplication of codes, it helps you to see the range of possible ways things could be and it makes possible certain types of analytic questions (pp.75-76). I began

to see patterns and comparisons and found explanations and began to build the analysis from that. At the end of this iterative data analysis process the categorization of codes for this research looked like this:

Categorisation of Codes		
Teacher Practice	**Learning Environment**	**Context and Change**
Reflective Practice	Student Involvement	Investment
Mindful	Relationship building	Collaboration
Sharing	Intervention	Change – new ways of doing
More focus	Enrichment	Broadening Perspective
Pursuing new knowledge	Dialogue & discourse on learning	Movement
Thinking about practice	Planning	Openness
Honing Skills		Outside Influences
		Belief in Student – Partnership
		Opportunities
		Frustrations

Figure 15 Categorisation of Codes

The three 'parent' codes (teacher practice, learning environment and context and change) were not prioritised in any order but were evidenced in varying degrees with the three cycles, critical and unique, within the findings. By spending time developing this categorization of codes I began to delve deeper and ask what is happening in the FET case study institution as the intervention was developed. This process started off with 24 codes but having developed the above categorization there were now three to focus on: teacher practice, learning environment and context and change. This made it much easier to handle and process the data. The approach was to look at the data as chronological comparisons and the tables that had been used to gather quotes representing the various codes were allowing this to happen. The participating teachers worked on this project together over two academic years and I wanted to capture the story the data presented. What were teachers saying during the life of the study, what were the participating teachers' views over the two-year period, and so determine the answers to the research questions of what happened. The chronological comparison happens by reading across the rows (Gibbs 2007) of what the teacher said, for example, about sharing in their practice at the start of the study and towards the end of the project.

Data analysis can be a very difficult and time-consuming aspect to qualitative data research. It is '...textual, non-numeric and unstructured' (Basit 2002, p.152). According to Basit (2002), you need to code your data

in order to organize and categorise themes that emerge from your research. Basit refers to McCracken (1988); 'The object of analysing qualitative data is to determine the categories, relationships and assumptions that inform the respondents' view of the world in general, and of the topic in particular (p.143). By coding the data you are putting meaning to the words spoken by your respondents and how their meaning will fit into the overall phenomena you are researching. Basit (2002) cites Seidel and Kelle (1995) where they see '...the role of coding as noticing relevant phenomena; collecting examples of those phenomena; and analysing those phenomena in order to find commonalities, differences, patterns and structures' (p.144). As the researcher, I needed to make sense of the codes and categories that I created for the research analysis. This process involved the identification of relationships between items of data across the participating teachers, noticing relevant phenomena in identifying the codes and analysing them in the excel sheet across the six teachers over the two-year period of the research in order to find commonalities and differences, which concluded in identifying patterns and structures in the form of the categorisation of codes (figure 14).

4.12 Methodological Limitations

According to Denscombe (2010) there are four bases of judging the credibility of research: validity, reliability, generalizability and objectivity. With a qualitative study it is challenging to prove the validity of your research (Lincoln and Guba 1985), as there is a need to persuade and assure readers that the data are reasonably accurate and appropriate (Denscombe 2010, p.299). In this study I continuously checked and rechecked that the data was produced and therefore interpreted accurately within good practice guidelines. This was achieved through the triangulation methods employed for the research. Another issue is the need to ensure the reader that the data is reliable and trustworthy. In this study this was achieved by detailing the processes that were taken to initiate, carry out and implement the research procedures. This research has outlined in chronological detail the process that took place over the two-year life of the project. This research project has revealed an explicit

account of the methods used: analysis and decision making that took place (Seale *et al*, 1999 as cited in Denscombe 2010), in order to show trustworthiness and reliability on data collection. In the conclusion chapter the project limitations are outlined.

4.13 Conclusion

This chapter has presented a detailed description of the methodological approach employed in this research. The constructivist approach was identified as the research paradigm as the inclusion of participants' values and opinions is important for the inquiry. The respondent and inquirer are working together towards a greater, more sophisticated understanding of a phenomenon of teaching within an FET context. The chapter discusses the influence of critical theory on this research project. The strategy employed in this research project was action research within a case study and the reasons for this choice have been argued. Data collection methods of interviews and teacher discussion group sessions as well as the researcher's reflective journal formed the tools for data gathering. The one-to-one and group interviews utilised were argued as appropriate methods to gather the main data for this study: how to promote a professional learning community among FET teachers in the case study institution. This chapter has outlined how the research data was gathered, checked and triangulated in order to ensure that the research was carried out with integrity, validity, and reliability and without bias. The approach to data analysis is described as well as ethical issues and considerations that were considered and managed.

The next chapter will present the data that emerged from the action research cycles that took place over the life of the project. There is a description of what happened in the three identified categories of findings, as well as a description of the events or key happenings in each cycle.

Chapter 5

Action Research Cycles – Case Study of Change

Findings and Discussion

Chapter Five Action Research Cycles

5.1 Introduction

This chapter describes the case study story that evolved over a two-year period. The chapter presents the three cycles of the action research project that took place within the case study institution: action research cycle one between January and May 2015, action research cycle two between September 2015 and January 2016 and action research cycle three between February and June 2016. The findings are presented from each cycle and these emerge from the coding and categorisation process described I the previous chapter into three main categories: teacher practice, learning environment, context and change.

The teacher participants in this study were given random pseudonyms that were selected with no specific rationale in mind. The pseudonyms given to the research participants were as follows; Kevin, Mary, Susan, Una, Breda and Seán. When a quote is used from one of their interviews or from the teacher discussion group sessions their full name was used, which interview it was (1st, 2nd or 3rd) and the line number on the transcript. Names were not abbreviated in the text, as there was a need for the teachers in this study to 'stand' out and for the reader to get to 'know' them as they formed such a foremost part of the study. It was hoped that the reader will get to know the six participating teachers and their individual personalities and ways of doing as the research was undertaken as *part of practice* (Denscombe 2010, p.127) within a case study approach, getting the '…sufficient detail to unravel the complexities of a given situation' with tendencies to '…emphasise the detailed workings of the relationships and social processes' (p.53). So in the presentation of the findings I am to reflect what happened for the individuals as well as for the intervention as it was implemented.

According to Hagevik *et al* (2012) action research has been considered a way for teachers to inquire into and improve their practice (Carr and Kemmis 1986). The authors describe action research as a '…way to

promote a cyclical process of improvement that includes describing a problem…' (p.675). The problem that was being addressed in this research study was how can I as the leader in the case study institution promote a professional learning community among the case study FET teachers? My observations were that there was very little or no explicit practice within the case study institution of teachers engaging in dialogue about their practice. I proposed to instigate an intervention, AfL feedback, which was practice based and asked teachers to implement it into their practice in a planned and focused way. The research questions that guided my action research study were the following;

- What experiences unfold for individuals in the action research project?
- What happens to the professional engagement of the FET teacher?
- What happens to students' engagement with their learning?
- What experiences unfold for me the research practitioner leading the project?

Carr and Kemmins (1986) state that action research aims to improve practice, understand practice and improve the conditions in which the practice takes place. I was hoping that we could improve and understand our practice through developing a professional learning community initiative among the FET teachers in the centre.

Action Research Cycles within the Case Study Institution

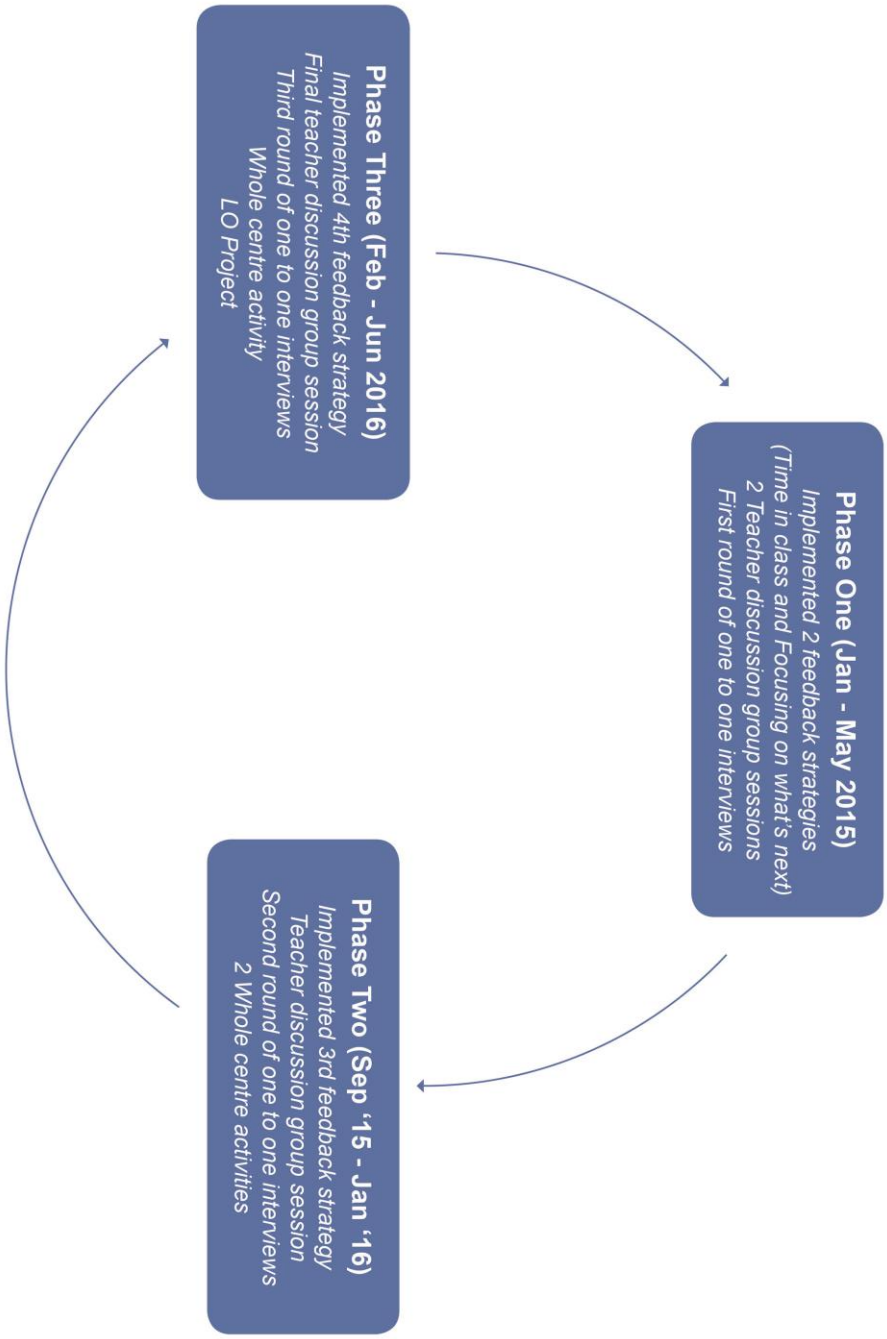


Figure 16 Action Research Cycles

Outline of Action Research Cycles within the Case Study

The diagram in figure 16 is a summary of how the action research project developed and evolved during the two-year period of the study. Once ethical approval was granted in January 2015 phase one of the study commenced. During the first phase, *Getting Along*, (January to May 2015) participating teachers implemented two feedback strategies; we held two teacher discussion group sessions (March and June 2015) and carried out one to one interviews. Teachers during this phase were starting to talk about their practice. They were beginning to share and explore the uses of the planned intervention. There was relationship building taking place as well as teacher collaboration activities. Teachers during this phase started to voice their challenges and difficulties in their practice and the teacher discussion group session offered practical solutions to these problems. I felt that we had really 'broken ground' during this phase. It was for these reasons I titled this phase *Getting Along.*

The second phase, *Making Headway*, took place between September 2015 and January 2016. Teachers implemented a third feedback strategy: we held the second teacher discussion group session and second round of one to one interviews. During this period teachers were involved with two parallel whole practice related activities. These involved the whole teaching staff within the case study institution redesigning their courses' assignment briefs and assessment criteria. Teachers started to engage with the intervention and the collaboration that it involved in a positive way. They started to approach the intervention in their practice in a collegial way. This, ultimately, resulted in the teachers engaging in reflective practice. During this phase, the teachers started to talk about the students' learning which was a positive sign of teacher engagement and a 'change in practice'. It was for these reasons I titled this phase *Making Headway.*

The third phase of the study, *New Habits*, took place between February and June 2016. During this period the implementation of the fourth feedback strategy took place and we held a teacher discussion group session and the third and final round of one to one interviews were carried

out. The final phase in the study showed a change in habits from the participating teachers. Teachers were being supported in their practice, which resulted in less isolation for them. There was a realisation that you can learn from your colleagues which results in a deepening of practice. However, more critically, there was a whole centre approach emerging from the data around the teachers involved. It was for these reasons I titled this phase *New Habits.*

The teacher discussion group sessions took place after the implementation of each feedback strategy where we came together in a sharing collaborative manner to evaluate our actions and activities and discuss issues and concerns within the participating group.

The chapter will now present the findings from each of these cycles.

5.2 Phase One – January to May 2015

Getting Along

'It (teacher discussion group sessions) gets people kind of focused even though everyone can be off on their own little tangent, I think it actually grounds us a little bit into what we are doing and we've never done anything like that before' (Una, Interview 1)

During this phase teachers were implementing two of the feedback strategies, time in class (Jan-Mar 2015) and focusing on what's next (Mar-May 2015). We held two teacher discussion groups in March and May to discuss these feedback strategies: their implementation processes and influence in the classroom. Individual one to one interviews with the participating teachers also took place. One of the initial tasks during this period was to organise the first recorded teacher discussion group session. I noted in my journal that this proved very difficult, '…trying to find a suitable time for everyone, coupled with the mid-term break' (pp.16-17) and only five of the six were able to attend. This is a reality of trying to engage in a professional learning activity in a rural FET centre when teachers are often working on part-time contracts.

The first teacher discussion group session took place on the 2nd of March 2015 with five of the six participating teachers attending. Susan was not available. The plan for the session is outlined below.

Teacher Discussion Group Session 1

March 2nd 2015
4-5pm

Layout

Brief introduction on study
- Consent forms
- Recording the session

Discussion on the feedback strategy
VTOS teachers - feedback on their experiences with the planned feedback interventions; tell a story around feedback in your class
Feedback strategies – what one to take next
Engaging with the literature
Schedule of interviews and next teacher group session

Figure 17 Plan for Teacher Discussion Group Session 1

The teachers in attendance were Mary, Breda, Una, Seán and Kevin. The format of the teacher discussion group session was very open and relaxed.

My opening question was to ask the group to relate their experiences of how the feedback strategy was going in the classroom. People were quiet and a little resistant. Kevin was first to respond and he said that he will '…make an effort' (Teacher discussion group session 1, p.1, 39) to start the discussion. He mentioned that he gave group feedback to his students on a particular topic in his subject discipline. There were some weak and some strong students in the class so he felt he needed to make sure that his feedback would not have a negative influence on the students and so he said, 'I chose this one as it is very easy one [feedback strategy] to understand and maybe it would give weaker students a bit of confidence…' (Teacher discussion group session 1, p. 2, 46-48). Kevin discussed how he carried out one to one feedback with students and he '… found that it was a, what's the word, a bit 'dead', you know, they weren't coming out, they weren't chatting or asking many questions. I thought it was more 'lively' in the group session' (Teacher discussion group session 1, pp. 8/9, 312-315) and he decided from this that in future he will focus on group feedback in his practice and he said, 'Yea, I think I will concentrate on the group part of the class...' (Teacher discussion group session 1, p.10, 375-376). During this first teacher discussion group session Kevin led the discussion and was open about his classroom challenges.

> *'…they don't like algebra but it is a good one, you can use more and more to show everyday problems like in the college to show drawings, tables or anything you use, if you could get that across in a simple fashion, they might concentrate more on actually doing the maths, you know, it often crops up, so where am I going to use this' (Kevin, Teacher discussion group session 1, p. 13, 476-483)*

During the initial stages of the discussion Kevin asked an enlightening question, 'Am I right in saying that the feedback works in two directions, from the students to the tutor' (Teacher discussion group session 1, p. 10, 360-361) and this was followed by others opening up about their experiences. Seán highlighted the challenges he has had in his class where students were very demotivated and he felt he could not implement the feedback strategies the way he wanted to.

> *'Yes, because of the sporadic-ness of attendance, the way I had to manage in terms of who was coming in, who wasn't, so the issues associated with having to deal with, having to go over certain things again, not being able to organise the class in such a way that you*

> *were actually following a plan' (Seán, Teacher discussion group session 1, p. 3, 85-89)*

> *'You couldn't before because you were pushed to get it done, get it done, get it done, where the main focus is your descriptor and getting that done, so you don't have the time to do the feedback' (Seán, Teacher discussion group session 1, p. 4 122-125)*

However, since the new term (January 2015) he was more able to engage in the feedback strategies with his class as he felt the student was 'maturing' in their learning as the project developed; it was about students' readiness to engage in this type of learning.

> *'...there is a maturity developing, the learner is now learning to learn, whereas before I think the learner could be immature in terms of their approach, in terms of feedback, in terms of what they've gained and what I have noticed is that there is a light going off; this is the approach to a new level, to what they were used to' (Seán, Teacher discussion group session 1, p. 11, 392-398)*

Seán also observed how the cognitive development of the student has an influence on how they can engage with the feedback.

> *'…now they are able to assess their learning and I am able to give feedback as it comes so today we had to review a meeting, to assess what was learned and what was gained, what we were going to do with that, even to a point what questions were asked' (Seán, Teacher discussion group session 1, p. 3, 107-110)*

As a result of this, his students

> *'…are more interested, they are able to reflect, the interest is allowing them to ask questions to get feedback on their learning' (Seán, Teacher discussion group session 1, p. 3, 115-117)*

Mary was also focusing on her practice and taking student needs into account when reviewing the strategy. The need to cater for all in her class and to be aware of all levels in her class was important to her.

> *'I don't ignore the stronger ones, but I certainly try to focus in on the ones that are weaker for fear that they will give up or find themselves really losing track of what they are supposed to be doing so I try and keep a close eye on them to make sure that they are staying with it' (Mary, Teacher discussion group session 1, pp. 7/8, 273-278)*

Mary told the group how at the beginning of her classes she would give 10-20 minutes to go over what was covered in the previous class.

> *'So I go back on what we have already done the session before and I give them the opportunity then, at that point say, feedback to me if there are any problems with any of the stuff or queries and how they*

> *think it has gone' (Mary, Teacher discussion group session 1, p. 7, 246-251)*

Mary also resonated with Kevin when he discussed giving one to one versus group feedback. She too felt that feedback delivered in group-sessions was more amenable for the student. She found with the one to one feedback students literally close down and they don't know what to say.

> *'I don't know why but they seem to be more able to do it in the group session setting than if I take them and do it on a one on one' (Mary, Teacher discussion group session 1, p. 8, 287-289)*

Breda added to the discussion when she says that feedback can be influential for students' progress.

> *'Once they've had feedback as well and they realise that they are progressing, once they know they are progressing then they can focus on what they are going to do next' (Breda, Teacher discussion group session 1, p. 12 448-450)*

To develop the effectiveness of the feedback strategies Breda responded by saying how she engaged the students in the different strategies.

> *'I'd ask them how is the delivery, is everything clear enough for them, do they need it changed in any way, because of the different learning styles as well you want to know that they are picking everything up' (Breda, Teacher discussion group session 1, p. 10, 384-387)*

At this stage of the discussion the focus moved to the students and their progress, and this was reflected upon by Una. Una identified ways in which her practice is now **more focused** and that she is getting a 'chance' or an opportunity to ask students questions about their learning.

> *'It does take time for them to feel comfortable to tell us stuff and us to engage with them as well. Not only is it their own learning to learn, but becoming more confident in talking to us, just the relationship is a big deal' (Una, Teacher group session 1, p. 11 417-420)*

During the discussion Una was the first to express real **frustrations** with absenteeism in the FET classroom and this resonated with Seán's reported challenges previously. She described a situation where she had planned a feedback session with her class and how it did not go well for her:

> *'I had spent the night before planning how I was going to do the feedback and got it ready and had a structure in place ready to do it but when I arrived in then the people that had actually completed the task the week before were not in and it was the people that hadn't it*

> *done that were in. So that meant that the feedback meant nothing to the group that was there' (Una, Teacher discussion group session 1, p.4, 152-157)*

The limitations presented by the context were starting to emerge towards the end of this teacher discussion group. Adding to Una's frustrations was the feeling of having made such an effort in her preparations for a feedback session and then she felt she was unable to implement it. She also highlighted another situation where she had given feedback on an exam that students had undertaken. It took a lot of time, 20 to 25 minutes out of class. If you are under time pressure this will be challenging. She felt it was good for students however, and they were '…still talking about it even though I was finished...and things like that' (Teacher discussion group session 1, p. 5, 188-193). Because students were aware of their exam results they now knew what they needed to get in order to complete the module successfully.

> '…that they actually learned something from talking about the exam and the usefulness of exams and real life and connecting that way. But what I did find that some of them really took it on that because their exam was not good, they had to do good in other areas, that maybe they were a little lax about things (Una, Teacher discussion group session 1, p. 5,183-188)

During this first phase I distributed 2 articles to the group on AfL and effective feedback; Changing Classroom Practice (Wiliam 2008) and Feedback (Brookhart 2008). Una discussed how she tried out another AfL strategy from the reading of this literature I gave them. She attempted to engage students in peer assessment and had set up an activity in class to do this. And while she admits that it didn't go so well as the students '…seemed quite competitive…' she could see how it could potentially be a good learning exercise for students and that she would '…like to try that more' (Teacher group session 1, p. 15, 546-547).

At the end of the teacher discussion group session it was agreed to focus on the second feedback strategy, focusing on what is next, until the end of the term 2015. There was a lot of time spent trying to organise the next date to meet for the teacher group session; this was finally agreed.

My thoughts on the teacher discussion group session

In this first teacher discussion group session there was evidence of teachers sharing experiences of their practice, in the particular elements of their practice that involved feedback. One thing that was very obvious was that there were struggles – to accommodate the strategy within their practice, to get students engaged and to change the habits of learning and participation of the students. However, looking back there was very good sharing of practices - what worked and what did not work in their classrooms. There was evidence of teachers asking for ideas and help, and the teachers appeared to be becoming more in tune with their teaching - how they deliver and interpret feedback in their classroom. The teachers were beginning to think in a more deeper and questioning way about what was happening for them in their classroom and discussing this with their colleagues. There was also evidence of teachers focusing on the needs of students and there was some evidence of opening up dialogue with students in a new way. For me as the researcher this was encouraging as they were positive steps that the teachers were taking towards building a community of practice within the case study institution. This was informing for research question on how do I promote a PLC in the case study institution. This period in the study led strategically into the start of conducting the one to one interviews with the teachers.

As part of the research design I decided to interview teachers individually on their experiences of working with the intervention and being involved in the study through one to one interviews. This triangulated the research for me. The first round of interviews with teachers took place in April 2015 and they lasted approximately 20 minutes. The purpose was to capture what was happening for the individual teacher in their classroom and specifically to explore the observations from the teacher discussion group in March (See appendix 1). So the objective was to determine how individuals were engaging with the feedback strategies in their classroom. In addition, how were their students responding to the strategies, what changes were they

making to the strategies to suit their learners' needs? I also explored within the interviews their teaching practice and how they felt it may be changing and why. Finally, I included questioning in the interview that focused on their response to the teacher group session that was held in the previous weeks.

In additional to teacher discussion group sessions and one to one interviews and as part of the data collection design, I gave the teachers a small notebook as a tool to jot down ideas and thoughts as they participate in the study. It was made clear to the teachers that it was not a diary and they were not expected to share the notebook at the end of the study. It was just a tool to help them think and track their thoughts during the project. Teachers generally welcomed this activity during the first interview:

> *'I'm just finding this [diary] a reflective tool; it really is a reflective tool. I've never taken the opportunity to, although I like to reflect on my work this is making me do it… which cannot be a bad thing at all' (Mary, Interview 1, p. 6, 193-196)*

> *'Just to spend a bit of time, the little booklet even though I wouldn't write that much I would still and something will come to my mind about it and I would write it down and I think Oh yea that's a point or whatever so I just think having a bit of reflection on it as well is a good idea' (Una, Interview 1, pp.7 /8, 272-276)*

Although not mentioning the notebook, Kevin highlighted that being involved in the study, '…makes me think, to think back on sometimes not to maybe rush forward that you have to reflect back and just think of this stuff' and continued by stating that you have to make sure that the whole class is coming along with you (Kevin, Interview 1, p. 2, 52-64). Breda also talked about **thinking about practice**,

> *'…sometimes after class you go home and you reflect on how the class has gone and what you could have done better or what you shouldn't have done or what you could use next time. So that was good for me as well listening to that and because you do go home and think, well that didn't really work, what can I do to change it' (Breda, Interview 1, pp. 6/7, 221-228)*

Evidence was that the intervention was allowing teachers to think and reflect more on their practice and on student learning. Teachers talked about being more aware of their practice now as a result of being involved in the study and looking at feedback in a planned and focused way. This

was new for the participating teachers. Teachers discussed having a greater sense of knowing what was going on for the student. In an evolving way the participants became more **mindful and aware** of themselves as teachers. Jarvis (2010) cites Brookfield in stating that '...teaching is a human project and in order to be good teachers we have to know ourselves and understand our strengths and seek to overcome our weaknesses' (p. 184). Una reflecting on her teaching states:

> *'Before you would do it but it wouldn't be in the back of your mind that that is what you are doing but now I think it brings it to the fore and you are more conscious that this is what you are doing and you are wondering what the kind of response will be from them, from the student as well so it kind of works like that' (Una, Interview 1, pp. 2/3, 70-75)*

> *'…but it definitely makes you mindful of what is going on and how you can improve your own teaching and the feedback that you are going to give to them. I can see how it would work very well' (Una, Interview 1, p.2, 55-58)*

> *'Well it impacts in a sense that I have a sense of knowing what's going on, other than delivering, what's going on for the student. It gives me a sense of where each one is at...' (Mary, Interview 1, p. 3, 92-96)*

Breda spoke of how after the first teacher discussion group session, she and one of the other participating teachers had a chat:

> *'And actually one of the tutors that is in the group as well, we were having a discussion yesterday and she was saying sometimes after class you go home and you reflect on how the class has gone and what you could have done better or what you shouldn't have done or what you could use next time. So that was good for me as well listening to that and because you do go home and think, well that didn't really work, what can I do to change it' (Breda, Interview 1, pp. 6/7, 221-228)*

Breda learned that she is not alone in her anxieties of how a class may not have gone so well, that others are in the same situation sometimes and so there was a sense of not being so isolated. So even at this early stage the teachers were **sharing** their thinking and reflecting with each other. They were engaging in dialogue on their practice, which is essentially **opening** their practice to others.

In Brookfield's critical reflection process, he refers to the experience of colleagues having a positive effect on our reflective practice. He states that we will become more aware of our own practice by examining and engaging with colleagues, we will look at our practice in 'a new light' (Brookfield 2005). Developing the theme of **reflection** and thinking on her practice and the impact of time for dialogue Una observes:

> *'It (teacher discussion group sessions) gets people kind of focused even though everyone can be off on their own little tangent in it sometimes but no, I think it actually grounds us a little bit into what we are doing and we've never done anything like that before where we actually focus on our, how we are getting on with the students, how we give feedback and it's actually good for our own personal development as well I think. It gives that time to do that' (Una, Interview 1, pp. 3/4, 110-117)*

As part of this research, relevant short articles on feedback and reflective practice were distributed to the participating teachers at the first teacher discussion group session. Brookfield states that relevant literature can furnish teachers with a wealth of knowledge and insight into teaching practices and teaching situations. Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) also suggest connecting with the latest research evidence. However, these articles were rarely discussed during the one-to-one interviews or teacher discussion group sessions. At this stage in the study there was limited evidence of participating teachers actively engaging with the literature.

In the interviews teachers welcomed the **sharing** that was happening in relation to their practice. Mary stated that teachers would learn from each other as a result of the teacher discussion group sessions. And that '…we are going to learn from each other different strategies, different techniques, different ways of doing and that way you can take that and build on it from there' (Mary, Interview 1, p. 5, 169-172). Teachers began to notice and copy what other teachers were employing in their practice. The discussion group also opened up the whole area of teachers being able to see what is happening in other subject disciplines outside of their own and some began to look for ways of integrating course content to make learning more meaningful for the student.

> *'Well like that as I said earlier if we could share notes and what worked and what didn't work and what changes were made' (Breda, Interview 1, p.7 256-258)*

Seán also made the point that when we observe what other people are doing "…it benefits everyone…' (Interview 1, p. 7, 245-247). Teachers didn't just share good practice but also highlighted areas of practice that they had tried out and did not work so well which is all positive, progressive dialogue around professional practice learning.

What was apparent to me as researcher, even at this early stage was that teachers discovered a new focus in their teaching as a result of implementing the feedback strategies. They were highlighting many wider issues such as discussion in class giving confidence to weak students, teachers having a better sense of knowing their practice, teachers getting feedback from students, listening skills, applying the strategies at different stages of the students' ability. Mary talked about focusing in and getting a sense of where they [the students] are at and where to take them next (Interview 1, p. 3, 104-106). In this phase of the study Kevin saw the potential of using feedback strategies on a topic that has always proved challenging:

> *'I just wanted to concentrate on this particular aspect…to try and improve our feedback situation and help out with this understanding of … and solving problems' (Kevin, Interview 1, p. 2, 46-49)*

Besides the usefulness of feedback, the **quality** of the feedback and how it is given was another point of emphasis. Susan brought this up in her interview stating that the study has made her think about the quality of feedback that she gives, that there is a new focus on how she relayed the feedback to the students. She also points out that it was good to have feedback more 'formalised' in our practice as it is so important for students but was also necessary under QQI assessment procedures, as per guidelines in syllabus material. Susan discussed listening to students in a more focused way now because of using the feedback strategies and how this has definitely affected her approach to teaching:

> *'Only in that it is kind of formalising the feedback that I have given, you are just being a bit more formal about it. And then I suppose the other thing is the listening. You know you are listening more to what*

> *the students say. So this definitely has affected my approach to the teaching – we'll see does it work!' (Susan, Interview 1, p. 3, 82-101)*

In this first interview Susan was explicit about being open to the idea of sharing practice:

> *'Or maybe there is something that somebody else is doing I could say, yea, that should work in my class. So, yea, I think it is valuable' (Susan, Interview 1, p. 4 138-140)*

Explaining more deeply about the usefulness of feedback Breda highlighted the positives of having **new and different ways** of engaging with the content with the students:

> *'…it opens your mind to different ways to using and delivering your stuff. It's just nice to have different ways of thinking…instead of just sticking with the same ideas and the same delivery and the same feedback and I think if you have different ways of giving feedback and even receiving feedback from your learners as well there is a chance of getting more information both ways' (Breda, Interview 1, p. 4, 109-115)*

What was significant here was that teachers were thinking about their practice in a way that they had not done before, or certainly never been in dialogue with their peers before about their practice. During the interview Breda mentioned that she now stops and thinks about where she needs to focus and that this helped her to structure her teaching better instead of just 'ploughing' through the curriculum for assessment purposes (Interview 1, p. 4, 122-126).

It was observed at this time from an in-depth reading of interview transcripts that there was a **change** in focus from the teachers towards catering for student engagement and student learning. Breda stated that she is more likely to '…stop and think where you need to focus', to try and identify the challenging parts of the syllabus for students and that way you can '…structure your teaching in a better way instead of just thinking to what is required from whatever module you are teaching…' (Breda, Interview 1, p. 4, 122-126).

Both Breda and Kevin welcomed the new approaches to teaching and learning, and to learn new teaching strategies to support them in their practice.

> *'It's just nice to have different ways of thinking about them instead of just sticking with the same ideas and the same delivery and the same feedback and I think if you have different ways of giving feedback and even receiving feedback from your learners as well there is a chance of getting more information both ways' (Breda, Interview 1, p. 4, 109-115)*

Seán talked about the feedback strategies helping him to structure his feedback in class better and identified that he is '…highlighting it [feedback] probably a little bit more than I normally would' (Interview one, p. 3, 108-110). Seán indicated that as teachers we need to figure out '…what best suits the dynamic of the class' (Interview 1, p. 1, 31-34). Kevin states the following, 'I definitely (see) an improvement in my thinking…' (Kevin, Interview 1, p. 1, 32-33).

At this stage in the research the participating teachers were beginning to show signs of habitual sharing with the other teachers in the group. There was a new aspect to their practice and it was very evident that teachers realised they were learning from sharing with their colleagues and the teacher discussion group session was allowing them the time and space to do that.

Mid-way through phase one it became evident that there was now a more **explicit focus** on the student and their role in the learning process from participating teachers. Data from the interviews indicated more explicit references to the students and a constant effort to improve student learning. Teachers also observed a level of maturity in the students and an enhanced confidence as a result of the focused intervention. The feedback strategies were engaging students and this developed an increased interest from students. Teachers spoke about their students being 'freer' to learn and progress. Also dialogue with students and the significance of having **collaboration** with students as well as with teaching colleagues was now happening.

> *'…when she [a student] was able to vocalise, it kind of gave her the confidence to say something. So it has that kind of knock on effect' (Mary, Interview 1, p.2, 55-57)*

> *'… and then I got into discussion with the students and they fed back to me as to how they would prefer the class structured. And I went with that and it worked well and I think it wasn't that much different but because it was their idea they seem to go with it better' (Susan, Interview 1, p. 2, 36-40)*

Later in the same interview Susan said '…getting them [the students] more involved in what we do and how we structure the class and how we approach things' (Susan, Interview one, p. 2, 67-68). Breda focused on a similar point stating that '…they like the interacting with you…they feel they are being listened to (Interview 1, p. 2, 45-48). As a result of this Breda states that students are more in

> *'…control of their learning so they will be able to get you to focus more on the area that they are more interested in' (Breda, Interview 1, p. 3, 95-97)*

Una also discusses the feedback strategies and the students' engagement with them. She highlighted that sometimes you have '…to build up a relationship with them…' (Interview 1, p. 3, 78-79) in order to get them fully engaged with the feedback. She also shared that it takes time for students to feel comfortable to tell us stuff and that the 'relationship is a big deal' (Teacher group session 1, p. 11, 417-420) for them. Seán discussed having to consider '…the characters and the demographics in terms of their abilities, their age groups…'(Interview 1, p.3, 89-91).

When FET teachers are considering their relationships with students in this way, they seamlessly are also considering their needs (Knowles, 1980). This relationship building resonates with Swaffield (2011) when she states that relationships between teachers and students are transformed and placed on a more equal footing, and the culture in the classroom is often transformed. As a result of this 'new' relationship teachers are 'reading' into their students' needs in a new way.

The students that present themselves in FET often have significant learning needs and experience many forms of disadvantage (Coffield *et al*

2004). According to the authors, social class and initial experiences of education are well documented as being the major catalysts for engaging in life-long learning (Rees *et al* 2000, Aldridge and Tuckett 2006). Therefore, it is important that a different and more collaborative relationship approach from traditional mainstream schooling to learning is adopted. It is generally acknowledged that FET students need **opportunities** for one to one learning with their teachers and the many supports that this offers. These teacher student relationships play a pivotal role in the success of the students' journey through their life-long learning. Such relationships can influence their personal identity and their overall attitudes to learning, '...the relationships between a student's personal identity, his or her material and cultural surroundings and dispositions to learning' (Hodkinson and Bloomer 2002 as quoted in Coffield *et al* 2004). The relationships that were emerging for teachers and students in the case study institution were a positive development at this phase in the study.

Looking back at this time **teacher collaboration** was beginning to happen on a more regular basis in the organisation as a whole. Teachers were talking more about doing things together as a team. There was a realisation that there are many benefits in working closely with colleagues and trying to integrate modules as much as possible across the awards being studied in the centre. As a result, there was a broadening of the teachers' perspective and a form of **investment** accompanied this or a 'movement' of understanding that working with colleagues is beneficial.

In the interviews Seán talked about working with colleagues and how important this is and that it is '…good education, good teaching' (Interview 1, p. 4, 133-137). Kevin also mentioned this point by stating that the teacher group sessions were helping 'the community spirit among teachers' (Interview 1, p. 3, 97-98). Mary mentioned that as a result of being involved in the study that the teaching staff is communicating more (Interview 1, p. 5, 160-161) as it is an opportunity for teachers to learn from their colleagues.

> *'It's actually good because I think that at the end of the day, as well as getting feedback from students you are getting feedback from*

> *colleagues. And you are learning from them' (Susan, Interview 1, p. 4, 134-136)*

While findings presented so far in this first phase have been very positive, there were also many **frustrations** articulated by the participants that can impede progress and development. There were many factors identified by participating teachers at this stage that contributed to the frustrations. There were factors related to the characteristics of the FET student. There were also factors related to the FET education system and particularly employment contracts for teachers working in the sector and the part-time nature of teaching positions, which work against team meetings and collaborations.

Absenteeism among students was a constant factor and source of frustration in the interviews held during this phase;

> *'...there is a lot of absenteeism, coming in late, leaving early. That was doing my head in a bit. I was finding it hard to keep my own focus' (Mary, Teacher session 2, p. 8 219-221)*

Teachers felt that because of the high level of absenteeism among the target group it had a negative impact on their practice and desire to improve it as well as on their peer students.

Another issue that arose was the different levels of students' abilities and engagement.

> *'… because of the way the classroom was set up, every student is at something different and it is just time consuming to go around to them individually. And sometimes you just get caught up with a student and then the next thing you look it is 1.30' (Susan, Interview 1, p.1, 8-14)*

Breda highlighted the struggle of **outside influences**, such as external summative assessment and how the curriculum often gets in the way;

> *'...you do have your curriculum that you have to cover and you have to get through that and for your exams and sometimes you have to focus more on what they need to know to get through their assessment' (Breda, Interview 1, p. 5, 146-149)*

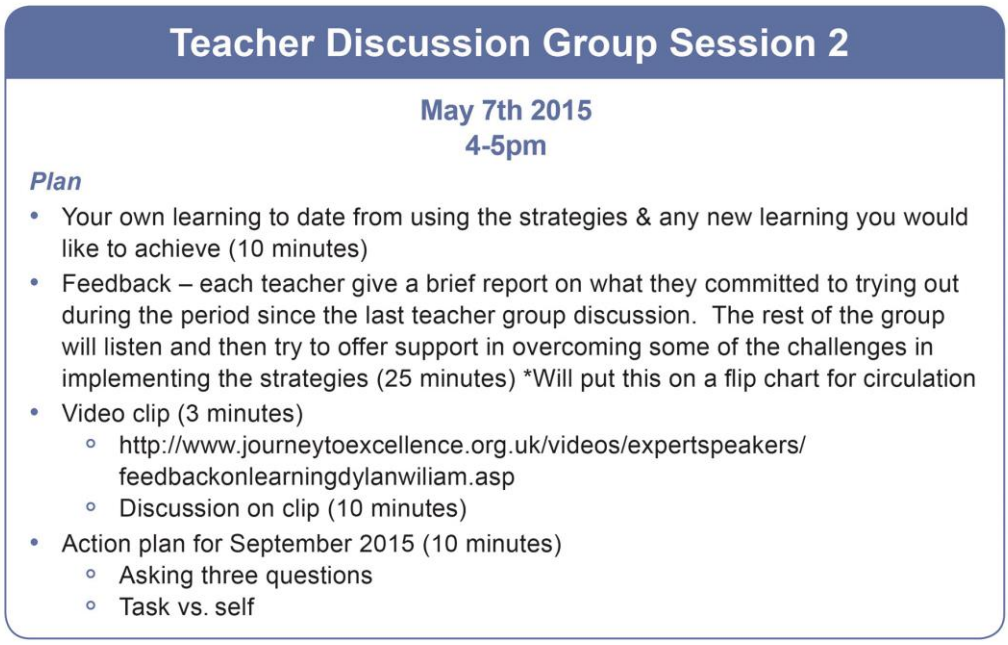
Motivation levels of the students were often at a low-ebb and sometimes students were really not interested.

> *'…because they are so low in motivation for everybody across the board…(Breda, Interview 1, p. 5 162-163)*

I observed that teachers were often becoming 'stuck' and couldn't move forward. They were aware that this 'is' the sector and that we have to come up with ways to work within the FET sector as this is what we are faced with daily. Teachers felt they were working hard on their practice and improving, but for what? I observed in my journal Seán's frustrations at this phase in the study:

> *'I felt a little surprised at his negativity. He had just finished class and he had a full class but previous absenteeism he was frustrated now because he had to catch up with those that were absent. He talked about the FET learners not really wanting to engage in their learning. I was not prepared for the negativity' (Researcher Journal, 17 November 2015)*

As a capstone to phase one we held the second teacher discussion group session in May 2015. I was excited about this second discussion group as the previous discussion session went very well and I could see the benefit of teachers having the opportunity to engage in discourse on their practice. During the discussion group session, through facilitation, I probed deeper into the areas identified in the previous interviews and meetings that were driven by the momentum of the project. I wrote in my journal that 'it was difficult to arrange this meeting and had to change the date three times to try and suit everyone in order to get full attendance' *(Researcher Journal, 28th April 2015).* This shows the need for a structured approach and time for this type of activity to support interventions being introduced. It must also be acknowledged that it was near QQI assessment time so demands related to the exams were prioritised. The session was for one hour as previously agreed. The plan for the session was as follows:



Teacher Discussion Group Session 2

May 7th 2015
4-5pm

Plan

- Your own learning to date from using the strategies & any new learning you would like to achieve (10 minutes)
- Feedback – each teacher give a brief report on what they committed to trying out during the period since the last teacher group discussion. The rest of the group will listen and then try to offer support in overcoming some of the challenges in implementing the strategies (25 minutes) *Will put this on a flip chart for circulation
- Video clip (3 minutes)
  - http://www.journeytoexcellence.org.uk/videos/expertspeakers/feedbackonlearningdylanwiliam.asp
  - Discussion on clip (10 minutes)
- Action plan for September 2015 (10 minutes)
  - Asking three questions
  - Task vs. self

Figure 18 Plan for Teacher Discussion Group Session 2

What was noticeable within this session was that there was evidence of deeper thinking, more elaborate ways of doing and more **openness** to others' perspectives and ideas – a general deepening of practice. Often teachers will discuss more of their feelings around their teaching practice in the company of their colleagues (Kitzinger 1995). In this second teacher discussion group session Susan reflected on having received feedback from her students on the layout of her assignment brief and how she needs to go back and structure it in a more student friendly way.

> *'But maybe I need to look at that brief and maybe the language I am using on that brief…' (Susan, Teacher discussion group session 2, p. 11, 330-336)*

This also prompted her to look deeper at all her teaching aids and to really make sure that they are student friendly.

> *'…and maybe that is something I need to look at to structure the brief so that it is like a checklist so that they can very simply go through the different tasks on the brief and tick off and anything they haven't ticked off then it is their responsibility. If there is something they missed. But maybe I need to look at that brief and maybe the language I am using on that brief to format of the brief isn't encouraging that' (Susan, Teacher discussion group session 2, p. 11, 330-336)*

The purpose and value of feedback as a two-way process was also being realised.

> *'Yea, so far up to now, I now realise that although I'm always giving feedback in both directions but principally I suppose giving them*

> *feedback but maybe not doing enough of asking them for their feedback' (Kevin, Teacher discussion group session 2, p. 4, 102-105)*

Others wanted to know more about feedback as a teaching and learning strategy and they started to engage with the literature. Mary, through engaging with literature, was more aware of the language and approach that she uses in giving feedback to students.

> *'But one thing after reading the hand out you gave us, it spoke about descriptive comments and I remind myself constantly that when I am giving feedback that I am aware of the language of how I do this anymore' (Mary, Teacher discussion group session 2, p. 7, 205-208)*

This deepening of **awareness** did not just focus on feedback but other areas of their practice too, such as catering for different student needs, teaching strategies and assessment.

> *'I then decided then that maybe the best way of approaching it was me being more aware of the sensitivity but reading their body language' (Mary, Teacher discussion group session 2, p. 3 85-87)*

Susan exploring the issues of clarity of language in assignments briefs has her eye on colleagues for feedback:

> *'Well, the brief I feel is clear but maybe it would be good as a group to look at it, maybe I am using the wrong language or the format or something' (Susan, Teacher discussion group session 2, p. 15, 442-445)*

Seán shared his thoughts with the group, highlighting that he knew that he has to focus more on certain aspects of his assessment procedures:

> *'And what I am finding now and even some of the stuff I have done the transparency is not there even for my own work. And I have left huge voids where I, even though I know the learner has learned it, trying to show some independent person who comes in (external authenticator) and look at the stuff because it isn't a tick the box there that shows this learning. It's putting myself in a very precarious position' (Seán, Teacher discussion group session 2, p. 15, 431-437)*

> *'You have to find a means, something in the middle of that, where they all link up so whether it be football, done deal, whether it be Massey Fergusons, whether it be drifting, something that brings the group dynamic together and that you can then interact with that in some means to bring your topic alive, whether it be maths, communications' (Seán, Teacher discussion group session 2, p. 9, 274-279)*

Breda sought out new ways of improving students' learning and motivation:

> *'Yea, I've learnt that the feedback helps. If I get feedback from the students it actually helps me to organise the class a bit better because you are getting it from their perspective and not just my perspective and sometimes there are things that I miss out on as a tutor, you know coming from their perspective, you're moulding the class around their*

> *needs, needs I wouldn't have seen if I didn't listen to their feedback' (Breda, Teacher discussion group session 2, p. 2, 56-62)*
>
> 'I would love to see if and try and get more ideas to see what can I do if I can't get a group motivated to get into what they are doing…' (Breda, Teacher discussion group session 2, p. 5, 136-139)

Una reported refining and polishing her adaptation of feedback and modifying her teaching approach to improve learning for students.

> *'I don't know if you can put it in a box and say I am doing that type of feedback. I think it is going to be more rounded and mixed, using all different ones dependent on the group and depending on what you are doing' (Una, Teacher discussion group session 2, p. 6, 177-183)*

Kevin further into the discussions stated that as he tried out the feedback strategies he realised that you must involve the students.

> *'…might have to stress it in the beginning of the module to let them know that feedback tends to have a positive outcome on education or an improving effect' (Kevin, Teacher discussion group session 2, p. 22, 646-648)*

What was happening was that the planned intervention had an influence on the teachers' engagement with and thinking of their practice. Teachers began to think about their practice in a more focused way. What was significant here was the opportunity to share this new thinking, doing and approach that arose at the discussion groups and its informality; this gave everyone a 'boost'. There was evidence of a growing confidence in their capabilities as teachers to stand up to the challenges of their role within the FET centre and their identity therein. Seán says in this second teacher discussion group session, 'I would say we are independent on our own in … our autonomy as an FET centre…' (Teacher discussion group session 2, p. 25, 741-742). He adds '…this is the way we are going to do it and we stand by it as a group but it is about everybody doing it together' (Teacher group session 2, p. 26, 756-759). It is important to contextualise these statements from Seán. They followed a discussion about the prescribed layout of assignment briefs that had been issued to us from our ETB. Teachers now wanted to design their own assignment brief for our centre, which was felt would be more learner centred. Seán reminds us all that '…we've all done it [teaching] for ten odd years but we are now dealing with new elements

and new subject material...(Seán, Teacher discussion group session 2, p. 17, 508-509) and we can embrace that in an autonomous, professional manner.

Susan's focus throughout this phase of the study was to have very concrete, practical supports and aids for receiving feedback from learners. This was a particular interest of Susan's as she often talked prior to the study on the challenges of recording feedback, which is a requirement for QQI assessment procedures. She tells the group about her new focus on this area:

> *'So what I've done out of desperation is pull together a calendar for the next 7 weeks because that is what is left and I have put down each week what we will be covering in class for the next 7 weeks and I've given them examples' (Susan, Teacher discussion group session 2, p. 2, 43-47)*

She also wanted to engage her students more in her class and so she invited them to feedback on the structure of the class. The outcome was very positive for all.

> 'What I did is try to get the students involved in helping to structure the class themselves, so we had group discussion and I gave them feedback and I listened to their feedback and we actually did structure the class I feel in a way that suited them better' (Teacher discussion group session 2, pp. 1/2, 32-36)

Susan feels very strongly about students taking responsibility for their own learning and again discusses the disruption that absenteeism plays in her classroom.

> *'…but if there was some way we could engender that sense of team that if somebody doesn't turn up in class that it's not just me they have to answer to they actually have to answer to the rest of the class' (Teacher discussion group session 2, p. 23, 691-694)*

A point also raised by Mary;

> 'And reminding the students that they have the control, as well, again it is their journey and you are there as their co-pilot to take them through that journey' (Teacher discussion group session 2, p. 7, 212-214)

She also highlights the importance of planning and to have a plan in place with your learners. She very openly says to them, 'if this is where you are now, how do we get you from there to here?' She talks about building a bridge to reach their goal, step by step and she feels this is working (Teacher discussion group session 2, p. 3, 95-97). As well as this focused planning

contributing to the enriched learning environment, teachers' openness about sharing on their teaching has also supported this. Una refers to the planned intervention [feedback] 'opening things up' in practice and that a deep transparency is developing between students and teachers.

> *'But I do think it opens things up, I think it opens up in the classroom as well; I won't say honest but open and kind of transparent kind of, of what goes on and especially if you are talking about results ...but like everything is kind of out there and they know what is going on, it's not like a secret like it was before sometimes. So I think that is maybe good, it gives them a bit of ownership then on' (Teacher discussion group session 2, p. 18, 539-545)*

Another significant feature of the discussions during this phase of the study was that teachers were beginning to talk about working as a group to overcome challenges in the FET classroom:

> *'And I think it would be a great idea if we brainstorm or something as a group about how we get the students to take responsibility' (Susan, Teacher discussion group session 2, p. 5, 144-146)*

What was happening was a new sense of **relationship** among the participating teachers. Susan did not only want collaboration among teachers to develop but also among the students themselves in order for them to feel a sense of '**team**':

> *'Collaboration amongst us but also amongst the students to give them a sense of team. Like, the biggest motivation for your students because they don't want to be letting the rest of the team down' (Susan, Teacher discussion group session 2, p. 26, 768-771)*

As the researcher, I was aware that during this second teacher discussion group session a form of '**movement**' taking place within the group.

> *'I feel there is an 'openness' to this type of activity, teachers meeting to discuss feedback in the centre and there was a lot of discussion on how we as teachers are trying to improve our practice' (Researcher Journal, 7 March 2016)*

There was a palpable new confidence evident amongst the teachers compared to our teacher discussion group. Dialogue emerged at this stage about the case study centre's assessment material and there was a suggestion that the whole staff get together to design an assessment brief template for everyone teaching in the centre to use. This would show consistency and it hopefully would alleviate confusion for learners.

> *'I would say we are independent on our own, in that our autonomy as a FE centre … if we decide as a group this is the way we are going to*

> *do it then that's fine' (Seán, Teacher discussion group session 2, p. 25, 741-745)*

Seán felt there was strength in being unified, it was important for learners to see the same professionalism from the centre as a whole and not just individual teachers working. From this discussion in the teacher discussion group session it was agreed that it would be a good idea that at the planning meeting for the new academic term (September 2015) all teachers in the centre and not just those involved in the study, would come together to design a centre layout for the assignment briefs that teachers give to learners which was a very good example of professional collaboration emerging in the case study institution.

At the end of phase one, participating teachers also discussed the many opportunities that are there for working and teaching in this way. What was 'ringing' through from transcripts of interviews and group sessions at this stage was the support that the teachers wanted to offer each other as teacher colleagues. The doors were opening to a conversation on practice. This collegiality added great value, weight and understanding for participating teachers. Breda observed this.

> *'So I would love to see if and try and get more ideas to see what can I do if I can't get a group motivated to get into what they are doing, not to let yourself get dragged down with it as well…' (Breda, Teacher discussion group session 2, p. 5, 136-139)*

5.2.1 Researcher Reflection at this stage – Getting Along

At the end of phase one, which I have referred to as 'getting along', I felt quite excited that we had arrived at this stage, that we will be moving onto phase two and planning the implementation of the next feedback strategies. I was delighted that the teachers were willing to get involved and that the project was working on the ground. What I mean by that is that my idea for the project was possible and so I was relieved. Of course the initial phase had its challenges but there was a willingness to work through them. At the end of this phase from the findings there was an increased level of dialogue on practice among the teachers participating as a group; the teachers shared and explored issues they were experiencing in their practice. Through the co-construction of knowledge and collaborative engagement that evolved from the dialogue amongst the participant teachers an inevitable sharing happened. Bolam et al (2005) in their extensive study suggest that there is a very positive influence on teaching practice and morale as a result of teachers engaging in collaborative sharing teaching activities. A parallel different dialogue was also happening between students and teachers. The general consensus from teachers at this time was that the practical nature of the intervention [feedback] was a good way to engage teachers as it has direct relevance and practical application. It also did not over extend or impact on the participants in terms of their daily practice and routines. There was no articulated expectation of change or disturbance. The participating teachers decided on how the teaching and learning intervention, the four feedback strategies, would be implemented, and so from the start there was participant ownership of and active involvement in the process. There was a realisation that teachers need to get feedback from learners through listening more to their concerns and needs and this resulted in an increased focus on planning for the learners' learning in their classes. Relationships were strengthened between teachers but also between teachers and students. At all times, I realised that in order to attract and engage teachers in a process of action research over two academic years the intervention had to be relevant and adaptable to everyday practice

(Learning Policy Institute 2018), whilst also cognisant of the FET teacher's context. At this stage I was confident that we had 'broken ground' and things were happening.

5.3 Phase Two – September 2015 to January 2016
Making Headway

'I think we have so much to offer each other by doing this project, I think it is really important because you are not working in isolation, you are working as a team' (Mary, Interview 2)

This phase of the research involved a number of activities. Whilst the research intervention was progressing with the participating teachers implementing the third feedback strategy into practice, feedback focused to the task, in September 2015 the centre had two whole centre activities that involved all teaching staff. The second round of individual one to one interviews took place in December 2015 and the third teacher discussion group session took place in January 2016. The participating teachers were implementing the third feedback strategy into practice, feedback focused to the task.

At the beginning of each academic year in the centre a teacher-planning day takes place. These planning days normally finalise timetables and discuss activities that will be coming up in the following term, QQI assessment dates and other administrative details. Following the second teacher discussion group session in May 2015 it was agreed that at the next teacher-planning day in September 2015 the whole team come together to design an assignment brief template for the centre that will be used in all classes. This would provide a uniform approach from the teachers to the learners as many teachers had observed that many times their learners are not completing their assignments, as sometimes they do not understand the brief. The layout of the brief and how accessible it is for the learner was seen as the problem. While this was a small activity for the whole centre, in many ways it showed that the teachers were taking ownership and leading as a group. It is important to state here that this was the first time in the centre that the teachers came together to work on a teaching and learning problem or issue. Over the two sessions the current template was re-designed to include elements that the teachers agreed were more suitable for the cohort of learners in the centre. I noted in my journal that

> *'…teachers engaged with the task immediately and were happy to launch into it. It was a very positive exercise; the teachers engaged*

> *immediately and collaborated well together. This is an encouraging sign and shows a willingness to get involved and to improve things for the better' (Research Journal, 26 August, 2015)*

During the first meeting it was agreed by the group to meet towards the end of September 2015 with completed assignment briefs and tasks. It was agreed that assignment briefs should be as transparent and clear as possible for the students. I noted in my journal at the time that teachers

> *'…felt ownership over this exercise, they had taken control over the design of the template and run with it. This resonates with the literature (Fullan 2000, Loughran 2010) around learning about having ownership and control over activities and course material (Research Journal, 24 August, 2015)*

The September 2015 session was collegial in nature. Teachers shared their assignment briefs, worked together to make sure learning outcomes (LOs) were covered and checked that the language used was learner friendly. In many cases in the past teachers were using text from the descriptor in their briefs and now they agreed to use the descriptors as a guide to design briefs using an alternative language accessible to learners. There was dialogue on the use of language in briefs and the layout, especially across the various levels and standards. One of the teachers commented that it was good for us to think outside the box and freshen up things a little. I noted in my journal that

> 'Teachers were very open to asking questions and looking for clarification. The session was very busy, active and teachers came away feeling it was very worthwhile. This is important that they can see meaning in the intervention and process that we are doing, collaborating on our practice and engaging in discourse around that' (Researcher Journal, 24 September, 2015)

Another suggestion from the teacher discussion group session in May 2015 and agreed subsequently in September 2015 was the need to let learners know that teachers are concentrating on giving feedback in a more focused way. All teachers agreed to talk to their classes about feedback: when they give it, how they give it, what learners need to do with that feedback – another significant development for the teachers' approaches in the case study institution.

Parallel with telling the students about the focus on feedback the project continued and in November and early December 2015 the second round of one to one individual interviews were carried out. These interviews focused on how the teachers were implementing the third feedback strategy, feedback focused to the task. The teachers were still struggling with building the relevance for the learning and engagement of the students.

This is what Seán said in his interview;

> *'They don't get it, they don't understand it, it's a case of when you ask them the question in terms of their learning they are not able to...their concern is very much getting it done. They are not concerned in terms of what they have learned' (Seán, Interview 2, p. 2, 36-40)*

However, despite these struggles during the second round of interviews with the participating teachers there was an acknowledgement of their increased thinking about effective and sharing practice. Breda also commented on sharing and how **new knowledge** can support her to do things better in her own classroom.

> *'Good, yea, it's nice to see especially when there are others that are doing the same sort of modules that you are doing, you can see the different ways of preparing things that people have and delivering and so on. It's nice to get new ideas from each other and share ideas' (Breda, Interview 2, pp. 4/5, 145-149)*

Una expanding on her learning from others felt that reflection is a positive activity for teaching and highlighted that rarely there is time given to this type of activity:

> *'I think anything talking about your work or spending a bit of extra time reflecting is a positive thing so whether it is feedback or whatever that's what is good about the meetings as well, it gives you a bit of time to talk about your teaching and the learning which doesn't happen in a meeting, we wouldn't have it on our agenda' (Una, Interview 2, p. 8, 276-281)*

Una again spoke about the notebook:

> *'It's good for organisation, it gets everyone going and then also you get a chance to integrate and overlap where you can see things where you don't get a chance' (Una, Interview 2, p. 6, 223-226)*

> *'Just to spend a bit of time, the little booklet even though I wouldn't write that much I would still and something will come to my mind about it and I would write it down and I think Oh yea that's a point or whatever so I just think having a bit of reflection on it as well is a good idea' (Una, Interview 2, pp. 7 /8, 272-276)*

Parallel with becoming more **reflective**, teachers were building their awareness of their students' learning, looking at students' learning in a more focused way.

> *'…and what I discovered with this student is that she is very, very precise and everything has to be very, very logical so now I know that when I am dealing with that student I have to be very aware if anything is out of order or out of sequence, or if I'm jumping from one thing to another' (Susan, Interview 2, p. 4, 136-143)*

While Seán was very frustrated at the start of his second interview he did discuss how he is looking at the learners now in a more in-depth way and realises that '…they are all different, they all have different intricacies' (Interview 2, p. 3, 105-106). He acknowledged that with some learners you have to approach things more strategically.

> *'So with some you have to be a little bit more gentle with them, some you have to be harder with them' (Seán, Interview 2, pp.3/4, 106-107)*

Honing skills and thinking about practice in a **more focused** way. Seán states that the study:

> *'…has given me an opportunity to reflect on different ways to give feedback which is always going to make my teaching better' and that it also '…gives me time to reflect on being better myself' (Seán, Interview 2, p. 4, 101-108)*

During this time there was also a continuous and increasing evidence of teachers sharing more in their practice. Teachers were really beginning to open up to each other on their teaching and move away from isolated silos of individual classrooms. Mary discussed in her second interview how the teacher discussion group sessions were an opportunity to raise challenges that one was having with particular subject matter and that it was great to get together and 'putting it on the table and working it out' (Interview 2, p. 4.120-125). There was evidence of teachers noticing what other teachers were doing and considering taking on ideas for the future. Teachers were more able to see what is happening in other subject disciplines outside of their own and to look for ways of integrating course content to make learning more meaningful for the student.

During these second phase interviews, teachers openly looked for more support and feedback on their own ideas. For example Susan wanted

some feedback on her feedback form that she had designed, '…I wouldn't mind … input on the design of the form and if there is something else that I can put there' (Interview 2, pp. 4/5 160-162) and she also raised this point in one of the teacher discussion group sessions. She was '…hoping that it [feedback] would just become a natural exercise that is done after every assignment' (Interview 2, p. 2 59-62). In interview two Una talked about how she now really concentrates on the language that she uses with students in her class and mentioned that '…you nearly want a little booklet of phrases and ways to say things' (Una, Interview 2, p. 5 185-187). Una feels that she has become more focused in her practice:

> *'I just think I am more conscious of what I say, how I say it and when I say it...but I do feel that I'm definitely more focused, trying to get, I wouldn't say a reaction but I'm trying to see what sort of response I get for the different things that I say or how it works (Una, Interview 2, p.3, 93-100)*

Teachers highlighted how the feedback strategies engage the learners and in some way 'ignite' an interest in their learning. They were engaging in open dialogue with their teacher in a way they didn't experience before. The barriers of the teacher/student relationship were different and a 'conversation' was happening about their learning in a safe environment. Kevin (Interview 2, p. 2, 45-46) observed students having more of an interest and they are not as 'worried' about challenging aspects of the curriculum, a point also raised by Mary:

> *'…and I think that fear or apprehension that holds them back goes and it allows them to be more confident' (Mary, Interview 2, p. 2, 48-50)*

Breda said that she could now visibly see learning taking place in her class as a result of using the feedback strategies in a planned way:

> *'Definitely, yea, and they liked the idea as well, as they were moving along with the task and getting feedback as they were doing it, because they were getting the feedback while they were doing it they wouldn't forget what they had to do' (Breda, Interview 2, p. 1, 19-26)*

It is more a partnership according to Una:

> *'…I do think getting them involved more instead of just you being the person giving the feedback, the tutor, that if the students are all involved in it I think that could work' (Una, Interview 2, p. 5, 158-161)*

Kevin also stated that using the planned feedback strategies has supported him in his relationships with the students. He says that the planned strategies have been '…an aid towards teaching and maybe even our liaising and relationships with the students' (Kevin, Interview 2, p. 2, 35-35). However, Una also made an interesting point about relationships in relation to one of the planned strategies that was used in the study. The third strategy, focused feedback to the task, often distorted the facilitative relationship that we are discussing above. She talks about how the students sometimes did not like the 'formal' element to feedback, and directing all the discourse to the task and not to them.

> *'…relationships I think is a key kind of think, the nature of the task and the relationship but they want to talk to you more maybe informal, and directing it at the task is kind of being quite cold and moving away from that. That is what I found that they wanted to say it more personally and they bring themselves into that. And then if you step away from that and talk about the task, well I'm doing the task. So I think the relationship, when you have the relationship with the students it can sometimes be very hard to separate' (Una, Interview 2, p. 2, 57-65)*

Una highlighted that it takes a while to develop these relationships, often not enough time as teachers may only have a group for a 40-hour period over a few weeks.

> *'I am starting fresh with them and also I never had them before so it is a new relationship with them and that takes a while as well for them to know me and my methods and things like that' (Una, Interview 2, p.3, 86-89)*

Kevin '…can see an improvement yea, maybe more of an interest, they are not as worried about algebra, I think' (Interview 2, p. 2, 45-46) and Breda sees an increased **student involvement** in her class.

> *'They also thought that it was a means to an end because they got the task completed and knew that they were doing OK because of the feedback given' (Breda, Interview 2, p. 1, 19-26)*

The practical and useful nature of the intervention was still recognised by Kevin, and Una found herself using the strategies as they fitted:

> *'…now that we have used them, like, there is no going back, like you have it there now and you can't help but use them' (Una, Interview 2, p. 2, 39-41)*

During the second round of interviews teachers spoke about the **teaching team** in the case study institution and how important it is to develop a culture of 'team' within the teaching staff:

> '*…but certainly I think if you are part of a team, you work as a team, you work together as a team of people with no particular person being the leader. I think we have so much to offer each other … it gives you that opportunity for everyone to sit down and say, well this is the way I've done it and this is the way I do it or I've never tried it that way, I must try it that way and see if it works. So doing that I think is really important because you are not working in isolation then and you are working as team' (Mary, Interview 2, p. 4, 130-140)*

Una discussed an example of further signs of teachers collaborating when she talked about how the teacher discussion group sessions give people a chance to talk to colleagues.

> *'You don't get a chance because we are all doing different hours and different days we don't actually get a chance to sit down and I think it covered a lot of issues that people were having maybe sitting at home maybe if they were doing it themselves and I think that was time well spent' (Una, Interview 2, p. 6, 205-209)*

There was more discussion on how engaging with the research and the planned intervention has enlightened their perspective on good teaching and;

> *'…is making me research a little bit more on the maths side of things and the relationship of students; you know sometimes when you are doing maths it is very easy to forget it from the point of view of the student (Kevin, Interview 2, p. 3, 70-74)*

All during this time there was an opening and examining of their own practice and looking at ways to improve. Una points out how it will be hard now not to use these feedback strategies. Mary raises the point that she is all for change, '…if it works then use it, there is no sense in holding onto old ways when other ways can improve' (Interview 2, p. 2, 52-53) practice. This shows a '**movement**' towards talking about teaching and more open communities of practice (Vescio *et al*, 2008). It is about building your human capital and investing in your practice (Hargreaves and Fullan 2012). Susan develops this idea even further when she states;

> *'…it was good but I think we are developing more collaboration outside of that say with the structured report with work experience and communications and I thought that might be an idea because I've covered communications so when you have an understanding of the module it's much more easy to identify areas where you can*

> *collaborate but I think that is a great idea (Susan, Interview 2, pp. 7/8, 272-278)*

Susan is broadening her perspective here by not only thinking about her own module but also thinking of other modules that the learners are studying and where they can be integrated. Once she has an understanding of other modules it opens up opportunities and possibilities of teachers integrating modules collaboratively. Vescio *et al* (2008) discuss collaborative efforts in teaching being characterised by open practice, displaying evidence of sharing, reflecting and taking risks (p.84). In Bolam *et al's* (2005) study they reported that collaborative efforts having a very 'positive impact'. Breda observed this impact in one of her interviews and also in a teacher group session. She reflected that you are not '…on your own…' and that '…it's great to be part of team…' (Interview 2, p.5, 163-166) when referring to the assignment brief task that took place during the study and how positive that was for her and the whole centre.

Awareness of the value of the teacher discussion group sessions as a support to a team was realised;

> *'Well I would like to see us still having those group sessions so that, its great. Rather than, I know we have our meetings but when you have a group session like that it's not like a meeting format, it is a conversation with each other and helping to develop around each other as well so I think it would work if we can keep going' (Breda, Interview 2, p. 5, 176-181)*

And so teachers could see the value in participating in this type of practice. It was the first concrete signs of the teachers recognising their membership of a community of practice (Wenger, McDermott and Snyder 2002).

During the second round of interviews many expressed concerns about students that were not taking autonomy over their own learning. Getting learners actually engaged with learning was still a challenge for Seán.

> *'Some of them just do not get the idea of looking at their own learning and they find it very hard to make that connection. So in terms then of giving them a sense of what they have done or asking them to review what they have done, they just don't get it' (Seán, Interview 2, p. 1 5-11)*

Seán continued in this vein and stated that his students are 'just not able for it' and he feels that the attendance in his classes is so poor that it [feedback] is 'not going to work'. The challenge related to absenteeism and lack of student engagement is a particular challenge in the FET sector. There are also identifiable levels of student ability within one class and their ability to engage in the learning process itself, as they are often unmotivated. Teachers highlighted that there are very low levels of student autonomy within the sector, which often alters the way they teach, as the curriculum needs to be covered within certain timeframes. Teachers were getting an opportunity to express their frustrations of working within the sector with their colleagues in a safe place and also an opportunity to address the issues with support from their colleagues.

The third teacher discussion group session took place on the 28th of January 2016. The plan for this third teacher group session is outlined below.

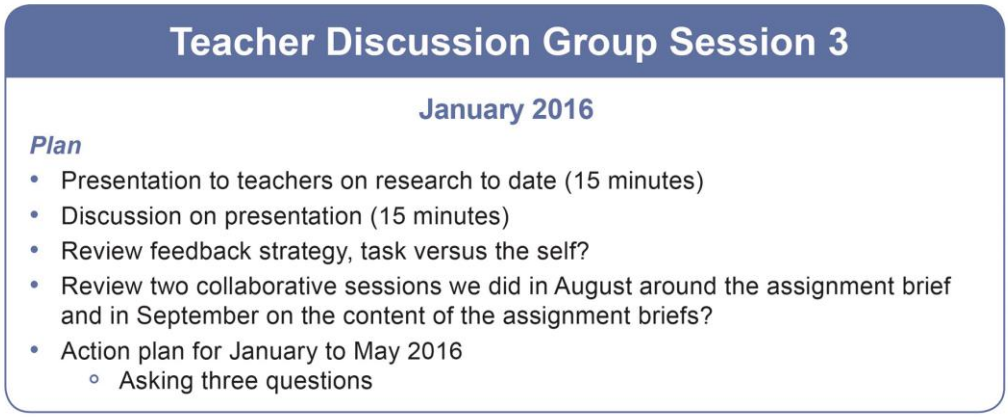


Figure 19 Plan for Teacher Discussion Group Session 3

The session started with an overview of the research to date. The aim here was to show the group the work that we had been involved in; this was an effort in keeping them involved with my objective of the research but also their involvement in it too. I noted in my journal that '…they couldn't believe that they were on the last strategy' (*Research Journal, 7 March, 2016*). I gave a presentation of the work to date and then asked for feedback from the group on the presentation and the work that we had been doing. The group then discussed strategy number three, feedback focused to the task and

the collaborative sessions we held during phase one of the study. We then discussed an action plan for the final stage of the research.

A feature of the teacher discussion group was the extent of focus on absenteeism and its' impact on their effectiveness in the classroom. There was a lot of discussion on how we as teachers are trying to improve our practice. But absenteeism is such a problem that sometimes it is difficult for teachers to engage in constructive teaching as time runs out. Not for the first time, Seán pointed out very early in the third teacher group session, '…but the problem in our case is the students might not be as enthusiastic about our jobs as we are!' (Seán, Teacher discussion group session 3, pp.1/2, 38-39). Teachers felt that because of the high level of absenteeism among the target group it had a negative impact on how they teach their classes and also a negative impact on learners that attend regularly. It is a whole class problem acknowledged by Susan;

> *'I think we need to focus, like a lot of focus has been on us improving on our practice and us getting feedback and us making sure but it is kind of being a bit wasted if the students don't realise that their actions are impacting not just on the teacher but on the rest of their class mates' (Susan, Teacher discussion group session 3, p. 2, 62-67)*

Kevin previously had an idea that grew with the study about informing learners about indicative content of modules. He presented it as a possible solution to some of the challenges being verbalised in the group. On discussing this further it was decided to try and introduce a small classroom based intervention on explaining learning outcomes (LOs) to the students. The approach was to engage learners in dialogue around the LOs of module components at the start of a new module. With this in mind I decided to ask Seán, Una and Breda to carry out this project, as they were all starting new modules. The outcomes of this intervention are discussed later in the next phase of the research.

During this teacher group session Susan introduced a feedback form that she had devised (See Appendix 6) for students. I noted at the time that there was a very good response from the group to Susan's feedback tool. All teachers had a look at the form and said they would like to try using it and

Susan was happy to share the form and requested that they also improve the form and share it back. These were very positive engaging signs from the teachers engaging in a climate of practice sharing and embedding practice.

> *'There was a very good response from the feedback form. I used it myself on a completed task in Communications and received a lot of good information from learners, including that they do not like to self-assess. This is interesting as maybe we need to teach our learners this (to self assess)' (Researcher Journal, 7 March, 2016)*

Often the issue with our students is their fears about education and as a result they feel they are alone in their difficulties. Susan acknowledged this and she feels that the enhanced feedback strategies can help with this issue;

> *'…but there are a couple of students in the group who have literacy issues and confidence issues so I think concentrating on the task is so much easier on them. I would have fed back from this feedback form and would have said that some people have problems so it meant then that they are not the only people that had problems' (Susan, Teacher discussion group session 3, p.9, 333-338)*

Another revealing point made in this teacher discussion group session by Susan was the growing sense of teacher responsibility for the students' learning;

> *'And I do say if there is confusion that is my fault, I will always say that in a class because it is my business to get it straight. So if there is unanimous confusion in class it is obviously that I am not imparting the information correctly' (Susan, Teacher discussion group session 3, p. 9, 340-344)*

The teachers were now pursuing ways of improving the learning experience of the students. Susan states that when we try out these new interventions in our practice that we can adjust and tailor them to our own practice as we develop our skills in this area. '…if you use it you might see… ways that it can be tailored' (Teacher group session 3, p.14, 518-519). During this session Breda talked about how the students are responding very positively to the third feedback strategy, focusing on the task.

> *'I was giving them feedback as they were in the process of doing the task and they like that fact because they could fix it while they were doing it instead of going back to them later' (Breda, Teacher discussion group session 3, p. 9, 346-349)*

Kevin pointed out that there was a lot of chat going on in the class now in relation to the problems that they are having and it 'fits in a bit with discussion in class giving them confidence for shy and weak learners so trying to get the good side out of this' (Teacher discussion group session 3, p. 1, 11-14). Kevin stated that this gives confidence to the weak and shy learners and they are engaging in dialogue with their peers on the subject material. He mentioned that the '…morale seems to be very good' (Teacher discussion group session 3, p.1, 18) as a result. Susan also made reference on how the students with low levels of confidence '…have really excelled…you know the people that were actually really nervous at the beginning...' (Teacher discussion group session 3, p. 3, 119-121). Susan and I discussed a piece of work that we had worked on collaboratively with a group of learners. I mentioned in this session that '…it wasn't easy, we were collaborating on that and it would be very easy just to go back and do our own thing. Doing collaborative teaching takes effort and it takes time' (Teacher discussion group session 3, p. 8, 295-297). But Susan points out that it will get easier and will also be 'less stress' for learners. I mentioned that as we continue with this type of collaborative teaching work we will become '…more skilled at it ourselves…' (Teacher discussion group session 3, p. 8, 299).

Seán articulates the need for a 'regular' approach from the teaching staff in the centre, as the learner needs to see a 'consistent approach throughout'. Breda also raised this point in the teacher discussion group session;

> *'I think the meetings we had where we were doing all the briefs together and stuff that really helps to collaborate as such that we are all working along the same lines' (Breda, Teacher discussion group session 3, p. 1, 31-33)*

Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) when referring to knowledge 'of' practice note that professional teachers already treat their classrooms and schools as 'sites' of investigation. We can learn very well from within our own institutions. Vescio *et al* (2008) state that we '…should support teachers in making decisions based on their contexts, their goals, current and new professional knowledge, and the needs of their students' (p.89). The

widening of perspectives through collaboration generated a deeper awareness of the students' workload and the whole centre's organisation. For example, Una suggested streamlining the assignment tasks.

> *'… we are doing the assignment brief would we have a calendar of when we are handing out (briefs) for the full time because if they said they had 6 at Christmas' (Una, Teacher discussion group session 3, pp. 7/8, 270-273)*

During the third teacher discussion group session the group were continuing to air their frustrations on absenteeism and the general teaching situation of the FET teacher. However, the tone had changed a little and there was evidence of searching for ways to solve the problem. The idea about the LO strategy on engaging LOs of modules with students is an example of this. Teachers were also devising feedback tools and sharing them with an expectation of feedback from their colleagues. Dialogue within the third teacher discussion group session was dominated by a need for a whole centre approach to teaching and learning and how the assignment brief task was a progressive step in that direction. There was a palatable openness emerging. Members of the group talked openly on how the feedback interventions were working in practice and how they were supporting students in their learning. The group noted that the whole intervention was particularly supportive for weak learners. There was general consensus that the feedback strategies, and the nature of the intervention, encourage a focus on the students and as a result other aspects of the teachers' practice was being improved. At the time I felt there was a renewed energy and enthusiasm amongst the teachers.

> *'She [Susan] had devised a feedback form for the learners on completion of a task. Some were reluctant to fill it and that was fine. However, she got a lot of information about her students learning as a result of content in the feedback form and has made changes to practice where possible. This was very insightful. She was also able to ask how to move forward with a particular situation, which was clearer to deal with [now] as it was now written down on the feedback form. The final interview with Kevin was also very good, better than previous interviews with this teacher. He talked about a move in learners' learning and how it also has impacted on his teaching' (Researcher Journal, 17 November, 2015)*

5.3.1 Researcher Reflection at this stage – Making Headway

At the end of phase two, which I have referred to as 'making headway', I felt that now there was something happening in the case study institution. There was increased engagement from the teachers. This phase of the study was very busy as we carried out extra activities as well as the planned data collection gatherings. At times I felt overwhelmed trying to coordinate everything and making sure that things ran smoothly and that teachers were informed at all times about what was taking place during this phase. This was a particular challenge as additional teachers were joining the group with the additional activities and I wanted them to feel safe and welcome into this established group setting. At the end of this phase two there were significant, albeit small, changes taking place. Teachers were engaging in deeper dialogue that reflected a whole team approach. A particular contextual factor was that teachers needed the time to get together as teacher colleagues. So the steps in moving the project along were slow and incremental in nature and this evolved organically. I realise now that this slow pace allowed for deeper engagement by the teachers as they 'loosened' their fixed ways of doing. Looking back this allowed initial capacity building for engagement in the project. Fullan (2005) as quoted in Stringer (2013) defines capacity building in education as the concept of '…developing the collective ability – dispositions, skills, knowledge, motivation and resources – to act together to bring about positive change' (p.4). In this regard, participating teachers were now shaping the research project. They were sharing their learning and deepening their practice knowledge as a result. In terms of action research theory the participating group were taking control of their work and the way they conduct that work and the research process was allowing them to try out new ways and practices. Feedback was relevant and important for them in their practice. This was emerging as a significant driver during the study. Another important point is that this was a local project, in that it was not a measure sent down from senior management or department level. Teachers didn't just share practical approaches to teaching – the 'how to' dimension - there was a deeper understanding of what was shared and the

discussion delved into the 'why' dimension of their practice. They were developing collective ability (Stringer 2013). There was an increasingly high value placed on sharing of practice knowledge and so the time spent in the teacher discussion group session evolved as a time of personal and professional growth. They were bringing about positive change. The teacher discussion group sessions were valuable occasions for teachers to converse on their practice in a new focused way. The sessions and the emerging feature of collegiality afforded opportunities to seek and get help with many teaching challenges that they faced on a daily basis. Teachers discovered that feedback to students about their work does help their learning and that providing effective feedback is far more difficult than it appears (Wiliam 2011, p.107). There was a realisation that feedback only functions formatively '…if the information fed back to the learner is used by the learner in improving performance' (Wiliam 2011, p.120). Overall, we were all beginning to work as a 'teaching team'. New and extra projects on the unit's assessment material happened and this showed that the activity and dialogue about their practice as teachers was becoming more open and transparent. I felt there was an increased focus on their learners' learning needs and how their teaching practice influences this. The teachers explored their work in a focused way, they challenged their practice in a way they had not done before and they embraced that activity. The teachers were free to discover this in their own way and it was unrestrained which lead to a form of emancipatory action (McLaren and Giarelli 1995).

5.4 Phase Three – February to June 2016

New Habits

'I would say we are changing because we have learnt' (Seán, Teacher discussion group 4)

This phase involved the participating teachers implementing the final feedback strategy, asking questions on learners' work. Here teachers were asked to consider devising high as well as lower order questions on course and assessment material in order to gain knowledge on the students' deeper understanding of learning. During this third and final stage of the study a number of the previously referred to activities took place in the case study institution. In February 2016 we carried out a whole centre activity on the assignment briefs and some teachers took on an exercise to try and engage students in LOs of modules during this period. The fourth and final teacher group session took place on the 4th of June 2016 followed by the one to one individual interviews with participating teachers.

The whole centre activity involved all of the teaching staff sharing their assignment briefs for the January to June (2016) term for their respective modules. The idea behind this was that teachers would get into small groups and discuss the briefs with their teacher colleagues, seek feedback and **change** as necessary. The focus of the activity was to assess if the language in the brief was accessible to learners, if the LOs were all covered and to also seek out opportunities for **collaboration** on tasks where teachers are teaching the same group of learners. This activity was not confined to the research participants but was open to all teaching staff in the centre. There was a very positive response and I do think the study did play a part in this, as one of the participants did not hesitate to collaborate with a new colleague. I noted in my journal the following;

> *We worked for an hour and a half and that teachers were very busy. During this session there was a new teacher to the team who had only recently joined the centre. I noted that he got 'right into it'. He asked to talk to an experienced teacher in the centre and also discussed teaching collaborative opportunities with Susan who was teaching the same group. (Research Journal, 7 March 2016)*

It was agreed to plan a similar activity in September 2016 and January 2017.

During the third phase of implementing the planned feedback interventions in the case study institution, as reported earlier, the teachers were becoming frustrated with absenteeism in their classroom. As suggested, it was decided to carry out an initiative on learning outcomes of modules with learners as a possible response to the absenteeism issue. It was discussed amongst the teachers that an opportune time to introduce LOs to learners was at the start of a new module. Una and Breda both agreed to implement this exercise. Una mentioned how she would not normally give out the LOs to learners as it is a '…big document and is off putting' (Interview 3, p. 3, 96). Some students liked to see what was going to be covered and when, while others were worried to see all that had to be done in front of them like that. However, Una states that it was a very positive experience for her as the teacher and for the learners involved;

> *'...we went through each learning outcome and they were actually ticking them off, yes I know that one, I know where that is and if they weren't they would nearly go on to the computer and actually look to see, double check. So it really worked well' (Una, Interview 3, p. 4,127-130)*

Una continues to discuss how she felt there was a real transfer of learning and how this type of teaching activity can be '…as good for the students as it is for the teacher' (Una, Interview 3, p. 4, 143-144).

> *'So there was a real transfer of learning, they were saying, well this will fit in and I can use this for the other module and also more so for the part-time students, if I brought in an assignment would I be able to practice on that what we are doing in class you know so you know to improve documents or something like that' (Interview 3, p. 5, 165-170)*

Breda's comments on this LO project was similar; when she reviewed the LOs with her learners she said they looked at her '…as if I was speaking a foreign language…'(Interview 3, p. 4,130). Her approach to introducing LOs to learners was to show them at the beginning of a module and then to revise them at the end. She highlights that at the end '…they could see what they had learned through those learning outcomes' (Breda, Interview 3,

p. 4, 133-134). However, she goes on to state that if she was doing that again, having discussed with Una in a group session, she would review the learning outcomes throughout the delivery of the module and not just at the beginning and the end;

> *'What I would like to do through a suggestion by one of the other tutors was that maybe as I've covered the learning outcomes (in class) as you go through the course, just say this is what we have covered….and then they can see it as they go through rather than just doing it at the beginning and the end' (Interview 3, p. 4, 134-140)*

Breda spoke about the fact that when learners have access to the learning outcomes it is nearly like a checklist for them to make sure that they have covered all elements of their course. It is also giving autonomy to the learner. I mention in the interview that this is something that all teachers in the case study institution could be introducing.

> *'I think that is something that we can all, every teacher can do really with their students around the learning outcomes. I think that is a suggestion that we will bring back to the rest of them' (Interview 3, p. 5, 153-155)*

Unbeknown to the teachers, although this LO activity is a recognised element of AfL theory, it was a teaching suggestion that arose as a result of the teacher discussion group. This was a 'new' activity for teachers involved, as we did not normally give learners LOs of modules due to the fact that we considered the language as too academic and so lacked meaning for learners. This kind of language can actually disengage and demotivate FET learners in their learning (Sotto 2007). Looking back, I consider that this initiative brought the teacher student relationships to a different level; students were more informed, engaged and they were taking ownership and responsibility for their learning. Likewise, teachers realised that learners can take this information on board when presented to them in a planned and meaningful way. The learners seemed to have traversed a gap in their learning once they understood LOs for their module. Once learners are aware of the LOs of a module they have a much better understanding of the module, and can apply this new knowledge to other modules in their major QQI award. Threshold concepts come to mind here, whereby a 'threshold concept is transformative in that once understood, it leads to a significant change in students'

understanding of the subject' (Zepke, 2013 p.100). Teachers reported that once students understood the learning outcomes for their modules there was a 'significant change' in their understanding of the module and the assessment associated with the module.

The fourth and final teacher group session took place on the 4th of June 2016. The session started with an overview of the data collected for the study.

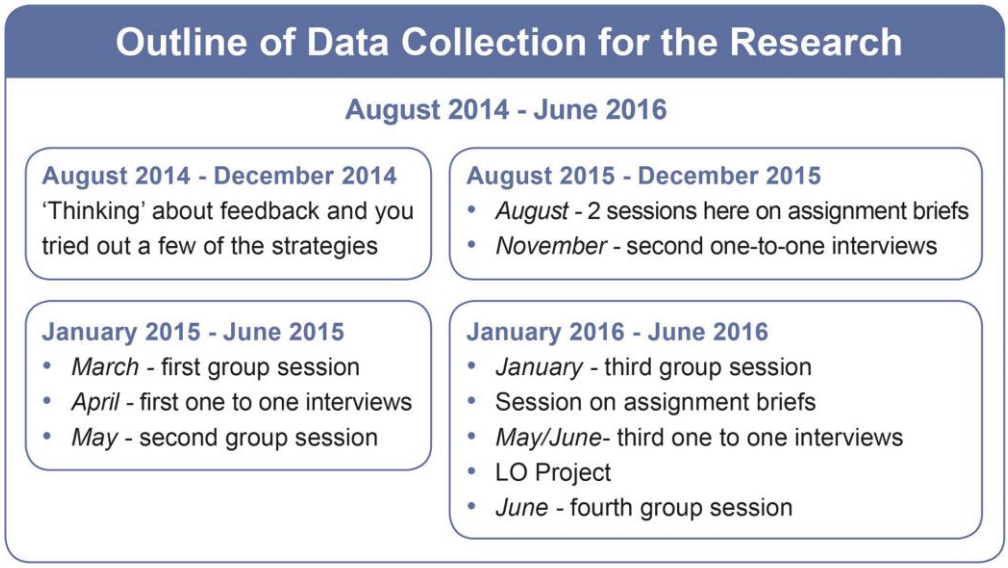


Figure 20 Teacher Discussion Group Session 4

We then quickly moved on to getting into small groups to discuss a number of questions that I had prepared for the session.

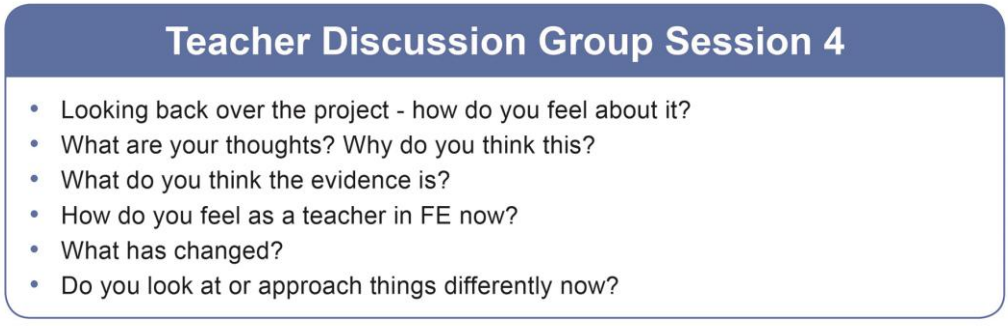


Figure 21 Discussion Questions for Final Teacher Discussion Group Session 4

The purpose of these questions was to get as much insight and understanding from teachers on their responses to the whole research study and activities; using the planned teaching and learning intervention

(feedback), engaging in the teacher discussion group sessions and what did it all mean for them as practicing teachers.

Teachers' responses around the project to this point were that it was a very positive and an awareness-raising experience. They welcomed the support from their peers; however, they still found it challenging to structure and document feedback in their practice. The group responded by stating that feedback needs to be integrated and seamless. It was a very practical activity and they liked that about it and they felt that they would continue with the focused and planned elements of feedback in their practice in future. The group felt that in some ways, the study was a form of teacher development and it brought about a lot of **teamwork**. They felt a greater confidence in what they were doing and that discussions are a two way process between students and teachers. When I asked them about how they feel now about their teaching they stated that, they realise the need for adaptability working in this sector. There was a new focus on **listening more to the student** and a realisation that it '…doesn't always go to plan'. I asked them what has changed, if anything. They felt they were more informed, more aware and that we have learned from the process. Teachers talked about needing to plan and prepare more and to spend more time on introducing modules to students. The group welcomed the holistic approach that developed as a result of the study.

> *'The final teacher group session was very positive I feel. Personally, I was tired as it was also the end of the academic year. I observed that the teachers talked a lot and gave very positive responses and reflections to the whole project. The language they were using – awareness, development, collaboration – were words to use to describe the project'. (Researcher Journal, June 6th, 2016)*

As the conversation progressed in this teacher discussion group session the discussion on practice was very **collegial**. Mary commented that it was nice to know that the teachers in the group cared about how I teach that '…people [the teachers] care about how I do my job…' (Teacher discussion group session 4, p. 5, 169-174) and that she felt supported as a result of that and was more inclined to talk about practice and to seek help when needed. There was a realisation that while at the start of the project the

focus was on feedback strategies, there was now a 'shift' towards their effectiveness as teachers. Una highlighted this point in the final teacher discussion group session;

> *'It was a focus on the students but in fact there was also a big focus on the staff' (Teacher discussion group Session 4, p. 8, 301-302)*

Breda stated this point;

> *'I think for me it's, what changed for me is that I have more an awareness from the feedback from the students' (Teacher discussion group session 4, p. 14, 522-523)*

Susan talks about how the feedback strategies gave her an opportunity to '…go back and improve on the way I'm delivering the modules' (Interview 3, p.7, 256-258) and in the final teacher discussion group session she concurred with this;

> *'The other thing that was good about that was to devise the three questions [strategy no.4] I had to think about the delivery of the module so that was kind of good for me, a kind of reflection' (Susan, Teacher discussion group session 4, p. 9, 314-316)*

Teachers continued to discuss their teaching methods and ways that they can be improved. Teachers did not just share good practice but also highlighted areas that they had tried out and didn't work so well. At all times the tone was positive; there was progressive dialogue on practice as teachers. Persistence and having to 'stick' with an idea and be patient with the learners was an interesting comment.

> *'But if you did it at the start, like I did it at the start and they were like, jeena mack, I don't know any of these and then by a few weeks and when they are actually able to tell you, Yes, this is what we have done, they are actually getting a real sense of achievement as well so' (Una, Teacher discussion group session 4, p. 10, 356-360)*

Another example of teachers now thinking about their practice in a new way is highlighted in the following quote from Susan;

> *'Feedback to me was always me feeding back to the students but I have realised that the students' feedback (to me) is just as important' (Susan, Teacher discussion group session 4, p. 8, 303-305)*

Mary is also now very happy with this type of activity in the centre and in her practice. She welcomes it, it is practical, everyone is participating and ultimately, it is for the greater benefit of student learning.

> *'…whereas with this, this approach is more realistic, it involves everyone, it involves a team, it involves individuals and it is for the benefit of the students' (Mary, Teacher discussion group session 4, pp. 1/2, 36-38)*

Susan is moving a step further again when she discusses that we need to find a meaningful way of introducing the LOs to learners in order for them to engage fully in the modules that are being delivered to them.

> *'If there was some method of relaying what the learning outcomes [are] in a simple way to the students then they would have a better understanding of the module' (Susan, Teacher discussion group session 4, p. 10, 343-346)*

Breda has been more aware of her learners learning, she was looking out for it in a new way. She talked about how learners learn in different ways and that she

> *'…might have to adapt to the way [she] teaches it to certain students especially with some of our groups who are so varied in levels, some can be getting it just like that and others you need to approach it differently' (Breda, Teacher discussion group session 4, pp.14/15, 525-530)*

Seán welcomed the opportunity to share in practice and felt this was the way forward for their practice in the case study institution as he stated; 'Well for feedback and any kind of training, or any kind of improvement strategies should be done with this way of bringing people on board' (Teacher discussion group session 4, p. 1, 29-31).

Mary makes a point about the students now knowing where teachers are coming from;

> *'…they have a sense of that and maybe they are a bit freer, open to giving feedback whereas if it is too structured, you know handing them a piece of paper, what did you think, tell me and put it down there, then nothing comes back to them' (Mary, Teacher discussion group session 4, p.2, 43-47)*

She also describes a situation with one of her students where she has seen real progression not only in the student's learning but also in the student's personal development.

> *'If you take for instance E, I sat with E the other evening she has come on amazing and when I sat and spoke with her and I said look back where you started E...and I took her on the journey of Youthreach and how she started there and then moving on to here and that she is doing fantastic and I could see her beaming and I knew this was doing*

> *her self esteem and confidence good' (Teacher discussion group session 4, p. 3, 111-117)*

Honest interaction and reporting of learning amongst the group was now evident. Susan revealed in this group session that she made a mistake with one element of the assessment documents for one of her modules that she was delivering; 'I made a big 'boo boo'…I nearly had a nervous breakdown over it, it was just at the time that it happened…I just thought I had everything together' (Teacher discussion group session 4, p. 18, 668-670) and goes on to state that she won't make that mistake again.

Currie (2008) states that there is a need to provide a safe and open learning environment for adult learners. Teachers in FET need to be responsive to a variety of learning histories presenting in their classrooms and so create an environment that is 'safe' and 'open' for the learner. Crowther *et al* (2010) also make this point stating that a key contributor to this safe environment for learning is the curriculum, which should be flexible and openly discussed with both teacher and student agreeing on the content. In the literature review of this thesis authenticity in teaching is discussed. Cranton and Carusetta (2004) define authenticity in teaching as;

> *'…a cluster of values related to self-awareness and bringing that self into teaching, understanding of learners and our relationships with them, a positioning of ourselves within a context and taking stances on issues and norms in the workplace and in our social world, and finally, engaging in critical reflection on each of these components' (p. 288)*

The authors discuss being genuine and open in your teaching and being 'socially situated'. I felt that teachers became socially situated during the life of this research project. Teachers felt comfortable in the process that was used around asking teachers to try out a new teaching methodology in their class. Mary spoke about how it was a form of internal continuous development and that she would have felt '…more obliged' if someone else had come in, like you'd hire somebody' (Teacher discussion group session 4, p.1, 14-15). This is important as teachers felt more at ease with this type of learning rather than an external body coming into the centre. There was a

sense of interest coming from the participating teachers as Seán talked about in this final teacher discussion group session;

> *'...but clearly the evidence is there that there is a sense of interest…evidence that people have shown because it shows that people have interest and that they care' (Seán, Teacher discussion group session 4, p. 5, 154-160)*

And teachers wanted more of this type of activity; 'This is why it is probably important that we can have more get-togethers like this' (Breda, Teacher discussion group session 4, p. 18, 655-656). Seán clearly noted that a change was happening; 'I would say we are **changing** because we have learnt' (Seán, Teacher discussion group session 4, p. 2, 53) and Una makes a similar point in the same group session;

> '…like CPD, staff development, rather than just doing feedback, it was also a big learning curve for the staff I think. We wanted to try and improve student feedback but in fact maybe we improved the way we approach things' (Una, Teacher group session 4, p. 8, 292-295)

There was a sense of teachers taking a step towards being in charge of their practice and their own learning. They realised that they had power to make the change internally in the case study centre. Teachers were beginning to talk about investing in their practice and continuing this type of teaching and learning activity into the future.

> *'Could we incorporate 5 or 10 minutes session on feedback into the teacher meetings, just an on-going if anyone has developed forms and to kind of and I think about sharing and adapting templates or strategies to your own situation' (Susan, Teacher discussion group session 4, p. 15, 557-560)*

However, Seán is still frustrated in the final teacher discussion group session when he makes the comment that some of his students still 'don't get' feedback;

> *'… my view is that the learner has not changed, the learner still does not understand what feedback is, they just don't get it' (Seán, Teacher discussion group session 4, p. 2, 53-56)*

All the participating teachers from time to time throughout the study felt these frustrations, and maybe it is a realisation of the reality of teaching? However, it is a positive sign that teachers are willing to discuss these frustrations in an environment that they feel is safe and are willing to try and overcome this. An observation from my research journal was that

teachers 'talked about the negative challenges of their practice more in the teacher discussion group sessions than in the individual interviews'. They felt comfortable airing these views with their teaching colleagues rather than directly with me – the centre manager. There was an acknowledgement of the support that we can offer each other as teaching colleagues.

Breda **reflected on the support** and stated that it was 'nice to have that discussion about it' (Breda, Teacher discussion group session 4, p. 7, 256-262), a point also raised by Una;

> *'Good support and a good focus because we don't spend time doing that either and if we have a meeting we are just going through an agenda so it was good time out to just focus on that which we probably would not have done otherwise. It was constructive as well, I think everyone got something out of it' (Una, Teacher discussion group session 4, p. 8, 282-286)*

Susan often looked for support from the group and mentioned on several occasions about getting support from colleagues.

> *'It might be good as part of a staff development thing that we look at, like I'd like to know what others felt about the feedback sheet and could it be developed over time' (Susan, Teacher discussion group session, 4, p. 11, 383-385)*

The final round of the one to one interviews took place during late May and early June 2016. In these final interviews many teachers were really content with their work in relation to feedback over the two years.

> *'One of the things that stick out for me the most is the whole feedback thing, about how we give feedback to the students, because I think that is really key to keeping the student on track' (Mary, Interview 3, p. 5, 160-163)*

The teachers revealed that they are now preparing their class material now in a more focused way and incorporating feedback into their lesson plans.

> *'So overall, the whole process has been an awareness raising kind of process where you're having to look at how you get feedback and how you ask for feedback' (Mary, Interview 3, p. 2, 49-52)*

Mary highlights that

> *'…it is that awareness raising in you that you tailor the task and whatever it is to the student, keeping the criteria up there, up front, the whole time but tailoring it to the students understanding and knowledge' (Mary, Interview 3, p. 4, 123-126)*

Susan is also being reflective and aware when she talks about what she is going to do next year in her practice. So she is looking forward with her new learning;

> *'But now maybe when we are doing that next year I will be more aware that I need to be sure that they are sticking to your content as well you know but in general can you see other opportunities' (Susan, Interview 3, p. 5, 180-183)*

Kevin states that '…it makes you **more aware** of the whole circle of learners because there is such a huge spectrum' (Kevin, Interview 3, p. 4 114-116). Participating teachers spoke about the feedback strategies being very useful for them in their practice. 'I enjoyed the project on feedback and I think it was beneficial for us all, good for us all' (Kevin, Interview 3, p. 5 168-169). Susan also made this point;

> *'I found it really valuable, every time I've done feedback it's given me an opportunity to go back and improve on the way I'm delivering the modules' (Susan, Interview 3, p. 7, 256-258)*

Thinking more deeply, Breda talks about the need to focus on the learners in this third interview;

> *'I think it opens your eyes a lot more into how you are delivering things and even seeing it from, well I always did try and look at things from the students' point of view anyway, to see how they are picking things up. But I think to implement it you really need to concentrate on putting it into your class plan' (Breda, Interview 3, p. 2, 60-65)*

This quote is very much grounded in her practice; it is not emotional but a practical statement of ways to move forward with her practice when she states that feedback needs to be built into the class plan. In my literature review John Hattie (2013) and his views of learning were reviewed. He describes learning as the '...process of developing sufficient surface knowledge to then move to deep or conceptual understanding' (p.26). He is discussing students here but equally I believe that the teachers in this project moved to deep learning about their practice.

Brookfield suggests that we look at our practice through the eyes of our students. This was evident during the final phase of the study where there was a realisation about being aware of how the learners' see things. Una discussed learner centeredness in her third interview when she talks about

the LO project that she was involved in. She states that the project was very 'do-able' and 'made sense' and spending time on that type of activity in the classroom is very positive.

> *'I think it is very do-able and it makes sense, doing the learning outcomes and spending some time with that, it's a good method of review when you recap and starting out, and it's a good way to settle people in, what we are going to be covering instead of just springing something new on them' (Una, Interview 3, p. 8, 286-291)*

Kevin highlights that he is now '…thinking of this feedback very early in the module whereas I would not have been thinking that early about it say a few years ago (Interview 3, p. 2, 66-69). Susan gives a very solid example of how one of her feedback tools supported her weak students. Her feedback form gave weak students an opportunity to show where their difficulties are in their learning and she was able to adjust and approach this now in order to improve learning for students (Interview 3, p. 4, 128-133). Teachers were beginning to look for signs from students about their levels of ability and as a result were able to support and help those students in a more enriched way;

> *'So one student where you might put out there how are you doing, ask the question straight and this student will respond and give you an answer. Where another student on being asked a question might be hesitant about answering so right away it gives you an indication, OK I need to check this, I need to probe this a bit further' (Mary, Interview 3, p.2, 44-49)*

Mary continues in the interview by stating that she is 'watching' out for the non-verbal or quieter ones in the group, as she wants to make sure that they are 'with' her.

> *'But we have to remember that people are coming from different corners, so what might suit one student won't necessarily suit another…So you have to alter or change or fix it so that all students are understanding' (Mary, Interview 3, p. 3, 94-99)*

Towards the end of the research project, there was a lot of discussion about embedding their learning about practice and that it should not now stop as the study has come to an end. The focus and development was different for everyone. Una talked about continuing to include planned feedback all the time and that she will look at things differently and will be more conscious of feedback when starting modules with new students (Interview 3, p. 1, 15-19). Kevin resonated with this point when he states the

following, 'I think it probably helps to try and be more current with my teaching' (Interview 3, p. 3, 101-102). There was also evidence from the interviews about trying new ideas and techniques in class because they saw that it worked and improved students learning so they '…really want to concentrate on adding that into my plan' (Breda, Interview 3, p. 2, 71-73). Una mentioned that we all want our classes to work better in order to enable students to progress and to provide them with opportunities to learn; '…so anything like that that helps you as a teacher and involves the students…'(Interview 3, p. 7, 274-277).

In the final interview I asked Breda what were her thoughts on the group activities that we have been doing throughout the project and her response was very positive, practical and focused on the benefits for her practice;

> *'I liked that because it is like putting so many brains together and coming up with a solution, whereas you know you are thinking from different angles as well, lots of people will see things that you have missed and it was great to come together and work things out' (Breda, Interview 3, p. 3, 101-105)*

Teachers at the start of the project were willing to get involved and could see the potential benefit for both themselves as teachers but also benefits for the students. By the end of the project, there were very solid examples of practice development and collegial sharing taking place. A deep sense of appreciation of what it means to share and the spirit of **sharing** was evident.

There was now a new level of **openness** with the students where teachers were engaging them in areas of the curriculum that would not have happened before and this was evident from the sharing of LOs activity;

> *'And that definitely said to me that was a good method to engage learners and to see the transfer of learning and for them to be able to mix and match, yea this will be very useful here and there' (Una, Interview 3, p. 5, 172-175)*

Wiliam (2011) discussed sharing learning intentions with students in the UK and that schools need to 'post' learning objectives at the start of classes but he felt this was often only a 'token' and was not really meeting the objective of students clarifying, sharing and understanding learning

intentions of classes. However, what Una experienced with her group was not 'tokenism' but clearly students began to become cognisant of the standards' criteria and ultimately, began to take a step towards taking responsibility for their own learning.

> *'But we all want to our classes to work better or to get more from it or make sure the students progress, to offer them the best opportunities, so anything like that that helps you as a teacher and involves the students…' (Una, Interview 3, p. 7, 274-277)*

Susan's focus throughout this study was to have very concrete, practical tools for getting feedback from learners. She often talked prior to the study on the challenges of recording feedback, which is a requirement for QQI assessment procedures.

> *'...but it definitely was advantageous and to think of what are the questions that I want answers to that will help me improve the delivery of the module for the next time I am doing it. And rather than giving spontaneous feedback it made me think what kind of information I wanted from the students rather than me giving them feedback, it was about me listening to their feedback' (Susan, Interview 3, p. 6, 205-210)*

Black and Wiliam (2009) discuss eliciting, interpreting and using information from students that will inform the next step the teacher needs to take in the class. Susan discusses how the new 'tools' that she designed and the strategies that we were implementing and experimenting with in the project support her in eliciting, interpreting and using information about her learners.

> *'I think those two tools now will help me to do at strategic times in the delivery of a module it will give me tools that I can actually get a really good feel for where the students are at and what issues need to be dealt with' (Interview 3, p. 7, 260-263)*

I observed at this point in the study that the focus on student learning was becoming deeper. Teachers talked about this in the interviews and in the teacher discussion group sessions. Seán talked about a student being 'enlightened' when he had to go back and '…re-read and assess and reflect himself on what he had learned' (Interview 3, p. 1, 15-17) and that learners were learning a lot from having this feedback conversation. Breda also mentioned confidence developing in students stating that the feedback improves their confidence and students realise that they can

actually learn and progress and they begin to work harder because they know they can do it (Interview 3, p. 2, 42-47). Seán mentions that this new knowledge for learners is allowing them to be 'freer' and they can take more learning on board as a result (Interview 3, p. 3. 92-95). Susan makes this insightful comment about the sustained benefit of the initiative as a result of being consistently implemented for two academic years;

> *'Yea, because they are getting more used to it, they understand more what they are being asked. And I think it is really important to keep saying in feedback that it is OK to be critical, because I do think that students think…resistance…they think something, they see criticism as something that is negative, whereas I am trying to highlight that criticism for us is positive because it gives us an opportunity to get rid of, improve, get rid of any confusion' (Interview 3, p. 7, 245-252)*

Breda refers to the students' appreciation of the new approach having engaged in formative feedback with her learners;

> *'…they kind of stand back and they realise then, well I can do this. So that improves their confidence a lot and they start to and really work more at it because they think, well actually, I can do this' (Breda, Interview 3, p.2, 44-47)*

Una comments on how the feedback strategies were planned over the two-year period. She felt the planning was

> *'…good because it gave everyone a chance to [get involved] because some weeks are different, so that was a good idea. Also, it was matched with meetings, that worked as well so you just had to get another hour, so the logistics worked I think, the way it was set up' (Una, Interview 3, pp. 6/7, 234-238)*

This is an important point to highlight as it shows that the planning of these teacher discussion group sessions to get teachers working together to promote a professional learning community needs to be embedded in practice.

Throughout the various discussions with teachers in interviews and the teacher discussion group sessions teachers talked about a need to invest in their practice and with any **investment** there is time involved. It is not something that will happen immediately, results are not instant. Teachers were aware that this planned intervention will not make all their teaching challenges disappear but instead could see that in time and with practice their teaching methodologies could improve the overall learning for both

teachers and students in the case study institution. Susan talked about the team aspect of practice in her interview and said that it is important to do things as a group rather than working independently (Interview 3, p. 7-276-278). Kevin mentioned that 'It got me out of my comfort zone and made me interact a bit better with the students (Interview 3, p. 1 10-12). Una talked about going beyond the delivery of modules but looking at the bigger picture in terms of the case study institution's core purpose - learning.

> *'I think not just feedback, I think we can improve the overall and improve the way we present modules, what we do, how we set up the structure of the BTEI, the part-time, VTOS and things like that. I think we could get a lot more out of them instead of just seeing is the student happy, what about the learning? Are we transferring the learning, are we getting the point across, is there enough feedback and so on. We can actually improve, there is another step. And that is good as well' (Una, Interview 3, p. 9, 354-361)*

Kevin pointed out that, 'I think we have to make a bit of time for it [team meetings]…It's informative' (Interview 3, p. 5, 164-165). And others agreed:

> *'Just in general it is nice when we get together anyway, not just to learn new things but to see how everyone else is getting on. It's almost like a peer support kind of thing because you can have good days and bad days. And if things are getting you down, things aren't working right for you at least if you talk to your peers, they'll say you can try another approach...' (Breda, Interview 3, p. 5, 174-181)*

Teachers engaging in dialogue with their peers needs trust, support and care (Hargreaves and Fullan 2012). The dialogue happening among the teachers was supporting deep relationships that were fostering a collaborative culture in the case study institution. Freire (1970) argues that true dialogue requires an '…intense faith in humankind, faith in their power to make and remake, to create and re-create, faith in their vocation to be more fully human' (p.90). An environment of true dialogue needs to create a climate of mutual trust that ultimately leads to closer relationships between the people involved (p.91). True dialogue needs engagement in critical thinking, thinking that is characteristic of solidarity (p.92). There was a sense of teachers taking the first step in taking charge of their practice and skills and this extended to suggesting ideas for the centre's next academic term;

> *'I suppose, what we would do then is maybe how we present the modules, what we do first, what we do next and so on so that the links are more fluid' (Una, Interview 3, pp. 8/9, 314-316)*

Una was very happy to engage in this project with her colleagues, which was personal development for herself but also professional development for her place of work, the case study institution.

> *'But I do think bringing in our briefs and different things and working together, it gave a good sense of team and community and overall if the students see that, it makes us more aware of what is going on and I think that is really good because you can integrate much better if you know what is going on' (Una, Interview 3, p. 8, 299-303)*

Seán felt it was '…extremely positive just to have those discussions, collaborative views' (Interview 3, p.4, 116-119). Little (2006) discusses building teacher learning into the school workplace. She is referring to giving schools an opportunity to learn and collaborate internally and not externally by '…allocating time, space and dollars to other kinds of activity that expand the opportunities for teacher learning in the course of on-going school life' (p. 21). She feels that this will leave a more 'lasting mark' on teachers' thinking and their practice. Little's ideals are resonating with Mary when she spoke about the teacher discussion group sessions;

> *'And I think those group sessions as well open up opportunities for collaboration that we might not otherwise realise and I think there is loads of scope for* ***collaboration*** *but it takes a bit of work and it takes time as well but it can be very good then when it does work' (Mary, Interview 3, p. 5, 151-155)*

Susan and Breda alluded to the opportunities that exist for the case study institution when this type of activity takes place;

> *'Huge opportunities and I think what it does is, it's two things, it's less work but I think the work you are getting is more quality and also it, yea, I just generally think it is useful, you know collaborating, integrating different modules, makes that connections with other modules and it also, they are* ***more focused****, like the thing is you get a much more quality report because they are doing it in two different classes' (Susan, Interview 3, p. 5, 184-190)*

> *'And I think everyone was getting something out of it for themselves and the chance that we got to play around with it. I think that was a good thing, with it being a study it was experimental and you weren't coming in getting something like sent down to you, you have to do X, Y and Z. So that gave people power over it and I think that is what is good and I think people were willing to put in their own ideas and say how it worked' (Una, Interview 3, p. 7, 267-274)*

In the above quote Una also made the valid point that this was not an 'external' project, something that was 'sent down' to try out from someone

else. This was an internal project that developed from the participating teachers within the case study institution and as a result teachers benefited from that. Mary also makes this point when she discusses how coming to the teacher discussion group sessions allowed the **sharing** of knowledge and it gave an opportunity to look at practice and new ways of learning (Mary, Interview 3, p. 4, 147-150).

5.4.1 Researcher Reflection at this stage – New Habits

At the end of phase three, which I have referred to as 'new habits', I was excited that we had completed the three action research phases with relative ease and I felt that the project was valuable and practical for the teachers involved. I felt that the teachers still had energy for this concept of working together and sharing practice in order to improve teaching and learning in the case study institution. I felt this final phase of the study showed evidence of further changes in habits among the teachers. There was a certain opening up and many reported less isolation in their practice and profession. They all spoke about learning from their colleagues and dialogue within the meetings. And importantly at this time, teachers extended this professional learning out to influence learners in the classrooms. The participating teachers began to 'think' about their practice through a 'learning' lens rather than strictly from a didactic-teaching of content approach (Jarvis 2010). Participating teachers welcomed the support that the project was giving to their everyday practice. There was a deepening of practice occurring among the teachers with a focus on learning. Through the teacher discussion group sessions teachers engaged more deeply in conversation and dialogue on their practice and this helped them embed the intervention [feedback] activity and habitually into their practice. Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) refer to building human capital; to look at individuals' strengths and weaknesses as a teacher, discuss these with peers and to build the capabilities of yourself and your colleagues (p.154). The teachers realised that the potential for the whole centre in this type of collaborative practice of engaging in 'peer collaboration and collegial dialogue in an effort to improve teaching

practices' (Clausen et al 2009) was very worthwhile and positive. My observation was that the teacher discussion group sessions built their own model of collaborative practice and developed '…local ownership through its own process' (Fullan 2000, p.582) and teachers became confident. Throughout the project teachers in the group were learning about the importance of effective pedagogy – they were becoming the 'teacher as learner' (Loughran 2010, p.37) and how thinking about their pedagogy helps to highlight teaching as an educative process. They aired their frustrations but they also talked and discussed ways to at least try and improve their situation. Towards the end of the project there was evidence of the teachers thinking of the whole centre and not just their individual practice through the practice of being reflective practitioners. As Brookfield (2005) states being a 'critically reflective teacher' you 'can stand outside' your practice and see what you do in a wider perspective (p.16). There was a beginning of a process of collaborative learning in their place of work; ultimately, engaging and participating as a group of teachers on their practice in the FET context.

5.5 Conclusion

This chapter presented data from the teachers' discussions about their practice over the two-year life of the project. The participating teachers were involved in this project for two academic years. Due to the way the changes happened, there was a need to present the findings in a way that was capturing all of the teachers' thoughts, feelings and actions about using the intervention in a meaningful way and engaging in a collaborative project with their teaching colleagues. The project involved three stages of an action research project placed within a case study FET institution and within the three stages there was obvious and definite developments that inform the conclusion to the project in the next chapter.

5.5.1 Final Reflection

The following diagram (fig: 22) is a visual of the developments that took place in this research project.

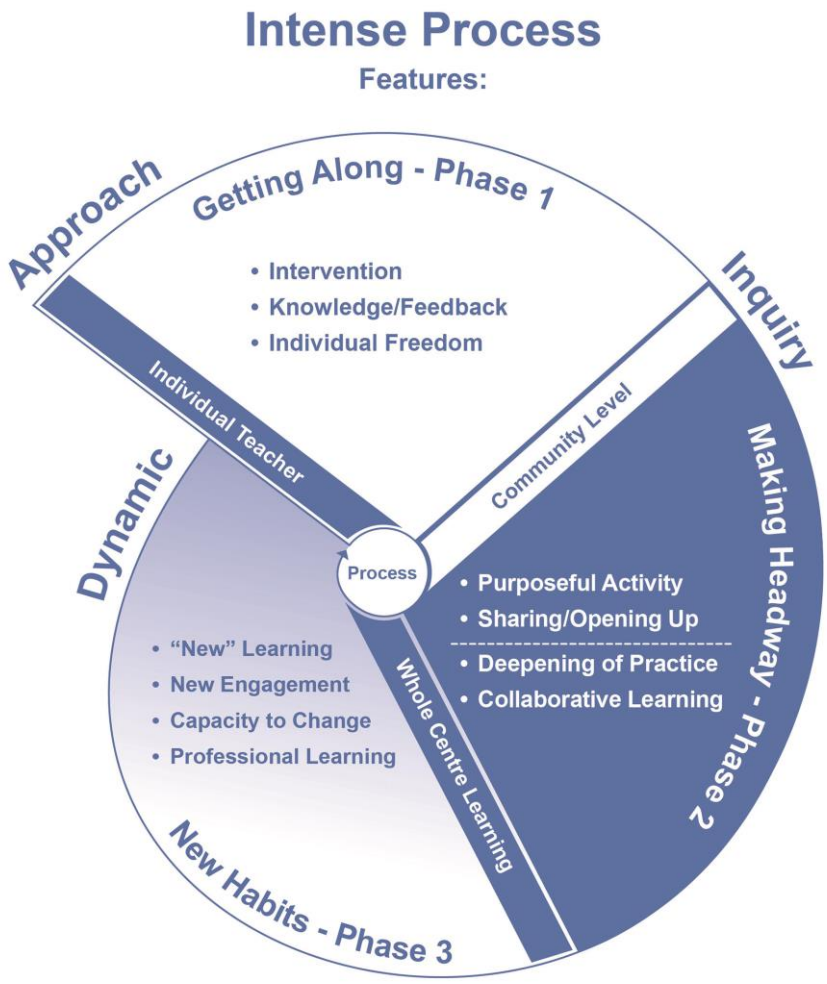


Figure 22 Developments that took place in this study

On reflection it was an intense process where I constantly had to keep the project on track. I reminded the participating teachers about the intervention and engaged in discourse with them on its progress within their practice at all stages during the project.

The initial stage of the project, called *Getting Along,* had some defining features. This stage was very much characterised by the individual teacher, with a focus on their individual skills and personalities. The focus at this stage was developing and working with the teacher and the intervention [feedback] and the teachers' prior knowledge of it. The chosen intervention played a critical role in that the teachers had the individual freedom and openness to work with feedback in their practice. There was the beginning of teachers engaging in dialogue about their practice. This gave the participating teachers a positive start to the project

that allowed the teachers to progress with it and to get along with their colleagues in the study. They were empowered by their willingness and openness to improve their practice.

The spirit of inquiry that initiated the project was the feedback intervention. It developed and progressed the individuals involved into the next phase of the study, *Making Headway*. The teachers had a purposeful activity to engage in, on their own and with their teaching colleagues. At this stage the teachers were beginning to open up and share in their practice in a purposive way. The teachers were succeeding with the intervention and with developing the community level of their practice. This progressed to a deepening of practice that led to collaborative learning among the teachers. The spirit of inquiry was the guiding feature of the project. There was a deepening of teacher dialogue about the feedback strategies and their impact on learning. There was a deepening of teacher dialogue, which focused on student needs and their learning. This phase showed evidence of a deeper focus on the learning environment including student-teacher relationships. Towards the end of this phase the teachers were looking outward towards the whole centre and thus adopting a whole centre approach to their practice and teaching activities.

The project continued to evolve and progress to the final phase of the study, entitled *New Habits*. At this juncture in the project what was evident was that there was new learning and engagement taking place among the study participants individually, but more critically among the whole centre. At this stage the spirit of inquiry had developed into whole centre learning around feedback and its delivery. Capacity building and a change in professional learning defined this stage. New habits were forming among the teachers and the whole centre. There was new collaborative teacher dialogue taking place. This was evidenced in their confidence in using the strategies and in their openness to engage in discourse on teaching and learning. There was deep and purposeful sharing of practice taking place. This all led to new habits in reflective practice for the individual teachers

involved, which contributed to their personal and professional practice learning in the centre.

This project was a process where each phase fed into the next steps and actions that were going to take place. The spirit of inquiry guided the project through all phases, which was a process of learning for the teachers involved. In this project the individual had to learn how to engage in a learning situation in their place of work. This led them to engage in their work at a community level and ultimately, reaching out to the whole centre involving all staff, students and stakeholders in the case study institution. I feel it was important for the participating teachers and me to go through the process of the three phases. It was important for teachers to be willing and ready to progress through the phases. It was important that this process was facilitated at all stages of the project. It was a dynamic practice that resulted in teachers displaying the features of a professional learning community – shared values, collaborative practice, deprivatising of practice, focus on student learning and reflective dialogue.

The next chapter will present the main conclusions as well as some recommendations for future work in this area.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

Chapter Six Conclusion

6.1 Introduction

> "Teaching is such a complex craft that one lifetime is not enough to master it…, but by rigorously focusing on their classroom practice, teachers can continue to improve throughout their career. Therefore, we need a commitment from teachers — not one to attend a certain number of hours of professional development per year but a career-long commitment to the continuous improvement of classroom practice, as well as an agreement to develop their practice in ways that are likely to improve outcomes for students" (Wiliam 2011)

In the rural FET centre where I have been teaching and managing for a number of years, there were few opportunities for the teaching staff and I to engage in educational discourse about our classroom practice. I was seeking ways to address this situation and to promote the concept of teacher dialogue through engaging teachers in a professional learning community (PLC). However, I knew that in the educational context of our centre and the FET sector, this could not happen without deep thought and planning. In order to embark on this research project and PhD study I had to consider the teachers involved, their working patterns and their teaching backgrounds.

The research set out to investigate how to promote a PLC in a rural FET centre in Ireland. The underpinning assumption here is that the PLC is made up of groups of educators who collectively examine and improve their own professional practice. The PLC concept is closely related to a learning community. These learning communities provide opportunities for teachers across a school system to learn and think together about how to improve their practice in ways that lead to improved student achievement and learning (Annenberg Institute of School Reform 2004). In an effort to promote a PLC in the case study institution this project described the involvement of six participating teachers, and this researcher, working closely together for two academic years on implementing a planned and focused teaching intervention [feedback] into the FET classroom. Throughout this exploration changes in the teachers' practices, teacher-student relationships and whole centre change were identified. As stated

previously, I was motivated by a desire to enable teacher dialogue and deepen engagement with teaching and learning within the case study institution.

This chapter seeks to answer the overall research question of how do I promote a PLC in the case study institution. When a planned and focused teaching and learning intervention is introduced into practice in the FET case study institution;

- What experiences unfold for individuals in the action research project?
- What happens to the professional engagement of the FET teacher?
- What happens to students' engagement with their learning?
- What experiences unfold for me the research practitioner leading the project?

Through answering these research questions the actual problem and challenges involved were further understood. The chapter will review the key findings and discussions already presented. The chapter will discuss the possible influences of the study as well as its limitations. There are suggestions for future research work in this area. The chapter concludes with some final reflections on the whole research process.

The research question posed for this action research case study was how do I promote a professional learning community (PLC) in the FET context, and so the lens I was adopting for this research was the theory associated with PLCs. PLCs are characterised by a set of attributes (Merriman, Bausmith and Barry 2011): shared values, focus on student learning, reflective dialogue, deprivatising practice and a focus on collaboration (Vesio *et al* 2008) and for this project this was my operating version of the PLC. I read extensively in the areas of teaching and learning, and the theory associated with the PLC, and with my research problem as its focus, I invited participating teachers to introduce a relevant teaching and learning initiative [feedback] (Wiliam 2011) into their practice and to discuss its effectiveness on their practice in their FET institution. I did this in an effort to give participating teachers a forum to start engaging in dialogue on their practice. The rationale for choosing feedback as the intervention was because teachers already engage in feedback in their practice and so they

were comfortable and confident using the intervention from the start. The intervention had meaning for the teachers. This resulted in early successes, which was important for sustaining the project in the case study institution for two academic years.

6.2 Features of this Research

Particular features of this research study that contributed to its successful implementation in this FET educational context were the following: the design of the intervention, the design of the data collection instruments and the action research approach to the project. The design of this participatory research project allowed a lot of freedom and openness on the intervention and how it unfolded throughout the life of the study. This was significant as teachers then freely shaped its course and so had ownership over the project and the process. The collaborative team approach to its implementation was another feature. Engagement with the intervention varied greatly between the teachers: there was flexibility to allow some teachers develop their individual skills of applying effective feedback in their practice while other teachers practiced the skills of teacher collaboration. Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) acknowledge that change in educational reform is a 'movement' rather than a specific change occurrence and remark that successful social movements '...persuade people to act in support of a shared common cause in the future, even though the immediate steps are psychologically difficult or dangerous in the beginning' (p.151).

The design of the data collection instrument greatly aided the project and contributed to its successful implementation and the effective outcomes. It was at the teacher discussion group sessions that the seeds were planted and nurtured that enabled teachers dialogue, sharing and learning from each other on their practice. These teacher discussion group sessions offered opportunities for teachers that they did not have before. Hence, possibly a new culture of practice was emerging.

The methodological approach to this study, action research, was a suitable and contributing feature. This action research project was practical in nature by using the meaningful teaching and learning intervention that involved changes in a cyclical process and included participation (Denscombe 2010). Through the action research approach it involved an enquiry into ones' own work, conducted by the self, into the self. Teachers involved in this study were examining their practice in a focused way. They were engaging in reflective activity. This type of research is open-ended and can be an idea that you develop over time (McNiff 2002). This action research project contained an element of social intent, an intention that I as the researcher wanted to improve my work for my own benefit and the benefit of others (McNiff 2002). All of these features contributed to the research in a positive way and allowed the study to flow throughout the whole process.

The planned teaching and learning intervention [feedback] gave a constant focus throughout. The intervention already had meaning for the participants and so their existing knowledge formed a solid foundation for them to engage. The freedom allowed the teachers to engage in the intervention in a way that supported them in their practice and contributed to the success of the study. As the project progressed through the three action research phases there was a sharing and open-mindedness (Loughran 2010) taking place within the teacher group because of this purposeful activity. They were responsive and receptive to the activity of teacher dialogue on classroom practice. There was a deepening of practice where collaborative learning was taking place. Teachers were planning their feedback delivery in their class in a new way, it was no longer an ad hoc activity. Teachers were discussing feedback with their colleagues and with their students in an effort to gain better understanding about their teaching and learning. There was a 'thirst' for new knowledge on effective feedback and what it looks like in practice. This led in the final phase of the project where teachers attained 'new' professional learning and 'new' capacity in their practice.

In the literature review of this thesis I referred to Heywood (2009) stating that in order to make changes in an educational context, schools and institutions should 'generate a spirit of inquiry' (p.309). I wanted to introduce into the case study institution activities associated with a PLC. The research design generated a spirit of inquiry based on feedback delivery in practice and this focus on feedback gave the project a solid foundation for dialogue throughout.

Although part of the research design, a promoter for participant involvement in this project was the planned and structured teacher discussion group sessions that took place. The purpose of the sessions was for teachers to meet and discuss freely the intervention that they were engaging with in their classroom. These were the first sessions that teachers in the case study institution were involved in that had as its focus teaching and learning. During the sessions, the teachers discussed how the students' learn, ways to motivate learning among their students and how the students learn with each other. There was a drive towards giving students an opportunity to learn better. The group during these sessions did not discuss other administrative issues around teaching and working in an FET centre, and this is noteworthy. The focus was always on teaching and learning and where the intervention functioned well and areas it was not successful, all shared in a collegial and open way among the group and so teacher learning on their practice was happening. The teachers engaged in educational discourse on their practice and the practice of their colleagues.

As a result of their experience on the project the teachers examined their current practice of giving feedback subjectively and then began to explore creative ways of delivering and receiving feedback in their classrooms. An ethos of sharing was underpinned by a practice-focused discourse, emerging through creative engagement with the intervention within the case study institution. An open-mindedness of how the intervention could be implemented allowed for 'new and different ways' and for teachers 'to be open to new ideas and thoughts that one may not have previously

entertained' (Loughran 2010, p.206). This engaged the teachers in a learning process of what it means to engage in professional learning. Teachers also engaged in learning conversations with their students (Brookhart 2011) through the feedback intervention.

Therefore, the research study with the teacher group sessions in particular, afforded the group the opportunity and freedom to engage in some professional discourse with colleagues around their practice. Learning to think for oneself involves becoming critically reflective of assumptions and participating in discourse to validate beliefs, intentions, values and feelings (Mezirow 1998). The teacher discussion group sessions afforded the participating teachers the opportunity to engage reflectively with their assumptions and ways of doing and to share and validate their beliefs and values. Through the collaborative process that emerged teachers engaged with a toolkit of strategies [feedback] to optimise their learning and so their learning about teaching and their practice deepened. Shared experiences, good working relationships based on trust, and people taking personal and social responsibility for their actions as well as being transparent, all support the cause of a change in practice taking place (Hargreaves and Fullan 2012, p.151). In essence these sessions contributed, alongside the feedback intervention, to plant the seeds for teacher dialogue about teaching, learning and therefore, their professional practice. Teachers were more connected with their teaching and during the study it was recognised that learners responded and engaged better as a result. The initiative was having an impact on the classroom. My guiding definition of the PLC was resonating here: teachers were sharing their values, they were focusing on student learning together as a unit, they were engaging in teacher dialogue in a collaborative and essentially, deprivatising practice within the case study institution (Merriman, Bausmith and Barry 2011). There was learning taking place among the participating teachers. There was a new focus on student learning. There was involvement from the participants.

A significant outcome from the project was the learners' learning relationship with their teachers, as exemplified by the sharing of the learning intentions and opening up dialogue in the classroom (Wiliam 2011). The planned intervention [feedback] allowed students to focus on their learning. There was a realisation of an opportunity for students to improve. The feedback strategy gave the students a voice that allowed them to engage in learning conversations. This contributed to an enriched learning environment for teachers and students. As a result students became more confident, freer and more open about their learning. There was a lot of evidence of collaborative learning taking place and the new enriched student teacher relationships were the catalyst for this. The planned intervention of feedback strategies equipped students with a method to engage in discourse about their learning that they had not experienced before. Strengthening the voice of learners is a challenge for both policy and learning providers (Coffield *et al* 2004, p.46). The authors refer to discussions that were held in the British House of Commons in 2006 stating that '…students views do not just appear out of thin air; they need time, space, encouragement and organisation in order to be able to produce and create those opinions' (p.46). The intervention in this project gave learners an opportunity to engage in discourse on their learning with their teacher and the teachers reported that student confidences and work rate grew. All this led to a holistic learning environment for both teachers and students, where both teachers and students were allowed to learn and grow together.

I want to return to the research question, how do I promote a PLC in the FET context? Vescio *et al* (2008) promote the instance of giving teachers an opportunity to share in their practice, as there is a focus on student learning and how to improve student learning for all. It requires collaboration and engagement in reflective dialogue among peers and colleagues and a deprivatising of practice (King 2016; DuFour and Mattos 2013; Hattie and Timperley 2007). I discovered that in promoting the features of a PLC in the case study centre a dynamic process took place. At the beginning the project required a building up of capacity among the

individual teachers to prepare them for the professional activity of engaging in collaboration and sharing with their colleagues. The use of the intervention allowed the teachers to think deeply about their practice on feedback. They developed language and insight into engaging in discourse within the group. A feature of this was their freedom to experiment and trial with the intervention being employed. This developed skills in the teachers to move to a broader level of engagement with the intervention and to work with their colleagues at a more community level of practice. There was purpose in their activity; they were sharing and being open about their experiences. A deepening of practice was emerging and teachers were learning collaboratively. This led in the final stages of the project to new learning and a new level of high-order engagement. A culture of professional learning was developing in the project that was resulting in a whole-centre learning environment. The process was spiral and interlocking (see fig: 21) in nature in that each stage of development was feeding into the next, where skills were being developed and built upon over the life of the project. The spirit of inquiry approach adopted for the project drove this.

This research suggests that the use of a teaching and learning intervention that has meaning and focus for the participants was a trigger and was essential to promote the fundamental features of a PLC in this FET institution. The use of the feedback strategies facilitated teachers in discourse on their practice of feedback. This followed an opening up, freedom and deprivatising of their practice and opportunities to engage in collaborative and reflective exercises.

As the researcher in this study I recognised that this cannot just happen in isolation; support from management is essential. There was a need for structured facilitated space, and time needed to be given to teachers to fully participate and engage. The teacher discussion group sessions enabled this. Towards the end of the project, as the teacher discussion groups developed, the participating teachers engaged in reflective dialogue and shared their values among the group.

As teachers working in today's society it is important to invest and reinvest in our professional capital and that of our colleagues (Hargreaves and Fullan 2012). It is agreed that continued learning on the job with colleagues allows the profession to foster, strengthen and maintain professional capital. Hargreaves and Fullan discuss the success of 'support on the job' (p.17), evidence from top performing schools in the OECD. The authors provide us with an inspiring quote in stating that '…teaching like a pro is about improving as an individual, raising the performance of the team, and increasing quality across the whole profession' (p.23). Loughran (2010) discusses professional learning working on the '…basis that change is as a result of work *with*, and/or *by*, teachers (p.201). Furthermore, professional learning brings our '…expert judgement to bear on how change might best be implemented in our own context and practice' (p.201). The learning that took place for teachers in this project was very much through the 'process' and how that learning can then be applied in practice. As this project evolved it was about tapping into the capacity and collective ability (Stringer 2013) of the teachers and so began to build their professional capital as teachers. Accepting responsibility for directing our own professional learning is a critical element of teaching (Loughran 2010) and this project realised that aim for the teachers involved.

It is my opinion that the positive progress that was made in the final stages of the study was because of teachers being in an encouraging, learning space as a result of engaging in this collaborative activity during the life of the project. This was a teaching and learning focused project, taking place in their own place of work with their own colleagues. Teachers were free and open to design how it unfolded and developed. They drove the project in the direction they wanted to and so as a result it fitted into their FET context. The positive nature of the project was due to teachers sharing core views and commitments and taking a dynamic and flexible stance towards their practice and regularly questioning and challenging their teaching habits (Little 2006) in the whole case study institution.

However, very early in the study I realised that there was a need for leadership and facilitation in order to develop the project in this contextual space. The time allocated and spent on the study, two academic years, was valuable and necessary in order to fully implement and evaluate the process that was being researched and ultimately, learn from its findings. Teachers discussed the project being like 'internal CPD',

> '….with this [the project], this approach is more realistic, it involves everyone, it involves a team, it involves individuals and it is for the benefit of the students' (Mary, Teacher group session 4, p. 1-2, 14-15, 36-38)

What emerged from the project is that the defining features of the PLC - shared values, collaborative practice, deprivatising of practice, focus on student learning and reflective dialogue were beginning to naturally and organically develop among the teacher participants over the life of the project. This was the beginning of a dynamic process that could potentially have a lasting mark (Little 2006) on the teachers involved. The theoretical framework that I developed in chapter two of this thesis (fig: 5) informed and guided the project satisfactorily and gave academic insight to the project. A social constructivist intervention, that had meaning for the teachers, was introduced as a spirit of inquiry to engage teachers in discourse about and on their practice. Purposeful time and facilitation had to be allocated for it and there was a need for teachers to be self-directed in order for them to be autonomous. There was a need for teachers to be ready and willing to engage. This process needed to be supported and facilitated by leadership. Right throughout there was a focus on practice through the feedback intervention. So in essence, this study was a stage of a lifelong process of change.

6.3 Contribution to Knowledge

There are a number of contributions of this small-scale research project. While the findings are unique to the case study institution, rural FET centres are very similar throughout Ireland in terms of the number of students and teachers attending and working in centres. The work patterns of FET teachers are also similar. While it is difficult to state that the research is generalizable it is certainly transferable (Denscombe 2010) in terms of the FET context in Ireland.

The national FET Strategy (2014-2019) has outlined five strategic goals, one of which is quality provision. The aim of this goal within the strategy is that '…FET will provide high quality education and training programmes and will meet the appropriate national and international quality standards' (DES/SOLAS 2014-2019, p.32). The rationale for carrying out this research was to generate empirical research in the FET context in relation to ways of promoting a PLC and therefore, quality teaching and learning within the case study institution. The focus was teachers' teaching and learning practices and processes within their classrooms. The research has contributed in this area by portraying potential ways to improve teaching and learning for the FET student and the FET teacher and so promote the teachers' professional practice learning. This is a critical time in the history of FET in Ireland and this research will help deepen understanding and knowledge on promoting quality of the teaching and learning experiences within the sector.

The very recent FET Professional Development Strategy (2017-2019) is underpinned by a number of principles; sector driven, holistic approach, evidence-based, flexible and accessible and future focused (p.9). This research has contributed to a number of these principles; this research took a holistic approach to the implementation of the intervention among the participating group, it is evidence based and emphasised the importance of planning such an activity in practice. But most significantly the project intervention was flexible and accessible to the case study institution and the research participants, and emphasises a varied method of delivery of PD in the FET sector today.

As the researcher in the project I have extensive knowledge of the field of adult learning and the life of the FET teacher having worked in the sector for 17 years. The participating teachers in the research have also worked over a decade in the case study institution and so offered knowledgeable and experienced insight into this research in terms of how the intervention can be introduced into practice. It is also important to note that their willingness and commitment to the research and the intervention were

profound; their beliefs and values towards professional learning was very prevalent and so embarked on the research project with that assertiveness. It is hoped that the findings and subsequent discussions from this thesis will inform future policymaking decisions that are pertinent to the FET sector.

However, for me as the researcher the resounding feature of this project was the element of freedom that the participating teachers had to influence and design the way that they approached the teaching and learning intervention in their own classrooms. This gave the teachers ownership and autonomy. This freedom led to the other emerging minute-change processes that took place; collaborative practice, sharing, whole centre approach, reflective dialogue, reflective practice. This was all context-specific to the case study institution. The timeframe of this project, two academic years, was a suitable timeframe for teachers to engage in the project and time for the intervention to be implemented. Fullan (2007) states that,

> *'Implementation for most changes takes 2 or more years; only then can we consider that the change has really had a chance to become implemented' (p.67)*

Fullan (2007) has carried out extensive work in the field of change processes in relation to education reform and he informs us that the '…dynamic of factors that interact and affect the process of educational change are too overwhelming to compute in anything resembling a fully determined way' (p.64). He informs us there are no '…hard-and-fast rules but rather a set of suggestions or implications given the contingencies specific to local situations' (p.64). Fullan (2007) identifies three phases in the change process;

1. Phase one is often labelled initiation, mobilization or adoption, is the process that leads up to and includes a decision to adopt or proceed with a change.
2. Phase two is the implementation or initial use, usually lasting 2 or 3 years and involves the first experiences of attempting to put an idea or reform into practice.
3. Phase three is often called continuation, incorporation, routinization or institutionalization and refers to whether the change gets built in as an ongoing part of the system or disappears by way of a decision to discard or through attrition (p.65).

For this research, a facilitator and a group of teachers *initiated* a program of change when we decided to look at feedback in our teaching. We then moved on and *implemented* its use over two academic years and in essence we experienced putting an idea of reform into practice within the case study institution by firstly initiation in the classroom and then impacting on the whole centre.

6.4 Limitations

Price and Murnan (2004) define research limitations as '…those characteristics of design or methodology that impacted or influenced the interpretation of the findings from your research' (pp.66-67). Research limitations need to be highlighted as part of any research process (Denscombe 2010) and this research had a number of limitation areas, most notably the scope and depth of the project and the use of action research and case study methodologies. The main limitation areas for me as researcher were the sample size, lack of prior research in the educational context and the concept of self-reported data (Price and Murnan 2004). The research sample was a purposive one, meaning that the participants were selected in a purposive manner; working in the case study institution during a specific timeframe, qualified to work in the FET sector and members of the Teaching Council. These criteria had the potential to exclude other key personnel that work with FET learners, for example, administration staff, guidance counsellors and literacy support workers. This research would not be considered generalizable as the research took place in one small rural FET centre with a small number of teachers. However, I feel the teachers' views and beliefs are highly valuable insights into working in FET in Ireland today. I feel that the research data is certainly transferable - results may not be similar if the same methods and techniques were implemented in another FET setting but new insights and information will be gathered that provide ways of promoting a PLC in an FET setting. There is limited empirical research on FET in Ireland and so this was a limitation in that I did not have access to context specific literature that would have supported the project design and implementation. This research relied on self-reported data from the

research participants and so adds another dimension to the research's limitations. The research did not engage FET learners directly in the data gathering. It would be worthwhile and interesting to add this dimension to the research. The case study institution was my place of work, where I hold a management position, and I engaged my teaching colleagues in the project. This could have had its challenges being working colleagues and the power relations (Banegas and Villacanas de Castro 2018) that may occur as a result. However, I feel as the researcher that this also generated opportunities for the study; existing, strong working relationships, trust and familiarity amongst the participating teachers. The project had its limitation areas, however they did not impact on the overall research findings and conclusions that are being put forward. Many of the limitations are also possibilities for future research work.

6.5 Critical Reflection

As the researcher in this project, I set out to examine ways of engaging FET teachers in dialogue on their practice. My rationale for doing this was that I found in the case study centre where I worked and managed a small rural FET centre there were few opportunities for the teaching staff to engage in dialogue on their classroom practice. In the literature review of this thesis, I documented an extensive reading of literature around teaching, learning and PLCs to inform and guide me as the researcher for this PhD programme. A core element for teaching in the 21st century is that the profession needs to engage in discourse on their teaching practices. I embarked on a journey of looking at ways to promote a PLC in the case study institution, as the fundamental characteristics of the PLC are reflective dialogue and collaboration. I learned through the action research process of this study that one way to promote a PLC in the FET case study institution was to use a well-grounded teaching and learning intervention to generate a spirit of inquiry that acted as a focus throughout the life of the project. This gave the participating teachers and I a solid framework to work from during all stages of the project.

So why is this important and what does it mean for me as the researcher? Over the two-year life of the project, I explored and examined ways of promoting dialogue and collaboration in the case study centre in an effort to engage teachers in their professional learning. Throughout the life of the project, I was analysing and reconsidering the actions and occurrences that took place. I was questioning the experiences that the teachers were having individually and collectively. I also questioned my own experiences of what was happening in the project. This was all in an effort to enhance the professional practice of the teachers and to give the case study institution an opportunity to participate in discourse on teaching and learning. Ultimately, this led to improved teaching in the classroom where student performance and student relationships were enhanced. This was very encouraging and positive for me as the researcher as it meant that the approach taken was something that can be replicated within the case study institution and potentially, to other similar FET centres.

Now I ask myself, where to from here. At the final stage of the action research project the teachers involved had developed a depth of new habits in their practice. They had experienced a depth of new professional learning and teacher engagement. However, I realised that in order for this to be sustainable in an FET centre there is a need for constant focus and facilitation from leaders. It was also realised that the teachers did not 'arrive' at this state of having new enhanced habits instantly – there was a lengthy process that teachers went through, learning along the way, of how to actively engage in the professional learning community in their place of work. The spirit of inquiry [feedback] employed throughout was a strengthening feature of the project as it had focus and meaning for the participating teachers.

6.6 Future Work

Further education and training has been delivered in the Irish education system for decades. However, it is only in recent years that the sector has been granted the solid structure that it so necessarily required. The

development and publication of the FET Strategy in 2014 marked a pivotal time in the sector's history. Up to recent years there has been limited empirical research carried out on the sector in Ireland and it is also limited in the European and International context. This is a critical time in the State's history to explore and examine the sector and its many characteristics and nuances. There are a number of areas of research that could be explored that would give the sector the much-needed insight that it deserves.

Leadership

This research was carried out with a steady and constant drive and effort from me as the researcher to ensure that the planned teaching and learning intervention was implemented into practice. There is potential for leaders (PLC Principals, Centre Coordinators and Directors) in the sector to take on a leadership role in developing teaching and learning practices in an FET centre using an approach similar to this action research project. However, there is a need for leadership training in order to realise this. It would be interesting to explore ways that this can be achieved in the sector given its current structure; work patterns of teachers and funding to the sector. Wiliam (2011) advocates that teaching is a learning profession and that teachers need to be committed to a 'career-long' commitment to improving classroom practice. Cosán, the national framework for teachers learning, provides a long-awaited opportunity to affirm the value of teachers' learning and acknowledge the full range of learning activities that teachers undertake for their own benefit and that of their students. I believe that there are opportunities within Cosán to facilitate this type of project for future practice and possible accreditation.

Continuous Professional Development (CPD)

The recently published FET Professional Development Strategy (2017) discusses professional development in the sector and highlights '…the importance of professional development as a process' (p.17). The strategy states that in addition to the formal training programmes that are available to teachers, it can also include '…other activities such as informal

professional exchange, practitioner research on best practice, and self-reflection' (p.17). There is a need to look deeper at this and to discuss and explore ways that the sector can engage FET teachers in the 'informal professional exchange' that they are referring to. How do we engage the FET teacher to examine practitioner research on best practice and how do we instill in the profession the need to self reflect? This research has highlighted one potential way of doing this but there is a need to examine alternative methods. I feel this is critical in this sector as the teaching professional currently working within the sector are not all traditionally qualified in teaching strategies and methodologies. Results from the strategy outlined that two thirds of respondents from their study (67%) are qualified to Level 8 and 9 on the NFQ. The survey also asked respondents about their confidence levels in their subject discipline. The results from this section are interesting.

> 'Overall, the skills profile suggests a workforce that is relatively confident in terms of 'soft' skill areas such as communication skills, teamwork and customer service, as well as the core teaching/training skill areas. Far fewer staff are highly confident in some technical skills (such as planning and budgeting, quality assurance). There is also less confidence in terms of ICT and, in particular, the use of technology to enhance learning. Skills such as addressing literacy and numeracy issues and dealing with challenging behaviours are also more clearly evident as areas for development' (pp. 23-24)

How can the sector provide this type of professional development and learning, together with accreditation and other learning to its workforce?

Reading of the literature

A limitation of this research was the limited evidence of teachers reading theoretical literature relating to teaching and learning, although there were many instances of sharing. One of the findings from this research is that many FET teachers involved were slow to engage with the relevant literature on teaching and learning in their practice. However, some did and it had an impact on change. It would be interesting to explore ways that this can be developed given that it is a critical part of the jigsaw in terms of being a reflective practitioner (Brookfield 1995).

Rural and Urban Contrast

This project was carried out in a small rural FET centre in a remote part of the west of Ireland. It would be important to examine if a similar type activity can be simulated in a large urban centre of FET.

6.7 Final Reflections on the Process

This research journey has been a very positive experience for me as an FET teacher. My experience of completing a Masters in Education in 2013 in many ways ignited the 'research bug' in me. I realised that I enjoyed examining and exploring teaching and learning in an in-depth way. I enjoyed talking to teachers about their practice and hearing their story. I felt I had knowledge to offer and new knowledge to learn. I did comment that in many ways it was at this time that I really learned how to learn. Having completed the Masters research I really wanted to continue and so embarked on the process of becoming a part-time PhD student.

The part-time structure of engaging in research is very challenging. Trying to manage working full-time and carrying out research at this level is difficult. However, I really could not have conducted the research in any other way. The very intimate and full engagement that I had with the research participating teachers was imperative to get that deep insight from the research and to get the project embedded into practice in the way that it did. I feel the fact that I was there every day, teaching and working alongside the research participants greatly contributed to the success of the project. This was a project that developed from within, from the bottom up, driven by me as the researcher and the teachers involved.

The action research approach to the research was an appropriate method employed for this project. The research did not use an action research methodology in its strict criteria but used an action research approach within a case study framework. I felt that this approach greatly added value to the overall project. It allowed the teachers to learn and share so much about their practice.

The teachers and I benefitted greatly from this research activity. There was full engagement throughout and we all learned a great deal about ourselves as professional teachers and about teaching and learning. In the case study institution today we are continuing with the sharing of practice and dialogue around our practice that the research was hoping to achieve. I feel as the researcher in this project that we have made a 'lasting mark' (Little 2006) on our profession in terms of sowing the seeds for promoting a PLC in an FET centre. My core values and beliefs around this research project were guided by the fact that I felt there was very little dialogue happening amongst the teachers where I work, and hold a management position, about teaching and learning. There was very little professional discourse about how our students learn, how we can improve the climate for learning, how as teachers we can support and learn from each other. This was my personal motivation to lead change and build a community of learners.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 – Interview Schedule

Interview Schedule 1 April 2015	
Research Question	***Interview Question***
What happens when we introduce AfL focused teaching and learning practices into the FE classroom?	• What did you think of the two strategies (time in class & focusing on what's next) we implemented? • Did you prefer one over the other? • What/any difference has it made in your classroom so far? • Have you made any changes as a result of using these- or are you using them as agreed?
What happens for the learning process among teachers and learners?	• How did the learners respond to the strategies? • Any examples of where it went well or didn't go well? • How do you feel about using the strategies? • Have you noticed any change in the learners now?
What influence does the AfL focused intervention have on improving professional engagement for the FE teacher?	• How do you think it impacts on your own teaching? • Has it had an impact on your preparation and approach to teaching? • Have you noticed any change in your thinking about teaching?
What influence is there on students' engagement with their learning?	• Have you seen any impact on the students' learning? • Are they engaging with the strategies?
What happens in the case study FE institution as an educational organisation, as a consequence of the teaching and learning focused intervention?	• What do you think of the group sessions we've had to date? • Do you think it has any impact on the centre as a whole? • How do you feel about working more closely with your colleagues and if so how? • Can we improve those sessions in any way?

Appendix 2 – Focus group guiding questions

Teacher Group Discussion 1

March 2nd 2015 4-5pm

Layout

- Brief introduction on study
    - Consent forms
    - Recording the session
- Introduce T and A to group – small discussion around feedback from them
- VTOS teachers - feedback on their experiences with the planned feedback interventions; tell a story around feedback in your class
- Feedback strategies – what one to take next
- Engaging with the literature
- Schedule of interviews and next teacher group session

Teacher Group Session 2 May 7th 2015 4-5pm

Layout

- Your own learning to date from using the strategies and any new learning you would like to achieve (10 minutes)
- Feedback – each teacher give a brief report on what they committed to trying out during the period since the last teacher group discussion. The rest of the group will listen and then try to offer support in overcoming some of the challenges in implementing the strategies (25 minutes) *Will put this on a flip chart for circulation
- Video clip (3 minutes)
    - http://www.journeytoexcellence.org.uk/videos/expertspeakers/feedbackonlearningdylanwiliam.asp
    - Discussion on clip (10 minutes)
- Action plan for September 2015 (10 minutes)
    - Asking three questions
    - Task vs. self

Teacher Group Session 3 January 2016

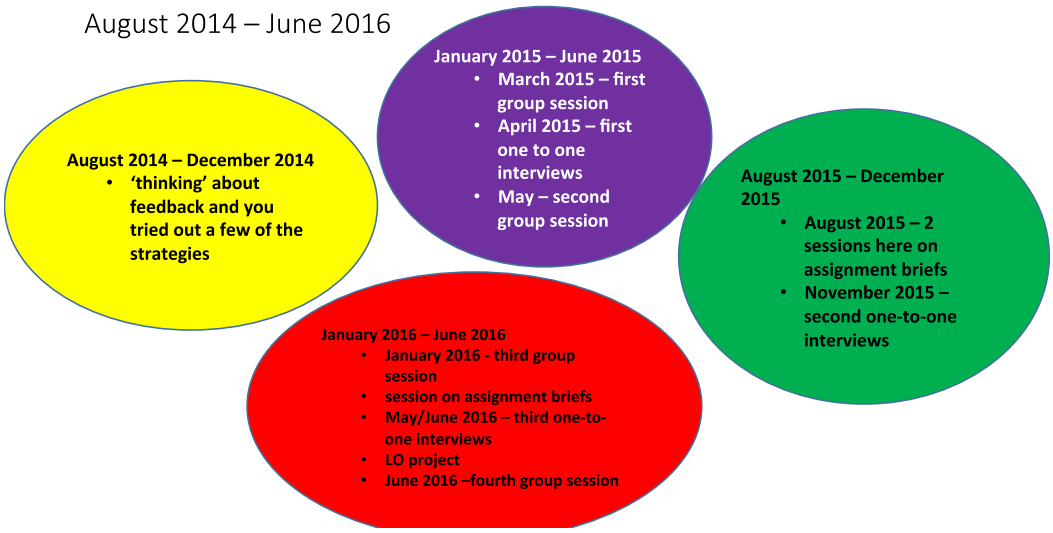
Layout

- Presentation to teachers on my research to date (15 minutes)
- Discussion on presentation (15 minutes)
- What did you think of the feedback strategy, task versus the self strategy?
- What did you think of the two collaborative sessions we did in August around the assignment brief and in September on the content of the assignment briefs?
- Action plan for January to May 2016
    - Asking three questions

Teacher Group Session 4 **January 2016**

Outline of Data Collection for the research

August 2014 – June 2016



Discussion – Teacher Group Session 4

- Looking back over the project – how do you feel about it?
- What are your thoughts? Why do you think this?
- What do you think the evidence is?
- How do you feel as a teacher in FE now?
- What has changed?
- Do you look at or approach things differently now?

Appendix 3 – Participant invite letter

Dear

I am currently enrolled as a part-time student on the PhD programme in the School of Education at NUIG. My supervisor for this study is Dr. Mary Fleming. My research to date has been exploring the area of teaching and learning in the FE sector in Ireland. I am hoping to engage professional, qualified FE teachers in this study by asking them to use a planned intervention in their classroom practice and to examine the impacts these interventions have on teaching and learning.

This is a very exciting and critical time in the history of further education (FE) in Ireland with the recently published FET strategy 2014-2019. One of the five core goals of the strategy is quality provision and I am hoping to debate this issue to see if the planned interventions will lead to quality provision that FET are referring to. There is also very little research carried out on FE in Ireland or in our neighbouring countries.

I am inviting you to participate in this study for a number of reasons;

- You are currently teaching on the VTOS and BTEI programmes being held in the centre and are timetabled there for the next two academic years while the study will be taking place.
- You are a qualified teacher and are registered with the Teaching Council

I am inviting you and your colleagues to participate in this study which involves implementing a planned intervention into your classroom practice. I then propose to carry out one-to-one interviews on three periods throughout the academic year. I also plan to hold three focus group sessions during the same period. It is hoped that we will learn a lot from these focus group sessions where teachers can collaborate and discuss the interventions and how they are working for you as an individual teacher and for the learners.

A determined effort will be made to ensure that the all findings are treated confidentially. However, full anonymity cannot be guaranteed due to the context of the study, as you are all currently working collaboratively together. The findings from the data collection will be used in the final dissertation for the award of PhD. It is very important that you are aware that you can withdraw from the study at any time and there will be no consequences. I am very aware that teachers' time is limited and also that some of you are teaching on other schemes outside of the centre. If you have any questions or concerns about participating in this study, please do not hesitate to contact me or alternatively, you can contact my supervisor, Dr. Mary Fleming mary.fleming@nuigalway.ie. Participants can also contact the Research Ethics Committee at NUI Galway if they have any issues with this study that concern them. If you are interested in participating in this study you can let me know in person or email me (sorcha.otoole@gmail.com) within the next two weeks and I will arrange the initial information session. However, I would like to reiterate that you are under no obligation to participate in this study.

Thank for taking the time to read this letter.

Kind regards,

_____
Sorcha O'Toole

Enc: Participant Information Sheet

Appendix 4 – Participant Information Document

Dear Research Participant
The following document is a research participant information sheet. It is envisaged that this information sheet will help to inform you on your decision whether to participate in the research.

Dissertation Title:
Teaching and learning focused interventions in the further education (FE) classroom – the impact on professional practice learning

Primary Researcher:
The primary researcher in this study is Sorcha O'Toole who is currently a VTOS Coordinator of a Further Education Centre in Ireland. The researcher completed a Masters in Education from TCD in 2013 around the impact of assessment for learning and feedback strategies in the FE sector in Ireland and is expanding the research topic from that degree.

Aims of the Research Project:
The researcher in this study is purporting to explore ways in which teaching and learning can be enhanced within the further education (FE) sector in Ireland. The aim of this research will be to investigate and analyse what happens when we introduce a teaching and learning focused intervention directly into the FE classroom. The proposed intervention is an adaptation from the theory of assessment for learning (AfL) and will involve the introduction and implementation of AfL strategies within the FE classroom. FE teachers will be invited to introduce planned AfL strategies into their teaching practice and the impact for them, as professional FE teachers, and for overall learning within the classrooms will be the focus of the study. The researcher is proposing to carry out this research using the case study method, involving experienced FE teachers from one single FE institution. The fundamental principles underpinning a professional learning community (PLC) will be used in the development of the intervention so that teachers collaboratively engage as they introduce and implement the AfL intervention. The objectives of the research are to answer the following key questions;

- What happens when we introduce AfL teaching practices into the FE classroom?
- What is the impact on the understanding of the learning among teachers and learners?
- What impact does the AfL intervention have on improving professional engagement for the FE teacher?
- What is the impact on students' engagement with and understanding of their learning?
- What is the impact on the case study FE institution as an educational organisation, as a consequence of the teaching and learning focused intervention?

Data Collection
Data collection will take the form of one-to-one, semi-structured interviews and focus group sessions on three occasions throughout the academic year, over 24 months. The primary researcher will also ask research participants to take a diary/notebook throughout the data collection period. All interviews and focus group sessions will be recorded on digital recording equipment. In accordance with NUI Galway's Draft Policy on Data Retention (2006), 'NUI Galway REC expects research data to be securely held for a minimum period of five years after the completion of a research project' (National University of Ireland Galway, 2006, p. 1). Following this five-year period, all data (hard and soft copies) will be erased and destroyed confidentially and with due diligence.

Confidentiality and Anonymity
For the purposes of this study full anonymity or confidentiality cannot be guaranteed as the sample group is of a small size and findings from the data collection will be included

in the final dissertation. However, personal names or any unique identification will never be used in the text in the dissertation. The researcher will use a unique identifier code while transcribing all the interview and focus group recordings in order to reduce the likelihood of identifying a participant.

Risks to Participants
There are limited risks to participants who get involved in this study. However, during interviews and focus group sessions you are required to discuss and reflect on your teaching practice and this may prove challenging for some participants. If participants find being involved in the study too challenging there are no consequences for departing from the study and support will be made available to you through the primary researcher and her supervisor. Participants can also contact the Research Ethics Committee at NUI Galway (091 495969) if they have any issues with this study that concern them.

Research Benefits
There are many benefits to the study participants that may get involved in this research. However, I would hope as the primary researcher that your professional practice would be enhanced and consequently improved as a result of participating in the study. It is hoped that you will gain a greater understanding of teaching and learning from being part of the study that will lead to 'quality provision' (FET Strategy 2014-2019) within the FE sector. Your involvement in the study will greatly contribute to a field of research that is not greatly documented in the Irish context of further education. Finally, you will get an opportunity to work collaboratively with colleagues over an extended period of time and be part of a teacher learning community.

Participant Rights
Your participation in this study will be completely on a voluntary basis and there will be no prejudice against you should you decide not to participate. If at any stage you wish to exit the study you can also do so without prejudice from the primary researcher and the associated supervisor. You can inform the researcher of your feelings at any stage during the research period. All recorded data and notes will be securely stored and password protected on the researcher's laptop.

Communication of Findings
The results and findings from this research will form the basis of a dissertation that will be submitted to the School of Education at NUIG for the award of Doctorate of Philosophy in Education.

I would like to thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet and should you need any further clarification please do not hesitate in contacting me in person, on my mobile or by email. It is also possible for you to contact the primary supervisor of this research project, Dr. Mary Fleming, mary.fleming@nuigalway.ie.

_____

Sorcha O'Toole
087-6359645
sorcha.otoole@gmail.com

Appendix 5 – Participant Consent Form

Research Student **Sorcha O'Toole**
Supervisor **Dr. Mary Fleming**
Programme **PhD (part-time)**
College **NUI Galway**
Dissertation Title **Teaching and learning focused interventions in the further education (FE) classroom – the impact on professional practice learning**

Please read the following statements and indicate your agreement by signing below

I agree to participate in recorded one-to-one and group interview sessions with the above named research student under the following terms and conditions

- Consent – the participant may withdraw consent to be interviewed or the usage of recorded material at any stage of the research process
- Confidentiality – the original recordings and notes will be made available upon request to the named supervisor and the members of the examination board
- Anonymity – the participant can request to have their identity hidden for the purpose of the research. However, full anonymity cannot be guaranteed in this study due to its small case size.
- Review – the participant has the right to review the transcriptions from the interview and focus group recordings and insert clarifications or corrections where necessary
- Purpose – the recorded material will be utilized by the research student for research relating to the pursuit of a PhD degree at NUI Galway
- Analysis – the recorded material will be transcribed, coded, categorized and interpreted in accordance with the recommendations of the School of Education at NUI Galway.
- Publication – extracts of the analyzed material may appear in the dissertation
- Security – all recorded material will be backed up, stored in a secure place and be password protected
- Storage – all recordings will be stored post qualification for a period (5 years) necessary for NUI Galway

Participant Signature: _____

First Name: _____

Surname: _____

Address: _____

Date: _____

Mobile: _____

E-mail: _____

Appendix 6 - Feedback form

Feedback Sheet

How did you find the task set for the assignment?

Are there any tasks within the brief that you are not confident about?

What tasks did you not enjoy about the exercise?

Why?

What tasks did you enjoy?

Why?

Can you see the relevance of the task to the module?

Comments

Name of learner Date: