Editorial: Ireland's Online Learning Call

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Introduction

The editorial board of the Irish Journal of Technology Enhanced Learning (IJTEL) would like to use this opportunity to thank each and every one of you working through a very challenging time over the past twelve months of the pandemic. It is a significant event, a critical incident, that will take some time to document and reflect upon in future journal editions.

So many words have already been written about this past year that try to capture the disruption and change. However, to summarise even a scintilla of what has happened across Irish higher education is a slightly daunting prospect. We have seen various terms used to describe the rapid shift to teaching and learning online, such as milestone, pivot, emergency remote teaching. None of these fully encompass the myriad of ways that those of us working in education have had to become resilient, responsive, and supportive of colleagues during this period.

Considering the response from members of the educational technology community within Ireland, one could argue that the term overwhelming is a good starting point. For a start, a tsunami of work ensued, that at times threatened to engulf individuals. Education 'pivoted' from a position where online was generally a supplementary or complementary activity to one where, in an online mode, we became the campus. Systems and processes were hastily altered, modified or expanded far beyond anybody's expectations. While some of those have creaked and groaned, we have managed to teach classes, run meetings and carry out assessments; run on-campus labs and social distanced teaching; in short, we have kept going. People have been inventive, innovative and extremely hard working. But above all else, they have been generous; generous with their time, their expertise and generous in spirit.

A collective and open response

The dilemmas and practical challenge presented in learning how to redesign our courses for remote teaching or in finding out how to determine the affordances of technologies appropriate to one's learning outcomes and context, was a shared and immediate difficulty. Under these circumstances, a myriad of open responses emerged.

The creative commons licensed global "Keep Teaching" resources originating from Indiana University (2020), were reproduced by some institutions local websites to help give guidance to staff. Others supports, notably the aggregated resource bank compiled by the National Institute for Digital Learning (2020) became a valuable reference. A curated listing by the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (2020) emulating the work of Daniel Stanford (2020) brought together collective responses for action from across all Irish higher education institutions, helping us learn from one another.

Accompanying this were numerous live webinars and events. Many were funded through support from the National Forum seminar series (2021), relying on individuals and groups, predominately in centres for teaching and learning, to open up their organised sessions to a wide audience. These events proved to be both a source of valuable information, inspiration, and support. The Irish University Association's EDTL project (2020) organised weekly events and complied resources and guides to support across the sector and included the student voice as a central part. The Munster Technological University's EdTech Seminar Series, Gasta Goes Global (O. Farrell et al., 2021; Farrelly, Ó Suilleabháin, & McCarthy, 2020) and the ILTA seminar series of events provided further opportunities to come together and strengthen the collective community. Further afield, several professional bodies, such as the European Distance and E-Learning Network (2021), freely opened up their webinar series to all, with several Irish researchers presenting their scholarship and changes in practice in response to the crisis.

Each of these events demonstrated individual's generosity of time, expertise, and spirit. There have also been countless informal meetings and webinars where people have come together in that spirit to share and support. Research from A. M. Farrell et al. (2021) indicated that it was to colleagues that we turned to seek the most support during the crisis. So, whilst there have been trying times, there has been much cause for hope. At the risk of offending anybody by omission, and apologies to those that unmentioned, we are all aware of many, initiatives, people, organisations, events that we feel capture this sense of optimism.

Alongside this, the National Forum's Open courses initiative, with rollouts of courses on Universal Design of Learning, Getting started with Teaching Online, Entice, and others, additional opportunities for educators to access timely professional development opportunities, that could directly impact on their understanding of the quality of teaching and the student learning experience. The European framework on digital competency of educators, DigCompEdu (Redecker, 2017) was also present in many discussions around gaps and provisioning supports on various dimensions of educators' capabilities or digital literacies. DCU's involvement in two relevant FutureLearn MOOCs (Futurelearn, 2020a, 2020b) also contributed not only to staff but to student's development of their online learning capabilities.

Two key publications have emerged over the last twelve months, from the Irish Educational Studies journal of the ESAI (Hall, 2020) and All Ireland Society for Higher Education AISHE-J (Maguire,

Munro, Brereton, Bree, & Huntley Moore, 2020) capturing some of the emerging scholarship, with more work emerging from presenters at the Irish Learning Technology Associations (ILTA, 2021a, 2021b) annual conference on "EdTech 2021*: Shaping Education Post Pandemic: Pockets of Innovation for 'Building Back Better*'". This highlights the importance of good evidence-based research on which to map our next steps. We need to ensure that lessons learned are not lost, through disparate surveys carried out by schools, units, students' unions, without ethical approval to use for research and to ensure we gain an understanding of this challenging time.

Learning Designers are waiting for your call

One group of people is worth calling particular attention to. They are not teachers or students but learning designers. These may be "blended professionals, who have mixed backgrounds and portfolios, comprising elements of both professional and academic activity" (Whitchurch, 2008). Originally, they could be conceived, by some of their own number, as "a unique group who had almost come together because there was a job to be done but it couldn't quite be articulated" (White & White, 2016). In 2020 this job was explicitly articulated and these vital third space people acted as "first responders" (Abramenka-Lachhe et al, 2021) to the emergency remote teaching call. Fifteen job advertisements were collected in the summer of 2020 about such roles advertised by Irish Higher Education Institutions. A preliminary analysis revealed an array of job titles including Digital Learning Developer, Digital Learning Support Officer, E-Learning Technical Officer, Learning Technologist, Instructional Designer, Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL) Designer and Transformative Pedagogy Lead. Some of these roles allude to their conceptualisation as administrative or technical respectively and their descriptions contained a wide range of skills and competencies. Whilst some had terms of more than a year, several had shorter terms, and none were permanent. Providing pathways and opportunities for development and career progression for people in these roles will be important. This is currently lacking in many respects for people who have already long served in these positions. Job security is an associated issue. Precarity is a feature of academic work in Higher Education in Ireland (Hodgins & Mannix-McNamara, 2021) as anywhere else and this has been called out for educational technology/learning design as a profession in the UK for example (Browne & Beetham, 2010). More research into the experience and place of learning designers in Ireland is needed. They have been called to serve and we must make sure that the sector, in turn, looks after and serves their needs into the future.

Missteps in haste

Whilst rethinking assessment towards more authentic and alternative approaches, and improved understanding of the importance of good learning design, other changes wrought over the last year have been less optimistic. Concerns around digital surveillance, misappropriation of learning analytic data, and remote proctoring abound (Watters, 2020; Williamson, Bayne, & Shay, 2020). Furthermore, commercial software companies now provide the digital infrastructure for teaching online to a degree that will be hard to reverse. Similarly, commercial publishers have also stepped into the breach to provide online alternatives to physical textbooks, profiting over new steeper costs. With each of the above concerns, there is always an alternative choice – to consider using open educational resources, to adopt or create open textbooks, to attempt to redesign assessments as open book exams, or alternative ways to assess outcomes fairly and equitably across a programme, to consider the precarity of much of the labour that

has sustained our institutions through this crisis, and the importance of relationships to the wellbeing of both staff and students.

Things to have and to hold

As we write this editorial, the future is still far from certain although that uncertainty is laced with a strong dose of hope. The latest StudentSurvey.ie interim report (2021) suggests that students have overwhelming expectations for elements of the period to continue, such as access to recorded lectures of staff directed teaching sessions. This is only one of the changes and choices that lie ahead for how we teach in a post-pandemic world.

We hope that we take the best of the evidence-based lessons from this time and take them forward; we hope that a Pedagogy of Care (Bali, 2020) becomes the norm and we hope that start to reflect more deeply on distance, presence and the social materiality of our digital education and considering what on what being on campus means (Bayne, Evans, Ewins, Knox, & Lamb, 2020; Fawns, 2019), beyond a return to all that was. Our recent EdTech conference asked us what changes we were forced to make to our practice that might improve learning into the future. As Costello, Brown, Donlon, and Girme (2020) advocate, "we call for other historians of futures past to help uncover timelines, and write alternative fictions, that promote pedagogies of hope, care, justice, and a brighter day."

Our current practices may not have been always perfect or even optimal at times, but we can strive within our future institutional and individual choices towards bridging the physical and transactional distance between us and those with whom we work and learn, into the future.

Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack, a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in.
(Cohen)

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