

ICT Supported Teacher Training in Ireland: the SPÉIS Project

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Abstract

The training and development of teachers in Ireland has been historically differentiated between secondary and primary. Only primary teachers have specialized teacher training colleges. These have been operated along traditional lines and are operated exclusively by the religious denominations which control almost all primary education in Ireland. An interesting element in the role and function of teacher training was the specific role assigned to language teaching in the Irish language. National policy, following the achievement of independence for the Free State in 1922, focused strongly on the teaching of Irish in an effort to preserve and promote its use after almost two centuries of decline, neglect and oppression.

This paper examines a recent innovative initiative by the Church of Ireland College of Education (CICE) which has implemented an e-supported portfolio system of learning scaffolding for its teacher training program. This project – termed Spéis or *School Placement e-Integrated Scaffolding* – was designed by a consortium of Finnish and Irish educationalists and e-learning experts to provide the first teacher placement e-support and portfolio system in Ireland. While not exclusively focusing on language learning or teaching, it has had a specific relevance to and impact upon the provision of quality support for the teaching of Irish. The project deployed advanced technologies to enable creation of a platform where academic staff in the College, student teachers and administrative personnel could plan, design, implement and review an ICT supported learning architecture.

This project supplements and complements recent developments in Irish curriculum reform and is seen as a template for future e-learning supported initiatives in the wider field of teacher training and support. The paper will look at the kinds of teacher-training support implemented and will cross-reference these to the changed primary curriculum, the Irish government's E-learning Road Map and the move towards competence based learning and the utilization of e-portfolios in the wider Irish educational and learning context.

The specifics of the Spéis project will be outlined against the changing and evolving context of teacher training provision in Ireland with specific reference to the central role of the Irish language and its promotion. Teachers, like other professionals, need to gather and demonstrate evidence of their growth and achievement over time. Developing a professional portfolio at undergraduate level is the first step in this process. It enables student teachers to begin the process of reflection which is necessary for them to develop as a reflective practitioner. There are many kinds of portfolios. Some portfolios are showcase in nature and indicate samples of the best work. Spéis is an innovative e-supported one, unique in Ireland. Reference will be made to e-learning best practice and its adoption in Irish schools using this project and other allied initiatives designed to promote digital access and excellence.