ICT Supported Teacher Training in Ireland: the Speis 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 I 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. 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. Spéis is an innovative e-supported one, unique in Ireland.

Throughout the nineteenth century, education policy in Ireland and the operation of a standardized schooling system remained highly contested areas. Issues around religious influence, national identity, political struggle and denominational control dominated discourse. The neglect of the Irish language (Gaelic) and of Irish culture in general was an important charge made against the national school system. With independence from Britain in 1922 for the majority of the island, education policy became central to the creation and maintenance of identity. The Department of Education was established in 1924 and, among its key tasks, was the development of a national curriculum in which the teaching and promotion of the Irish language became central. The Constitution of 1937 set forth fundamental rights and principles relating to education, but education and strategic policy/planning remained totally subservient to a centralized system of rules and regulations in which compulsory language teaching, denominational control and a rigid focus on memorization in an examination dominated system remained the norm. The influence of the Department of Education pervades the entire Irish educational system, especially at primary and secondary levels, where it controls regulations, standards, operational criteria, curricula and examinations. Only vocational (technical) schools had oversight from local authorities and elected public representatives.

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 also operated along traditional lines and are under the exclusive authority of 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 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. After independence, the priority was to recruit and train as many teachers as possible to be proficient in Irish and teaching through the language. Secondary teacher training follows a very different pattern where graduates merely go through specialized postgraduate training. This paper focuses on the adaptation of advanced technologies to support teacher training at primary level, including emphasis on competence in Irish.

In 1992 Irish primary teacher training was addressed in the context of a major government policy paper, *Education for a Changing World*. This proposed a restructuring of teacher training and integrated structures of academic an professional training for trainee teachers. The Church of Ireland College of Education (CICE) was established specifically to meet the needs of the minority protestant population in Ireland and operated under the patronage of the Church of Ireland. Founded originally in 1811, the College has played a significant role in Irish education through periods of significant change. By the 1990s, it linked its teacher training efforts to the Bachelor of Education degree program offered by Trinity College Dublin. The increasing professionalization and the growth in graduate entry to teacher training produced a dramatic new emphasis on innovation, multidisciplinary linkage and the need to address quality in competence-based learning. At national level, the *Education Act* (1998) addressed governance and policy and ushered in an era of sustained innovation in the modernization of Irish structures.

Specific challenges have remained however in teacher training with regard to language learning/teaching, innovation, use and adaptation of new technologies and advanced ICT support systems and the effective teaching and development of fluency in the Irish language. CICE has been ideally placed to draw on its own rich traditions of education and pedagogical development but also upon its strengths as a small college with a specific remit to safeguard minority perspectives and ethos in a rapidly changed and transformed external social and economic environment in modern Ireland. In 2011, CICE had identified a number of issues that were complicating the teaching mission of the College. These related to the scattered and remote nature of many Irish schools operating under Protestant patronage. They also related to the changes in the degree structure being proposed and developed in the B.Ed. program. All these factors (as well as the implications of the financial and banking crisis for public expenditure in Ireland after the crisis of 2008) meant that the College now required the development of a learning management system and remote supervision tool for the practical placement module of the B. Ed. degree program.

Here we examine this recent innovative initiative to create and implement an e-supported portfolio system of learning scaffolding for the CICE teacher-training program. In recent years, all teacher education in Ireland has developed so that it is based on a primary degree. This degree is now standardized as a four-year program. In the final year students are expected to undergo a teaching placement in a school - which could be anywhere in the country. Given the remote and inaccessible nature of schools in many areas and the sparse numbers of the protestant community in many areas, this means that schools can be quite geographically scattered. The teaching placement lasts three weeks and during this time, student teachers are expected to complete a series of activities, observations, interventions and supervised activities to a set standard. This has also proved very expensive for both the monitors and tutors who have to examine extensive written records, essays, journals and also physically travel to the various placement locations to undertake on-the-spot supervisory and monitoring activities.

In 2012, the teaching placement was extended to 10 weeks and was expected to require substantially more supervision, follow-up and monitoring. It is in this context that the College decided to move to a virtual learning, mentoring, supervision and communication system. This e-support system was designed to achieve a number of outcomes:

1. Method of supervision and contact for trainee teachers and supervisory tutors in CICE.
2. A means for on-line engagement with trainee teachers.
3. An e-forum and seminar framework for group learning and exchange.
4. A method to manage classroom practice and learning.
5. A means for trainee teachers to upload assignments, materials, essays and journals of reflective practice.

6. Integration of pedagogical processes and technology solutions to meet CICE requirements
7. A creative and dynamic mechanism to supervise and support the placement process over 10 weeks in various and remote locations.

There were 32 students on the initial program. The new system came into force in the 2012-13 academic year. The first placements will occur in the 2014-15 academic year. It was agreed to pilot the program in 2012-13 in the Church of Ireland College of Education.

This project was termed Spéis or *School Placement e-Integrated Scaffolding.* It was designed and developed by a consortium of Finnish and Irish educationalists and e-learning experts from Universal Learning Systems and Context Learning Finland. These specialists had extensive previous experience in the design of innovative learning architectures supported by advanced ICT systems, all of which created added value for educationalists, pedagogical policy experts and language design experts. These previous projects included collaboration, among others, with the following:

Amiedu: Context consulted in e-learning strategy for Finland's largest and leading provider of vocational training: building and providing concepts and tools for e-learning implementation and provision of many interactive e-learning courses
Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences: Context facilitated the design and implementation of Haaga-Helia's new learning portal in Finland
University of Helsinki: Context developed future learning spaces for the teacher-training department (World Design Capital 2012 project)
National University of Ireland, Galway: ULS consulted on the development of innovative distance and open learning support systems.
Platon School, Katerini, Greece: ULS designed a teacher/student ICT support system using advanced technology supports.
Open Discovery Space: ULS is National Coordinator for Ireland in the ODS project, the largest ICT supported digital repository innovative program in the European Union.

The aim and achievement of Spéis have been 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. The development of the CLE (Context Learning Environment) and on-line tools was based on the extensive experience in innovative learning design and student support developed by ULS and CLF over many years. There was a strong emphasis on user-friendly systems and enhanced communications at all points of contact and interaction. The model developed referenced quality international practice, advanced ICT supports, innovation and the experience in particular of Finnish educational and teaching excellence.

The Context Learning Environment (CLE) concept was developed for efficient and smooth digitalization of learning processes and learner administration. CLE takes a learner-orientated approach to ICT systems, tools and processes implementation by mapping the current state of the learning organization, identifying potential areas where ICT tools can improve learning and establishing a clear roadmap and milestones for e-learning implementation. The ultimate objective and outcome of this process was the successful and accurate implementation of e-learning technology solutions that enabled a smooth transition towards digital learning. CLE used tested and tailored open source technologies integrated with commercial applications. The first priority of CLE is user-friendliness and seamless operation between different functional modules. The system has built-in tutorials, which provide users with on-demand support when necessary.

The initiative had an elaborate and detailed implementation process which included the following stages:

1. Detailed identification of needs (1 workshop)
- review of existing resources, plans/documentation and source material related to the project
- learning process mapping; describing the B.Ed. learning process (learner/teacher/mentor perspectives), with main focus on placement periods

- identifying areas in which technology can be applied to foster learning and improve the effectiveness of learner management and follow-up

2. Development and implementation plan (Context and ULS prepared this based on workshop results)
   - defining learner and teacher/mentor processes and tools
   - integration of pedagogical processes and technology solutions to meet CICE requirements (pedagogical/administrative)
   - implementation plan

3. Technical implementation
- tailoring and configuration of CLE solutions for CICE's ICT environment
- integration of communication, management/administration and evaluation tools into CLE

4. Piloting
- user training/induction
- testing CLE solutions and tools with a pilot group
- pilot follow-up, collecting feedback, evaluating the process
- identifying critical development needs
- making the necessary improvements into CLE solutions and tools
- quality management (ULS)

5. Launching the full B.Ed. on-line program

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 Spéis initiative is designed to look at the kinds of teacher-training support implemented and cross-references these to the changed primary curriculum, the Irish government's *E-learning Road Map* and the move towards competence based learning and utilization of e-portfolios in the wider Irish educational and learning context.

A critical role has been the integration of the Irish language and language teacher training supports. The deployment of advanced ICT supports in the digital portfolio construction has enabled Irish to be fully integrated as a means of communication and engagement. The history of language learning in Ireland has not been a happy one. Decades of compulsion and mandatory rote learning produced catastrophic results for the language as a positively perceived medium of education, enjoyment and expression in its own right. The use of digital portfolios is designed to reinforce and complement language instruction approaches that are proactive and learner centered.

The required features and functions for the roll out of the Spéis project include the following:
- learner (user) data management
- management of learning activities (on-line, classroom) and remote supervision
- management of assignments, essays, learning materials, journals of reflective practice, etc.
- synchronous communication and group collaboration tools
- e-forum for sharing ideas and building knowledge
- e-portfolio (for students to maintain course-specific portfolios and develop a personal student portfolio)

In the context of the European Union's Agenda for new skills and jobs, recent forecasts of future skills and needs anticipate an increase in jobs requiring high or medium-level qualifications. However, such qualifications need to be accompanied by key competences that equip teachers to work in intercultural, multilingual and rapidly changing circumstances and to contribute to creativity and innovation. The development of key competences should include both subject-based and transversal competences that will motivate and equip student teachers for further learning.

With the Spéis project there is an intention to contribute to enhancement of transversal key competences by student teachers through their ICT supported training. The methods are founded on a holistic view of student teacher learning, personal and social development. This goes beyond subject boundaries and finds application in a wide spectrum of curriculum subjects such as social sciences and history, arts and culture, environmental education and languages. A key outcome of the Spéis

initiative was that it forged links with other EU language learning projects. In May 2013 a joint seminar was held with LANGO (Language on the Go), an EU funded project with 6 partner organizations (Bulgaria, Cyprus, Ireland and Malta) to explore opportunities offered by new technologies to encourage learners to maintain and build upon their existing language skills. The consortium has developed a multilingual language tool of interactive learning approaches and innovative e-learning platforms to provide mobile assisted language learning within a framework of attractive and easy learning content. The tool integrates technology and uses innovative applications that do not require advanced computer skills on the part of the learner. This allows for more individualized and independent learning in terms of pace, time and place (home, work, on the move).

The specifics of the Spéis project have been 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 reflective practitioners. 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. E-learning best practice and its adoption in Irish schools using this project and other allied initiatives is designed to promote digital access and excellence.