



## **Leading Learning**

**Newsletter of the Instructional Leadership Programme**

**Issue 15: November 2021**



### **Professional Reflection**



#### **What's in this Issue**

##### **Dr Conor Mellon**

*Tugging at the Blindfold – My Journey with Reflection*

##### **Professor Brendan Cropley**

*Enhancing Learning and Teaching through Reflective Practice: The Key to Thriving Educational Practice*

##### **Ms. Carmel Kearns**

*From Frantic to Flourishing: the potential for reflective practice to support teachers' lifelong personal and professional growth*

##### **Ms. Emily Ann Doyle**

*Cosán, Professional Learning, and Reflective Practice: A Teacher's Experience.*

##### **Ms. Gillian Doyle**

*Reflecting on my journey as an Instructional Leader and the power of framing questions effectively towards enhancing student achievement*

##### **Ms. Sarah Buckley**

*Reflecting on my journey as an Instructional Leader, as a teacher, as a deputy principal and now as a principal.*

##### **Mr. Gerry Maloney**

*Reflecting as a co-operating teacher and the scope for collaborative learning.*

##### **Ms. Cara Doyle & Ms. Laura Mullins Coláiste Pobail Setanta**

*Reflecting on our journey as an Instructional Leaders and the power of professional collaboration.*



**etbi**  
Education and Training  
Boards Ireland  
Boird Oideachais agus  
Oiliúna Éireann

### Introduction

Colleagues,

Welcome to the Instructional Leadership Newsletter, Issue 15. It is difficult to believe that we are still dealing with the uncertainty that COVID 19 brought to our doors back in March 2020. While it has been demanding time for everyone, it also has compelled us to look outside the box in terms of how we do things and certainly has provided the opportunity to improve our IT skills! Using Zoom, Teams, and Webex no longer create that knot of anxiety in the stomach! Nonetheless, like me, I am sure you are all looking forward to meeting up face to face over a coffee and enjoying a professional conversation, uninterrupted by a bad signal!



I announced in the last newsletter that, as a Steering Committee, we had published the Strategic Plan 2021 -2023. It has proven to be a great compass for us in terms of developing the programme. I look forward to publishing the first Instructional Leadership Programme Annual Report early in 2022, giving you a flavour of how we have developed the programme under the headings of developing: partnerships; a support structure for graduates and a framework for the sustainable delivery of the programme. Watch out on our twitter feed, @ILProgramme, for the details of publication.

As part of the support structure for graduates, we hosted a Teachmeet for post-primary teachers on 9<sup>th</sup> November, where teachers gathered online from across the country and across the sectors, to reflect on their challenges they faced in reengaging students in their learning. They shared experiences of skills and tactics invoked to overcome the challenge. A Teachmeet for primary teachers is scheduled for 15<sup>th</sup> November at 7pm. A bank of resources, capturing participant's ideas and tools will be posted on the IL website in the coming weeks.

Work is continuing on the editing of Barrie's book, *Instructional Expertise: Conversations with Myself and Others*, for the Irish educational context. The first draft is currently at design stage. I extend my deep appreciation to all students and teachers who submitted photographs and samples of work for inclusion. They have added immense value and interest to the book. We are aiming to launch it in spring 2022.

It was great to witness the launch of the Cosán Action Plan on 14 October 2021. A copy of the plan is on pages 10—13. Cosán also offers us the opportunity to identify and engage with meaningful professional learning opportunities through critical professional reflection. Through the Cosán Action Plan, the Teaching Council and the Department of Education specifically aim to assist us in deepening our understanding, of and supporting our engagement with the framework, to the benefit of our professional practice and ultimately enhanced student outcomes. It also offers an exciting opportunity to be explicit about our professional learning journeys, gaining recognition for what we do, individually and collectively. As the IL Steering Committee, we are looking forward to engaging with the Teaching Council in the development of a module to support teachers in the practice of professional reflection through their learning journey on a daily basis, across a range of actions and events with the Instructional Leadership Programme. The module will launch as part of the programme for Cohort 15, providing participants with a range of models and tools to assist them in engaging with authentic professional reflection.

This edition of the newsletter specifically focuses on professional reflection. Dr. Conor Melon provides us with an opportunity to understand the theoretical framework underpinning professional reflection, while at the same time provides us with a very helpful insight to professional reflection in practice advising that *approaches to effective reflection may alter and shift as our own professional paths twist and turn over time*. Professor Brendan Cropley, at the University of South Wales also provides a wonderful opportunity to us in deepening our understanding of the importance of engaging with professional reflection as leaders of teaching and learning. He advises that professional reflection facilitates *personal and professional growth through behavioural change and a commitment to advance practice – an ongoing process of seeking to be the best version of ourselves*.

### Introduction

A number of our programme graduates also put pen to paper and shared their reflection on how their learning from engaging with ILP has impacted on their professional practice. Gillian Doyle, Primary School IL Facilitator, reflects on her learning journey in the skill of framing questions effectively and the impact that it has had on her as a professional, and on the Junior Infants she teaches. Sarah Buckley reflects on her journey as a leader of teaching and learning, as a teacher, a deputy principal and currently as a principal. In her story she highlights the importance of the role of senior school leaders in leading learning. Gerry Maloney's reflection tells how the programme supported him as a co-operating teacher. Gerry's story highlights the place of IL across the continuum of teacher learning and gives a lovely insight to the impact of professional conversations between the 'in-career' teacher and the 'pre-service' teacher. Coláiste Pobail Setanta kindly shared how they are collaboratively embedding the ILP, IT and professional reflection as they commence their journey of learning together as a staff. Carmel Kearns, Head of Teachers' Learning and Research at The Teaching Council give us a comprehensive overview of Cosán, including the key features and underlying principles. While Emily Anne Doyle, Cosán Workshop Facilitator tells us about her journey with Cosán, and the impact it has had on her as teacher with the specific aim of engaging with professional learning to support her pedagogical practice. All articles, while their unique lens, present us with the key message, of the imperative of engaging with professional reflection for our own sake as a professional and ultimately for the sake of our students. As the IL Steering Committee, we are looking forward to engaging with the Teaching Council in the development of a module to support teachers in the practice of professional reflection through their learning journey, across a range of actions and events with the Instructional Leadership Programme.

I hope you enjoy reading their stories. If any of the messages in articles resonate with you, please do let us know or maybe write an article for the next edition! (contact: [admin@instructionalleadership.ie](mailto:admin@instructionalleadership.ie))

I wish you success and safety for the remainder of the school term.

Stay safe and stay connected with us by following us on twitter @ILProgramme or visiting our website [www.instructionalleadership.ie](http://www.instructionalleadership.ie)



Le Meas,

Chairperson National IL Steering Committee

Education Research Officer (ETBI)



#### Contact us



[admin@instructionalleadership.ie](mailto:admin@instructionalleadership.ie)

[www.instructionalleadership.ie](http://www.instructionalleadership.ie)

[@ILProgramme](https://twitter.com/ILProgramme)

## ***Tugging at the Blindfold – My Journey with Reflection***

Dr Conor Mellon

Programme Director / Lecturer in Education,  
National College of Ireland.



While engagement in reflection is crucial to our development as educators, the actual practices and processes involved remain a source of constant debate. Selecting models and tools to support authentic reflective teaching and learning can depend on a range of factors, and what works for some teachers, may not work for others. Likewise, approaches to effective reflection may alter and shift as our own professional paths twist and turn over time. This brief narrative offers insights into my own experience, and the tools and processes that I have employed in attempting to remain reflective throughout my professional journey.

### ***Starting out on the Reflective Road***

In contemplating my own encounters with the notions and processes surrounding reflection I am immediately drawn back over two decades, to my time of, as it was then known, “teacher training”. As with many student-teachers at the time, my initial reflective efforts involved descriptions of the highs and lows of placement practice, and while these proved of some use in charting my practice over time, I was also fortunate to have co-operating teachers who readily supported me in unpacking elements through critical dialogue. I can still recall the authenticity of such conversations, where while remaining constructive, they openly challenged my assumptions about effective pedagogy and inclusive provision. To say I am indebted to them is an understatement. Their intervention had a profound impact on my teaching, which continues to this day.

This image, of a teacher, at any stage of their career, caught between the risk of superficial over-engineered reflective products, and the capacity to engage in deep and critical deconstruction of practice and assumptions, is certainly not unique to my experience. The literature on reflection abounds with calls for greater scrutiny of how we support teachers to engage in authentic reflective processes (Hoffman-Kip et al., 2003; Hobbs, 2007; McIntosh, 2010), so that we might support them in moving from, as Christopher Johns’ (2017) reminds us, ‘doing’ reflection, to the state of ‘being’ reflective. Of course, I am not questioning the vital role that reflective processes and products should play in initial teacher education programmes. Reflection is undoubtedly a foundational and critical element in preparing teachers for what is a complex and evolving professional path, that requires ongoing internal and external questioning about practices, values, and assumptions. Neither am I claiming the superiority of reflective dialogue over written reflections. The key lessons learned from my initial endeavors are those of readiness and relevance. Laura Finlay (2008) makes an important point in this regard i.e., that teachers need to be developmentally ready to engage in critical reflection. In citing a number of other authors, she makes the case for a consideration of the needs of ‘novice’ professionals, who may be inclined to follow models mechanically, but as they develop professional mastery, this reliance lessens. I would agree to an extent here but would also contend that even experienced teachers who are not regularly afforded opportunities to engage in critical reflection, via for example, authentic critical dialogue, may also be inclined to rely on rigid models of reflection, which in turn are seen as fulfilling a requirement, with little impact on practice. However, Finlay also makes a clear case for flexibility and relevance here, where individuals may be ready to engage with certain models or reflective processes at different times or have preferences around the tools, they call on to support reflection. In my case, I was potentially ill-equipped early in my career to rely solely on post-activity written reflections, and in tandem I demonstrated a readiness and preference for reflective dialogue with peers and mentors. This tendency toward dialogue has remained with me for many years.

### ***Reflection as Dialogue***

Reflection as a form of dialogue is well documented, with a range of authors espousing the benefits of same for teachers at varying stages in the teacher education continuum (Katz et al., 2000; Hord, 2004; Kazhikenova et al.,

2021). Hilary Brown and Richard Sawyer (2016) offer a useful characterisation of dialogic reflection, which they describe as ‘embodied’ reflection. Embodied here refers to how the participant ‘involves himself or herself in a process in which he or she disrupts and reconceptualizes their views in relation to their narrative’ (p.5). This definition is appealing as it demonstrates how through critical dialogue the teacher demonstrates agency and ownership over their reflective process and in turn their practice, and how they actively disrupt taken for granted assumptions and ideas, that may warrant reconfiguration and development. Of course, it is worth noting that the dialogic nature of reflection can be considered as both external, in the form of critical conversations and discussions with peers, or indeed internal, in the form of self-dialogue with oneself (Chohan 2010). I will explore the notion of self-talk further along, but to explore dialogue with peers first.

Critical dialogue for teachers as a form of reflection is not always easy. Helen Timperley’s (2015) assessment is somewhat disheartening here, where she describes how:

*Deep sustained conversations among teachers about matters of teaching and learning remain uncommon. Professionals, including leaders, talk in generalities, fail to make tacit knowledge explicit, gloss over differences so as not to offend, rarely seek clarification from one another or revert to telling others what they should do (p.4)*

There are a range of barriers offered for this lack of effective dialogue, including, for example, institutional culture, a lack of resources, a focus solely on outcomes, and highly prescribed protocols. There are also frequent references to the notion of ‘privacy of practice’ amongst teachers, with some authors clearly demarcating this as the route to professional isolation and as a barrier to improvement (Elmore, 2000; Johnson and Donaldson, 2007). However, as teachers we are deeply passionate about our profession and hold a range of values and beliefs about e.g., curricula, pedagogy, our students, and our schools. Understandably, drawing these out for potential scrutiny, even with a supportive colleague, may be daunting, as it brings with it an inevitable sense of vulnerability. However, perhaps rather than developing practices to extinguish this fear of exposure, we might accept that vulnerability is itself a natural calling card in the reflective process as it positions us in a space of ‘not knowing and authenticity’ (Lombard and Horton-Deutsch, 2017, p.78). For me, this vulnerability is part of the healthy skepticism I hold about my practice, where I acknowledge that I am continuing to learn, to make mistakes, to grow as an educator.

A range of other elements have proven key to my engagement in reflective dialogue, including trust in those ‘critical friends’ with whom I regularly engage. The element of trust here pertains not only to a mutual understanding around care, safety and support as we dually deconstruct practice, but also trust in that we can each expect an element of challenge in the dialogue. Louise Stoll (2014) in her work on meaningful professional conversations, advocates not only for this trust-based challenge, but goes further, where such dialogue should involve risk-taking, as this can stimulate creativity and push us further out of our comfort zone.

Of course, the anchor of such dialogue is the learner, who remains central to the reflective process. And here I am reminded of Stephen Brookfield’s (1998) seminal ‘lenses’ to support reflective practice. His ‘students’ eyes lens’ has proven fundamental to my own engagement in reflection and continues to form the backbone of my reflective conversations. Continually returning to the student experience, drawing from their feedback on the learning process, and using evidence gathered from students to inform perspectives and conclusions is crucial to meaningful dialogue. Again, both Louise Stoll and Helen Timperley remind us of the importance of using evidence to sustain and support authentic professional conversations. In my own case with peers, this evidence can be samples of student work, and captured feedback from student questionnaires or focus groups. I also regularly draw on the experience of past students to offer insights for future cohorts, which has proven invaluable. In fact, I would argue that calling on critical friends who can offer different perspectives gives a sense of multi-positionality to the reflective process, facilitating the viewing and unpacking of practice from varying relevant stances. A further point here of course involves the use of a structure or format for such dialogue, particularly at the early developmental stages of such practices. In my own work with student-teachers I use a

triadic structure based on Kelsey Rushton's (2017) 'questioning for reflection' process. Key elements here include time and space to prepare for the dialogue, and the commitment to active listening, constructive but challenging questioning, and a safe space for critique.

In my own practice, in keeping with Stephen Brookfield's lens of 'theoretical, philosophical, and research literature' I continue to rely on such sources to offer another vantage point. This particular habit developed over time, particularly as I responded to the diversity of my learners, requiring me to engage in an ongoing process of exploration and inquiry in ensuring I was identifying and meeting their needs. This seeking of solutions to often complex questions of course offers the development of new knowledge and skills, but in doing so it forces me to take another perspective on my assumptions and practices. Juxtaposing my current ways of thinking and working with theories, evidence and propositions from other authors, allows me to affirm certain practices and see potential gaps elsewhere. Brookfield reminds us that in engaging with wider literature, we are provided with 'multiple perspectives on familiar situations' (p.200). This is especially important in the face of barriers in the teaching and learning process, which through wider analysis might be identified not as personal failings, but as politically, socially, or economically driven.

On a final note, regarding evidence to aid reflection, the so-called 'digital pivot' as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic has forced many of us to reconceptualise provision. For me, while offering a seismic shift in practice that brought with it a range of complexities, it has also resulted in a bank of recorded tutorials, lectures, and seminars. These recordings have proven invaluable to my own reflective journey over the past year as they have allowed me to revisit teaching and learning experiences and gain unforeseen insights into a range of pedagogical issues. While not immediately accessible to teachers in face-to-face provision, video recording and reviewing can aid dialogue, support more accurate reframing of events, and the exploration of often 'unseen' behaviours (Xiao and Tobin, 2018; Harford et al., 2010). I do believe that there is potential to capitalise on this tool to a greater extent and am planning to explore this in greater depth this coming academic year, including the use of video to support reflective dialogue between myself and colleagues.

### ***Reflection and the Inner Voice***

Of course, while dialogue with 'others' is incredibly powerful as a reflective tool, it is also human nature to engage in self-talk i.e., dialogue with the 'self'. However, sometimes we can struggle to locate and attend to this 'inner voice' amidst the inevitable throng of our professional and personal lives, and indeed, in the polyphony of voices that shape and influence the system in which we work. I am reminded of John Dewey's (1910) appeals here, where in describing the need for 'mental leisure' he insists that:

*We say "Stop and think "; well, all reflection involves, at some point, stopping external observations and reactions- so that an idea may mature. Meditation, withdrawal, or abstraction from clamorous assailants of the senses and from demands for overt action, is as necessary at the reasoning stage, as are observation and experiment at other periods... A silent, uninterrupted working-over of considerations by comparing and weighing alternative suggestions, is indispensable for the development of coherent and compact conclusions... The teacher must secure opportunity for leisurely mental digestion. (po.209)*

For me, this inner voice is the motor for my practice, as I move between experiences, weighing up decisions, possibilities and conclusions, as I respond to the needs of my students and the inevitable twists and turns of the teaching and learning process. However, I recognise that there is a need to attend to this inner dialogue in a more meaningful and intentional way at specific times. Otherwise, I run the risk of only 'stopping and thinking' when forced to e.g., in the face of a critical incident or sudden breakdown in practice. There is a further difficulty in attending to self-talk where, without the support of a peer to steer the conversation, it may become more about rumination, rather than reflection. Gillie Bolton and Russell Delderfield (2018) in their work on reflect practice, caution against rumination as it can suppress emotions and create absorbing negative thoughts, where we

essentially end up ‘thinking and thinking and ruminating but not getting anywhere’ (p.21).

For me, reflective writing has proven key to supporting my self-dialogue. This practice became habitual during postgraduate study, where reflective/reflexive journaling was encouraged so as to aid us in keeping our biases and assumptions in check during the research process. However, I have continued to employ reflective writing in my teaching and learning, in an effort to articulate my self-talk in a more tangible and structured way. The overall benefits of reflective writing, via journals or other mediums, is of course widely accepted, but the format and process can vary widely. Reflective writing can be structured around pre-existing questions (Roller and Lavrakas 2015) or more ‘free’ in orientation (Watt 2007). Some formats may be multi-modal, using not only narrative but images, video, and other texts, akin to portfolio construction (Orland-Barak 2005). In my own case I tend to employ a three-part sequence which involves both structured and free writing forms. I find that the latter allows me to ‘work through’ experiences in detail, before deconstructing them, and their emotional impact via structured questioning. The overall process can take very little time, but there may also be times when having engaged in free writing, having ‘externalised’ my inner voice, I actually step away from my writing and let the dust settle. Returning to re-read my detailed description of an event, a problem, or quandary I’m experiencing, can sometimes bring up new insights or details I neglected to include. The overall process has the added benefit of representing a physical memo of my thought processes over a period of time, where I can revisit written reflections and resolutions.

### **A Word on Culture**

The brevity of this article does not facilitate a broader discussion of the intersection between professional culture and reflection, or how I have navigated these often choppy waters over the years. Safe to say that any attempt to engage in deep and critical reflection is always impacted by the cultural context in which we find ourselves. Institutional culture in particular can impact the value we place on reflection, and the time and space we afford reflective processes. Yet again, I return to the notions of trust, challenge, and a focus on learning and the learner, as key tenets in such cultures. My (brief!) key learning as an educator here, is that reflective cultures necessitate personal and professional investment across the institutional community. They take time to build, often proceeding incrementally, as we develop a shared vision and shared language that can sustain our efforts.

### **Conclusion**

Engaging in reflection has been, and continues to be, key to my ongoing development as an educator. Over time I have adopted a range of tools and processes, that help me to take up different positions when viewing my practice and support me in asking important questions about my values and assumptions. I am reminded here of Brian Matthews and John Jessel’s (1998) illustration of reflection, where we ‘carefully, cautiously, and inexorably tug at our blindfolds...to explore and learn about the territory our personal and professional selves so guardedly inhabit’ (p.233). The hope for me is that by continuing to take up different vantage points, engage in critical internal and external dialogue, and seek out evidence and insights, that I might continue to explore the evolving and exciting territory that I inhabit as an educator.

### **References**

- Bolton, G., & Delderfield, R. (2018). *Reflective Practice: Writing and Professional Development*. Routledge.
- Brookfield, S. (1998). Critically reflective practice. *Journal of Continuing Education in the Health Professions*, 18(4), 197-205.
- Brown, H., & Sawyer, R. D. (2016). Dialogic reflection: An exploration of its embodied, imaginative, and reflexive dynamic. In *Forms of Practitioner Reflexivity* (pp. 1-12). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Dewey, J. (1910). *How We Think*. D. C. Heath & Co.

- Elmore, R. F. (2000). Building a new structure for school leadership. *Albert Shanker Institute*.
- Finlay, L., (2008). Reflecting on reflective practice. *PBPL*, 52, 1-27
- Harford, J., MacRuairc, G., & McCartan, D. (2010). 'Lights, camera, reflection': using peer video to promote reflective dialogue among student teachers. *Teacher development*, 14(1), 57-68.
- Hoffman-Kipp, P., Artiles, A. J., & Lopez-Torres, L. (2003). Beyond Reflection: Teacher Learning as Praxis. *Theory Into Practice*, 42(3), 248-254.
- Hord, S. M. (Ed.). (2004). *Learning together, leading together: Changing schools through professional learning communities*. Teachers College Press.
- Horton-Deutsch, S., & Sherwood, G. D. (2017). *Reflective practice: Transforming education and improving outcomes* (Vol. 2). Sigma Theta Ta
- Johns, C. (2017). *Becoming a Reflective Practitioner* (5<sup>th</sup> Edition). Wiley
- Johnson, S. M., & Donaldson, M. L. (2007). Overcoming the obstacles to leadership. *Educational leadership*, 65(1), 8-13.
- Katz, S., O'Donnell, G., & Kay, H. (2000). An approach to analyzing the role and structure of reflective dialogue. *International Journal of Artificial Intelligence in Education (IJAIED)*, 11, 320-343.
- Kazhikenova, G., Zhumataeva, E., Kozhamzharova, M., & Aubakirova, S. (2021). The effectiveness of reflective dialogue in the development of reflective thinking in rising teachers. *Thinking Skills and Creativity*, 41, 100902.
- Matthews, B. and Jessel, J. (1998) Reflective and Reflexive Practice in Initial Teacher Education: a critical case study. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 3(2), 231-243.
- McIntosh, P. (2010). *Action research and reflective practice: Creative and visual methods to facilitate reflection and learning*. Routledge.
- Orland-Barak, L. (2005). Portfolios as evidence of reflective practice: What remains 'untold'. *Educational research*, 47(1), 25-44.
- Roller, M. R., & Lavrakas, P. J. (2015). *Applied qualitative research design: A total quality framework approach*. Guilford Publications.
- Chohan, S. K. (2010). Whispering Selves and Reflective Transformations in the Internal Dialogue of Teachers and Students. *Journal of Invitational Theory and Practice*, 16, 10-29.
- Timperley, H. (2015). Professional conversations and improvement-focused feedback. A review of the research literature and the impact on practice and student outcomes. Melbourne VIC: Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership
- Hobbs, V (2007). Faking it or hating it: can reflective practice be forced?, *Reflective Practice*, 8(3), 405-417
- Watt, D. (2007). On becoming a qualitative researcher: the value of reflexivity. *Qualitative Report*, 12(1), 82-101.
- Xiao, B., & Tobin, J. (2018). The use of video as a tool for reflection with preservice teachers. *Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education*, 39(4), 328-345.

## ***Enhancing Learning and Teaching through Reflective Practice: The Key to Thriving Educational Practice***

Professor Brendan Cropley

Ph.D., C.Sci., FBASES, FHEA

Professor of Sport Coaching | Athro Hyfforddi Chwaraeon

Brendan is a Professor of Sport Coaching at the University of South Wales and a British Association of Sport & Exercise Sciences Accredited Sport and Exercise Scientist. He is a Fellow of the Higher Education Academy and has worked in Further and Higher Education for 18 years. Brendan has published work in the areas of reflective practice, sport psychology, coaching, teaching, and learning.

Reflective Practice has been firmly embedded as a key component of the professional development and practice of those working at all levels of education for some time. This is perhaps because it is widely agreed that effective teaching practice, across contexts, requires more than that of simple application of pedagogical theory to practice. Indeed, the nature of teaching practice is (amongst other things) underpinned by culture and context, requires multiple human interactions, and is potentially constrained by policy. Consequently, the teaching environment is dynamic, ever-changing, complex, and somewhat contested (e.g., understanding how to differentiate based on individual learners' backgrounds, histories, values, and needs). Further, an individuals' ability to enact effective teaching practice requires them to manage and adapt to the demands they experience in their personal and working lives so that they can *perform* within the classroom and *thrive* within their role. The situations that teachers experience during their day-to-day work are, therefore, seldom presented in easily definable and recognisable forms. To navigate the complexities embedded within the job, therefore, teachers require an intricate and multifaceted form of knowing. A form of knowing that is bound within their daily experiences and illuminates understanding of *what does and does not work in practice* – a way of *knowing-in-action* (Schön, 1983).

Knowing-in-action (or craft knowledge) is made up of: social norms (e.g., what is expected in an educational setting; relevance of language); values (e.g., aspects of an individual's moral code relating to education and person-development); prejudices (e.g., things an individual dislikes); experiences (e.g., an individual's history of engaging in teaching); technical knowledge (e.g., subject knowledge; pedagogical theory); aesthetical knowledge (e.g., a teacher's understanding of the look and feel of the classroom and the learners within it); intrapersonal knowledge (e.g., emotional intelligence; knowledge of strengths and limitations); reflective practice personal knowledge (e.g., knowing how to communicate and motivate effectively); and ethical knowledge (e.g., understanding appropriate classroom behaviour). Teaching practice is thus constructed from both the union and interplay of these different sources of knowledge. This form of knowing is constructed by reflecting on what we (teachers) actually do – our experiences, which generates a rich and detailed knowledge base derived from practice that is subsequently used by teachers in their work (Huntley et al., 2019). This form of knowing, developed through Reflective Practice, is arguably the most essential form of knowledge as it allows teachers to manage and adapt to the dynamic and context specific nature of their work.

Certainly, if we ask ourselves "how have we learned how to do what we do as teachers?", many of the responses will be linked to the concept of experiential learning (e.g., learning on the job; mentoring; observing others). It is difficult to deny that much of what is needed to be known in order to engage in effective pedagogical practice is already bound in what teachers are currently doing. However, much of this knowledge is somewhat tacit, subconscious, which consequently makes it difficult to access when different situations arise that require us to adopt different courses of action. Additionally, simply having an experience does not necessarily mean that we learn from that situation or position ourselves to improve what we do in future experiences. To engage in

experiential learning, we must seek, through Reflective Practice, to excavate the type of knowing that is buried within the experience, bring it into consciousness, and transform it into something that is almost tangible , something that can inform future action to the extent that we can make appropriate decisions about how to improve or sustain the quality of our practices. Reflective Practice must, therefore, be seen as a fundamental aspect of being a teacher, and not simply an “add on” to the many tasks associated with the role.

### **Clarifying Reflective Practice**

Reflective Practice is: “A purposeful and complex process that facilitates the examination of experience by questioning the whole self and our agency within the context of practice. This examination transforms experience into learning, which helps us to access, make sense of and develop our knowledge-in-action in order to better understand and/or improve practice and the situation in which it occurs” (Knowles et al., 2014, p. 10). To add clarity, it is important to examine and understand both the process and outcome elements of the aforementioned definition in order to bring REFLECTIVE PRACTICE to life (see Table 1). Further, teachers should be aware that considering (and engaging in) REFLECTIVE PRACTICE in this way has been associated with several key benefits:

- REFLECTIVE PRACTICE bridges the gap between theory and practice to allow individuals to develop their own theories for (teaching) practice.
- REFLECTIVE PRACTICE helps teachers to build on achievements. Too often REFLECTIVE PRACTICE occurs following negative outcomes or situations of concern. However, it is equally as powerful to reflect on positive outcomes and situations of strength to help practitioners understand how to replicate and build on success.
- REFLECTIVE PRACTICE affords teachers the opportunity to critically explore their practice and thus become creative in attending to the effectiveness of their practice.
- REFLECTIVE PRACTICE facilitates the exploration of the congruence between values and behaviour, which can help to guide ethical practice and foster a sense of self-actualisation.
- REFLECTIVE PRACTICE has been reported as a key process in helping individuals to develop the coping strategies needed to manage the demands of their work (e.g., enacting emotional labour), as well as being an integral aspect of self-care and in managing teachers’ well-being.

To achieve such outcomes, it is well-established that the skills for critical REFLECTIVE PRACTICE (e.g., problem solving, questioning the whole self) need support and development and the characteristics required for REFLECTIVE PRACTICE (e.g., open-mindedness, whole-heartedness) need nurturing. Educational establishments and governing bodies must, therefore, be aware of their responsibility in providing teachers with the opportunities (formal and informal) required to augment their reflective practices. This includes time in the working week to support shared reflection, personal reflection, and group-based reflection that allows teams to reflect on and celebrate the excellent work that is often taken-for-granted within schools. Such opportunities are likely to engage teachers in meaningful professional development that supports the enhancement of thriving within educational practice.

Table 1. Constituents of REFLECTIVE PRACTICE and their application (adapted with permission from Cropley et al., 2018).

| Constituent                                | Meaning  | Application  |
|--|--|--|
| <b>Purposeful</b>                          | Reflective practice is something that we consciously decide to engage in, which distinguishes reflection from the subconscious processes of day-dreaming and navel-gazing. In addition, there should be a <i>purpose</i> to the reflection (an aim) to give the reflection focus and make the process manageable | Many believe that they reflect 'all of the time' usually through some subconscious, implicit process that they cannot explain. However, in order to really make sense of and examine practice in a meaningful way reflective practice has to be purposeful. It must be about something (e.g., a teaching experience) and for something (e.g., questioning taken-for-granted practice). Identifying a purpose for the reflection, instead of aimlessly looking back over an entire situation can result in focused learning outcomes. |
| <b>Complex, involves the whole self</b>    | Reflective practice has to consider personal thoughts, emotions and behaviours, their interaction and impact on the situation, as well as the impact of the context on these.  | We have to excavate beneath the surface of our observable behaviours (e.g., the use of different approaches to teaching) and examine why these behaviours occur, how they have come to be that way, and what impact they have. For example, attempting to heavily scaffold learning may not fit well with your beliefs about what is effective but is adopted as necessary means to achieve an outcome.  |
| <b>Instigated through questioning</b>      | Thinking in an un-structured way about experience is complicated. Trying to process and make sense of a series of connected but random thoughts often leads to more confusion.   | Using a series of questions through a reflective conversation (either with yourself or with other(s)) helps to guide the reflective process and encourage teachers to examine aspects of practice that they might overlook (e.g., why do I react as I do to certain learner behaviours? What impact do my values have on my teaching?)   |
| <b>It's about you and your practice</b>    | Through reflective practice teachers need to consider the 'self' as an agent of change. Reflective practice is therefore about who you are, what you do, why you do it, and how it has come to be that way.  | Many teachers focus too much on the external (e.g., the learners, the environment) without considering themselves and the way in which they have impacted on the 'external'. Teachers have to question their own practice and the values that underpin it. Place yourself at the centre of your reflective practice.   |
| <b>It's also about valuing what you do</b> | Too often do teachers reserve their reflective practices for dealing with issues, solving problems, overcoming mistakes, or improving limitations. Better practice, however, comes equally from identifying strengths and identifying opportunities to utilise them more often.                                  | Many teachers overlook the success they have within their role and, perhaps more importantly, the part they played in contributing to such positive outcomes. Reflective practices should be afforded to making sense of and valuing your practice in a way that leads to appreciative and positive action.  |
| <b>Results in change</b>                   | Change represents: (a) a change in behaviour, values, or beliefs; (b) confirmation or rejection of a particular theory or practice; and/or (c) a change in knowledge of the self, the context of practice or the environment in which the teacher is working.  | The outcome of reflective practice is vital. It should result in a form of learning or understanding depending on the nature and purpose for reflection. This 'learning' should be articulated, and sense should be made about how this will impact on future practice. Goal setting and goal striving (action planning) are good ways to consider how learning can be integrated into practice and evaluated for efficacy.  |

### (Some) Barriers to Meaningful Reflective Practice and Potential Solutions

Some of the barriers associated with engagement in meaningful REFLECTIVE PRACTICE are often cited as: time to engage in the process; being misguided, fixated use of models of REFLECTIVE PRACTICE; and too great of a focus within reflection on problems and/or weaknesses. In attempts to overcome such barriers, it is recommended that:

- REFLECTIVE PRACTICE has to be seen as a “must-do” process, a necessity rather than a luxury. In fact, it should be seen as a way of thinking and acting that is embedded within a teachers’ philosophy.
- Time is built into the working week for REFLECTIVE PRACTICE. If done appropriately, REFLECTIVE PRACTICE is likely to support more efficient and meaningful practice. This will help REFLECTIVE PRACTICE to become a habit that is fully integrated into daily activities.

- REFLECTIVE PRACTICE that is purposeful is more likely to be meaningful and critical. Teachers need to worry less about reflecting on the entirety of their classroom-based work each week and instead spend time highlighting one/two key issues that emerge across the week that can form the “purpose” of their reflection. Narrowing the focus in such a way is likely to improve the depth and insight gained through reflective practice, and thus facilitate learning and subsequently improve practice.
- While REFLECTIVE PRACTICE should be systematic, teachers should be aware of the range of different approaches that may support REFLECTIVE PRACTICE (e.g., models, technology) and select the most appropriate mode given the situation and the purpose of the reflection. Critical REFLECTIVE PRACTICE is driven by the right questions (dictated by the purpose of the reflection) rather than the right model per se. So, worry less about the approach and more about the purpose of the reflection and how the reflective episode can be made meaningful.
- REFLECTIVE PRACTICE should be about valuing what teachers do. It should be appreciative in nature and afford teachers the opportunity to explore their strengths and understand how these strengths might be utilised within their work more often. Start to ask more positive based questions, such as: “What one thing, if I could amplify it, would have a significant impact on me, the learners, and the classroom environment in which I work?”

### Summary

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE connects what is known to what is done. It reinforces learning, augments critical thinking and self-discovery, and facilitates personal and professional growth. At its heart, REFLECTIVE PRACTICE is about behavioural change and a commitment to advance practice – an ongoing process of seeking to be the best version of ourselves. As such, teachers have a professional responsibility for committing to reflective practice, and the organisations who they work for have the responsibility to create the capacity, resources, and environment to support teachers in their endeavours to become reflective practitioners.

### References

Cropley, B., Miles, A., & Knowles, Z. (2018). Making reflective practice beneficial. In R. Thelwell & M. Dicks (Eds.), *Professional advances in sports coaching: Research and practice* (pp. 377-396). Routledge.

Ghaye, T. (2010). *Teaching and learning through reflective practice: A practical guide for positive action*. London: Routledge.

Huntley, E., Cropley, B., Knowles, Z., & Miles, A. (2019). The BASES expert statement on reflective practice: The key to experiential learning. *The Sport & Exercise Scientist*, 60, 6-7.

Knowles, Z., Gilbourne, D., Cropley, B., & Dugdill, L. (2014). Reflecting on reflection and journeys. In Z. Knowles et al. (Eds.), *Reflective practice in the sport and exercise sciences: Contemporary issues* (pp. 3-14). Abingdon: Routledge.

**From Frantic to Flourishing: the potential for reflective practice to support teachers’ lifelong personal and professional growth**

Ms. Carmel Kearns

Head of Teachers’ Learning and Research  
Teaching Council



In her article in this newsletter, Emily-Anne Doyle generously shares her memories of the start of her teaching career. In all likelihood, her experience is probably similar to that of many new teachers. The picture she paints is one of a hard-working, committed, and well-intentioned young teacher who is determined to do her best for her students, to ‘get everything done’ and, to finish the race that she appears to start every day. The race to correct homework, to create tests, to write reports, to get to grips with the syllabi, novels, plays and poets, regions, glaciers, and field studies. I note that in her third paragraph, she uses the term ‘busy’ three times, and one can almost sense the relentless pressure that she faced. The word ‘frantic’ springs to mind.

Emily-Anne goes on to explain that, through professional conversations she later had with respected colleagues, she began to see the opportunities for growth that lay in, as she calls it, ‘growing her career outward rather than upward’. Her words vividly convey the rich learning journey she embarked upon and continues in the years since, including her experience of the Instructional Leadership Programme and Mike Hughes’ Magenta Principles. She describes the profound impact her learning had on her role as a teacher, and on her own sense of fulfilment. I believe the article conveys Emily-Anne’s journey from frantic novice teacher, to flourishing lifelong learner.

In sharing her story, Emily-Anne beautifully captures the essence of Cosán, the national framework for teachers’ learning<sup>i</sup>. Published by the Teaching Council in 2016, Cosán recognises that the act of travelling a lifelong learning journey is more important than the destination. It is about making steady progress at one’s own pace, and savouring every moment of the journey, rather than striving to ‘get everything done’, as Emily-Anne appeared to do in her early years of teaching. After all, teachers’ learning is not a race, but rather a lifelong journey in which “the point of the journey is not necessarily to arrive, but to make the most of getting there” (Hicks<sup>ii</sup>, 2005, p. 205). A central focus of Cosán, therefore, is on the need to press pause, or in the words of John Dewey<sup>iii</sup>, to stop and think. For it is only by reflecting that we truly experience growth and enhance our professional practice.

Cosán is a flexible framework, that recognises that no two teachers will have the same learning journey. It acknowledges and nurtures teachers’ professionalism, and allows them to exercise autonomy in identifying, and engaging in, the types of professional learning opportunities that benefit them and their students most. It recognises collaborative as well as individual learning, and values learning processes that take place outside of the school, as well as the diversity of learning that is school-based, or even classroom-based.

It is also a supportive framework. It supports teachers in purposefully and proactively planning for quality learning. It facilitates them as agentic professionals in identifying their professional learning needs based on ongoing reflection on their learning and its impact on practice. It then supports them in charting their own learning pathways, by choosing a combination of learning processes. In doing so, their compass is the two guiding standards in Cosán (see Fig. 1), namely, a commitment to quality teaching and learning, and a commitment to continued professional growth. These provide a consistent focus for teachers’ ongoing learning.



Fig. 1 – Graphical depiction of Cosán, the National Framework for Teachers’ Learning

And, importantly, Cosán is an affirming framework. It makes explicit the fact that teachers are already committed to their learning, and highlights and celebrates publicly the breadth of learning processes that they currently engage in. It sets out the Teaching Council's belief that they require dedicated space and time for their own learning, and reflection on same.

Since its publication, schools have been exploring how the Cosán framework can support them in charting their own learning journeys and development as a professional learning community. We are delighted that Emily-Anne is one of 20 practising teachers who are working with the Council, and Education Support Centres Ireland (ESCI) to facilitate a series of Cosán workshops for schools. With the benefits of collaborative learning in mind, the workshops allow for groups of teachers from different schools and sectors to come together as a professional learning community and share their experience of professional learning.

Through the workshops, they are introduced to practical tools and strategies that support them in collaboratively reflecting on their learning, and on its impact on the quality of teaching and learning in their classrooms. Between workshops, they apply those tools and strategies as they engage in school-based reflective learning activities. These activities support schools in other areas of their work, such as School Self-Evaluation, or particular aspects of teaching and learning that they choose to prioritise. Participants then share their experience of that reflective process with colleagues from other schools at the subsequent workshop. In this way, they are focusing on their own school context, but with the benefit of rich professional conversations and shared learning from other contexts.

### Focal scoir

All journeys, whether literal or figurative, require purposeful navigation. Teachers' lifelong learning journeys are no exception, and the Cosán framework supports schools and teachers in charting the best way forward, progressing on their learning journeys at a pace that suits them, and celebrating the achievement of key milestones. In her article, Emily-Anne wrote about her love of professional learning, and the fact that it is an extension of her professional being. Through the reflective approach that underpins it, Cosán helps teachers to rediscover or deepen their love of learning, so that they can achieve the sense of contentment and enrichment that Emily-Anne describes, and truly flourish, personally and professionally.

If you are interested in working with your colleagues to chart and reflect upon your collective professional learning journey, the Cosán workshops are for you! Find out more about the Cosán workshop series by emailing [Cosan@teachingcouncil.ie](mailto:Cosan@teachingcouncil.ie), or contacting your local Education Centre.

Carmel Kearns

---

<sup>i</sup>Teaching Council (2016) Cosán Framework for Teachers' Learning. Available at: [cosan-framework-for-teachers-learning.pdf \(teachingcouncil.ie\)](https://www.teachingcouncil.ie/cosan-framework-for-teachers-learning.pdf)

<sup>ii</sup>Hicks, T. (2005). Beyond the "Bells and Whistles": Toward a Visual Rhetoric for Teachers' Digital Portfolios. *English Education*, 37(3), 200–222. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40173191>

<sup>iii</sup>Dewey, J. (1933). *How We Think: A Restatement of the Relation of Reflective Thinking to the Educative Process*. Boston, MA: D.C. Heath & Co Publishers

## **Cosán Action Plan**

### Introduction

This Cosán Action Plan was formally launched at the Cosán Stakeholder event that was jointly hosted by the Department of Education and the Teaching Council on 14 October, 2021. It will provide a springboard to progress Cosán, the national framework for teachers' learning, beyond the development phase and into a growth phase. It sets out short-term and medium-term actions to support that transition, and identifies the stakeholders who will lead each, as well as those who will support their implementation. The Teaching Council looks forward to collaborating with the Department of Education and key stakeholders, in implementing the action plan.



**An Roinn Oideachais**  
Department of Education

# **Action Plan to Support the Growth Phase of Cosán: the National Framework for Teachers' Learning**

## **Action Plan to support the growth phase of Cosán: the national framework for Teachers' Learning**

Cosán, which was published by the Teaching Council on 15<sup>th</sup> March 2016, is the name given to the national framework for teachers' learning. Cosán means pathway and this name was chosen to reflect the fact that teachers' learning is a journey. It marks the continuation of a journey that teachers undertake from Initial Teacher Education, through Induction via the Droichead model, and this professional learning should continue across the duration of a teacher's career.

Central to Cosán is a vision of teachers as professionals who are intrinsically motivated to take ownership of their professional learning and development. Through Cosán, the Teaching Council is seeking to foster a culture of professional learning based on teachers' active engagement in their own learning, for their benefit and that of their students. Key elements of Cosán are that of reflective practice and collaborating with other teachers. This Cosán action plan sets out the actions that the Department of Education proposes would be taken to support the growth phase of Cosán within the continuum of teacher education, taking account of existing supports, resources and structures that are already in place. It is noteworthy that the actions under each of the headings below (Short term actions and Medium term actions) will be progressed in parallel, and the position of each action in the table is not intended to suggest that any greater or lesser priority will be afforded to it than to any other action under that heading. The Department will continue its collaborative relationship with the Teaching Council in advancing this important work.

Short term actions (2021—2022),

| Action No | Action   | Lead   | Others   |
|-----------|--|--|--|
| (a)       | Q4 2021- Online Cosán action plan stakeholder consultation event   | Joint Teaching Council (TC) & Department Event |  |
| (b)       | Further align the design of teachers' professional learning programmes with Cosán  | Teacher Education Section( TES), TC            | TES Support Services, Post Primary Languages Ireland (PPLI), National Council for Special Education (NCSE), Education Support Centres Ireland (ESCI) |
| (c)       | Develop a webinar explaining what Cosán is and how it can support teachers.  | TC   | ESCI   |
| (d)       | Develop a series of interactive online Cosán workshops-  | TC   | ESCI   |
| (e)       | Continue to raise awareness of Cosán and promote engagement with the framework   | TC, TES  |  |
| (f)       | Further align relevant Inspectorate documentation with Cosán as documents are updated (such as LAOS)   | Inspectorate                                   | TES, TC  |
| (g)       | Support the development of Cosán through the work of Department of Education School Excellence Fund Clusters (DEIS, Digital, STEM, Step up, Creative). | TES, TC  | Teacher Education - Digital Section, Social Inclusion Section, Inspectorate and other relevant sections  |

Medium term actions (2022—2023),

| Action No | Action   | Lead                        | Others   |
|-----------|--|-----------------------------|--|
| (a)       | Q2/Q3 2022 Implementation of Cosán action plan- Stakeholder Event  | Joint TC & Department Event |  |
| (b)       | Continue to raise awareness of Cosán and promote engagement with the framework   | TC, TES                     |  |
| (c)       | Further align the work of Teacher Professional Networks (TPN's), TL21 project, ESCI with Cosán   | TES, TC                     | TPN's, ESCI, TL21 project  |
| (d)       | Engage with Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to ensure consistency of message re Cosán and the building of reflective practice methodologies into Initial Teacher Education (ITE) and other programmes for teachers' professional learning | TES, TC                     | ITE providers  |
| (e)       | Further align Cosán with Droichead.  | TES, TC                     | National Induction Program for Teachers (NIPT)   |
| (f)       | Support Treoraithe in using Cosán to guide and acknowledge their learning  | TES, TC                     | ITE providers  |
| (g)       | Further align the work of Centre for School Leadership (CSL) with Cosán- ensure consistent message delivered to school leaders (including in postgraduate course for school leaders).  | TES, TC                     | CSL, University College Dublin (UCD), University of Limerick (UL), National University of Ireland Galway (NUIG)                      |
| (h)       | Liaise with Inspectorate to explore how teachers' learning, reflective practice, collaboration etc may continue to be reflected in school inspections and the SSE process, and in DEIS action planning where relevant.                         | TES, TC                     | Inspectorate   |
| (i)       | Encourage Boards of Management to play a role in acknowledging engagement in teachers' professional learning and providing practical supports.   | TES                         | Management bodies, School Governance   |
| (j)       | Encourage School Leaders to acknowledge and support collaboration, reflective practice and authentic teacher engagement in ongoing professional learning.  | TES                         | Management bodies, School Governance, CSL  |
| (k)       | Commence an examination of the potential ways in which time for reflective practice and collaborating with other teachers could be provided for.   | TES                         | Teacher Terms & Conditions (TT&C), External Staff Relations (ESR), Unions, Management bodies, Curriculum and Assessment Policy (CAP) |

## ***Cosán, Professional Learning, and Reflective Practice: A Teacher's Experience.***

**Emily Anne Doyle**

I still remember what my driving examiner told me when I had passed my driving test. *'I am confident that you have learned enough about driving to continue your life-long learning on your own. Well done!'*

The message that I was only starting my driving journey really resonated with me. Somehow I missed the same message when I completed my H.Dip. in Education in 1997. After four years, I thought, surely, I am the finished product.

My career started and I was busy with being a young teacher and trying to pretend I was more adult than the 6<sup>th</sup> Year students in front of me. I was busy correcting homework, creating tests and writing reports. I was busy with getting to grips with the syllabi, novels, plays and poets, regions, glaciers, and field studies. The only professional learning I undertook was compulsory when the English and Geography syllabi changed. Looking back, that was even before I'd had the chance to get to grips with the original iterations!

My route to Professional Learning ultimately came about because of knowing that I didn't not to move into a management role. I love the classroom. Since further study in any management course seemed somewhat pointless, I was left wondering where my career was taking me. With 71% of post-primary teachers in Ireland being female and only 44% of management positions being held by women (CSO, 2015) I think a significant number of teachers, especially female teachers, must find themselves in a similar situation. Thankfully, some professional conversations with respected colleagues allowed me to see the opportunity to grow my career outwards rather than upwards.

These conversations opened up wonderful opportunities that have led me to really embrace a professional learning experience that has unquestionably impacted positively upon my teaching. Engaging with both Barrie Bennett's Instructional Leadership and Mike Hughes' Magenta Principles has shaped the way I teach in a very structured and informed way. Both courses have led to classrooms where students have an 'equal voice', where I (attempt to) control the class through effective questioning, where tasks are shaped to a purpose and where there is a sense of 'fun' at the heart of what we do. Not every class works out perfectly but then neither does life! A summer Restorative Practice course in Portlaoise and a RCSI course on the Science of Health and Happiness for Young People have cemented my opinion that ongoing Professional Learning is vital for dynamic teaching and learning and that the fulfilment felt through teacher-learning spreads to student-learning.

This relatively new-found love of Professional Learning introduced me to Cosán and the framework for professional learning. Initially, I was simply an interested voice attending workshops in Kilkenny Education Centre, then joined colleagues as one of the first twelve facilitators assisting in its rollout throughout the country. The framework resonated with me, much as my driving examiner's words had all those years before. I could see myself, my colleagues, and my school in the simple message of the need for ongoing professional learning and reflective practice. I could see what I felt was being done well, and equally I could see where changes needed to be made.

Just like the courses I have attended, Cosán has been an extension of my professional being, I engage with learning and importantly, with professional reflection. Reflecting on my experience of COVID 19, it was interesting to see the difference between online classes for students and online workshops for adults, and the surprising number of similarities. I have learned that I cope better and prefer my learning to be in the real world; remote learning has advantages, but I benefit greatly from the human interaction and definitely need a blended approach, at least.

Cosán has also challenged me to question the courses I have been selecting which, until then, had been selected on a 'that sounds good' principle. Now, through reflective practice, course selection is based upon the needs of the student. It was this simple change that led to me undertaking the RCSI course to back up a Transition Year Personal Development programme that I currently teach, and to undertaking my next course on dyslexia.

A final benefit of both Cosán and my professional learning journey is a more personal one: a sense of contentment and enrichment. It has been really empowering to come out of the classroom and to engage in professional conversations that have been directed towards shaping the future of our educational system. As facilitators of the Cosán message we have been given a professional autonomy and trust that respects our learning and experience. Most positively of all, at the heart of all these conversations has been student welfare and student learning.

To echo and extend my examiner's sentiments, I hope Cosán takes us all down a path of life-long learning and reflection.

## ***Reflecting on my journey as an Instructional Leader and the power of framing questions effectively towards enhancing student achievement***

Ms. Gillian Doyle

Primary School Teacher from St. Fiacc's NS, Graiguecullen,

### **Putting Junior Infants in the Frame**

*Gillian Doyle is a primary school teacher from St. Fiacc's NS, Graiguecullen, Carlow. Gillian completed the IL programme in March 2019. She is one of eight facilitators trained to facilitate the delivery of the programme at primary level.*

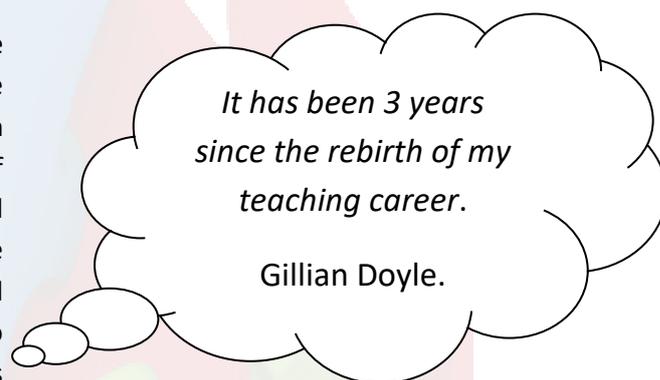
In 2018 the Instructional Leadership Programme (ILP) launched a pilot programme, in partnership with five Education Centres, aimed at the sharing our learning from the ILP with the primary school sector. The specific aim of the pilot programme was to train ten primary school teachers as facilitators of ILP, who would then facilitate the programme at regional level to other primary school teachers. An invitation to make an application to participate was issued by each of the Education Centres involved, and my application the Kilkenny Education Centre was successful.

I began my journey in October 2018, with nine other primary colleagues. Rooted in professional reflection and pedagogical practice, Professor Barrie Bennet and post-primary graduates of the IL programme facilitated our learning over five days in October 2018, and five days in March 2019.

The excitement was palpable because what we were introduced to was so transferable to our roles in our specific schools. Similar to my primary colleagues, I knew that the interactive and child-centred pedagogical skills, tactics, and strategies we were introduced to, would seamlessly integrate into daily life in most primary classrooms. I was confident I would bring my new learning into all classrooms, and to all conversations and interactions with students and colleagues - enhancing learning and ultimately make me more effective in my work. I was eager to get started on my own learning journey, and as a facilitator of learning for other primary school teachers.

The impact of the IL programme for me was immediate. I extended my instructional repertoire and on reflection since, I attribute the programme as being the reason I finally started to become 'intelligent' and 'conscious' about instruction. In a discussion with a colleague from the IL programme, we concluded that our career thus far has two distinct stages, the 'Before IL' and the 'After IL'. Reflecting on the 'before', I would cringe to see recordings of myself teaching a classroom. Unconscious incompetence springs to mind....okay, I definitely wasn't that bad...but I do wonder what past pupils might say about the kind of teacher they recall I was back then, particularly about the way I asked them questions and facilitated their answers.

In September 2019, I found myself in a junior infant classroom. Applying instructional tactics and strategies to a classroom full of students who don't yet know how to read or write seemed like such an impossible undertaking. There are only so many placemats you can complete when mark making, and pencil grip are the lesson objectives for a whole term. Ranking ladders aren't something to attempt when the concept of numbers one through five is not consolidated. Nonetheless, I had experienced many light bulb moments during the course, and I knew there were other skills and tactics that would impact positively on student learning in the classroom. As I reflect now, it is the skill of framing questions that has had the most impact on my practice as a junior infant teacher.



The average junior infant class in Ireland today will have somewhere between 20 to 30 students. Research tells us that the average teacher asks approximately 400 questions per day and the average 4-year-old asks roughly 300, equating to about eighty percent of a teacher's day spent in questioning mode. Furthermore, the large majority of these questions are lower order, mundane questions that require little thinking. Of course, I know now it's not the questioning itself that's the problem. It is what we refer to as 'the art and the science of questioning.' Anyone can ask a question, but an effective teacher frames questions. Yet refining the skill of framing questions is much trickier than one might imagine.

Re-learning is essential in order to break the habit of firing out questions quickly as a means of achieving a lesson's objective. It's not just a matter of asking a good balance of lower order to higher order questions (as I was taught during my college days), but of asking questions and expecting and enabling each child to engage with the question to the best of their own ability.

Learning this skill revealed to me why I had been playing a game of whack-a-mole for so long with the students in front of me. I would ask questions I believed were thought provoking and required reflection, and yet children would often call out a variety of responses within milliseconds.

Sometimes I would get the correct answer, but not always. Can anyone tell me what a sign of autumn is? "winter", shouts out the enthusiastic 4-year-old. And if I wasn't playing whack-a-mole I was 'hunting gophers' as Barrie Bennett so descriptively puts it; picking off targets of children who might give me the answer I wanted in order to move a lesson in the direction I felt it needed to go.

The truth was that I was not skilled at how to facilitate their answers and responses, whether they were correct, incorrect, partially correct, silly, convoluted, or even a guess. Looking back now, I recognise it as a bad questioning technique that sometimes led to a classroom management issue.

As my awareness developed and I began to consider how I posed questions, I noticed just how often questions such as, who can tell me, does anyone know, or hands up if, so easily popped out of my mouth. The concept of accountability was challenging me. I knew I needed to pose questions in such a way that I held every child on the alert that the question asked might become theirs to answer. I changed my script and learned how to start my questions with phrases such as think to yourself for ten seconds, close your eyes and imagine. I also monitored the time I gave to students to think before allowing them to answer. That required me to become comfortable in the silence and to recognise the power in waiting for them to formulate an answer. Proving everything I had been taught on the IL course, I recognised that all children preferred to share answers with a partner before publicly sharing answers because it increased their sense of safety. What also proved invaluable were the opportunities it offered me to identify what children required further support as I observed them rehearsing answers with a partner. I could see that as I improved the technique of framing questions, the children became more motivated to engage with me and with their peers on whatever topic was being discussed. It also increased the amount of time the children were engaged in the content of my lessons.

Since graduating from the IL programme, I have often reflected on Barrie Bennett's words when he paraphrased from an 1897 publication about how when a teacher asks a question, the most important thing is to select the student who is most in need of the question while simultaneously being sensitive to the needs of the class. What I understand now is that there really is an art and a science to questioning; the art is in knowing which type of question to ask which student, the science requires that I know how much time I give a student before answering, or how I select a student to answer. The skill of framing questions requires you as a teacher to consciously engage with the skill and once mastered is simple and powerful. I can absolutely say it has improved my academic power in the class.

Today's junior infant students will enter the workforce sometime around 2038. It's difficult to imagine what

the world will look like in five years' time, much less 20. Experts forecast that a vast amount of jobs will become automated in the next 10 years, in particular jobs with repetitive tasks being done by artificial intelligence. Emerging professions will instead demand proficient critical thinking skills. In his 1938 book, *Experience and Education*, John Dewey states that while we cannot learn or be taught to think, we do have to learn how to think well, to acquire critical thinking skills and to acquire the practice of reflection. Indeed, the art and the science of how teachers ask questions in their classrooms will drive more complex thinking processes. I believe that teachers who are effective at framing questions help students in acquiring critical thinking skills such as investigating, analysing, predicting, hypothesising, evaluating, revising, reflecting, comparing, forming opinions, creating, synthesising.

My own observations of my students reveal to me that they have the capability to think and to answer even the most basic questions on deeply cognitive levels. Who can argue with the junior infant child who made the following deduction during a maths lesson in June 2020?

**Teacher: *Orla, if you had 10 cupcakes and you wanted to share them equally with your friend, how many would each of you get?***

**Student: *None teacher, because my friend got stopped at the Covid checkpoint, so I'd keep them all myself.***

As I conclude on this personal reflection, I recall a recent moment in class. A work colleague walks into the classroom, announcing that she has seen our lovely art display (squirrels with bushy tails) and says that she is going to ask a question. *"Hands up, what animal collects nuts in the autumn?"* About six or seven hands go up. She points a finger purposefully at an enthusiastic student and calls out to her, *"Marie, what is the answer?"* Marie, a very biddable student lowers her hand but remains quiet. At first, she attempts to say something, but nothing comes out, and I can just about see the lump form in her throat. There is silence. It's not the wait time type of silence we are all now used to. All eyes are now looking at Marie. The pressure is on. She feels exposed. No safety. More silence. At this point several students are now trying to get the teacher's attention to tell her about their cat's trip to the vet or other news. No accountability. Despite everything I've learned I find myself jumping in quickly to save the student. Isn't that what we do when we see a student struggling, we come to their aid much quicker. *"Marie"*, I call out. *"You remember. It's a squ....."* The teacher's pointed finger is redirected towards me, and I am then encouraged by my colleague not to give Marie a clue. Instantaneously, almost everyone in the class shouts *"Squirrel!"* The moment passes but I chuckle to myself as I conclude that the people in the room who most need to learn something today are the teachers.

Yes, I might still be a mechanical user, but in this instance, I can least describe myself as being on a journey towards being CONSCIOUSLY competent.

*Gillian Doyle*

***Reflecting on my journey as an Instructional Leader, as a teacher, as a deputy principal and now as a principal.***

Ms. Sarah Buckley, Principal Schull Community College

*Leadership is second only to classroom instruction as an influence on student learning.*  
Leithwood et al. (2010)

In 2008 I was working as an English and Learning Support teacher in McEgan College, Macroom, when my Principal approached me and suggested that I sign up for the Instructional Leadership Programme (ILP). It was the first time I had heard of the programme and the truth is, that in that moment I gave very little thought to what it was I was signing up for. It was only a few weeks later when we set off on the long road to Tullow that it sunk in. Suddenly I was aware that my school had invested a lot of money for me to attend this course as well as having to cover my classes during my absences. I felt lucky to have the opportunity to participate but there was now a looming sense of responsibility as I realised that I had to ensure that my school benefitted from my being there. We arrived at Mount Wolseley, late I might add as we got lost, and when I arrived in to room with the other 120 or so participants of Cohort 1 I felt completely overwhelmed. That feeling would not fade for some time.

Up to that point I had always considered myself to be a competent teacher. I was well prepared for my classes, I felt like I was giving my best to my students, and I had had no complaints. I quickly realised that in Barrie Bennet's words, I was in fact "accidentally adequate". Throughout the programme, every drive back down to Macroom was filled with thoughts of what I was going to do next. For the first time ever, I was really reflecting on how I taught. I wasn't focussed on the content of the lessons I was really looking at how my students were learning. It sounds like such a simple thing, but it really wasn't. There was a shift in me, and I felt that I was giving an honest self-appraisal of my practice for the first time. Like so many, I learnt so much from Professor Bennet and from the other participants. It was a very enriching experience and to date, is still the most powerful CPD I have participated in. But of course, I knew that the opportunity was one that I needed to share with my colleagues. I returned to my school full of ideas and enthusiasm but what came next was a challenge.

I quickly set about trying to spread new ideas amongst my colleagues. I practiced and shared various tactics and skills. My colleague, who attended with me, and I presented at staff meetings and there was some uptake amongst our colleagues. It was difficult however to get any real momentum going and I never felt like we were making a significant difference. Schools are dynamic places; we had a change of management and there were so many other initiatives and projects happening that Instructional Leadership (IL) somehow became swallowed up. I went back to focusing on my own teaching with the occasional input at a staff meeting that through no one's fault, felt like box ticking exercise.

I began to realise that one of the things I really valued from those trips to Tullow was the professional dialogues and that sense of community that was created in the Mount Wolseley. It kept me engaged and enthusiastic and most importantly, conscious of what I was doing in my classroom. I was lucky to be offered opportunities to deliver workshops at the National Instructional Leadership Conferences and at Féilte and it was through that, that I kept a connection with a professional learning community. Working with others to create and run the workshops kept me focused and enthusiastic. It also gave me confidence and whilst I was very happy in my school, I began to consider the possibility of moving.

In 2015, seven years after beginning the ILP I moved to Naas Community College as a Deputy Principal. This was a once in a lifetime opportunity as I was a founding member of the school and we were tasked with creating a culture of teaching and learning rather than trying to change one. It turned out that the Principal of the school had also been in cohort 1. He was very committed to ensuring that IL was at the centre of what was happening in the school, and I felt that we made a very good start. We set up a system of peer observation whereby teachers visited each other's classrooms to watch each other teach using a traffic light system. We ensured every classroom had

an IL box which contained all the tools a teacher might need, from laminated placemats to decks of cards and, we had regular Teach / Meets. For me, it was a powerful experience because I felt that I could really influence change at school level as a senior leader. As a teacher in 2008, I perhaps didn't quite understand the importance of Principals / Deputy Principals attending the training but now I realise that it is integral. Working in Naas was definitely a career highlight. I was asked to share my experience with other senior leaders at various conferences and was asked to join the National Steering Committee.

In 2019, I returned to Cork as the Principal of Schull Community College and this role has again brought about a change in how I look at IL at school level. As a new Principal, I feel pulled in so many directions as I grapple with everything from recruitment to a leaky roof to Covid-19. In many ways I feel like I am back to square one as I have less and less time to be an Instructional Leader. This is a constant source of worry and frustration, but I do now have a greater understanding of the struggle faced by senior leaders as they try to keep the focus on Teaching and Learning. I am lucky to have an amazing and hardworking team of teachers here in Schull CC some of whom have trained in the ILP and some who are currently undergoing training. Having been focused on Distance Learning and our Digital Learning Plan during the pandemic, our Teaching and Learning Committee have agreed to renew the focus on instructional leadership for the coming year.

For me personally, I feel I have gone full circle on my IL journey. I have gone from being a teacher focused on my own practice in my classroom, to being an instructional leader trying to support other teachers in my school. From there I have gone on to becoming a Senior Leader who is trying to support teachers to be Instructional Leaders whilst balancing all the demands that come from being a school Principal / Deputy Principal. And now, as a member of the National Steering Committee, I look at the overall system and how the programme supports teachers nationally.

As I start the thirteenth year of my journey, I now see my role as empowering teachers to understand that they are all leaders in their classrooms and in their schools. I realise the importance making space as a school leader for professional conversations about instruction. Teachers have some many things to focus on, School Self Evaluation, Digital Learning Plans, Inclusion, Assessment, Wellbeing, Extra-curricular. The list is endless, and it can feel overwhelming but, the key is to understand that all of these things come back to one important question; How do we support student learning? Everything we do as educators is about ensuring students are active, independent and responsible learners. It is easy in a busy school environment to lose sight of this and to turn on teacher auto-pilot. We must constantly fight against being "accidentally adequate". As a school Principal today, I feel this as acutely as I did when I drove down from Tullow after that first session. Meaningful reflection is powerful. We must continually find the time to step back and honestly look at what it is we are doing. We need to carve out that space for ourselves as individual teachers and also together as teams of instructional leaders within schools. The Instructional Leadership Programme has taught me to be conscious. I strive every day to be competent knowing there is always more to learn.

*Sarah Buckley*

## ***Reflecting as a Co-operating Teacher and the scope for collaborative learning.***

Gerry Maloney

### *A little bit about 'me' first:*

As I think back, my introduction to the Instructional Leadership programme occurred relatively late in my teaching life. I commenced my studies on the programme in 2011, graduated in 2013 and retired from teaching in 2019. I found the programme as presented by Barrie Bennett truly inspirational. Without a doubt it brought real change to the way I planned a lesson and also how I actually taught the lesson. I became Coordinator for implementation of the IL Programme in my school St. David's Secondary School, Greystones, Co. Wicklow and chaired our in-house IL strategy committee. I now work part time as a tutor in methodologies in the Post Primary Education School, Mary Immaculate College (UL), Thurles Campus and also as a School Placement Tutor supporting student teachers in their teaching practise in accordance with the MIC philosophy.

### *From my perspective, as a Co-operating Teacher:*

Writing these few words has caused me to think back to my own days as a student teacher many moons ago, and how nervous and apprehensive I was coming out of college and visiting class for the first time. Back then it may have been fair to say that student teachers were often abandoned by the co-operating teacher who at times viewed the prospect of 'having a dip in with me' as a mini respite for a few weeks. Opportunities for professional conversation did not present too often in those times. Thankfully things have changed, thanks to Droichead, a process which has taught us a lot.

As a co-operating teacher, curiosity gripped me as to how many elements of 'the IL programme' were being shared with student teachers in the various education schools as they trained, because to me since I graduated the programme, IL had become the future of teaching. This curiosity paved the way for deep conversations with student teachers and gave rise to the formation of 'communities of learning and good practice' within my school, comprised of in-career and student teachers. The sessions we ran were very well attended and conversation flowed.

I encouraged student teachers to observe not just the classes of their co-operating teachers but to sit with other teachers also and note their style of teaching. Our teachers were most co-operative in this regard and those who were graduates of the IL programme had no hesitation in welcoming student teachers to their classes. This was usually followed by sessions where the teachers explained for example how they used Bloom's Taxonomy in their class activities to enhance question distribution and Perkin's 'Knowledge as Design' to encourage deeper understanding of concepts.

The learning was not one way, we all learned from each other. Student teachers were encouraged to critically appraise what they had seen in the classrooms they visited and make observations to the host teacher. Their insights were taken on board and often led to a refinement of the tactics and skills invoked. For instance, one of my student teachers had observed me using the Traffic Lights system in class as a check for understanding and she asked did I mind if she played with the idea a bit more. I welcomed her initiative and a few days later she sat with me and explained how she had 'tweaked' things. She had added a blue card to the red, amber, and green cards and indicated that if a student chose to turn up the blue card it signified that they were sufficiently confident in their understanding of the topic that they were willing to make a two-minute presentation to the class on the topic. She informed me that she felt this would be ideal as preparation for CBA 2 in Junior Cycle Business Studies which obliges the students to make a three-minute presentation which is recorded on a topic of their choice. When I am teaching 'Traffic Lights' to student teachers in my work as a methodologies tutor, I include the four cards in the presentation, and I have also observed them use this in class when I visit as a placement support tutor.

Their comments are very positive regarding how effective it is and how it contributes to enhancing the confidence and safety of their pupils in class. I owe this to my student teacher who was a keen thinker and who was willing to share on how, in my opinion, she had brought things to the next level.

*Reflection – my learning:*

Taking on the role of co-operating teacher to a student teacher today is a significant undertaking. It requires time, energy, passion, and commitment. Any teacher who undertakes the role understands the demands. It requires the co-operating teacher to be available, to open the eyes of the student teacher to all aspects of school life and to become a mentor across many different areas not just in the realm of teaching practice. The giving of meaningful support and constructive appraisal is essential, and the co-operating teacher should ensure that numerous opportunities for professional conversations are available for the student teachers, as they usually have many questions to ask. Student teachers tend to appreciate guidance on framing questions, checking for understanding and effective distribution of questions across the various levels of Bloom's Taxonomy in real classroom situations. As I mentioned earlier these conversations quickly become 'two-way streets' and student teachers very often provide moments of enlightenment from which the co-operating teacher and entire school community can benefit.

For me the real respite of acting as co-operating teacher down the years derived from being in the actual company of my student teachers, being exposed to their idealism and enthusiasm, comparing notes on approaches, discussing and playing with various elements of the IL programme, exploring life in the modern classroom and examining the challenges, benefits and risks in the use of technology.

In the parlance of the current times, I guess I always regarded the prospect of having a student teacher coming to sit with me as a 'booster shot' which would keep me young and enrich and extend my teaching life.....If you haven't tried it yet.....

*Gerry Maloney*

**Reflecting on our journey as an Instructional Leaders and the power of professional collaboration.**

Cara Doyle & Laura Mullins  
Coláiste Pobail Setanta

After our visit to Mount Wolseley Hotel in March 2019 we decided to feedback to our colleagues what we had learned about Instructional Leadership and how it can benefit the teaching and learning of our students in Coláiste Pobail Setanta. However, due to the global Covid-19 pandemic this was unfortunately put on the back burner until this academic year, 2021 - 2022.



In September 2021 we decided to create an opportunity for teachers to come together and discuss strategies and approaches in a collaborative setting where teachers would have the chance to have their voices heard and best practice shared. Focusing on concept maps and mind maps, we decided a teach meet would be the best approach for two reasons:

1. Given the current covid climate, we realised we had been remote teaching for quite a while and that it would be beneficial to refresh and relearn different IL approaches, methodologies, and AFL techniques.
2. We wanted to make the TeachMeet accessible to all teachers in the current climate. Some teachers decided to attend in person, while others decided to join the meeting online at the same time.

We decided to facilitate two teach meets per school term. For our first session we chose concept/mind maps as our IL focus. We presented the theory behind each, and shared examples that we had used in our classrooms, as well as exemplars from the IL website. We promoted the importance of using concept and mind maps in a manner that facilitated structured learning combined with an enquiry-based learning approach. As Coláiste Pobail Setanta is a technology-based school and our students use devices we looked at ‘coggle’, an online website for creating mind maps and concept maps. We found this website particularly beneficial as students can collaborate and create mind maps online in groups, while remaining socially distanced. Teachers had time at the teach meet to trial ‘coggle’ and use it’s different functions. Teachers will feedback on their use of concept/mindmaps at the next teach meet. School management will consider how this strategy can be build into future staff meetings. Our colleagues found the meeting very beneficial and suggested ideas for the next teach meet session.

**Reflection:**

|   |   |
|---|---|
| <p><b>What worked well? How do we know? Why did it work?</b></p> <p>Feedback form teachers told us:<br/>The TeachMeet worked well because of the hybrid approach to attendance.<br/>The use of examples was very helpful.<br/>The application of Coggle was helpful.</p>              | <p><b>What didn't work so well? How do we know?</b></p> |
| <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Next Steps?</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">Teachers will use mind maps and concept maps in their classrooms and will monitor their impact. We will gather data in advance of the next teach meet and provide a report at the beginning.</p> |   |

*Cara Doyle & Laura Mullins*

*Members of the Student Voice Team in Colaiste Pobail Naomh Mhuire, Buttevant, reflecting on student feedback and the core learnings from the schools work on Student Voice to date.*



## IL Programme Schedule Update

### IL Programme March 2022 Schedule

|           |           |   |
|-----------|-----------|---|
| Cohort 13 | Session 2 | Monday 28th February to Wednesday 2nd March |
| Cohort 12 | Session 4 | Wednesday 2nd March to Friday 4th March     |
| Cohort 15 | Session 1 | Monday 7th March to Wednesday 9th March     |
| Cohort 15 | Session 1 | Wednesday 9th March to Friday 11th March    |

**\*\*Please Note** - The above are the scheduled dates for March 2022 but may be subject to change. An email will issue to notify participants of any amendments to the schedule

**Please check our website for regular updates and information, Thank you.**



# Notices & Updates



Have you a query or looking for information?

Click on our website



[www.instructionalleadership.ie](http://www.instructionalleadership.ie)



or email

[admin@instructionalleadership.ie](mailto:admin@instructionalleadership.ie)

Congratulations to ETBI Take 1 Programme, recognised by OECD, UNESCO and International Education.

<https://bit.ly/38MEzW>

Take 1 Embedding Sustainable Development Education in an innovative and engaging cross curricular approach.

## Update—IL Book

*Instructional Expertise: Conversations with Myself and Others*

Thank you to all who answered the call for submissions!!!

We are currently at the final stages of editing & design and aim to launch in Spring 2022

Date for your Diary!

**Senior and Middle School  
Leaders Conference**

scheduled for Monday 13th June 2022

**Details to issue shortly**

Email: [admin@instructionalleadership.ie](mailto:admin@instructionalleadership.ie)

Dates for your Diary!

**IL Teach Meet**

Tuesday 18th January 2022 @ 7.00pm

Tuesday 29th March 2022 @ 7.00pm

**Details re registration to issue shortly**

Email: [admin@instructionalleadership.ie](mailto:admin@instructionalleadership.ie)



Have you registered? Limited places available for Cohort 15  
Email [admin@instructionalleadership.ie](mailto:admin@instructionalleadership.ie) for an application form  
or download the application form from our website

[www.instructionalleadership.ie](http://www.instructionalleadership.ie)

Please check our website for regular updates and information, Thank you.



INSTRUCTIONAL  
LEADERSHIP  
programme

### **Contact Details**

**Ms. Joan Russell**

*Chairperson National Steering Committee Instructional Leadership Programme*

**Ms. Paula Fitzpatrick**

*Instructional Leadership Programme - ETBI Head Office, Piper's Hill, Naas Co. Kildare*

[admin@instructionalleadership.ie](mailto:admin@instructionalleadership.ie)

[www.instructionalleadership.ie](http://www.instructionalleadership.ie)

[newsletter@instructionalleadership.ie](mailto:newsletter@instructionalleadership.ie)

@ILProgramme



**etbi**

Education and Training  
Boards Ireland  
*Bord Oideachais agus  
Oiliúna Éireann*