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## **Conversations on an Emergent Professional Network: a personal reflection on the background, development and sustainability of the Educational Developers in Ireland Network (EDIN)**

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### **Introduction**

The purpose of this chapter is to capture an oral history of the Educational Developers in Ireland Network (EDIN), which was established in 2002, and to provide a snapshot of the Network as it is currently in 2012-13. The oral history/dialogue-based approach was chosen in order to chronicle key moments in the establishment and growth of the network leading up to EDIN's tenth anniversary this academic year.

The chapter is a personal reflection on a conversation among key players in the Network, which took place in the Athlone Institute of Technology, prior to the EDIN Annual General Meeting on May 28th 2012. The pre-scheduled conversation, which lasted for just over one hour, was recorded and subsequently transcribed. Four EDIN members who previously held or are currently chair of the network were invited to participate, namely:

- Dr Alison Farrell, Teaching Development Officer, Centre for Teaching and Learning, National University of Ireland, Maynooth – founding chair/network co-ordinator of EDIN from 2002-2006;
- Ms Anne Carpenter, Coordinator of the Teaching & Learning Centre, Institute of Technology, Carlow – chair of an EDIN working group from 2007-2008; appointed network chair of the inaugural committee in 2008;
- Dr Marion Palmer, Head of Department of Learning Services, Dún Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design and Technology - vice-chair of EDIN from 2008-2009; chair from 2009-2011;
- Ms Nuala Harding, Learning and Teaching Co-ordinator, Athlone Institute of Technology, vice-chair 2009-2011; current EDIN chair.

### **Context**

This chapter is written against the backdrop of an ever-changing landscape of higher

education in Ireland. According to the Irish government's higher education agency, the Higher Education Authority (HEA), a total of €33.5m was invested in teaching and learning since 2000 (HEA, 2011: 4). Over the past decade, government-funded strategic investment initiatives, such as Strategic Initiatives Funding (known formerly as Targeted Initiatives) which commenced in 2004 and more recently, the Strategic Innovation Fund (SIF) established in 2007, led to many learning and teaching developments. These included the establishment of learning and teaching centres or units in many institutes of higher education, the subsequent appointment of educational developer or academic developer roles, local and national teaching and learning initiatives, and a range of collaborative innovations and events (HEA, 2011).

This period was characterised by strong investment which coincided with a favourable economic climate and led to:

transformation in the resourcing of teaching and learning with greater availability and uptake of professional development opportunities, the adoption of new forms of pedagogy for enhanced student engagement, extensive usage of technology in Irish higher education and an increasing emphasis on teaching in the tenure and promotion processes for academic staff

(O'Connor & Chantler, 2011: 16-30)

In 2011, the government published the first overall strategic policy document for the Higher Education sector, the *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030*, known locally as the 'Hunt Report', which had as Section 3 of Part 2 'The mission of higher education' (Department of Education and Skills, 2011). This dedicated section on 'Teaching and Learning' recognises the significant advances made in teaching and learning over the past decade with the establishment of centres for educational development. The collaborative work undertaken by individuals, centres, units and specific voluntary networks such as the Educational Developers in Ireland Network (EDIN), the Irish Learning Technology Association (ILTA), and the All-Ireland Society for Irish Higher Education (AISHE) affected much of this change agenda, in tandem with an enhanced strategic focus within institutions on learning and teaching.

### **Beginning the EDIN Conversation**

EDIN began in 2002 with a small group of individuals who were focused on their specific needs at the time (Potter and O'Farrell, 2009). From these beginnings, the conversations within the group moved very rapidly from congenial dialogue to collegial discourse with members, 'collaborating and sharing experience and expertise in learning and teaching' (Potter & O'Farrell, 2009: 97). In tandem with the exploration of the area of education development and the emergence of the roles of education developers and academic developers, the Network was to provide a dedicated space – what was denoted in this conversation as 'a space that was ring-fenced where we could talk about our roles at that time.'

Initially, the network comprised of members who were working in the university sector and who had a shared interest in educational development. In 2005, representatives of the Institutes of Technology (IoTs) were actively encouraged to join by network members who were already involved and were experiencing the benefits of the group such as the opportunities to write for publications and to provide or attend expert sessions. Prior to this moment, very few staff held the role of educational developers in that

sector. Two authors in this edition of Emerging Issues - Sylvia Huntley-Moore and Roisin Donnelly - were cited in the conversation as having encouraged participation from IoT colleagues.

### **This chapter – why a conversation?**

This chapter explores, through dialogue, the origins and work of the group over the past ten years. Methodologically and philosophically, it is underpinned by the members' commitment to the importance of co-enquiry, co-creation of knowledge and conversation. As noted in the introduction, four chairs, current and past, met to discuss EDIN's history, its current iteration and activity, and its future. Farrell began by noting that she believed it appropriate that the group were having this conversation. She remarked that the Network:

didn't really begin with any strategies or documents or anything written down. It was just that we were seeking the opportunity to talk and to thrash out the things that we were facing at that particular time.

This approach, and the courage of the instigators of EDIN, echoes the advice given by Wheatly (2002) when she describes the behaviours of those who want to affect change in a collaborative and collegiate way:

Be brave enough to start a conversation that matters.

- Talk to people you know.
- Talk to people you don't know.
- Talk to people you never talk to.
- Be intrigued by the differences you hear.

(2002: 116)

Conversation has played a vital role in the development of the Network and in essence it is also the subtext of this publication. As noted in the introduction by Farrell and O'Farrell (2013), dialogue was central to the processes underpinning the writing of the book and both editors asked contributors to be particularly aware of the links between speaking and writing as part of the process of the composition of their chapters.

Conversation was selected as the prompt for this chapter in order to capture the spontaneity that occurs with open dialogue. Throughout the conversation, participants highlighted key themes and recollected important stages in the development of the Network from the early days; in the dialogue, they articulated their concerns and views in relation to the sustainability of EDIN. The process also served to record the oral history of the Network which we believe is of particular value. EDIN is greatly influenced by the strong relationships within it; having conversations reminds the network of its origins and contributes to its sustainability. Part of this chapter is the celebration of the importance of purposeful dialogue, now more than ever in this time of rapid change in HE, when educational developers are required to adapt to the changing context in which they work. As evidenced by the work of EDIN to date, providing opportunities for purposeful dialogue allows developers to support each other and can be the impetus for action and further collaboration, notwithstanding the diverse range of educational settings in which EDIN members operate.

In this particular conversation about EDIN four key themes emerged:

- Growth and Formalising the Network
- Funding
- Scholarship and Policy
- The Future

Each theme will be discussed in this chapter with specific commentary and observations made by the participants incorporated where appropriate.

### **Growth and Formalising the Network: Capturing the spirit of the Network and establishing an identity**

The history of EDIN is well documented in Potter and O’Farrell, (2009). Therefore, it is sufficient to say here that by 2006 the Network was a well-established group but one in need of formalising and role identification (O’Farrell, 2008; Potter & O’Farrell, 2009). EDIN was supporting an emerging profession of educational developers as opposed to higher education staff interested or involved in learning and teaching in Higher Education; however, it was operating on an informal basis. As part of defining who the group was, it needed to identify who it was not and this process brought about tension and uncertainty, not least because of the overlap in membership with other professional groups for HE staff. It became apparent to those concerned with sustaining the network, that a clearly defined role was required: one which would differentiate it from other groupings, particularly AISHE which is a professional society dedicated to the promotion of good practice in learning and teaching across disciplines throughout the island of Ireland. In addition, in order to sustain the network, a more formal approach was required. Palmer noted this in conversation where she says:

One of the difficulties at the start, and I think you can see it in *Emerging Issues I*, is the boundary between AISHE and EDIN. If you look at the authors in *Emerging Issues I* they actually are almost all education developers but it’s very definitely ... an AISHE publication.

Carpenter concurred and noted that one of the key factors in the Irish context at that time was ‘the emerging profession of education developers ... when AISHE started that wasn’t a clear role’. The requirement to define EDIN as Carpenter notes ‘led then to the whole move to a more formal network’ which she contended led to ‘a more robust structure’ based on Gina Whisker’s report. This report was commissioned by EDIN in 2006 (Whisker and Antoniou, 2006).

### **The Catalyst for Moving from the Informal to the Formal**

The Wisker and Antoniou (2006) report proposed a framework for the sustained development of EDIN. The report included a history of the network and considered the international picture for educational development. The proposals noted in the document included the drafting of a constitution, developing guidelines for membership, establishing a budget and specifying financial reserves, establishing a committee with specific roles and developing a timeline for development (Wisker & Antoniou, 2006: 21).

Carpenter described the Network at the time of commissioning the report as being in a ‘state of flux’. However, from this fluidity came a deliberate discussion, at a meeting in

2007, on the future of the Network, its identity and relevance. Although there was a fear expressed that a more formal structure, as suggested in the report, might ‘diminish the congeniality’, there was agreement to proceed with the establishment of a working group with the purpose of devising a more robust structure in a timely fashion. Carpenter, who chaired the working group, outlined that it also included representation from University of Limerick, NUI Maynooth, Dublin Institute of Technology, University College Cork, and Dublin City University.

The working group was required to make recommendations which would facilitate the Network in serving the needs of the growing number of professionals within Irish HE with ‘a central role in developing or providing support for teaching and learning development’. In addition, it was noted at the time that the new structure could not be dependent on one person or one institute which had been the case in the beginning. Harding remarked that a key issue for the Network, which emerged from the Wisker & Antoniou (2006) report, was sustainability; if the Network was ‘too reliant on one person and suddenly they’re gone ... does that mean the network collapses?’ Farrell indicated that the Wisker & Antoniou report really ‘helped us to clarify matters and to consider a course of action’ and that it was crucial in helping to achieve clarity. It was fortunate that the Network had, what Carpenter described as, ‘the foresight’ to commission the report.

In line with the proposals noted in the report, the working group called an AGM in May 2007 where the first committee was elected and the constitution was proposed and accepted. The establishment of what Carpenter described as ‘a small executive committee’ helped to ‘steer the group, make decisions and plan for the future’. The committee, coupled with the AGM, enabled the Network to function, grow and perform. As might be expected, there was a transition phase from informality to formal structures which posed some issues, in particular as members got used to having a committee in place. Palmer noted:

In the move from the (informal collaborative network) ... to where you have a committee whose job it is to strategize ... there have been one or two hiccups. Moving from the informality is different to a formal structure.

The establishment of the new structure represented another phase in the Network’s development. Palmer recorded that ‘Anne Carpenter led the working group that developed the constitution which was approved in March 2008’. It was obvious that Carpenter played a crucial role at this time in formalising the network and establishing a schedule of regular meetings and events. Palmer and Harding subsequently occupied the roles of chair and vice-chair respectively and they put together a strategic plan; the document was straightforward and ‘provided a road map.’

Another important outcome of the formalisation was that it helped clarify a specific role for the network where it could co-exist with AISHE and be explicit with regards to a differentiated membership. Palmer remarked that ‘at the committee meetings ... it was very easy for us to say, when we looked at the membership applications ‘yes’ or ‘no’ because the Network was very clearly for academic/educational developers.’ This group has subsequently grown to include e-learning professionals and education technologists. With regards the development of the Network, it was noted that membership was frequently symbiotic in nature. This is exemplified by Harding’s experience. She outlined that her experience of the Network was one where in the beginning it helped to sustain her in a new role and in turn she became interested in sustaining the network by working on the committee. This in turn needed to be supported by her institute (as is true of her

counterparts in other institutes): ‘first of all my Institute supported me in being involved and that was crucial’. Harding remarked that:

My involvement started in 2007 ... I remember attending that meeting (when the constitution was agreed) and it was at that point I joined the committee, and I then worked as secretary ... And then we moved to the point where I was vice-chair with Marion Palmer. I’ve moved through the committee roles ... I joined at the point where the whole thing was in place... so I didn’t know EDIN before we had these formal structures.

Harding also commented that the essential role EDIN played in supporting those new to educational development in particular, should not be underestimated:

It does sustain people; there is no doubt about it. I had that extra support from the Network and it was a way of affirming the decisions I was making on my own because I was virtually on my own for the first three years in my role.

As a result of this process of formalisation, the group crafted a mission statement. The mission and constitution articulated the values of the network, its specific aims and objectives and the requirements for membership. In the conversation, it was apparent that formalising the network, which was certainly influenced by the Wisker & Antoniou Report (2006), was a key milestone, essential in the development and continuity of the group.

### The Growth of the Network

Having commenced with a small group of like-minded individuals in 2002, the membership of the network continued to grow; by 2005 there were 53 members on the mailing list (Wisker & Antoniou, 2006: 2). Since then, the membership has more than doubled and at present the total number of listed members is 116, with representation outlined in Table 1 which indicates the membership according to the type of institution and including independent consultants. The current membership is comprised of developers who are at a variety of career stages, with very different roles and a diverse range of research interests. Membership level and representation was a contributory element in the successful application to the National Academy for the Integration of Research with Teaching and Learning (NAIRTL) funding call in 2011 which led to this publication.

2012	Number by sector	Number of members
Universities	7	49
Institutes of Technology	11	45
Other HEs including private colleges	8	17
External HEs Universities in UK and Australia	2	2
Private Consultants	3	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>116</b>

**Table 1: EDIN membership 2012; source: EDIN distribution list November 2012**

The original EDIN Constitution, approved in 2007, was quite specific in terms of EDIN membership; it noted that it was open to those who held ‘a central role in developing or providing support for teaching and learning development in a Higher Education institute in Ireland’ (EDIN, 2007). In addition, a formal process for approving applications was established with the first committee. However, currently there are new trends emerging which are evidenced in the recent applications for membership and amongst members of the group; the most noticeable shifts are where members have changed career path and/or are working now as private consultants, particularly post SIF funding. In the past, members who moved to another country continued to be members of the network. Recently, the changing circumstances for staff engaged in education development and academic development in Ireland, and the interest generated through AISHE, led to a proposal to amend the EDIN constitution at the AGM in May 2012. This proposal was approved and membership is now open to ‘those who hold a central role in developing or providing support for teaching and learning development in Higher Education in Ireland’ (EDIN Constitution, 2012).

Palmer noted how the landscape has changed, particularly recently, and how the network needs to be mindful of this. She remarked:

It’s interesting now as we are trying to expand; Nuala Harding is proposing that we change the membership and we really need to do it because we now have education developers who have now lost their jobs and who have the skills and knowledge, who are there, and who need the network to stay in touch. If we only involve people who are currently employed in higher education we are going to lose a lot of good people.

As Palmer observed, the Network may be more valuable than ever now, particularly for staff in transition; she emphasised that ‘the network is providing great contacts in terms of work, short term contracts and the like because of the collegiality’.

## Funding

Since its origins in 2012 the Network has been very successful in terms of its applications for funding; as a result it has supported, among other initiatives, a writers’ week, the establishment of networking/travel fund and the development of a website (Wisker & Antoniou, 2006: 2). Grant funding secured through competitive bidding processes has also allowed for the commissioning of the Wisker report. This funding was extremely significant, indeed, critical, to the development of the fledgling network. As noted previously, the HEA’s funding for amongst other things, support for teaching and learning in the form of ‘Targeted Initiatives’, began in 1996 and was renamed ‘Strategic Initiatives’ in 2004. The ‘Support for Teaching’ strand of the initiatives, through which a host of teaching and learning projects were funded, commenced in 2000 (HEA, 2011). Over successive years, EDIN bid and secured funding recognising the importance of this support whilst in its infancy. Though the Network was conspicuously a collaborative effort, the HEA is to be commended for funding a group in the initial stages of network development. Both Carpenter and Farrell noted in this conversation that the funding served to support the day-to-day activity of the network and other initiatives. As Carpenter outlined the funding supported ‘network meetings, training and development, ... research, mentoring ... and supporting the network members then as champions of innovation etc.’ Farrell, as

founding chair of the network, remarked that 'I don't think we could have done quite so much without the funding; the funding was absolutely crucial'.

Funding was returned to again and again as a key theme in this conversation; it is an ongoing concern for the network. It was noted that, while it was always tempting for the network to bid for funding, being cognisant of its importance for sustainability and the achievement of strategic objectives of the network, it was also essential not to lose sight of the group's spirit and ethos. To some extent, the funding was a double-edged sword; it was necessary for the Network's activity and longevity, but there was a danger of being distracted by the funding at the expense of putting energy into that which really mattered or that which might have had some impact on the ground. It was noted that the achievement of funding, particularly through competitive bidding, helped to raise awareness of the network with the HEA and also amongst institutional senior management. This was, and continues to be, essential, as it is only in conjunction with institutional support that members can contribute to EDIN events, either by attending or facilitating meetings or other events that have helped to sustain the network. Carpenter emphasised this in the conversation:

I think the very fact that EDIN actually put in for funding, ... was recognised by the HEA and got funding ... was key ... that's the money that's still keeping us going ... it would be a big issue if there was no funding. The other thing is that over the last few years, because we were aware that that's the only funding that is there, the committee has been very conservative in how it should be spent, they are managing the money as best they can.

Palmer noted how the funding can greatly influence the activity of the network and, referring to the impact of receiving funding for this publication, she noted: '... it has taken the network on a different path to what it might have been and that's absolutely fine. That's the flexibility of the network and taking it through.' Farrell also reiterated this point noting that 'a network can be driven by funding ... we wouldn't want to go after a piece of funding and then find we had no sense of ourselves.' In response, Carpenter remarked that she believed that 'the funding had been used for the core mission of the group' and Farrell agreed noting that one would not want the network to be 'only a series of activities linked by one piece of funding to the next ... with nothing more strategic'.

The mention of strategy led the conversation from funding to policy and scholarship with participants sharing their views which were contrary in nature on occasion.

### Scholarship and Policy

From the outset, EDIN concerned itself with scholarship leading to members producing the first *Emerging Issues in Higher Education* publication in 2005. Government funding supported the first *Emerging Issues* which was co-ordinated as a project and edited by O'Neill, Moore and Mc Mullin. This work was a significant development not only because it addressed the need for localised scholarship and for the documentation of academic development in higher education in the Irish context, but also because it led to a developmental model for collaborative writing which included: a facilitated or structured writers' retreat allowing total immersion in the writing process; peer review; and the opportunity to engage with and be supported by a community of scholars. James Wisdom, then Co-Chair of the Staff and Educational Development Association (SEDA) suggested in his review of *Emerging Issues I* that the publication itself would be especially



valuable to those undertaking professional development programmes. He also made particular reference to the use of Creative Commons in the publication which essentially allowed for open sharing of the materials. In his review of the publication he commented:

while the content of the volume may be most particularly relevant to new lecturers, its ethos and method of production has plenty to say to members of SEDA in their work to build a community of practice around educational development

(Wisdom, 2005: 12).

This open source approach was utilised subsequently in Ireland by the National Digital Learning Repository (NDLR) for the sharing of digital learning resources and by the Learning Innovation Network (LIN) for sharing professional development modules and resources which were developed collaboratively amongst participating institutes. Thus, the editors of the first volume of *Emerging Issues* set a standard to be met which embodied EDIN's collaborative and collegiate spirit.

The developmental model of writing for publication was utilised again in *Emerging Issues II* (2008). The second book showcased the continuing development of the EDIN community of practice. Edited by Bettie Higgs and Marian McCarthy of University College Cork, both network members, it included chapters which provide situational 'snapshots of the intersection between theory, practice and research' (Higgs & McCarthy, 2008: 1). As predicted by James Wisdom, chapters from both editions are now used in a variety of developmental contexts (2005: 12).

The *Emerging Issues* publications are a touchstone in the history of education development and teaching and learning support in Ireland as they are the confident articulation of the voice of a newly emerging profession in Irish higher education. The Network continued to be concerned with publication outputs while other institutions and networks also filled the gaps in research and scholarship in this area from an Irish perspective. EDIN members sought to impact on policy through publication with the Network and through other groups.

Scholarship and policy were discussed in tandem during the conversation. It was noted that if the Network does indeed wish to influence policy, scholarship may be its most effective way of achieving this aim. Farrell remarked that she believed that EDIN could have a much greater impact on policy and that she considered the lack of 'lobbying' as a gap. She commented that 'I don't think that we do much (lobbying) but then maybe that's not what we are supposed to do ...' It would be fair to say that the Network has been ambivalent about its role with regards policy. This may be because it is still a relatively young organisation, with its basis in grassroots. However, ten years on and in a greatly changed higher education landscape, impacting on policy is very much on the table. EDIN was active in promoting its mission and activities during the consultation process in 2010 which informed National Strategy for Higher Education and members of the EDIN executive were involved in making submissions. In addition, Marion Coy, former president of the Galway Mayo Institute of Technology (GMIT) and member of the strategy group, presented at the EDIN AGM in 2011 in conjunction with Muiris O'Connor, Principal Officer in the Policy and Planning section of the HEA. This opportunity was used by the outgoing chair Marion Palmer to outline the mission and strategic plan of the Network, whilst emphasising the potential for this group of educational developers to play a key role at local and national level.

The EDIN committee also made a submission to the HEA in response to their call regarding the formation of a national forum (HEA, 2011). Farrell noted

I think that even if we haven't been explicit about lobbying, people *are* doing different things to try to influence policy which is important for us; we frequently have to implement policy but we can also influence it because we are on the ground and consequently we have a very good idea about what is needed and what would be constructive.

Carpenter remarked that it is 'policy at national level really that we wish to influence' and she believes that 'the publications are crucial' in this regard. Farrell agreed that the Network should be trying to influence policy and wondered about how forthright it could be about this aim. There was little disagreement about the role that publication and scholarship would play here but there is also a strongly held belief that as a Network we should not get too carried away with publication at the expense of pursuing our primary role which is to be a collective for those who are supporting teaching and learning. Having tracked the development of the network, it seems that giving consideration to and being in a position to influence policy at national level has been augmented as a result of formalising the operations of the network and increasing the membership.

The EDIN conversation which formed the basis of this chapter, in addition to the invaluable collaborative and collegiate efforts of Irish educational developers leading to another contemporary publication, should help to inform the contribution of the Network to the recently established National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning. The Minister for Education and Skills, when launching the National Forum on November 22nd 2012, suggested the forum will 'allow the system to provide all students with a teaching and learning experience of the highest quality through engagement with innovative pedagogies and the technologies that support these.' The Minister also acknowledged the existing strong areas of teaching and learning expertise throughout HE institutes believing the forum 'will build on that expertise and disseminate best practice throughout the system, raising standards of teaching and learning overall' (Quinn, 2012).

### **The Future: Network growth and development through activity, collaboration and identity**

Carpenter noted that EDIN started when the educational developer role was emerging in Ireland as a profession; although there was already a significant level of collaboration among educational developers, before EDIN there was no formal entity to support developers:

However, with SIF, there came a whole plethora of training ... nearly overload for a while. Now that has eased off now again because the funding is gone ... but the network filled a huge gap for a while and now ... EDIN has begun to think more and more of the needs of the education developers, what needs the network has, and it has the confidence to partner with others in events...

Harding commented that there have been 'very successful collaborative events with the NDLR and with LIN'. This type of activity demonstrates EDIN's ability to look beyond itself in order to define its identity. In addition, the executive has been mindful of an over reliance on experts from the British Isles. A sign of the maturity of the network is the invitation to experts within the Network to provide development opportunities for members in themes such as writing for publication, supporting curriculum design, teaching at third level and the evaluation of teaching.

Visibility and promotion of the network was also considered important and the ongoing development of the website was seen an essential element of this work. Palmer recorded that the 'website was set up in 2006 and that now EDIN is slowly finding a way of managing it and keeping it live, which is critical'. The website has been updated and now includes a blog, a project page, an events page and an online membership application process. In addition, there is a proposal to include minutes of the AGM and reports from the chair, secretary and treasurer. This would provide for even greater transparency and a clear record of activities. Regular contact with members is ensured through the monthly EDIN newsletter which offers the opportunity to inform members of events and calls for submissions to conferences and publications.

### **The Future: Is the network still relevant ten years later and how do we sustain it into the future?**

The final part of this conversation focused on looking to the future and considering the sustainability of the network particularly in the current economic climate. Farrell noted that 'one thing that we are trying to do in this piece is capture another snapshot of the organization at this time and place'. Harding observed that the NAIRTL funding this year 'did bring us in a different direction' but that she was 'very interested to see the authors selected from the review process, the themes for the chapters that are being written and the trends around technology, and the emerging pedagogies.' She also noted that the Network's strategic plan included five streams and whilst one of these was scholarship, through which we might impact on policy, continuous professional development (CPD) also remains very important to the group and its members and should remain so for the future.

This chapter is being written in a very different context to that in which the group was established and even to the landscape when it moved to a formal structure. We are currently in a maelstrom in higher education that includes cutbacks, proposals for rationalisation, mergers, the establishment of technological universities and a clearly articulated national strategy to 2030. Carpenter noted 'I think the key role at the minute in the current climate with cutbacks and people being let go, is to continue to provide support and to be a resource to members'.

Perhaps EDIN should consider these concerns in order to remain relevant. Ron Barnett (2011) suggests it is time to rethink the idea of university and he challenges educational developers to think creatively and to encourage 'daring, forward-looking and imaginative conceptions' among management and academic staff about what a university should be, including the idea of an 'ecological university' in the broadest sense: one that is 'dynamic, continuously remaking itself, but with a world view and not solely focused on its own interests' (p. 4-5). This publication should help educational developers meet current challenges as it includes chapters which focus on the implementation of innovative approaches such as: civic engagement; the use of technology to enhance learning and provide a flexible learning environment; capturing the student voice in curriculum design; the transition to HE for first year students; engaging students in learning processes which are transformative in nature.

Palmer suggested that she would like to see two things in the future, namely, increased university involvement, particularly in role of chair and vice-chair on the executive, and consistent CPD support for members. She remarked, 'I worry about supporting my colleagues in their day-to-day needs in higher education e.g. classroom management, planning classes, the real nuts and bolts of teaching and learning.' Participants agreed

that consideration should be given to developing ongoing supports for colleagues to meet these challenges.

Whilst accepting the issues which the current economic climate brings, this is still an exciting time in Irish Higher Education. It is hoped that the National Forum will provide a platform for the articulation of ideas and implementation of key initiatives, thereby offering EDIN the opportunity to engage in and inform teaching and learning, ensuring the Network not only remains relevant but is an integral part of the change agenda in Irish Higher Education.

## Final Reflections

Looking back over the key factors which led to the establishment and the advancement of EDIN has been an interesting and worthwhile exercise. In the process, factors such as funding and the objective evaluation in 2006 were outlined; both of these helped in transitioning from an informal group to a formal network with a mission, constitution and a strategic plan which provided a roadmap for the future. There has been a significant increase in the membership which now includes educational developers working in HE institutes and others supporting the development of teaching and learning, including private consultants.

The foresight of the original group must be acknowledged and its focus on the collegiality and the professional development of the members. However, the sustainability of EDIN is also reliant on the membership, and in particular those who take on a voluntary role on the committee. This commitment, albeit for a given period, is essential as this is the group who will lead the network by articulating and achieving agreed strategic objectives.

Through this conversation, specific areas for further engagement were identified including:

- making our commitment to scholarship more explicit;
- engaging in policy formulation at national and local level.

In addition, the participants considered it essential that EDIN return to first principles in supporting each other through this time of increasing change in HE and have a strategic focus on supporting early career academics, in addition to those working with an increasingly diverse student population and grappling with classroom management issues, assessment design and with developing strategies for teaching and learning including the use of technology. This publication should contribute to and assist in each of these areas.

Conversation is crucial to sustaining EDIN. I revert to Wheatly, to guide us on simple but effective ways to sustain the Network even within a formal structure:

Ask “what’s possible?” not “What’s wrong?” Keep asking. Notice what you care about. Assume that many others share your dreams.  
Trust that meaningful conversations can change your world.  
Rely on human goodness. Stay together.

(2002: 116)

I am very privileged to be involved with such a dynamic and committed group of educational developers in Ireland. My hope for EDIN is that it will continue to sustain, support and

engage members through annual events, opportunities for collaborative writing and the sharing of expertise with the resultant enhancement of the learning experience of students in Irish Higher Education.

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## Response to

### **Conversations on an Emergent Professional Network: a personal reflection on the background, development and sustainability of the Educational Developers in Ireland Network (EDIN)**

by Tai Peseta, Institute for Teaching and Learning, University of Sydney, Australia.

On first joining the community of educational and academic development, conversations of all kinds become particularly important forms of professional learning. They are essential for finding out about operational matters: how things get done; what has been tried in the past with success and failure; who the key learning and teaching players are and what they are each trying to achieve. Conversations are similarly important for extending one's conceptual and practical knowledge base – the scholarly substance of educational development. And conversations too, help us learn about each other.

Conversation is a meeting of minds with different memories and habits. When minds meet, they don't just exchange facts; they transform them, draw different implications from them, engage in new trains of thought. Conversation doesn't just reshuffle the cards; it creates new cards (Zeldin in Haigh, 2005: 14).

In this chapter, Nuala Harding reminds us that conversations are also mechanisms for remembering and relaying *history* – in this case – what the initial talk, curiosity and enthusiasm was that led to the formation of the Educational Developers Ireland Network (EDIN). While there is to my mind a focus on the beginnings of EDIN and the conditions leading to its arrival on the Irish higher education scene (together with its achievements), there is also a looming future focus to contend with: where should EDIN devote its energies in the second decade of its work? What should its proper focus be given the constant change which now besets the higher education sector? How best can EDIN demonstrate its impact on curriculum, teaching and student learning? What role has it yet to play in building individual and institutional learning and teaching capacity?

#### **How might EDIN plan a sustainable future for itself?**

EDIN is clearly not alone in recognizing and being caught up this tension. Indeed, it is a very real one for many professional societies and organisations who must choose carefully how they will engage in improving higher education learning and teaching. The educational developer-on-the-ground struggling to support the diversity of new, casualised teaching staff (for example) is an issue the world over, and Harding's chapter raises tough and uncomfortable questions about the responsibility of organisations like EDIN to work at that level given its limited funding and resources. Extending its reach beyond the grass-roots level through policy, advocacy and scholarly publication appears to be the route to EDIN's national impact and sustainability. No doubt, there will be a challenge ahead to ensure that EDIN's early collaborative spirit does not become lost in its efforts to scale up.

Harding's history of EDIN, derived through reflection and conversation, demonstrates just where the gusto of a few individuals keen on educational development can lead. There are histories precisely like this one littered throughout educational development

– the Australian publication *Making a Place: an oral history of academic development in Australia* (Lee, Manathunga & Kandlbinder, 2008) – a story of academic development told through the eyes of Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australia (HERDSA) life members, is at the forefront of my mind. Although it is less a history of HERDSA, it builds a composite picture of the events leading to its development. But these examples are too few. One of the lessons from Harding’s chapter is to consider how we can be systematic in capturing and researching the conversations that seed learning, teaching and educational development change.

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