



**Researching our own practice: an individual creative process and  
a dialogic-collaborative process**

*Self knowledge is the beginning of wisdom.* Krishnamurti (1991, p. 196)

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**Abstract**

*In this paper, we explain how our individual PhD enquiries (Farren, 2006; Crotty, 2012) have informed the philosophical underpinnings of our postgraduate programmes. The approach used to ensure validity and rigour in the research process is presented. We report on the development of the International Research Centre for e-Innovation and Workplace Learning and its collaboration in European projects such as Pathway to Inquiry Based Learning, Inspiring Science Education (ISE) and the African based Global e-Schools and Communities Initiative (GeSCI) project Leadership Development in ICT and the Knowledge Society. Our claim is that researching our own practice can be a transformative experience for the practitioner-researcher who is committed to generating knowledge that has personal, professional and social value.*

**Keywords:** Action research, Inquiry learning, e-learning, reflective practice, collaboration

## **Background**

The idea of practitioners generating knowledge has not been given serious weight in the academy. Schön (1995) referred to the power of the disciplinary in-groups that have grown up in the academy around the dominant epistemology. Since the establishment, twenty years ago, of the Self-study of Teacher Education Practice Group of the American Educational Research Association (AERA), higher education educators have been exploring the epistemological implications of self-study - researching our own practice - for the generation of knowledge. Pithouse, Mitchell and Weber (2009) rightly point out that the process of self-study changes its practitioner and their situations; seeing things differently, self-study can prod us to take action. These authors include action research, arts-informed inquiry, auto-ethnography, and life histories as approaches to self-study research.

Universities were traditionally seen as the centres of innovation and knowledge generation, however, it is now recognised that knowledge and ideas generation can come from a range of contexts. The direction taken in our research has influenced the philosophical and educational foundation of the Masters in Education and Training Management (eLearning) programme which was established in 2002. African leaders who graduate from the Graduate Diploma in Leadership Development in ICT and the Knowledge Society programme can progress to the Masters in Education and Training Management (eLearning) and continue to PhD research. We will now describe how our doctoral research studies have informed our approach to the development and implementation of postgraduate taught and research programmes.

## **Philosophical Approach to Postgraduate Programmes**

In her doctoral research, Margaret showed how ICT far from displacing the educator, opens up new creative possibilities, provided we see learning as collaborative and cooperative, not only involving the teacher-student dialogue but including student-student dialogue and moving toward the wider social dimension of a web of betweenness that ICT can facilitate (Farren, 2006, 2008)). The relational and dialogic quality of learning embedded in the notion of a web of betweenness (O'Donoghue, 2003; Farren, 2006), brings us back to the intuitive world of the Celtic Imagination and captures the idea that each person's uniqueness enriches the community. The web of betweenness is inextricably linked with the idea of pedagogy of the unique (Farren, 2006) which recognises that each human being has a particular set of values that motivate their enquiry and that sets a distinctive context for that enquiry to proceed. The web is intended to be creatively and critically responsive to each person while emphasising the relational dynamic element of pedagogy. Pedagogic knowledge creation and analysis is seen to involve both an individual creative process and a dialogic-collaborative process.

Yvonne's research seamlessly melds with Margaret's theory as she draws on her fifteen years experience as a secondary school teacher to show how collaboration, cooperative and project-based learning is essential to her pedagogy. (Crotty, 2005, 2011, 2012). Her research emphasises the importance of creating safe environments to ensure meaningful, enjoyable, creative learning abounds. Within these safe educational spaces she connects the head with the heart, marries the sense and soul (Wilber, 1988) to combine a constructivist,

behaviourist, cognitive pedagogical approach that avoids a fragmented learning experience as she inspires others to bring their ideas to fruition. Her interest in the use of multi-modal (sound, video, images and text) forms of communication and expression to represent educational knowledge and her belief in the power of visual methods (Crotty, 2005), narrative accounts and online journaling led to her doctoral research, in which she clarified what it means to have an educationally entrepreneurial spirit (Crotty, 2012). Yvonne believes that entrepreneurship is not only about setting up a business for economic gain.

Since the establishment of the [Masters programme](#), over a decade ago, professionals from different sectors of education (primary, post-primary and tertiary), along with personnel from industry (including technology and pharmaceutical), creative arts, finance, NGO's, government departments and state agencies have provided action research accounts of how they are improving their work practice and developing creative and reflective approaches to the use of ICT in the learning environments in which they work. Throughout the Masters programme participants are exposed to a collaborative learning environment and develop an awareness of how knowledge can be created between learners. For example, a virtual learning environment is one of the tools used to assist participants to collaboratively explore the values embedded in their practice. Through the coursework assignments participants have the opportunity to observe and reflect on what is happening in their practice and work context. They document these observations and reflections in their learning journals. At the same time the coursework requires participants to critically engage with the wider literature, for example, philosophy, learning theories, organisational culture and emerging literature from neuroscience, digital literacies and technologies. Participants are encouraged to engage their imagination and creativity in

developing multimodal forms of representation in order to express and communicate their research – [Reflections from students](#)

In collaboration with a previous programme participant Mike O’Byrne, a multiple case study approach has been used to analyse the knowledge that has been generated from a sample of the action research enquiries conducted by previous participants into the implementation of a virtual learning environment in their work context. These enquiries were carried out in the participants own work context and recreated aspects of the collaborative learning environment that the participants had experienced during the Masters programme (publication due 2014).

The key themes emerging in relation to the influence of the Masters programme in their individual work contexts include:

- Values – the articulation of educational values is primary to engaging in research.
- Reflection – the practitioner-researcher reflect on their practice and identify an area of concern/. Focused use of learning journals.
- Continuing Professional Development.

Collaboration – the construction of new knowledge through collaboration with other learners. The participant experiences online collaborative learning before carrying out their own research enquiry. Learning together is developed through the course of the programme.

The vital role of the educator as a designer and facilitator of the online learning activities is recognised. The use of different pedagogical approaches is promoted. Moderation of discussions is practically experienced.

The following are examples of the types of research enquiries from students on the Masters in Education and Training Management (eLearning) programme.

- The Potential use of an Entrepreneurship Education programme with pupils with Special Learning Difficulties. Afric Creedon (2013). Primary Teacher.
- An Educational Enquiry into the production and implementation of multimedia screencast resource to support student learning in Horticultural enterprise. Louise Jones (2013). College Lecturer. Teagasc.
- Barriers to developing inquiry based learning, in science, assessment and teachers' perceptions of VLEs' Tom Lonergan, (2012). PDST – Professional Development Service for Teachers.

### **Validity and Rigour in the Research Process**

Schön warned scholars to make their practice into appropriately rigorous research (Schön, 1995, p. 34), and Schneberger, Pollard, & Watson's (2009, p. 53) advocate that academic research should demonstrate 'academic rigor and practical relevance'. In guiding practitioner researchers we take account of this advice, acknowledging Dadds & Hart's (2001, p. 169) point that, 'no methodology is, or should be cast in stone, if we accept that professional intention should be informing research processes, not pre-set ideas about methods or techniques'. Our intention in supporting practitioners to research their own practice is primarily to enable them to grow in self-knowledge by critically evaluating and reviewing their beliefs, values and professional practices, leading to new understandings of themselves and others in ways which they experience as transformative. With the observer situated within his or her research enquiry, there is the making of a reflexive methodology

for research (Steier, 1991, p. 180). In this way, research in the human sciences can and should consider the potentiality for creative action of all relevant participants, including the researcher, and relate to the wider social environments.

We draw on Winter's (1989) criteria for judging action research accounts which include dialectical critique, reflective critique, collaboration resource, risk, plural structure, theory, practice and transformation. We recognise that practitioners' values and concerns need to be addressed in the research process and this can be done by involving them in critical reflective dialogue and developing an open attitude to practice. We agree with Sparkes (2002) that validity in participatory research approaches should be reconceptualised in relation to the efficacy of the research in changing relevant social practices. As for methods of establishing social validity, we include the application of Habermas's (1976) four criteria of comprehensibility, truth, rightness and authenticity.

Yvonne believes that an entrepreneurial way of being involves collaboration, reflexivity, creativity and taking risks in bringing ideas into action – <http://www.yvonnecrotty.com> In her supervision of postgraduate research, Yvonne supports masters and PhD students to be entrepreneurial in their research by experimenting with multimedia forms of representation in order to express and communicate their educational knowledge.

Since 1998, Margaret has supervised students to research their own practice at masters degrees level. In the PhD research that Margaret has supervised, students have used action research, ethnography, auto-ethnography and participatory research approaches. Rather than focusing on the notion of a generalisable theory, Margaret works with the idea of a

theory as situated in practice, explaining and energising human exchanges in transforming social contexts (Farren, 2006, p. 85).- <http://www.margaretfarren.net>

We will now report on the development of the International Research Centre for e-Innovation and Workplace Learning which was created in order to connect the research work that we are doing at a national level with our international research projects.

### **European and African Projects**

The [International Research Centre for e-Innovation and Workplace Learning](#) was established with the aim of engaging and collaborating with practitioner-researchers, academics and policymakers in Europe and beyond in exploring the enabling capacity of digital technologies and participatory research approaches to support personal and professional change and organisational development. Current international projects include the European Seventh Framework Pathway to Inquiry Based Learning, the Information and Communication Technologies Policy Support programme Inspiring Science Education' (ISE) and the African based GeSCI project Leadership in ICT and the Knowledge Society.

The main aim of the European Seventh Framework project [Pathway](#) is the implementation of Inquiry Based Science Education (IBSE) workshops for teachers and providing online resources and classroom strategies to support IBSE in schools across Europe. The online resources that have been developed during the lifetime of the project are available on the Pathway website. The Pathway team in [Ireland](#) facilitated IBSE workshops for pre-service teachers, in-service teachers and teacher-educators. An inquiry approach was vital for the facilitation of these workshops with time for participants to explore specific



examples of computational models and simulations and to reflect on their classroom usage (Farren, Crotty, Martin and McTiernan, 2012).

Our work on the Pathway project led to an invitation to participate in a European Competitiveness and Innovation project proposal under the Information and Communication Technologies Policy Support programme. The project proposal was successful and as a partner in the [Inspiring Science Education](#) (ISE) project, we are currently supporting teachers through online and face-to-face [workshops](#) to inquire into their own practice as they make innovative use of existing eLearning tools, using an inquiry based approach. The research enquiries resulting from this research project will be shared with the wider European community.

Our collaboration with the African based Global e-Schools and Communities Initiative (GeSCI) began in 2012 when the CEO of GeSCI contacted us asking for assistance in the design of a blended learning programme for African leaders with a view to accreditation of the programme. Once the programme content and form of delivery was agreed, a proposal was submitted to Dublin City University (DCU) for a level 9 Graduate Diploma in Leadership Development in ICT and the Knowledge Society. The programme was successfully approved by DCU in 2012. This flagship programme brings together participants across African countries to address the regional and country specific issues in policies in ICT, Education and Science, Technology and Innovation. Key areas include Leadership in the Knowledge Society, New Strategies for Science, Technology and Innovation, Telecommunications Infrastructure and Quality Internet, ICT Applications and the Role of Government, Education in the Knowledge Society, Knowledge Society for Africa.

In July 5<sup>th</sup>, 2013, the first cohort of 180 participants from across the African continent successfully graduated from the programme – [video](#). Participant countries included Kenya, Zambia, Mauritius, South Africa, and Tanzania, Malawi, Botswana, Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, Namibia and Mozambique. A further cohort of students from another group of African countries commenced the programme in 2014. African leaders from government ministries or state organisations in Africa who graduate from the programme can progress to the Masters in Education and Training Management (eLearning) programme and conduct action research inquiries in their workplace by observing, reflecting and acting on real issues that enable leadership, change management and movement towards a knowledge society. They will be encouraged to create, share and contribute to new knowledge for their own personal and professional growth and for the development of their particular enterprise. There are also opportunities to continue to [PhD research](#). In our view the development of a knowledge society involves an individual creative process and a dialogic-collaborative process.

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