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A Recipe for Change

By Elena Gamble, Dublin Institute of Technology

This is a good news education recipe, whipped up with some intelligent ingredients, which directly responds to the Taskforce on Active Citizenship's vision for citizenship initiatives across the Higher Education sector and the recent National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030.

A Recipe for Change has one special ingredient which, though grown successfully internationally for the last 40 years, is relatively new to Ireland. This special ingredient, called community-based learning/research (or service-learning), is where students use their specialist subject skills on course-based, credit-bearing, collaborative projects with community partners, for mutual benefit. It has been tried, tested and very much embraced and we hope you will enjoy it.

To begin take a large bowl and in it place:

1. One small country facing unprecedented economic, social, political times;
2. One very big need to support the development of socially responsible citizens with relevant experience and skills to meet these challenges;
3. One concentrated dose of Community-Based Learning and Community-Based Research teaching and learning strategies across the higher education sector in Ireland;
4. All Higher Educational Institutions;
5. As many Community and Voluntary Organisations as you can find, as well as civil society organisations, NGOs, not-for-profit organisations, and disadvantaged local community groups.
6. Season to taste with appropriate links with industry.

Firmly mix your ingredients until they turn into an inspiring blend of local, national and international collaborations. Place this mix in a baking tray and cook in third level institution ovens at relatively low cost. The result - third level students and the community sector (with support from industry) working together to address the challenges facing society, locally and globally.

The Programme for Students Learning With Communities in the Dublin Institute of Technology was set up especially to cook up this concentrated dose of community-based learning/research (CBL/CBR). In the first two years of the programme 900 students on average each year have been well fed using this recipe.

An example of a perfectly baked recipe for change:

Home-Start Ireland is a voluntary organisation set up to support families with young children. In 2008 to celebrate its 21st birthday, Home-Start staff, families and volunteers collaborated with a dedicated DIT lecturer, 39 3rd year BA Early Childhood Education students, one fourth year BA Journalism student and a MA in Professional Design Practice student to write, edit, and design a publication *Tea and Friends*, documenting the experiences of mothers, fathers and volunteers involved in Home-Start over the years.

At the launch of *Tea and Friends*, DIT students shared how much they enjoyed this innovative learning experience and developed a greater appreciation of Home-Start's work. They also developed skills in research and interviewing techniques, gained

confidence, and learnt to be flexible and adaptable in communication as they encountered families of different cultures and backgrounds.

In turn, Home-Start received a beautiful publication to celebrate its birthday, which enables it to communicate more effectively the rich and meaningful work it carries out. Home-Start's work also became better known to a large body of Early Childhood Education students, important work which will remain with these students as they move into their professional careers.

In a follow-on article written by Tony Bates (founder director of Headstrong – the National Centre for Youth Mental Health), in the Irish Times (2009), he said '*Tea and Friends* reminds us all of what it means to feel like you are a part of a community'.

CBL projects like *Tea and Friends* benefit students, who develop 'a deeper understanding of course material, a better understanding of the complex problems people face, and an ability to apply course material to new situations and real world problems' (Hurd, 2008). Students develop a range of key transferable professional skills (increasingly a requirement of many Irish and international professional accreditation bodies) alongside their technical skills, while having the opportunity to gain insight into disadvantaged communities. The community can also benefit from the tangible end products delivered by the students, and from the long-term opportunity to influence higher education agendas through collaboration with students and staff.

Community-based research (CBR) offers the same benefits, such as through the research that DIT students carry out in collaboration with the LIFELINE project. The LIFELINE is a community-led project based in the Grangegorman area of Dublin's north inner city. Inspired by local resident Kaethe Burt O'Dea, the project involves piloting new ways of inner-city living and wellbeing, particularly through exploring the transitional use of the disused railway line in the area. Research themes for this project include preventative healthcare strategies, urban agriculture, industrial ecology, zero waste, biodiversity and eco-literacy. To date DIT students in chemistry, spatial planning, sustainable development, and architecture, both at undergraduate and postgraduate level, have been involved in contributing to this research.

Ultimately our recipe for change aims to energise all participants to work for social change. The recently launched National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 recommends that service-learning be expanded across a wide range of higher education programmes in Ireland, and provided that resources are delivered to back it up, then the scope for cooking up this recipe and effecting change will be maximised nationally. In this instance DIT's Programme for Students Learning With Communities, resourced effectively, can share its expertise, from its well stocked larder of experience.

See www.communitylinks.ie/slwc for more details.

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