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## Supporting Professionalism in Educational Development in Irish Higher Education

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## *Supporting Professionalism in Educational Development in Irish Higher Education*

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Keywords: Academic development, professionalism, third space, identity, community, reflection, research-informed

### **Abstract**

Higher education, in Ireland and globally, is undergoing profound change influenced by a variety of factors. In conjunction with these changes many initiatives to improve teaching and learning and the quality of graduates in higher education have been introduced in recent years. The changes and expansions in the sector has enabled growth of new roles in higher education described as '*third space*' professionals by Whitchurch (2008).

This paper describes the struggle of those in third space professions, such as academic development, to establish a professional identity in higher education. The benefits of these contemporary roles to higher education are discussed, while the circumstantial challenges presented to third space professionals in building collaborative relationships between academics and administration both internally and externally to the institution are acknowledged.

Finally the professional futures of academic developers are considered. This paper urges investigation into professional values of academic developers and the key strategies that might develop and sustain a community of academic developer professionals in Ireland. Also these approaches must acknowledge the dynamic and complex nature of higher education and academic development in order to survive into the future.

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# Supporting Professionalism in Educational Development in Irish Higher Education

## Contents

- Introduction ..... 3
- My professional role within higher education ..... 4
  - Challenges to newer professional roles in Irish higher education ..... 5
- Changing professional identities ..... 7
- Building an identity for educational developers ..... 10
  - Communities of practice in educational development..... 10
  - Educational developers as reflective practitioners ..... 12
  - Continuing professional development and research informed practice ..... 13
  - Irish educational developers in a changing environment ..... 14
- Conclusion: responding to challenges ..... 15
  - Professional futures of educational developers..... 16
- References ..... 18

## Introduction

Higher education, in Ireland and globally, is undergoing profound change influenced by a variety of factors including: economic importance of higher education graduates; rise of student numbers (Morley, 2003; Fitzmaurice, 2010), change of focus to a student centred approach to learning (Biggs & Tang, 2007); and moves towards ensuring quality of higher education (Watts, 2000). Ireland has recognised the significance of a strong graduate base for the economy establishing mechanisms to enhance quality, improve the student learning experience and research output (Hunt, 2011). It is against this background that recent initiatives to improve teaching and learning and the quality of graduates through educational development in higher education in Ireland have commenced (Potter & O'Farrell, 2009)

At national level, innovations for educational development in higher education were sparked in response to an Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development review of higher education in Ireland (OECD, 2004). In response to this the Higher Education Authority (HEA) of Ireland coordinated the release of strategic innovation funding (SIF) in 2005 (O'Connor & Chantler, 2011) to higher education institutions in Ireland. This funding aimed to enhance education and research, expand postgraduate education, and improve quality in teaching, support access and retention. A second cycle of SIF was released in 2008 to build on previously initiated projects and encourage greater inter-institutional collaboration within projects. The evaluation of the SIF projects (Davies, 2010) commends the achievements and indicates future directions for improvements; however future initiatives may be in jeopardy or considerably less well funded in light of the current economic downturn.

At my institution, Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) the Learning and Teaching Centre (LTC) was established in 1999, employing learning development officers to provide academic development to lecturing staff in order to enhance and develop pedagogical strategies. Two years later the institution recognised the significance of technology enhanced learning and set-up the Learning Technology Team (LTT) employing a number of eLearning development officers (learning technologists) to work alongside the existing Learning and Teaching Centre (LTC). More recently the LTT and the LTC merged to form the Learning, Teaching and Technology Centre (LTTTC) whose overall aim is to develop, support and facilitate good learning and teaching

practices across the Institute. The functions and roles of both learning and eLearning development staff have also merged, with roles having equal status and similar responsibilities in terms of learning and teaching development at the Institute.

It is a result of the initiatives mentioned above that I have come to work in the area of academic development specialising in technology enhanced learning in Irish higher education. In this paper I will explore professionalism and the professional identity of the educational developer, changing identities of professions in contemporary society and the challenges to being a professional in difficult economic circumstances. I will then investigate strategies of enquiry and development for professional identity including those of reflective practice, active participation in communities of practice, engaging in professional development and research activities. I will conclude by considering the virtues of professionalism and approaches that I and fellow educational developers can adopt in our journey towards professionalism.

### **My professional role within higher education**

Changes and expansion in higher education has enabled growth of new roles especially those associated with modern technology. Over the past eleven years my career has comprised of several positions including information systems engineer, information systems trainer, eLearning developer, eLearning project manager and presently learning development officer (more commonly known as academic developer). Many of these roles have presented themselves as opportunities for learning and growth, which I have wholeheartedly accepted. My career has been thoroughly stimulating and fulfilling but it has also presented challenges both professionally and personally along the way.

In my struggle to carve an identity I encountered a feeling, not alien to professionals like me (Canning, 2010) of not being able to find 'vocabulary' to describe my particular activities to others unfamiliar with newer burgeoning roles (Whitchurch, 2008). However over time I became conscious that my involvement in professional activities, projects and certain communities were aligning to the skills and attributes of the 'learning technologist' (ALT, 2010; Ellaway et al, 2006) despite having no formal job specification or title in this regard. More recently my role has evolved again, I now coordinate academic programmes, teach and

supervise postgraduate students in areas of academic practice. I recognise that while having the expertise of a learning technologist I now belong to the growing professional area of the educational (or academic) developer (Handal, 2008; Rowland, 2006). Currently I refer to my professional role as that of an 'educational developer' which encompasses duties I fulfil as a (1) lecturer in academic development, (2) by providing pedagogical and eLearning support to lecturing staff and (3) through coordination of educational development projects within DIT and in collaboration with partner institutions.

Flynn, Boon and Land (Boon, Matthew, & Sheward, 2010) describe themselves as educational developers and reveal the varying journeys that have led them into the field of academic development. According to Boon academic development is not an intentional career choice but a '*destination that seeks us*' (Boon, 2010, p. 7). Boon et al also describe their good fortune to enjoy roles that develop themselves personally and professionally and that are aligned with what they value as professionals. This links strongly with Palmer's (1998) assertion that acknowledging and discerning what is of value to one's self is important in leading a fulfilled and meaningful life. Similar to reflections in Breslow's article I feel that I am fortunate to have a role that enables me to "*live my values*" (2010, p. 35) which allows me to extend and deepen my knowledge, work creatively within my institution and other organisations and ultimately empower and prepare others with a disposition for lifelong learning (Nixon, 2008).

### **Challenges to newer professional roles in Irish higher education**

Numerous schemes of innovation both at national level and at institutional level sought to improve the quality of learning and teaching in Irish higher education. My current and previous professional roles were of direct consequence of funding into these project-based initiatives. As a result, I have collaboratively engaged with colleagues across Irish higher education institutions to lead and develop educational projects in the sector. This way of working is not unique to the Irish setting, Whitchurch's research (2008) reveals many roles in international higher education characterised by mixed teams of staff working on fixed-term projects. She refers to these roles as being located within the '*third space*' and identifies the benefits of this third space to higher education while also acknowledging the circumstantial challenges

presented to third space professionals in building collaborative relationships between academics and administration both internally and externally to the institution.

More recently, in the face of an Irish and global recession, measures have been taken to rationalise and cut costs in higher education (Hunt, 2011; DoF, 2009). The economic downturn has forced cuts to public funding in education, impacting on raising of ancillary fees for students, while also leading to the scaling back of human resources in higher education in an effort to cut costs. The Employment Control Framework for the Higher Education Sector (HEA, 2011b) resulting from the national moratorium on recruitment and promotions in the public service (DoF, 2009) has prevented the extension of contracts to those who have been employed through the previously mentioned SIF projects. This proves to be a challenging time for staff in project based roles, whose contracts are governed by short-term contracts, many of those involved in educational development roles as described in Whitchurch's (2008) third space.

Presently my colleagues and I are confronted with challenges of job insecurity in the Irish higher education sector. National recession and cut backs may hinder continuity of previously flourishing educational development projects. Regardless of unstable circumstances there are HEA proposals (HEA, 2011a) prepared for consolidating and sustaining existing SIF projects aimed at mainstreaming educational development within higher education and continuing collaboration among Irish higher education institutions. Just as Hoyle & Wallace (2005) urge teachers to be eternally optimistic in enabling positive change for students, we as educational developers need to demonstrate our professional and active commitment to current and future academic development by engaging and consulting with higher management and colleagues in higher education so that best models for educational development are implemented.

Challenges to the role of the educational developer, therefore, include economic recession and the nature of project based roles within Irish HE. Research and consultative reports endeavour to inform a future of practice for educational developers. At this time it has never been more important for educational developers to question their present roles; to reflect on practice; plan for the future; and determine overall what it is to be a professional within educational development in this environment. This necessitates the examination of the origins and

characteristics of what it means to be professional and look at the ways that professionalism is changing in this contemporary era.

### **Changing professional identities**

Traditionally the characteristics of the professions included a specialist knowledge base, the ideal of service with an emphasis on a code of ethics (Goode, 1969). The intellectual technique of the professional was acquired through specialist training (Crook, 2008) which strengthened the social and economic position of the professions. Knowledge was inaccessible to those other than within the professional community, giving professions such as medicine and law considerable authority and providing professionals with a '*self-aggrandisement*' (Hoyle & Wallace, 2005, p. 168) separating them from laity. However due to political and market changes over the past forty years (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009) political and public support for the traditional model of the professional has diminished (Hoyle & Wallace, 2005).

Professionalism and what constitutes being professional in contemporary society has been opened to significant debate and discussion. Many authors now call for those wishing to 'be professional' to engage in critical and constructive analysis of their professional practice, identity and values (Nixon, 2008). Freidson (2001) argues that professionals explore the underpinnings of high level and formal theories of knowledge and challenging abstract concepts in their quest for professionalism. Other changes have contributed to the shift in the perceptions of professionalism, phenomena such as the rise of the information age has provided the non-professional with access to specialist types of knowledge; commonly called the democratisation of knowledge (Keen, 2007). Ordinary citizens now have access to previously specialist types of knowledge and importantly have the means by which to construct their own structure of knowledge (Crook, 2008): this presents many challenges to professional knowledge.

In higher education many authors including Hargreaves & Shirley (2009) and Enders (2000) consider how more market and state control in higher education has resulted in increased control of the performance of academics. Power (2008) presents how the managerial culture of the audit challenges the traditional autonomy of the professional leading to constant focus on



accountability. Quality assurance measures and administration present many challenges for academics with increased workload in addition to research and teaching functions contributing to higher levels of complexity within academic professions (Barnett, 2008). Nonetheless Barnett (2008) highlights the benefits of certain accountability measures such as quality assurance enabling more transparent codes of practice. New measures for quality assurance have resulted in roles and projects that develop and enhance teaching practices and student experience in higher education bringing about positive change and benefitting the student clientele of higher education and ultimately feeding social and economic agenda (Hunt, 2011).

Contrary to the attention on the outwardly accountable professional, Day and Sachs (2004) outline an alternative discourse of professionalism which places emphases on the intrinsic development of the professional, and collaborative and cooperative action amongst professionals. Nixon (2008) argues that while government policy forces certain change processes on academic practitioners, professional change and development must largely come from within and involve a sense of purposefulness and commitment from the professional: “academic practitioners need to constitute not only a changing profession but a learning profession” (Nixon, 2008, p. 15).

Both Nixon (2008) and Palmer (1998) urge that we demonstrate integrity, acknowledge our values, assert a commitment to practice and make explicit the moral bases of that commitment and the values that sustain our professionalism. Professionalism based on virtues gives direction, inspiration and incentive leading to a fulfilled and flourishing professional life (De Ruyter, 2003). In agreement with this Nixon (2008) emphasises the significance of practicing a virtuous disposition and the qualities of truthfulness, respect, authenticity, magnanimity amongst other professionals, stakeholders and communities we engage in. Discussion of professional values among professional communities is vital and Fitzmaurice (2010) advocates open discussion among professionals on the importance of values in academic practice. Consistent with this Troman (2006) argues for debate on values that underpin professionalism leading to socially constructed and established concepts of professionalism providing greater meaning to the professional community. This facilitation of critical discourse within the

professional community confirms a commitment to discipline and a pledge to better practice. Later in this paper I will explore how I and other educational development professionals participate in communities of practice in pursuit of developing our professional practice.

Discussions of what it is to be a professional in complex higher education environments are prevalent (Nixon, 2008) (Barnett, 2001) with Whitchurch & Gordon (2010) arguing that academic and professional identities have become increasingly dynamic and multifaceted. Many influences including government led quality control demands, institutional policy demands, innovations in technology and knowledge working have established new professions and working practices in higher education. Roles specialising in information technology, business, student support and educational development have grown rapidly (Whitchurch, 2010). The working patterns of professionals in these roles are dynamic, as they tend to needs across the institutions, engaging with stakeholders from different professional groups and collaborating with partners outside the institution. These are blended professionals working within the third space (Whitchurch, 2008) bringing experience from varied backgrounds, establishing and developing partnerships with academic colleagues.

Whitchurch (2008) acknowledges the challenges for third space professionals endeavouring to work laterally across disciplines and academic boundaries building collaborative relationships in order to progress projects. Whitchurch & Gordon (2010) portray the diversification and complicated nature of contemporary professional identities in higher education and urge for agency and active involvement in developing the profession from within. Taking on board this counsel, it is important that educational developers in Ireland seek out opportunities to engage in discussion and form identity through a sharing of professional practice and critical reflection with others who share their workplace (Jawitz, 2009). Meaningful participation in communities of practice will lead to the development of professional identity (Wenger, 1998) furthering the development and growth of the educational developer as a professional thus impacting positively on Irish higher education. Indeed there are many strategies for growth of professional identity and nurturing of professionalism which I will endeavour to now examine.

## **Building an identity for educational developers**

In Ireland, we are starting to demarcate the role of the educational developer, and the part people in that role play in developing learning and teaching practices in HE. As educational development is a relatively new concept in Ireland (O'Farrell, 2008) job roles and titles are often loosely defined and available for specific durations of time. This resonates strongly with Whitchurch's (2008) suggestion of the third space professional being characterised by mixed teams of staff working on short term projects. As a solution Potter & O'Farrell (2009) urge the development of a description of professionalism for educational developers through investigation and critical assessment of purpose and practice of our roles.

Despite recent shifts to a more externally enforced management and accountable approach to professionalism (Hoyle & Wallace, 2005) educational developers as newer professionals have yet to be directed by self-regulated codes of practice or government led regulations. Perkins (2001) asserts that newer professions sharing specialist skills sets, but without guiding principles or assembled ways of working often form more democratic associations or communities in order to learn, share and solve problems of practice. In Ireland educational developers including those in academic development and learning technology roles have voluntarily formed communities of practice (Wenger, 1998). Associations such as the Educational Developers of Ireland Network (EDIN) and the Irish Learning Technology Association (ILTA) have developed from the necessity of discussing and developing practice with colleagues involved in similar roles. Through sharing of practice, problems are solved, new knowledge is acquired and fundamentally a sense of trust is developed amongst colleagues as they endeavour to determine a professional status.

## **Communities of practice in educational development**

The EDIN network is a self-formed community sharing concerns for academic practice, engaging in critical reflection on academic practice in higher education in Ireland in order to improve teaching and learning practices. EDIN's community members have a less than formal commitment to professional development, believing it to be an intrinsic part of growth and development for a professional career. This is demonstrated by EDIN's attempt as a community to form an identity through the pursuit of collaborative reflective writing enabling the

development of a shared identity and also supporting individual work of members (Potter & O'Farrell, 2009). O'Farrell (2008) describes the activity of writing as a means to collaborate and engage members of the community in reflective practice on their function and professional practice. Badley (2009) agrees on the importance of academic writing and connective essaying as a potential useful means in making further contributions to knowledge and to new educational practices. This shared practice through writing promotes honest dialogue and collegial discourse among practitioners, an activity that Palmer (1998) believes to be important. This shared experience of identity formation is a process that is in a constant state of 'becoming' rather than in a state of 'being' according to O'Farrell (2008).

Jawitz's study (2009) reveals a group that associated identity formation through engagement in a community of practice. Wenger (1998) asserts that identity is built around social engagement and is constantly renegotiated as individuals move through different forms of participation "building an identity consists of negotiating the meanings of our experiences of membership in social communities" (Wenger, 1998, p. 145). Canning (2010) similarly discusses academic coordinators becoming a tribe of their own, developing their own community of practice from within. In the field of educational development I participate as a member in many communities of practice, in Ireland and internationally, including: Educational Developers Ireland Network (EDIN) and the Irish Learning Technology Association (ILTA) and the Association for Learning Technology (ALT). Through these communities I acquire important opportunities to communicate with similar professionals, interpreting knowledge and beliefs which emerge from our activities and sharing meanings of frequently experienced situations and practices. Taking into account Wisker's report on the EDIN network (Potter & O'Farrell, 2009), deeming the continued development of educational developer networks as crucial, it is essential we sustain our inherent motivation as third space professionals and persist in seeking space for these communities to prosper and develop.

Currently educational development within higher education is affected by wider political and economic problems (HEA, 2011b). Communities of practice can assist in solving these broader problems by actively debating the cultures of higher education and where they stand in relation

to them. Trusting and virtuous friendships (Nixon, 2008; Sachs, 2003) have been developed amongst members of the EDIN and ILTA communities of practice through the sharing of authentic practice. These relationships of virtue (Nixon, 2008) involve us in a commitment to sustaining one another in this struggle, taking time and listening to one another, investing in positive relationships with colleagues and stakeholders. It is within a safe trusting environment we are encouraged to take risks, reflect and try new approaches to practice (Fitzmaurice, 2010).

In a safe setting learning can become one of the communities principle enterprises, initiating experiments in which associated risks are not a threat to membership and does not imply exclusion (Wenger, 1998). Within the Irish context a trusting collegial positive community of educational developers and learning technologists has resulted in the formation of successful collaborative projects. One such project, the Dublin Regional Higher Education Alliance (DRHEA, 2009) has stimulated cross-institutional collaboration and sharing of eLearning practice, providing support for academics in incorporating innovations in eLearning into teaching practice. This has led to the expansion of the 'DIT eLearning Summer School' now accessible to academics across the Dublin region<sup>1</sup>.

### **Educational developers as reflective practitioners**

In the classical professions, reflection on theoretical and real issues is deemed essential (Crues & Crues, 2006). Power (2008) emphasises the importance of reflective investigations leading the professional to develop a greater understanding and better contribution to professional life. Through examination of inner elements and issues that filter down from international and government policy, the professional becomes knowledgeable in thinking and acting critically and empowered to tackle the wider challenges constructively (Power, 2008).

Critical reflection has clear emancipatory objectives (Sachs, 2003) and enables the discovery of the authentic voice (Brookfield, 1995). Morley (2003) recommends that professionals develop individual learning strategies to becoming self-observant and indeed Nixon's (2008) series of questions to academic practitioners could be used as useful scaffolding for an ethical self-audit

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<sup>1</sup> The Dublin Institute of Technology's eLearning Summer School was awarded first prize as an example of best practice in engaging academics in the use of technology enhanced learning UCISA, Dec 2011, ([http://www.ucisa.ac.uk/en/groups/new\\_layout\\_SSG/News/2011-12-07Engagingwinner.aspx](http://www.ucisa.ac.uk/en/groups/new_layout_SSG/News/2011-12-07Engagingwinner.aspx)).

aiding reflective practice. Reflection-on-practice, solving problems collaboratively and teasing out new ideas requires time and provision of appropriate supports (Trevitt & Perera, 2009). Concurring with this Edwards & Andrews (2008) encourage the allocation of time and space to enable critical reflection on one's professional identity and to work towards solving a professional '*restlessness*'

EDIN's collaborative writing activities encourages educational developers to reflect critically on practice (Potter & O'Farrell, 2009). Similar to Potter & O'Farrell (2009), Baguley & Brown (2009) refer to the clear link and importance of reflection in order to build the sense of identity and belonging to community of learners. The sharing of narratives often originating in problematic situations and the essential task of interaction with appropriate research literature makes connections used to enhance self-awareness and develop a shared knowledge and greater understanding of practice. As an educational developer I strongly believe that through awareness of my professional values and reflection on my current practice that I am better prepared for a challenging future in educational development. In a time of job uncertainty I feel encouraged by Nixon's persuasive stance that professionals work past the limitations of working conditions and sustain a commitment to practice influenced by moral values inherent within us. Through deliberate reflective practice I am consciously guiding my own professional metamorphosis and have a commitment to educational development in a purposeful way.

### **Continuing professional development and research informed practice**

Lunt (2008) asserts a numbers of strategies for development of the professional: that peer-professional discussion take place; joint problem solving; and that continuing professional development (CPD) be engaged with. Morley (2003) describes CPD as the systematic maintenance for professional learning. Day & Sachs (2004) also state that CPD is no longer an option but an expectation of all professionals to deepen knowledge and skills and stay abreast of important developments for improvement in practice.

Academic practitioners are a learning profession (Nixon, 2008) and higher education institutions should be involved in cultivating learning environments for professional development (Trevitt & Perera, 2009). Eraut (2004) emphasises that professionals continually

learn on the job but unless time is deliberately set aside then learning may not be integrated into general practice. This seems especially important in a time where space and time for learning is diminishing due to work intensification and diminishing resources (Trevitt & Perera, 2009).

Sachs (2003) urges professionals to seek and create spaces for action and debate. Similarly Whitchurch (Whitchurch, 2008) pushes third space workers to be active in seeking appropriate professional development opportunities. We as educational developers are burgeoning third space professionals without previous professional customs, consequently our development needs should be discussed and highlighted from within the community and appropriate directions for development sought out.

To date the educational developer and learning technologist communities in Ireland have been agents of their own development organising peer-discussion of practice, engaging in collaborative writing activities and organising annual conferences to encourage dissemination of practice and issues in pedagogy and technology enhanced learning. Many Irish educational developers and learning technologists are engaging in formal academic research studies on their professional areas via Master's and Doctorate programmes. Sachs (2003) encourages research informed practice, actively producing knowledge about teaching contributing to their own and others professional development. Hoyle & Wallace (2005) echo this argument recommending that reflective practice, work of communities of practice, professional development and research all lead to dissemination and sharing in order to transcend time and perpetuate good practice.

### **Irish educational developers in a changing environment**

In a dynamic environment, with fewer resources and time, it is vital that academic developers and learning technologists continue to value and recognise the importance of ongoing professional development in continuing much valued efforts (Nixon, 2008). We also need to engage higher education managers in discussion on our professional development needs so that best practice continues in carrying out roles and responsibilities. Indeed the Higher Education Authority of Ireland already recognise and commend the work of projects such as the

Learning Innovation Network Project<sup>2</sup> and state that pooling of resources and establishing networks are critical to ensuring that Ireland's higher education institutions thrive in the competitive, global environment of the 21st century (O'Connor & Chantler, 2011). Managers in Irish higher education need to recognise the importance of third space professionals and continue to support them with appropriate time and resources into the future to ensure a budding profession.

Most challenging of all is the current economic climate which has forced cost-cutting measures issued through directives such as the Employment Control Framework (HEA, 2011b) and the Hunt Report (2011). These directives have immediate impact on the futures of academic developers and learning technologists in Irish higher education. However I believe that through these challenges, professional identity can be strengthened and by engaging in reflective practice and discursive creation (Barnett, 2008) in our communities of practice we are cementing our commitment to roles in educational development and making best practice plans for those we serve in Irish higher education.

### **Conclusion: responding to challenges**

Being an educational developer in socially and economically challenging times is undoubtedly an arduous task. Nixon (2008) warns that steadily increasing insecurity could make it impossible for higher education professionals to achieve a strong commitment to roles. Newer professions in higher education might be marginal but are essential to the processes of institutions (Oliver, 2002) and new understandings are required on the part of managers, about the contribution of these informal spaces and networks to the processes of the institution. It will be a critical challenge for senior managers to shift attention from control mechanisms to understanding how to enable and facilitate the effective performance of third space professionals (Whitchurch & Gordon, 2010).

Despite difficult times the development of academic practice and enhancement of learning in Irish higher education looks bright. The Hunt Report (2011) recommends that Irish higher

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<sup>2</sup> The Learning Innovation Network is an Irish higher education collaborative project pooling resources among Irish institutions facilitating academic development of staff.



education students experience excellent learning and teaching informed by up-to-date research, facilitated through a high-quality learning environment. The consultation document for the 'National Academy for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning' (HEA, 2011a) demonstrates the commitment of the Irish Higher Education Authority to pursuing advancements in teaching and learning. This process so far has engaged with all stakeholders ensuring opportunities for third space professionals to exercise agency in discussions (Whitchurch, 2010).

Badley (2009) encourages critical debate where we shape and re-shape ourselves as professionals within higher education. Important to this is our disposition to respond to change (Barnett, 2008). As professionals we need to be creative and to develop a "*professional imagination to face challenges of professional life*" (Power, 2008, p. 144). We need to articulate responses to change and be agents of transformation into the future.

### **Professional futures of educational developers**

As educators we need to continue to be sincere, attentive, honest, courageous and compassionate in our endeavours (Nixon, 2008). It is necessary to accept that our emergent professional area is an uncertain one but through self-study and examining our identity and integrity, we can as suggested by Palmer (1998), reclaim a sense of vocation and define a commitment to practice and discipline. We need to engage in an eternally optimistic attitude (Hoyle & Wallace, 2005) embracing doubt and uncertainty and continue to identify it as '*provocative, enriching, challenging and encouraging*' (Potter & O'Farrell, 2009, p. 106).

Developing a professional identity and an understanding of practice in the context of the changing society in which we live is a trajectory (Wenger, 1998) which demands commitment in terms of intellectual endeavour, time and energy. I have attempted to explore and discuss several key strategies underpinning professional development for educational developers in higher education which I believe to be:

- providing opportunities for professional dialogue
- promoting collaboration and sharing of practice

- creating an environment of trust and mutual respect
- creating a culture of inquiry and reflection
- developing a realistic understanding of how external realities affect what we can do.

In building professionalism for educational developers in Irish higher education we cannot depend on a single model but instead seek to develop approaches which acknowledge the dynamic nature of our practice, the complexity of the third space in which we work and seek to carve a commitment to our own continuing professional development. As Barnett (2008, p. 206) affirms “*the professional is a living project in creation*”.

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