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Enhancing academic currency by the ‘Visiting Lecturer’ programme

Tadhg Walshe

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Introduction

Most lecturers in 3rd level educational institutions realise that they need to maintain academic and professional currency; they need to research and refresh if they are to be properly relevant to students and to make their jobs fulfilling. How can we stay abreast of our subjects and deliver lectures that engage the interest and participation of our student audience? Take a subject like ‘Building Management’; since I joined the staff of Bolton Street many years ago, I have been grappling with how to make my ‘Management’ lectures interesting and useful, and so ensure a ‘captive’ audience in the classroom!

From the start I was aware that building management – and construction generally – was greatly influenced by developments in technology. But up until the 1980s, when many building contractors still directly employed most of their workforce, building sites seemed to be flooded with operatives. Specialisation started in earnest then and developments in construction technology – especially in plant and equipment – accelerated at a pace never experienced before.

This pace of development during the past two decades has made it difficult for Management lecturers to keep up with changes in construction technology and management practice. Management was not really judged to be a discipline or an academic subject then, but now, like the established disciplines, it has become increasingly necessary for Building Management lecturers to specialise and to focus on branches of construction technology, management and administration.

In common with other civil engineers of my vintage, my professional and teaching strengths stemmed more from experience of management-in-practice in the construction industry than from my academic studies. Whilst I undertook a ‘taught’ Master’s degree in engineering soon after completing my primary degree, I was not properly conversant with quantitative ‘research methods’ or focused literature reviews.

My contact with the construction industry and the professions was to become important in keeping up-to-date with practice. When I first started to invite ‘visiting lecturers’ into my classes more than 25 years ago, I did not know then how significant these ‘visitors’ were to become in my own as well as my students’ professional and academic development.

College/industry liaison

Educational institutions must continue to reach out to the outside world of arts and commerce and industry and engage with them as regards ideas and ways of doing business. The ‘Visiting Lecturer’ programme was guided by a perceived need for a two-way interaction between the college and industry outside.

Members of DIT staff have for decades been leaders in innovations, technologies, design as well as in the arts and crafts – individuals and teams who pushed back knowledge boundaries and influenced the direction of people, societies and businesses.

Bolton Street has during this time liaised with industry and the professions; and almost 200 ‘Visiting Lecturers’ – many leading graduate employers – professionals, managers and doctors, government ministers, senators and civil servants came quietly to Bolton Street and presented to students as well as staff and led seminar discussions on a wide range of topics and issues. Each one was an important ‘research’ source, a way of keeping up-to-date with ‘practice’ and each one benefited from the contributions and interactions with students.

Education and training for industry

The building industry is still a male bastion, and so the late Dr Anthony Clare came here in 2000 and spoke about ‘Masculinity in Crisis’ and how the shrinking male sexuality might impact on this industry.

The very much alive Frank McDonald made many contributions to large audiences in Bolton Street from the early ‘The Destruction of Dublin: The Construction of Dublin’ to his recent talk on property developers in ‘The Builders’ which highlighted milestones impacting on our infrastructure.

We need to be constantly reminded of what Niamh Brennan had to say in her eloquent and forceful presentation to an overflowing theatre of students (and some staff) on what constitutes good governance in business and in the public service.

For 25 years – without fail – Kevin Kelly and Tom Costello (bosses of John Sisk and one of our larger graduate employers) presented to students and staff on construction contracting in Ireland and abroad. These presentations and notes continue to influence the direction of my lecture programme in Construction Administration and Management.

Structural engineer John O’Conner (Sinead’s and Joe’s father) – one of my earliest annual ‘speakers’ discussed the roles of the professional and the administrator and the responsibilities and liabilities flowing these various roles.

Architect and author David Keane – a regular contributor in the 1980s and 1990s – explained the architect’s roles in a building contract and the very wide powers of the

architect even through not being a party to the contract. During this time he was writing what became the influential book *The RIAI Contracts: A Working Guide*.

The presentations by the inimitable scholarly lawyer Max Abrahamson throughout the 1990s were annual highlights. He presented on forms of contract to large audiences for 12 years and responded to their many queries. I remember his response to the question ‘Why are written contracts not short and simple?’ with the statement that ‘One should make things as simple as possible but no simpler’!

As regards the ‘Education Market’, Fergal Quinn’s presentation influenced my thinking (and that of others) with his response to the question: ‘Who are DIT’s customers’?

These customers – the students themselves – consistently gave very high ratings to Jim Horan, Head of Architecture on his interesting ‘subjects’ and delivery style.

Without the insights gained from the visiting lecturers I would not have been equipped – indeed it is unlikely that I would be asked – to chair the national Task Force on ‘Education Training and Recruitment’ for the Forum for the Construction Industry. This task force (and others) was charged with implementing the Recommendations of the Strategic Review of the Construction Industry and was completed early in this decade.

Are we educators or trainers?

In our programmes in the Faculties of the Built Environment and Engineering we are primarily preparing our students for the job, but we do also, I believe, to some extent at least, ‘educate them for life’. As we become more mature our interest in ‘life’ tends to grow as our interest in the ‘job’ wanes. We should, I believe, have a (compulsory) Module: ‘Professional and Business Ethics’ in the final year of our degree programmes; because we should be engaged in an ongoing debate with students on what constitutes ‘good’ as opposed to ‘bad’ business practices.

The library – a place to reflect

To stay interested and on top of his subject the lecturer needs constant ‘refreshments’. At the beginning of my lecturing career in building and management subjects, text books were important in guiding me into proper qualitative and quantitative academic approaches, and learning about various schools of thought and theories. I soon began to realise the value of the other resources in the library.

‘Reading makes us erudite’, Jack Carney (a colleague and architect) said to me at the time. There is no doubt that the busy – yet quiet – college library is a wonderful place. For the student and lecturer, the daily papers and magazines, the journal articles and textbooks are essential to bring ‘quality’ to our studies. In this space we add to our knowledge of life itself, of the sciences of materials, design and analysis, construction technology and aesthetics, project viability and function, administration and management.

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We lecturing staff – teachers and researchers – must keep informed of theory and also continue to maintain our strong links with business, industry and other parts of the public service.

Note: Tadhg Walshe (SL1) retires this Summer

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