4 Discourse and Connectivity: Capturing the voice of educators

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Introduction

Events such as symposiums, conferences, and workshops provide excellent opportunities to disseminate research. The networking opportunities provided *vis-à-vis* informal conversations with like-minded individuals are invaluable. Attendees have the chance to share and discuss their values, beliefs, and experiences related to their practice. However, this networking is rarely formally recorded or disseminated to the participants or the wider education community.

In order to address this shortcoming the authors developed a mechanism to capture this valuable information through an innovative framework, which addresses the challenge of capturing multiple disparate voices and conversations by providing an approach that encourages collaboration, sharing and dialogue. The approach involves providing iterative opportunities to review and re-engage with the data as it emerges and evolves. The structure of the framework is transferable, and experiences to date would suggest it has the potential to provide a viable platform from which events such as these could increase capacity and improve sustainability.

In this chapter, a case study of the experience of adopting this approach at the International Conference for Engaging Pedagogy (ICEP) conference will be provided, followed by a description and an evaluation of the framework. The chapter concludes with reflections and recommendations for educational developers who are interested in adopting the framework for similar events.

The Background

This approach, a Framework for Capturing Informal Conversations (CIC Framework), is influenced by the theory of appreciative inquiry and it offers an opportunity to reposition current approaches to capturing the voice of Irish educators. Appreciative inquiry emphasizes reflection on our successful endeavours rather than deep analysis of our perceived problems and issues. The objective is not to ignore or gloss over problem areas, rather to re-balance the emphasis with the hope that a stronger more positive foundation will enable participants to 'dream' of alternative scenarios to the challenges they encounter as pedagogical practitioners. It is those very challenges and 'dreamed' alternatives that are discussed informally, but often not captured. The CIC Framework was conceptualised in order to record formally these often hidden or lost conversations,

with a view to using the analysis to inform and advance academic development initiatives such as conferences like ICEP.

Conferences are an integral part of academic life with participant roles varying from organizer to reviewer, to author, to listener/attendee, to presenter etc. These roles incorporate varying levels of authority at different stages in the conference lifecycle. In the early stages, the conference organizing committee and program committee are to the forefront ensuring that the logistics are in place and encouraging participation. As the submission deadlines approach, reviewers involved in the peer review process, and the refinement of conference thematic areas, are key players. The committee re-emerges in order to address the practicalities of hosting and managing the conference and to ensure that all delegates engage in the fullest manner with the final conference programme. For many people, both organizing and attending the conference, the informal activities are often as valuable as the formal paper presentations, with the opportunity to network and converse on a range of topics with colleagues and peers as beneficial as the formal presentations themselves.

The ICEP conference, which began in 2008 and is held annually in different locations, is one of many events occupying an already crowded space in the Irish higher education landscape. The steering committee for the conference was concerned that there seemed to be little difference between events, with most covering similar themes and utilising the same format. All appeared to encourage, yet ignore, the informal activities, such as the opportunities to network, that inevitably took place. In light of this, the ICEP committee conceptualised the CIC Framework so that participants at the 2010 ICEP conference would have a dedicated space to converse and informally share before the conference concluded. In facilitating this activity, the key questions for the organizers were (i) what shape would such a space take (ii) would participants be willing to engage (iii) how should their interactions be captured and (iv) how could we encourage ownership of the process and the end product i.e. their contributions. Engaging participants in a process that might encourage them to share and discuss their practice in a personal and emotional manner was a key concern. The decision to design a focus group to explore their motivations and challenges, referred to here as an armchair session, was approached with some apprehension, but also with an energy that sprang from recognition that the current de facto approach could be changed. The CIC Framework grew out of these initial concerns and discussions.

The CIC Framework is based on four key phases, but its value lies in the manner in which the cyclical and iterative nature of the Framework sustains and builds capacity for recurring academic development initiatives. Phase one is identifying the opportunity or problem that requires attention and re-direction; the second phase is about data collection i.e. where and how will collection of this valuable information be facilitated; phase three is analysis of the data; phase four closes the loop by disseminating the research and using it to inform future academic activities.

Case study

ICEP seeks to support lecturers in addressing the challenge of creating a dynamic and engaging learning environment. A key success factor in achieving this has been to offer practitioners an opportunity to share their experiences with each other. This chapter is offered as a tool to support other educational developers as they endeavour to sustain academic development initiatives, through devolving ownership of the initiative to the participants; in this way, the collective voice informs and directs, and by default sustains,

the initiative. We recommend this process with one specific caveat i.e. it is by its nature 'fuzzy' and 'messy'. It is proposed as a skeleton – the flesh on the skeleton lies in the case study, or each case study that uses this approach. It is iterative in nature and composed of several stages that may or may not overlap. Its cyclical nature further sustains the initiative.

Problem Definition: The opportunity

Our enterprise began with a meeting where we voiced our concerns about the future of ICEP. We had a collective desire to find a future for the ICEP Conference and to sustain ICEP in its transition from a local Irish conference to an international conference. We observed there were numerous competing conferences, for example, AISHE (All Ireland Society for Higher Education), NAIRTL (National Academy for Integration of Research, Teaching and Learning) and LIN (Learning Innovation Network) and that there was significant overlap between the themes that they and ICEP were attempting to address. We noted that the focus of many pedagogical conferences was on the 'what we do' and the 'how we do it' but that the 'why' was not the central question that we felt it should be. This observation led us to a philosophical debate about why we do what we do as pedagogical practitioners and about our desires to encourage practitioners to shift their thinking from pedagogic tools and resources to their personal values, beliefs and underlying motivation. This was not a trivial issue to address and as a first step we attempted to define the problem.

Although approaches to defining problems are outlined in the literature (Ritchie & Lewis, 2005; Silverman, 2006; Seale et al., 2007) they typically start by listing loosely defined problems, selecting one to address, and carefully refining it into a clear, concise problem statement. However, we soon realised the redundancy of this approach because we were inspired by appreciative inquiry and in that regard were more concerned with using the CIC Framework to create opportunities, rather than solve problems. We needed to shift our focus from problem to opportunity, thus providing ourselves with a focus that was motivated by a desire and an appetite to seek a more defined and sustainable future for the ICEP conference. The opportunity space that was unfolding was more amorphous than we expected and relied on group passion and commitment to challenge ourselves to improve something that was not necessarily broken, but could benefit from redefinition and focus. Our subsequent approach was inspired by appreciative inquiry in that we were 'dreaming' about a better future for ICEP. In the crowded space of Irish education conferences, the committee had to address the challenge of how to forge a worthwhile identity for ICEP. Through a series of discussions in early 2010, the team agreed on the broad scope of the core values which would underpin the CIC Framework. They included the following:

- ICEP would be a place where the voice of the educator would be paramount;
- the conversation that educators had would be the source for the future direction of ICEP;
- that we needed to facilitate and capture these conversations at ICEP2010 in order for attendees' voices to inform future ICEP conference themes;
- that if we were to get feedback from attendees, we needed to 'close the loop'. There had to be a meaningful return of results of that feedback, back to the original contributors;
- that the process, given the collective participation required, would naturally be 'fuzzy'. However, enabling and capturing the voice of the educator would be our starting point.

Data Collection: Pace, place and people

Information gathering was a pivotal point in our process. There was considerable debate on the merits of quantitative vs. qualitative analysis, the choice of which would ultimately determine our data-gathering methodology. Initially the team gravitated towards quantitative approaches with statistical analysis; however, one of the authors had recently been involved with an appreciative inquiry project, for which qualitative data formed the backbone. After lengthy discussions about their experience, and the richness of the data that could be captured using such an approach, the team agreed that a qualitative approach would lead to more insightful conclusions.

As is the norm for most conferences, the themes for ICEP 2010 were chosen based upon what we envisaged educators would wish to discuss. Nonetheless, we were open to the possibility (and hoping) that the CIC Framework would facilitate attendees of 2010 identifying different views on what the themes should be for ICEP 2011.

ICEP 2010 was run as a one day conference with paper presentations by many of the attendees. In addition, attendees were assigned into one of four groups at registration for participation in a focus group session. Group assignment was random, based on the attendee's name. These four groups were colour-coded and attendees would know to which group they were assigned by a colour-coded sticker on their name-badge. This had the additional benefit that they would also be able to identify fellow group members throughout the day. An information sheet was also included in the registration pack to inform the attendees about the plan for the group session. Early in the day, during the keynote, we drew attention to our plans. We announced that we would be running parallel focus groups after the last presentation in the afternoon; there were various reminders of our plans throughout the day. Concerns were expressed that attendees would leave after the last talk of the day, so we employed a range of methods to incentivise their staying. These included presentation of the best-paper award after the focus groups had concluded, accompanied by a wine and cheese reception, followed by a free coach transfer back to the city. In the focus groups, attendees were encouraged to share their opinions and views; we hoped that the availability of a space and an opportunity for them to discuss their roles would be motivational.

We chose focus groups as a means to collect our data because they facilitated the gathering of in-depth information through open ended discussions. We felt it was important not to stifle contributions, but rather to stimulate them by using loosely defined headings to guide the discussion. The headings for each focus group were based on earlier conference themes and paper contributions. The advantages of the topic heading selection were twofold. Firstly, these topics were the focus of presentations and general discussion during the conference. Secondly, given that the attendees had chosen to attend a conference with these themes, they had an inherent interest in them and had something to contribute. We believed that the facilitator in the groups should be unintrusive and should allow discussion to emerge and take its own direction. However, we also recognised that the facilitator was tasked with balancing their hands-off role with the need to keep the group broadly on track (Ritchie & Lewis, 2005). It was essential that all facilitators were fully briefed and aware of their role so that there was uniformity with regards to the data collection which would assist in the analysis phase. Additionally, it was noted that facilitators should be similarly passionate and familiar with the objective of the exercise, and committed to the ultimate aim of valuing and being true to the voices captured and to the role that this rich data might ultimately play in informing the challenge. In reality, facilitators allowed the conversations to go off in tangents under the broad structure of headings. Ultimately, the overarching objective was to allow

contributors a platform or an opportunity to do something they clearly wanted to do – have their voices heard.

We committed that anyone who contributed to the discussion would be recorded as having done so in a paper based on the output from the focus groups; the content and their voice therefore would be captured and published formally. Subsequently, the ICEP 2010 research paper was presented during a plenary session at ICEP 2011. All focus group contributors were acknowledged in the ICEP 2011 published proceedings. Anecdotally, many participants expressed a strong interest in the dissemination of the results of the focus groups in the form of this promised paper and the pledge proved to be a strong motivator for the authors to complete the analysis after the conference had concluded.

Attendance at the focus groups in the afternoon was excellent, with 75% of those who attended the conference remaining for the 20-minute session. Each focus group was assigned a facilitator and the audio for each of the four parallel groups was recorded. The facilitator, or an assigned scribe, captured key points on a flipchart. Although each discussion was opened up around the theme for that particular group, the discussions were allowed to take the direction dictated by the participants.

Once the focus groups concluded, the attendees returned to the main conference venue for a plenary where each facilitator reported a summary of the group discussions and findings. Following these contributions, a further 'Keep/Change' session took place. During this session, participants were encouraged to place post-it notes on flipcharts placed around the room, allowing them to record what they would like to keep and what they would like changed with regard to the conference. This offered another layer to the consultation and a further opportunity for voices to be heard, particularly in relation to the conference structure and approach.

Methods of Analysis: Immersion and analysis

Qualitative analysis provides an array of tools and approaches ideally suited to analysing and exploring complex media rich data. Our data were 'messy' data due to the natural way in which they were captured. The experience led us to endorse the sentiments of Spencer et al. (2005: 199) when they note that analysing qualitative data is challenging and '…requires a mix of creativity and systematic searching, a blend of inspiration and diligent detection'. In addition, we would suggest that commitment and endurance are also required. We were, as Gibbs (2007) proposes, using induction, as opposed to deduction, to move from initial specific observations towards broader generalisation and theories. We applied, as Spencer et al. recommended, diligent detection and inspiration, along with a sincere commitment to the voices of contributors, to search systematically for patterns or constructs (Gall et al., 2007) in order to work, in a bottom-up manner, towards theory generation. Some qualitative analysis traditions include ethnographic accounts: life histories and narrative analysis; content analysis; conversation analysis; discourse analysis; and grounded theory analysis. We were influenced by conversation analysis but essentially used grounded theory. Conversation analysis seeks to explore naturally occurring conversation and the manner in which the conversation flows. Though we had transcripts of the audio and we used these in our analysis, we frequently returned to the audio itself to explore, in a deeper manner, the flow and tone of the conversation. Although we had a collective body of knowledge regarding pedagogy, it was vital, in order to be true to our approach, that we did not initially engage in any focused or directed literature review. In this regard, our methodology was guided by Glaser (1978), who notes that the literature might 'desensitize' the researcher; in order to allow theory to

'emerge', it is best to keep an open and creative mind. Grounded theory is 'grounded in a set of real-world data', such as our data (Gall et al., 2007: 97). In analysing our data, we established categories and examined the frequency of occurrences within categories and associations between categories. We hoped that an emergent theory would bubble up to the surface as a result of data analysis through identifying categories and relationships (Ritchie & Lewis, 2005; Silverman, 2006; Seale et al., 2007). We spent prolonged periods of time, over many months, in the analysis phase. Working individually, notable points in the transcripts were flagged. Collectively, discussions ensued on the significance of the points noted. This allowed constructs to be derived from the data. We would estimate approximately half of the entire project time was devoted to this phase. In addition to our monthly meetings of approximately four or five hours, over a nine month period, we each spent individual time analysing and coding the vast data generated. We used Atlas.ti to code, annotate and capture the complex relationships in the data. Despite having the full transcripts, access to the audio tracks was useful at times, in order to capture exactly what the participants were trying to say and the context in which they were saying it.

The main output from this analysis phase was four groupings into which the major part of the discussion could be generally categorised. Earlier published conference proceedings have presented our findings in detail (McNutt et al. 2011; O'Riordan et al., 2010.) Discussions under these four groupings were not broken down along the original four parallel session topics. Instead elements of each of these four groupings were found in the transcripts of each parallel session. The groupings the authors identified were:

The Role of the Educator – a substantial amount of the discussion in the various groups centered around the motivations and beliefs of the educators themselves.

The Learner Profile – participants were keen to discuss the learners themselves. In particular, issues around their motivations, age-profiles and ethnic backgrounds were all discussed.

Assessment – a recurring theme in the discussions was that of assessment. Some discussion was on how best to assess, but much of the debate centered around the observations that learners were perceived to be assessment driven. There was general agreement that this was a bad phenomenon and that educators needed to address this.

Teaching methods – overlapping somewhat with assessment; discussions under this category centered on how to encourage deeper learning, to better engage students and how to use technology effectively in the classroom.

These groupings formed the streams for ICEP 2011, under a conference theme of 'The Changing and Evolving Roles of Educators'.

One of the more positive results from the focus groups was that these four themes appeared in all of the group discussions. It was also striking that some of the groups did not adhere to the group's assigned discussion theme for very long, mirroring the observations of Ritchie & Lewis (2005). For example, our transcripts show that one of the groups veered off-topic almost immediately to topics they wished to discuss with hardly a mention of the original topic. These tangential discussions were exactly what the authors were hoping for as they clearly reflected the issues that the participants were most interested in addressing.

Methods of Dissemination: connection and closure

When disseminating research findings, consideration must be given to where the target audience might be, and what resources are available for dissemination. For us, the choice was obvious; we chose ICEP 2011 to disseminate the research, and to seek further feedback. We used a plenary session at the conference to present the research, in the form of a co-authored paper, and to remind the audience what the aim behind seeking their input was and what the research focused on. We then invited their feedback to the paper during the poster sessions over tea and coffee. We felt it was vital to close the loop and conclude the process by gathering the views of the stakeholders with regards whether the framework had resulted in a satisfactory plan of action for ICEP. The importance of closing the loop cannot be overstated, particularly if one is employing an iterative cycle such as we were. In ICEP 2011, we were able to point to how the feedback of attendees was made concrete by our shared paper and by using the findings to determine the new conference themes themselves. This made it considerably easier to seek further feedback in ICEP 2011. In an ideal world, there would not be significant changes in terms of the make up of the group between the collection of data at ICEP 2010 and the reporting at ICEP 2011. Given the changing nature of conference attendees from year to year, this was not entirely possible; however, online publication of the shared paper allowed attendees from ICEP 2010, who could not return in 2011, to see the results of their input.

The Framework for Capturing Informal Conversations (CIC): A reflection

This CIC Framework has evolved through a planned process but the approach does not possess sharp edged boundaries. Though key tasks, phases and a process associated with the framework can be provided, we suggest that these elements in isolation offer only an artificial lifeless abstraction of the actual event. The overarching spirit of sharing and dialogue is for us the most salient feature; this is what we recognise as 'an eternal conversation about things that matter, conducted with passion and discipline' (Palmer, 2007: 106), that must be nourished and supported to enable an holistic approach to addressing the myriad of issues confronting higher education.

The CIC Framework can be represented as a series of interdependent phases gathered around one central theme and objective (see Figure 1). Each phase informs and shapes the next, building on the experiences and outputs as delicate contributions that must be treated with respect and sensitivity. Ownership and authenticity were important hallmarks of the engagements that continued and circulated through each of the phases and were the essential lifeblood necessary to sustain the energy and enthusiasm behind the endeavour. The CIC Framework, in essence, emerged and was nurtured by a desire to facilitate and encourage the use of informal conversations to inform, guide and develop a sense of ownership for ongoing academic development initiatives.

The starting point in this instance was a group of like-minded and like–motivated individuals who dreamed of 'more' with a view to augmenting or enhancing existing arrangements. Through the process, the voice of the practitioner was centre stage. This message was reiterated throughout the day of the conference and supported by the opportunities presented there to meet, share and commune at a pace conducive to conversation and discussion. Analysis of the data gathered required dedication and diligence in order to be true to the information and those who had provided it. The final phase involved reconnecting with the participants once more to seek their views and reflections. We see the CIC Framework as a four phase approach as represented in Figure 1.
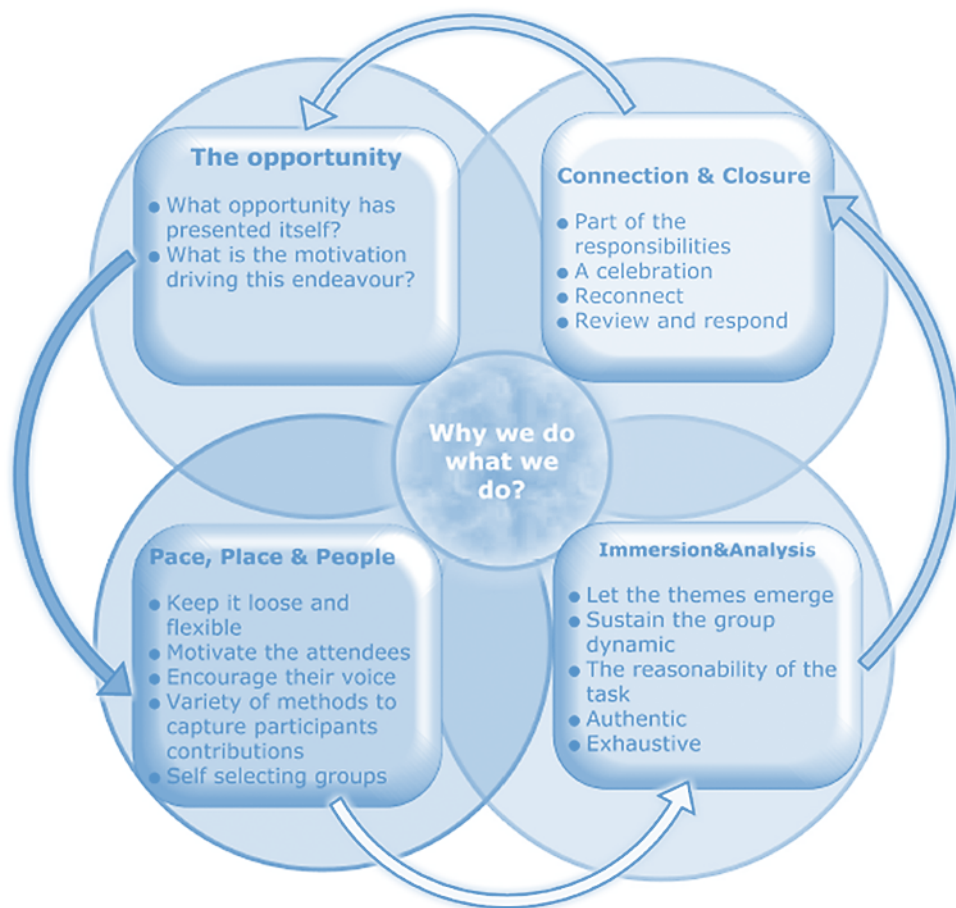
Figure 1: CIC Framework

Recommendations for Educational Developers

We believe this framework offers a mechanism to devolve ownership of a development initiative to academic members. It does so by providing a systematic approach for encouraging and capturing shared dialogue. In this way, the initiative can be self-sustaining. In our experience, members are keen to have their voices heard and they are quite happy to take the ball and run with it. Rigid structure is not necessary and may even impede the process.

An overarching concern was gauging the success of the initiative. However, on reflection we recognised that the CIC Framework is a process in and of itself, and in addition to its outputs, could become an integral and defining characteristic of the ICEP conference.

Key recommendations for other educational developers include the need for a passionate and committed research team who are dedicated to remaining true to the voices of participants, and the pivotal role those voices can play in sustaining educational development initiatives. We cannot over-emphasize the sheer volume of data such an approach generates and the commitment required to fully unlock and do justice to the richness of this data. Equally essential is the requirement to close the loop and show contributors that their voices were heard, and more importantly, acted upon. This will continue to be evidenced in subsequent iterations of the initiative.

In conclusion, if we could distill some essential ingredients from our experience of the process with a view to guiding others, we would recommend the following:

- Build a good research team who are passionate and committed to their cause;
- Emphasise the group/collective - each team member must be selfless and put the needs of the group membership ahead of their own;
- Do not over-orchestrate the process;
- Be flexible - the stages are iterative - there are no hard edges;
- Trust in the members to take responsibility and ownership;
- Provide closure.

We would like to conclude by echoing Palmer's observation that surface discussions around 'tips, tricks and techniques … fail to touch the heart of a teacher's experience' (2007: 12). He suggests that 'good teachers possess a capacity for connectedness', and this has been our experience throughout this process (2007: 11). This framework supports this capacity for connectedness to facilitate deeper discussions which can drive ICEP and sustain its future relevance.

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Response to

Discourse and Connectivity: Capturing the voice of educators

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Every year, thousands of people attend conferences on learning, teaching and assessment in higher education with the aim of learning more, so they can make their personal contributions to enhancing the student experience. However, few attending adopt systematic approaches to ensuring that their being at a conference actually does make an impact, nor do conference organisers in the main establish means to ensure permanence of impact. In this chapter, colleagues associated with the International Conference for Engaging Pedagogy (ICEP) conference in Ireland set out to remedy this omission by developing and using a Framework for Capturing Informal Conversations (CIC framework) attempting to capture the outputs of both the formal and informal interactions using an appreciative enquiry approach. As a UK-based contributor to the ICED conferences, I had the opportunity to see at first hand how this multi-stage practical approach worked.

The originators use this framework to enable dreaming of alternative scenarios and envisioning better futures for staff and students, and the analyses undertaken *post hoc* enables them to postulate that such a methodology is readily transferable to other conferences with similar formats in other nations. The strength of the approach is that it is not excessively structured and enables productive fuzzy thinking, where the voices of educator participants are not silenced within the discourse of the imposed conference structure, but are heard then and thereafter. Providing social spaces with hospitality and opportunities for free conversations were highly productive, and effective interaction was fostered by mixing participants up in random allocated groups for discussions. The ultimate purpose was to associate the conference programme with continuity, coherence and connectedness.

The authors make a convincing case that such an approach could be more widely used at pedagogic conferences internationally, since it fosters a collegial and collaborative approach, making space for thinking and reflection within the event itself and subsequently. Reflective practitioners tend to be more effective as educational developers, change agents and supporters of student learning (McGill and Beaty, 2001). The building of communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) relies substantially on effective and active reflection in collegial environments, of the kinds proposed in this chapter.

The approach merits further research and it would be valuable to learn of the impact of rolling it out both within the ICEP community and within other educational development organisations worldwide.

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Section 2

Supporting Academic Development