How has my learning enabled me to create and share an animated video to assist Newly Qualified Teachers in the creation of a safe critical space for their students?

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Abstract

This paper presents my emergent living theory as it developed while I attempted to address my concern "How has my learning enabled me to create and share an animated video to assist Newly Qualified Teachers in the creation of a safe critical space for their students?"

I explore how my learning on the Masters in Education and Training Management (e-learning) has affected me both personally and professionally and how my learning has impacted the learning of others. In particular, I look at the role of critical pedagogy as it impacted my development of the video.

I document the creation and distribution of an animated video using the State package by Xtranormal, through one action reflection cycle.

I claim that through the use of an animated educational video, NQTs may engage critically with classroom management and in so doing improve their practice so that they can facilitate critical discourse among their students in a safe environment.

Keywords: Living Educational Theory; Critical Thinking; Emancipation; Animation; Video.

Introduction

In this paper I explore the development of my emergent living theory as I create and share an animated video to assist Newly Qualified Teachers in the creation of a safe critical space for their students. This paper charts the actions undertaken throughout the process of the animated video production and the research that affected those actions.

The process highlights the interlinking of my personal, pedagogical and political self in the creation of the video. Enmeshed within this interlinking is the common thread of my values. These values are the result of my own previous life knowledge and experience informing my pedagogy of the unique. The pedagogy of the unique is the "particular and distinctive constellation of values that motivates his/her [my] enquiry and that sets a distinctive context within which their [my] own enquiry proceeds" (Farren, 2007, p. 5).

In order to express the journey of the research process I have loosely divided the paper into two sections. The first explains the experiences and learning that shaped my values and the second documents how those values were realized in the production of the animated video. This division is intended to reflect my lived experience of the journey starting where I started and continuing from there.

Life knowledge, experience and learning

I am a teacher of twelve to eighteen year olds in an urban Irish co-educational vocational school. The school operates in a challenging environment against a backdrop of social deprivation, exacerbated by rising unemployment, government cutbacks and increasing hopelessness in the face of national difficulty following the Irish property and banking crash.

This environment creates conditions wherein ill-discipline may be considered commonplace resulting in elevated staff turnover. The negative impact of increased staff turnover is seen in a lack of continuity of care and resultant student disengagement. It is my belief that staff turnover would be reduced if staff were better able to maintain adequate self-care and were equipped with skills to ease issues of ill-discipline in their classrooms. This is particularly relevant in the case of Newly Qualified Teachers (NQTs – i.e. teachers in their first year post-qualification) as they are developing the skills to last them throughout their career. The real beneficiaries of the improved staff morale and reduced staff turnover are the students in our care, and it is to them that we owe our first duty as teachers.

Functioning within an area of social deprivation has heightened my sense of social justice and my belief in the emancipatory and transformative power of education. The school in which I teach is very different from the single sex convent school where I received my own secondary education. In some respects the differences are stark, for example in the area of staff turnover and the area of discipline. My experience at Secondary level was in the traditional vein of the "job for life" teacher, so that in some families there was an inter-generational experience of being taught by the same teachers. This situation was relatively common in secondary schools in Ireland although it is becoming less so as a result of recent

government policy which means that teachers will not receive tenure, part-time teachers will be redeployed on an annual basis and there will be a drastic cut in the employment opportunities for newly qualified teachers. Although some negatives may be perceived in the old system it is my belief that continuity and consistency benefits students, even when it is an average teacher for an extended period of time rather than an incredible teacher for a short burst of time (obviously, a struggling teacher would ideally be supported in improving their practice for the benefit of their students).

As an educator I could juxtapose the experiences of my students with my own experience as a student and recognise the factors that affected the differing outcomes common in the two environments. In my Masters in Education and Training Management (eLearning) studies at Dublin City University I encountered ideas from critical pedagogy. Critical pedagogy is a theory of education that positions the work of the classroom within society, promoting social justice. It encourages the critical reflection of students and teachers and works toward a democratic educational interchange.

Freire writes of the liberation of literacy and the politicization of education in the interest of keeping an oppressor-oppressed dynamic functioning within society (Freire 1974). This experience of language as a tool of oppression is one that I had encountered as a student of English literature. It reminded me of Shakespeare's Caliban "civilized" by the oppressive Prospero in The Tempest. As a student in University College Dublin, I had directed the play Translations[1] by Brian Friel and I always felt that the issue of language as dealt with in this play effectively highlighted the cultural link between a language and a people. Perhaps I am more acutely aware of the interplay of language and identity as a teacher of both Irish (Gaelic) and English. The work of Critical Pedagogy may speak to me through a post-colonial echo between the Brazilian and Irish experience.

The teaching of the Irish language is often politicized in Ireland and opinion can be divided between those who feel that teaching the language is a waste of time as it has no economic value, those who feel strongly that it is our strongest link to our pre-colonial identity and those who do not have strong feelings one way or the other. My decision to study and then to teach Irish has forced me to articulate a political position around language and culture. I exist between the English and Irish speaking communities. On the one hand I am a fluent Irish speaker with a profound love for the language and at the same time I am from an urban English-speaking household and have no association with the other cultural traditions, for example, traditional Irish music, dancing and Gaelic games that are often part of the community experience of the scattered Irish speaking population.

I feel that the Irish language is a connection to a past that predates the arrival of the English language by around sixteen hundred years. A knowledge of the language allows an Irish person to access that past for themselves rather than relying on translation in order to read their culture. In this instance I mean reading as defined by Freire: "Reading is re-writing

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[1]   Translations is a three–act play by Brian Friel set in the fictional town of Ballybeg in 1833. Although the play is written in English, it is portrayed through the action of the play that some are speaking Irish and the Irish–speaking and English–speaking characters cannot understand each other. The backdrop of the play is the translating of the Irish placenames into English. The play highlights the significance of language as an expression of cultural identity.

what we are reading. Reading is to discover the connections between the text and the context of the text, and also how to connect the text/context with my context, the context of the reader" (Shor and Freire, 1987, p. 11). Freire's reading requires literacy as the point of access, whereas for me, language is the point of access in this instance.

When I completed my studies and started to teach both Irish and English in a school with a significant literacy problem, the importance of literacy to ensure practical engagement with society superceded my political interest in the Irish language and allowed me to connect with Freire's work in terms of literacy rather than language.

In particular, I looked at how the denial of literacy can manifest as a denial of citizenship, as Freire writes:

> One of the violences perpetrated by illiteracy is the suffocation of the consciousness and expressiveness of men and women who are forbidden from reading and writing, thus limiting their capacity to write about their reading of the world so they can rethink their original reading of it. Even if illiteracy does not wipe out the socially created relationships between language, thought, and reality, it is a handicap that becomes an obstacle to achieving full citizenship. (Freire, as cited in Bertrand, 1998, p. 93).

This interplay between literacy and citizenship is an example of the broader connectedness of action and reaction that all teaching impacts. Failing to create a suitable environment for learning has an impact far beyond a particular class or a particular forty minutes (the standard length of time for a single tuition class period). When a teacher has not been equipped with the skills to create a positive learning environment the consequences reach further than her own particular context.

I felt that critical pedagogy spoke to the sense of injustice and inequality that I perceived in the acceptance of lower standards of continuity for children from areas of social deprivation. In recognising that it was the acceptance of a lower standard than could be achieved that affected me most, I came to articulate my own standard of excellence. I define this as meaning that in anything that I attempt I should strive for the highest possible standard achievable.

Later on, my learning about Critical Pedagogy would directly impact how I taught English to a group of my students. Rather than providing a set of notes, detailing my reading of the poetry, I engaged in a dialogue with them about how the poetry spoke to them. I also decided to study The Tempest with this class and we explored ideas of identity, power and post-colonialism. This was particularly pertinent as within this group there were six nationalities from three continents represented. When we studied Adrienne Rich we examined the relationship between the personal and the political and how individuals can change society. My learning in my research was impacting on my student's learning, and it was another way in which my personal, political and pedagogical self was interlinking.

My own training occurred some years after I started to work as a teacher. Initially, I started to teach out of necessity, I had completed my Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) in English and Irish (Gaelic) in University College Dublin in 2001 and moved away from Dublin. The limitations of my qualification and lack of alternative employment meant that teaching was a natural progression. At that time, with a B.A., it was possible to gain permanent employment in the vocational education sector without a professional

teaching qualification. It was not possible, however, to gain permanent employment in the voluntary education system without the qualification. In Ireland, voluntary schools are generally run by religious orders or have been run by religious orders in the past and they maintain a religious ethos although they are now run by lay people. I spent three years teaching in a country town and developed a deep passion for teaching.

The school in which I taught served a diverse community of students from both farming and town backgrounds. In the main, the school was considered locally as the default option if a student was unable to gain placement in the local convent or Christian Brothers school. Although schools are required by the Education Act 1998 to have an enrolment policy, there is no standardised admission policy for access to a school in Ireland, enrolment policy is determined by the local Board of Management. Voluntary schools, although funded by state monies, are permitted to discriminate on religious grounds through the Equal Status Act 2000. Anecdotally, it has been suggested that this clause and other restrictive practices are used to restrict access to certain schools. An audit of school enrolment was conducted by the Department of Education and Science in 2007. An example of a restrictive practice may be recommending a student engage in the more vocational school finishing exam, the Leaving Certificate Applied, when it is not offered in the school or recommending that another school has superior special needs provision and would be a better choice for a child. The audit analysed the intake of a range of schools regarding students with special educational needs, students from a traveller[2] background and students who did not speak English or Irish as their first language. The Minister for Education's letter accompanying the report stated:

> ...The audit does not find evidence of problematic enrolment practice on a system wide scale. However, it does identify pockets of inconsistent activity on a local school cluster basis that would indicate that some schools are assuming disproportionate shares of responsibility for enrolling children of all backgrounds and needs within their local community. The audit also identified elements of the written enrolment policies of schools that may appear to have the effect of disadvantaging certain pupils. (Department of Education and Science, 2007)

In this way vocational schools, which are non-denominational, can have a concentration of students of non-Catholic background, students who are being constructively excluded and students with special educational needs. This can result in a higher proportion of international students, who require additional language support, students requiring additional behavior support and students requiring additional learning support. Over time this subtle segregation is self-perpetuated as the school gains a reputation as being "good with that type of student." As a teacher in a vocational school, observing this practice was one of the first ways in which I started to look at a link between my classroom and society. These types of practices enraged my sense of social justice and reinforced my commitment to achieving the highest possible standard in my own learning and teaching, so that the students I work with, within the vocational sector, receive the best possible education. The creation of a positive, supportive learning environment is critical to achieving this. Creating a safe space within the classroom allows the teacher to promote critical thinking (Giroux, 2010; Crotty,

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[2] a nomadic group of people, similar to gypsies

2009a). Equipping students, particularly marginalised students with these skills allows them to read the world in a way that is their own creation, and to take ownership of their position within the world. It allows them to own their education also. Ultimately, the creation of a positive environment for critical thinking has an expansive positive impact for society.

Subsequently, I gained tenured employment in an urban co-educational vocational school. My passion for teaching was developed "on the job", but I felt that it was necessary to formalise my commitment to teaching. I enrolled in a professional teaching qualification course. It had not been possible for me previously as there was no part-time teacher qualification course available in Ireland and I could not afford to return to education full-time.

As a student on the Graduate Diploma in Education in Dublin City University, I saw how teachers were taught classroom management at initial training. In my practice I had developed my own systems of classroom management, some of which were based on recommendations from Cowley (2003) and Rogers (2006a, 2006b), authors in the field of education with a particular focus on classroom management. On the diploma course I saw how trainee teachers felt about classroom management and the support they needed. Equally, I experienced the intense workload of a trainee teacher while I was teaching a full timetable. I felt that it was irrational to expect trainee teachers to be critical thinkers in the area of classroom management when they were trying to cope with such an intense workload. It was my experience that physical and mental reserves were exhausted meeting the "day to day" demands of planning and executing effective teaching at this early stage. The trainee teachers who had least experience were also trying to be critical of theories that they had little opportunity to apply due to the reduced class contact requirement for trainee teachers versus full-time teachers. My on the job training put me in a different situation to my peers, but I was able to see how they could become very overwhelmed by the wealth of classroom management techniques proffered.

The poverty of effective engagement with classroom management techniques is borne out by the results of a survey conducted by the National Pilot Programme on Teacher Induction in Ireland, which found that NQTs had concerns:

> Dealing with pupil behaviour and discipline. This area was found to be particularly problematic for those working in schools designated as disadvantaged. NQTs working in particularly challenging school situations spoke of teachers needing specific advice and support to cope with this area. (DES, 2006, p. 88)

The impact of this difficulty was that "These NQTs found the initial weeks and months of teaching very difficult and stressful, and as a result they often expressed doubts over their career choice and their ability to remain in the profession" (DES, 2006, p. 88).

From my own experience both in work and in my training I felt that there was a need to support and assist NQTs with practical classroom management tools. I completed the mentor's course on the National Pilot Project on Teacher Induction (NPPTI) in 2010. The NPPTI was a pilot project in teacher mentoring and induction funded by the Department of Education and Science and operated by University College

Dublin and St Patrick's College. I had been working with NQTs in my workplace as a mentor for three years prior to this and it was a timely opportunity to learn best practice. The NPPTI was formalised in 2011 and is now the [National Induction Programme](#).

    I observed as a mentor that NQTs could be reluctant to highlight issues that they were experiencing in the initial stages of their teaching, until we had established a relationship that allowed for an honest dialogue. I felt that this dialogic approach to mentoring encouraged the beginning teacher to become more critical of their own practice. My role was not to instruct the mentee in a how to from an elevated position as external expert but to encourage them to reflect on their own practice, provide suggestions of things that had worked for me in my teaching and invite them to reflect whether or not this approach would benefit them and why.

    The initial teaching period, establishment phase (Rogers, 2006b, p.36), is critical to establishing an atmosphere for work between a teacher and a class and it was difficult for teachers to reassert themselves as the year progressed if this opportunity was lost. Rogers (2006b, p. 36) speaks of the importance of each beginning phase, the start of the year and the start of a class, in establishing a teacher successfully. When I set about creating the video it was these critical beginning phases that I wanted to address.

    My studies on the Masters programme introduced me to action research and the idea of a living educational theory. At first, as a graduate of the traditional propositional approach, I was concerned that my research would lack validity as I didn't feel that I was qualified to comment on my own practice. My first introduction to the idea of creating a pedagogy of the unique (Farren, 2006), based on my experience as an internal expert within my own practice occurred at this time, and it resonated with me as an emancipatory and empowering concept that was compatible with my own values as an individual and an educator.

The Creation of an Educational Video

    For the practical development of the video I used the Carr and Kemmis model of plan, act, observe, reflect and revise (1986). This model required me to be self-critical and to submit my work for observation and appraisal by my critical friends, validation group and my research supervisor, Yvonne Crotty. The practical development of the video cannot be divorced from my pedagogy of the unique. The decisions that affected the development of the final video are the product of my values made evident in my practice. When I had the opportunity to embark on my research and create a video, it made sense for me to employ a self-study action research approach.

    Although the work of animation and video editing can involve a lot of solitary time spent perfecting action and audio, this research was not a technical exercise in video production but an attempt to live my values in practice. Whitehead (1989) states that: "a systematic reflection on such a process [attempting to improve practice] provides insights into the nature of the descriptions and explanations which we would accept as valid accounts of our educational development... a living educational theory

will be produced from such accounts" (Whitehead, 1989, p. 41). These descriptions and explanations include values "whose meaning can only be clarified in the course of their emergence in practice" (Whitehead, 1989, p.43). Over the course of this research I documented and analysed my work to see my values in action as I worked to improve my practice and influence the learning of others through dialogue and public scrutiny. In order to meet my standard of excellence it was necessary for me to consult regularly with others in order to ensure that the research could influence the learning of others and could create new knowledge that was valid. As I undertook the research I reflected that what I was producing was a convergence of my personal, political and pedagogical self. The common thread linking these three areas was my values

The main value informing my work was the value of empowerment. This is key to the advancement of social justice that I had encountered in Critical Pedagogy. This value is recurring throughout my experience of education, whether as a motivation in teaching Irish so that people could empower themselves to read their own culture, teaching literacy so that students could empower themselves as active citizens or creating an animated video that teachers could access on their own terms.

I had felt strongly that I would like to create a video to support and empower NQTs in the area of classroom management. I felt, from my own experience, that NQTs needed support on their own terms and that they needed to be able to access this assistance without fear of repercussions so that they could engage critically with the content. NQTs can feel that asking for assistance would create a perception that they are unable to cope and jeopardise continuing employment (Department of Education and Science, 2006, p. 89).

When I had acknowledged a need for assistance in my own practice, I had to rely on the texts available in my local bookshop. The bookshop was my first recourse as, at that time, YouTube was not in existence and it was difficult to find video material. Since then, YouTube has gained prominence and, as it is linked into Google searches, is one of the first places that information can be accessed. YouTube was therefore the natural distribution channel for the animated educational video as it would be easy for an NQT in difficulty to locate and they could interact critically with the video. It would be possible for them to respond through the comments and like feature on the video. In keeping with the critical pedagogy and social justice influencing factors on my work, the use of YouTube in this way moves the viewer beyond passive consumer and enables them to voice their criticism publicly and have it heard.

This decision on an avenue of distribution, which ironically, would be the last stage of the video production, was one of the easiest and earliest decisions made. Alternative distribution through DVD would not have the same accessibility or anonymity and other online video repositories like Vimeo did not have the same ease of access through Google.

The Educational Applications of Multimedia module (now Multimedia and Educational Innovation) requires participants to combine their theoretical knowledge of education, developed on the Emerging pedagogies module, to the practical application of multimedia through developing visual narratives as explanations of educational influences in learning (Crotty and Farren, 2009; Crotty 2010). The module is a core

requirement in the first year of the course but a choice is given in the second year where participants can elect to take the Digital Creativity in the Workplace module. Participants who undertake the second module are required to produce a video as part of their final assessment. Participants also have the opportunity to explore various animation software and create a short animation.

I enjoyed the support of a validation group made up of the other participants on the Educational Applications of Multimedia module. We met regularly throughout the year online and in person, to view and discuss our work and propose improvements that could be made. We were encouraged to have a vision for our own learning by creatively using digital technologies. Through these meetings and my consultations with my supervisor and lecturer, I made the initial decision to create an animation rather than a documentary style video.

I started by investigating the possibility of using documentary style film-making for the video. I watched a video of Frank McCourt[3] talking about his teaching experience and I thought that his biography was very powerful. I particularly liked the phrase "they validated my experience because they seemed to be interested" which linked in with what I was attempting to achieve by connecting and documenting my own lived experience and inviting validation by others. I considered whether the purpose of the video could open a dialogue around teaching that could be supportive for new teachers while prompting critical dialogue and reflection on the challenges of the profession.

I was concerned about the ethical considerations of videoing students, I felt that in filming the students and teachers I would have a particular motivation but that once I shared the video publicly, it could be used in ways that I had not anticipated.

I was worried that the stakeholders trust in me could be compromised if I were to share the video publicly. I had to choose between videoing students and teachers and sharing the video as I wished.

My validation group had experience of this as they worked with vulnerable groups also and they proposed ways of overcoming the issue. As our dialogue progressed, however, it became clear that I was also reluctant to film in my workplace as it empowered the organisation with the means to prevent me from achieving my aims. Filming would be dependent on the permissions of the organisation and this could lead to the content being compromised also. The content would be compromised as, if the organisation was identifiable in the video, the content would have to be representative of the values of the organization which may be in conflict with my own values.

Finally, I felt that the use of real-life setting would provide cultural cues that could cloud the content that was being imparted. In this way, the scope of the video could be limited for a viewer. A viewer may interpret the setting of the piece through the appearance and expression of students and teachers – the content may be situated

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[3]   Frank McCourt was an Irish-American teacher and author. His novel "Angela's Ashes" won a Pulitzer prize and was made into a feature film. His book "Teacher Man" documents his days as a teacher in a number of schools in New York.

through clues in accent, language and environment. Unintentionally, this may result in a viewer invalidating the content by thinking, "that's alright in that type of school but in my school...", "those kind of students would respond but my students..." or "that type of teacher can do it but I can't."

At the end of this period of reflection and dialogue I was committed to creating a piece that was not culturally loaded and could be shared with the widest audience possible. At the same time I wanted to ensure that the video would be of specific value to Irish teachers across a range of educational contexts. This could only be accomplished through the use of representative rather than actual actors and settings. I needed to create a mask to allow for the full expression of the content of the piece. I sought to create an emancipatory space that could invite dialogue and criticism, free of cultural, social and professional bias.

People who use the internet socially are familiar with the use of avatars, visual online representations of themselves. An avatar may be as simple as the image that accompanies the username in a forum posting, or as complex as a fully evolved visual representation of the individual that inhabits a synchronous virtual world, like Second Life. A more nuanced version of the avatar is the Voki. A voki is a virtual representation of the individual that has a speaking voice. My reflection now moved to an analysis of whether I needed to use avatar, voki or animation to create the emancipatory space for my content. In my reflective blog I noted that in essence what I needed was a voki that was fully animated and existed in an animated environment that was asynchronously accessible.

The most appropriate mask for my content was animation. The animation was limited and it was necessary to employ the design principles developed by Kuomi through his work with the Open University in video. Kuomi advocates the use of animation as a "hook" for the viewer aiming to capture attention and sustain it, e.g. involving, introducing, "the unexpected, whether negative (shock) neutral (surprise) or positive (delight), which will arouse and engage the learner." (Kuomi, 2006, p. 138). He goes on to recommend fascinating, entertaining and amusing the viewer:

> Entertainment is certainly not inimical to learning, nor does it necessitate superficial coverage of the subject... For example, everyone likes animations (almost without exception) ...if the budget will bear it (or if the animation can be done cheaply) perhaps you should include animation... just to entertain and hence create a positive feeling towards the learning material and sustain attention. (Kuomi, 2006, p. 141)

The use of Xtranormal can therefore be seen to provide a hook that enables the further engagement of pedagogic design principles. Xtranormal is an online animation package that uses text-to-speech software. Users create movies using stock animated characters and sets. Users can add their own script which is automatically lip-synched to the characters. As I explain later, it is possible to download a version of the package that allows for voiceover. Xtranormal was initially created as a storyboarding tool for scriptwriters but was developed for use as an amateur animated movie-making tool in June 2010 (Learmonth, 2011). The work of the Open University in advancing video education continues and it is one of the few organisations I could find to make use of Xtranormal for educational purposes (Carle, 2011).

The influence of critical pedagogy as a pedagogy of liberation (Giroux, 2010), seeking to empower the enslaved to navigate their own liberation is evident in the process by which I created the video itself. Rather than risk enslaving myself to the social and cultural cues evident in a reality-based exposition of the content, I have liberated myself through the use of online animation so that the undiluted content may be expressed. Through the use of animation and YouTube distribution, the viewer is free to respond to the content and a transactional dialogue is promoted.

I invited a group of my colleagues to participate in the research as content experts. I wanted to confirm that the content of the video would be beneficial and reflective of the practical experience of professional teachers. I sent an email in which I asked my colleagues to reflect on their own practice and to ask themselves what they would say to their NQT self if they could travel back in time. I called this part of the project "Things I wish I knew when I was New." The replies from this group of content experts echoed a lot of my own thinking but much of the advice seemed abstract (e.g. Be fair, talk to your colleagues etc.). I thought about this advice and I decided that I really wanted something solid that could be immediately implemented and achieve observable results.

I spoke to another teacher who is no longer an NQT but who is at the start of her career and asked what she felt would be of benefit – her advice was to keep it simple, pick one thing and explain it well. I had been mentoring this teacher a number of years ago and I asked her what she felt had been of help at that time. She reflected on it, and told me that she felt the advice to have a beginning routine was the most effective and powerful. A beginning routine is a series of actions that occur in the same way at the start of each class. Examples would be: lining students up, seating them, taking a roll call and then writing the objectives for the lesson on the board before the lesson commences. She informed me that she had shared this same advice with an NQT in her own school and it had proved very effective. From our combined experiences, it seemed that explaining how to establish a beginning routine would be the best advice to impart in the video.

Notions of control and management of student behaviour appear to be completely at odds with a critical pedagogy based view of education. I queried whether I was becoming a living contradiction (Whitehead, 1989) espousing the very values of the system that I was supposed to be working to change. I asked myself who would benefit from my approach and whether I was promoting control without cause. In answering this, I thought of what democracy in the classroom really means and what my ultimate aim was as an educator. I assessed my responses in two ways, firstly by reflecting on the impact on teachers, the primary audience for the video and secondly, by reflecting on the impact on students, the final beneficiaries of the video.

Control without cause is how I would refer to the traditional dominance-driven approach to classroom management. This type of classroom management has no further aim than control for its own sake. It seeks to assert the dominance of the teacher and the subordination of the students in order to maintain a status quo. What I was aiming for in the creation of the video was a control with cause, whereby a teacher would be aiming to control classroom behaviour in order to facilitate the development of a safe democratic space for critical exchange. Giroux writes:

Rather than viewed as disinterested technicians, teachers should be viewed as engaged intellectuals, willing to construct the classroom conditions that provide the knowledge, skills and culture of questioning necessary for students to participate in critical dialogue with the past, question authority, struggle with ongoing relations of power and prepare themselves for what it means to be active and engaged citizens in the interrelated local, national and global spheres.' (Giroux, 2010)

This video aims to empower teachers to construct these classroom conditions.

In my consultations with my colleagues and the starting teacher, I challenged them to reflect (as I had) on their experience and to be critical of their performance in the early days of their career and what they could have done to improve the quality of their teaching. I informed them of how their input would be used and provided them with an informed consent form, in keeping with the ethical considerations of the research. My own engagement with critical thinking through my learning was influencing them as educators reflecting on their practice. In essence, what I was asking them to do in the Things I wish I knew when I was New project was to make explicit the tacit knowledge that they had acquired through their experience in the classroom, so that I could share it with others.

From the start of the Masters programme we were encouraged to keep a reflective journal in the first year of the Masters and in the second year, this was expanded into a blog (Crotty, 2009b). The use of the blog had a number of key benefits but the main one for me, given the nature of my research, was the ability to archive video. It meant that I could collate videos relevant to my research and reflect on them in one space, which expanded it beyond the scope of the YouTube channel that I created (which was part of my Multimedia module assignment) to post my own videos and link to other videos connected to my research. The blog gave me an audio-visual record of the influences on my learning over the course of the research.

Originally I thought that I would use whiteboard animation to create my video. I rejected this idea because, as I researched it using YouTube videos I started to acknowledge that my artistic abilities were not of a high enough standard to allow me to use this form and effectively communicate my message. It would create a disconnect between my espoused standard of excellence and my work in practice that would invalidate my claim to this value.

Subsequently, I investigated the use of 2D cut-out stop motion animation. I created a short animation using geometric shapes in order to test the quality that I could achieve using this form of animation. I was unhappy with the quality of the short but I hoped that it could be improved by using proper lighting and the I Can Animate software. I participated in a pairwork assignment as part of an I Can Animate workshop within the Masters Multimedia module. The aim was to create an animation based on the use of reflective journals. In anticipation of the workshop I downloaded the I Can Animate app from iTunes so that I could familiarise myself with the interface in order to maximise my time in the workshop and achieve the best possible work from the day.

The I Can Animate application has an onion-skinning feature which maintains a residual image of the last shot so that the subsequent shot can be placed more precisely to keep the action of the animation smooth. I created a short animation to test the

software on the phone, which I posted to DCU Moodle for my class and I also posted this I Can Animate short onto my YouTube channel. I felt that the I Can Animate app was lacking some of the adaptability of the traditional camera shot technique that I had used but I reserved judgement until after the workshop in order to be sure that these limitations were not the result of reduced functionality in the phone-based application that would be overcome in the full package.

Video 1.   I Can Animate Short

At the workshop it became apparent that the software was limited significantly by the cameras with which it was compatible. Quality lighting was difficult to maintain due to changes in the ambient light in the room, affected by the weather outside, and the shadows cast by the cut-out shapes themselves. While the onion-skinning feature was beneficial, overall I felt that the method that I had used initially provided greater quality work. In keeping with my standard of excellence I reverted to the earlier method in order to achieve the best possible result at that time. I was able to take the photographs using a Nikon digital single lens reflex camera, which allowed for greater quality shots, using the macros setting, than the webcam that could be used with I Can Animate could produce. I was able to import the shots into iMovie, Apple's movie editing software. This allowed me to set the timing for each shot, meaning that I did not need 25 individual shots for each second of footage.

I had become proficient in the use of iMovie in the first year of the Masters programme and I was confident in my ability to edit out some of the problems in the animation in this programme. I could enhance light and audio settings and insert transitions between scenes. I worked with my partner on the project and we showed the animation to the validation group for feedback. When we had taken the feedback

and made the advised amendments, the final animation was posted to YouTube. We called the animation "Mr Reflective."

Video 2:　　Mr Reflective

When I reflected on the final animation, I was disappointed in the standard of the animation and I felt that it was a style that would not be suitable for use for my final video. I investigated alternative animation programmes suggested by the blog freetech4teachers (operated by a teacher in Maine, USA) which had been suggested to me through Twitter by user Mike Walsh (@IMSteacher) a humanities teacher and school technology leader in Alberta, Canada. I rejected the sites due to limitations in the presentation, audio or movement of the characters.

After visiting the website Xtranormal.com I felt that the site had the potential to allow me to create an animation that would be of an excellent standard. Again, I contacted my supervisor to ensure that the software was appropriate for use and that I was right about the quality of the animation. I created a sample Xtranormal animation called Mr Reflective Re-imagined and posted it to YouTube.

Video 3:   Mr Reflective Re-imagined

My supervisor, Yvonne Crotty advised I had an ethical obligation to ensure that the software provider was satisfied with their programme being used to create an animation that would be shared publicly. Equally I wanted to ensure that the script and the action of the piece, which would be my creation, would remain my property. I contacted the company and received an assurance that these ethical considerations were met.

There were two versions of the Xtranormal software, the online Movie Maker package and the PC based State package. Both use text-to-speech software. The State software has added features including the ability to add voiceover, insert audio, images and movies and allowed me move characters as I wished. I could also utilise range of camera angles to maintain visual interest.

I proceeded to create a new version of the animation. In this version I documented the challenges my partner and I had faced in creating the original Mr Reflective animation. I was able to use the original animation by utilising the movie inlay feature in the programme. This new animation was of a superior standard to the original while still allowing the original work to be used. The new version, renamed "Reflecting on Mr Reflective" was presented to the validation group for observation and following revision Reflecting on Mr Reflective was posted to YouTube. In Xtranormal I had found an animation that would allow me to communicate my content effectively while meeting my own standard of excellence.

Figure 1.   Xtranormal State Welcome Screen

Video 4.   Reflecting on Mr Reflective

Action research allows for the natural flow of research in practice. It accepts that the research is an organic process that is mutable and flows depending on the changing circumstances in which it occurs. Throughout my research the cycles of plan, act, observe, reflect and revise often overlapped, and within the one cycle that resulted in the production of the final video there were many micro-cycles. The process of

producing this first Xtranormal animation is a micro-cycle in itself but represents a large part of the planning phase of the overall cycle.

The next part of the planning phase was to create a script. From the group of content experts I had invited earlier in my research I asked two to act as critical friends. I chose these two critical friends as one is a recently qualified teacher with an expertise in ICT and the other is a mentor on the National Induction Programme. I felt that both had demonstrated exacting standards in their own work as I had observed over the years of working with them and this meant that they could check that my standard of excellence was being lived in my research.

Writing the script was a natural and enjoyable process for me. I have a passionate interest in writing since childhood. In recent years, I had neglected this part of my self, rejecting it as I focused on my career goals. Two things occurred over the course of my studies which allowed me to re-visit this passion. The first was that I was asked to teach Leaving Certificate English to a class of higher-level students. This class was very influential in reminding me of my passion for writing and in challenging them to think critically about poetry and language I re-engaged that part of my own psyche. The second learning experience involved the creation of a photograph slideshow with titles in the second semester of my Masters studies.

My supervisor, Yvonne Crotty, set the assignment to create the slideshow. I experienced a degree of apprehension as the assignment seemed very broad and my past experience had been of much more restrictive and prescriptive assessment. My previous experience was that there would be a very restrictive style of assessment that I could connect with only in a step-by-step manner, without creative engagement. In the absence of such a checklist of requirements, I was forced to trust myself to engage with the process on a creative level, in a way that captured my passion following a conversation with Yvonne after class where she suggested linking it to my love of poetry as an English teacher. The final slideshow enabled me to develop a new skill, photography, to marry it to this my passion, poetry, and to link those passions to my practice. I had never had the experience of being rewarded academically for my creativity. ([Here is link to a short video where I talk about this](#)). I was able to use the visual representations of the poetry quotes in the slideshow with my class to promote debate and discussion around the use of imagery and representative language. As a result of this positive experience of creativity I committed my Summer holidays to writing full-time and had my first piece of creative writing published in [The Stony Thursday Book](#).

In writing the script, I wanted to ensure that I expressed the message of the video effectively. The message of the video was (a) a statement of recognition of the challenges NQTs face and (b) an articulation of a solid, practical piece of advice that could be implemented immediately with observable results. This piece of advice was to inform a beginning routine for a NQT. The beginning routine was a lining up procedure prior to class commencement. The advice needed to be presented as a suggestion rather than a prescription.

The lining up procedure is advocated by both Rogers and Cowley. Rogers writes "corridor-settling does not take long but it prefaces the teacher/student expectation about purposeful behaviour on the other side of the classroom door" and "what we establish tends

to have a significant initiating effect from day one" (Rogers 2006a, p. 74). Cowley states "the first strategy (lining up) is probably preferable in difficult schools, as it allows the teacher to structure the entry of the class into the room, and it also demonstrates a high level of control to the students" (Cowley 2003, p. 5). Cowley also devoted a full programme on TeachersTV to the beginning routine (Cowley, 2006).

As a teacher of languages, I regard language in terms of accuracy and fluency. I look upon language as the way in which an individual expresses their reading of the world. The choice of language in the script needed to be accurate in the content that it was communicating and needed to be fluent in order to communicate that content effectively. It was important to me that the characters would be representative of the Irish context as Irish NQTs were my primary target audience. There are a number of videos on classroom management available online. I was unable, however, to find any that were situated in an Irish context. I felt that the use of an Irish accent and speech pattern would make the video more accessible to an Irish audience.

In giving voice to the characters I wanted to be sure that the relationship between the experienced teacher, providing the advice and the inexperienced teacher, receiving the advice was not hierarchical. I was wary of creating an oppositional or patronising tone. I decided to situate the action in a current affairs style news programme. This allowed me to introduce other characters who could mediate the communication of the video's message so that it achieved this aim. The character of the reporter, Maura Handy, is able to provide the background information on teaching. She asks questions that prompt the NQT character, Síle Williams, to expose the concerns and experiences that I had found in my research. The news presenter character, Bryan Brady, is able to challenge the experienced teacher character, Melissa McRee, in order to dissipate any patronising overtone. These questioning characters engage in a critical dialogue with the representative NQT and experienced teacher characters.

I sent the script to my critical friends for validation and began working on the visual representation of the script. Within the State software package there are "showpaks" of characters and sets. This is a limiting factor in using Xtranormal. I would have preferred to have more control over the representation of what an NQT looks like and what an experienced teacher looks like especially. It had been one of the things I liked about Go!Animate but in the end it was superceded by the superior interactivity and usability of the Xtranormal programme.

Figure 2.   Showpak selection screen

I decided that the teacher characters would be female as around 80 per cent of teachers at primary level in Ireland are female and in my own work context that figure is around 90 per cent. This decision further reduced my options for characters within the package. Xtranormal is mainly used for creating parodies or comic animations and a number of the characters would not be suitable for my audience or realising my aims as they are dressed in humorous costume. In State there are two showpaks that have school related backgrounds, Peepz and Playgoz. I created a Peepz and Playgoz version of the first scene of the animation and invited my critical friends to view them. The Playgoz showpak had very good newsroom backgrounds but the school setting backgrounds were poor and the characters were a bit too comic in appearance.
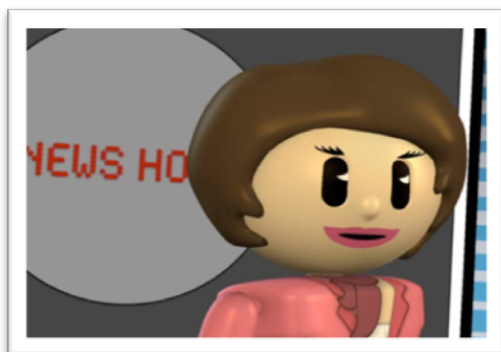

Figure 3. Playgoz character

Figure 4. Peepz character

The Peepz version had superior school backgrounds and the characters had a more humanistic appearance. The challenge in using this showpak was to create a newsroom backdrop. I was able to do this using the inlay feature that I had learned about on the earlier Reflecting on Mr Reflective animation.

My critical friends supported the use of the Peepz showpak. I created the animation using the script and the animation pack that had been validated by my critical friends. I invited my critical friends to participate in the creation of the final video by providing voiceovers. I felt that this would allow them to see and share my learning that they had influenced. My critical friend who is a technical expert provided the voiceover for the Melissa McRee character and my critical friend who was a beginning teacher provided the voiceover for Síle Williams. As they were providing the voiceover they could observe and participate the action of creating the animation, after participating in its planning. As I have stated, the process of creating the animation could be a very solitary one and the participation of my critical friends at this stage in the action helped to maintain connections through this more solitary phase. It also ensured that my work was validated in progress. Following their participation in this stage one of my critical friends took the decision to use Xtranormal with a class to deliver a presentation on their locality, demonstrating the interconnectedness of our respective learning.

Video 5: The animation as presented to validation group. (Gallagher, 2011)

I presented the animation to my validation group and my research supervisor Yvonne Crotty at a validation meeting. As the validation group were observing a completed video and had not watched the work in progress, I was confident that they could criticise the video animation on the same basis as the teachers who would access it on YouTube, and do so without any bias induced by an awareness of the workload involved in the creation of the

video. This would be my evaluation criteria, that is, that a viewer would accept the video production as of a professional standard and that the content would convey a sense of shared experience and practical assistance.

Video 6:   [Things I Wish I Knew when I was New](#) (Gallagher, 2011)

The validation group were impressed with the progress of my learning from the Reflecting on Mr Reflective project. I had been able to enhance the animation by using my skills in iMovie for transitions and voiceover that helped to pace the action of the video. I had also developed a greater control over the camera functions and character movement in the package. I was able to marry the character movement to the script so that the characters used minor inflections and accompanying gestures to create a more natural flow in the action. The validation group felt that the standard of the video would be improved by increasing and equalising the spoken audio and adding ambient noise to outdoor scenes. They also suggested changing the title text colour from red to white to make it more legible. I revised the video in light of these recommendations and presented it at a subsequent validation meeting. At this meeting, the validation group asserted that the video had reached a standard of excellence.

Following the validation meeting, I gathered the original group of content experts to view the video and offer feedback. They concurred with the assessment of the validation group. One of my critical friends suggested contacting the National Induction Programme directly and linking them to the video. I contacted the research and co-ordination section at the National Induction Programme with the link to the video. They responded favourably to the video and stated that although the training for the induction programme this year had ended, they would share the video with colleagues going forward.

In embarking on this research I aimed to create an animated video that could be used to assist NQTs to establish a beginning routine that would assist them in creating a safe space for critical discourse in their classrooms. I decided to create this video to assist NQTs as I felt that providing a resource for teachers in difficulty that they could access on their own time, would provide support that could be more difficult to access in a workplace. I hoped that by assisting NQTs I could, through the interconnectedness of teaching and learning acts, positively impact the learning experience of students. I was especially concerned that it would assist those dealing with the elevated levels of poor discipline reported in vocational schools as I have worked in this sector throughout my career.

I was empowered through my learning about the critical pedagogy to articulate the link between the classroom and society. In acknowledging what I perceived as a reduced expectation of excellence I sought to improve the situation. I created the video not just for my own use but for use by anyone who may need it. I selected a means of distribution that would allow the broadest possible audience to benefit from the work.

This research study has been a journey of personal and professional growth. It has enhanced my learning and, I hope, the learning of those stakeholders who participated in the development of the animation. This research process is the latest, living chapter, in the evolution of my pedagogy of the unique.

No study using ICT can call itself definitive, as the technology is communicative, and it is, like language, ever-evolving. Already, since the creation of the video the dialogue is shifting, in January, Xtranormal moved from a free to a paid model, in March it announced the cessation of the development of the State software. In April 2011, TeachersTV, the United Kingdom government's online educational video repository ceased operation – the videos are currently inaccessible online. The cessation of TeachersTV is reflective of the recessionary times which we inhabit, and is a disappointing turn of events given the forward-thinking nature of educational video use in the UK, where the BBC appointed its first education broadcast specialist in 1925 (Moss, 1983).

As the clouds of teaching cutbacks and deteriorating working conditions for teachers gather and darken the Irish education landscape, the need for a spirit of collegiality or web of betweenness (Farren, 2006) is heightened. As competition intensifies for teaching posts the potential for NQTs to isolate themselves and to avoid any sharing that may show vulnerability is increased. In this environment, there may be a greater need for support through risk-free, privately accessible content like this animation.

The next phase of this journey is yet to unfold, the next cycle of this research has yet to evolve, the full exposition of my living theory is not yet complete. I would like the video to inspire other teachers to create their own videos in response and share them freely. I will use the video in my work as a mentor in my own context. I hope to link in with the National Induction Programme in the future to target the video. If the video can support NQTs I hope that that transfers into an improved learning experience for students, particularly those disadvantaged students most affected by poor discipline.

This research process has allowed me to re-awaken my creative self and linked my personal and professional passions. This learning will impact my teaching, promoting the use of creativity in my classroom and perhaps the first exercise I can undertake is the creation of an animated video by my own students guided by my learning but empowered in their own.

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