

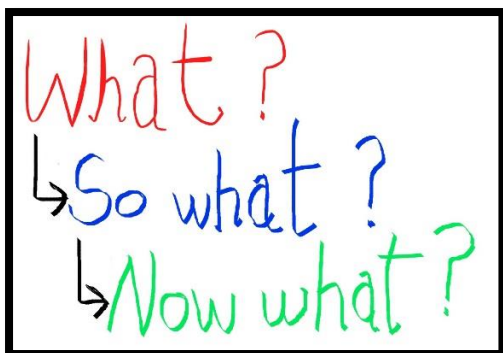
## What? So What? Now What? - Reflection on completing the GMIT Certificate in Teaching and Learning, 2018/2019

- Rachel Mc Carthy, Galway, May 2019

Completing the Post Graduate Certificate in Teaching and Learning (PG Cert. in T&L) in GMIT this year has been career affirming for me. It has been a wonderful learning opportunity which has enhanced my teaching and increased my pedagogical knowledge and confidence.

John Dewey was one of the first scholars to write about reflective practice, he explained that we do not learn from experience, but from reflecting on experience (Dewey, 1938).

Reflective practice (in a teaching and learning context), is the process of; critically reviewing an experience retrospectively to examine what worked and what did not work, consulting literature and colleagues and students to determine how best to improve, and then, formulating a plan for these improvements. There are a number of reflection models in use in education including; Kolb's reflective model which concentrates on experiential learning (Kolb, 1984), Gibbs reflective cycle (Gibbs, 1988) and the one I have used in the title of this reflection, the reflective model "What? So what? Now what?" developed by Rolfe, Freshwater, & Jasper (Rolfe, et al., 2001).



### Reflective model summary (Rolfe, et al., 2001)

#### What?

The first stage is a description of the experience you would like to critically reflect and what happened

#### So what?

Ask yourself what the experience and situation mean in the context of your teaching, consult with students and colleagues for others' perspectives.

#### Now what?

Outline the steps you will take to improve your practice after learning from the initial experience. Complete an action plan including how improvement will be determined.

One of the reasons I registered for the Cert in T&L is because I value the importance of Continual Professional Development (CPD). As lecturers, I believe we need to keep up to date with developments in our disciplines and we also need to embrace technology enhanced learning methods to best prepare our students for the ever changing work environment, "If we teach today's students as we taught yesterday's, we rob them of tomorrow."- John Dewey. I have discovered that I like to learn for learning's sake and that I am intrinsically motivated. I try to foster this in my students - experience the joy of learning and the realisation that with the increase in knowledge and skill, there is an increase in confidence, once you give the learning process the respect and time it deserves.

My teaching mantra is, "who dares to teach must never cease to learn" – John Cotton Dana. Throughout this year, as a student of the Cert. in T&L, I have learned many things that have shaped me as a better teacher. I fully appreciate that because I am working in an educational institution I got to apply the tools and techniques that I learned during the year, sometimes as soon as I got to my next class, which is experiential learning in action. I have more understanding of pedagogical methods and additional vocabulary for the teaching methods that I have employed since I started teaching but had not previously formalised.

In the CPD training courses I delivered in the Medical Device industry, my modus operandi was Problem Based Learning (PBL). In my teaching, I encourage students to widen their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), by giving them the information and tools they need to master a topic or question and facilitating them through the learning path.



Crossing the bridge on the learning path.

As many of my students are mature students working in industry, they come to class with a wealth of experience which I encourage them to share with their peers which facilitates peer learning. I facilitate more than lecture and make effective use of scaffolding where I give students the tools to build the learning bridge but not built it for them with the aim of making them self-sufficient. I now recognise this as the teaching method of scaffolding that is used with the ZPD (Vygotsky, 1978). I value the importance of having a student-centred classroom, challenging my students to be outside-the-box thinkers, encouraging them to apply the course material to their jobs, and being a compassionate teacher.

As part of the cert in T&L Dr. Maura Fitzsimmons, GMIT, delivered a lecture on “Developing your Reflective Practice”, which was an insight into a process which I previously would have done informally. Maura highlighted the positives that can come from adopting reflective practice in a formal way. I now realise that employing critical reflection has helped me to become a better teacher. In fact, according to (Noddings & Enright, 1983, p. 182) “The best hope for improvement in educational practice is

the enhancement of teachers as autonomous and reflective beings.”. There is benefit to students also in engaging in critical reflection and I incorporated critical reflection in my assessment methods in semester two.

I try to “begin with the end in mind” so when I set out on this learning journey, I wanted this course to have a positive impact on my teaching and on my students’ learning - which was evidenced from the very first weeks as I incorporated in my teaching, some of the methods learned. This year the first question I asked in my first year Science, maths tutorials was; “What type of jobs do you see yourself working in when you graduate with your B.Sc. in 4 years time?”. After I had compiled a list of jobs that the students proposed, I then asked if they thought they would use maths, data and statistics in those science related roles. The resounding answer was “Yes”. The purpose of my opening questions to these students was; to contextualise their weekly maths tutorial, to encourage them to also begin with the end in mind and to also improve student engagement with their maths tutorial. That this was not a torture to be endured on a weekly basis but would result in developing useful and lifelong skills. Throughout the year I promoted the use of logic and common sense, encouraged them to attempt every maths question and come up with an answer even if it wasn’t the right one, as B.F. Skinner said “A failure is not a mistake; it may simply be the best one can do under the circumstances. The real mistake is to stop trying.”

One of my priorities at the start of each academic year is to instil in my students, the confidence and belief that they have within themselves, the ability to learn anything. In order to be open to learning, students need to feel comfortable in their learning environment, they need to feel a sense of belonging, that this is their classroom too. So, I applied this to myself this year even though in the beginning I was somewhat intimidated, as I was the only one among my classmates who hadn’t already completed a Master’s or a PhD. The learning environment in the Cert. in T&L was very supportive and informal which was conducive to learning and I comfortable sharing teaching experiences.

An added benefit of completing this course was getting to know and working with colleagues on the course and in my peer mentoring group. We learned from each other and helped each other and heard about teaching from different viewpoints which enriched us all. I struggled at times to combine, work, my studies and family and the moral support and the emails of encouragement coming up to assignment deadlines helped greatly. I completed the Technology Enhanced Learning module in semester two of 2017/2018 but this was the first academic year where I was engaged in a course of study over the full academic year whilst also working full time. With lecturing responsibilities, it was a challenge to find time for study and assignments within the busy thirteen-week semesters, so having the assessment deadlines for the Cert in T&L outside these windows was much appreciated. Being a student as well as a lecturer and on the receiving end of all the pressures that come with assessments and deadlines, gave me increased empathy and understanding for what my students go through. As a result, I changed my assessment deadlines for my students to Monday mornings rather than Friday evenings giving them the extra weekend as many students work full time or part time.

I have become more aware of the importance of the emotional engagement and pastoral care of our third level students. Many students are undergoing a major life adjustment of living away from home for the first time. An Australian study has documented the importance of pastoral care in higher education including the importance of approachability of lecturers and mentoring of new students (Maher & Macallister, 2013). I employ a humanistic approach to teaching by collaborating with and teaching students as partners, guiding them through the learning process and I endeavour to build trust and confidence from my first lecture.

From experience, I would have recognised, but my research this year has confirmed, that motivation and learning are inseparable. I have also learned, that in the classroom; attention, interest and inspiration are valuable emotional elements of the learning process and are in fact, part and parcel of the process itself (Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 2017).



Snowdrops in January in GMIT

The added bonus of completing this course has been to cement the importance of the unconventional methods I have employed to motivate my students and engage them on an emotional level as well as on an intellectual one. I bring acorns into class in October to inspire students that they may be at the acorn stage now but will reach oak tree stage some day. I bring snowdrops to all my first classes in January to remind students that if these fragile flowers can blossom during the harsh January conditions, then we can too.

One of my goals in teaching my statistics students is to build their confidence in the understanding and application of statistics in the workplace. If students can see the value in what they have learned, and can apply that knowledge at the relevant time, and in various real-life situations, real learning has taken place. I remind them that they have gained transferable skills which they can apply to future roles and that the use of common

sense and understanding is more valuable than rote learning just to pass an exam at the end of the year. I was delighted in the course of my research to find an eminent scholar who agreed with my teaching goal; "as lecturers/teachers we have the potential to hugely influence our students, I want my influence to be positive and thought provoking and to ignite enquiring minds that think and develop beyond the exam paper" - Michael O'Loughlin, Professor, School of Education, Adelphi University, New York (and a native of County Clare).

Next year, I would like to continue my research and reading of the work of the American educationalist and philosopher Nel Noddings, Professor of Education, Emerita, at Stanford University, who has written extensively about the ethics of care. I am very interested in the pastoral



care of students and believe it has been somewhat overlooked in third level education. Noddings places great importance, on the learning transfer that can occur during less formal student-teacher interactions. “What is learned from caring teachers willing to share their knowledge and their pleasure in learning is often incidental and very powerful precisely because it is given freely. We live in an age that concentrates too narrowly on the specification of what must be learned and on testing to be sure that it has indeed been learned.” (Noddings, 2005). It is often when discussions in class veer away from formal lesson plans that the students open up and respond in a positive manner, with much peer discussion and learning resulting.

As an educator for 18 years I have much valuable experience to draw from. This course confirmed much of what I believe and do as an educator as I instinctively apply best-practices in my teaching. What completing this course has added is the academic gravitas of having an accredited level 9 qualification in Teaching and Learning and all of the additional knowledge, skills and insight into the teaching profession that this affords. I have more to offer my students in GMIT as a result.

My ongoing teaching objective is to be an interesting and knowledgeable, inspiring and approachable, student-centred lecturer, striving for the best results for my students.

I will continue to use effective teaching methods in my classes and hone my teaching and learning knowledge and skills through my future engagement with the Diploma in Teaching and Learning and subsequently the Masters in Teaching and Learning in GMIT. I look forward to continuing this interesting journey.

A huge effort has gone in to developing and delivering the Certificate in Teaching and Learning in GMIT. Thank you to all the organisers and contributors. I expect you will be busy for 2019/2020 and beyond, as the GMIT Strategic Plan 2019-2023 has “Innovation in Teaching” as one of its strategic enablers and one of its goals is to; “Implement mechanisms and supports for teaching staff to acquire at least the PG Cert in Teaching and Learning.” Best of luck to all, I would highly recommend it.



On my journey.

**#GMITMATL**

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