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ICT and Education:
INCREMENTAL PROGRESS OR FUNDAMENTAL CHANGE?

Discussion group: **CHANGE**

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How many minutes do I have then? Paul Conway is my name, and I'm from University College Cork and I want to emphasise that we were all happy group members, Aidan Mulkeen, Corinne Hermant, Lilla Voss, Stephen Sayers, Don Foresta, Brendan (Donovan) – I didn't get his surname – Stuart Robinson, Eileen (Brennan) Freeman and Ann Moloney and Zoltan Foley-Fisher. My time is short: what I'll do is just mention the fundamental issues in relation to change; change was our focus.

Eight or nine key words are helpful to hang the points we made. First the issue of values; we talked about communication space, and I'll talk about these in a minute. We also talked about the average school – what does the average school have to say about change? Flowing on from that conversation about the average school, we ended up talking about the ecology of technology as opposed to technologies without the context being taken into account. We talked about the types of change, and in relation to that we talked about cheese. I'll come back to that in a minute. Technology has changed lives was a point that was made in a variety of different ways. Sometimes we think of something like television and forget that it has had a huge impact on how we organise our living rooms, so technology has made a difference even if it is slow and incremental over time. We spent a considerable amount of time talking about the levers of change, and I think we ended up looking at the levers and different levers – and different systems was an issue that arose.

We ended up in a quite heated debate towards the end of our session on this difference between basic skills and higher skills, and the role of technology in meeting basic skills. We ended up maybe thinking about whether we should use the term “essential skills” as opposed to “basic skills”, because “basic skills” has a whole load of baggage going with it. I suppose the final point that we ended up talking about was the notion that change, and most of what we had been discussing, was about incremental change. We didn’t spend as much time talking about transformative change – and I suppose just to wrap up, one of the things we talked about was cheese, again, and I’m going to come back and explain what that means.

So to get to values, in education we are in the business of making decisions, making choices about what happens for others. And if that’s the case in relation to technology then we have to be clear about what do we value? What do we value about technology, what do we value as educators – so in making any choices – in prioritising particular tools, particular technologies – underpinning those choices are values.

So in envisioning a role for technology in education, we have to step back and ask questions about values. One example is the claim, for example, or assertion, that every student ought to have a lap-top. If that is prioritised over other claims or other assertions about what is important – for example, ought every student have an experience of learning from working with and participating in schools with students who are very different from him or herself? If that latter goal is prioritised over every student having a lap-top, investment goes in certain directions. So the issue of values is fundamental.

Early on in our discussion we spoke about communication space as an arena in which values get teased out. I think an important point that we addressed was, the communication space in which we operate has significantly changed because of ICTs. The means of communication have changed, the modes of communication, the manner in which we communicate, all of that has changed. The stakeholders who in a sense dominate a particular communication space are often unquestioned. So for instance, one of the issues we discussed is the dominant role of the IT industry in

shaping some of the discourse around ICTs in education. Maybe it's time to begin to ask questions about some of the values that underpin the IT industry's interest in promoting a certain vision of ICTs in education.

As we were talking about change, I suppose we were interested in teasing out what change means for the average school. It's okay – I'm using somebody else's phrase here – to talk about what can happen in one or two boutique schools but the average school, what does change look like in that context? What are the levers of change in that context? In talking about the levers for change in particular contexts, we ended up talking about the impact of television on children in families, which is a particular ecological context. And when we talked about that, one of the distinctions we made was that television being watched by a lone child is very different than that television programme being mediated by parents, so we began to think about and use the ecology of any technology as a way to think about ecology in relationship – sorry, technology in relationship to all the other mediating factors that play a role in understanding its impact and influencing the impact.

A number of times we circled around this whole issue of the interlocking nature of the various levers and variables. One point was made that in seeking to change and instigate change in education, we have to in a sense have all the levers working at the same time: you can't just afford to shake one lever and hope that will move the system. That was one particular point of view. Another point of view was that you also put your money on particular levers – put your money on the assessment lever, right – activate assessment in the system, as a lever for broader change. We then ended up in a conversation about how, for instance in the Scottish system, teachers tend to use their curriculum guidelines on a day-to-day basis much more so than say, in the Irish context, where teachers have the curriculum mediated for them by textbooks. So they are quite different contexts and levers that might need to operate within different systems. So again, this issue of the governing structure, the enactment of the curriculum and how that plays out within particular jurisdictions, was important.

An issue which I suppose was fundamental to most of what we talked about was, “What do we mean when we talk about change?” Do we mean amplification of what is already occurring or are we talking about fundamental transformation? So for instance, one of the examples given was in an assessment situation, are assessments that can be undertaken by technology assessments of traditional exams using the new technology to assess in old ways, or are we going to assess in very new and very different ways? In talking about levers, I gave the example a minute ago about the difference between Scotland and Ireland in terms of the relative role of curriculum and assessment. When we talked about the levers we ended up thinking an awful lot about context and this brings me back to cheese.

Now, why was cheese an interesting issue? Corinne I think mentioned that de Gaulle used a particular phrase to talk about the difficulty of governing France. He said, "How can you govern a country that has 300 different types of cheese?" And I mean, one of the points there to think about is, how can we govern ICTs in education if there are 300, 500 different types of initiatives? Maybe it is quite difficult to tease out, to lay out, to envision all of the possibilities for ICTs in education. Cheese also featured in another way. Lena Voss from Denmark spoke about how the school system was traditionally more like Gouda cheese: it was an impermeable wall; whereas contemporary school systems are probably much more like Swiss cheese: there are more holes. There is a different relationship between the school system and society than there has been in the past. And if I can just finish on the final point in relation to cheese, somebody mentioned that sometimes cheese smells and it's an important point in relation to ICTs because sometimes there are very good uses made of ICTs and sometimes there are not so good uses made of ICTs. So you have to be careful about how you interpret the smell. So I'll finish there. My group may want to add because I've certainly given my own particular version of our discussion.