Chapter 8

Tightrope Walking: Balancing IT within Service-Learning in Ireland

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents findings from an established service-learning module at the National University of Ireland, Galway, in a postgraduate IT degree programme. It describes the context at a local and national level for embedding service-learning within IT while likening it to the process of tightrope walking involving the complexity of balance and control in a sometimes uncertain terrain. The findings highlight both the challenges and successes of service-learning in IT following a series of semi-structured interviews conducted with community partners, the course director and the 2008-2009 student cohort. Service-learning provides a means of connecting students’ academic study with community and society with the explicit intention of promoting active and responsible citizenship (Bringle and Hatcher, 1996; Furco and Holland, 2004; Zlotkowski, 2007). Using service-learning in computing programmes is not new (Webster & Mirielli, 2007; Tan & Phillips, 2005; Scorce, 2010; Lawler et al., 2010); however, an analysis of this work taking the perspectives of multiple stakeholders and its contexts within Ireland are all original.

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Tightrope Walking

The cable was guy-lined by a number of well-tightened cavallettis. Sometimes he loosened them so the cable would sway. It improves his balance. He went to the middle of the wire, where it was most difficult. He would try hopping from one foot to the other. He carried a balancing pole that was too heavy, just to instruct his body in change. (McCann, 2009, p. 158)

SERVICE-LEARNING IN IRELAND

Service-learning is a priority issue within higher education in Ireland. This has been prompted by the ‘Celtic Tiger’ when the 1990s brought a profound change and the country benefited from a period of economic boom. Coupled with this wealth was a growing concern over perceived declines in levels of “social capital” and to counteract this there was recognition of the potential role that service-learning, as well as other civic engagement strategies within higher education could play in redressing the balance (Boland & McIlrath, 2007).

The concept of ‘social capital’ has been defined as “networks, together with shared norms, values and understanding that facilitate co-operation within or among groups” (OECD, 2001) and “connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them” (Putnam, 2000). Putnam’s research, gathered from data collected over half a century, indicates that since the 1960s there has been a steady decline in civic participation in such activities as voting, volunteering, giving and socialising in the US. The research points to the adverse effects of this decline and the benefits to be reaped from an increase in participation in local community. If volunteering and voting are active expressions of strong social capital, there are also worrisome trends relating to youth within Ireland. Those under the age of 29 are the least active, (after those over the age of 65), with this being the only group to experience a drop in volunteering activity, from 16.9% to 14.7%, between 2002 and 2006. In addition, over 55% of eligible voters under the age of 25 do not vote at all (Taskforce on Active Citizenship, 2007). Over 85% of new entrants to higher education in Ireland are between the ages of 17 to 25 (HEA, 2007), and so fall within the cohort of those least active in civic engagement.

Putman’s Bowling Alone (2000) had a profound impact on the Irish government and prompted the former Taoiseach (Prime Minister) to create the Taskforce on Active Citizenship in Ireland in 2006. The Taskforce was charged with advising “the Government on the steps that can be taken to ensure that the wealth of civic spirit and active participation already present in Ireland continues to grow and develop” (Taskforce on Active Citizenship, 2007). The following year, the Taskforce made a series of recommendations two of which concerned higher education: first, to establish a network of higher education institutions (HEIs) to promote, support and link civic engagement activities, including volunteering and service-learning; and second, to develop a national awards/certificate system to recognise students volunteering for community activity.

To this end, the Irish HEA, through an innovation fund, granted 1.4 million Euros to five universities to introduce, support and embed civic engagement activities across Irish higher education. Under this funding a national network entitled ‘Campus Engage’ was established (McIlrath and Lyons, 2009). This work is at a nascent stage. It mirrors other national networks such as Campus Compact in the U.S. but is tailored to operate in an Irish cultural, social and economic context. In 2010, a national survey of institutional commitment will be undertaken so as to benchmark contemporary perspectives on commitment to social capital through civic engagement activities.