

E Twinning and Education for the 21st Century

Anne Looney, NCCA, Ireland

Intro

That so many of us have gathered here today to consider how better to connect Europe's teachers and students, and how the benefits of those connections can be harnessed for schools and communities, sends a very different 'news headline from Europe' than the others being flashed around the world today.

- That the European project is dead
- That Europe is falling apart
- That European citizens have lost faith and confidence in the EU

We are not isolated from these headlines. Neither are our students, nor their families and communities. But there are some very particular features of etwinning that set it apart from other European engagements, and from the current European crisis. In the course of our conference today and tomorrow we will have plenty of opportunities to discuss these particular features, and how best to improve them. For my part, this morning, I want to connect etwinning with educational innovation more generally and show how what it offers, and how it is working and developing is not just reflecting some of the current trends in educational development, it's actually leading some of those developments.

An idea about interaction

I want to begin in another conference, in Ireland two years ago, when I was asked to address a gathering of people who worked in the arts and creative industries about the importance of the arts in educational innovation. The other speaker was Paul Collard – I expect he is known to colleagues from the UK – a leader of the Creative Schools project. I arrived in the conference venue as Paul was

speaking with a very cool power point presentation full of examples of the work of creative schools. But I soon realised that no one was looking at the stage. Instead, they all seemed to be working on their lap tops or texting with their smart phones. I thought it was very rude! But the average age of the audience was in the 20-30 age group, and so, with all my middle aged prejudice, I just assumed that this was how they were.

But then I realised something... Paul Collard was not just looking at his own presentation on the screen and computer, he was watching another screen in front of him where all the participants twitter comments were appearing. And they were appearing not just on that screen – but in public, open to anyone on twitter. He was talking, they were listening, but commenting AT THE SAME TIME. And the presenter was interacting with their comments. And then I realised the really terrifying thing. I was next!!!

I had to begin my address by explaining that as a teacher I believed that if they weren't looking at me, they weren't listening, and that I would be happy to take any comments or questions – but after I had finished. They laughed at my discomfort, and generously listened to my speech, and held their comments until the end. But I have thought a lot about that event since. About the difference between my expectation and theirs, about my preferred style of speaking, and their preferred style of listening. I had used technology in my presentation – but a means to add strength to my points, to illustrate what I wanted to say and summarise my key points. They used technology in their listening, but not to record or note down my key points – but to challenge or comment on mine and make *their own* key points. And I began to reflect on the implications of this for education, and for the experience of schooling in particular which, although making more and better use of the opportunities offered by new technologies, tends to confine its use to giving teachers better tools to present content and to access content from across the world, to motivate students or to assess their progress.

Etwinning and interaction

Except of course in etwinning; where technology serves purposes well beyond this. For the 100,000 teachers who have engaged with etwinning, the portal offers an opportunity to connect with other professionals on all kinds of issues. With apologies to those of you who don't like the silent observers in e-twinning, I did just that on and off since I was asked to join you for this event. I think the technical term is 'lurking' or 'silent participation'.. and I know that I am not alone in doing this act of ' virtual' eavesdropping as the portal attracts teachers who are thinking about e twinning and wondering what it might offer to them But perhaps more such eavesdropping should be encouraged... especially for some who work in education policy, or even outside education and who voice frustration that schools are hostile to innovation or, worse, that teachers are the enemy of change!

Because what can be 'heard' in the etwinning space are the voices of teachers looking for new opportunities for themselves and for their students, who are looking for new ways to add depth to the student classroom experience, who want widen the horizon of the classroom and get beyond the classroom walls. Some are more enthusiastic than others. Some are nervous of taking on additional work. Some are nervous of working with technology in this was. Some are concerned about including groups of students who are less engaged with school than others. But through etwinning they find encouragement, teachers who have done it, had failures, had successes and are willing to share and encourage their colleagues – sometimes faceless, sometimes even nameless – from across Europe. One teacher commented that over the last two years something very interesting has happened to the etwinning portal. **It was a set of useful tools, she said, but now it is a community.**

Another teacher described it as a **safe harbour on the internet.** So while etwinning is clearly meeting its goals of linking pupils and teachers as part of the European vision for school collaboration and co-operation with mutual learning, something else interesting is happening. Etwinning is not just making connections, and then offering the tools to support these connections. For teachers, it has

become a type of community of practice, focused on new possibilities for that practice. It has become a community of possibilities. And a community of teacher voices. This to me seems to be one of the best features of etwinning.

The vision of the European Teacher

In 2010 the European Commission published 'Common European Principles for Teacher Competences and Qualifications'. Some of you will be familiar with the report. The document aimed to support national and regional policy-makers interested in enhancing quality and effectiveness across the EU. The 'competences' – what a teacher should be able to do, are defined as types or forms of work for the European Teacher. So what should the European Teacher be able to do...

According to the commission, teachers should be able to

- Work with others
- Work with knowledge, technology and information
- Work with and in society

This vision of a European Teacher is an interesting one. Teachers are the most sophisticated kind of knowledge worker, but in a social and civic context. Etwinning represents evidence that this European Teacher is alive and well, despite reduced pay, and larger classes and working with a changing and challenging cohort of young people – evidence that this teacher is alive, well, and connected to other European teachers. Through e twinning the European Teacher has a voice, has many voices. The commission may determine the competences. But etwinning gives them the space to grow and develop.

One small important point worth noting by all involved in the European activity. Again and again, those who use Etwinning and the portal, comment on how easy it is to use, once you get used to it, and most importantly, how making projects happen is just a few clicks away and does not require endless form-filling and paper work!!

Etwinning and students

So enough about the teachers – what about the students, the young Europeans who connect through e-twinning? Those students of the generation who increasingly expect to interact (as shown at the theatre conference I mentioned earlier) with teachers and with others as part of their learning. Let's think about our school students for a moment, and about where they fit in the debates about educational change.. In Ireland, in the last number of years we have made a significant attempt to include consultation with students – including the very youngest children – about changes to curriculum and assessment. We have just announced a major programme of reform at lower secondary education. Not alone did engagement with students help shape the reforms, but on Friday, the Minister announced that the new qualification at the end of compulsory education would have a new name – decided on by the students. The best the imagination of the adults could come up with was the Certificate of Junior Cycle Education. I hope the students can do better than this!

Of interest, in student feedback on their own e twinning experience, what is it that they always want more of – the interaction with other students! More of **their voice**, more of **their space**, more of their **ideas**. It seems that e twinning is now at a point where we can see a scenario, in the not too distant future, of a model where teachers connect around a project that connects students, to one where students connect, develop a project, and present it to their teachers!

Certainly, if the move for teachers is from a tool kit to a community, this trend must surely follow for students. And we know that they have little of their teachers discomfort around technology, and yes, we know that the internet can be a stormy place, but e twinning has created that safe harbour! Of course giving more of the lead to students is challenging from a number of perspectives.

The nature of educational innovation

First – are we ready? This may seem obvious in a room full of people already engaging in innovation. But being ready to give the lead to students is a big ask. All educational change is informed in equal measure by three things –

- excitement over the future
- nostalgia for the past
- anxiety about the present.

We know about the first one. We can identify with this future orientation. After all, education as a process is oriented towards the future as young people grow towards adulthood. We know that the future is elusive and hard to pin down, that it is full of uncertainties and that learning how to live with uncertainty will be one of the defining challenges of our current educational project. Imbued with that future orientation, we would expect education and school systems them to be ever changing, radically re-shaping themselves, and yet they don't. To some they seem impervious to reform, old-fashioned, based on an industrial model of knowledge that has little impact anywhere other than schools. Why is that the case? Because the other force on the education system – the pull of nostalgia – holds education back. Nostalgia gives us a very powerful image of a 'good school' and a 'good education'. For many, this is the image of 30 silent students, big text books, one speaking adult, and plenty of hard tests and examination. Despite what research might tell us, or what the future looks like and requires, there are many who long for this kind of school, and who believe that all this sitting around in groups will get us nowhere! What's even stronger than educational nostalgia, is a sort of cultural nostalgia – that longs for a golden age of the past, that existed only in the mind, but believes that if only schools were like what they used to be, society would be too! This is a naïve assumption – schools and culture are not separate entities. Children come from families and towns and villages and cities and bring culture to school and to classrooms where it is shaped and informed in turn.

So we have a pull towards a future we don't know, and a push back towards a past as we would like it to have been. And in the middle we have education. This balance might work quite well, keeping education from rushing into hasty changes for example, if it were not for the third force – anxiety about the present. It was the American educational Historian Larry Cuban who gave us the great phrase.. If society has an itch, schools get scratched. As an educator, it drives me crazy that whatever the latest anxiety of the adult population – there is an assumption that the solution is to start in schools. So not alone must we insist that children learn about heart disease, litter; tooth care, arthritis, smoking, diabetes, drugs, alcohol, safe driving and the importance of green vegetables – in short, anything ADULTS are anxious about. I am not suggesting that children don't learn about these things. They should! The problems arise when the anxiety we might be feeling is transferred to children and young people and we make them afraid, and cautious, when they should be bold and willing to take risks. Technology is a source of anxiety for many adults. Because it can be difficult to 'patrol' we can over regulate, and over control and spend more money blocking inappropriate material than on teaching students the critical skills and digital literacy and cyber safety they need to use their technologies well.

In such a context of anxiety and fear, the idea that students and young people might have greater control over the learning and over their own projects, is seen negatively. As something they could not manage effectively. I wonder how this is communicated to students. In Ireland, as in many other developed countries we are wondering about our recent drop in PISA test scores. Of course we are concerned with drops in literacy and numeracy, although we performed well on electronic reading. What really worried me was that were top of the list for unfinished items – 15 year olds who just gave up and abandoned questions, who responded to the challenge by just leaving it there! Without a teacher's intervention, they were lost! We have lots of teachers who say that in their schools, they are working harder and harder with students who seem to be working less and less. Someone once said that schools are places that students come to watch teachers work. It is true that students do not come to school to learn. They come to be with their friends. That's where projects like e

twinning have the edge..... they build on that powerful motivation, they harness student energy – not just teacher energy and are getting closer and closer to having students lead the innovation. Perhaps our anxieties about the present, and our need to protect and cocoon students has over-protected them from their responsibilities as learners and as the source of energy within a school. We need to move some way in that direction; to give them greater responsibility in educational innovation, especially where technology is concerned.

From facilitator to curator

Etwinning has already moved teachers into a facilitator role. How ready is etwinning to move to the next stage for teachers – where the teacher becomes the curator of the tools needed to make connection and of the artefacts created by the students connecting with others. This concept of curator in education is an interesting one. Just as *facilitator* does not replace *instructor*, but moves alongside it, curator joins these words as role descriptions for teachers in 21st century. The concept, drawn from the world of museums and galleries is increasingly used in digital content, and in collections such as TED talks. Applied to education the teacher gathers, displays, presents, and the student experiences, connects and makes meaning of what is presented. The student is active, connected, but making their own meaning in their own voices. The student in turn curates his or her own collection, or does so in collaboration with others. Meaning is created, meaning is shared. It's an interesting concept and one we will hear more about in the coming years as education makes more use, as etwinning does of the virtual as well as the factual.

I hope that in our deliberations together, we can curate a collection of experiences and ideas that inspire us and those with whom we work to visit and revisit and visit again the world of etwinning with its ever widening horizon and never ending possibilities.

Ends/draft/14.11.11

