Introduction

Set against the backdrop of Samhain, a Celtic tradition dating back thousands of years celebrating the changing of the seasons from light to dark, the 28th ICDE World Conference on Online Learning in Dublin brought together around 800 educators from 80 countries. Over five-days in November 2019 the World Conference provided a timely opportunity to critique, critically reflect on and celebrate the many and varied facets of online education. Framed by the overarching theme of Transforming Lives and Societies, the discussions in Dublin explored competing powerful change forces and different and contrasting preferred futures for online learning. From a rich tapestry of future discourses in Dublin, the following strands help to tease out and distil some of the key messages.

1. Shifting shapes

Online education is not a neat singular shape. There are a variety of forms of online education and greater understanding is still required of the contextual and societal contours and the influence of important cultural factors in supporting learning. Moreover, the boundaries between online, open, digital and traditional models of distance learning have become increasingly blurred—for better and for worse. Therefore, online and off-line education is not a simple duality between good and bad, old and new, public and private — such binary thinking fails to convey the complexity and rapidly shifting forms of online learning and education.

2. Shades of Openness

There is a sense in which Openness is the elixir, the new gold standard of education and research. However, openness can be opaque with many different meanings and challenges. A broad spectrum critique of openness is continually required, so that a myriad of education and learning futures can emerge. A renewed commitment to open practices and social justice for transformative learning experiences was asserted in Dublin.

3. Sharpening the Shoots

Talk of openness also raises controversial questions about business models. Such questions were not avoided in Dublin as the conference explored the evolving nature of the MOOC movement and the influence of commercial forces. But business models are not new and polemic debates do little to advance deeper understandings of how new models of online education might serve to unlock the so-called iron triangle of widening access to education whilst enhancing quality and reducing costs. Governments and policy-makers need to do more to fully harness the potential of online education to promote sustainable business models and implementation that support the goals of life-long learning and education for all.

4. Sunsets and Breakdawns

A key theme emerging from Dublin was that traditional face-to-face delivery models should no longer be viewed as the default or baseline of education and lifelong learning. Indeed, new and emerging models of online learning challenge conceptions of good pedagogy—inrespective of when, where and how people choose to study and learn. The continuing development of online education is impacting all delivery models and diminishing the distinction between formal, non-formal and informal learning. This point is evidenced by the strong focus on Dublin on the continued emergence of micro-credentials and their position within the landscape of recognised learning pathways.
Online learning is not the panacea that will by itself transform the education system. Discussions in Dublin renewed the importance of reimagining the arc of the possible and the need for growing miniscus in turbulent times. A consistent theme is the hope that new online technologies will promote more transformative and considered learning experiences that largely hype and technocratic. The conference highlighted the need for teachers, educational leaders, researchers and policy-makers to embrace and critique current models of teaching, learning and assessment in context. Tensions remain between traditional conceptions of education and the creation of a culture of innovation. More creative, equitable and critical forms of pedagogy to redefine learning and education are required for the knowledge society and in response to the ecological crisis facing the planet.

6. Closing Chasms

The need for balance and disciplined debate to critique online education to expose the challenges, the big questions and indeed its limits were brought to the fore in Dublin. In this respect the ICDE World Conference supported rich debate, disagreement and the expression of differing viewpoints. This critique should not simply be rooted in simplistic narratives or comparisons. It requires sophisticated theoretical reasoning and empirical evidence drawn from multiple disciplines to challenge myths, misinform and half-truths whilst aiming to research and to inform transformative practice. Questions of who is telling the online learning story, who are they telling and why and who benefits most remain crucial to harnessing the transformative potential of digital technologies in the service of a quality education for all. In this respect the conversations emerging from Dublin reminds us to also ask whose story is not being told and whose voice is missing or misrepresented?

7. Rays of Light

The Dublin Conference was anchored in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the conversations served to paint a bigger picture of how online education has enormous potential globally to help support and transform lives and societies. With tones and intentions of optimism, realism and activism the ICDE World Conference on Online Learning has left us with the clear message to engage with issues of social justice. It illustrated the importance and necessity of digital presence and participation of indigenous heritage and culture in the networked world to promote diversity and support context and situated learning experiences. A rich tapestry of cultures and contexts in the online learning space connects learners and does not offer their learning experiences. The concept of othering, challenged the Dublin ICDE conference to renew our commitment to access, to inclusion and to lifelong learning and to reject hegemonic monolithic thinking. Delegates leave Dublin with a clear message for the future that online learning is committed to the values and practices of social justice, equity and ethics in a cohabited, sustainable society.

Conclusion

At the heart of the ICDE World Conference in Dublin was the message of transformation. The challenge outlined by this declaration for all participants before we meet again in Natal in Brazil is to take ethical, sustainable and transformative actions that go beyond lofty aspirations.

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