

CHERIL report – EDriNet The Educator Driven Network.

Research aims:

The overall aim of the research was to build a formal network between A-Level teachers and University teaching academics to facilitate two way communications to the benefit of education. Geography was used as a pilot to critically evaluate whether the approach could be rolled out to other disciplines.

To achieve that aim specific objectives were:

- To consider the most appropriate tool to build the network;
- To think critically about what 'a network' means in the delivery of education;
- To identify opportunities for university and A-level educators to work together to the benefit of learning;
- To think critically and strategically about those opportunities to align them with school and University agenda to maximise outputs.

This project contributed to the strategic goals of the University and of CHERIL in multiple ways. Whilst academics differ in the detail, none would deny that within the shifting landscape of higher education, learners' needs are changing (Times Higher Education, 2014). To maintain excellence in teaching we have to understand *how* those needs are changing. The University of Manchester's growing student intake is synonymous with success; but it brings with it the increased challenge of providing individualised student support through personalised learning whilst maintaining excellent student experience. As numbers have increased, so too has diversity and ability, with higher entry grades and diverse backgrounds and learning needs further fuelling the question of how to effectively engage students in the learning environment (see Baron and Corbin, 2012). Amongst others, Tate and Sword (2013) highlight the difficult, and often stressful, transition to University away from the 'spoon feeding of school' and the 'rollercoaster of confidence and emotions' (Hazel *et al.*, 2008:567) as students undertake massive steps in both their personal and educational lives; steps greater still for students from 'non-traditional' backgrounds. Anecdotally, as First Year Advisor, there has been a notable increase in mitigating circumstances cases, referrals to the Counselling Service and DSO support which was reflected in findings of the Times Higher Report (2014). All of this is situated against a higher educational landscape that was shifted by the Browne Review which ended the Higher Education Act of 2004 and removed the cap on tuition fees enabling universities to 'compete on an the global stage' with a £9,000 annual price tag (see Harrison and Hatt, 2011).

As Learners' needs have changed, so too have the needs of the staff teaching them. A Manchester education prides itself on teaching excellence as academics deliver stimulating ideas of the highest quality. To do that effectively, academics must fully understand the shifting learning needs of their students. Furthermore, academics need to enhance exemplary fair access to education and know how best to support students from diverse backgrounds. Many academics also need to balance increasing teaching demands with excellent research output or, for teaching focused academics (TFAs), like myself, developing pedagogic innovation.

Geography is a particularly interesting pilot for this research as it represents a discipline that has undergone subsequent waves of question over its identity since the 1970s (see de Blij, 2007); an existential crisis that speaks to the central issues about Geography's definition and purpose as a subject (Bonnett, 2008). Furthermore – and arguably as a result of the identity crisis - Castree *et al.*, (2007: 130) suggest that 'university and pre university geography [in the UK] are like distant relations: there is a family connection but it is fairly weak'. That debate needs to be expanded to consider the weak connections within the discipline itself which further exacerbate questions of identity and bridging the school – university gap. Castree (2002; 1999) touched upon this when he highlighted the importance of contesting the moral and political economy prevailing within our academy before we can reach from it, i.e. the *politica* of how 'in here' affects what we do 'out there'.

This research aims to bridge the gap between school and university learning of Geography, in the first instance to maintain teaching excellence and a positive supporting working environment for teaching academics.

Methodology:

A total of £3100 was requested from CHERIL. £100 of that was intended to purchase a professional profile of the online networking tool 'Linked In' which was tested as a potential tool to build EDriNet. The remaining sum was to employ Joe, an interrupted Geography PhD Student and local Geography teacher. Joe's role was to promote the network, inviting colleagues to become part of EDriNet in the first instance and then facilitating conversation through the on line platform. Joe's positionality was considered particularly useful as he acted as a gatekeeper to the snowball sample.

Linked In is a freely available online professional profile tool. A professional account opens further capacity such as extended searches of Linked In members and an increased allowance of internal messages. Linked In also offers a helpful discussion platform where conversation threads can be easily hosted and developed according to theme. With some simple guidelines profiles can be constructed with code words that indicate specialism or interests. Teachers would immediately know if, for example, an academic was teaching focused or had a particular research niche. In turn, academics could easily identify which teachers were key workers for disability, perhaps, or experienced in handling big classes. Geography teachers were approached in the first instance with a view to evaluating the project and extending the disciplinary remit if the network concept was successful. It was made clear to members of the network that a requirement of joining was to undertake a three monthly survey of their engagement either directly through the network or as a result of it. This aimed to capsule any communications that were instigated by EDriNet but occurred in personal space. The plan was to use this space for informal discussion, to share opportunities such as seminar or training sessions and to generally support educators. A core element of the network was that it should be educator driven.

Initial findings:

An immediate – and key - finding was that whilst academics are familiar with Linked In, it is not one used by school teachers. A total of 70 teachers were approached via email, (in total by both the RA and the Researcher) of those only 4 had Linked In profiles. Even those profiles were poorly

developed and under used. We experimented with drafting a simple set of instructions explaining how to sign up and build a profile. Evaluation from the teachers agreed that the instructions were clear but explained that they had neither the time nor the need for such a formal space.

Whilst the process of building a formal network was less successful, the *process* of networking was almost overwhelming. Of the 70 Geography teachers that were approached, all expressed a keen interest to work more closely with the University, specifically to get involved with Widening Participation activities such as Gifted and Talented and Insight Days; they were referred to central services. There were also more specific requests via email and telephone for support in the form of literature or teaching materials and particularly about entry requirements and admissions. Concerns were also expressed over the new A-Level syllabus which, as explained below, is a major contribution of the informal network to pedagogic change.

Discussing this with the researcher's critical friends they agreed that the barriers to enhancing engagement between schools and university were encapsulated in a formal network that had rules and regulations, a sign up process, and so forth. The beauty of the networking process is the organic nature with which it unfolds as it is driven by the needs of the educator – needs are acute in times of crisis or difficulty. In this situation the platform of Linked In proved ineffective and inappropriate to link teachers and University academics but the *process* of networking was significant. The overwhelming response to enhance links between schools and university highlighted the demand and potential to work together around particular topics. Curiously, however, this demand reinforced the initial motivation for the original CHERIL bid. A huge amount of time was consumed in conversation with teachers. It was also problematic that during the research time, Joe's school went into special measures and he was effectively forced to withdraw from the research; a gap that I had to fill. Whilst the conversation was valuable as it enabled me to gain a better understanding of the Geography A-Level and teachers' pedagogic approach, it arguably did not have wider impact and it was problematic to consider how I could share those findings with educational colleagues. It is also impossible to evaluate the impact of informal networking.

Evaluating a way forward it was obvious that conversations tended to focus around specific events. The University admissions process is a good example, I received a number of emails and phone calls from teachers that we had networked with about students who had fallen ill during their A-Levels and missed a grade, or advice about writing personal statements. The 2016 introduction of the new A-Level syllabus, in itself a really good example of the historic existential crisis within the discipline, was also a concern. The advisory panel that generated the new curriculum was headed by Professor Martin Evans, Head of Geography@Manchester. The informal network of teachers proved invaluable to understand how the new curriculum has been received, what teachers think of it, but moreover how Geography@Manchester could tangibly support the introduction of the new curriculum.

Learning from the decades of cyclical discussion (Morgan, 2002) and disciplinary shifts (Blunt and Wills, 2000; Johnston and Sidaway, 2004) the new A-Level curriculum endeavours to enable learners to:

'be inspired by their geographical understanding of the world they live in and to engage critically with real world issues and real world locations through the application of geographical knowledge, theories and concepts' (ALCAB, 2014:2).

It aims to specifically bridge the gap between school and university geography learning by:

pitching the material at an appropriate level of demand by showing clear progression in content, concepts and skills from GCSE. It must prepare students who go on to study geography and related subjects at university, and be relevant to those who end their studies of geography at A Level' (ALCAB, 2014:2).

Whilst 60 per cent of the content is core, based around substantive themes, fieldwork, and notably, skills, the awarding organizations can select up to 40 credits of noncore content in order to create distinctive specifications (ALCAB, 2014). Fieldwork features highly with mandatory opportunities for students to engage in independent investigate and research work. Of the core content, four of the six themes are not unlike the current AS and A2 syllabi with a balance of human and physical geography focusing on global governance and global systems, landscape systems and water cycling. The real changes are the introduction of carbon cycling and 'changing places' which is exactly the social and cultural theory that caused so much consternation within the academy with the cultural turn of the 1990s. The core curriculum includes place making and marketing, cultural and artistic approaches to representing places and lived experience of place in the past and present (Department of Education, 2014). Talking to teachers through the network it became clear that many of them had touched upon cultural geography at university if they studied from the late 1990s onwards. But unfortunately, unlike tangible skills in map reading, the more theoretical cultural geography is not necessarily something that geography teachers will have engaged with since their formal learning years. Space and place theory represented a particular concern. Geography@Manchester is a research centre for cultural geography and carbon cycling, as well as global systems, global governance landscape systems and water and carbon cycling (amongst others). In effort to aid the recruitment to university geography, to equip students with the skills to assist in their transition (and arguably retention) the informal network will lead the dissemination of the new curriculum with North-West Geography teachers at a one day conference event on 24th June, 2016.

The day has been designed in conjunction with Geography teachers and the informal network (that should have been EDriNet), we decided, for example, to host a one day conference rather than subsequent twilight sessions. After parallel workshops run by Geography academics, teachers will go into round table discussions to consider how to take that learning and translate it into classroom lessons. This event has been fully funded by the Manchester Geographical Society, SEED's External Affairs and Public Relations fund and the RCUK-Schools University Partnership. The event itself will provide an opportunity to further enhance our list of geography teachers and mobilise other opportunities to enhance the educational experience for all stakeholders.

Implications and moving forward:

The A-Level conference day represents one way in which the informal network has triggered pedagogic change. Teachers will learn the material that they need to develop their teaching, in turn enhancing the space for informal networking. This is two way dialogue which feeds back into the core aims of EDriNet but drawing on the research of Imrie and Cowley (2006), Jeffrey (2003) and Birnie (1999) it became clear that spaces needed to be created to facilitate informal dialogue between teachers and lecturers (albeit in their own time (Prykett and Smith, 2009)) which is needs driven. It was the platform that was inappropriate here, not the process. The very fact that the RA

had to withdraw from the research as his school went into special measures highlighted the lack of space that teachers have to engage in anything other than specifically advantageous projects which open space for discussion. The professional on line profile has been replaced by a simple Excel spreadsheet of contacts but moreover a very clear visibility that Geography@Manchester are keen to partake in such discussions for mutual educational gains.

The full budget was spent on Joe's time (but very much impacted by the Full Economic Costing process). After the initial investigations it became apparent that spending £100 on a professional Linked In account would be a waste of resources.

If we were to undertake the project again we would be braver about dismissing the use of a tool that performs the same action as an Excel spreadsheet, but looks prettier and fits with an academic perception of networking. The actions of talking, of sharing ideas, of emailing and telephoning represented the networking here. The project itself is self sustaining. The network has been shared across the network and will be shared again as a delegate list at the A-Level conference and beyond. It is impossible to measure the impact of the informal networking that could take place beyond the formal space of the classroom or University of Manchester.

The 'network', or at least Geography@Manchester's willingness to work with Schools has been clearly expressed on the University [website](#), for Geography specifically and SEED more general. Since the site was launched two weeks ago, I have already received two requests for school visits. Critical question now lies on the capacity of future activities as opportunities to be as strategic as possible with school engagement to maximise impact for all concerned. The findings of this project, and particularly the almost overwhelming demand for engagement with Geography@Manchester supported a successful pitch to recruit an Associate Director for Widening Participation to exactly continue the aim of this research and maximise school-university engagement to mutual gain and roll efforts out across the School of Environment, Education and Development.

Final steps:

Linked In proved to be an inappropriate tool to build a network. The process of networking is, by default, largely demand driven, but opens up difficult critical questions of how to measure and evaluate impact though informal engagement. Arguably here, as with so much of education, the tangible benefits are not quantifiable and should not be simplified into targets. Certainly this project not only built a network but identified multiple ways for university and A-Level educators to work together to the benefit of learning, in the immediate term with the A-Level curriculum day but more long term through opportunities advertised through our website which is already having impact. Utilising this research I will be working closely with the newly appointed Associate Director of Widening Participation to maximise the impact that we have with schools to the mutual benefit of education. With thanks to CHERIL, a small financial investment should have significant long term education impact.

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