INTRODUCTION

- This case study details the impact of the application of a Threshold Concept approach (Cousins, 2018; Myers & Land, 2006) on the experience and performance of Practitioner-Students on a professional development Masters Program (The Masters in Christian Leadership in Education (MACLE)) offered by Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick in 2010-2011. The students were professional educators and mostly Principals in second level education in Ireland.

- The case study describes an intensive module: the "Integrating Seminar" that ran over a two-week period at the end of the taught component of the Masters Program (June 2011). This module was structured to create a learning environment that would support the production of a range of novel solutions to complex, topical and realistic issues facing Practitioners. In doing so, it encapsulated the key principles of Threshold Concepts by facilitating a transformative space in which participants work through a formal (and troubleshooting) space, leading ultimately to more integrated and profound understanding.

- The Integrating Seminar was a pedagogical vehicle designed to encourage the assimilation of the academic knowledge and research components of the three multi-disciplinary streams that constituted the Masters in Christian Leadership (Theology, Psychology and Educational Practice & Leadership, taught over twelve course modules), with the professional experience of the students.

- The aim was to induce ‘novel knowledge’ that could be used by the students to address and evaluate a series of realistic and complex problems with a range of solutions/actions plans.

- The Objectives for the Integrating Seminar:

  - Extract holistic knowledge of MACLE academic content using ‘surface’ questions based on multiple modules.
  - Increase awareness of how:
    - Legal issues
    - Management issues
    - Spiritual issues
    - The relationship between the school and community may be interpreted.
  - To stress the need to make/take:
    - Informed decisions/actions
    - Encourage use of sources of information identified within the Masters’ modules
    - Enhance our Principals’ awareness of how seemingly idiosyncratic behaviour can snowball
    - Provide and opportunity to work closely with varied members
  - To foster the need to make/take:
    - Informed decisions/actions
    - Encourage use of sources of information identified within the Masters’ modules
    - Enhance our Principals’ awareness of how seemingly idiosyncratic behaviour can snowball
    - Provide and opportunity to work closely with varied members

METHOD

The Integrating Seminar was split into 3 components:

1. Short Scenarios (Students need to draw on their knowledge of multiple modules in order to arrive at creative solutions to everyday problems).
2. Case Narrative
3. Fishbowl Role Play

2. Case Narrative

- What was different?.. The sheer scale of the exercise:
  - To get our Principals to integrate knowledge ‘in real time’ extracted across an entire Masters degree.

Taught Modules of the Masters in Christian Leadership

3. Fishbowl Role Play

- The Fishbowl exercise aimed to facilitate and promote through role play:
  - A better understanding of the impact of Leadership style on aspects of group dynamics
  - Enhanced awareness of how our characters’ behaviour shapes a meeting, and influence decision making and group productivity
  - Encourage reflection on how we might ‘improve’ group dynamics

The Scene

The School Management Board (SMB) who were mostly new to the ‘job’ agreed that in order to make decisions about the presentation to a evening Whole School Inspection Team, they needed information. The board asked Joanna (the new and inexperienced Principal) and her staff to provide several short ‘bullet point’ reports that outlined the relevant obligations, procedures and processes.

Role Play Design

- 6 pairs of students were assigned a character (actor who took part in the meeting & assessor for their performance) of Practitioner-Students on a professional development Masters Program (The Masters in Christian Leadership in Education (MACLE)) offered were professional educators and mostly Principals in second level education in Ireland.

- The Need to explore solutions in the context of legal and societal frameworks
- The complexity of problems that face Principals (e.g. staffing issues not just student issues)
- The need to explore solutions in the context of legal and societal frameworks

The Case Study highlights the importance of detailed structure in the design of such pedagogical tools in order to optimize the student experience of the threshold concept approach