



# Transforming the Practitioners: an exploration of the application of Threshold Concepts to a multidisciplinary professional development Masters course in Christian Leadership.

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## INTRODUCTION

- This case study details the impact of the application of a Threshold Concept approach (Cousins, 2010; 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 went through a liminal (and troublesome) 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/action 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 intertwined
- 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

## METHOD

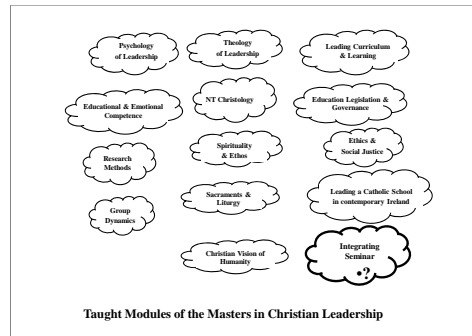
The Integrating Seminar was split into 3 components:

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



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.



## 2. Case Narrative

- A Complex Case Narrative was written with multiple modules in mind.
- Lecturers provided questions pertinent to their own module.
- These questions were filtered to produce 'surface level' problems that could arise from the content of different modules.

The scenario (Religious Equality in Schools) had to be:

- Feasible
- Realistic
- Complex

Encourage student teams to produce a range of possible solutions.

Create an awareness that perceived quality of solution is a function of many factors:

- Value Systems
- Time Constraints
- Awareness of and access to information sources.
- Efficacy of Decision making processes
- Other group dynamics.

## 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 shape 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 content of a presentation to a looming 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 who rated their performance)

Characters were based on profiles from the Aamodts EPI

In so far as was possible the characters reflected both

**similar characteristics** to student own profiles

**'opposites'**; very different to those they exhibited naturally

Extract from 'Joanna's' character profile

Joanna enjoys being in charge, but in fact is not good at leadership.

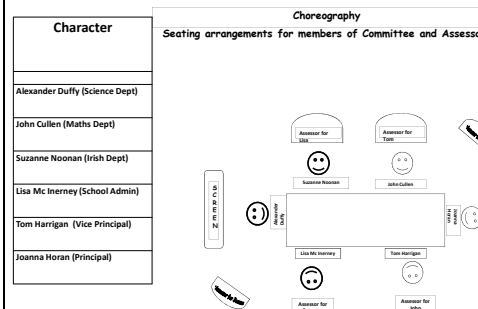
She employs a very directive style and rarely asks for advice or approval of others.

She sets goals, provides direction, and expects a high level of performance from everyone.

As a leader, Joanna is good at making tough decisions, has a can-do attitude and will cut through red tape

Strengths	Weaknesses
• Ability to get things done	• Perceived as being too competitive
• Willing to take charge	• Can be abrasive, impatient and short with others
• Able to quickly make tough decisions	• Not good followers or team players
• Efficient user of time: high productivity	• Tendency to break rules-regulations

Each of the six pairs produced their report for the meeting based on a number of criteria BUT only three would be chosen for presentation to the board. Each character had the added responsibility of making sure that their report would be chosen...leading to some interesting group dynamics as the meeting progressed.



\*Video Still from Fish Bowl exercise. The meeting was videotaped and students were provided with a copy of the video to use as a feedback tool.

## FEEDBACK

•What did the students think of the Integrating Seminar?

These students are mature, seasoned professionals...

...not afraid to give honest and blunt feedback

Students were asked to indicate their agreement with the following statement

"The integrating seminar was helpful in integrating the learning across the course"

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree

- Out of 12 respondents 10 strongly agreed (1) with the above statement.
- One did not provide an indication.
- The remaining respondent agreed (2) with the statement.

Qualitative comments were most favourable

\*Some feedback concentrated on the impact of the I.S. on Relationships within the group (each component had different group membership)

"The integrating seminar was a major highlight of the course to date. Really well organised, challenging and a great deal of fun. It had the unintended (?) outcome of bonding the group to an even further degree-if that's possible!"

"Both useful and enjoyable and strengthened the relationship bond in the group. Helped us to interpret the content of the course in a meaningful way. Well done to the MT for developing this course. A great experience"

## CONCLUSIONS

The Integrating Seminar was a vehicle to :

- Demonstrate in real time over an entire degree
  - Students academic knowledge gleaned from the different modules
  - Application of theoretical and skills based knowledge honed or acquired in the MA (e.g. Personal/spiritual development; group dynamics)
- Enhance awareness of
  - The inter-relatedness of the modules
  - 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