



2nd Burren Symposium:
Towards a More Creative Education System
Building Momentum

16-18 September, 2019
Burren College of Art, Ballyvaughan





Centre for Universal Creativity at the Burren College of Art

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

What the Symposium set out to do:

‘Towards a More Creative Education System: Building Momentum’ was designed:

- To continue to develop the narrative about the change we want to help happen;
- To build momentum in the direction of greater creativity within the education system by sharing inspiring stories of what’s been happening and offer support for any new initiatives that may be emerging;
- To explore how we can grow agency and co-agency (core concepts in the OECD’s 2030 Learning Compass) in the education system;
- To provide an opportunity for participants to reflect on how they can contribute to systemic change and;
- To develop the role of BCA’s Centre for Universal Creativity as a catalyst for systemic change.

An Emerging Narrative

There is growing recognition of the need for change in education and there was a palpable sense that those present were up for that change, intuitively sensing the new narrative that is needed. Students are confronted with unprecedented challenges from changes to the world of work, climate change, social media pressure, identity politics, post truth and disrupted cultural narratives. An industrial age paradigm of education was widely acknowledged as a significant additional contributor to the stress and mental health issues they were experiencing.

The emerging narrative of the school of the future reflected a shift from an industrial-age paradigm to a space of psychological security in which the highest attributes of purpose and creativity could be nurtured. The cultivation of internal qualities of awareness, empathy, connection to self, others and the environment, resilience, responsibility and agency would be at least as important as content knowledge in preparing students for a highly uncertain future. Risk taking and a willingness to be vulnerable would be welcomed as much as conformity and control were in the past. The wellbeing of teachers would be a necessary pre-requisite - without it the wellbeing of students could not be secured.

Energizing the Change Process

The dynamic for change that had taken root at the first Symposium was coalescing around a number of initiatives while other sparks were being ignited:

- The BEACONS process was catalysing a conversational process among parents, students and teachers at a local level about the kind of education they wanted in their contexts.
- The CAFÉ process was seeking a commitment from the political system to the hosting of a Citizens Assembly for Education which would explore the fundamental question of what education needed to be at this time thereby accelerating the changes that are now urgently needed. The voice of students would be central to the CAFÉ.
- The hosting of SIFI's Gamechanger Dialogue at BCA show-cased alternative education and the imperative of 'no one left behind'.

Other impacts that could be traced to the symposium process were the Inspectorate conference devoted to creativity, while the showcasing of Burrenbeo's place-based learning (PBL) programme will hopefully accelerate the adoption on a much wider scale of this

essential form of education in linking students to the stewardship of their place. Significant positive impacts on the understanding and practice of individual participants were evident from the evaluation carried out in April while the magnitude of other impacts will only become evident with the passage of time.

Agency and Co-Agency

The exploration of agency and co-agency, which was a focus of the symposium, revealed what participants sought in the shift from the old to the new:

- **the letting go of** : control, judgment, fear of making mistakes, lack of trust, measurement and curriculum focus while
- **allowing more room for**: personalised learning, student voice, more time and space, greater clarity on the role of teacher as supporter of learning rather than provider of knowledge, space for being vulnerable and a sense of being in this together.

To progress the agency agenda participants delved into thirteen topics which constellated around wellbeing, innovation, creativity, student/teacher dialogue and diversity. The elements that percolated through this exploration were:

- the search for beauty;
- mindfulness;
- deep listening;
- connecting with the earth;
- engaging with drama and the arts;
- building community;
- how to introduce something as subversive as creativity without being tokenistic and
- the challenge of introducing student-teacher dialogue in an authentic way.

The Way Ahead

The essence of this and the preceding symposium was an organic process of tending the soil of education, creating the conditions for transformation to occur. [Cré na hÉireann](#) a clay ritual introduced by a participant captured this understanding very nicely while reminding us in the process of the importance of connection, community, sustainability and groundedness.



'Cré na hÉireann' – a ritual of communion with others and the earth

By the conclusion of the Symposium the soil had been enriched, connections reinforced and energy renewed for the work that lies ahead. Momentum was building through the change initiatives already under way. The potential of each participant in the system to be instrumental in the shift to greater creativity and agency was becoming clearer. The power of creative conversational processes, artfully facilitated, were shown to have enormous power to catalyse systemic change. Here's a [Visual Harvest](#) of the symposium output together with a [Compilation of Images](#) of the event.

Everyone with an interest in the future of Irish education is invited to be part of the ongoing conversation



Symposium Report

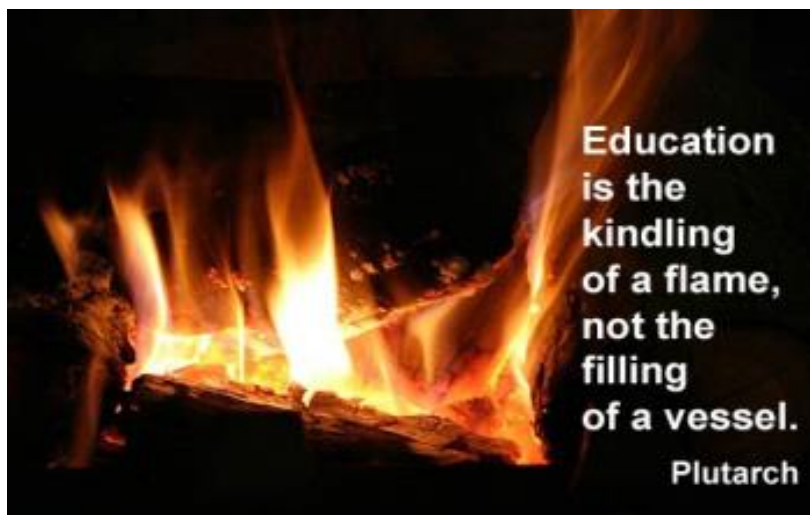
The Context - Kindling a Flame

'Towards a more Creative Education System: Building Momentum' was built on the conviction that a shift of educational paradigm's in education was not only possible but was happening already. Creativity was a birth-right and an imperative. This conviction emerged from the first Symposium held at the [Centre for Universal Creativity](#) at the Burren College of Art in September 2018. Through a conversational process hosted in a safe, creative way a new awareness was being born. There was a palpable sense that *'We are in liquid times, anything is possible and we need to move now'*.

The challenge was to engage with the sense of urgency that this historic moment in human history called for. Confronted with climate change, a revolution in the world of work and artificial intelligence, the pressures of the digital surround, post-truth and the dislocation of cultural narratives, young people were in the midst of what could be characterised, without exaggeration, as an existential trauma. The epidemic of stress and mental health issues affecting students here and elsewhere was at record levels – and the nature of the education system was a major contributor to the stress, notwithstanding the heroic work being done by very many innovators across the field of education.

How to quickly evolve an education system that would equip students with the creativity, agency and resilience to transform their world was the challenge of this generation? As people were awakening to the illogic of an industrial age model for a twenty-first century world in crisis, business as usual was no longer an option. 'We are the change' - we owe it to ourselves to get on with it.'

What emerged from this, the second Symposium, was a strong commitment to a programme of work to drive forward the transformational reform processes at local and national levels that were birthed by the first Symposium. An important dimension of this work was to be clear what a new system would look like. The words of Plutarch seemed to capture the shift in emphasis that was required:



Cultivating internal capacities of students – awareness, agency, creativity, wellbeing and relationship – were as important as, if not more important than, content knowledge. The need to respect and care for the profound inter-connectedness of self, other, society and the natural world felt like an implicit understanding. Empathy, beauty, creativity, wellbeing and openness to diversity were just some of the qualities that were being sought. It was now time to realize these aspiration in the work that was underway. *‘There is agreement on the destination – the challenge is how to get there, working at the ‘acupuncture points’ of a system that is not good at change.’*



An Emerging Narrative – *safety in which creativity can flourish*

One of the objectives of the second Symposium was to develop a narrative of what we want to see happening in education. It needed to be grounded in an acknowledgment of contemporary realities while sensing what a vision for a new system might look and feel like in the face of these realities. Participants were asked to share their aspirations at the outset of the process.

Aspirations: What was called for was the scaffolding of creativity rather than its stifling by removing unnecessary structures and restrictions. Creativity needed to ripple through the curriculum, not be confined to arts. Cultural inheritance – ‘Tá dóchas sa dúchas’ - was an enabler of creativity, an unseen source to be drawn upon. *‘Creativity allows generosity and generosity allows everything to grow.’*

Children needed to be listened to and to be the drivers of change. We needed an education of the heart that included the alienated. Things were very clear at the margins of alternative education and the insights from here needed to be included. Students seeing teachers being vulnerable allowed for feelings of common purpose. Teachers, like students, also needed support at a time when huge challenges were impinging on schools from society and the wider global context. We needed to trust teachers and schools. In the words of MIT’s Otto Scharmer: *‘We need to put the learner in the driver’s seat of profound societal change.’*

They were also asked what they needed more and less of. Perhaps not surprising they needed more breathing space, more scope for students to lead, more trust and less fear, more curiosity and persistence, more agency and co-agency, more listening, more innovation and less control, more mindfulness, more joy and imagination, more support and less pressure, more vulnerability – more ambition at all levels of the system.

Implicit in these aspirations and needs it was possible to discern a call for school to be a zone of psychological safety in which students’ innate creative abilities were enabled to flourish in the face of existential challenges which were sensed even if not fully acknowledged or articulated. Could it be that the current focus on wellbeing in the system actually requires a greater willingness on the part of society at large, and teachers in particular, to be honest about the crises facing the contemporary world combined with an empowering vision for how education can be an enabler of how to deal with these challenges? Feeling safe, the most basic prerequisite for wellbeing, needs to be based on a sense of standing on the solid ground of reality.



Feeling safe – creativity can flourish

Creativity: Since creativity and the related concept of agency was an organising principle in the symposium process, it needed to be demystified, being frequently confused with art which was a particular expression of the creative impulse. Creativity, simply defined as the inborn ability to create that which is new and valuable, was foundational to what made us

unique as a species and was key to solving the challenges that confront our civilisation. It was time to reverse the baleful effects of the industrial-age model of education which had been demonstrated to suppress rather than enable a capacity connected to the source of our being.

Cultivating creativity, it was suggested, entailed enabling students to cultivate Purpose and Presence. Facilitating the emergence of a sense of purpose in students, typically in early adolescence, was foundational to resilience and wellbeing as well as creativity. At this time it reflected the urgent call to citizenship both local and global. *'The why question is important to creative risk-taking and modelling resilience.'* *'Purpose - what makes me feel powerful and puts fire in my belly? We lack a vocabulary of purpose; to connect with what is in my heart and express it fully.'* As Nietzsche observed: *'He who has a why can suffer any how'*.

Cultivating Presence required attending not only to the 'open mind' but to the 'open heart' and the 'open will'. A culture that made it safe to be vulnerable was central to the cultivation of all three – allowing the exploration of:

- The 'open mind' of imaginative possibility – free from the tyranny of rigid assumptions and the 'one right answer';
- The 'open heart' of connection, empathy and communication – a vital capacity of reconnection at a time of alienation from self, others and the natural world and
- The 'open will' of spontaneously arising action, responsibility and resilience in response to the call of purpose and the demands of the moment.

The call of education at this time was the call to enable the highest creative capacities of students built on alignment with the true-north of their life purpose and the capacities of the open mind, heart and will. Nothing less would suffice to equip them not just to survive but to thrive in the changing world that was now opening up.



Building Momentum – The Change is Underway

A primary aim of the Symposium was to share stories of what had been happening in the past year, to synergise and share learnings. We heard inspiring stories of conversational processes that were launched and in prospect at local and national level with the potential to connect bottom-up with top-down in a transformational wave. They carried acronyms such as BEACONS (Bringing Educational Alive for Communities on a National Scale) and CAFÉ (Citizens Assembly for Education).

BEACONS:

A 'tribe' of supporters, assembled at the first Symposium, met on a regular basis at venues across the country to clarify thinking and potential ambition for a BEACONS process. The first prototype event, held at Ennistymon on 16/17 May, was the fulfilment of a long-held vision of the Director of the Teaching Council (TC) to catalyse a conversation process among parents, teachers and students in their local areas to allow them say what's important – what's in their hearts – about the future of education in a safe, inclusive, inspirational way. Taking its inspiration from the conversational process that underpinned the Symposium the focus was on igniting a process which, like a conker breaking open, would allow new shiny fruit to emerge. The hoped-for fruits included tapping the insights, hopes and aspiration of diverse participants as well as shedding light on how such a BEACONS process might best be facilitated to grow on a national scale.

Fuelled by a 'just-do-it' spirit the first prototype was co-created with the Teaching Council by the Ennistymon schools and the Burren College of Art. Some fifty parents, teachers and students from five primary and secondary schools came together over a day and a half to explore what education needed to be in their contexts at this time. The stress in the system and the crucial importance of the quality of relationships and being listened to were highlighted. Students were clear what they wanted implemented in relation to their school environments – and they were insistent in wanting to know 'will anything change?' So there will be another event in Ennistymon before Christmas to interrogate progress in the meantime. The aliveness of this unique event in creating conversation and deep listening is captured in this [video](#).

Inspired by the success of the first prototype and supported by a small grant award from the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (DPER) it was decided to press ahead with a series of BEACONS events in Baltinglass and Larkin College in November. These will bring together combinations of six and seven primary and second-level schools respectively. As in Ennistymon, observers from other schools will be invited to experience these events in anticipation that they will seed the process into their own contexts. A year-end event, hosted by the Teaching Council, will bring together the learnings from the three BEACONS events.

Ongoing evaluation of the process is being undertaken by the Centre for Effective Services ([CES](#)) who are already well advance in developing an action logic model and testing 'casual chains' for the BEACONS process.



CAFÉ:

The idea for a Citizens Assembly For Education, catalysed by Catherin Byrne (former Deputy General Secretary of the INTO), garnered huge support at the first Symposium with a group of thirty signing up to support an idea whose time they felt had come. As with the BEACONS process a working group was established to examine how to progress the securing of a commitment in the programme for the next Government to the hosting of a Citizens Assembly (CA) on the theme of education. Larkin College in Dublin graciously agreed to host the meetings while facilitating the participation of students which constituted a powerful contribution to the group's understanding of the learner's world.

An early realization was that for a CAFÉ process to be effective it would need to engage with a high-leverage question that addressed what the philosophy and purpose of education needed to be at this time. By generating an informed consensus on this basic question a clear mandate for policy change should hopefully emerge. (Diving into any of the many policy issues such as patronage that require dedicated attention was likely to get bogged down and divert attention from the over-arching question.) Giving students a voice in the process would be an important and necessary innovation in the Citizens Assembly model which could transform the nature of the debate. As with previous assemblies it was envisaged that there would be an Oireachtas Committee dedicated to considering the outputs of the CAFÉ.

The CAFÉ group received a very informative presentation from the secretary to the last [Citizens Assembly](#) - in particular in relation to the disinterested nature of the evidence presentation - while positive meetings had been held with the CEO of the NYC and with the Secretary General of the Department of Education and Science. Informal soundings had also been held with the political system and more formal contacts were pending with the object of securing a commitment to a CAFÉ in the party manifestos in advance of the next election. With elections in the offing (May 2020 or earlier) there is likely to be an up-tick in the pace of engagement in the period immediately ahead.

Once a new Government is engaged with the CAFÉ project it moves beyond the capacity of the current tribe of supporters to be involved. However the potential for BEACONS to feed into and inform a CAFÉ is but one of the many synchronicities that are possible in an elegant linking of a local with a national conversation.

SIFI: The Social Innovation Fund's [Gamechanger Dialogue](#) for innovations in education took place at the Burren College of Art 8 – 10 May show-casing nine innovations in alternative education supported by SIFI. SIFI were seeking to enhance philanthropy in education with an emphasis on social protection and pathways from welfare to work. With students co-presenting there was powerful learning in a safe space with a recognition that lots of work needed to be done in relation to alternative education. Major themes included adapting the education system for an unknown future; the need for innovation and a student-centred approach; building on what we value as a society with an imperative of 'no one left behind'.

“The event and location gave us the time and space to step out of our respective corners of education, have a meaningful dialogue about what positive change is needed and take the first steps together before leaving. It was hugely encouraging”.

A further Gamechanger event will take place at BCA in 2020.

Other Impacts: The ultimate impacts, direct and indirect, of a creative process such as employed at the symposia can only be guessed at. [Place Based Learning](#) a model that allows students to learn collectively from and about their own environment has been pioneered by the Burrenbeo Trust and is getting wider recognition through the symposia process for the vital role it has to play at a time of climate and environmental challenge – could it be time for the education system to take on board a model that has been well trialled in Clare and Galway? The decision of the Inspectorate to devote their 2019 Conference to the theme of creativity demonstrated the power of synchronicity with the involvement of students from the Burren marking the connection. Feedback from an [evaluation exercise](#) conducted six months after the first Symposium indicates the impact on the work of many practitioners and innovators within the field of education. Such latent effects cannot be measured with any precision but their impacts are likely to be considerable.

The Power of Creative Process: The power and paradox of creative process is such that none of the foregoing could have been foreseen when the first symposium was planned. Risk is inherent in the creative process – which is why it's so challenging to any education system with an industrial-age heritage. What the above demonstrates is that the act of faith required in committing to the unknown with a clear sense of purpose is likely to be more than repaid by the results. In modelling the vulnerability of creative risk-taking the symposia were pointing to what education needs to look like in the future in preparing students for an unknowable future. This may ultimately be their greatest impact.

Exploring Agency and Co-Agency

An exploration of how the education system inhibits and supports 'student agency' and 'co-agency' was an important element of the Symposium. The concept was important not just because of its central role in the OECD's [Future of Education 2030](#). It was also an integral dimension of creativity which was ultimately about new knowledge embodied in the

impulse to action. And whereas western culture had placed a focus on the agency of the individual, the invitation to explore co-agency as well was a timely corrective. Many of the challenges confronting the world from climate change to a crisis of meaning and purpose were now seen as having their roots in the alienation of the individual from communion with others, the natural world and his/her own essential self.

Reflecting on the dynamics within the system which inhibited agency, participants identified how power was exercised, fear of making mistakes, lack of trust and trustworthiness, hierarchy, self-limiting beliefs, a lack of room for diversity, judgment and control, a focus on what can be measured, inauthentic jargon, complexity and exhaustion, insufficient time to thrive, rigid structures, limited access to extra-curricular. *'There is devastation if you don't make the grade in the points system; failure is barrier to agency.'* In other words, the characteristics of an industrial-age paradigm were still in charge, innovations within the system notwithstanding.

Participants felt that agency and co-agency would be supported by a focus on the student with personalised learning based on the student's individual needs - *'Berries ripen at their own pace – forced fruit is never sweet'* - promoting student voice as self-advocates without fear, self-awareness and awareness of difference, more time and space – pressing the 'pause button', teacher empathy, clarity on the role of teacher as supporter of learning and discovery rather than provider of knowledge, teachers secure in being vulnerable, multi-disciplinary approach to learning and a sense of being in this together. *'While the OECD's vision is for 2030 we need to dare to live the future now.'*

Invited to consider what might be done in the near future to enable agency and co-agency to grow, participants chose thirteen subjects reflected in the following themes:

- **Wellbeing:** a culture of care and kindness; how to build beauty into the classroom through shapes, materials, murals and flowers – **'Beauty opens us up'**; how to create space for 'passion, art and culture; nurturing the senses through being in nature and nature walks; spending time in silence; paying attention to whether students and teachers are depleted or nurtured by education; acknowledging vulnerability as a strength; taking explicit responsibility for teacher wellbeing. One group responded to the call of agency by going for a **mindful walk** with a focus on deep listening. Another enacted a **'clay ritual'** – a gathering-in and ritual pouring and mixing of clay, individual and collective, and symbolising creativity, inclusion, celebration and grounding.
- **Innovations:** One group explored the innovations already happening in education: from [GAFF](#) in Limerick, a drama and arts-based resource; the [Tribes](#) programme, a primary-age facility with a focus on learning through building community and belonging; **'Grounded Warrior'**, an 8-10 week alternative learning environment in TY connecting individual to groups/networks, with potential to scale beyond TY; 'Place-based Learning' ([PBL](#)), a well-developed nine-week programme in national (and secondary) schools in Clare and Galway with field trips and active learning about local geography and biodiversity; now being extended to teacher-training as well as community organisations. Another group looked at the possibility of supportive

principals bringing **non-teacher skills and talents** into school, creating connection with the local, encouraging experiential opportunities, making space for artists and valuing entrepreneurialism and inclusion.

- **Creativity:** Three different groups addressed aspects of creativity. Exploring the **tensions in bringing greater creativity into the** system one group felt that: there was a danger of its being siloed into the arts space; it required permission to take risks and fail – contrary to much prevailing culture; it needed to respect different schools and contexts; it could be part of ‘Looking at our School’ (LAOS) and would benefit from dissemination of good practice stories.

Another group looked at ‘Acknowledging Creative Thinking Skills [ACTS](#)’ an approach that has emerged from Steiner education without need for text books or exams; entailing project work that demonstrate creative thinking and personal learning across a broad range of subjects and carrying EQF level 3/4 certification. Finally, a group looked at the challenge of **how to avoid creativity being another programmed activity** – the value of risk and the unknown had to be accepted. The word itself might be problematic?

- **Citizens Assembly for Education (CAFÉ):** There was ready support for the work that had been done already in clarifying the concept, the process and undertaking engagement with the political system. The objective now was to light a fire under the proposition– giving voice to ‘We the Citizens’ and enabling the student voice to be heard loud and clear. To build momentum from the bottom up against a perception that education is fine there was need to invoke the changing landscape of the world of work and invoke the need for a ‘national conversation’ around what education needs to be now. Engage with younger politicians. Why not engage with students as part of the BEACONS process?
- **Student-Teacher Dialogue Café:** How to create a structured but informal safe-space where teachers and students could meet to chat? While challenging it was necessary to try it, using the student council as a sounding board and the school white board for communications. The aim was to make it casual and student-led.
- **Gender and Diversity:** Looking to **empower women in education** one group posed a series of questions about staff-room dynamics, internet influences, equality of sports opportunities, the merits of mixed vs single-sex schools and the role of gender. Another group explored **diverse belief systems** - why we feel threatened by difference, the need to replace obedience to authority with philosophical enquiry and helping young people *how* to think rather than *what* to think.

Within the rich diversity of themes and approaches in the above it is perhaps possible to discern how the system might shed its old skin, creating the conditions for a new culture to emerge: relaxing control in favour of risk; embracing innovation; teachers and students relating in new ways; welcoming diversity; connecting with the natural world of the great outdoors; cultivating conversation and deep listening:

'When defences are lowered, magic can happen.'
'Isn't the 'dúchas' amazing.'
'What's coming to me is that vulnerability is our greatest strength as humans.'
'Today is a celebration of creative thoughts in action.'
'Students need to find rootedness in their bodies.'

The Road Ahead – 'We are the ones we have been waiting for'



A Ritual Feast

The final session of the Symposium followed an evening of ritual celebration – a feast with toasts, many songs and the modelling of vulnerability. There had been an injection of energy and freshness that would carry the symposium process forward. *'We should be singing.'* *'Can we leave with a fresh sense of how to really strengthen the student' voice?'* *'What resonates is the clarity of the voice of students – meet them as people.'* *'Students need to meet as their own tribe before meeting adults to challenge and be challenged.'* *'Otto Scharmer speaks of three systemic disconnects – the social, environmental and spiritual.'* *'We are the ones we have been waiting for.'* ([Message](#) from Hopi Native American elders).

Twentieth September was the day for the latest global **Climate Strikes**. So the students instigated a ritual action of having all participants enact the [clay ritual](#) while they led a chant of 'No more coal, no more oil, keep you carbon in the soil'. It felt like students were taking the driving seat of civilizational change.

Closing reflections echoed the need to do more about climate change –

‘Change must address the pocket, the heart and the head; and there must be space to express creativity’

‘As we return to other lives we need to collect stories for what this process meant.’

‘Our case clinic around creativity and self-expression went to unexpected places with practical outcomes’.

‘I’m feeling impatient for the change we know needs to happen’.

‘We need to anchor the urgency’.

‘We need to answer the students ‘So what?’ question’.

The dynamics of change were sensed to be alive within the system. It was time, in the words of Burren poet and philosopher, John O’Donohue, to:

‘Hold nothing back; Learn to find ease in risk,’

The words of Margaret Mead captured the sense of possibility and commitment.

