

SPARK

Initiative Report 2022-23



Contents

Foreword	3
Educating for Action: Climate Justice and Social Change	5
Wargaming as a pedagogical tool - a case study approach using Operation Green (the German plan to invade Ireland in 1940)	11
Creating an Enhanced Online Learning Environment to Better Support Student Engagement and Motivation	16
Enhancing the online space: using an interactive engagement platform to improve student engagement and interaction within a blended learning environment	21
DIY Audiobooks	27
Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE): enhancing students' confidence, competence and pedagogical skills	33

How to cite this report: Centre for Teaching and Learning (2024). Spark Initiative Report 2022-23. Maynooth University: Maynooth.

Foreword

Colleagues,

I'm delighted to share with you the Spark Initiative 2022-23 report, which captures the spirit of the overall initiative theme, 'Change one thing and do it well'.

A key aim of Spark is to support Maynooth University staff in implementing small-scale teaching and learning change and enhancement projects. It enables staff to consider an aspect of teaching and learning practice that they would like to enhance or to initiate a starter/incubator project that they can build on beyond the funding timeframe.

Within the report, Spark recipients share project details, learnings, and future initiative plans. The projects offer innovative approaches to teaching and learning that could be applied and/or adapted across other disciplines or teaching and learning contexts.

On reading the report, I was struck by one reflection that Spark funding has been a "catalyst to allow small changes to occur at department level, that overall, will make significant differences to the student experience". Together with encouraging colleagues to read the report, I also urge you to consider engagement with the Spark initiative in future years. We are also open to working with colleagues who wish to avail of this funding to examine and develop their teaching and learning practice.

I would like to pay tribute to all the Spark 2022 recipients and contributors for their commitment to good practice in teaching, learning and assessment and to their spirit of exploration in trying new approaches to enhance the student learning experience. I would also like to acknowledge the Spark 2022 co-ordinating team Clare Cullen and Dr Alison Farrell for their work in producing this report.

I hope you enjoy reading the Spark 2022-23 report.

Lisa O'Regan,
Head of Centre for Teaching and Learning

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Educating for Action:

Climate Justice and
Social Change

Initiative title	Educating for Action: Climate Justice and Social Change	
Initiative fund recipient	Patrick Bresnihan	Department: Geography
Project team names (staff/student)	Patrick Bresnihan Fiadh Tubridy	

Aim of the initiative

The aim of this project was to develop a more critical, participative, and active approach to teaching a second year Geography module, entitled 'Global Environmental Change' (GY261). The module is designed to teach students about responses to global environmental problems. In previous years, the approach has been to look at different case studies to explore some of the challenges and equity issues related to environmental governance, such as climate change and biodiversity loss. Based on my own reflections, discussions with colleagues teaching similar topics, and engagement with the literature on pedagogy in a time of ecological crisis, I recognised that some key elements of the student experience, including the assumptions they carry with them into the classroom, were not being addressed. For example, there was little space for students to discuss their feelings about climate change and ecological breakdown, nor was there space to consider their own position within global political and economic structures that drive ecological degradation and block meaningful action.

Reason for undertaking the initiative

Since 2015, I have been teaching versions of a module that aims to support students to engage with climate and ecological problems in more reflective and critical ways. Two questions that I have encountered over this time are, how to expose students to the urgency and scale of climate change whilst also encouraging them to be hopeful and active around the possibilities for social change, and how to foster more thoughtful points of contact between their own personal lives and actions, and the socio-economic systems they are embedded in and which are driving the ecological crisis.

Audrey Bryan (2022, 1) argues that there are few frameworks for Climate Change Education (CCE) that 'simultaneously address the complex psycho-affective as well as political-economic aspects of the climate crisis'. Bryan draws on Deborah Britzman's conceptualisation of 'difficult knowledge' to discuss the challenge of bringing students into contact with perspectives that not only trouble their own assumptions about the world, but also implicate them within the unequal economic systems that drive climate change and biodiversity loss (Young 2006). In other words, forcing students to not only confront ecological crisis but also their privileged position within that crisis. One of the clearest manifestations of this privileged positionality is a tendency amongst students to moralise about individual environmental behaviour – 'if only people recycled more', 'if only people ate less meat'. Based in a narrow understanding of (individualised) social change, this perspective ignores the constraining social norms and economic structures within which individuals are unequally located, as well as the limits of individual action. A key question for me, then, is how to problematise this dominant understanding (reproduced within the media and wider society), without pushing students towards cynicism and greater apathy.

At the same time, students and young people in general are also prone to ‘eco anxiety’ as the worsening effects of climate change become more evident and scientific and media reporting forecasts increasingly dire future conditions (Bryan 2020). This presents another form of ‘difficult knowledge’ to negotiate in the classroom and yet has not been sufficiently engaged in CCE (see Pihkala 2020). Indeed, there is increasing recognition that pedagogical encounters with climate change are ‘difficult’ in the sense that they tend to evoke a range of emotions including discomfort, guilt, anxiety, grief, and despair. Being attentive to these emotions is not just a question of pastoral care and responsibility, but also important for teaching and learning as it is these very emotions that can give rise to various forms of denial. In Britzman’s conceptualisation of ‘difficult knowledge’, students develop defenses that allow them to *negate, resist, ignore or not know* certain truths about themselves and the world we inhabit. These defenses are barriers to effective learning.

Intended project outcomes

There were three intended outcomes of this initiative:

- > First, to activate students to think more critically, deeply, and actively about the unequal and global socio-economic systems that drive climate and ecological crisis.
- > Second, to encourage students to reflect on their own position vis-à-vis these systems and the extent to which they are implicated in and constrained by them.
- > Third, to begin identifying, in collaboration with their peers, strategies for intervening in these systems – moving beyond paralysis or denial, to meaningful action at different scales.

Description of project process and outcomes

In 2022, I applied to the SPARK fund for educational initiatives in Maynooth to develop and pilot a new approach to teaching GY261. This discrete project built on some participative, scenario-based teaching implemented in 2021 in the same module, carried out in collaboration with a postdoctoral researcher.

The SPARK project was co-designed and implemented with the same postdoctoral researcher I had collaborated with in 2021. Preparation for the six-week module took the form of reading and discussion of some key articles I had identified. The readings were intended to generate ideas, rather than provide direct examples. Both of us also drew on previous experience of CCE and facilitation of group discussions and workshops in non-formal contexts. We did not want the module to be too reading heavy or academic, and did not want a lecture format, which meant our discussions focussed on the learning outcomes of each week, and teaching methods for participative engagement in the classroom.

There were 76 students enrolled for the module, which is about average. Based on previous experience, where attendance has been low, we made it clear (via email) to the students that to effectively achieve the learning outcomes on the module would require in-person attendance. Typical attendance was about 25-30 students, which again was about average. This made group discussion work and class-based discussion easier but also made assessment of those who did not attend difficult. One way we responded to this was by putting more resources on Moodle (articles, podcasts and video), so that students who did not attend would at least have some material to learn from.

We had two contact hours a week, which is twelve hours over six weeks. Rather than covering discrete themes or topics, our aim was to design the six weeks as a trajectory or arc as each week's discussion question built on the last. The first week introduced the module, our approach, and assessment. As our six-week unit was the second half of a 5 ECT module, it was important to establish that we were taking a different approach to the teaching and that the students would have different roles and responsibilities in the classroom. We also used this week to gauge what the students understood and felt about climate change and biodiversity loss – less a test of their knowledge, than a means of getting them to talk about environmental problems more generally. After showing them some recent headlines (the sixth IPCC Report had just been published), we asked them to write down reflections on how this news made them feel, whether they cared about it or not, whether it was something that imposed itself on their day to day lives, and what kinds of emotions such information evoked. The intention with this exercise was also to introduce them to reflective writing, which was the main assessment for the module – a reflective journal. From the personal reflection, we got them to talk in groups and then feed back to the class.

After the introductory week, we had four core weeks: confronting climate denial, re-thinking responsibility, climate justice: a vision for the future, and taking action for social change. These four topics were intended to move them from a more critical mode (denial and responsibility) to a more active, speculative mode (vision and action). In advance of each week's classes, we sent an email to the students outlining the key question we would be addressing that week along with one key reading (usually an academic blog post or long read media piece) and suggested other resources (including podcast, academic articles and short videos where possible). Rather than overloading them with dense, academic reading, the intention with the supplementary materials was to provoke them into thinking about the question/topic – a springboard, rather than an explanation. We thus spent some time choosing the materials, to ensure they were engaging and varied.

We used the discussion forum on Moodle as part of their assessment and to encourage them to start thinking about the week's discussion topic. The posts on the discussion forum were also designed to provide useful input to our own classes i.e. giving us insight into the kinds of questions and responses the students were raising. To summarise, the resources on Moodle and the discussion board were part of a flipped classroom model. While students did not need to prepare anything formal for class, discussions were built around the key reading.

The class formats varied and were developed as the module progressed. Initially, we had anticipated using more group activities and participation, but we found that students needed more content to focus their discussions. In general, the first class of each week was spent setting up the question for the week by introducing the key text/provocation and getting student feedback on what they understood by denial, responsibility, hope, and social change. These discussions (in groups and all together) were deliberately open. In some classes, we used short videos or news stories to provoke discussion. The second class drew on this feedback to design more focussed activities, including time spent on key concepts introduced in the readings, and identified the key learnings from the week. We also gave students 5-10 minutes at the end of this second class to write down notes and reflections that they could use for their reflective journal assignment. The idea for this was that they would see the assignment as a continuous assignment, rather than coming to it at the end of the module.

Assessment for the module (50% of the overall module) was in two forms: discussion forum posts (15%) and a final (1500-2000 word) reflexive journal (35%). We provided a clear marking rubric for the reflexive journal and covered what its purpose was, how it differed from an essay, and why it was important to approach it as a continuous assessment.

There were three ways we planned to evaluate the intended outcomes:

First, the quality of in-class discussions, discussion forum posts, and the written reflexive essay. After each class, the postdoctoral researcher and I reflected on how the class went, what worked well and what could be improved. This was useful as the classes were tailored to reflect what the students were engaging with most.

Second, we had intended to ask the students to respond to three questions at the start of the module, and then return to their answers at the end to consider how their perspectives and feelings may have changed. In the end, we decided not to do this but we did use the final week of classes to reflect on the module as a whole. We covered the following questions: What discussion topics particularly interested you, and why? Were there any readings or materials that you particularly liked, and why? What parts of the class (e.g. topics, discussions) would you like to pursue further? What is your main takeaway from the first part of the module?

Third, an online evaluation survey was made available to students allowing for a more quantitative evaluation of the module. This included generic questions, as well as focussed questions relating to module materials, topics covered and teaching methods. Unfortunately, the results from this online evaluation form related to the whole module (GY260) so it is hard to discern the responses that are specific to the second half of the module (which was the six-week unit).

Impact on current Teaching and Learning

The quality of in-class discussions varied, as might be expected, but the important point was that discussion happened. Based on the objective of activating students to think about important, and often difficult, questions relating to climate change, this was a success. Similarly, with the online discussion forum.

The quality of the reflexive journals also varied a lot, and overall the marks were no higher than last year. However, it was clear that the students who consistently attended the module (approx. 25 out of 74) answered much better than those who didn't. Certainly, the level of critical reflection and depth of understanding (rather than just relaying information) was higher than in previous years, with students using expressions like: 'I never thought about this...', 'This class really opened my eyes...', 'This reading got me thinking about...'. We can link this to the high response in the module evaluation survey to the question 'the module broadened my understanding of geography', where another strong thematic in the higher-grade assignments was a strong linkage between environmental issues and social justice. Informal chats with individual students after class affirmed that they had never learnt about environmental issues in this way and that they appreciated connecting them to their everyday lives, social norms and economic systems. That said, many students did not attend classes and so missed out on the key learning objectives. It is not clear how this can be addressed if student-led learning is the heart of the pedagogical approach.

Anticipated future impact

The questions/topics raised in class were interesting to students – while their defenses to 'difficult knowledge' were to be expected, they did engage well and with enthusiasm to questions relating to responsibility, action, and social change. This was the most rewarding aspect of the module. I will certainly keep these questions/topics and the related readings and materials that received such positive feedback.

Some specific learnings are that the discussion forum is a useful tool but needs to be more focussed, particularly for such a large class, for example, asking students to do two posts, not five, and including at least one relevant source they have found themselves. The value of in-class discussion is to get the students talking, and for me to learn more about where they are in terms of their own understanding of the topics at hand – which then helps in the design of later classes.

I can also see from the module evaluation that the high level of discussion was a strength for some but an area that others wanted less of. The latter wanted more information on slides, others wanted more ‘science’ (less discussion of opinions), and one found the online discussion forum stressful as they were worried about what others would think. These are all valid responses. One obvious response to this is to balance the classes more, particularly as content is more important at the 2nd year level. I will still use the flipped classroom approach but combine this with more lecture/content format.

Resources

An interview with Professor Kari Norgaard (podcast)

<https://www.thesustainabilityagenda.com/podcast/episode-104-an-interview-with-professor-kari-norgaard/>

Riofrancos, T. (2019) ‘What Green Costs’. Logic Magazine.

<https://logicmag.io/nature/what-green-costs/>

Heglar, M. A. (2019) I work in the environmental movement. I don’t care if you recycle. Vox Magazine.

<https://www.vox.com/the-highlight/2019/5/28/18629833/climate-change-2019-green-new-deal>

A Message from the Future w/ Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. The Intercept.

<https://theintercept.com/2019/04/17/green-new-deal-short-film-alexandria-ocasio-cortez/>

Upstream (2022). The Green Transition Part 1: The Problem with Green Capitalism (podcast)

<https://www.upstreampodcast.org/greentransitionpt1>

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Bryan, A. (2020). Affective pedagogies: Foregrounding emotion in climate change education. *Policy and Practice: A Development Education Review*, 30, 8-30.

Bryan, A. (2022). Pedagogy of the implicated: advancing a social ecology of responsibility framework to promote deeper understanding of the climate crisis. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, 30(3), 329-348.

Dadvand, B., Cahill, H., & Zembylas, M. (2022). Engaging with difficult knowledge in teaching in post-truth era: From theory to practice within diverse disciplinary areas. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, 30(3), 285-293.

Pihkala, P. (2020). Eco-anxiety and environmental education. *Sustainability*, 12(23), 10149.

Young, I. M. (2006). Responsibility and global justice: A social connection model. *Social philosophy and policy*, 2.

**Wargaming as a
pedagogical tool -
a case study
approach using
Operation Green**
(the German plan to
invade Ireland in 1940)

Initiative title	Wargaming as a pedagogical tool – a case study approach using Operation Green (the German plan to invade Ireland in 1940)	
Initiative fund recipient	David Murphy	Department: History
Project team names (staff/student)	David Murphy Max Louis Picard	

Aim of the initiative

The aim of this initiative was to develop a multi-team, scenario-based exercise as a capstone assessment for the MA in Military History and Strategic Studies. This exercise focused on the German plans to invade Ireland in 1940. Three teams were briefed on the historical context and the strategic horizon of 1940 with the goal to develop transferable skills in terms of understanding the historical and strategic context, while also focusing on skills development in terms of communication, decision-making and critical analysis.

Reason for undertaking the initiative

The key rationale behind this scheme was to give students an opportunity to experience real-time decision-making processes, based on an actual historic context. In the context of the course (the MA in Military History and Strategic Studies), there is frequent reference to political and strategic decision-making. To illustrate key points associated with this element of the course, it has always been my practice to include short (one-hour) decision-making exercises. These are used to unpack aspects of the specific context of each scenario as well as allowing students to examine the decision-making process and perhaps offer alternative courses of action. This approach has been beneficial in developing greater understanding of historical context, while also honing critical skills. Over the last five years, I have increased the frequency of these exercises on the MA and, on reflection, they have brought much to the classroom scenario. In the context of this scheme, my purpose was to offer students an Irish-focused case study to which they could apply a counterfactual decision-making process. This allowed students to develop a greater understanding of Ireland's strategic reality in 1940 and, to connect some of the elements being discussed to contemporary concerns, where the material considered was remarkably similar to current debates on Irish defence. By running this as a two-hour event, in which each team would have to make a series of strategic decisions, my further aim was to build their confidence working as part of a team to generate real-time solutions.

During pre-war reconnaissance, German students and tourists took photographs or bought postcards showing possible landing areas.

Intended project outcomes

The intention of this process is to develop specific skills throughout the course and then to test these in a final, live exercise.

In the course of this process, participants develop skills with respect to:

- > Intelligence analysis.
- > Terrain analysis.
- > Interpretation of primary documents.
- > Critical thinking.
- > Teamwork.
- > The military decision-making process.
- > Communication.
- > Sequencing the moves of large formations.
- > Planning logistics.
- > Factoring in ethical and humanitarian issues in their planning process.

Description of project process and outcomes

In Week 6, the class undertook a field trip to the Dublin Port Authority to tour some key strategic infrastructure from the WW2 period. Lar Joyce of the Dublin Port Authority gave an overview of the strategic importance of Dublin Port, then and now. Between Weeks 7 to 10 in Semester II (2022-23), the class was introduced to original documents and reports of the period, to allow for a fuller understanding of the historical context. This process was based on the surviving plans and required engagement with primary material held in the Military Archives in Dublin and the National Archives, Kew. In the context of the capstone exercise in Week 11, the participants were tasked in deploying strategic and decision-making skills developed during the semester in a real-time setting.

This process was implemented in Semester II in connection to HY676, a module of the MA in Military History and Strategic Studies. As described above, the HY676 participants were issued with specific reading in relation to Operation Green. They were also issued with primary documents from Irish and UK archives, and went on the aforementioned field trip. In the weeks leading up to the in-class exercise in Week 11, there was a series of weekly briefs in which the class was read into the strategic environment of Ireland in 1940, while also being asked to consider issues such as Irish-UK government co-operation, the treatment of refugees, issues of neutrality etc.

On the day of the in-class exercise, the class was split into three teams – Irish, German, and Northern Irish. The German team was kept in a separate location and was brought in to outline their subsequent moves, to which the other teams had to react. On the Irish-UK side, the Irish team had to gauge when to request assistance from the UK team. The exercise ran for two hours and presented the participants not only with immediate strategic issues, but also had them dealing with the activities of “bad actors” in their own system (collaborators and defeatists etc). In keeping with the ethos of this process, they were presented with a challenging, real-time environment.

It had been intended for Katie Kennedy (currently a Departmental PhD candidate) to act as a facilitator for this exercise, but she was in Croatia at the time engaged in her own research. Max Louis Picard (MA MHSS) served in this role and also headed up the German team. Extracts from his report on the process are presented here:

Operation Green Wargame

“ I thoroughly enjoyed the wargame. It allowed the class to practically apply what we have been studying this year – and put us in the driving seat in the decision-making process. It served as a very useful means to expand my understanding of Operation Green. Until preparing for this wargame, I had knowledge of WW2 as it pertains to mainland Europe but not an extensive knowledge of Germany’s invasion plans for Ireland

While I found the wargame highly enjoyable and a great learning opportunity, it would have been a much more effective exercise if the leadership of the three factions involved had brought the same zeal or confidence to their decision making The indecisiveness of our opponents allowed German forces to capitalise and seize the initiative. This clarified to me that inability to decide upon decisive action when one is required only gives advantage to your opponent. For the duration of the wargame, the German side dictated the flow and intensity of the game.

Exercises such as the Operation Green wargame greatly aid the teaching of modules such as HY676. They’re unconventional, and being unconfined to a textbook or lecture, they allow you to think on your feet in a practical manner. In isolation, this wargame favoured one side in particular but if it were to be repeated with a class of pure military history students where knowledge is matched by all sides, it would lead to a truly captivating wargame which would likely last longer than the two hours of class time. ”

Impact on current Teaching and Learning

In the past, I have used scenario-based exercises as part of my teaching at both UG and PG level. These were also particularly effective in terms of military teaching at the cadet school. Previously, these have been focused exercises, usually deployed in the context of one-hour class time. Through international contacts, I have been increasingly aware of the use of longer wargames/exercises, usually developed across a semester to allow participants to have a fuller understanding of the historical and strategic context. This was the format that was followed in this case, and I would intend to make this exercise an integral part of the MA MHSS and to try to introduce similar elements to my undergraduate courses. This would allow the exercise to serve as a capstone event, in which the various elements discussed during the MA could be fully explored in a live scenario. This is my intention for the 2023-24, and subsequent, academic years. In the best-case scenario, it would be my intention to develop a strategic module, which could largely be taught through a series of similar exercises. I am, however, hugely constrained due to issues of time/teaching hours. At an international level, it is becoming more common to use such exercises to examine context and develop students’ skill sets in terms of teamwork, leadership formation and decision-making. Increasing these elements on the course would also boost students’ skills element across the MA. The key downside/pinch point here is time – this places some pressure in the system, considering the broad remit of the MA and the amount of content that it must necessarily cover.

Anticipated future impact

In terms of future iterations of this process, the award of funds generated a store of in-class materials, and this will allow the wargame to run in successive years as a classroom-based exercise. Funding for the integrated class trip will be obtained from the Department. The intention therefore is to make this exercise and the preparatory phase an integral part of the MA in Military at History and Strategic Studies, in the HY676 module.

In connection with the Department's wider teaching commitments with the Defence Forces in the Military College in the Curragh, this is a process that can be replicated in the context of our range of courses in professional military education.

It is my intention to develop an article based on this exercise and the pedagogical outcomes for the in-house journal of the Centre for Military History & Strategic Studies. This is the online *Journal of Military History and Defence Studies*.

See: <https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/news-events/publication-journal-military-history-and-defence-studies>.

This article will be available in 2024.

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**Creating an
Enhanced Online
Learning
Environment to
Better Support
Student Engagement
and Motivation**

Initiative title	Creating an Enhanced Online Learning Environment to Better Support Student Engagement and Motivation	
Initiative fund recipient	Linda Shortt	Department: German, SMLLC
Project team names (staff/student)	Linda Shortt Lisa Winter Sandra Weber Astrid Schumenjak	

Aim of the initiative

This project aimed to address a dip in learner motivation and learner engagement which had been noted by Year 2 language teachers in 2021-22. While, in the past, learners have retrospectively identified Year 2 as a point when they can sometimes temporarily lose sight of their longer-term academic goals, in 2021-22 language teachers noticed an increase in levels of disconnection from the learning process in the classroom. The learner desire for proficiency was no longer spontaneously translating into active classroom participation or into engagement with the wide range of supplementary materials on Moodle, designed to support and accelerate learning. This shift in learning habits and participation may have been affected by learning adjustments and the transition to online learning during the pandemic. As noted by Jereb, Jerebic and Urh (2023), learners seem to find it more difficult to focus on learning after the pandemic. Through more careful scaffolding of online learning tasks and resources, and the introduction of timed reflective tasks that could help to realign learning goals, this intervention aimed to increase opportunities for engagement and hopefully create a better learning situation for students and teachers.

Reason for undertaking the initiative

While motivation is always important in learning, this is heightened in the foreign language (FL) classroom where emotions and motivation are so intrinsically connected (Dewaele, Saito and Halimi, 2023) that a specific form of anxiety has been defined 'Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety' (Horwitz et al., 1986) which affects learner proficiency and learner wellbeing. In the foreign language classroom, a disappointing performance in class or unexpected test results and perceptions of a lack of progress can lead to motivational dips, increased frustration, a withdrawal of engagement and less active participation in the learning process. This possible learning situation has been further complicated by the pandemic and the switch to online learning and assessment which seems to have affected how students learn. Despite returning to the classroom in 2021-22, some of our FL students reported they found it harder to study and stay focussed after the pandemic. This was partly due to increased competition for their attention (part-time work etc.), but some also admitted that they had begun to lower their learning goals and now often relied on supplementary tools for homework and assessments, creating an unsatisfactory learning situation for learners and teachers.

One of the positive outcomes of the switch to online instruction during the pandemic was that staff were able to create banks of online learning materials, course assets and tasks that can be used to supplement face-to-face instruction. Although these materials were made available to students in 2021-22, the Moodle statistics showed that learners were reluctant to engage independently with these resources even though these materials could help to reinforce and develop knowledge and skills. By creating dedicated learning paths that link revision, practice and critical reflection on personal progress, we hoped to (1) foster more meaningful engagement with course assets (2) offer cues to create new patterns and good study habits (3) support learners to become more autonomous and accountable for their own progress and (4) create opportunities for micro successes and mastery which could in turn increase enjoyment and motivation.

Intended project outcomes

This project intended to use Moodle to create new opportunities to successfully nudge students to:

- > review grammatical topics and themes covered in class to ensure that key rules have been understood and mastered;
- > actively engage with their own learning by reflecting critically on and taking responsibility for their current language level and their short- and medium-term language goals;
- > increase opportunities for personal reflection on individual learning habits, learning routines and engagement;
- > request individual support from instructors on how to enhance their language proficiency;
- > set short- and medium-term goals for the semester in the hope that this will lead to increased confidence and a sense of mastery;
- > become more autonomous learners.

Description of project process and outcomes

Challenges

- 1) Timing.** When we planned our project, we envisaged an extensive period of student consultation in the summer before preparing the materials on Moodle for release in the new term. However, funding was only announced in late summer, and, at this point, our student participants were already away ahead of their Year Abroad. This meant that we had a shorter consultation process on Teams instead.
- 2) Staff Changes.** In August, Lisa Winter left Maynooth, and she was replaced as Austrian Exchange Service (OeAD) Lecturer and Year 2 Co-coordinator by Astrid Schumenjak in September.
- 3) Moodle.** Our project originally envisaged using learning journals on Moodle. However, we were unaware that there is an extensive process for approving additional Moodle functionality. When we enquired about adding the learning journal plugin with the Moodle Support Team in September, we learned that the process can take a number of months. As we needed to have our Moodle platform ready for the beginning of term, we had to adapt our plan and, after researching different tools available, we opted to use the Moodle Lesson structure instead of a learning journal as this could be set up to include a reflective element that staff could access.

Process. In September, we developed targeted resources, streamlined our materials on Moodle and used Moodle Lesson to create two progress checks at different points in the term. These were set up as ungraded, linear learning experiences which would combine different activities including (1) reviewing key grammar points using short videos (2) completing a subject-specific quiz with in-built cues and responses and (3) engaging in a reflective exercise. In Progress Check 1 (week 2), this reflective exercise was to include a reflection on proficiency and the learner's short- and medium-term goals. These reflections could be reviewed by staff who would be able to offer short feedback and advice on learning plans where appropriate. Progress Check 2, which would take place in week 6 ahead of the continuous assessment in week 7, was to review progress and realign learning goals to optimise opportunities for success.

Outcome. The plan did not play out as anticipated. Students were initially reluctant to engage with the self-directed progress check. Although all learners acknowledged its potential usefulness in class when the activity was discussed, only highly motivated learners engaged with the lesson voluntarily. After repeated reminders, all learners engaged with Progress Check 1 over 2 weeks; however, our statistics showed that learners only accessed the learning video and quiz, opting out of the reflective task. We initially thought that this was deliberate, and that learners had refused the invitation to reflect; however, a class discussion made clear that there was a bug in the system which caused the lesson to loop so that reflective exercises were not saved. Although students were a little discouraged by this, they did later engage with Progress Check 2 when the bug was eliminated, and instructors were able to respond to their personal learning plans and strategies. Unfortunately, this was already mid-way through the semester.

Review. The technical glitches with Moodle Lesson were unfortunate. However, Progress Check 2 showed that this tool can function effectively to allow increased opportunity for review and practice. The inclusion of a reflective exercise in the lesson offers learners a chance to identify knowledge gaps and skills goals. It encourages them to engage in higher-order thinking on learning as a continual process of adjustment and development. It also facilitates an additional layer of interaction between learner and instructor, increasing opportunities for help-seeking and individualised support. This may help learners to feel more in charge of their learning and their progress which could in turn mitigate foreign language classroom anxiety.

After reviewing student responses in the reflective exercises, instructors noted that not all learners were willing to engage in serious reflection on their language proficiency and they were reluctant to reflect on their learning expectations and practices. In a follow-on discussion, one learner noted that they preferred to use exams as a measure of their competence; another mentioned that, as these exercises did not contribute to formal course assessment, they did not have time to engage extensively with them. Connecting these exercises to continuous assessment could increase engagement as Creme notes; however, it could also undermine real reflection and encourage learners to avoid risk by producing more generic answers (Creme, 2005).

Impact on current Teaching and Learning

In 2021-22, we thought having a suite of resources online that students could access at their leisure depending on their learning needs was a useful facility, but we see now that this can be overwhelming if learners are unsure how to use these resources appropriately. Reducing optionality and connecting lessons so that new materials are unlocked on successful task completion may help to create micro learning successes while practising good learning habits. These micro successes may be vital for creating positive learning moments and sustaining motivation as foreign language learning can feel challenging in some learning stages (Busse and Walter, 2013). We remain convinced of the value of learner reflection and individual goal-setting in learning processes. However, we acknowledge that this may not be comfortable for all learners who may need more opportunities to practice this.

Anticipated future impact

We will try to rework the Moodle lessons for 2023-24. Despite our limited success with this tool in 2022-23, we believe that the lesson activity has potential to improve the learning situation. Lesson activities can be designed so that remediation helps learners to master the content, creating opportunities for learning successes which – although low stakes – may help to boost confidence and increase motivation and engagement.

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Enhancing the online

space: using an interactive engagement platform to improve student engagement and interaction within a blended learning environment

Initiative title	Enhancing the online space: using an interactive engagement platform to improve student engagement and interaction within a blended learning environment	
Initiative fund recipient	Ian Speller	Department: History
Project team names (staff/student)	Ian Speller Laura Brown	

Aim of the initiative

The aim of this initiative was to explore the use of Mentimeter software as a tool to enhance student engagement and interaction when teaching online, within the context of a module that had recently switched to a digital format within a wider blended learning approach. The project was intended to support the development of new skills (for both lecturers and students), and to promote the utilisation of a wider range of digital tools to enhance teaching and learning. It was designed to allow us to develop online teaching from what was once an emergency measure - based on rather a shallow understanding of the possibilities - into a more mature and well-supported venture that encourages and facilitates student contributions in class.

The module in question was DE505 Military History and Strategic Studies. This is a 10 x ECTS compulsory module on the Higher Diploma in Leadership Management and Defence Studies, a course taught at the Military College in partnership between Maynooth University and the Officer Training Wing of the Infantry School. The module had 29 students, all of whom were Army officers with around ten years of prior service.

Reason for undertaking the initiative

The main reason for undertaking this initiative was to explore ways in which we could improve teaching within the online environment and, specifically, to explore whether this technology could encourage more engagement and participation during online classes. A considerable body of research shows the value of strategies that promote student participation, in terms of improved attention, engagement, collaborative learning and interaction (Pichardo et al., 2021) and we were keen to retain this as a core element of our teaching.

Prior to 2020 classes for this module had all been 'live', and were usually held on campus in Maynooth. This represented a change for the students, whose other classes took place at the Military College. Study at Maynooth gave the students access to the learning supports available on campus and, perhaps even more significantly, it provided an opportunity to change out of uniform (literally and also metaphorically), to study in the more relaxed environment of a civilian university and (it was hoped) this encouraged students to engage actively and to think creatively. Over the years the approach proved very successful, with high levels of student engagement and interaction supporting a progressive and student-centred approach to learning. As lecturers we felt that this represented a key strength of the module, built on our understanding of the need to foster active learning and intellectual creativity within professional military education (Auguier and Hughes, 2019).

In 2020 the module moved online as an emergency measure in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Subsequently, our partners at the Military College decided to keep the majority of classes for this module online in order to improve the work-life balance of students completing a very intense residential course. As such, rather than attending class at Maynooth each Wednesday (as was previously the case) students attend remotely, providing an opportunity for many to return home mid-week. This is particularly significant given the age of the student cohort, as there are usually a large number who have small children at home; note that the nature of a military career means that often these students miss time with their families. Thus, retaining an online element to the module can enhance accessibility. However, it provides challenges in terms of maintaining the same level of student participation. It became clear to those teaching on this module that we were struggling to retain the same levels of student engagement and active learning that had characterised the in-class teaching prior to 2020, hence the desire to seek solutions.

Intended project outcomes

The project was intended to provide the opportunity for lecturers to integrate Mentimeter interactive tools seamlessly into their lectures and other classroom activities, in a manner that is not possible without purchasing user licences. The intended outcomes identified at the outset of the project were as follows:

- > To provide the lecturers with full use of Mentimeter, to enable them to more fully exploit the opportunities associated with teaching online.
- > To develop skills and methodologies required to support and promote active learning and student engagement within the digital environment.
- > To enliven and invigorate the learning experience for both teachers and learners.
- > To facilitate contributions from all students, with particular emphasis on those who might be reluctant to engage using more traditional means.
- > To test whether Mentimeter could usefully be employed on the other modules (live, blended or online) taught by Maynooth University at the Military College.

Description of project process and outcomes

The Higher Diploma did not begin until January 2023, providing some time to prepare before the initiation of the project. The plan, therefore, was first to develop knowledge and understanding of the potential of Mentimeter in Semester 1 (2022/3) before trialling its use in the module *DE505: Military History and Strategic Studies* in Semester 2 and then evaluating the results through lecturer reflection (captured in a reflective journal), through formal and informal student feedback, and an anonymous end of module digital questionnaire. Mentimeter has built in metrics that revealed the number of interactions with each tool, but all student engagement was anonymous.

The project was initiated in Semester 1 (2022-3) with the purchase of 2 x Mentimeter licenses for use by relevant teaching staff. This provided time for the latter to familiarise themselves with the software and to experiment with the different tools. This process was enabled by the prior completion by the project leader of TL517 *Digital Technologies in Higher Education*, which provided insight into some of the possibilities associated with such tools. During this period, it was decided to extend the planned project to include use of Mentimeter in a more traditional 'live' classroom environment, covering broadly similar topics to DE505, to cater for comparisons on the utility of the tools within the different contexts.

As a result, the project leader simultaneously introduced Mentimeter to his Second Year Undergraduate History Elective Module *HY20001: Introduction to Military History and War Studies* (28 students).

A variety of different approaches within Mentimeter were employed on both modules including multiple choice questions, rankings, yes/no answers, word cloud and open-ended questions. The general approach adopted in both modules was similar, with Mentimeter tools integrated into powerpoint presentations and then used as a vehicle to ask questions, generate discussion or to identify new lines of enquiry. In some cases (word cloud, open ended questions) the tools acted as a direct alternative to simply asking the class for a verbal response. In other cases (polls, scales etc) it allowed for a rapid, easy collection of simple responses, with a facility to allow students to change their mind and thus to chart how responses changed over the course of a discussion. The tools could be used in a variety of ways to canvass opinion, test understanding, identify new areas of enquiry or even just to inject a little levity into a lecture – depending on the nature of the question asked. As noted below, response rates varied but the tools did generally prompt useful discussion and, if nothing else, gave all students the opportunity to engage. Potential problems associated with access to laptops or broadband connectivity, which might have impacted on the online class, were not apparent in this case as students all had access to equipment and facilities provided by the Military College.

Lecturer reflection and both formal and informal student feedback suggests that the tool did provide a useful way of encouraging engagement, and of fostering a lively discussion within both live and online classes. Students reported that they found the tool to be valuable in allowing them to contribute to discussion in a very ‘low risk’ manner, without the pressure that many feel when thinking about speaking in front of their peers. Some students liked the idea that we were trying ‘something different’ and were keen that staff should continue to develop their skills in this respect. Findings here accord with the results of the INDEX Report into digital resources (2020).

The project identified some limitations. Use of Mentimeter required activities to have been planned and prepared before class. It was not realistic to adapt the tool during the course of a class; polls/questions/scales etc had to be set in advance (reducing the opportunity to respond to evolving lines of enquiry). Of course, the same applies to any form of pre-prepared presentation.

Metrics from Mentimeter show that the levels of engagement varied, as one would expect. Response rates ranged from around 80 per cent at the highest level, to as low as 10 per cent (three students). Typical responses for both groups suggested average active engagement of around 50 per cent. Engagement was highest for those tools (i.e. polls, scales, yes/no answers) that required relatively little input from the students. Tools that required students to write a response (i.e. word cloud, open-ended questions) consistently resulted in much lower levels of active engagement. It was also the case that engagement levels dropped each time Mentimeter was used within a class, suggesting that a ‘less is more’ approach might be best.

However, it is important to note that engagement was not limited to those who completed the tasks online. In most cases the results were discussed in class; even those who did not contribute via Mentimeter may still have benefitted from engagement in the associated discussion. Thus, using Mentimeter to encourage engagement is grounded in more than the number of ‘hits’ on any given question. There were numerous occasions where limited (single figure) responses to word-cloud/open ended question tools identified important questions or suggested new lines of enquiry that might otherwise have been missed and prompted discussions that included the wider class. This helped to enrich the learning experience and created an environment where student views, opinions and ideas were valued.

A key aim of this project was to assess whether Mentimeter could be useful in promoting engagement from those students who might not be comfortable contributing in traditional ways. Response rates suggest a level of contribution that surpasses the norm for in-class student contribution but the anonymous nature of the tool, and of the feedback and evaluation methods adopted by this study, make it impossible to know which student contributed, whether there were some students who never contributed, and whether or not these were the same students who contributed/did not contribute to traditional in-class discussion.

Impact on current Teaching and Learning

Our hope had been that use of this tool would enhance the student learning experience, create a more varied, interesting and lively teaching environment and facilitate engagement by all students, including those who might be uncomfortable contributing by more traditional means (i.e. verbal contributions in class). In doing this it was intended that we would foster a more inclusive approach that would engage all students. Results from student feedback suggest that the project helped us to achieve this. The project also succeeded in allowing lecturing staff to ‘upskill’ and to enhance their understanding of this tool, with positive impact on their teaching. Contrary to expectations, the greatest impact appeared to be within the ‘live’ undergraduate class, where Mentimeter proved an excellent tool to gain responses and to enliven discussion and debate. However, it did also prove useful in the online context.

The project had additional impact, in a slightly unintended way. Students appeared to value the effort undertaken to ‘try something new’ and this helped to foster a positive staff/student relationship. Also, engagement in the project encouraged a reflective approach from the relevant staff and it prompted many useful informal discussions about teaching and learning.

Anticipated future impact

The project supported the belief that Mentimeter can be used to good effect in both an online and a ‘live’ classroom setting. It also provided lecturers with valuable experience in using this tool. This will ‘feed forward’ into teaching on future modules and it is intended to maintain and develop the use of such tools. The Centre for Military History and Strategic Studies will continue to employ Mentimeter in support of DE505 and will extend this use to include other modules, live and in-class, across our programmes at the Military College. It may be the case that in future alternative tools are employed, such as Padlet, depending on the resources that the University chooses to invest in. It is anticipated that this will continue to enhance student engagement and will provide for a more interesting and varied learning environment, equipping lecturers with a useful range of tools and skills.

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DIY Audiobooks

Initiative title	DIY Audiobooks	
Initiative fund recipient	Meishan Zhang	Department: Department of Chinese
Project team names (staff/student)	Meishan Zhang Yang Cheng Can Shao	

Aim of the initiative

The aim of the initiative was to allow students to experience the fun of using Chinese through the writing and recording of audio storybooks. During the production of the audiobooks, by integrating the characters, students would experience the eloquence of Chinese speaking, which would enliven their classroom experience. It was hoped that based on situational dialogues in traditional classrooms, production of original audiobooks would further develop students' imagination and creativity, encouraging them to actively explore new vocabulary, exercise their logical ability and Chinese language expression, and enjoy the fun and sense of accomplishment of writing in Chinese.

Reason for undertaking the initiative

Language is an applied tool for organizing thought and expression. However, as far as students in the Department of Chinese are concerned, in the learning process, the input of language has been far greater than the output. In addition, affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, students have been passive in learning, and their communication with teachers and other students has been reduced, greatly damaging the learning effect and students' classroom enthusiasm. These are universal challenges faced by language teachers and learners. Faced with the uncertainty of going to China for exchange study, creatively developing tasks and projects for students to stimulate their interest in using the Chinese language and increasing their Chinese expressions in and after class is the direction teachers of the Department of Chinese decided to explore.

The approach adopted provides students with rewards which are similar to how the creative industry operates rather than assessment. It was an adjustment based on the previous experiment in a small-scale audiobook production practice in class. In 2021, I found the *Story Box* while searching for good resources for language learning through storytelling. The *Story Box* was created by Anne Laval. It contained 20 puzzle pieces with the same protagonists and different scenarios, which encouraged the users to create different storylines while piecing together its pictures in various orders. As a pilot project, I selected ten pictures from the *Story Box* and gave them to my CN220 students to create their own story as their group assignment. All twelve students completed two fairytales written in English and Chinese, and they also made the voiceover based on those pictures. I edited the pictures, voiceovers, English and Chinese subtitles, self-made background music and closing credits into audiobooks. The result was excellent, as the two stories were entertaining and imaginative.

After the first year's success, Yinya Liu and I decided to expand this project into all undergraduate years in our department as part of our SPARK Initiative. Instead of group assignments, we made it into a competition providing prizes and certificates for students to achieve larger engagement and enrich their portfolios. Students would fully participate in the story conception, scriptwriting and dubbing under the guidance of three tutors, Meishan Zhang, Yang Cheng and Can Shao.

Intended project outcomes

The intended project outcomes were to:

- Increase students' interest and ability in listening, speaking, reading and writing.
- Make students proud of using, and inspired to use, Chinese more creatively.
- Increase the fun and sense of achievement in language learning, and enhance their experience by making Chinese-related cultural products.
- Increase students' expressiveness and engagement in language classes.
- Improve students' ability to work together whilst demonstrating their individuality and creative mind.
- Explore and test new forms for student-centred and task-based projects.
- Keep digital records of students' achievements in making cultural products and enrich their portfolio.

Description of project process and outcomes

In October 2022, an introduction session was delivered to students in language modules CN110, CN210 and CN310 with a demonstration of the previous year's audiobooks. Prizes and awards were promised, and four groups competed with the guidance and organisation of three tutors. Sixteen students working in four groups were asked to re-arrange the same set of 11 pictures from the *Story Box* and accomplish their unique audiobooks.



Fig. 1 *Story Box*



Fig. 2, 3 11 pictures selected from the *Story Box*

The students had two to three brainstorming sessions in two months. In the first session, students carefully observed and analysed the content of 11 pictures, arranged them in a specific order, and discussed the story's outlines that matched the arrangement. The second and third sessions were used to finalise the story and polish the texts in English and Chinese. At the beginning of the second semester, the tutors proofread the four stories and returned the revised drafts to the students for reference.



Fig. 4 Year 1 students brainstorming their scene



Fig. 5 Year 2 students brainstorming their scene



Fig 6. Year 3 students brainstorming their scene

The next step for students was to record voiceovers for the stories. At the beginning of the second semester, the students submitted all recordings of their vivid dubbing to me. In mid-February, I completed video editing, combining the English and Chinese subtitles, student voiceovers, background music and pictures into audio storybooks. Four stories were sent to all teachers in the Department of Chinese. After discussion and voting by the Department of Chinese faculty, Ivan Xue, Télió, Sasha and Nkemjika from the second year won the Winner Award for their smooth plot and dubbing. Lee, Linda, Hannah and Edwin's work 'Journey to Her' won the Best Creative Award for its continuous reversal of the plot. Caoimhe, Noah, Carrie and Ammarin, from the third year, won the Best Screenplay Award for their profound thinking and high integrity of the story in their work 'Resurrection'. Wen Qian, Jennifer, Hei-Lam and Ling Wen Winnie, first-year students, won the Best Vocals Award for their work 'Chad & Stephen' for their excellent Chinese pronunciation and vivid emotional expression.

On March 9, students from the Department of Chinese at Maynooth University participated in a launch event of their works - the 'DIY Audiobooks' award ceremony. Zhouxiang Lu, the head of the Chinese Department, along with Yang Cheng (Year 3 instructor), Can Shao (Year 1 instructor), and myself (Year 2 instructor), presented awards to the 16 students from 4 participating teams. All participating students received Chinese-style prizes and their names on the event posters.



Fig. 7 The 'DIY Audiobooks' award ceremony and launch event

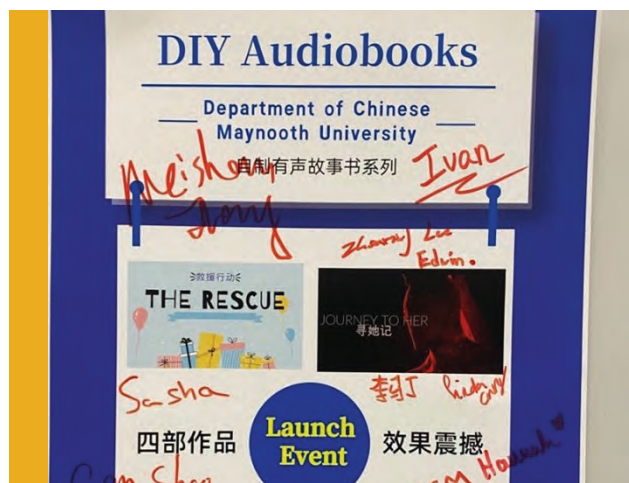


Fig. 8 Poster signed at the event

After the awards ceremony, the students watched all their audiobooks for the first time. They expressed that they enjoyed the process of writing stories very much. After overcoming various difficulties, they were satisfied and proud of their work. After the event, all four audiobooks were officially released on the 'Chinese Culture and Language' Channel on Youtube.

Impact on current Teaching and Learning

This project is an innovation of the Department of Chinese in its existing teaching mode, and it is a first in higher education Chinese language teaching in Ireland. The successful making of the audiobooks not only enhanced the students' sense of achievement in learning Chinese but also gave teachers more confidence to explore many task-based ideas that are fun and challenging. I have brought this project and its production to several conferences in Ireland and the U.K. and received positive feedback and willingness to collaborate in future initiatives. As it maintains an archive of students' creative work, more possibilities emerge, which help the exploration of language teaching to become sustainable and expansive.

Anticipated future impact

This initiative is suitable for long-term continuous operation and can be applied to teaching at different language levels. The number and content of pictures chosen can be adjusted, and live performances can be added based on the storytelling. It is also an excellent opportunity to stimulate the combination of language teaching with art forms other than creative writing, such as films, documentaries, exhibitions, dramas, and songs. Despite the successful outcome, students found it difficult to meet the scheduled deadline due to their heavy workload, many exams, and the project's lack of reflection in their marks. Therefore, adjustments can be made in the future within the Department of Chinese for such projects to be counted in students' overall assessment. Such projects also can be developed into credit modules and internship opportunities.

The student-written and student-produced artwork developed and inspired by this project will form the character and brand of the Chinese Department and Maynooth University.

Resources

Four DIY Audiobooks and their awards:

Winner

The Rescue

Team: Ivan, Télió, Sasha, Nkemjika

Video link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SprVLLIJ-Xg>

Best Vocals

Chad & Stephen

Team: Wen Qian, Jennifer, Hei-Lam, Ling Wen Winnie

Video link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ksEPtxJ3CoQ>

Best Screenplay

Resurrection

Team: Caoimhe, Noah, Ammarin, Carrie

Video link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D-ZhT-h0ds4>

Best Creativity

Journey to Her

Team: Lee, Linda, Hannah, Edwin

Video link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LKWx_FNN0hE

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Acknowledgement. I want to thank Dr Yinya Liu, who gave me guidance and advice for the application for the SPARK Initiative. I want to thank Linda Conroy, a second-year student from the Department of Chinese, for providing valuable feedback for this project report.

**Relationships and
Sexuality Education (RSE):**

enhancing students'
confidence, competence
and pedagogical skills

Initiative title	Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE): enhancing students' confidence, competence and pedagogical skills	
Initiative fund recipient	Suzanne O'Keeffe	Department: Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education.
Project team names (staff/student)	Suzanne O'Keeffe with 10 PMEd Year 2 students and BEd Year 3 students.	

Aims of the initiative

The aims of this initiative were threefold:

1. To support, through dialogue and the co-construction of knowledge, student teachers' confidence and competence in the provision of Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE).
2. For student teachers to become confident in using the language and terminology associated with RSE pedagogy and practice.
3. To unpack RSE in terms of personal experiences, assumptions, biases, as well as historical contexts, in order to enhance the overall experiences of teaching, and learning, this subject.

Reason for undertaking the initiative

Sexual health has long been on the political agenda in Ireland, which is evident in policy documents such as 'The Irish Study of Sexual Health and Relationships' (Layte et al., 2006), 'The National Sexual Health Strategy 2015 – 2020' (Department of Health, 2015), and 'The Report on the Review of Relationships and Sexuality Education in primary and post-primary school' (NCCA, 2019). With a history of more than half a century in Europe (European Expert Group on Sexuality Education, 2016), sexuality education is known to have positive and life-long effects on the health and wellbeing of young people and is associated with healthier sexual behaviours and sexual outcomes in later life. Whilst Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) has been a mandatory subject in Irish primary and secondary schools since 2003, it remains a highly contested space.

There are many and often complex challenges faced by teachers and student teachers in delivering RSE due to, for instance, a diversifying societal and schooling body, stakeholder demands and other dynamics. This is discussed in more detail in the 'Report on the Review of Relationships and Sexuality Education in primary and post-primary school' (2019). Coupled with this is a growing emphasis on school community wellbeing, as indicated in Department of Education publications including the forthcoming Primary Curriculum framework (2025). In response to these challenges and opportunities, this SPARK project aimed to create occasions for shared personal and professional learning in the intervening period between the NCCA's 2019 report and the publication of revised RSE curricular materials. The SPARK project also sought to support and enhance teaching practices in RSE within four Cosán¹ areas: Leading Learning; Wellbeing; Inclusion; and Supporting Teachers' Learning.

¹ Cosán, the Irish for pathway, is the National Framework for Teachers' Learning (CPD) which has been developed by the Teaching Council. <https://www.teachingcouncil.ie/en/teacher-education/teachers-learning-cpd-/cosan/>

Intended project outcomes

- > RSE Capacity Building/Reflective sessions. This initiative will enhance students' subject knowledge and skills and their levels of confidence and readiness for exploring RSE norms, attitudes, beliefs, values, identities, and the lived experiences of people.
- > Community building. This initiative will build a community of practice that places student voices and experiences at the core. This will encourage dialogue and shared learning among teachers all the while enhancing the development of professional partnerships.
- > Technology. This initiative was designed to be the springboard to create an online space to share RSE resources and good practice.

Description of project process and outcomes

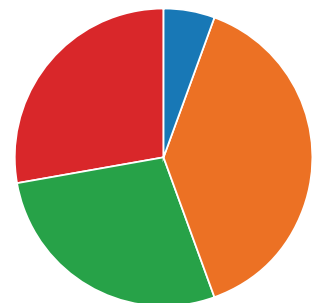
The research question guiding this project was, how can student-teachers best meet the needs of primary-school children in Relationships and Sexuality Education in changing societal and curricular times?

The project was carried out through a blend of two Microsoft Form online questionnaires, two RSE capacity building/reflective sessions and one guest-speaker lecture with Margarita Gerouki question-and-answer session. Informal discussions also took place pre and post each input/session.

One of the tasks to commence this project was for student teachers to complete a Microsoft Form questionnaire to establish their needs at that particular point in time. Some pre-SPARK initiative findings included the following:

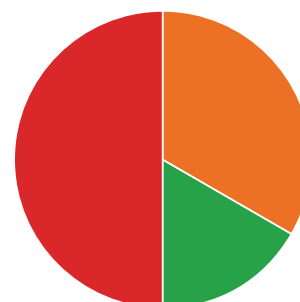
1. Feeling comfortable. Combined responses from PMEd Year 2 and BEd Year 3 students.

● Very comfortable	1
● Somewhat comfortable	7
● Neither comfortable or uncomfortable	5
● Somewhat comfortable	5
○ Very uncomfortable	0



2. Feeling confident. Combined responses from PMEd Year 2 and BEd Year 3 students.

● Extremely confident	0
● Somewhat confident	6
● Neutral	3
● Somewhat not confident	9
○ Extremely not confident	0



3. Student teachers' concerns relating to teaching RSE. Combined responses from PMEd Year 2 and BEd Year 3 students.

18 Responses

Latest Responses

“Content, classroom management”

Not knowing enough about the opposite sex (male), suitable language and

“How to deal with a child who’s questioning their gender identity”

6 respondents (33%) answered **children** for this question

questions and scenarios | knowledge | RSE | language with the children

difficult questions

correct terms

children

appropriate

sensitive to children

sensitive to children | student questions | gender identity | RSE talks

gender identity | correct language | boys and girls

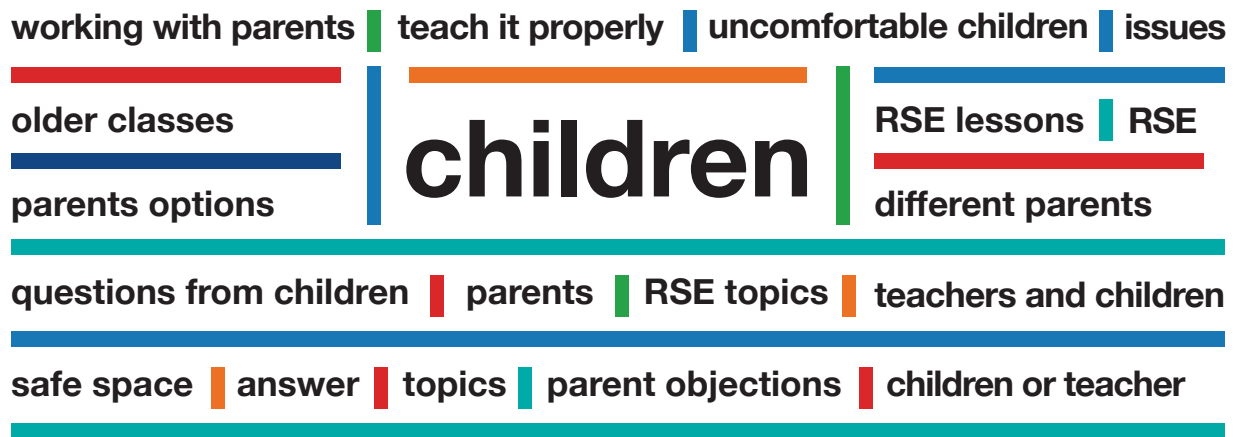
identity and dysphoria | terms for the children | questions from children

The above answers supported with in-class discussions indicate that student-teachers feel confident in teaching RSE related topics if they have a personal interest in the area. However, they do not feel competent in teaching RSE as it is not permitted to be taught on School Placement due to its sensitive nature. As a result, student-teachers do not receive sufficient guidance, theoretically or pedagogically, in the teaching of RSE at third level.

Building on the findings of the first questionnaire, RSE Capacity Building/Reflective sessions were held. These reflective sessions explored student teachers’ levels of confidence and readiness for exploring RSE norms, attitudes, beliefs, values, identities, and their lived experiences. These sessions were a welcomed opportunity for students to reflect on their personally held beliefs and past schooling experiences.

Students completed a Microsoft Form questionnaire for a second time ahead of guest speaker Margarita Gerouki’s lecture and question-and-answer session. Once again, this questionnaire sought to establish what the needs of the student teachers were.

4. Problems that student teachers envisage when teaching RSE. Responses from BEd Year 3 students.



The results of this Form were shared with Margarita Gerouki ahead of time to allow her to base her lecture around the needs of the students. Students readily engaged with Dr Gerouki at the end of her lecture, and it proved to be a very fruitful experience. An additional benefit was that a link has been made with Dr Gerouki and she has agreed to join us as a guest lecturer for a similar input next year.

Overall Project Findings:

1. Student-teacher frustration with the current curriculum e.g. the current curriculum does not state or give guidance on the full range of identities and sexualities, nor does it offer guidance for (student-) teachers should children ask related questions.
2. Student teacher concerns regarding their agency e.g. student-teachers remark that they will feel exposed, at risk personally and professionally, when discussing RSE issues when they are fully qualified teachers.
3. The importance of (1) respecting the child's right to be heard (2) meaningfully and safely engaging with children when (s)he/they ask a question (this commitment aligns with Article 12, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child), and (3) the need for the curriculum to identify and name issues relating to relations and relationship rather than being solely guided by a biological focus.

Two of the three outcomes of this project were met: RSE capacity building/reflective sessions and building a community of practice that places student voices and experiences at its centre. Due to varying factors, such as time constraints, availability and resources, the third objective was unable to be met: 'Technology: creating an online space to share RSE resources and good practice'. This will be a target for next year.

Impact on current Teaching and Learning

The SPARK funding was a catalyst to create a student-led approach in this contested area. It allowed, for the first time, for Relationships and Sexuality Education to take a more prominent and formalised place within the timetable. It provided time, space and recognition to be given to this topic, a topic that is often silenced and even outsourced to external providers. It encouraged conversations among staff as well as conversations between staff and students, and students with students, that would not have taken place otherwise. Material has been purchased that will aid future teaching and a blueprint is now in place to build on going forward. Finally, this funding has indicated the importance of RSE as an area for discussion and investigation and has paved the way for future dialogue in this evolving space.

Anticipated Future impact

As RSE is growing in importance at a national and international level (NCCA, 2019; Maunsell et al., 2021), further supported by the 'Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice' (2019), it is envisaged that this project will be an annual feature for BEd Year 3 and PMEd student teachers. The SPARK funding has been the catalyst to allow small changes to occur at departmental level that, overall, will make significant differences to students' experience, knowledge and skills in this area. Links have been made with RSE expert Margarita Gerouki and she has agreed to join us again next year to discuss best practice with next year's cohort of students.

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