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Foreword

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There is a pernicious idea that education is something that we can get right. This is an idea that crops up in many different contexts, and in various forms: whether in well-intended but naïve drives to develop scripted curricula (e.g. Eisenbach, 2012) or in the apocalyptic predictions that MOOCs would sweep away conventional Higher Education and replace it with recorded lectures by ‘star’ performers (e.g. Barber et al, 2013). This tendency is particularly visible whenever technology enters the discussion, simply because it is far easier for it to broadcast standard content to new audiences than it is for it to respond creatively to the complex and unpredictable situations learners create.

Some authors have added nuance to this general picture. For example, some have suggested that evidence-based educational approaches might need to build their generalisable power by moving carefully from individual cases through case-controlled studies to cohort trials (e.g. Alsop & Tompsett, 2007). Others have focused on individual differences, and the idea that with enough data, educational approaches can be adapted and optimised (e.g. Luckin & Cukurova, 2019). The promise of an educational utopia is dangled before us – in spite of decades of evidence that shows that education is always a work in progress, never an end point (e.g. Laurillard, 2008).

The papers in this volume offer a refreshingly honest alternative to the promise of perfection just over the horizon.

Egan & Crotty (2020) explore a situation where, no matter how good education has been, the existing system was utterly unprepared for the new demands that have been placed on it: how educators have responded to the COVID-19 pandemic. Many educational responses might best be understood as coping and making do: as Egan & Crotty illustrate, even when educators or learners have chosen online education before, no-one chose this. All too often, this making do and getting by is achieved through exceptional efforts, which are reflected in unsus-

tainably increased workloads. What this work highlights is that even though the situation is far from ideal, it is good enough for the moment – so long as the relationship between educators and learners can be sustained.

An imagined future is developed by Ó Beaglaioich & Crotty (2020), but importantly, this is not one where perfection is achieved and locked down. Instead, rather than envisaging structures and content, what is imagined is a new kind of space, and an invitation to ongoing dialogue. Recognising that Irish-medium schools are poorly served in terms of materials and examples of practice, evidence is generated about how teachers could create and share this for themselves. Here too, what is important is the kind of relationship that people develop: trust and a sense of belonging are vital, and collaboration will be important in making this future work, not just amassing resources.

Nally & Ladden (2020) focus on something many visions of the future seek to downplay: the teacher, understood as a real and complex person. While research in educational technology has tried to reduce teachers to manageable components in an engineered system (Friesen, 2004), this work shows how mentoring has emotional and developmental benefits as well as pragmatic ones, but also how the supportive aspects that are of most benefit can be undermined by an evaluation that is focused on technical concerns. Unlike the more sterile visions of standardised education as a perfect system, this shows just how important it is to understand education in terms of cultures whose meeting is complex and often challenging.

Finally, McLoughlin & Farren (2020) speak directly to the idea that people are not fixed, but should always “have a hunger” to develop – whether they are teachers thinking about professional practice or learners thinking about their potential for future growth. In this work, the deployment of technology is not a case of achieving perfection, but is about transformation and adaptation. Each step in the process uncovers new insights, reframing the problems in ways that can transform them, not just edging closer to one final solution. In this case, what initially appeared as technical issue with understanding rotation in transformational geometry, framed in terms of teacher preparation, developed into something that transformed how students who had struggled with these ideas understood the subject.

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All this work shows just how limited a vision of a perfectly engineered future can be. As the papers in this issue demonstrate, unless our ideas about education take into account relationships, culture and ongoing personal growth, we will be left with something brittle, and altogether unable to cope when the world changes in unexpected ways.

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