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## A Charter for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning in Ireland – a manifesto for change

Science Gallery, 22 April 2010



## **SUMMARY**

“If, in twenty years time, we hear the word ‘reformation’, we don’t just want to hear about Martin Luther and the Catholic counter-reformation; we want to hear about the Irish reformation of the education system.” - Student participant’s call for change

Imagine if students were allowed to redesign the school curriculum according to the skills they felt they needed to develop. What would their vision of the school of the 21st century look like?

On 22nd April 2010, over 40 students from secondary schools all over Ireland gathered at Science Gallery, Trinity College Dublin, to put forward their proposals to create an education system that meets the needs of the 21st century.

The students, who were joined in the afternoon by An Tanaiste and Minister for Education and Skills, Mary Coughlan and a number of well known creative professionals, spent the morning deconstructing the existing educational system in order to understand how the different component parts interact, and to discover which were there through need or simply as a result of convention and tradition. They then reconstructed the system, swapping out elements that they felt were never intended for our own time and circumstances, and tweaking what remained to bring it up to date.

At the end of the daylong session the students produced their charter for learning - a blueprint for redesigning second level education in Ireland, which encourages creativity, imagination, collaboration, problem solving and the development of technological fluency. The resulting charter, reproduced on the next page, contains ten key principles for 21<sup>st</sup> Century learning.

The young people attending the workshop want a complete reformation of the current education system in Ireland, which means new methods of teaching, learning and assessment. One of the most poignant points raised was that 21st century children want to be more involved in directing the course of their learning. They are more willing to collaborate with teachers and with each other and they see that technology makes it easier than ever to do so. Moreover, the students accept that this is a process, which will take commitment, time and investment of those involved. It became apparent through the workshop that they see their role as initiating this process and sowing the seeds of change.

### **Preamble**

We are in the middle of a revolution. Science, technology and culture are changing at a rapid pace, the five year olds that enter our schools this September will retire in 2075; they need an education system that prepares them for the future but we have no idea yet what that future will be.

Our students need a curriculum that is about becoming a learner, not a knower of facts, a curriculum that is connected to their interests, experiences, talents and the real world. A curriculum that nurtures the creative, flexible thinkers of the future that Ireland needs to be competitive on a global stage.

This is our manifesto for change, 10 points that should be applied to redesigning the second level curriculum and school experience. We believe that our schools can be creative communities where ideas can flourish. We are committed to this manifesto for change.

## A CHARTER FOR 21st CENTURY LEARNING – A MANIFESTO FOR CHANGE

1. **Cultivate Creativity** - Place more emphasis on the skills that will help young people to progress and prosper in the twenty-first century such as critical thinking, problem solving, collaborative learning, adaptability, initiative, ability to access and analyse information, curiosity and imagination.
2. **Encourage Flexible Learning** - Organise learning around projects and short-term studies. Engage in work that is project based, research driven, relevant, rigorous and real world.
3. **Trust the Learners** - Encourage group-based learning and allow students to teach each other. Offer more choice in terms of how to display knowledge and competence – test ability and skills as well as memory, and include credits gained through extra-curricular activity
4. **End the all-at-once assessment cycle** – introduce a system of continuous and flexible assessment that allows work to be assessed as it is completed. Encourage self, peer-to-peer evaluation and portfolio based assessment.
5. **Embrace Diversity** – We live in a diverse and multicultural society; our schools should reflect this in a curriculum that recognises diverse backgrounds, opinions and skills.
6. **Foster Mutual Respect** - Develop a culture of mutual respect and learning between teacher and student – It's not a one against thirty situation any more
7. **Invest and build on physical learning spaces** - Embrace the full potential of social media, gaming technologies, virtual learning environments and other alternative platforms for learning
8. **Rethink the role of teachers** - Let teachers act as guides rather than judges of outcomes by making it easier for teachers to vary their approach according to the circumstances, the subject and the preferences of the learners.
9. **Future Proof** – Technology and culture are changing at a rapid pace. We need to develop a responsive curriculum that allow teachers and schools to rapidly respond to new knowledge, living culture and emerging technologies.
10. **Global Classroom** – We live in a globalised society. Our learning environment should reflect this. To navigate in a 21st Century world we need to be literate in a multicultural, media saturated, high tech society. We can do this through meaningful collaborative projects with students across the world.

We the undersigned are committed to the ideas and principles put forward in this charter and agree to take on these ideas in our own communities, schools and universities and spread the word.

## **WORKSHOP FORMAT**

On 22nd April 2010, over 40 students and eager education thought leaders assembled to develop the manifesto for 21st Century Learning. A brief overview of the input and discussion is given below, which was assembled by the workshop facilitator Sean McDougall from video documentation of the work and through each group's notes. In particular it provides some detailed notes on the process in the afternoon session where students worked from looking at where we are now in our current education system to where it should be? Some notes follow this where the group aimed to establish how they might go about making the transition and what ultimately lead to the 10-point manifesto.

### **Workshop Stage 1 – Stage 3**

In the morning session the group looked at some of the differences between our current, 19th century based school system and what they felt a 21st century school might be. From this a number of issues were raised and suggestions made. These were used to generate a series of polar opposites – so, if someone suggested that there was a need to spend more time visiting places, it was turned into “Everyone always in one building” and “Entirely virtual – there is no building to go to”. If someone said they would like more control over how they learn, it was turned into “Teacher decides how all learning happens” and “Student decides how all learning happens”. In the end, 17 polar opposite positions were created.

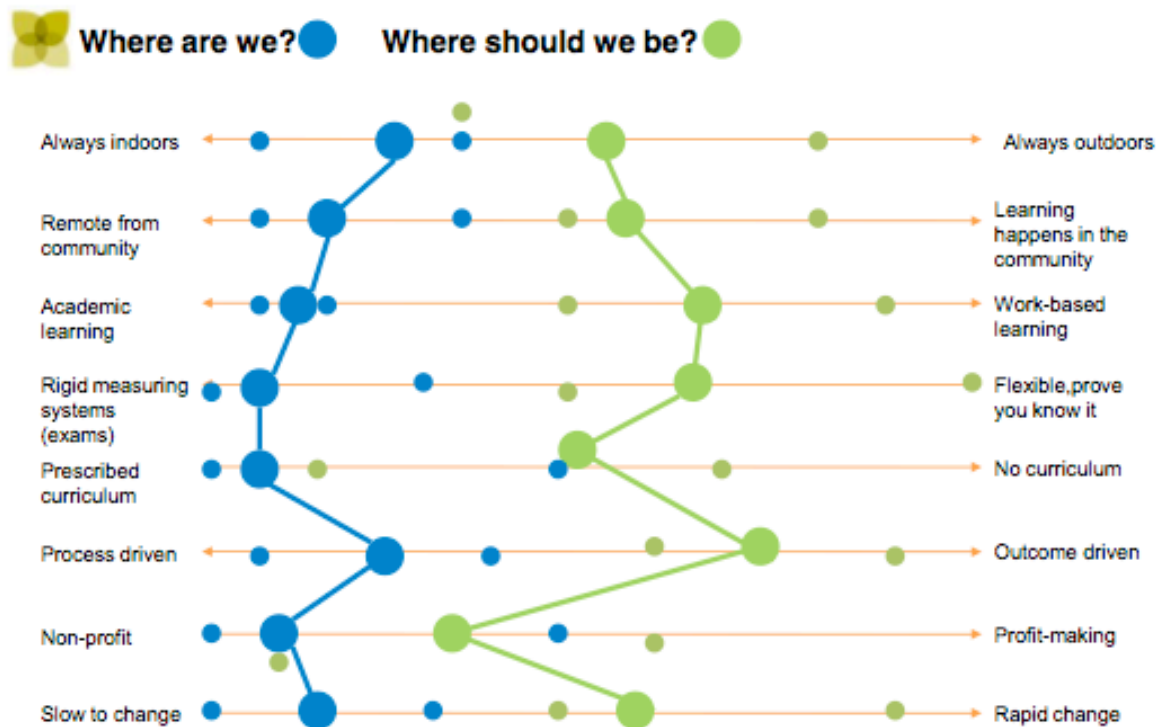
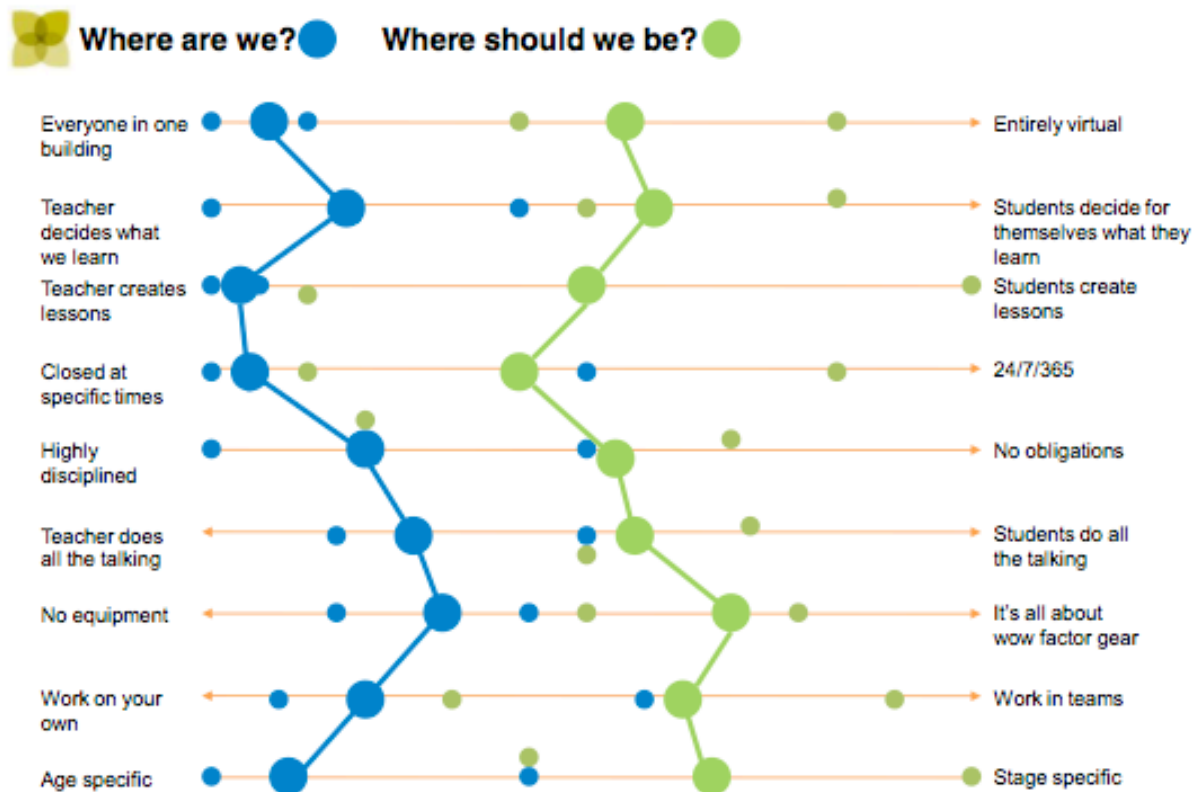
The statements were produced in real time and printed on the spot so that we could then map their opinions against them. We asked, “Where do you think we are now?” and “Where do you think we should be?” Each group came to their own conclusions and, over lunch, the findings were averaged. In the two images in Figure 1, the large blue dot shows where they think we are right now; the small blue dots show the lowest and highest score awarded. The same arrangement applies to the green dots, where the largest dot shows exactly where the group would like our reformed educational system to move to.

Given that the graph was produced by the equivalent of one large class of students, there was little scope for large scale averaging. Nevertheless, it provides powerful insights into the type of changes the group would like to make to the system. There are some areas where students feel less need for change – they respect schools for their non-profit ethos, while seeing opportunities to make them more enterprising. They also accept and respect the need for discipline, but believe that teachers who demonstrate more trust will quickly realise that there is scope to loosen the reins.

On the other hand, they feel very strongly that “school” should be one amongst many physical places that they access in order to engage in learning. They discussed that distributing learning resources across the community rather than locating all of them in one place has implications for finance, security and the timetable. However, it is also worth noting that it would be cheaper, and would be no more dangerous than going into town at a weekend or in the school holidays.

They additionally discussed that there is no longer a reason to continue educating by age rather than by stage. They want to work in groups and want to see the examination system changed to allow (rather than obstruct) that.

Figure 1:



## Workshop Stage 4 & 5

Over lunch, the students were joined by a group of adults with an interest in education. While some were accomplished academics or worked in the curriculum development, others were from the creative industries and some of them had mostly negative memories of their time at school. Today, many of the professional bodies representing the creative industries (new media, music, ICT, design, fashion, film, architecture etc) say that schools do not prepare people very well for the type of work they do

The first task of this session was for the students to explain to the adults why they wanted to see change in each of the categories shown above. Having done so, the group as a whole could select three themes they felt were especially important and discuss how the suggested changes could be implemented.

In relation to each change, they asked:

- How could you achieve it?
- How long would it take?
- What obstacle would you encounter?
- What are the benefits of making the change?

### Issues raised

**“Flexibility to display knowledge using any medium.”** As one student pointed out, “many of us have our fortes using arts, music, computers. So what if they could find a way to convey our knowledge in another subject through our passion?” For this student, progress could be as simple as allowing a choice between writing an essay or making a presentation using Powerpoint.

**“Improving student-teacher relations through mutual respect.”** Many students felt that older teachers lose touch with modern trends and how younger minds work, while younger teachers retain (for a time) more of an understanding and insight. This is displayed in the lack of comprehension of the potential of texting as a learning method, and recent research by Oxford University and Monkseaton High School that demonstrated beyond doubt that the timetable runs at odds with the biological clock of teenagers. Starting and finishing later is a sure way to improve pass rates, but are teachers willing to do so?

**Students resent the all or nothing binary nature of working methods.** “There is textbook learning and then there is technology learning – they think there needs to be a half-way house between the two”. This group spoke of the desire to spend time in businesses seeing how they work, and want to see schools sharing (at the moment the student experience is that they tend to meet only to compete with each other). Above all, they want “real life based learning experiences”.

Asked to amplify on this point, the discussion focused on young people who go to Gaeltacht regions over the summer and the advantages that accrue for them – would it be possible to do the same thing but with the focus being applied learning in business? This would not be the same as getting a summer job – it would require some businesses to open themselves up to young people, exactly as in the Gaeltacht, with a view to developing their skills.

**“A more relevant final assessment system”.** One group of young people proposed that the HPAT method used in selecting Medical students should be incorporated into the wider Leaving Cert framework. The difference between the Leaving Cert and HPAT is that the latter specifically tests logical reasoning and problem-solving, inter-personal understanding and

non-verbal reasoning – which are important to employers across Ireland. In this case, the originators of the idea thought that every university course should have an HPAT attached – so if someone wanted to be a teacher, they would be tested on their personality, ability to work with children and the like. “You’d get the best people for the job rather than the person who did best at Leaving Cert”. Starting with a pilot scheme, the idea would develop until it eventually replaced the points system. More importantly, though, the young people were saying that testing for these attributes would create the circumstances in which they could work in much more interesting ways.

The obstacles cited were quite interesting – the Department for Education was expected to be against such a move, and they spoke of “society’s belief in conformity and measurements”. Here is an issue that is best seen from two perspectives. For the young person, wishing to enter a profession, the Leaving Cert is their only proof of competence. Yet afterwards, the Leaving Cert becomes almost totally irrelevant – people are picked on the basis of ability and practical experience. So the young people are asking why they cannot be assessed from the start in the way that will apply for the rest of their lives.

**The same pre-employment/ post-employment dichotomy was raised by another group in relation to ways of working.** Employers value team-workers, communication skills, empathy and emotional intelligence, yet there is little opportunity to develop this skill in schools that still expect students mostly to work in silence and assess them individually within an exam framework. They noted that students have little opportunity to be the teacher, although this is a key element of working in teams and essential to the task of management. Systemic compromise would see most schools allowing students to spend some of their time working in this way, but not so much as to reduce their chances of doing well at Leaving Cert stage.

The group had their own ideas of how it might work, and it is likely that business leaders would recognise many of them as similar to their own forms of assessment. Continuous assessment, in which you explain the problem, explore responses and present a convincing conclusion using whatever form or presentation serves your purposes best is a normal way of doing things at work. Importantly, one group recognised that there is no component in English to test ability to communicate verbally – unlike French or Irish – and yet the ability to communicate and persuade is now one of the top job-hire skills in Ireland. For this group, the Leaving Cert should be replaced with a CV listing skills and abilities, both school-based and extra-curricular.

**“Not everyone does well on that one day.”** One group questioned whether the Leaving Cert could be described as a fair measurement of assessment. While everyone has the same experience at the same time, ability to do exams is arguably at least as important as possession of knowledge in determining the final score. If all exams were replaced with practical demonstrations, it is likely that some people who did well in the past would start to struggle, while some who have struggled would start to shine. The new system would be just as fair as the old one – and how fair is that?

The group suggested that students should be able to tweak the proportion of time and marks allocated to different parts of the assessment. For instance, in Geography, 20% was allocated to field studies and 80% to a final written exam. They asked why, in some cases, that might not be changed to 60% of time and marks for field studies, 20% for continuous assessment and 20% for the final exam. Ultimately, that would mean that instead of writing three essays in three hours they would write one essay in one hour. However, they would also spend lots of time helping to maintain a river system. It is remarkable that their ideas fit

so neatly with the idea of personalised learning and so badly with the present school operating system.

**Another group brought the point back to the issue of Certificates of Achievement**, which might include credits for extra-curricular indicators like sporting ability or success in debating. They felt that students should continue to do the whole curriculum, but be able to increase the weighting of subjects that they are most interested in to influence their final score. Like others, they identified teacher unions as a potential obstacle, citing the change in approach that teachers would have to adopt if the new system was to flourish.

**The same group called for more teamwork in schools**, for the primary school round table approach to be maintained but with more emphasis placed on working as teams. Teachers trained in the new approach would allow students to teach each other and develop understanding as groups, then assess each student's contribution collectively or individually.

**The next group to speak asked why bells are used to signify the end of lessons when music could be used instead. They also wondered why Skype is used so often outside school and so little within it.** As a free resource, they believe that it should be routine to speak with students in France, Spain and Germany in order to improve language skills.

**One of the adult stakeholders echoed their views:** "I like the 'lose the bells' comment. It's a bit like if you're running a prison, you'd have a bell system. And our schools really shouldn't be like that. They're going to have to move to a system of trusting young people much more to learn from each other. Certainly, in the area of technology they are already ahead of the adults anyway."

He added: "There's a lot of sitting in groups going on in primary schools, but the research shows there's not much working in groups going on."

Students are more worthy of respect in the 21<sup>st</sup> century than they were in the Victorian era. "The implications are that you should be trusted to work together in teams and not commanded to start now, finish now, move over there. You guys can manage your lives better than that?"

**The next group made the case for drawing down practices from the university sector.** Just as the passage of time allows technology to cascade through society, they wondered why educational practice cannot do the same thing. In particular, they saw merit in the seminar approach whereby teachers would initiate discussions within small groups. This would also address a problem whereby "most children who come out of school and enter real life have problems with interviews."

**They also highlighted the merits of short, concentrated immersions in topics rather than longer, drip-feed engagements.** "It keeps you interested and it eases the pressure that is the great, looming Leaving Cert exams".

**The next group to speak asked why the knowledge and experience of older students cannot be made available systematically to the younger ones.** Again, the teaching profession was perceived to be an obstacle and not an enabler of change. Yet in the Victorian era, it was normal for students of all ages to sit together, with the older students helping the teacher to explain ideas and concepts to the younger ones. From there comes the statement "the best way to learn is to teach".



**The final group described a change to the American credit system**, whereby students must achieve 240 credits to move to the next level in school. They noted that the number of courses on offer was significantly wider than in Ireland and asked why there should be less choice here than elsewhere. Once again, they sought to preserve the formal exam, but only as one form of assessment with students being able to make up lost ground elsewhere if they were not suited to it.

### **Final Workshop Stage**

As the discussion progressed each group was asked to refine their ideas into three manifesto statements and put these forward to the entire group. Following each group presenting their ideas we placed each on a separate sheet and asked the entire group to vote on what they felt were the most important ones to make it into the manifesto. With that in mind each participant was given 10 blue dots, which they could use to vote. People were free to spend all 10 on one idea, to put one dot on each idea, or to mix and match as they wished. In the end, the ideas that had the most dots on them would be deemed the most important. In order, they make up our Charter for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning – a manifesto for change.

### **Next Steps**

Following feedback from the participants, we will use this document as the bones of a design brief moving forward. The aim from here is that each participant will present this charter to his or her schools, institutes and local business and industry getting further support for our manifesto. We are currently finalising a date to bring this document to An Tanaiste and will facilitate another session in September 2010 where we will present the finalised charter to a range of education and industry stakeholders.

### **Contact**

If you have any questions or input about this document please contact Lynn Scarff or Maria Phelan below

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