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**Supporting Conversations in Education:**

**reflections from ReSource at Burren College of Art**

For the past seven years, the [Burren College of Art](https://www.burrencollege.ie/) has facilitated conversations on the future of education in Ireland. This document offers an overview of the processes used and the things we have learned from hosting these conversations.

*(A variety of supporting resources are listed below)*

In summary, we have found that making the education system more visible to itself enables all participants to be part of a process that values their roles and affords them agency in contributing to positive change.

***Context & Background***

ReSource at Burren College of Art is a centre dedicated to fostering creativity in individuals and groups, encouraging them to retreat, reflect, and reimagine new ways of being and working amidst uncertainty. Building on the college's commitment to time, space, and inspiration, ReSource offers facilitated sessions in the Burren landscape, supporting participants to address complex challenges through creative processes. Notable initiatives include the Climate Gathering and the Creative Education Symposium, which led to the BEACONS initiative. ReSource's approach combines the arts, ecology, and systems thinking to facilitate positive transformations in various sectors.

Sensing an appetite for meaningful conversation on the future of education, the Burren College of Art has held several symposia. Each event gathered around 50 diverse participants—students, teachers, civil servants, parents, union leaders and others. Set in the reflective landscape of the Burren, the gatherings created spaces for honest dialogue and deep listening.

***Process Matters***

While the education system in Ireland is both complex and evolving, there are recurrent patterns and dynamics that inhibit positive change. Our process has centred on carefully facilitated conversations, where we have paid attention to making these patterns more visible, appreciating the structures, systems, attitudes that support them and appreciating the perspectives of diverse and multiple stakeholders. In such spaces, creative and collaborative responses emerge.

Over time, we have gained considerable insight into how to create conditions for rich and meaningful conversations on education. These include:

* Hosting the conversation in authentic places that are welcoming, emphasising hospitality;
* Creating a microcosm of the ‘whole system’ in one room (including children and young people);
* Ensuring participant ‘safety’, so that people can be brave;
* Having clear and relevant questions for inquiries that matter to participants;
* Avoiding ‘attack and defend’ dynamics by including diverse perspectives on issues.
* Involving stakeholders in the design process (through bilateral conversations in advance of wider meetings);
* Explicitly involving and respecting all voices (noting specific efforts are required to enable marginalised voices);
* Enabling different people to participate in different ways;
* Helping people to see how their perspectives are shared / not shared by others;
* Making sure children and young people are in the centre of the process (the quality of their contributions and their ability to participate constantly surprise adults);
* Including time for reflection on ideas;
* Including time in nature, the importance of shared meals, and creative practices.
* Recognising that specific places and contexts matter and differ;
* Paying attention to the life / vitality of ideas as they emerge
* Balancing being real in relation to current challenges, with being appreciative that lots of good people are doing lots of good things, with imagining different possible futures;
* Ensuring people can see where outcomes of conversations are going to go and the potential for them to have influence on these;
* Designing process so that easy wins are recognised and can be acted upon while also paying creative attention to issues that may take more time;
* Sustaining connections and involving new stakeholders, as relevant.
* Supporting participants to build on emergent ideas.

Our work does draw on a theoretical base (mostly ‘Theory U’, pioneered by Otto Scharmer and colleagues at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and summarised in this short [video](https://vimeo.com/289408025) prepared for our Symposium in 2018)

The process we have developed is flexible and adaptive. When guided by skilled facilitation, trusted by stakeholders and one step removed from relevant day-to-day educational practice, transformative conversations can result.

***What we have learned from hosting conversations on the future of education?***

Through hosting conversations on the future of education, we've come to understand that meaningful transformation in education arises when participants engage as equals, setting aside formal roles and hierarchies and moving away from established dynamics. In such settings, the facilitator's role is to create a space where authentic dialogue can flourish, allowing diverse perspectives to surface and interact.

The arts have proven instrumental in this process, offering alternative lenses through which to view challenges and fostering a shared sense of purpose and celebration. Creative practices enable participants to access deeper levels of understanding, often revealing insights not readily accessible through conventional discussion alone.

Central to the success of this work is trust—both in each other and in the process itself. For many participants, stepping into a space that invites vulnerability, uncertainty, and new ways of thinking can feel risky. Trust builds gradually through careful design, consistent facilitation, and an atmosphere of genuine respect. When people sense that the process is thoughtful, inclusive, and open-ended—not predetermined—they are more willing to speak honestly, to listen deeply, and to remain engaged even when conversations are challenging. Trust enables the group to move beyond surface-level discussions and begin grappling with the deeper questions and tensions at the heart of educational change.

However, several essential challenges persist.

* The pace and demands of educational environments often leave little room for reflection, leading to a sense of overwhelm among educators, students, and policymakers alike.
* There's a tendency to view systems learning as a one-way transmission rather than a collaborative, ongoing process involving all stakeholders.
* Finally, we have  a cultural tendency to try to deal with complexity by breaking it down into component parts, rather than seeing the living interconnectedness of issues.

To navigate these complexities, our approach emphasises the importance of creating environments that nurture trust, collective agency, and a shared commitment to change. By facilitating processes that encourage open dialogue, mutual respect, and creative exploration, we make the education system more visible to itself cultivating a culture where innovation in education is not only possible but sustainable and transformative.

***Relating process to outcomes***

It is not always easy to see the links between process and outcomes.  A lot of what makes the difference goes on ‘under the surface’, for example relationships, confidence and trust grow over time and are critical in making things possible that weren’t possible previously.

When we reflect on changes we have witnessed over the last seven years across the system, we can see:

* Substantial progress with including the voices of children and young people in policy and strategy processes
* A greater commitment to including voices from the margins
* A greater recognition of the interconnectedness of issues

We are excited by the prospect of the forthcoming national conversation and national convention on education to build on the work that we and others have been involved with for many years.  National conversations have the potential to identify the issues that most need to be addressed.  Regional conversations can hopefully explore these issues in greater depth to more closely identify the patterns and structures that inhibit positive change and then finally, a National Convention can help chart paths forward to enacting systemic change.

Burren College of Art remains committed to supporting these continuing processes in whatever ways it can.

***Supporting Resources***

Resources relating to BEACONS and the subsequent OECD pilot are here - [BEACONS - OECD Pilot - Resources](https://burrenresource.ie/strands/beacons-oecd-pilot/)

Resources relating to the National Convention on Education are here - [**NCE - Resources**](https://burrenresource.ie/strands/cafe/)and the NCE  
  
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