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Joanne O'Flaherty Mags Liddy Lorraine Tansey Cathy Roche

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# Educating engaged citizens: four projects from Ireland

Educating  
engaged citizens

Joanne O'Flaherty

*Department of Education and Professional Studies, University of Limerick,  
Limerick, Ireland*

Mags Liddy

*Ubuntu Network, Department of Education and Professional Studies,  
University of Limerick, Limerick, Ireland*

Lorraine Tansey

*Community Knowledge Initiative, National University of Ireland, Galway,  
Ireland, and*

Cathy Roche

*Young Social Innovators, Dublin, Ireland*

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper aims to describe the four education projects that demonstrate how Irish education provision is adapting to meet social and economic changes: Ubuntu Network working to integrate education for sustainable development (ESD) into teacher education; Community Knowledge Initiative (CKI) facilitating service learning modules at higher education; Young Social Innovators (YSI), a social justice education programme for 15-18 year olds; and a study of Irish students' levels of moral reasoning. Four commonalities are identified between the projects: critical thinking, active and participatory learning, knowledge skills and social justice. Discussion highlights features of the Irish education system that contrast with these commonalities and impact on their long-term objectives, which may in fact hinder the development of engaged learners.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Four commonalities were identified at the roundtable discussions at the Irish Aid Sustainable Global Development Conference. Each commonality is discussed from the perspective of the projects described and contrasted against core features of Irish education.

**Findings** – All four education projects make positive contributions to civic engagement in Irish education, acknowledging education as central to active citizenship, social awareness, and empowerment of learners.

**Originality/value** – Discussion centres on how Irish education provision is adapting to meet social and economic changes. The paper argues that distinctive features of the Irish education system and the prevailing culture of Irish education do not lend themselves to social justice concerns such as education for sustainable development, moral reasoning or civic engagement.

**Keywords** Education, Students, Ireland, Social change, Citizen participation

**Paper type** Conceptual paper



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The views expressed in the paper are those of the authors and researchers. They can in no way be taken to reflect the official opinion of the Ubuntu Network or Irish Aid.

To educate a man in mind and not in morals is to educate a menace to society (Theodore Roosevelt).

## 1. Introduction

This paper centres on the concept of education as a personal and social process, with the aim of developing effective and engaged citizens capable of making informed cognitive moral decisions. In the context of social, economic and cultural changes, the role of education and the learner's skill set needs to be vastly different from the past. The four projects described in this paper endeavour to demonstrate how Irish education provision are changing to meet these challenges. The changes include: developing learners' questioning and critical thinking skills; amending learning outcomes to engender ethical engagement, and developing abilities to integrate knowledge into a coherent understanding of place in the world, economy and society.

At the Irish Aid Sustainable Global Development Conference in October 2009, four education projects in Ireland came together to share their learning, attempt to identify commonalities in their work, and make linkages to ongoing education reform in Ireland. These projects are presented here as illustrative exemplars of innovation and change in Irish education, and are explained in detail later in the paper. The projects are: the Ubuntu Network working to integrate education for sustainable development (ESD) into initial teacher education; the Community Knowledge Initiative (CKI), facilitating service learning modules at higher education; Young Social Innovators (YSI) a social awareness education and action programme for 15-18 year olds in post-primary education; and lastly a study of Irish university students' levels of moral reasoning. Ensuing discussion identified four commonalities across the projects: critical thinking, active and participatory learning, knowledge skills and social justice. In this paper, we explain these commonalities and locate them within the context of dominant features of the Irish education system. The authors contrast these features with the commonalities identified and question the potential impact of these features on the long-term objectives of each of the projects.

## 2. Context – features of education provision in Ireland

In this paper we focus on some identified features of the Irish education system: consensualism, competitiveness and individualism (Lynch, 1987, 1989), strong exam focus (OECD, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 1991), lack of democracy in school structures (Smyth, 1999), the dominance of the Catholic Church and the technical paradigm (Gleeson, 1996). We argue that these distinctive features dominate the culture of Irish education and do not readily lend themselves to social justice concerns such as moral reasoning or civic engagement.

Within a consensualist society there is a belief that society is an undifferentiated whole, with a failure to recognise difference in terms of class, gender or race and ethnicity. Where subject matter and knowledge is based on acknowledging difference and celebrating diversity, content can clash with the dominant thinking and culture of the system. In her classic study, Lynch (1989) discusses the influence of the Catholic Church on Irish post-primary provision, arguing that this influence leads to a conservative environment where Church and moral teaching were inextricably linked and the Church provided clear and unquestionable answers to all moral problems. In addition, it has been suggested that a general consensus has emerged around education provision in Ireland, which prevents serious interrogation of the status quo (Gleeson, 1996). Gleeson (2008) suggests that the discourse of Irish education limits opportunities

for debate on education for democracy. This results in a school culture that is the antithesis of empowerment and critical questioning of power relations in society (Lynch and Lodge, 2002) and does not encourage young people to become active in democratic processes. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (1991) highlighted the authoritarian nature of the teacher-student relationship in Irish post-primary schooling. Lynch and Lodge (1999) further examined the lack of autonomy afforded to post-primary students in Ireland. The relational context within which Irish pupils are socialised in second-level schools is profoundly hierarchical, where learners have little control over what they do in school (Lynch, 1989). The lack of inclusion of power in syllabi, combined with lack of inclusion in power structures, can undermine educational work centred on critical thinking and inclusion described in this paper. Greater civic engagement means working with learners and communities from different social backgrounds, often confronting assumptions and stereotypes of marginalised groups.

Lynch (1989), contends that “competitive individualism is an endemic part of life in second-level schools” (p. 87). The structural organisation of post-primary school requires students to compete persistently against others whether they desire to or not (Lynch, 1989). The entire process “rewards egocentricism highly and sanctions altruism severely . . . it imposes penalties on cooperative effort at times of evaluation” (Lynch, 1989, p. 43). The competitive, individualistic nature of schooling is compounded by assessments, as “Doing the leaving”[1] is a particularly Irish experience (NCCA, 2003, p. 23), as entry to third level education is closely linked to the results achieved by students at the Leaving Certificate Examination. This exam-driven nature of post-primary education in Ireland leads to a nature of competitiveness, “where one works for extrinsic gain rather than for intrinsic value” (Lynch, 1989, p. 44). The Irish post-primary curriculum has been dominated by the ideology of classical humanism with its emphasis on knowledge transmission and book learning (OECD, 1991, p. 68). With regard to teaching approaches, a comparison study of five countries by The Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) indicates Irish teachers were somewhat less supportive of constructivist beliefs, and somewhat more supportive of direct transmission beliefs than their counterparts (Sheil *et al.*, 2009, p. 7). The dominance of the Classical Humanism approach results in a concentration on facts (Gleeson, 1979). Living in an information age requires learners to develop skills of evaluation and critical thinking to understand, interpret and appraise the information received from a variety of academic disciplines and sources. Didactic teaching and rote learning inhibits these skills, thus active and experiential learning methods are advocated.

Education involves more than just instructing students, “it is an activity in which the teacher is sharing in a moral enterprise, namely, the initiation of (usually) young people into a worthwhile way of seeing the world, of experiencing it, of relating to others in a more human and understanding way” (Pring, 2001, p. 106). Criticism of the Irish post-primary curriculum has highlighted its subject-base rather than interdisciplinarity (OECD, 1991), while there has been a neglect of the social and personal development of students within the formal education system. This is reflected for example in the ongoing difficulties pertaining to the implementation of Senior Cycle[2] Social, Personal and Health Education and the Relationships and Sexuality Programme (Smyth, 1999).

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Skilbeck (2001) in his review of third level education institutions in Ireland suggested that the “university” seeks to strengthen cultural values, foster responsible citizenship and provide service to the community. Skilbeck queried whether universities generally are actually performing the role of intellectual leader and moral critic within the public domain, saying

There is a sense in the general community that too often they (the universities) remain preoccupied with their own needs, especially for public funds, and their special interests. Cultural criticism, intellectual and moral leadership tend to run counter to the predominance of economic concerns (Skilbeck, 2001, p. 37).

The increasing importance of the economic and vocational role of the university appears to be gaining momentum especially within a society in the midst of economic unrest.

There is a tension in recent debates about directions universities should take: between their traditional and much prized cultural/critical/liberal education roles and their constant adjustment to socio-economic pressures, particularly workforce preparation and economic returns to research (Skilbeck, 2001).

A tension therefore exists in the perspectives held of the role of the university in society today. Thus, two polarised definitions emerge where the university is a provider of services to enable economic development, or the university as a member of and contributor to civil society (Breathnach, 2004). Chapter 1 of the Irish Universities Act (1997) outlines the objectives of the university, which include: fostering a capacity for independent critical thinking among its students and supporting and contributing to the realisation of national economic and social development. No mention is made regarding character development, active citizenship, student integration or contribution to society. However educational provision is adapting to these challenges and the four projects described here are exemplars of these changes.

### 3. Methodology

This paper is a conceptual paper, centring on four commonalities identified from four case studies. Yin (2009) identified three types of case studies: exploratory where the study is often a prelude to a further piece of social research; explanatory in terms of explaining causal relationships; and descriptive where theory or an analytical framework needs to be expanded to set the scene for further research work. Using this typology, the work presented in this article is a descriptive case study, based on four exemplars of education research and project work in Ireland. Rather than being an in-depth study of a particular case, this paper takes an exploratory stance to examine common characteristics’ across four individual cases of education projects and research. The cases were selected and invited to participate in a roundtable discussion at the Irish Aid Sustainable Global Development Conference. Each of the authors presented on their work, followed by an in-depth question and answer session with audience participants and the speaker panel.

Each of the four projects is explained in detail, including the operations of the project, their educational setting and an exemplar of typical work is presented. They are presented here in order to acknowledge commonality across the four cases, and to present a framework for understanding the complexities of the education system within which they work. The four projects are not selected using any sampling frame,

rather they were selected and invited to participate due to personal experience[3]. While the work of each project is to be acknowledged and praised within their specific setting and context, broader questions of their potential for success need to be investigated within the constraints of the Irish education system described previously. The learning from the four cases and projects presented here cannot be generalised; however this is not the aim of this paper. While the interpretative nature of case study research is often criticised as journalism, bland or weak (Nisbet and Watt, 1984; cited in Cohen *et al.*, 2007), it is precisely the interpretative and illustrative aspect of these case studies that enhance the conceptual nature of this paper. Through analysis, interpretation and discussion of the four projects, this paper identifies key features, common to all cases that enhance engagement with social justice. In the following section, we describe the four projects and their ongoing work.

#### 4. The four projects

In response to criticisms of Irish post-primary curriculum provision, Senior Cycle Education is currently undergoing a major review by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). Five key skills have been identified as central to teaching and learning across the curriculum at senior cycle; namely critical and creative thinking; communicating; working with others; information processing and being personally effective (NCCA, 2003). In April 2010, a period of national consultation on the development of junior cycle education began. A further six key skills have been identified as central to the development of curriculum at junior cycle; creating and innovating; using (and learning through) Information and Communications Technology; developing personally and socially; improving literacy and numeracy; behaving ethically; and taking leadership (NCCA, 2010). Furthermore the National Strategy for Higher Education recommends that “both undergraduate and taught postgraduate programmes should develop the generic skills needed for effective engagement in society and in the workplace” (DES, 2011, p. 8).

#### *Education for sustainable development (ESD)*

Sustainable development addresses broad social challenges and is more than a reliance on technological progress and development of alternative technologies. Many taken for granted behaviours and lifestyles actually maintain un-sustainability. UNESCO (2002) says:

[...] while sustainable development involves the natural sciences, policy and economics, it is primarily a matter of culture; it is concerned with the values people cherish and the ways in which we perceive our relationship with others and with the natural world (p. 8).

Education for sustainable development is defined as a “dynamic concept that encompasses a new vision of education that seeks to empower people of all ages to assume responsibility for creating and enjoying a sustainable future” (UNESCO, 2002, p. 5). It seeks to foster the values, behaviour and lifestyles for social change across the three arenas of sustainability, economy, environment and society. The primary focus is on developing ethical attitudes of rights and responsibilities in learners and engaging them in action for a sustainable world, while remaining cognisant of the globalised world – where communities and issues are international. UNESCO has taken the lead in promoting education for sustainable development at the international level through the current UN Decade for Education for Sustainable Development running from

2005-2014. The approach advocated by UNESCO (2005) is known as the strengths model, where each and every subject can make global concerns more explicit and work to re-orientate the education system. The Ubuntu Network supports teacher educators to integrate ESD perspectives into their professional practice through action research, capacity building and creating a disposition of engagement with global issues (Hogan, 2008). The Network began in 2005 as a Limerick based pilot project and has now grown to include 12 participating teacher education institutions and programmes in Ireland both at undergraduate and postgraduate level. The Ubuntu Network focuses on supporting teacher educators to carry out context-specific projects to explore ESD integration into their programmes and professional practice (Liddy and O'Flaherty, 2009). Every year the Network places a call for action research projects within teacher education, providing seed funding and research support for the work. The projects may take the form of reorientation of content and syllabi, or use of innovative pedagogies. Examples of reorientation of existing education provision include: home economics modules which introduce students to ethical and eco-friendly consumerism in relation to textiles and clothing; art and design programmes centred on themes of sustainability, shelter and materialism; and English pedagogy students who identify curriculum opportunities in the cultural context of texts which address themes such as gender, power and influence, and significance of race and class. Education for sustainable development is not just focused on knowledge and content, but also the need to examine personal identity, interpersonal skills and ethical maturity. Thus a number of capacity building projects have been implemented, including book and film clubs, and professional development days on ESD for teaching practice tutors. All of this work is showcased at annual Dialogue Day conferences and a collection of research reports was published in 2009 (Liddy and O'Flaherty, 2009).

#### *Moral reasoning*

Moral reasoning is concerned with making a decision regarding what course of action is best. Kohlberg's (1958) stage theory provides the framework for cognitive theory development in moral reasoning. He proposed three levels through which moral reasoning develops: pre-conventional, conventional, and post-conventional. Each stage represents a progressive shift in moral reasoning development where the primary concern is with the principle of justice. Kohlberg (1958) tried to quantify how justice and fairness were conceived in societal terms. Given the paucity of Irish based research on students' levels of moral reasoning, a longitudinal study was conducted investigating levels of moral reasoning in a convenience sample of students in an Irish university (O'Flaherty and Gleeson, 2009). This study reflects higher education institutions increasing interest in the development of social capital and the whole person. The study utilised Rest's five-story Defining Issues Test 2 (DIT2), an objective measure based on the principles of Kohlberg's Moral Judgement Interview, to identify the levels of moral reasoning of 682 first-year students at an Irish university to gather base-line data for a longitudinal study up to their graduation. The development of the Defining Issues Test (DIT) arose due to a combination of factors namely empirical findings and also significant concerns regarding Kohlberg's interview process and scoring procedures. The DIT presents 12 issues following a hypothetical dilemma, where a subject must rank, and rate in terms of their importance. Students tested represented six colleges within the university: Education; business; humanities; engineering; science and informatics and electronics, and were tested on three

occasions between 2002 and 2006. The relationships between levels of moral reasoning and certain independent variables were investigated. The students made impressive gains in levels of moral reasoning over the four years, consistent with the positive effects of higher and continued education on the development of moral reasoning identified internationally. However results indicated that Irish students' levels of moral reasoning are considerably lower than their international counterparts (O'Flaherty and Gleeson, 2009).

Research suggests that explicitly including moral content in the curriculum fosters growth of moral reasoning (Mayhew and King, 2008; D'Arcy-Garvey, 1988). Findings reported by Schlaefli *et al.* (1985) indicate that use of interventions involving both discussion of dilemmas and presentation of theoretical models of moral development produced moderate effect sizes and also an intervention that lasted anywhere from three to 12 weeks was ideal. Within the current academic year 2010/2011 a moral reasoning intervention is being undertaken (O'Flaherty and McGarr, 2011). The focus of the planned intervention is the development of moral reasoning ability. The methodology used is peer discussion of controversial moral dilemmas of classroom management issues. These dilemmas are used to challenge thinking, re-examine personal assumptions, argue in a logical manner and respond rationally to counter arguments. At the end, students will complete a reflective overview of their experience and analyse how they plan to apply their learning from this intervention to their future pedagogic strategies.

#### *Service learning*

Service learning is defined as "a teaching method that involves students performing community service in order to learn knowledge and skills connected to curricular objectives" (Billing, 2002, p. 3; cited in Mahoney and Schamber, 2004). This type of learning typically involves students performing community service in order to learn knowledge and skills linked to their programmes of study. Characteristics of service learning include critical reflection, civic values, community partnership and social change with the aim of developing greater levels of civic engagement. Civic engagement as an academic strategy seeks to engage students in activities that enhance academic learning, civic responsibility and the skills of citizenship, while also enhancing community capacity through service (Furco and Holland, 2004). The recent emergence of such initiatives in Irish higher education coincides with concern about a perceived decline in levels of social capital and a growing recognition of the role higher education can play in supporting civil society through proactive measures (OECD, 2004; cited in Tansey and Gonzalez-Perez, 2007; Putnam, 2000). The Community Knowledge Initiative (CKI), based at National University of Ireland, Galway (NUIG) seeks to reinvigorate the civic mission of higher education and instil in students a sense of social responsibility and civic awareness through the development of community based teaching and learning opportunities. The CKI aims to promote greater civic engagement through core academic activities, namely teaching, research and service at the levels of students, staff, courses, programmes and the institution as a whole. Through its key objectives the CKI seeks to create opportunities to integrate and relate theory to practice; enhance partnerships between the university and the wider community; increase the civic, academic, personal and professional capacity of students through experiential learning. The CKI facilitates greater connections between community and academia, where the community becomes both a teaching tool

and a partner. Currently there are over 25 service-learning modules available at undergraduate and postgraduate level at NUIG. Examples of service learning courses include: language acquisition in schools for students of Italian: occupational therapy students identifying emerging areas of practice in marginalised communities: learning to teach for social justice module in education. An example of a service learning module that is currently available to students is the “School’s Out” case study. Fourth year students enrolled in Speech and Language Therapy are offered the option of participating in a community outreach programme where they engage with a person with aphasia, which is a communication impairment effecting stroke patients. Rather than building a professional/client relationship this module encourages and scaffolds participants to engage and relate with the clients on a human level (see [www.nuigalwaycki.ie](http://www.nuigalwaycki.ie)).

In addition to curricular-based activities the CKI promotes co-curricular, non-formal learning opportunities through the ALIVE volunteering programme. ALIVE (A Learning Initiative and the Volunteering Experience) seeks to foster civic engagement, enhance student learning and serve community needs (Tansey and Gonzalez-Perez, 2007, p. 6). ALIVE was established by the CKI to harness, acknowledge and support the contribution that NUI Galway students make by volunteering. Established in September 2003, over 1,200 students have been recognised to date for their volunteering commitment within a variety of pathways including community and non-governmental organisations, through participation within societies and clubs, and mentoring first-year students through the Student Connect Programme.

#### *Civic engagement*

In order to nurture and cultivate citizenship in learners, it is necessary to provide them with the social tools necessary to develop as active citizens and facilitate them to participate fully in exercising responsibility for the condition of society. Civic competencies can be encouraged, taught and valued in educational settings. Young Social Innovators (YSI) is a programme designed to enable educators and empower young people to explore being part of a society and take actions that have a real impact on people’s lives. YSI began by Sr Stanislaus Kennedy as a small pilot programme in 2001 to encourage innovative responses to the emerging needs of Irish society (Gleeson *et al.*, 2008). Sr Stanislaus, influenced by her experiences at the Social Services Centre in Kilkenny, was “convinced of the need to provide the structures and systems whereby people can contribute to their community” (Gleeson *et al.*, 2008, p. 1) and established Focus Point (now Focus Ireland) helping people find, create and maintain a home.

The vision of YSI is to encourage young people’s passion to change the world for good, based on the belief that every young person has the passion, creativity and energy to make a real difference. It is now Ireland’s largest social awareness education and action programme, providing proven frameworks for meaningful civic engagement by young people (Young Social Innovators, n.d.). YSI involves young people (15-18 years) in action projects to improve the lives of others in their community. Underpinned by the values espoused in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, YSI promotes experiential learning, empowerment, respect, and innovation. The pedagogy of YSI is premised on the idea of “practice of social innovation” (introduced by Focus Ireland and based on a tested framework for social innovation learning, spanning over ten years). Key features of the pedagogy

utilised in this social awareness education and action programme include care (developing levels of understand and empathy around a topic); co-operate (working as a team, connecting and collaborating in partnership); change (innovation, youth led action to bring about change), and communicate (telling the story of your project). Issues addressed have included mental health, addiction, bullying, peer pressure, eating disorders, and internet safety. Local community concerns such as pollution, accessibility of public amenities, road safety and combating the isolation of older people. Participants present their projects and social enterprises at Regional Speak-Outs and at the Annual Showcase, and are judged by representatives of education institutions and relevant NGOs. One example of a YSI project is “The Mill Youth Café” completed by students representing Scoil Mhuire Gan Smal, Blarney Co. Cork. Through their research this YSI project team established the need for a youth café for young people in the Blarney area. The team approached the local Council and were donated a building for the purpose. The team made contacts with various organisations, local politicians, the Council and the local media and, through a successful grant application, the team secured funding towards building and renovating costs of the building. The team have signed up 30 volunteers to staff the café and have organised the training and Garda [police] vetting of all those signed up.

### 5. Four commonalities

Emerging from the roundtable discussions at the Irish Aid Conference (O’Flaherty *et al.*, 2009) four commonalities across these projects have been identified. These commonalities are defined in the following, and details of how each of the projects link to these areas are discussed.

#### *Critical thinking skills*

Education should challenge a student to think for themselves, and should not advocate any particular attitudes, or styles of thinking, but rather independent thinking. Piaget (1968) argues that in order to achieve principled levels of moral reasoning young people must move away from an egocentric orientation to a societal, community based perspective and finally to a principled method of resolving moral dilemmas. A key aspect of democratic citizenship is the capacity to move beyond one’s individual self-interest and to be committed to the well-being of some larger group which one is a member. Critical thinking is defined as:

That mode of thinking – about any subject, content, or problem – in which the thinker improves the quality of his or her thinking by skilfully taking charge of the structure inherent on thinking and imposing intellectual standards on them (Fasko, 1994, p. 4).

Empirical studies suggest that levels of moral reasoning increase with higher levels of educational attainment. “The critical characteristic of a college for promoting moral judgement seems to be a commitment to critical reflection” (Rest *et al.*, 1999a, p. 73). Critical reflection examines events from a broader social and political perspective. When post-conventional levels of moral reasoning are evident, an individual develops moral autonomy and avoids violating the rights of others, not because of fear of punishment or because it is against the law but because a conscience orientation towards universal principles of logic becomes the dominant process of thought. The person begins to appreciate that there must be some basis for establishing a

society-wide network of cooperation based on shared ideals, which are fully reciprocal and open to scrutiny. Sustainable development solutions and policy answers may change over time; thus the focus of teaching should not be placed on the knowledge but on developing skills and abilities. The UNECE (2005) Strategy for ESD demands the use of “systemic, critical and creative thinking and reflection in both local and global contexts” (p. 4), in order to develop critical engagement and understanding of the complexity and evolving nature of sustainable development concerns. Service learning provision can enhance students’ civic engagement, as it is framed by reflection and analysis. Eyler and Giles (1999) describe service learning as a cycle of action and reflection, which engages students in critical reflection and interrogation of their activities, essentially a structured time for a student to think, talk, or write about what the student did and saw during the activity (Meltzoff and Schroeder, 2004). The actual work of service learning can open students to new experiences and people, thus enriching their social capacities and the reflection opportunity can lead to a questioning of their assumptions and stereotypes (DeLuca *et al.*, 2004). The YSI programme is underpinned by the five key skills identified by the NCCA (2003), of which critical and creative thinking is one. Thus critical thinking is at the core of the YSI programme, which also provides opportunities for engagement with a broad range of social groups. The focus on personal effectiveness and critical thinking as key skills for teaching and learning in Senior Cycle Education (DeLuca *et al.*, 2004) is very positive in terms of the promotion of skills that will facilitate development of moral reasoning ability. Critical thinking skills underpin the work of each of the projects described in this paper; however this feature clashes with the competitive individualism (Lynch, 1989) described earlier.

#### *Active and participatory learning methods*

Promoting active citizenship is not just a matter of exhorting people to be more concerned, more selfless or more involved but rather requires institutional frameworks that make it possible and the provision of education and resources that make it practical (Honohan, 2004). The four projects described in this paper fulfil this aim by encouraging participation and empowerment, with an attendant sense of personal responsibility and efficacy. There have been growing concerns in Ireland in recent years regarding the extent to which people are prepared to be involved in their communities. Universities are providing students with opportunities to engage with social issues through service learning. Service learning allows students to learn and develop through active participation in thoughtfully organised service experiences that meet actual community needs. It enhances theory and content by extending student learning beyond the classroom and into the community, and helps foster the development of a sense of caring for others (Meltzoff and Schroeder, 2004). DeLuca *et al.* (2004) found that third level students engaged in service learning demonstrated collaboration with peers and colleagues.

Working together in a holistic manner is necessary to address issues of sustainable development, requires interdisciplinary capacity as well as interpersonal teamwork skills in order to achieve cooperative learning. Working together is important as it provides the capacity to recognise the diversity of human opinion, politics and values, all of which need to be respected but at times challenged in an appropriate manner. The UNECE Strategy for ESD (2005) identifies issues of equity, solidarity and interdependence, as well as relationships between humans and nature, and between

rich and poor as central to sustainable development. Following an independent evaluation of YSI, awareness/knowledge of people and issues; teamwork skills; communication skills; and self-confidence were identified as key learning outcomes of participation in the programme (Gleeson *et al.*, 2008). The young social innovators work in teams to identify a social issue that they believe they could help to change. They study the issue through research, meeting people affected, and relevant organisations, and then identify ways of improving the issue. Opportunities are organised throughout the year at local Speak Out Fora, which provide a platform to present their views to an invited audience. Key elements of the YSI framework include project work that is youth led and team-based, placing the young person at the centre of the learning process. The DIT is a measure of the development of concepts of social justice (Bebeau and Thoma, 2003). Essential for the facilitation of principled moral reasoning is the idea that moral obligations are to be based on mutual ideals, where meaning is shared and discussed openly (Rest *et al.*, 1999a, b). Debate and discussion of hypothetical issues or real-life dilemmas facilitates increases in levels of moral reasoning ability (Rest *et al.*, 1999a).

### *Knowledge skills*

Across the world, education finds itself at the centre of a set of global concerns about the future of the planet. The worldwide economic crisis adds to these concerns and increasingly education providers are being asked “not simply to teach students about these issues but to shape the next generation of creative problem solvers who can quite literally, ‘save the world’” (NCCA, 2010). Proposed Irish educational developments at both Junior and Senior Cycle (NCCA, 2003, 2010) as well as the National Strategy for Higher Education (DES, 2011) reflect the need to focus on education provision that can successfully meet the social, economic and cultural challenges that face us over the coming decades. Knowledge skills can no longer be the mere consumption and regurgitation of information and facts, which is a core feature of current Irish education provision (OECD, 1991; Gleeson, 1979). Education must move towards developing knowledge skills of evaluation, problem solving and information processing, and abilities to cope with ambiguity, uncertainty and risk. Knowledge skills need to move beyond awareness of social justice issues and towards understanding the context and the interconnectedness between issues, leading to assimilation and action.

Honohan (2004) makes the distinction between the “good” citizen and the “critically” engaged citizen, whose engagement may involve interrogating existing authority – which is reminiscent of Kohlberg’s Conventional levels of moral reasoning, based on questioning the status quo (Kohlberg, 1958). Gates (2006) contends that key ingredients in the development of moral abilities include clarity of conceptual understanding and interpersonal skills, “necessary for pro-social engagement in a democratic society” (p. 440). The YSI programme positions itself as a social justice action and education programme. Young people who participate in the programme develop knowledge of a specific social issue of concern to them. Using this knowledge they must then devise and implement an innovation response to their chosen social issue. Service learning provides students with opportunities to use newly acquired skills and knowledge in real-life situations in their own communities (Meltzoff and Schroeder, 2004). The ALIVE initiative is designed with the intention of developing conscious, culturally aware students who are able to communicate, collaborate and problem solve

effectively. DeLuca *et al.* (2004) suggest that students exposed to service learning are able to apply theoretical models to practice and therefore bridge the theory practice gap. Research suggests that service learning can help develop an ethic of service; civic attitudes; cognitive and social competencies and problem solving skills (Althof and Berkowitz, 2006).

In order to respond to the changing and transient nature of knowledge, where answers and solutions are open to revision and amendment, knowledge management skills need to be different. Education needs to re-orientate itself towards changing knowledge and be open to inputs and solutions from a variety of subjects. The Ubuntu Network has worked to develop interdisciplinary literacy, recognising that subject discipline boundaries are one of the causes of sustainability problems, and one of the major barriers in finding solutions to these problems. Interdisciplinary literacy centres on the acknowledgement of subject disciplines as a resource enabling learners to see the world in an interdisciplinary manner and utilise knowledge from different perspectives (Tormey *et al.*, 2009).

### *Social justice*

There is a critical need to address the disregard for social justice in Irish society, where poverty and poor health services were not successfully addressed during the economic boom (Moran, 2010). Furthermore these persistent inequalities are now amplified by the economic crisis, as many policy-makers disregard concepts of social responsibility towards their fellow citizens. It is imperative that education prepares students not only for professional working life, but also as responsible citizens and members of the community. The four projects described in this paper are centred by the concept of social justice. Both service learning and YSI action projects directly engage students with communities affected by issues of social justice. YSI was created to develop social awareness and activism among young people so that they become effective champions for social justice. YSI has introduced a flexible, curriculum-relevant framework for social awareness and action education, which can be used in second level schools, and other centres of education. It identifies working for social justice and caring for the community involving thinking, analysis, problem solving and taking action as essential elements of the YSI framework.

Service learning has been included in education provision to facilitate greater understanding and contextualisation of the specific needs of marginalised communities. Through engagement with these communities it provides undergraduates with opportunities to address these issues in relation to their professional practice. The UNECE Strategy for ESD (2005) acknowledges diverse themes such as poverty alleviation, gender equity, human rights, and democracy and governance, saying these issues need to be addressed in a holistic manner. This broad basis to ESD work gives it a strong knowledge basis, strengthened by the concept of social justice as well as advocating social and political change.

Increased levels of moral reasoning not only contribute to moral and ethical behaviour, but also engage the individual in thought processes centred on societal cooperation, cohesion and social justice. Each level and each stage of Kohlberg's theory of moral reasoning displays its own distinctive method of interpreting and understanding social justice (Kohlberg, 1969). Individuals must not only be able and facilitated to engage in principled moral reasoning; they must also be able to translate their moral reasoning ability into concrete ethical actions and behaviours (Rest *et al.*,

1999a). The relationship between moral action and moral reasoning is complex; however principled moral reasoning is a prerequisite for moral action (Bebeau, 2002; Thoma, 1994). Moral reasoning development and ESD facilitate cognitive skills for engagement with issues of social justice.

## 6. Conclusion

Ranson states that a society facing a period of structural change requires individuals to acquire new skills to contribute to civil society.

Society can only develop through learning and the learning needs to be public learning shared through institutions of democratic governance [...] only if learning is placed at the centre of our experience will individuals continue to develop their capacities, institutions be enabled to respond openly and imaginatively to change, and the differences within and between communities become a source of reflective understanding (Ranson, 1998, p. 253).

This quote illustrates many of the arguments made in this paper. Projects, which facilitate social justice education, and action, are contrasted with a system dominated by institutions lacking democratic ethos. The Irish education system does not reflect constructivist approaches to teaching and learning, as it is a conservative system and does not respond easily to change. Additionally it is strongly consensualist and un-acknowledging of difference within and between communities. The prevalence of consensualism militates against critical thinking while competitiveness and individualism militate against moral development. These core features of the Irish education system are outlined in this paper - taken cumulatively, these distinctive features could undermine the good work and innovation of the four projects described previously. In addition none of the projects described are core or mandatory to education provision in Ireland, which enhances their peripherality.

Although different in their knowledge base and in operational approaches, the four projects described here share a common goal and purpose; namely “educating engaged citizens”. All of the projects described here make positive contributions to civic and social engagement in both post-primary and university level education, acknowledging education as central to active citizenship, social awareness and responsibility, and the empowerment of learners. The commonalities identified in this paper offer a practical “snap shot” of educating engaged citizens, ready and capable of addressing global concerns. They align with the vision of Irish post-primary and higher education as outlined by the NCCA (2003, 2010) and DES (2011) in terms of educating young people and professionals with a heightened sense of social responsibility and leadership in light of global and economic recession.

The commonalities identified across the four projects are based on real-world examples of Irish education innovation and change. They are presented in stark contrast to the dominant features of Irish education provision, but hopefully they offer a way forward for Irish education especially as they are in alignment with policy initiatives. It could be argued that these four commonalities need to be addressed in educational provision, in order to challenge the prevailing ethos evident in the Irish education system. The commonalities identified, through interpretation and illustration, are presented as replicable aspects of an education that educates and develops engaged citizens.

**Notes**

1. Two public examinations set by the State Examinations Commission are taken by Irish post-primary students – the Junior Certificate (age 15-16) and the Leaving Certificate (age 17-18).
2. The post-primary school span is predominantly a six-year cycle, taken by ages 12 to 18. The terms Junior Cycle and Senior Cycle are commonly used to signify lower secondary and upper secondary.
3. Each of the projects were known to each other; in fact the first author had worked on three projects during the past three years.

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### Further reading

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### About the authors

Joanne O'Flaherty completed her PhD research project, studying levels of moral reasoning in an undergraduate population of an Irish university, the influences, implications and effects of such research using the Defining Issues Test. She holds an undergraduate degree in Physical Education and English from the University of Limerick. Joanne worked as a Post-primary Teacher before returning to fourth level education. She currently works for the Department of Education and Professional Studies, Faculty of Education and Health Sciences, University of Limerick, Ireland. Joanne O'Flaherty is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: [joanne.oflaherty@ul.ie](mailto:joanne.oflaherty@ul.ie)

Mags Liddy is Research Associate with the Ubuntu Network, based at the University of Limerick, Ireland. She holds a Master's degree in Equality Studies from University College Dublin and worked as sociology lecturer at St Catherine's College of Education. Her research interests include social and political movements for change, education for sustainable development, and interdisciplinary approaches to sustainability.

Lorraine Tansey is the Student Volunteer Coordinator of the Community Knowledge Initiative with responsibility for the ALIVE Programme. She graduated from NUI Galway in 2004 with a BA in Legal Science and Sociological & Political Studies and completed her LLB in 2005. Lorraine's areas of interest currently include student participation on campus, international volunteering opportunities and volunteer management.

Cathy Roche is Education Manager with Young Social Innovators based in Dublin.

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