

The Ability of Education to Build Bridges in a Post Conflict Scenario and the Role Technology-Enabled Education Can Play

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Abstract

This paper is a story rather than an academic paper. It is a story of the victory of peace and collaboration over violence and conflict. It is the story of a community's commitment to making life better for new generations and how the Blossoms connection and technology-enabled education can play a role in this. It is the story of a community putting differences into a different paradigm – not ignoring them but rather embracing them and celebrating them. It is a story of respecting and celebrating difference and diversity. It is a living history story. It remains to be seen whether there is a happy ending, but the story thus far is worth telling.

1. Introduction

I welcome the opportunity to share with you the background to and structure of the Lisanelly Shared Education Campus (LSEC). I will outline the context within which the campus was developed and how the developing relationship with MIT BLOSSOMS will enhance its effectiveness as a bridge builder in a post conflict scenario. In particular, Technology-Enabled Education (TEE), which will be delivered primarily through our proposed “School of Making”, will greatly enhance both the teaching and the learning experience at Lisanelly. The BLOSSOMS connection will also facilitate both teachers and students in reaching out to and learning from the wider world cultural community, a process which will be beneficial to all parties.

We would see the relationship with BLOSSOMS as an initial stepping stone to having teachers and students in Omagh become more familiar and comfortable with TEE. We would also see the campus developing relationships with other programmes which, like BLOSSOMS, would expand the range of benefits delivered to the project at Lisanelly.

2. Background

“The Troubles” in Northern Ireland lasted for more than 30 years from 1969. During that time more than 3,000 people were killed and countless more were injured, and live with their injuries to this day. It is not my intention to try to explain the complex background to the conflict. There

are many excellent publications which will do this, if anyone is interested to read further on the subject.

However, I do wish to relate a little background just to serve as a context to the Lisanelly project.

Omagh has been a British Army garrison town since the mid 1800's. During the Troubles, in the 1970's, the military strength of the town was more than doubled. Notwithstanding that there was a significant military presence in the town, Omagh was relatively peaceful during the period, with little trouble between the communities.

At 2.30 on the afternoon of Saturday, 15th August 1998, a number of bomb warnings were received by a Northern Ireland TV station and a volunteer worker with a charity organisation *The Samaritans*. The warnings said variously:

“Bomb Courthouse Omagh, Main Street, 500 pound explosion, 30 minutes”
“This is a bomb warning, a bomb will go off in the centre of Omagh in 30 minutes.....about 200 yards up from the courthouse.....High Street, the main street”

A dissident terrorist codeword was given.

What we know from these warnings is that the bombers were not locals. They did not know Omagh, for there is no “Main Street” in Omagh. There is a short section of street called High Street, which is located close to the Courthouse. The real town centre in Omagh is centred round a street called Market Street which links to High Street and the courthouse.

The police officer to whom these warnings were communicated assessed, given the content of the various warnings, that there was a bomb in the general area of the courthouse and that this was the main area to be cleared. Police began *“to make a sterile area around the courthouse and then start pushing everybody back down, away from the courthouse, towards Market Street”*. Based on the information to hand this appeared to be a sensible approach. Shortly before the bomb was due to go off, the area around the courthouse was cleared to the extent that it resembled a ghost town.

Sadly, this apparently sensible course of action was one that herded people away from safety and directly into the location of the bomb. At 3.04 on a sunny August afternoon the bomb exploded and carnage ensued. The bomb killed eleven children, twelve women and unborn twins and six men. Two of the children were Spanish and the victims included Protestants, Catholics and a Mormon. The Omagh bombing was the worst single atrocity of the entire 30 year “Troubles”.

In July 1997, nearly 30 years after the start of the Troubles, the Provisional IRA called a cessation of violence. Extensive negotiations followed culminating in the ***Good Friday Agreement*** of 10th April 1998. This is an agreement between the British and Irish Governments that includes, inter alia, the following provisions:

- Northern Ireland's future should be determined by majority vote;
- All parties will use exclusively peaceful and democratic means;

- An NI Assembly with devolved powers be set up along with a power-sharing Executive;
- A British-Irish Council and a British-Irish inter-governmental Conference be established;
- Release within 2 years of paramilitary prisoners of organisations on ceasefire;
- A 2 year target for decommissioning of paramilitary weapons;
- Republic of Ireland to abolish it's constitutional claim to NI;
- New legislation on policing, human rights and equality

Following the Omagh bombing and the outrage it caused, various other dissident terrorist groups announced ceasefires. Ironically, the Omagh bombing acted as a catalyst for the acceleration of the peace process and a significant reduction in military activity all leading to a further agreement, the ***Hillsborough Agreement***, in April 1999.

As part of the Hillsborough Agreement, the British Government undertook to hand over various redundant military barracks to the Northern Ireland Executive.....and thus the story of the ***Lisanelly Shared Education Campus*** began!

3. New Schools and New Ideas for Omagh

Omagh is a town of some 25,000 population but with a rural hinterland and catchment for the market town of some 50,000 persons. There are various organisations that are involved in the delivery of 2nd level post primary education in Northern Ireland. In most cases, schools are faith based around Catholic and Protestant education. Within these genres, there is a further delineation between schools with an “academic” approach to education, known as Grammar Schools, and schools with a more comprehensive approach to education.

Some local school operators, from both traditions, recognised the upcoming decommissioning of the substantial lands associated with the military barracks at Lisanelly as a potential location for new schools, in order to replace substandard accommodation. In the early stages the idea was for a co-location of schools with no intention or indeed thought of introducing any “shared” element. However, when the possibility arose that the British Government would “gift” the lands to the NI Executive for the development of a “shared education campus”, the idea of exploring this concept began to develop.

There are currently 7 post primary schools in the Omagh area catering for some 4,500 pupils. A new “Integrated School” where Protestant and Catholic pupils are educated together, was established about 5 years ago in a new build facility. While this is a very popular school, for some in the community the idea of “integrating education” is still a step too far. However, the idea of shared education, where each school retains its own individuality and ethos in a shared environment is a concept that is more achievable in the short term. Thus the proposed campus is being developed to cater for some 3,700 pupils in a variety of school types. This includes a “Special School and Resource Centre” catering for children from 4 – 19 who have both moderate and severe learning difficulties. Including this school fulfils another Departmental policy of increasing the integration between such schools and mainstream schools.

When approached by the school operators in the Omagh area, the Department of Education, Northern Ireland, supported by the Strategic Investment Board, recognised the unique opportunity to develop a state of the art Campus to deliver the educational needs of children from all communities within the Omagh area, through collaboration, co-operation and interdependence between participating schools, and the beneficial use such a facility could have for the wider community.

In 2010 a budget of £3m. was set aside for the development of a Masterplan for the campus and Exemplar Designs for the participating individual schools. It was at this stage that I was appointed Programme Director to drive the project forward.

4. The Shared Education Campus Concept

Following consultation with many different stakeholders, the following **Principles of Sharing** were identified and formed the basis for the development of a Campus Masterplan:

- Each participating school has a core building where its own ethos and individuality is nurtured and developed;
- Pupils during Key Stage 3 (KS3), 11-14 years, receive almost all of their education within their core institution;
- Pupils at KS4 and KS5 receive a substantial part of their education in the shared facilities;
- Each participating school donates a % of its new build entitlement (i.e. the gross floor area it is entitled to in a stand-alone new build) into the “shared element” of the campus;
- Sharing is only proposed where it has an educational benefit.

Consideration of all of the above principles led to the development of the “shared schools” where economies of scale allowed the designers to propose facilities which could not be delivered if any school were to act on an individual basis.

The Shared Schools proposed are:

- **The School of Activity**

A centre of excellence for the teaching of sports, fitness and lifestyle;

- **The School of Performance**

A centre of excellence for the teaching of music, dance, art, design, drama and media studies;

- **The School of Making**

A centre of excellence for the teaching of science, technology & design, and engineering.. It is in this school that the benefits flowing from the BLOSSOM Connection and TEE will have the greatest impact

These subject groupings were proposed because they have synergies and the intention is to create dynamic hubs which will develop into ***Centres of Excellence*** for the teaching of these groups of subjects.

For more background to the project and for a 3D Visualisation of how the Masterplan design has been developed you can follow the following links:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LjUCABc5l3c>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2ygVvyI6Prs>

5. LSEC and MIT BLOSSOMS

It was in considering how to develop a ***Centre of Excellence*** for the teaching of the STEM subjects in the School of Making that led me to make contact with MIT..... which has led to me being here today!

As Programme Director I feel it is my responsibility to bring as much additionality to the campus project as possible, almost as a reward to the community's faith in, and ongoing commitment to, the project. I am only too aware of the importance of the STEM subjects to local, national and global economies and the importance for today's students to have a good grounding in those subjects.

While there is already an excellent standard of teaching of these subjects in NI, there is always room for improvement, and linking with a prestigious organisation such as MIT, through the BLOSSOMS Programme, and through them linking the young people and teachers of Omagh to a global network of young people and teachers, can only bring benefits. The idea that the School of Making has a link to MIT BLOSSOMS may also attract more young people in the area to study the STEM subjects and this can only be good for the local economy.

There are a number of important strands to the role that MIT BLOSSOMS can play in the LSEC including:

- Reinforcing the importance of strong STEM teaching and learning at the campus;
- The programme will be the mechanism for bringing together STEM teachers from the different schools to learn about MIT BLOSSOMS and to learn a new active, problem-based teaching, that is the BLOSSOMS pedagogy;

- Bringing together STEM teachers from the various campus schools and encouraging them to work together in teams to develop their own BLOSSOMS lessons, thus introducing the idea of “team teaching” to the shared campus;
- The “lessons” created by the LSEC STEM teachers will be added to the BLOSSOMS website and shared globally, thus presenting a new, united face to the world;
- Through BLOSSOMS, connecting the LSEC teachers to other teachers around the world;
- Through BLOSSOMS, connecting LSEC students to other students around the world and facilitating them becoming more familiar with other cultures;
- Through BLOSSOMS, both teachers and students will gain access to additional TEE resources at MIT and will be encouraged to access other quality TEE resources available online.

We are at the very early stages of the development of this relationship but I am confident that it will be positive not just for the young people and teachers at LSEC, but for all BLOSSOM partners, worldwide, who will have the opportunity to engage with the young people and the educational workforce of Omagh.

6. Community Support

On being appointed, one of my first tasks was to carry out a public consultation exercise to “test the temperature” of community support for the project. We asked the community very direct questions as to their support for the project. I’m not sure what we would have done if they had said no, but in any event they didn’t! We asked them what sort of subjects might be shared, we asked them whether retaining ethos was important, we asked whether sharing might be different depending on the age of pupils.

The positive response was overwhelming, and this has continued through further public consultation exercises we have carried out and indeed through the ongoing public consultation via our website omaghisanellycampus.org. (A copy of a typical questionnaire is contained at the end of the document.) The outcome of this public consultation exercise formed the basis on which we moved forward to develop the shared education campus concept and the Masterplan for the development.

We were very keen to engage with the youth of Omagh in particular, as they were the people who would be most affected by the proposed development – either directly or through their siblings, or as “future parents” of children who would attend the campus.

Interestingly, where we had some 70% support amongst the general community, the support for the project amongst young people is consistently well in excess of 90%, and the 10% of young people who are not supportive are not in fact anti the project but rather are attendees at the local integrated school who received a new build in the last 5 years at another location, so can’t actually be part of the campus in terms of a building presence. Their lack of support is actually a reflection of their disappointment at not being able to be a central part of the campus per se.

You might be interested to view a local youth production relating to the project:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c1_LtidUrVA

When the idea of linking with MIT BLOSSOMS Programme with first mooted in the community there was an overwhelmingly positive response. The chance to be part of such a global Technology – Enabled Education initiative has galvanised those who have supported the project from the outset and in particular those who see that the delivery of education has, thankfully, moved on from the stale rote learning approach.

7. Conclusion

The LSEC is a challenging project, mostly because it proposes changes to the established way of doing things educationally. Northern Ireland has a good reputation in the delivery of education so some may feel that “if it’s not broken, don’t fix it”. But the fact is that, in the interests of continuing the development of a peaceful and integrated community, things in the area of education in NI need to change. It is proposed at Government level to use the Lisanelly Shared Education Campus as a model for the delivery of a number of shared education projects across NI.

The availability of Technology – Enabled Education is a huge opportunity for students and teachers alike . I believe that linking with MIT BLOSSOMS will be a symbiotic relationship for LSEC and BLOSSOMS partners. The Minister for Education in NI, Mr. John O'Dowd, recognised the potential in this partnering arrangement straight away and it is with his enormous support that I am here today.

I look forward to working with MIT BLOSSOMS and its partners to bring the very best educational opportunities to the young people and education workforce of Omagh, and indeed I look forward to reporting to future LINC Conferences on the progress we will have made.

Lisanelly Shared Educational Campus

"An investment in the future of Omagh's children"

Feedback form

June/July 2010

This project involves the redevelopment of a former military barracks into a shared education campus for up to 6 post primary schools in the Omagh area. The co-location of all schools on a single site will increase opportunities for collaboration and sharing of facilities. As this is a project for the entire community in Omagh, it is important that local views and suggestions are shared and where possible incorporated into the design and master planning process. Please let us have your views and opinions by filling in this questionnaire.

1. Do you support in principle the development of the Lisanelly Shared Education Campus?

strongly support support don't support unsure

2. Do you consider it is important to preserve the individual ethos and identity of the schools on the site?

strongly agree agree don't agree unsure

3. Would you support the shared teaching between schools of some subjects for older pupils (15+) to ensure they have access to a greater variety of subject areas e.g. languages, sports, drama, etc?

strongly support support don't support unsure

4. (a) Would you support the sharing of some key facilities between schools on the campus?

strongly support support don't support unsure

(b) If yes please tick which areas you believe could be shared.

Sports facilities Library Information Technology

Multi Purpose Hall Careers Suite Drama/Lecture/Dance

Medical Support facilities Dining/Catering facilities

Other. Please state _____

5. The Design Team will also look at whether some of the shared facilities on the campus can be used by the community outside of school hours. Would you support these facilities being made available to the local community?

yes no don't know

6. Please indicate which school(s) you are associated with now, in the past, expect to be in the future?

Loreto Convent Omagh Academy Christian Brothers

Sacred Heart Omagh High School Arvalee Resource Centre

Other. Please State _____ None.

7. Are you a

parent/guardian member of school staff

pupil other. Please State _____

8. Are there any specific comments that you may have in relation to this project or have you any ideas for facilities that you would like to see on this campus?

Thank you

Please place your feedback form in the box beside the exhibition display. If you wish to post the form, please send it to LSEC FEEDBACK, C/o LSEC Project Office, Western Education & Library Board, 1 Hospital Road, Omagh, Co Tyrone, BT79 0A. You can also submit comments by email to lisanellyfeedback@sibni.org. Closing date for submission of questionnaires is 16th July.