SEDA Conference: Report

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This conference was held in Dublin Castle and was hosted by SEDA and AISHE on the 11th and 12th of April. It offered delegates and presenters a wide range of sessions and as usual choice was difficult!

As we were presenting a paper it was only possible to attend five sessions/workshops in addition to the keynote and the final plenary.

The first session examined support for high quality and scholarly e-learning. It produced an interesting debate and explored whether there were real differences between e-learning and face to face learning. Opinion was divided – but it is clear that it is easier to identify shortcomings in online courses as they are likely to be more public than the traditional environment. The debate was useful; however, the rather large group meant that the discussion did not develop in any depth.

The next session explored the use of an e-portfolio to develop reflective dialogue. The presentation included extracts from students dialogue over a period of time. It also considered the distinction between reflecting on something and being reflexive. It argued that it is possible to be good at reflecting on a particular issue without being reflexive – the term reflexive used for the self-aware. It was a most useful session in that it linked into the teaching on one of the Social Science modules – the handouts will be returned to for more in-depth perusal.

The workshop on 'Stimulating and supporting change through Action Mazes' demonstrated the use of an 'action maze' developed at De Montfort university. It encouraged a lot of interaction and participation. It was enjoyed by all but, perhaps most importantly, it stimulated a useful and interesting discussion on how this approach could be used in a range of decision-making situations. The action maze consisted of a set of about a hundred cards each with a set of different decisions related to a case study. The participants were invited to read the case study and then use the cards to select a particular response. The chosen response led to a new card with a set of options … and so on. The case study used was based on a student undertaking a course in teaching and learning in higher education and used a particular dilemma in relation to this student. The action maze allowed the participants to explore how they responded to this student's dilemma and also how one set of choices impacts on the options that then become available. The action maze takes quite a long time to develop (50-60 hours) and it needs to be used in conjunction with other activities. However, it did seem to offer a structured way of exploring decision making in a range of settings – and may well be worth developing for a staff development exercises that are 'recyclable'. Website: www.doceo.co.uk/mentmaze_web/

The session on supporting learning choosing different modes of support offered an opportunity of exploring how different media of communicating (face to face, telephone and email) with students requires different types of communication styles. It was a workshop that required the participants to engage in these different forms of communication with an imaginary student – and the plenary explored the need for the tutor to recognise the need for positive comments as well as constructive criticism of work submitted.

A seminar on 'Developing evidence based activities to enhance employability' explored the need for embedding employability with the curriculum – especially when dealing with students from less advantaged backgrounds. It focused on an evaluation of a research study undertaken at

London University; however, it did not really explore any activities – so was a little disappointing for those who had hoped for some useful suggestions!

The final plenary session examined the value of problem based learning: 'Telling tales: supporting problem-based learning through a community of learners'. The presenters (including three students) came from Dublin Institute of Technology and demonstrated a model of developing problem based learning and exemplified different stages of the model through inputs by two lecturers and three students. It inspired many of us to go away and think more seriously about the value of problem based learning!

In addition to the formal sessions there were also a range of posters and displays by booksellers which allowed for examination of books and journals relevant to teaching and learning.