

# **How do I improve support and training for etutors in the Teagasc eCollege?**

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Master in Science in Education and Training  
Management (ICT)**

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## **Assessment Declaration**

**I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme of study leading to the award Master in Science in Education and Training Management is entirely my own work and has not been taken from the work of others save and to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my own work.**

**Signed:** \_\_\_\_\_

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**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

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I would like to express my gratitude to Teagasc Management for giving me the opportunity to take on this field of study.

I would like to thank my fellow classmates in the ICT stream as they were always open to share their knowledge and experiences.

Finally, I sincerely thank my family and friends and in particular my fiancé Andrew for their support and patience throughout this process.

## **Abstract**

This study investigates the development of a FETAC accredited etutor training programme and the provision of support for etutors in the Teagasc eCollege.

Thirty one etutors participated in a blended etutor training programme. This programme was evaluated by the trainer and the participants. Information from these evaluations was compiled with online questionnaire results, emails from etutor trainers in the UK and USA, in order to identify the training needs of etutors and to establish the content of specifications for a new etutor training programme. The Teagasc Curriculum and Quality Assurance unit was involved in collaboration with Teagasc eCollege staff in this process.

A resource pack was developed to provide etutors with essential information and guidelines for etutoring in the Teagasc Virtual Learning Environment. The resource pack will be updated on a yearly basis and will be available in an online format to etutors. An online discussion forum was facilitated to provide new etutors with support and guidance after their first experience of etutoring. This mode of support proved very successful and will be implemented to provide some of the formal training in the future.

An action research approach was used as it allowed the trainer-researcher to explore the key question: How do I improve support and training for etutors in the Teagasc eCollege? The new training programme establishes a standard for etutor practice and will provide skills, knowledge and competencies for effective etutor practice in a knowledge based society.

## **Abbreviations**

CQA	Curriculum and Quality Assurance
eLearning	Electronic Learning
EU	European Union
FETAC	Further Education and Training Awards Council
HETAC	Higher Education and Training Awards Council
ICT	Information and communication technology
MLE	Managed Learning Environment
VLE	Virtual Learning Environment

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# Chapter One

## Introduction and Context

### 1.1 Background

Teagasc is the state body with responsibility for providing education, research and advisory services for the Agri- Food sector and in the mission statement as defined in the Statement of Strategy for Teagasc 2005-2007 (2005:5) is:

To generate and apply new knowledge for the sustainable development of agriculture and the food processing industry to enable it to respond profitably to consumer demands and requirements and contribute to a vibrant rural economy and society.

A number of state agencies including Teagasc implemented new elearning initiatives in adherence to European Union objectives in the Lisbon Agreement and the Copenhagen Declaration. At the Lisbon European Council held in March 2000, the Government and the heads and states set the European Union a major strategic goal in eLearning and ICT integration. The objective was for the European Union to “become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-driven economy in the world, capable of sustaining economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion” (WWW1). A comprehensive eEurope Action Plan was subsequently developed to encompass national initiatives with the Commission’s eEurope strategy in training and education. Four main lines of action for eLearning in the knowledge-based society of the European Union were established:

- Equipment: High quality infrastructure to access outside and local networks for schools, vocational training centres and private industry particularly SMEs is required;
- Training at all levels: Training is needed at all levels as technology will impact pedagogical approach, structure and content of education and training and will shape a new learning environment;
- Development of good quality multimedia services and contents: The educational multimedia industry will be strengthened and funded in order to successfully incorporate information technology into the education and training sector;
- Development and networking of centres for acquiring knowledge: Teaching and learning centres will be transformed into centres for acquiring knowledge which are versatile and accessible to everyone and also equipping and training their teachers.

The Copenhagen Declaration (WWW2) in 2002 prioritised vocational education and training and aimed to:

Increase voluntary co-operation in vocational education and training, in order to promote mutual trust, transparency and recognition of competencies and qualifications, thereby establishing a basis for increasing mobility and facilitating access to lifelong learning.

The Commission of European Communities (2006) presented its eGovernment Action Plan (WWW3) which is a central tenet of the i2010 initiative for employment and progression in an information-based society. The action plan has five major objectives:



- Inclusion for all citizens in this initiative;
- Efficiency and effectiveness in government services;
- Implementing key services, improving access to services;
- Strengthening participation and decision-making in a democracy.

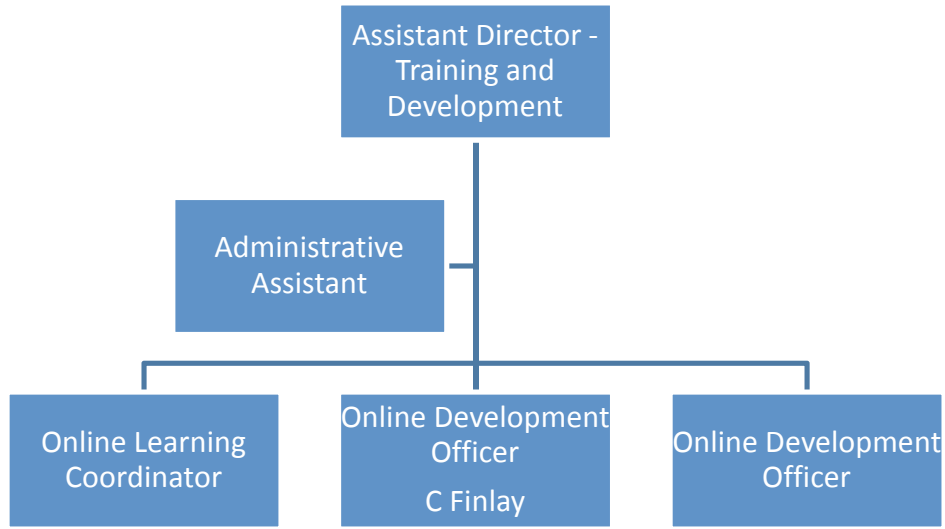
In compliance with the EU objectives for the Lisbon Agreement and the Copenhagen Declaration, Teagasc initiated a number of strategies to underpin the e-services to Teagasc clients, including the establishment of an eCollege in November 2005. In the Teagasc Statement of Strategy 2005-2007 (2005:13), it is planned to expand the range and scope of eLearning programmes delivered by the Teagasc eCollege.

Training schemes administered by Teagasc are accredited by The Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC). In June 2001, FETAC was established by the Qualifications Act 1999 and is the national awarding body for all vocational education and training in Ireland. The act requires FETAC to make awards and determine the standards of knowledge, skills and competence to be acquired by the learner for making an award (FETAC 2006). All education providers accredited by FETAC are compelled to comply with the Quality Assuring Assessment policy, which sets down the procedure and policy for fair and consistent assessment. The Teagasc Curriculum and Assurance Unit was hence established to monitor and verify all Teagasc assessments in line with FETAC procedures

## **1.2 Context**

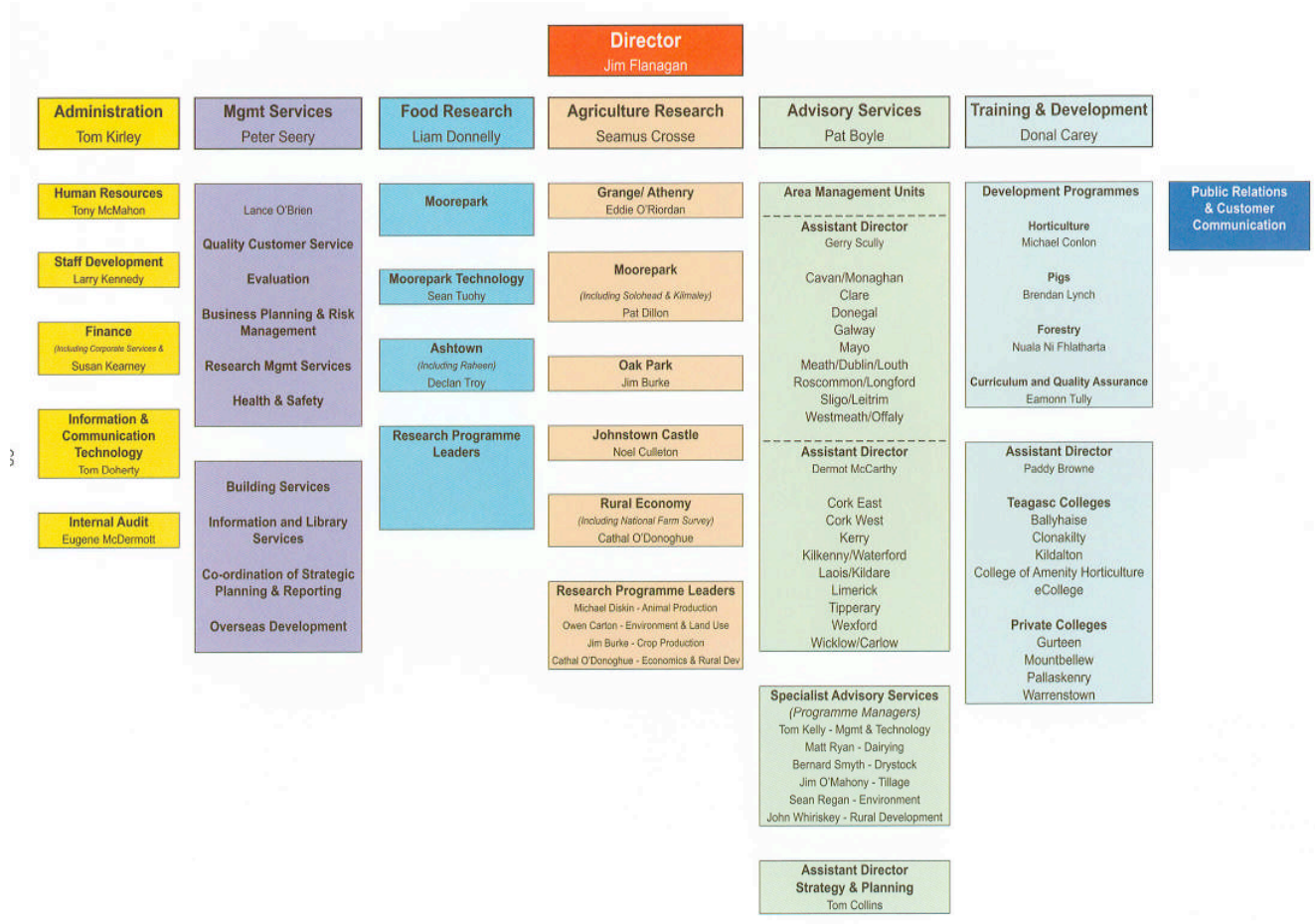
In 2002, Teagasc staff based at the then Curriculum Development Unit investigated a number of Virtual Learning Environments (VLE) in a selection process to identify an appropriate model of an online training platform to deliver the Teagasc programmes. As Teagasc did not have the resources available to design and develop an online training platform, external providers of online learning environments were evaluated. Carmarthenshire College in Wales which offered a well designed VLE and provided technical support for a modest fee was selected to deliver the Teagasc online training programmes. Teagasc introduced a pilot online training programme for the 180 hours agricultural programme. This programme consists of two courses- the Level 5 Special Purpose Certificate in Animal and Crop Production and the Level 6 Specific Purpose Certificate in Farm Business. This pilot programme has run for three years with enrolment numbers doubling each year, from 40 participants in 2003, 80 participants in 2004, and 160 in 2005.

In November 2005, the Teagasc eCollege was officially launched and staff was recruited to develop and deliver online training programmes. There are over four hundred students registered on the VLE in 2006 and it is intended to increase this number as other training programmes will be delivered in an online format online in the future. The Teagasc Assistant Director of Education and Training is currently the acting principal of the eCollege and is supported by two development officers and an online learning co ordinator with a clerical officer to provide administrative support (Figure 1.1).



**Figure 1.1 Teagasc eCollege Staff Structure**

The Teagasc eCollege operates in collaboration with agricultural and horticultural training colleges within the Teagasc organisation structure (Figure 1.2). The colleges provide facilities for practical skills training and face to face sessions with eCollege students. The colleges are located all over Ireland which provides easy access for students. The delivery of the online programmes are facilitated by tutors the majority of whom are Teagasc staff that contribute their services on an intermittent basis to the eCollege in addition to their existing job demands as teachers in agricultural colleges and agricultural enterprise advisors.



**Figure 1.2 Teagasc Organisational Structure**

### **1.3 The Researcher's field of practice**

I had been employed by Teagasc in the agricultural training sector since 1996, lecturing in both Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC) and Further Education and Awards Council (FETAC) accredited courses. My involvement with online training was initiated by participation in the pilot delivery of online agricultural training as an etutor. In November 2005, I was recruited as an Online Development Officer in the Teagasc eCollege with responsibility for etutor training.

Action Research, a research methodology, facilitates the self-study of my practice as an etutor trainer. McNiff (2002) refers to action research as an enquiry that a practitioner conducts into their own practice. I have used action research in this study to understand and develop the provision of support and training to etutors. Data was gathered to establish the need for improvement of etutor training. Following collaboration with fellow colleagues in Teagasc and other sectors, new actions were implemented to bring about a change in my practice. Validation procedures were in place throughout this research to ensure the validity of my claim. I will provide evidence of my learning and the learning of others using living education theory as a result of the transformation of practice in this enquiry. Action research and living education theory are both established and legitimised as recognised research methodologies at Masters-level work at the School of Education

Studies, Dublin City University (Fitzpatrick, 2004, Williams 2004) and at doctoral level at the University of Bath (Farren 2005)

#### **1.4 The aims of the dissertation**

The aim of this study is to improve the support and training for etutors in the Teagasc eCollege, which in the future will enhance the skills, competencies and knowledge base of etutors. The objectives of the research are:

- To establish the training needs of the Teagasc eCollege tutors;
- To develop course specifications for an accredited etutor training course and to identify a pedagogical approach for training etutors;
- To pilot the delivery of online support and mentoring for new etutors in an online learning environment.

#### **1.3 The content of the dissertation**

Chapter Two assesses the current literature regarding elearning. Online learning environments and delivery of training in an online learning environment will be investigated. The roles, competencies and training requirements for etutors will be analysed in order to evaluate the role of the Teagasc etutor. Case studies will be used as reference to establish best practice in the industry for training etutors.

Chapter Three details an overview of the research approach and methodologies. I will discuss my reasons for choosing action research as the methodology for my

study and in particular the Living Education Theory. I will then detail the elements of the action research planner that I have been used as a strategy for my study.

Chapter Four describes the two action research stages that I undertook in this study. The action research planner will be used to present the process of inquiry for each cycle. Action research cycle one involves the delivery of the existing training programme to new etutors. Action research cycle two shows the progression of my learning and the mechanisms I initiated to improve support and training for etutors.

Chapter Five summarises the main findings of my study. Problems and restrictions that I encountered in carrying out this research will be discussed. Both action research cycles will be assessed and evaluated. Recommendations for the future support and training of etutors in the Teagasc eCollege will be stated.

# Chapter Two

## Literature Review

### 2.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to assess the current literature regarding elearning and to identify the role of the etutor in the online learning environment. eLearning will be defined and modes and features of elearning systems will be investigated. Virtual Learning Environments will be explained and the future developments in this field of elearning will be detailed. The roles, competencies and training requirements for etutors will be analysed in order to evaluate the role of the Teagasc etutor. Case studies will also be presented to establish best practice in the industry for training etutors.

### 2.2 eLearning

In the last ten years, significant progress has been made in integrating information and communication (ICT) technologies into electronic learning (elearning) environments. The Joint Information Systems Committee (WWW4) describe eLearning as learning that is facilitated through the use of ICT involving the use of electronic equipment such as digital cameras, mobile phones and online communication tools such as email or discussion forums. Totkov (2003:3) defines eLearning as

A contemporary form of DE (distance education) that enhances teachers and students to communicate by the intermediary of synchronous and asynchronous audio, video, text, and/or graphics in a hypermedia environment.



eLearning providers assert elearning have a number of advantages:

- Access to information on a global scale;
- Flexibility in learning: any time, any place;
- Consistency in teaching content and standards;
- Customised training adapted to specific training needs;
- Competitive advantage.

Bonk et al. (2004:71) contend that the online environment offers permanence which can “foster student self reflection on their conceptual learning as well as instructor evaluation of the effectiveness of various online teaching techniques”.

### **2.2.1 Modes of eLearning**

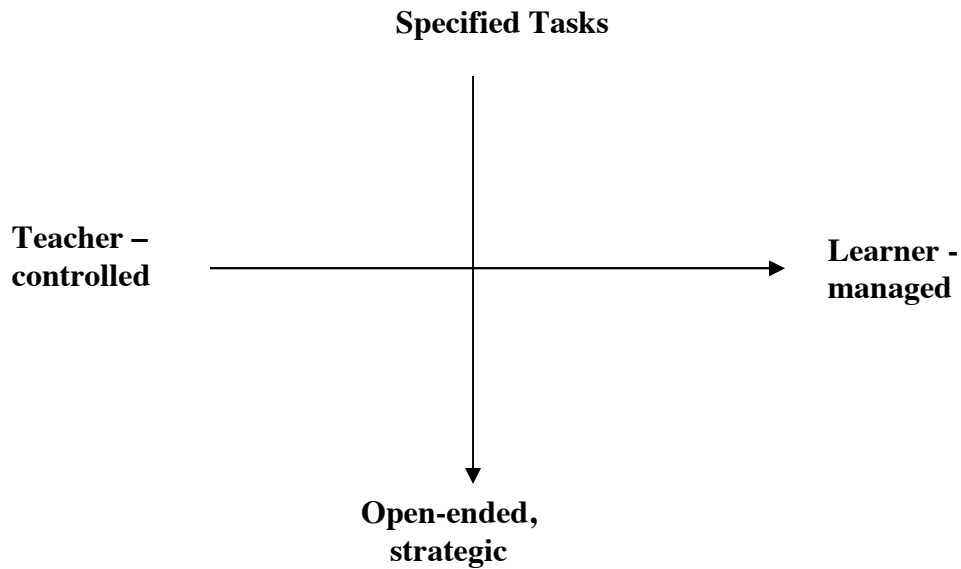
It is established that there are two modes of elearning: fully online and blended. The modes are distinguished by absolute reliance on online activity in the case of the fully online elearning courses and the integration of online learning with other formats of delivery in the case of blended elearning, such as classroom delivery complimented by online discussions in chat rooms or discussion forums. Driscoll and Carliner (2005:88) state that blended Learning integrates learning programmes in different formats to achieve a common goal. Fully online elearning courses exclusively offer individual, self paced programmes with no access to collaborative work or discussions. Both fully online and blended modes can facilitate instructor led collaborative and individual based learning.

Singh (2003) concurs with this interpretation as he characterises blended learning by the mix of a purposeful activities, such as face to face classroom sessions, synchronous or asynchronous discussions and self-directed learning.

The advantages of blended learning are two fold - for the learner and organisation or institution. Firstly, the advantages of blended learning for the learner include self-paced, self- directed learning combined in solitary and collaborative learning environments. For the organisation or institution, low cost generic content can be integrated in an online learning environment with more expensive tailor-made content. Blended learning can also reduce training time and reduce the amount of time employees are away from their job (Driscoll and Carliner 2005:91)

### **2.2.2 Features of eLearning Systems**

Dialogue, involvement, support and control are identified as the four significant features of good online practice (Coomey and Stephenson 2001:41). Learning materials and activities in the online environment must be structured and designed to ensure discussion is facilitated, the learner is working in a secure environment, feedback and support is provided and a level of control is exerted over the learner. Four paradigms of online learning, can be distinguished by the variation in teacher or learner control level, and task specific or open-ended learning (Coomey and Stephenson 2001:41).



**Figure 2.1 Paradigm Grid for Online Learning**

**(Coomey and Stephenson 2001)**

This grid demonstrates the shift in pedagogical approaches and the role of the tutor as the focus of online learning environment moves from teacher controlled to student controlled.

### **2.2.3 eLearning from Experience**

Alexander and Boud (2001) propose five key areas that online learning must incorporate in order to enhance learning from experience:

- Providing a setting in which the learner is recognised, their opinion valued and not threatened;
- Engaging the learner in activities that involve critical thinking and problem solving;
- Ensuring that the learner is receiving feedback and responses for their work and are interacting the elements of the VLE or the technology

- Establishing learning environments that provide useful and relevant information to the learner in a structured format and facilitates reflection on the learning experience;
- Facilitating online discussions and debates between participants.

McKenzie (1999) refers to the use of educational scaffolding to structure and organise learner activities. Scaffolding includes the provision of clear instructions, clarification of purpose, maintaining learners on the task and direction to worthy sources of information. Scaffolded learning experiences should “nearly scream with efficiency” and creates momentum (McKenzie 1999:5).

#### **2.2.4 E-tivities**

E-tivity is a framework for active and interactive online learning (Salmon 2002:1). E-tivities can be used in many online environments and Salmon (2002:1) distinguishes a number of common elements:

- Motivating, engaging and purposeful;
- Based on interaction between learner/ students/ participants, mainly through written message contributions;
- Designed and led by an e-moderator;
- Asynchronous (they take place over time);
- Cheap and easy to run usually through online bulletin boards, forums or conferences.

Salmon (2002) insists that e-tivities are based on established principles and pedagogies for learning and are best implemented in networked environments. E-tivities could include online submissions to a task/ topic on a discussion forum, responding to other participants' postings in the discussion forum and an etutor providing feedback.

### **2.3 Virtual Learning Environments**

Cheng and Yen (1998) recognised that the Internet and associated technologies should support self-directed, exploratory interactive and collaborative learning, and thus were prompted to develop one of the first Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) at the University of Hong Kong. The Virtual Learning Environment was designed through adherence to constructive leaning and instructional design recommendations, with a simple user interface to enable communication between students and staff, in the form of questions and answers sessions, asynchronous discussions and web-based lecture materials.

A Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) or Online Learning Environment (OLE) is a structured, specifically designed website that facilitates controlled access to content that is in structured sections, such as course specifications, assessment criteria and resources. A VLE also facilitates communication between the tutor, learner and peer group, using live chat sessions, delayed response discussions and video conferencing. There are a number of commercially available online learning environments readily available on the market, such as Moodle, Blackboard and

WebCT. Alternatively, organisations and education institutes can design and develop VLEs to their own specific requirements and objectives.

Dillenbourg (2000) makes a clear differentiation between a VLE and a website, the VLE is “a social space” for learners with information that has been specifically designed for learning activities and interactions, whereas a website is simply an information system. Salmon (2003) prefers the use of the term – Computer Mediated Conferencing (CMC) to describe the online learning environment. She aligns traditional conferencing with that of computer based conferencing as there is a similar communication process between the tutor and learner, except with CMC the participant requires access to a secured online access to the virtual learning environment.

Curtis and Lawson (2001) concur with Salmon’s definition of the CMC, but they conclude that this term CMC can be used in a number of different ways- email, bulletin boards and also video, audio and document sharing. McNaught (2002) prefers the use of Computer Facilitated Learning, as she emphasises that the learning experience is facilitated by computers. Sorensen (2004) refers to distributed computer-supported collaborative learning (CSCL) as the learning process that occurs in asynchronous online collaboration between people.

### **2.3.1 Future Developments of VLEs**

Totkov (2003) proposes the future of VLEs will be in the form of integrated systems. A Managed Learning Environment (MLE) is an example of an integrated VLE. Totkov (2003:4) maintains that a MLE should “offer functions to support pedagogy, the management of learning materials, student administration and communications”. MLEs include a range of information systems and processes such as human resources or student registration and fees, which are inherently linked to the provision of training.

Totkov (2003) identifies intelligent software packages known as cognitive learning systems as a further development of eLearning in the future. He predicts that VLEs will be highly advanced integrating delivery of courses and student monitoring into one system. Small chunks of course content that can be reused are known as Reusable Learning Objects (RLO) and will constitute the content of many courses in VLEs. mLearning or mobile Learning- the delivery of education and training from wireless devices is deemed to be the future of learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, according to Totkov (2003).

### **2.3.2 Social Presence Online**

Bonk et al. (2004) appraise the use of online discussion forums as they can be effectively used to assess the level of student understanding of key concepts. The process of posting comments to an online discussion forum establishes an online presence. A comment or posting therefore serves two functions: to communicate its

content and to communicate presence (Sorenson 2004). In addition, when participants collaborate and actively share their knowledge base and experiences, an online social presence is created. Bender (2003:9) supposes that the online instructor plays a critical role in creating effective social presence and personalising the educational approach by compensating for the “coldness or remoteness that messages on a computer screen might otherwise entail”. Sorenson (2004:249) infers that creation of an online presence in an online collaborative learning environment that results in effective learning is “a pedagogical challenge that is tied into the symbolic nature of the online environment”

#### **2.4. eCoaching and eMentoring**

Mentoring and coaching are two traditional approaches to staff training and development which have been encompassed by technological developments, mainly the Internet. Two new radical approaches have evolved: e mentoring and ecoaching. These terms are often used interchangeably but succinct differences between the approaches exist. eMentoring involves an experienced practitioner advising and guiding a less experienced practitioner, whereas ecoaching involves work-based training and talent development for the practitioner by a target driven expert. Starcevich (1998) developed a model to distinguish these forms of training and development on the basis of focus, role, relationship, source of influence, personal returns and arena (Figure 2.2).



	Mentor	Coach
Focus	Individual	Performance
Role	Facilitator with no agenda	Specific Agenda
Relationship	Self-selected	Comes with job or hired
Source of Influence	Perceived value	Position
Personal Returns	Affirmation and learning	Team work/ performance
Arena	Life	Task-related

**Figure 2.2 Model of Differences between mentoring and coaching  
(Starcevich 1998)**

Driscoll and Carliner (2005:193) maintain that there are benefits and limitations for virtual coaching. The benefits are:

- Record of communication: emails and online discussion that the participant can refer to and reflect on at a later stage;
- Good option for time-constrained workers: provision of professional development at flexible and suitable times for those that cannot take time away from work;
- Easy accessibility: convenient to participate in a relationship without having to schedule meetings. Greater access to the services of the mentor;
- Good for senior level staff: Facilitates improvement of performance through ementoring and ecoaching. Also provides a practical mode of training and sharing experience with less experienced managers.

However, there are limitations to e-mentoring and e-coaching. Interruption of the natural flow of communication: due to the delay in responding to emails or discussion topics, less obligation to reply immediately as not face to face and lack of computer access and skills could impinge on the success virtual mentoring and coaching.

## **2.5 The eTutor**

In e-learning, there is still a recognised need for the interaction of a teacher/tutor, perhaps even more so than in traditional education. The teacher or tutor has a generic meaning in all educational sectors, traditional or online. Terms such as online tutor, online moderator, online instructor, e-moderator and online teacher, are commonly used to describe the e-tutor. Denis et al. (2004:8) describes the e-tutor as the person:

Who interacts directly with learners to support the learning process when they are separated from the tutor in time and place for some or all these direct interactions.

### **2.5.1 The Role of the eTutor**

Denis et al. (2004) define the role of the e-tutor under two classifications: Central roles and peripheral roles. The central roles of the e-tutor include being a content or subject expert, supporting reflection on learning activities, examining and giving feedback on assessment. The e-tutor is also the primary contact for providing technical support. The peripheral roles of the e-tutor are deemed to be administrator of records and enrolments, designer of course material and co-learner. Denis et al.

(2004) view the etutor to be multi-skilled with more than one role to play in the online environment. Alexander and Boud (2001:9) articulate the essential role of the moderator in “designing and facilitating learning activities that assist learners to learn from experience”.

Salmon (2003) concurs with Denis et al. (2004) and summarises the etutor competencies as understanding the online process, technical skills, online communication skills, content expertise and personal characteristics to suit the online environment. Salmon (2003:11) also recognises that the e-moderator plays a pivotal role in the success of the online environment as she states that they are “the Champions” who make the learning come alive”. A champion in online learning is deemed to be someone that is positive about online learning and will share their experiences and skills with others.

Shank (2004) identifies five main competencies for online instructor/ etutor, administrative, design, facilitation, evaluation and technical. Barker (2002:7) suggests that there are other significant roles that etutors must play in the online environment. These include the following: pastoral care of students in terms of advising them about careers and course choices, marking students’ assignments and coursework and providing feedback on submitted material, which correspond with the peripheral roles as defined by Denis et al. (2004).

In further agreement, Thompson (1997:3) admits that “in the learning environment... communication and interactions must be engineered to provide motivations for participation and effective learning”. Thereby, recognising the supportive and motivational roles of the etutor in online learning. Although Goodfellow (1999) acknowledges three main roles of the etutor, namely facilitating asynchronous exchange of information and opinion, providing personalised support for the individual learners and synthesising the knowledge which is constructed. However, Goodfellow (1999:3) admits that there is an evident conflict in roles for the etutor-

On the one hand, the constructivist, facilitating and Knowledge construction roles created by the expectations in the learners that tutors would be peers as well as mentors ..... On the other hand, the assignment-marking and student support roles that forced the tutors into the position of expert and assessor.

Three key qualities are identified by Anderson (2002) as defining the excellent eteacher (etutor). Firstly, the e-teacher should possess excellent generic teaching skills, such as sufficient knowledge of subject domain, pedagogical understanding of the learning practice and skills to facilitate, encourage, and assess effective learning. Secondly, the e-teacher should have sufficient technical skills to competently navigate and manage the online system. And thirdly, the e-teacher should be innovative and committed to success using this mode of delivery of training. Duggleby et al. (2002:6) suggest an all encompassing definition for online tutoring:

The teaching, learning, management and assessment of Individuals or groups on programmes of learning where there is significant use of Internet technologies such as the World Wide Web, email and conferencing.

In order to fulfil the roles as an etutor, the etutor must be equipped with the appropriate skills for effective tutoring. Duggleby et al. (2002) propose that an etutor requires the following skills: good organisation, subject expertise, technical fluency, ability to communicate, positive and a good relationship with learners. There is common agreement by a number of authors that these are the required skills (Barker 2002:7, Salmon 2003: 40, Ko and Rosen 2004:194, Woodill 2004:6). The degree to which an etutor will use these skills will depend on the design aspects and resources of the online learning system.

### **2.5.2 The Online Facilitator**

In the online environment, the discussion forum is used as platform for debating opinions and sharing experiences of participants in a structured and controlled format. The etutor plays a critical role when initiating the discussions. Anderson (2002:280) recommends that firstly the etutor must “develop a sense of trust and safety within the electronic community”. Anderson (2002) further explains that this environment of trust is developed by requesting students to post their first message giving introductory details about themselves and he also suggests that it is useful if the tutor posts a sample response on the bulletin board so that students know what is expected. Ko and Rosen (2004) recommends that the instructor (etutor) should always start the discussion topics and ensure that the topics are specific and concise, which is concurred by Bender (2003). Palloff and Pratt (1999:74) add that it is important that the etutor should make “thoughtful comments on student posts, designed again to stimulate further discussion”. Collison et al. (2000) suggests that

the etutor should focus on the key points of the discussion as a critical thinking strategy to highlight new ideas and connections made by students.

### **2.5.3 eTutor Training**

In order to fulfil the roles as an etutor, the etutor must be equipped with the appropriate skills for effective tutoring. In education and training institutions, it is commonly assumed that a good teacher will seamlessly integrate into the online environment and that perhaps training may not be required. However, Riding and Daw (2002:1) admit that “successful face to face teachers do not necessarily make successful online moderators”. In a recent study, Thornton et al. (2004:7) evaluated the introduction of a Managed Learning Environment (MLE), StudyNet, at the University of Hertfordshire and ascertained that:

Elearning is a tool that can be used for the enhancement of learning and teaching. Its effectiveness will depend on how well the tool is used, not the quantum of its use.

In this study it was found that the rate of progress and success of an MLE will be determined by the readiness of staff to adapt to this new tool. Thornton et al. (2004) recommended that staff must receive structured training in order to perform effectively and efficiently in their role as etutors. Moreover, champions and colleagues were the preferred guide by staff rather than text based support when integrating Study Net in the University.

Furthermore, McNaught (2002) calls for sufficient time and resources to be allocated to staff development when adopting computer facilitated learning. Thompson (1997) proposes that staff development programmes should focus on growth and recognise the need for staff training, to effectively use the learning technology in order to promote effective learning. Wills et al. (1997:2) advocate that staff should actively experience the same learning environment that their students are working in and “be able to put themselves into the learners’ shoes”. Thompson (1997) concurs with this proposal the teaching staff should experience the same online environment and problem scenarios that occur for students.

I can conclude that the role of the etutor is multi-faceted, such as subject expert, discussion facilitator, content designer and administrator depending upon structure and format of VLE. The etutor is also responsible for encouraging participation from learners and discourse between learners in both synchronous and asynchronous forums in the VLE. I have also identified that training in the administration and student environment is required for etutors and staff involved in the delivery of online training.

## **2.6 Case Studies on eTutor Training and Online Professional Development Programmes**

The following case studies have been included to provide examples of training programmes for etutors. Both etutor and online professional training courses have been investigated in order to establish best practice and content of etutor training programmes in the current eLearning environment. Case study one relates directly to my study as it describes an innovative 33 week etutor training programme developed by TAFE in Australia. Case study two evaluates an online professional training course, run by University of Sheffield. This course promoted group communication utilising of the Internet, rather than just as a source of information, thus demonstrating the effective use of online discussions. Case study three details a joint etutor training programme run by universities in Belgium, France and Switzerland in which used case studies effectively to define etutor roles. Case study four details an etutor training programme run by University of Sheffield where the etutor was used as a model of good practice and materials developed during the course, could later be used as resource material by course participants.

### **2.6.1 Case Study One: The TAFE FAME eTutor Programme**

TAFE (Technical and Further Education) NSW is the state agency in New South Wales in Australia with responsibility for providing educational resources for the Vocational Education sector. Evans and Hillery (2002) describe the FAME (facilitating and managing eLearning) project was developed by TAFE staff to train vocational tutors to use an online learning environment. The course was run over a



33 week period and included a number of topics, such as basic principles of online learning, engaging and communicating online learners and evaluating online learning. Janison's Toolbox was selected as the web-based platform for delivery of the course as it was widely used throughout TAFE NSW and most participants were familiar with it. The course design was based on the constructivist theory, and included the following objectives- engaging learners in active learning exercises, both individually and group based, concentrating on educational issues rather than technological, and to encourage fun in learning.

Online games were used to encourage participation in the online environment in conjunction with chat rooms and email games. Dr. Thiagi's Depolariser was one such game which the participants enjoyed. The "Depolariser" introduces a controversial subject and gets the participants to eventually argue extreme points of view in a non-threatening environment (<http://www.thiagi.com>). The course evaluation was in the form of qualitative questionnaires for both tutors and participants. In evaluations, learners commented that too many modules (8) were delivered over the 33 week period, and also modules were delivered simultaneously with group activities. However, participants did express that they learned new approaches and were keen to adapt the new activities in their online classes. From tutor evaluation, it was found that tutors had an extremely full workload for the duration of the course, as assessments were being submitted and there were a lot of online activities.

### **2.6.3 Case Study Two: The University of Sheffield Online Professional Development Programme**

In 1998, twenty people participated in an eight week online professional development course organised by the University of Sheffield in England. The emphasis of the course was to promote group communication rather than just using the internet to source information. Farren (1998) describes her experience as a participant in this course which was delivered using WebCT. The course was structured on the use of a number of discussion forums:

- General forum provided participants with a forum to introduce themselves and for the facilitator to post general messages during the course;
- Notes forum facilitated discussions by participants based on specific course content;
- Learning sets forum enabled participants to collaborate in smaller groups, exploring topics of common interest in detail and sharing their own experiences;

On completion of the course, participants submitted their comments and opinions of the course. Overall, the participants found the course beneficial and enlightened with the potential for technology, as it allowed interaction between participants in different locations. WebCT also allowed effective transfer of information and feedback on course materials. From this course, it was found that discussion forums could be used quite effectively to share opinions on course materials. It was an effective mode for small working groups to explore new concepts. However, it was

deemed important to allow adequate time to allow the participants experiment and familiarise themselves with the new technology.

#### **2.6.4 Case Study Three: The Learn-Nett eTutor Training Programme**

Banks et al. (2004) describe the format of the Learn-Nett etutor training programme. The Learn-Nett programme was developed in 1997 with the aim of implementing a collaborative learning environment between universities in Belgium, France and Switzerland, to address the needs of future teachers and trainers using Information and Communications Technologies for Education (ICTE). A model of training by Denis (2003 cited in Banks et al.2004) was used for the etutor training programme: (1) Experience of distance learning system, (2) Sharing representations of tutor's roles, (3) Definition of tutor's target, (4) Consensus of tutor's roles and editing a charter, (5) Practical Preparation (6) Animation and feedback loops.

Currently there are 15 new etutors enrolled in the programme each year. The programme starts with a one day workshop, whereby etutors participate in discussions and group exercises with the common objective to reach agreement and produce an overall framework of tutor's roles and interventions. Case studies are also used to help tutors clarify their roles and activities. After this one day session, support is provided in the form of online discussions forums and phone conference. The common profile was defined but not standardised as etutors intervened differently and often needed to be proactive in interactions with students. The etutors felt that their roles were focused on the pedagogical and communicational processes

and was dependent on the specific situation and evolution of individual groups of learners.

#### **2.6.5 Case Study Four: The LTSN eTutor Training Programme**

Banks et al. (2004) also detail the etutor training programmes and workshops at the University of Sheffield. In 2003, the Learning and Teaching Support Network (LTSN) Generic centre in the UK commissioned the University of Sheffield to run two virtual workshops in elearning for teachers in Higher Education. Each workshop was delivered over a three week period for 18 hours in total. The workshops were designed to allow experiential learning in elearning and etutoring using a VLE. The specific aims of the workshops related to the implementation of e-learning in different contexts, pedagogy, student motivation and collaborative learning. In week one of the programme, participants introduced themselves and acclimatised to the new environment. In week two, articles on key topics and case studies were posted online for discussions, which were facilitated by the etutor. A number of online resources were available to the participants including links to websites, a dedicated website and numerous online articles. In the final week, all activities were reviewed and summarised and provided a resource pool for participants. In the evaluations, there were a number of relevant findings:

- Participants valued the experience of actually being an online learner, communicating online with fellow participants and the etutor
- Participants viewed the etutor as a “model” of good practice, through communication and facilitation skills

- The online materials provided in the course could be used as resources after the workshop.

Overall, this etutor training programme was highly successful for professional development of staff as etutors. In feedback evaluations, participants expressed that they valued interactions with etutor and fellow participants. However, Banks et al. (2004) found that a large amount of content was condensed into 18 hours, so course length would be extended. It was deemed necessary to scaffold online activities in order to define the learning contexts of both tutor and participants also. From this study, face to face workshop were successfully used to allow tutors to familiarised themselves with the VLE. Tutors exercises include identification of the roles of etutors and the use of case studies. Online workshops were very effective. The eTutor was used a model of good practice for training etutors. Participants valued the online discussions with etutors and fellow participants, so it was recommended that the learning community model where participants discuss their professional interests and work on activities related to these in collaboration with others is particularly appropriate for this training context.

## **2.7 Summary**

The focus of this literature review was to evaluate the research and findings in the field of elearning and online learning environments. The roles, competencies and training requirements of etutors were analysed in order to evaluate the standards for etutor training. Case studies were presented to establish best practice for etutor training at an international and local level.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Methodologies and Research Approach**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

The purpose of this chapter is to give an overview of the research approach and methodologies that I have used in this study. I will explore the research paradigms that have evolved in the social science field. I will discuss the reasons why I have chosen action research and the living education theory as methodologies to investigate the support and training of etutors. I will detail the elements of the action research planner that was used as the strategy for my study. I will refer to relevant research and literature that have been used to structure and direct my learning.

#### **3.2 Research Aim**

The aim of this research is to provide evidence of how I can improve the support and training of etutors in the Teagasc eCollege.

#### **3.3 Rationale of study**

The Teagasc eCollege is an initiative by Teagasc to comply with the eGovernment strategy to improve competitiveness and improve eservices to Teagasc clients. In doing so, etutors will be tutoring an increasing number of students from diverse sectors in many course programmes. From the literature reviewed, it is recognised that training is required for etutors to ensure that staff are adequately prepared and

the effectiveness of the online programme is maintained (McNaught 2002; Duggleby et al 2002; Thompson 1997).

### **3.4 Teagasc eCollege VLE**

The Teagasc eCollege Virtual Learning Environment VLE was developed by a technical team, headed by Dave Howells in Carmarthenshire College in Wales. The design of the VLE focused on developing a suitable online pedagogical approach and then integrating a learning support model. The VLE is hosted on the server in the college campus in Wales and Teagasc for the use of the VLE and technical support provided. The VLE was designed for use with Internet Explorer Version 6. Teagasc is currently using the updated version 6 of the VLE (Appendix A).

### **3.5 The Role of the etutor in the Teagasc eCollege**

The etutor plays a key role in the delivery of online training in the Teagasc VLE. Each etutor is assigned to deliver two modules to forty learners in the online 180 hours agricultural training course. The modules are delivered in a consecutive basis in two week blocks during which time the etutor facilitates a structured discussions forums for participants. The etutor also corrects the associated assessment scripts for each module.

### **3.6 Research Methodologies**

Within the social sciences, there are a number of research approaches that can be used to explore and study human behaviour. For this study, as action research was the chosen methodology to investigate the support and training for etutors in the

Teagasc eCollege. In this section, I will describe the origins of research paradigms and the evolution of action research. I will also explain why I have chosen action research as a research methodology for my study. I will then present the sequence of questions known as the Action Research planner, and show which I implemented this planner to structure my research strategy.

### **3.6.1 Research Paradigms**

There are three philosophical paradigms in social science research namely- Positivism, Interpretive and Critical Theory. The Positivist approach is deeply rooted in the theories and laws of the natural sciences and an externalist approach is adopted when using this approach. The externalist approach to research involves the study an object of enquiry in nature and then aims to establish a causal agent and effect. In the social field, it places the social scientist as an interpreter or analyst of human behaviour in an objective scenario. Briton (1996:79) maintains that that positivist mode of inquiry is:

...a disinterested process of inquiry that proceeds from unconditional observations of experience, via a rule governed method, to find the meaning of that which is observed.

Cohen et al (2005:9) affirms that “positivism may be characterised by its claim that science provides us with the clearest possible ideal of knowledge”. In the early 1900’s, the Interpretivist/ Constructivist paradigm shifted the focus of the enquiry to interpretation of the field of study. In this paradigm, the researcher establishes meanings by observing other people, but does not regard themselves as part of the research. The interpretist researcher attempts to understand the interpretations of



their environment. Mertens (1998:11) explains that the laws and theories that govern the natural sciences were rejected by Interpretivists who proposed that the researcher's goal was to understand the multiple social constructions of meaning and knowledge.

In the 1950's, Critical Theorists challenged the Positivist approach, by claiming that it was not logical to carry out research in a vacuum with a researcher based in the external field. Critical Theory considered that people are products of their social and economic environment and it brings together the participants, researchers and facilitators through a process of understanding, questioning and changing actions. It is also known as the Emancipatory Paradigm as it directly addresses the political issues in research by emancipating the socially oppressed. It is from within this critical theoretic paradigm that Action Research evolved.

### **3.6.2 Action Research**

Action Research is a form of education research, which involves the self study of a teacher/practitioner. Stenhouse (1975:25) introduced the concept that the individual (teacher) could effectively bring about improvements in their practice and stated that “new strategies must be worked out by groups of teachers collaborating within a research and development framework”. Action research is particularly relevant in the educational sector as it encompasses the analysis of a teacher or practitioner's actions and the subsequent implementation of changes or improvements in practice.

However, Whitehead and McNiff (2000) insisted that research-based evidence had to be produced to prove the researcher's claim that they had improved their practice. The focus of the research was the actions of the living researcher and the influence of their values on the enquiry, thus creating a living education theory. Whitehead and McNiff (2000:199) claim that "the living theory means that people produce accounts to show how and why they are claiming to have become better practitioners".

In the living education theory, the researcher is encouraged to express their values as this will influence their change in practice. Due to restrictions and circumstances in the work environment, a practitioner may not be able to work or act according to their own inherent values. Whitehead (1989:3) refers to the practitioner in this case as "acknowledging ones existence as a living contradiction". Whitehead and McNiff (2000:203) address the elements of Action Research as follows:

- I, the researcher, am central to the process;
- I am learning first about myself, possibly to change a social situation;
- I am not aiming for closure but ongoing development;
- the process is participative;
- the process is educational.

In the living education theory, the practitioner is central to the research and their values and experience is central throughout the enquiry as the practitioner's values are used as standards of judgement to validate the claim to new knowledge. The practitioner must validate their claim to new knowledge from transformation of their

practice to validation groups and critical colleagues. Farren (2005:4) identifies that each practitioner has their own inimitable values and affirms that the:

Pedagogy of the unique is characterised by the recognition that each individual has a particular and distinctive constellation of values that motivate their enquiry and sets a distinctive context within which the enquiry proceeds.

### **3.6.3 Deciding on Action Research and the Living Education Theory**

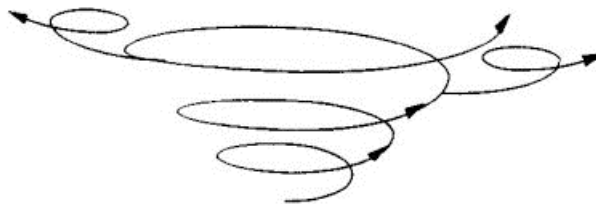
I have chosen to use action research as the research methodology for my study because I feel that it is the most suitable research approach in my attempt to improve my practice as an etutor trainer. Firstly, this methodology enables me to integrate my actions and analysis in a structured and rigorous study to improve my overall practice. Action research allows me to identify a problem in my field of practice, which in this case insufficient etutor training, and then to systematically evaluate, direct and implement a process of improvement, in an attempt to minimise or eliminate the initial problem.

I have chosen the living education theory because I realise that as a practitioner, I have developed values throughout my professional work that influence my work and this theory facilitates the identification and expression of these educational values which influence my action. I can subsequently, evaluate my practice and assess if I am negating my educational and professional values. I can then assess the situation and implement changes that will influence change. The educational and professional values will be recognised as standards of judgement in evaluating the validity of the

claim to new knowledge in my field of practice. The new knowledge is created by a transformation of my practice brought about by findings from this research.

#### **3.6.4 The Model of Mortality Boundaries**

McNiff (2002) refers to the model of mortality boundaries which is a diagram of an expanding spiral (Figure 3.1). This spiral indicates the evolutionary nature of all developments by humans, and is only limited by mortality. From my own perspective, I understand this model to indicate continuity and an ever upward movement, which I interpret as improvement. As a practitioner, I am aware that I may be faced with difficulties and unforeseen problems as I undertake this research, but I am confident that what ever the results, I will aware that I have attempted to bring about change and improvement.



**Figure 3.1 Mortality Boundaries Spirals (McNiff 2002)**

### 3.6.5 Recognition of my Educational Values

In order to implement action research to improve my own practice and that of Teagasc etutors too, I must firstly declare my educational values and adhere to them, in order to be in a position to improve my practice. The Living Education theory focuses on expressing one's values through their practice in their professional role. As a teacher for over ten years, I have developed my own unique set of values which are deeply embedded in my practice. I express these values through my practice. So if some of these values are negated in my current practice, I must address these contradictions and attempt to bring about an improvement in my practice as an etutor trainer. My educational values are:

- ***Fairness:*** I believe that all people should be treated fairly and are entitled to training and support if working in a new field
- ***Professional Integrity:***
  - ***To fulfil my every day tasks to a high level of efficiency and effectiveness:*** I feel compelled to do my best;
  - ***To support and assist my colleagues in the eCollege-*** I always offer support and assistance in varying forms to those who I am in contact with on an everyday basis;
  - ***To maintain a positive approach in the face of problems-*** I take a positive approach to all aspects of my job as I believe this affects all my actions and communications with others;

- *To gathering sufficient information from learners in order to include them in a process that will affect them-* I believe that all learners and environments must be evaluated when planning delivery of support or training;
- **Teamwork:** I believe that people working together can create a dynamic atmosphere. Levels of creativity and productivity are far in excess of what an individual person could produce on their own. I value other people's opinion and believe that everyone's experiences and opinions should be recognised through teamwork;
- **Support:** I believe that all people are entitled to support and guidance their particularly when taking on a new field of practice.

In stating my values as a practitioner, it has allowed me to identify what is important to me and to be aware of the situations and scenarios in which I am living a contradiction to my values. I can also refer to my values as standards of judgement in validating my research claim.

### **3.7 Research for the Action of Improvement**

The action research planner (Whitehead and McNiff 2006) is a series of critical questions for the practitioner about their practice and is specific to the living education theory of action research. The questions challenge the practitioner, to construct their own answers/ solutions for the improvement of practice. Also as action research is a collaborative practice, so the opinion, judgments and impact on

others must be considered in the action plan. Whitehead and McNiff (2006:93) developed the sequence of following questions in the action research planner:

- *What is my concern?*
- *Why am I concerned?*
- *What kind of experience can I describe to show why I am concerned?*
- *What can I do about it?*
- *What will I do about it?*
- *What kind of data will I gather to show the situation as it unfolds?*
- *How will I explain my educational influences in learning?*
- *How will I ensure that any conclusions I reach are reasonably fair and accurate?*
- *How will I evaluate the validity of the evidence-based account of my learning?*
- *How will I modify my concerns, ideas and practice in the light of my evaluations?*

I have used the action research planner to develop a strategy for my study into how I can improve my practice as an etutor trainer, as detailed below.

### **3.7.1 What is my concern?**

I am interested in assessing improving the level of training and support for etutors in the Teagasc eCollege, thus asking the question: How do I improve training and support for etutors in the Teagasc eCollege?

### **3.7.2 Why am I concerned?**

I am concerned because I believe the current etutor training programme does not equip etutors with all the knowledge and skills that they require I am also concerned because I have been given responsibility for training and supporting etutors and realise that there is a need for improvement. My professional values of fairness and provision of support and training in a new field of practice are comprised and negated in this current situation. It is unfair that staff are etutoring without receiving sufficient training and support and training is not provided in a structured format. Furthermore, I value professional integrity and the fulfilment of my professional role, which is a contradiction to the current situation also.

### **3.7.3 What kind of experience can I describe to show why I am concerned?**

eTutors facilitate the delivery of training using an Online Learning Environment (OLE). In the first year of the pilot delivery, Carmarthenshire College in Wales delivered specialised etutor training to a small group of etutors which I participated in. Subsequent etutor training consisted of an online introductory module and attendance at a one day workshop. This training programme has a different format due to a lack of resources. The online introductory module consists of completion of ten tasks, which is the module that all online course participants must complete.

From the knowledge and experience gained in completing this Masters programme in DCU, I realised that more specialised training is required for the Teagasc eCollege etutors. From my own experience of etutoring for three years, I know that I have learned from trial and error as there was limited support after the initial



training. As the online environment was a new reaching platform that I was not familiar with, I struggled to develop better online tasks for students and also time saving procedures for dealing with large numbers of students in discussion forums.

From my experience of teaching, I have experienced fear and lack of confidence as a result of lack of planning and training. I lectured for ten years in agricultural training and often requested to teach a topic that I had no experience. On the first occasion, I had only recently started teaching and was asked to cover a session in a particular field that I had no knowledge in. I battled through the session but I know that I did not transfer any useful knowledge to the participants and failed to answer their questions. On reflection, I do realise that I should not have given the presentation, but I was young and only new in the job and I wanted to show that I was competent. I still remember the emotion of fear and insecurity brought because I did not have the knowledge or skills to fulfil my role. As a result, I since ensure that I would not request an untrained person to do a job nor would I take on a task without sufficient training.

#### **3.7.4 What can I do about it?**

There are a number of options for consideration:

- I could develop an online training programme for new and existing etutors in order to develop their skills. An OLE could be used to facilitate the training programmes and they could be offered in a series of modules, to facilitate staff requirements.

- I could deliver the training in the existing format as it was accepted up to now and no one ever questioned the suitability of it except for myself. This would give me the opportunity to concentrate on other areas of my work.
- I could evaluate the current etutor training programme and support mechanisms. Then in collaboration with the Curriculum and Quality Assurance unit, etutors and fellow colleagues in the eCollege develop a new etutor training programme.

### **3.7.5 What will I do about it?**

I will choose the option to evaluate the current training programme for etutors and then work on developing a new course for training Teagasc etutors. I will contact the Teagasc Curriculum and Quality Assurance unit and discuss the option of developing an etutor training course with them.

### **3.7.6 What kind of data will I gather to show the situation as it unfolds?**

Firstly, I will circulate an evaluation form to the recently trained etutors in order to identify the level of satisfaction with the format and content of the course. I will then gather evidence from all etutors (new and experienced) to find out what format and content of training or support they would like to receive based on their experiences of etutors and the demands of the role, using an online questionnaire. In compiling this questionnaire, I will refer to guidelines for effective questionnaire design by Winter and Munn-Giddings (2001). I will also try to ascertain the mode of delivery that would be preferable to the etutors using this online survey. I envisage that this training would be recognised by management when reviewing staff performance. I

will also investigate the requirements for accreditation of a training programme by FETAC.

My own learning journal will be maintained throughout the enquiry using the online learning environment in DCU as it not only facilitates the continuous recording of observations throughout this enquiry, but allows the practitioner to express their feelings and emotions (Mills 2000). I will also use informal interviews with my colleagues throughout everyday practice to show how the situation develops. In summary, the following data sources will be referred to in order to show evidence of my own and other people's learning:

- Questionnaires
- Evaluation forms from participants on completion of course
- My own learning journal.
- Evaluations from online discussion forum for new etutors
- Informal chat/ conversations with colleagues

### **3.7.7 How will I explain my educational influences in learning?**

I will refer to my original professional values in order to evaluate if I have brought about improvement or negated the contraction of the expression of these values in my practice. I will look for evidence that my values were realised in evaluations, reflections in my learning journal communication with etutors.

**3.7.8 How will I ensure that any conclusions I reach are reasonably fair and accurate?**

In carrying out this enquiry, I must ensure that my claim is unprejudiced and authentic. I will present my findings and claim to knowledge to both a validation group and critical colleague so that it can be scrutinized and rigorously critiqued. My anticipated claim will be to have improved the support and training for etutors in the Teagasc eCollege, so I intend that my validation group and critical colleague will see the specifications for new the etutor training course that I will develop and also the measures that I will put in place to provide support for etutors.

**3.7.9 How will I evaluate the validity of the evidence-based account of my learning?**

The validation group and critical colleague will also assess the validity of my claim by scrutinizing whether or not I have complied with the methodologies and procedures for making a claim to new knowledge. The following four questions will be answered in my presentation to validation group and critical colleague in the process of social validation:

- Are the descriptions and explanations for my learning comprehensible?
- Is there sufficient evidence to justify the claims being made?
- Are the values that constitute the enquiry as “educational” clearly revealed and justified?
- Is there evidence of the practitioner-researchers’ educational influence on the learning of others?

The group will also offer professional opinions on the presentation and analysis of data. Dialogue and discussion are critical when carrying out action research, so by working with the validation group, work colleagues and my supervisor, I can apply a systemic evaluation procedure to this research.

#### **3.7.10 How will I modify my concerns, ideas and practice in light of my evaluations?**

I hope that I will have improved my understanding of the training needs of etutors, which will affect my practice of providing support and training for etutors. I hope that by developing a standardised level of training for the Teagasc eCollege that etutors will undertake this training to improve their level of skills and competence and thus improve the quality of the online learning experience for the online agricultural students

### **3.8 Summary**

In this chapter, I have provided a brief overview of research paradigms and the basis of action research. I have described the Living Education Theory and detailed my reasons for choosing this research methodology. My educational and professional values have been identified in the recognition that these unique values will influence my practice. The action research planner was detailed as the strategy for my research. In this study, I am making a claim to new knowledge in my own field which I will validate and I will show the process that I have undertaken to improve my practice.

## **Chapter Four**

### **Implementation and Evaluation**

#### **4.1 Introduction**

In this chapter, I will describe the two stages of action research that I undertook to improve support and training for etutors in the Teagasc eCollege. Firstly, I will describe the field that I work within as an etutor trainer. I will then describe the two action research cycles that I undertook using the action research planner to present the strategic process of enquiry. I will reflect and analyse my learning throughout each cycle. Cycle one will focus on the delivery of a two week etutor training programme and cycle two will detail the development an etutor training course, development of resources for etutors and the pilot delivery of an online discussion forum for etutors.

#### **4.2 Context**

The Teagasc eCollege provides online training for the Agri-food sector using a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). The delivery of training using a VLE was piloted from 2003 to 2005 to establish if this mode of delivery was viable. This proved to be a popular option for delivering training and the Teagasc eCollege was officially launched November 2005. The VLE is a structured web site that provides access to learning material, course specifications and discussion forums. The online discussion forums are facilitated by trained Teagasc staff. These etutors, the majority of whom are employed by Teagasc, work fulltime as agricultural development

officers in advisory-training centres and colleges. They provide an tutoring service to the Teagasc eCollege on an intermittent basis for four to six weeks each year.

### **4.3 Rationale**

In September 2005, I was recruited as an Online Development Officer for the new Teagasc eCollege. I had been involved as a lecturer in FETAC and HETAC agricultural training programmes in agricultural colleges for ten years previous to this appointment. I have been involved as an tutor for the pilot delivery of online agricultural training since 2003. My role as online development officer included design and delivery of new online courses, tutoring and administration of agricultural programmes. I was also given responsibility for training and support of tutors. In November 2005, there were 24 trained tutors providing tutoring services to the eCollege. It was planned to train new tutors to meet the increased demand for online courses when the eCollege was officially launched. The existing tutor training programme was a blended course integrating online tasks and a face to face workshop session

### **4.4 Action Research Cycle One**

For Action research cycle one, I have used the Action Research Planner (McNiff and Whitehead 2006:192) to explain how I implemented the research in my field:

#### **4.4.1 What was my concern?**

The focus of my research for cycle one was the investigation of the content, format and effectiveness of the current tutor training course in the Teagasc eCollege. My

concern in relation to the quality and suitability of this training course motivated me to carry out research in this field. The research question in this cycle was “How do I find out if the blended etutor training programme for the Teagasc eCollege is suitable and effective?”

#### **4.4.2 Why was I concerned?**

I was interested in investigating the eCollege etutor training programme because I realised from the knowledge gained through this Masters programme at DCU, that etutors required specific training in a number of areas. I felt that the eCollege training programme was limited in its content. Participants in the etutor training course completed tasks in the student VLE, which was the same training course for online course participants. The second part of the training involved practical demonstrations of the administration VLE in a face to face workshop. This training did not involve transfer of information about eLearning or development of tutoring skills. In my opinion suitable training should be delivered to people in order to equip them with knowledge and skills to fulfil their role competently. I also value my professional integrity, in that I want to perform my role as etutor trainer to the best of my ability. A contradiction existed, as I realised that the etutor training programme that I was now involved in was limited in content and skills development. This negated my educational and professional values. I instigated an investigation in this area because wanted to find out exactly what the etutor training involved and then evaluate its effectiveness.



#### **4.4.3 What experiences could I describe to show the reasons for my concern?**

In this Masters programme in DCU, I completed a module: Collaborative Online Learning, which included online asynchronous and synchronous activities. Through the course, we evaluated effective etutor practice, motivational and participative elements and collaborative learning, which equipped me with background knowledge and skills for facilitating the online discussion. I then facilitated an online discussion forum with my fellow colleagues as part of this module, which I found challenging and enjoyable. From the knowledge gained in completing this module, I understood the dynamics and benefits of online discussion and I felt that the Teagasc etutors would benefit from training in effective etutoring practice.

In the first year of the pilot delivery, Carmarthenshire College in Wales delivered specialised etutor training to a small group of etutors which I participated in. Subsequent etutor training consisted of an online introductory module and attendance at a one day workshop. This training programme took a different format due to a lack of resources. The online introductory module consists of completion of ten tasks, which is the module that all online course participants must complete.

During my teaching profession, I experienced lack of confidence and stress as a consequence of poor planning and lack of training. On one occasion, I taught a class covering a topic that I was not familiar with. I will never forget the emotions of fear and angst during that session. It was not a positive learning experience for the students as I was unable to transfer any more knowledge than based in the text book. However, I did learn a lot from the experience and I promised myself that I would

never be forced into a position like this again and I also was determined that I would never ask anyone to complete a task without sufficient training.

#### **4.4.4 What did I think I could do about it?**

There were three options that I could undertake to address this concern:

Option one was to delivery of the existing blended etutor training by the staff in the eCollege. I could teach the online tasks and the online learning co ordinator would preside over the face to face session as she had previously done. This would give me the opportunity to evaluate the quality of training from the trainer's viewpoint. I could also assess the effectiveness of this training by circulating evaluation forms to etutor course participants.

Option two involved delivering the existing online training and taking the approach that it had been carried out in this format in the past. I could choose not to concern myself with assessing the suitability of the training and focus on the other areas in my job such as new course development and tutoring. Due to the fact that this was a new field of work for me, I had to learn a lot of new information. I could defer the investigation of training until a problem arose.

Option three was to develop a new training course for etutors that was in line with international standards and recommendations. This would involve carrying out evaluations of other etutor training programmes and designing a new training course. The time frame would be at least two to three months and would involve

collaboration with fellow colleagues in the eCollege and the Curriculum and Quality Assurance unit in Teagasc.

I was aware at this stage if I involved any etutors in the research, I would have to inform them of the ethical considerations and that all contributions would be treated in a confidential manner and would not be used for any other purposes. The research in this field could only benefit the Teagasc eCollege as the etutors are a central tenet to the provision of online training and assessing the quality of training and support would improve services to our internal customer (etutors) and external customers (agricultural course participants).

#### **4.4.5 What did I do about it?**

I chose option one to deliver the existing online training as I felt that it was the only way forward at that time in order to establish if the blended training programme was suitable and effective. There was also a time factor to be considered as the newly trained etutors were required to deliver modules in a course scheduled to start at the end of January 2006. As a consequence, there was not enough time to develop and implement a new training programme for etutors. There were 33 new etutors were registered for the training in response to notification of etutor training on the staff intranet site. The training course was scheduled for two weeks in January 2006 with participants completing ten online tasks in the student VLE (Appendix B) and then attending a face to face workshop session. A new version of the VLE was released the week before the start of the etutor training course, which caused frustration for me as I was not familiar with the new layout of the VLE and this also rendered the

support material that I had posted to the participants was futile (Appendix C Learning Journal week three). 31 participants successfully completed the online training as two participants dropped out due to heavy workloads. Prior to the face to face session, I contacted the online learning co-ordinator as I was dissatisfied that the new etutors had not received any background information on elearning or their role as etutors and it was decided that I would deliver a session during the face to face workshop on elearning and etutor skills. The participants then attended a face to face session which was facilitated by the online learning co-ordinator and I delivered a presentation on elearning, etutor skills and online teaching approaches (Appendix D).

#### **4.4.6 What kind of evidence did I produce to show the situation as it unfolded?**

The current online etutor training programme was delivered successfully as 31 participants completed the ten online tasks. When I completed the online training, I realised that information on elearning, VLEs or tutoring was lacking. This I felt was essential knowledge for new etutors that were about to deliver online modules in the agricultural programmes. I requested that extra material needed to be added in the face to face session, so I prepared and presented a presentation on elearning. Evaluations for this initial training were posted to etutors in order to evaluate the effectiveness and suitability of the etutor training course. This training had never been analysed before as the online agricultural courses were in the pilot phase and

resources were not available to carry out evaluations. The content of the evaluation form was:

- Did the training programme meet your needs as an etutor: Yes/No
- List three features of the etutor training programme that you found useful;
- List any features of the etutor training programme that you did not find useful;
- Describe any additional information/ topics that should be included in the etutor training programme that would be useful to you in your new role as an etutor;
- Rate your overall level of satisfaction with the etutor training programme (1-5)
- Additional comments or suggestions with regard to the Teagasc eCollege etutor training programme;

Despite my concerns, ten of the 13 respondents found the training satisfactory to their needs, but did specify that they would like training in further areas (Appendix E).

#### **4.4.7 How did I ensure that any conclusions I came to were reasonably fair and accurate?**

The validation procedure for action research cycle one involved focused discussions with a critical colleague in the Teagasc eCollege (Appendix F). He agreed with the structure of my study and could see why I was concerned about the quality and suitability of the existing etutor programme. I chose this critical colleague because he had extensive experience in tutoring and also had completed a Graduate Diploma in Information Technology. My critical colleague suggested that more

training was required for the tutors and that support systems needed to be put in place as we were both receiving a large number of phone calls from tutors with technical and administrative queries. I also attended scheduled meetings with my validation group in DCU where I presented my progress at different stages of the research process.

#### **4.4.8 How did I evaluate the validity of the account of my learning?**

I evaluated the validity of the account of my learning by referring to my living values as standards of judgement. I value professional integrity, which I classify as fulfilling my role as tutor trainer to a high level of efficiency and effectiveness and to offer support and guidance to all with whom I work. Furthermore, I value the act of gathering as much information from learners as possible in order to make an informed decision when developing training programmes. The needs of the learner must be considered in order to ensure that the learning experience will be beneficial and useful to them. I value support and training as I feel that it is necessary for people when working in a new field.

Taking these values as standards of judgement of my practice, I admit that there still exists a contradiction in the training of tutors as their needs have not been addressed in the current training. However, when I requested and successfully presented an overview of elearning and tutor roles at the tutor meeting, this exhibited a change in my practice.

#### **4.4.9 How did I modify my practice in light of my evaluation?**

By carrying out the research in cycle one; I had gained a clearer understanding of the delivery and format of the existing training programme for etutors in the eCollege. I realised that it was beneficial for etutors to carry out tasks in the student VLE as they gained experience of being an online student so that they could empathise with agricultural students' experiences in the future (Wills et al 1997; Salmon 2003). I had implemented a small but significant level of change in the etutor training by presenting information about elearning, VLEs and etutor practice. Following this, I could be reassured that etutors had gained some background knowledge of tutoring. I still felt that the existing training could be supplemented with more information and skills training. I would have preferred not to deliver the existing training programme to etutors but I had no choice as time was a critical factor.

#### **4.4.10 Reflections on Action Research Cycle One**

In this cycle, I learned that there are limitations within day to day practice that can cause a change of plan. I would have preferred to defer the training of such a large group of etutors until a new training programme was available, but I had no option to do as the new etutors were required to deliver training. I also learned that there was a value in completing the etutor training in the students' online environment as the etutor gained a greater understanding of the student working area and to "put themselves into the learners' shoes" (Wills et al 1997:2). ). I realised that the pedagogical approach of the VLE used by Teagasc is teacher controlled and all tasks are specified (Coomey and Stephenson 2001) and this is particularly the case in the

etutor training programme. The comments in the evaluation of this etutor training programme were most enlightening for me as they provided a lot of useful information on training for etutors. For example, one etutor suggested that online tutor's ability to use the VLE should be assessed before starting to etutor and assistance with managing emails. In action research cycle one; I investigated the content, format and effectiveness of the current etutor training programme for Teagasc etutors. Equipped with this knowledge and experience, I initiated cycle two.

#### **4.5 Action Research Cycle Two**

For Action research cycle two, I have also used the Action Research Planner (McNiff and Whitehead 2006:192) to explain how I progressed through this enquiry:

##### **4.5.1 What was my concern?**

In this cycle, my research focused on designing a training course for new eCollege tutors and developing resources to improve support and guidance for etutors. This research ensued from my concern of the limitations of the existing etutor training programme and etutor support mechanisms.

##### **4.5.2 Why was I concerned?**

I was concerned about the level of training and support for the etutors because I realised that my values were being contradicted by my practice. The training and support was not sufficient to provide the etutors with the required skills for effective tutoring practice. I wanted to carry out the research to stay consistent with my



values. These realisations brought about awareness that my living values were negated. I valued the development of skills and knowledge through training, support, guidance and professional integrity, but these values were compromised by the delivery of the existing etutor training programme. I was compelled to pursue this field of research in order to establish how other colleges delivered training and provided support for their etutors. I needed to find a solution to this problem of inadequate training and support. I knew that there were solutions to this problem and that I could bring about change by working through the process in collaboration with my colleagues.

#### **4.5.3 What experiences could I describe to show the reasons for my concern?**

When I reflected on my experience of delivering the existing etutor training, I realised that I was dissatisfied with the content and format of the training (Appendix C-Learning Journal week three). It was also evident from the evaluations of the etutor training programme that etutors would like more content such as procedures for dealing with late submissions to the bulletin board and standards for marking assessment (Appendix E). eTutors attended eCollege meetings twice yearly and received a handout detailing new developments. If an etutor missed this meeting, they would not receive the update on developments, as I found from my own experience as an etutor.

These realisations brought about awareness that my values were contradicted by my practice. I valued the development of skills and knowledge through training, support,

guidance and professional integrity, but these values were compromised by the delivery of the existing etutor training programme. I was compelled to pursue this field of research in order to establish how other colleges delivered training and provided support for their etutors. I needed to find a solution to this problem of inadequate training and support.

#### **4.5.4 What did I think I could do about it?**

Firstly, I assessed the possible options to solve this problem of inadequate training and support:

Option one involves an investigation into how other colleges and education institutions deliver etutor training programmes and development of specifications for a training course in conjunction with the Teagasc Curriculum and Quality Assurance unit. I would involve the current etutors in this process by gathering information on their training needs. With regard to the support mechanisms, I could investigate what type of formal support our etutors require and pilot the delivery of the training using the Teagasc eCollege VLE.

Option two involved making the suggestion to eCollege management to employ a consultant to audit the quality of the training and support. This would be a time-saving option as I had a lot of other work building up in my role as development officer.

#### **4.5.5 What did I do about it?**

I decided that I would take on option one as I felt that it was the most appropriate option available as the training issue needed to be addressed and action had to be taken. It was not problematic to go forward with this option, as I had been given responsibility for etutor training and could develop the specifications within my role.

##### *eTutor Training Course Specifications*

I decided that I would develop accredited specifications for an etutor training programme for the eCollege. The development of specifications for FETAC accreditation would involve collaboration with staff in the Teagasc Curriculum and Quality Assurance Unit and fellow colleagues in the eCollege. I circulated an online questionnaire to all eCollege tutors to gather information on their requirements for format, content and delivery mode of training.

##### *eTutor Resource Pack*

From the data gathered from the online questionnaire, 100% of participants agreed that they would like to have access to online resources. I reviewed a number of online College etutor services in order to identify how etutors were supported and guided. I compiled a set of resources for the eCollege etutors in line with recommendations by Duggleby et al (2002: 37) who assert that an etutor guide is a “comprehensive way to outline the key components of online tutoring and what is expected from the online tutor”. I followed these recommendations because I felt

that the key areas identified by the authors most suited the needs of the etutors in the eCollege.

#### *Online Discussion Forum*

Due to the lengthy process of submitting a course to FETAC for accreditation, there would not be an opportunity to involve participants in this new training in the current year. The online discussion forum offered a readily accessible platform to provide support, coaching and guidance to the new etutors.

#### **4.5.6 What kind of evidence did I produce to show the situation as it unfolded?**

##### *Course Specifications*

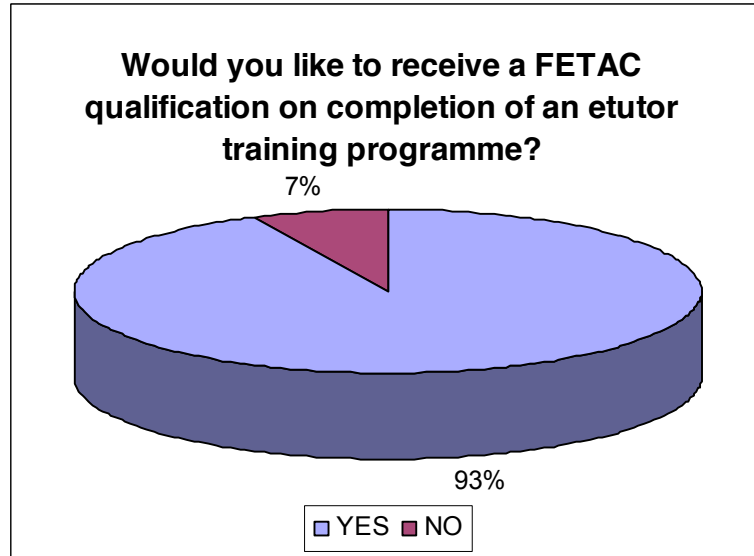
In order to establish the needs of the Teagasc etutors, I decided to circulate an online questionnaire to all etutors. I focused on the key information that I needed to elicit and structured the questions with this mind. I circulated the questions to three other people for their constructive criticism and suggestions. Taking their recommendations (Appendix G) on board, I made the suggested changes and emailed the details of the survey to fifty five etutors. I used Survey Console ([www.surveyconsole.com](http://www.surveyconsole.com)) to formulate and analyse the findings of questionnaire.

There were seven questions in the questionnaire:

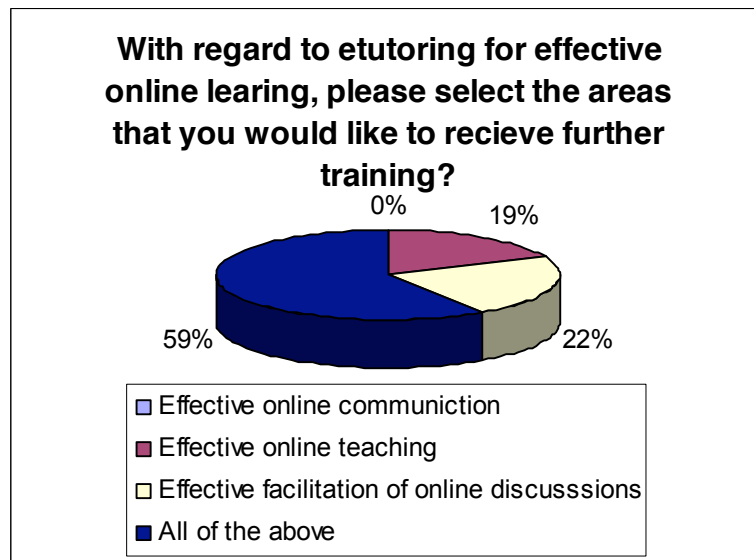
1. Would you like to undertake further training in tutoring? Yes/No
2. Would you like to receive a FETAC qualification on completion of an etutor training programme? Yes/No

3. What format would you prefer the training to take? Select one of the following: Delivered fully online/ delivered online with workshops/ Face to face workshop sessions only
4. With regard to etutor administration tasks, please select the areas that you would like to receive further training? Email management and record keeping/ setting up and management of forums/ correction and marking of examination scripts/ procedures for internal verification/ all of the above
5. With regard to tutoring for effective online practice, please select the areas that you would like to receive further training? Effective online communication/ effective online teaching/ effective facilitation of online discussions/ all of the above
6. Would you like to have online access to resources for etutors? Yes/ No
7. Additional comments/ suggestions

The results of this questionnaire (Appendix H) provided very useful information and assisted me to develop a template of course specifications for the key areas to be included in the new etutor training programme.



**Figure 4.1 Would you like to receive a FETAC qualification on completion of an etutor training programme?**



**Figure 4.2 With regard to etutoring for effective online learning; please select the areas that you would like to receive further training?**

I sent emails to a number of etutor course directors, tutors and organisers in order to ascertain the content, duration and delivery of etutor training programmes on an international level. I emailed the Online Learning Manager at the Sheffield College which runs the Learning to Teach Online (LeTToL) Course in the United Kingdom, , the Programme Director for the Training Online to Teach Online (TOTO) programme at Baltimore City Community College in the United States of America and the Deputy Director in the Blended Learning Unit in the University of Hertfordshire in United Kingdom (Appendix C-Learning Journal week 6).The information that I received was invaluable in compiling the content and structure of the etutor training programme(Appendix I).

I contacted the Teagasc Curriculum and Quality Assurance unit to establish the requirements for course design and accreditation by FETAC. I received advice on course specifications and the procedure for FETAC approval (Appendix J). I compiled the first draft of the course specifications (Appendix K) based on information received from course directors, data gathered in online etutor survey and from findings in literature previously reviewed. I emailed this draft to the Curriculum and Quality Assurance unit and in a follow-up phone call received valuable constructive criticism and recommendations for changes to ensure that the specifications were in line with FETAC requirements (Appendix J).The main roles and competencies of the Teagasc eCollege concur with those identified by Goodfellow (1999). I also discussed the content of the training course with my supervisor during a scheduled meeting. Margaret must useful suggestions that I

implemented, such as getting the learners active at the start of the course. The final version of the etutor training programme was submitted to the Teagasc Curriculum and Quality Assurance unit for submission to FETAC.

### *eTutor Resource Pack*

I compiled a draft version of the resource pack including information on accessing the VLE, setting up and facilitating online discussion and monitoring student progress. At an etutor meeting in April 2006, I circulated this draft version in order to evaluate the content and find out if the etutors required more information in any areas. This was a very useful exercise as I received positive feedback from etutors and also recommendations for more information to be included in the resource pack, such as features of the student VLE (Appendix C- Learning Journal week 11). By involving our etutors in the process of developing these resources, I felt that it exhibited to the etutors that the eCollege staff valued their opinions and comments. In developing these resources, it also showed that we were aware of their needs and experiences as etutors and displayed a desire on our part to support them. It also gave me an opportunity to identify the duties of etutors and to commend them for their work. In further collaboration with colleagues in the eCollege, it was also requested that I should include a section on plagiarism. I made the final inclusions and changes to the etutor resource pack as suggested by colleagues and etutors and circulated the final version to eCollege colleagues as a resource (Appendix M)



*An Online discussion Forum as a platform for delivery of training*

Due to an increased number of learners on the agricultural training course, two courses were scheduled for 2006 and the new etutors were involved in delivering training in the both courses, I felt that support and guidance should be provided to the new etutors in order to identify any problem areas, before they start their second session tutoring in the second agricultural course. Time was a restricting factor as many of the new etutors were college teachers and as the end of the academic year was approaching, they were not available to attend a face to face session.

In Case study three in Chapter two, Banks et al. (2004) provided support after initial training using online discussion forums. With this idea in mind, I decided to pilot the delivery of support and coaching to the new etutors using the online discussions forums in the Teagasc VLE. The pilot programme of support and coaching would be evaluated to determine if it is a suitable mode of delivery of training platform for eCollege staff. I circulated an email to all new etutors to inform them of the upcoming discussion forum decided that an online discussion (Appendix N).

Salmon (2002:1) referred to e-tivities as “motivating, engaging and purposeful... designed and led by an e-moderator”. I modelled the discussions on the e-tivities framework as I found them the most suitable for this purpose. I facilitated the discussions and referred to the suggestions from etutors for training needs given in the online survey to determine the content.

The discussions were timetabled for the first two weeks in May. There were four participants in the discussion forum that I facilitated. The discussions ran for a two week period in May (Appendix O). Palloff and Pratt (1999: 76) proposed that online discussions should commence with introductions from all participants as “jumping into the course material without this creates an atmosphere that is dry and sterile, devoid of any sense that people are engaged here”. With this in mind, I posted a welcome message to start the discussions, introducing myself and my background and requesting all participants to introduce themselves. I posted a schedule of the discussion topics on the forum so that participants were aware of the timing and content of discussions. Each discussion topic was posted as a new topic in the discussion forum in order to avoid congestion and improve interaction and continued participation (Bender 2003). The second discussion topic involved participants reflecting on their first experience of tutoring. I used this topic because I felt that it was more beneficial for tutors to reflect and assess their own performance as tutors rather than for me to dictate how tutoring should be performed. The Teagasc eCollege VLE does not have learning journals as a resource for participants, so I used some of the discussion topics to help participants reflect. I checked the forums twice daily and responded to participants within 24 hours in order to model tutor good practice, which is recommended by Salmon (2003) and also advocated by Banks et al. (2004) in Case study four. I also ensured that my replies were well structured and grammatically correct as advocated by Bender (2003), in order to set the tone for discussions.

#### **4.5.7 How did I ensure that any conclusions I came to were reasonably fair and accurate?**

During the course of my research, I attended two validation meetings to ensure that my conclusions were reasonably fair and accurate. The validation meetings consisted of my class colleagues in the DCU masters programme and two supervisors. This group was chosen as they were experienced in education and training management specialising in the field of ICT. At the first validation meeting on 15<sup>th</sup> June 2006, I presented the provisional conclusions of my research (Appendix R). I used a question and answer style for a format for presenting my research strategy and findings. After this meeting, I received feedback from my course supervisor that the focus and findings of my work were unclear and it was recommended that I should review my findings and the explanation of the strategy that I undertook. I accepted this feedback because I valued the opinions and knowledge of the participants in my validation group and I realised that I was so involved in this study that I had lost a clear vision of my research study. I recognised that I was “lost” in the swampy lowlands of everyday practice as referred to by Schön (1983). I presented my research work again to my validation group on 20<sup>th</sup> June (Appendix R) where I received positive feedback from the group. The members agreed that the research focus and question was defined clearly and the strategy for my work was structured and my educational values were expressed and referred to throughout my presentation.

I also discussed the layout and delivery of the programme with my critical colleague (Appendix S). He expressed that the development of specifications would be very beneficial to the overall success of the eCollege as it put a framework on place to train all our etutors to a given standard. I discussed the use of the online discussion forum for delivery of training with him. He felt that this was worthwhile as it provided immediate training and support for etutors and could now implemented as a mode of providing training as it had proved successful.

#### **4.5.8 How did I evaluate the validity of the account of my learning?**

I took great care in the research procedures that I undertook in making my claim to knowledge. The standards of judgement that I used were my own educational and professional values:

- Fairness
- Professional Integrity-
- Team work
- Support

I used these standards of judgement to validate this account of my learning. I value fairness, a concept that is often eroded in the workplace currently. I wanted to ensure that all etutors were treated with fairness and were not asked to complete skills that they were not competent to fulfil. In developing a new etutor training programme, it is hoped that all etutors will complete this training, which will enrich their skills, knowledge and competencies.

Professional integrity is a value that I believe is a central tenet to a content life. I have always strived to perform my job to a high level of efficiency. This is often compromised when working in a new field of practice as the new tasks and knowledge has to be learned first. In my role as etutor trainer, I wanted to ensure that I trained etutors to a high level of skills and competency. By investigating and evaluating the existing training programme for etutors, I equipped myself with background information that I used to integrate the existing training programme into a new etutor training programme and ensure that etutors would now gain the essential knowledge and skills to fulfil their role.

I value teamwork as an essential factor to create a dynamic environment. In this enquiry, I worked collaboratively with a number of Teagasc staff both in course development and extraction of opinions, information and data.

I place a high value on provision of support and training to people whom are working in a new field of practice. I lived this value by firstly developing the etutor resource pack so that etutors had resource available to them at any time and were not fully dependent on the telephone support provided by the eCollege staff. I further developed this support mechanism by facilitating an online discussion forum for new etutors. The discussion forum ran over a two week period discussing issues such as forum management, administration tasks and student participation. This proved a successful mode to support and coach etutors. It provided a

I referred to these values as standards of judgement and explained how I used them to validate this study in my validation meetings and final meeting with critical colleague. Throughout my research, I maintained personal reflections, summaries of meetings and emails sent and received to explain how my learning progressed and deepened during this study.

The following four questions were answered in my presentations to the validation group and critical colleague in the process of social validation as referred to by Farren (2005):

- Are the descriptions and explanations for my learning comprehensible?

The language and terminology that I have used throughout this study is clear and unambiguous. I have clearly identified my position in the enquiry and described my experiences which led me to my concerns. I have adhered to the criteria and prescribed thesis format as outlined by Dublin City University School of Education Studies. I have expressed my opinions, thoughts and my recognition of learning throughout the process.

- Is there sufficient evidence to justify the claims being made?

I provided evidence to justify the claims my claim to new knowledge. I referred to extracts from my online learning journal reflections and finding of questionnaires and evaluations. I also provided emails and summaries of meetings and conversations to provide evidence of my claim.

- Are the values that constitute the enquiry as “educational” clearly revealed and justified?

I have revealed the values that influence my professional practice as fairness as I believe that all people should be treated fairly and are entitled to training and support if working in a new field. I also value my own professional integrity in that I want to complete my every day tasks to a high level of efficiency and effectiveness and to support and assist my colleagues in the eCollege. I value a professional and positive approach in the face of problems. I feel that it is crucial to gather sufficient information from learners in order to include them in a process that will affect them- Finally, I believe that people working together in a team can create a dynamic atmosphere and that support and guidance should be provided to people when taking on a new field of practice

- Is there evidence of the practitioner-researchers’ educational influence on the learning of others?

The evidence from this enquiry that I had an educational influence on the learning of others is displayed in the online discussion forum that I facilitated for a group of new etutors. I also provided evidence in the form of my reflections on the evaluations from etutors.

#### **4.5.9 How did I modify my practice in the light of my evaluation?**

By implementing this enquiry, I developed new practices to support and train etutors and also developed new thinking in this area. I changed my practice in a number of

ways. My practice in the support and training of etutors has modified in a number of ways as a result of the evaluation of my learning. Firstly, I am more aware of the needs of etutors so this will influence the level at which I communicate with our etutors. I ensure that I explain all areas and clarify that they understand what I am saying. I cannot assume that all etutors have the same level of knowledge. This awareness stemmed from the type of questions from etutors at the meeting where I presented the draft resource pack. The online survey provided valuable information for the training needs of etutors and I could also elicit the key areas that etutors prioritise for further training. I am aware that as an etutor trainer, new etutors refer to my actions to model their own etutor practice. As a consequence of this, I ensure that I respond to my own students in a timely fashion and adhering to the guidelines for good forum management that I developed.

I facilitated an online discussion forum to support new etutors in their practice. This was an improvement on the previous action research cycle where there were no formal support mechanisms in place. Using the online discussion forums was a new initiative for the Teagasc eCollege. However, it proved to be a successful platform to deliver training and guidance to newly trained etutors that were dispersed all over Ireland. My value of support was realised in this discussion forum, as it ensured that new etutors were offered support and training and were not unfairly coerced into an tutoring role.



My value of gathering sufficient information on learners and their environments planning training that will affect them was realised in the online questionnaire that I circulated to all etutors. The questionnaire provided etutors with an opportunity to express their perceived needs and opinions with regard to etutor training.

I lived my value of fairness in developing a new structure for etutor training that will provide a framework and a standard for all etutors in the Teagasc eCollege. After many hours of discussion and collaboration with others, I finally submitted specifications for a new training course for etutors to FETAC for accreditation. This new course will ensure fairness in so far that etutors will be adequately equipped with skills, knowledge and competence to fulfil their role as etutors.

On reflection, I would schedule the online discussion forum during a time when tutors are free to participate. I would also extend the duration and content of the discussions, so more online collaboration is facilitated between participants and new approaches to tutoring could be demonstrated.

Although it is evident that this is the end of action research cycle two, I realise that my enquiry is not complete. I need to test the new practices that have evolved from a transformation of my previous practice through new knowledge. These new practices must be evaluated and improved where necessary. I will in turn generate new practices and new thinking. In action research, this is deemed only to be the half way point of this study. Furthermore, I must realise that this study has taken me to a new beginning in my practice as an etutor trainer. I have gained a deeper understanding of etutors needs and training requirements. At this stage, I can

confirm that I intend to live by my expressed values. I feel compelled to investigate the effectiveness of the pedagogical approach in the discussion forums as they are intensely teacher-led and task orientated. I believe that we as eCollege staff need to encourage more collaboration between students and etutors in problem solving, critical thinking activities.

#### **4.5.10 Reflections on Action Research Cycle Two**

In action research cycle two, I realised that other people can offer valuable opinions and insights and can elicit new ideas that I may not have thought about. But there are risks associated with going outside my own domain of comfort as a professional, but I have realised that the benefit of doing so outweigh the potential risks

In action research cycle two, I aimed to deliver a new training programme to etutors. Due to the scheduling of agricultural courses and the timeframe involved in seeking FETAC accreditation for the course it was not possible to run the new training programme. I learned that external factors must be taken into consideration when planning the development and delivery of training. However, despite these restrictions; I was determined to provide support and coaching to the new etutors. I suspected that there would be areas that they would need clarification and guidance on, so I was prompted to provide this support using an online platform. The online discussion forum was successfully piloted to support and coach newly trained etutors in improvement of their practice.

I was not familiar with the area of curriculum development. But I enjoyed the task of developing specifications and complying with FETAC course requirements in collaboration with others to achieve a common goal.

I learned that provision of support materials and resources are crucial when working in a new or unfamiliar field. I developed the resource pack for etutors with the intention that etutors would have access to materials to support them in their role as etutors. One etutor referred to the resource pack as a “one stop shop” for all his needs, which provided me with an assurance that it was beneficial to him.

During the etutor meeting when I circulated the draft format of the resource pack to the etutors, I also gained a greater understanding of the needs of the etutors. There were a number of questions from etutors with regard to the student VLE. I have omitted this area from the resource pack as I mistakenly decided that all etutors were familiar with it. From this session with the etutors, I realised that I should not make assumptions of people’s knowledge. Following this, I set up a test student and circulated the login details to all etutors, so that they could log into the student VLE and familiarise themselves with the site.

#### **4.6 Validations claim to new knowledge**

In my field of practice as an etutor trainer, I can establish that my learning and the learning of others has been affected as a result of this study. My learning has been altered as I have progressed from the inexperienced position of a newly appointed etutor trainer to that of a more experienced, more enlightened etutor trainer. This

enquiry has provided me with a process to understand my practice and in expressing this understanding; I am creating my own living theory. This theory is deeply embedded in and generated from all my actions and practice as an etutor trainer. This new theory will influence new practices, which will evolve and establish new theories and practices again.

As I reflect on my influence on the learning of others, I admit that there is no clear evidence of my affect in this study. However, the online discussion forum was used a platform for the exchange of information between the experienced etutor and the not so experienced etutors. I feel that through this interaction, I have influenced their learning in a small way. The second task that I posed in the discussion forum was for etutors to reflect on their experience of first time tutoring. In doing so, the etutors had to describe their online practice and give reasons for those actions. At the end of the discussion, the etutors had to describe what they would do differently next time tutoring. In this exercise, it helped etutors to recognise that they had developed their own skills by participating in the online discussion forum and could improve their practice. As a result, I believe that I have influenced the learning of etutors on a small but significant scale.

#### **4.7 Summary**

In this chapter, I have presented my work in this study using two action research cycles. I use the action research planner to show the process of my thinking and actions. I have described the processes that I have undertaken and explained the reasons and background of those processes.

# Chapter Five

## Conclusion

### 5.1 Conclusion

The Lisbon Agreement was a radical objective set by the European Union to develop its member states as the “most competitive and dynamic knowledge-driven economy in the world, capable of sustaining economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion” (WWW1). Provision of training at all levels was identified as one of the key areas for prioritisation in the drive to elevate the European Union to this status. Teagasc subsequently established the eCollege in adherence with this objective.

In November 2005, I started in my new role as online development officer in the Teagasc eCollege with responsibility for etutor training. This was a new field of work for me and I took on this post with energy and a desire to fulfil my role as competently as I could. From the knowledge gained in this Masters course at Dublin City University and my own experience of tutoring, I felt that the etutor training programme in the eCollege needed to be evaluated. The focus of this enquiry was to improve the support and training for etutors in the Teagasc eCollege. In action research cycle one; I undertook an investigation of the format, content and effectiveness of the current etutor training programme. The existing training course was blended, online tasks mixed with one workshop session. I had the opportunity to

evaluate the training from the trainer's viewpoint as I delivered an element of the training to a group of 33 new etutors in January 2006. Evaluations were sent to course participants in order to establish their level of satisfaction and opinions on the suitability of the training.

In action research cycle two, the enquiry progressed further into the support and training mechanisms for etutors in the eCollege. I developed specifications for a new etutor training programme, to be accredited by FETAC, in collaboration with staff from the Teagasc eCollege and Teagasc Curriculum and Quality Assurance unit. A resource pack for etutors was compiled to provide etutors with and an online discussion was facilitated to provide support and coaching to newly trained etutors. The online discussion forum proved a worthwhile experience for all participants as they had access to an online environment that they could benefit from, rather than just etutoring in.

During both action research cycle cycles, at times I grappled with all the new information and data that I was gaining. Furthermore, I had to develop my administration skills to deal with managing the etutoring of 120 students in the online agricultural course that ran simultaneously to this study.

However, the driving force behind this enquiry was the realisation that my practice was not in accordance with my educational and professional values. The living theory in action research methodology provided me with a strategy to address this

contradiction. I used these living values as standards of judgement to validate my learning and the learning of others.

Winter (1989) identifies what he believes are the main principles in the conduct of action research: reflexivity, dialectics, collaborative resource, risk, theory and practice and transformation. From a reflexive viewpoint, this thesis is based on a small scale self study and analysis into practice of providing support and training to etutors in an eCollege. The findings may be specific to my practice but can be considered by other research-practitioners in developing their own theories in practice.

Dialectics involves the resolution of differences by question and answer. In this research, I identified that there was a contradiction with regard to my educational and professional values prompting my question: How do I improve support and training of etutor in the Teagasc eCollege? I was not practicing in adherence to the values that I had established over the last ten years as a lecturer. This initial question was then transferred into ideas and further strategic questions in the form of the action research planner (Whitehead and McNiff 2006: 91). Through this enquiry, I have investigated my practice and implemented measures that negate the contradiction of my values.

Action research involves working in collaboration with other people in the practitioner's field of practice and beyond. As I was working in a new field of

practice, advice and opinions from colleagues were a central tenet in my learning throughout this enquiry. I also facilitated an online discussion forum with tutors to support them in their practice. Also, the validation meetings held through the last six months, as outlined in chapter four, involved the questioning and critiquing of my work. This process of validation assisted me to clarify my focus and ensure that the research methodology I used was rigorous and valid.

At a professional level, there are risks involved in publicising an enquiry into your own practice as it may not reflect positively on the practitioner's competence or capabilities. When circulating evaluations on training that I delivered, I felt exposed and at risk as I publicly requested opinions on my practice. But in doing so, I was creating my own living theory by improving my practice of support and training. This study may be referred to by others in the future in the development of their own living theories.

The symbiosis of theory and practice in an educational field is a much debated topic. Theory and practice are deeply intertwined and co-dependent as theories can only be proved in practice and practice is based on theories. Action research facilitates reflection on theory in which practice is grounded but also facilitates the researcher-practitioner to affect change in their own field of practice. I engaged in action research because I was concerned about my role and my practice and wanted to bring about change or improvement in some way. Transformation of practice results in theory based practice transforming or altering thus demonstrating the co-



dependency of both. The living education theory in particular encapsulates this process of transformation of practice following a realisation of contradiction of living values.

I can conclude that my learning and the learning of others has been affected by this enquiry. I confirm that an improvement in the support and training mechanisms for new etutors has been achieved through my actions in collaboration with many others. I have developed my own living theory in transforming my practice to support and train etutors in the Teagasc eCollege.

### **Recommendations**

- Online discussion forums can be implemented as a successful element of training and coaching for etutors. The discussion topics will be structured, specific and tailored to tutors needs.
- Online training for etutors should incorporate the use of a “model” etutor to demonstrate good etutor practice as the etutors can experience the benefits of effective tutoring from the learner’s perspective.
- eTutor training should be available at off-peak times so that etutors can focus on the training and also that participation numbers are higher.
- An online learning environment can be developed and designed to deliver an etutor training programme.

### **5.1.2 Areas that will be investigated for future work**

- To assess the learning experience of online course participants using the current pedagogical approach in discussion forums. Currently, they are tutor led and task orientated.
- To develop a model for training to deliver specialised training for etutors with varying levels of experience- beginner, intermediate and advanced. To address the issue of etutors with a variety of computer skills and experience with the VLE.
- Investigate the implementation of a long term ecoaching system to support new etutors in their practice
- To investigate the integration of learning journals to record learner's experiences and reflections, in the Teagasc eCollege VLE