THE SYMBIOTIC LEARNING PARADIGM (SLP): A LEARNER-CENTRED CURRICULUM DESIGN APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

The Symbiotic Learning Paradigm (SLP) has developed from practice in the Centre for Adult Continuing Education at University College Cork (UCC). Central to this practice are the core concepts of 'Learner at the Centre' and 'Lifelong and Life-wide Learning.' SLP offers a curriculum design approach that is dynamic and adaptive for the rapidly changing and perpetually challenging world of twenty-first teaching and learning in higher education. It offers a new curriculum design lens that places the learner at the centre and focuses on the importance of collaborative co-designing relationships within and beyond the university as a means to achieve this. Life-wide learning recognises that people occupy different learning spaces (personal, professional, public, community) and the lifelong learning journey provides the learner with a variety of learning experiences (Jackson, 2012). SLP offers a flexible and reflexive approach to co-designing these varied learning experiences. As part of the Erasmus+ ECOLHE Project: Empowering Competencies in 'Onlife' Learning, SLP was piloted in six higher education contexts across Europe. Through this process SLP has been developed and refined as a model of best practice and as evidence-based critical reflection on practice to improve practice in higher education. Its process of inquiry into teaching and curriculum design as a 'practically oriented activity, conducted collegially' through the ECOLHE project has grounded it in the scholarship of teaching and learning (Prosser, 2008). Through the piloting process of the ECOLHE project we came to understand that the central tenet of the SLP approach to curriculum design is 'Learner at the Centre' and so this is the concept that we will discuss here in the ECOLHE final conference paper.

BACKGROUND

University College Cork (UCC) has been providing adult education-based courses since the early 1910's and the Centre for Adult Continuing Education (ACE) as an organisation has been operating since 1946. It began by providing a diploma in Social and Economic Science and it has grown to provide over 90 programmes ranging through social science; arts, culture and heritage; community, diversity and inclusion; business and coaching; health and wellbeing; education and learning and a wide range of cross-sector personal and professional development programmes delivered locally, nationally and online. Its purpose is to provide opportunities in lifelong learning within UCC for all adults irrespective of age and previous educational background. The Symbiotic Learning Paradigm emerged from ACE's practice of learner-centred and transformative lifelong and life-wide learning provision, and this has shaped our design choices through this research process. Curriculum design at ACE embraces all forms and types of learning. It is driven by learner interests, needs, and values - both professionally and personally - and this is why 'Learner at the Centre' is at the core of the holistic SLP approach. SLP was chosen as the name for this approach because 'symbiotic' denotes a mutually beneficial relationship between different people or groups, and collaborative co-design relationships are key to the success of the SLP approach. We chose 'learning' rather than 'teaching' to highlight the lifelong and life-wide

learning context of the approach and to centralise the 'learner' rather than the 'teacher' for twenty-first century teaching and learning. Finally, SLP is a 'paradigm' as it proposes a set of assumptions from which you can begin co-designing lifelong and life-wide learning curricula in higher education. SLP is not a framework, model, or method, it is a perspective that challenges traditional higher education curriculum design assumptions and opens curriculum design processes.

Coming from a constructivist approach to teaching and learning at ACE, SLP recognises the importance of the learner's prior knowledge, experiences and unique perspectives and aims to bring this not only into the learning environment but also into the design processes of curricula. For this to happen attention must be given to the processes of engagement with SLP to consider how this learner perspective is positioned in the dialogic space alongside the other 'professional' stakeholders. This is why a participatory and co-design approach is central to SLP. We acknowledge that this is an approach that will need to be worked towards in HEIs, but it is in the process of moving towards a participatory and co-design process that space and time is allocated to placing the learner at the centre of their learning. This is not an accomplished task at ACE but rather part of an ongoing process to centralise the learner in all processes.

ECOLHE PROJECT

The SLP approach was piloted through the ECOLHE project, and the research activities (Fig. 1) found SLP to be robust and flexible as our partners in each HEI context were able to engage with the process regardless of the stage of design of a programme. Our partner's universities largely provide traditional undergraduate and postgraduate degree programmes but in a variety of formats i.e. online, in-person, blended, asynchronous. We viewed the ECOLHE project as an important opportunity to critically explore implementing SLP in higher education contexts that differ to ACE. Flexibility within the design of SLP is important as the higher education sector is diverse and HEIs often act with a significant amount of autonomy within the sector and within the various colleges/schools of an individual HEI. The flexibility of SLP allows it to be used as a co-designing method in traditional higher education contexts as well as contexts with a focus on designing lifelong learning opportunities. Praxis in education research involves a deep exploration of pedagogical experiences and theory to critique practice (Arnold, Edwards, Hooley, & Williams, 2012) and for our output we challenged our partners to engage in this critical praxis at the design phase, through facilitated co-design workshops with learners and both internal and external stakeholders. We had a set of ten original elements (Version 1) that we considered central to the SLP approach and through the project we refined these based on the 'meaning making' of our partners' through their evaluations of engaging in the SLP process in their contexts (Version 2). We also facilitated workshops with our own staff for their reflective evaluations and feedback to further refine the approach, so it reflects their lifelong learning ethos, values and practices (Version 3). This last step was important as an aim of creating and refining the paradigm was to make explicit the implicit lifelong learning values and practices at ACE, to define clearly and concisely our processes so we can then open our processes of designing for lifelong learning in higher education to the wider sector. As part of the research activities for ECOLHE the project partners facilitated a reflective workshop to self-assess the piloting process using a set of qualitative indicators and the data they gathered in their reports was then analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022).
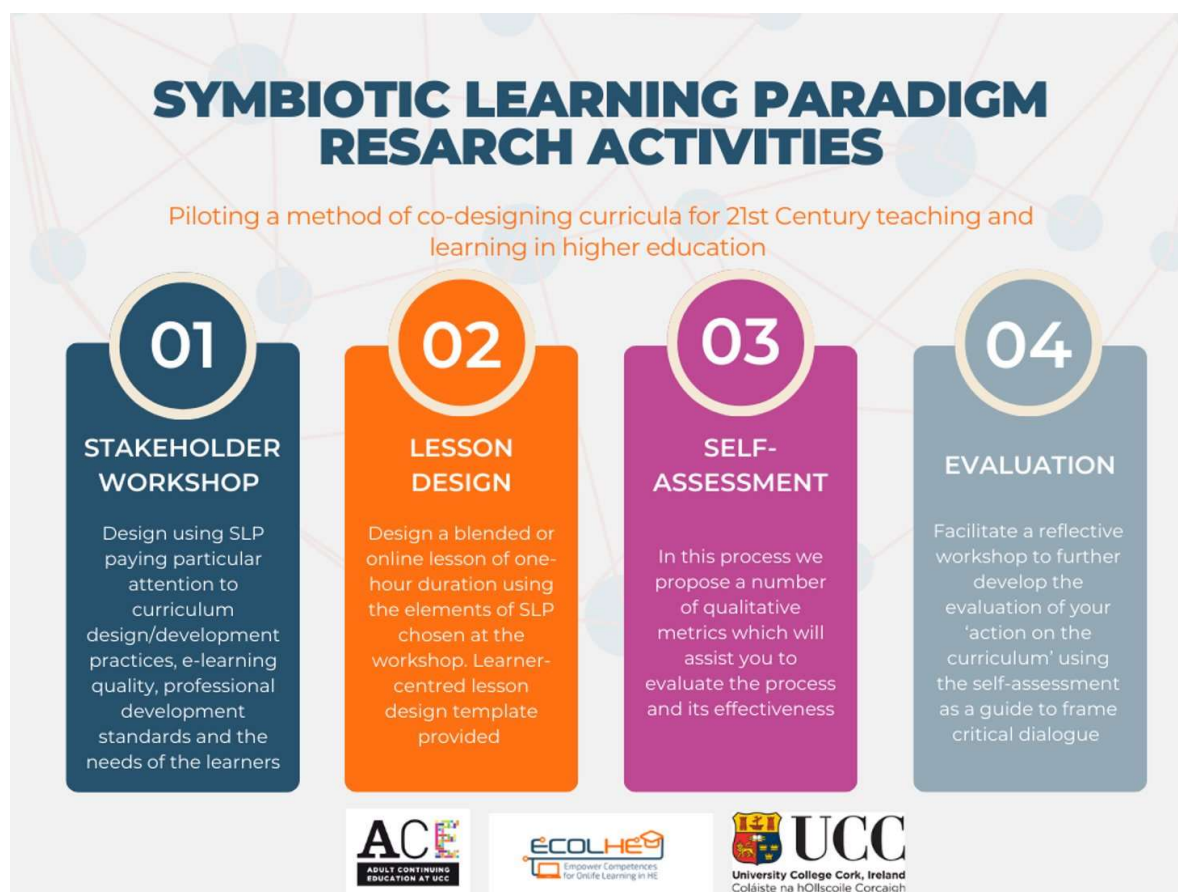
Fig. 1 Summary of the 104 – SLP Research Activities undertaken as part of ECOLHE

FINDINGS

From our piloting process we understand that the central concepts underpinning the SLP approach to curriculum design are 'Learner at the Centre' and 'Lifelong and Life-wide Learning.' Through the ECOLHE project the key elements of the approach have been refined – some of the original ones have been replaced, updated and/or re-worded – and we now have eight key elements to the paradigm. These are:

1) Collaborative Relationships
2) Tripartite Stakeholders: Learners, Externals & HEIs
3) Flexible, Accessible and Open
4) Reflective Education
5) Knowledge and Skill Adaptive
6) Transversal Competencies
7) Responsive to Unpredictable Futures
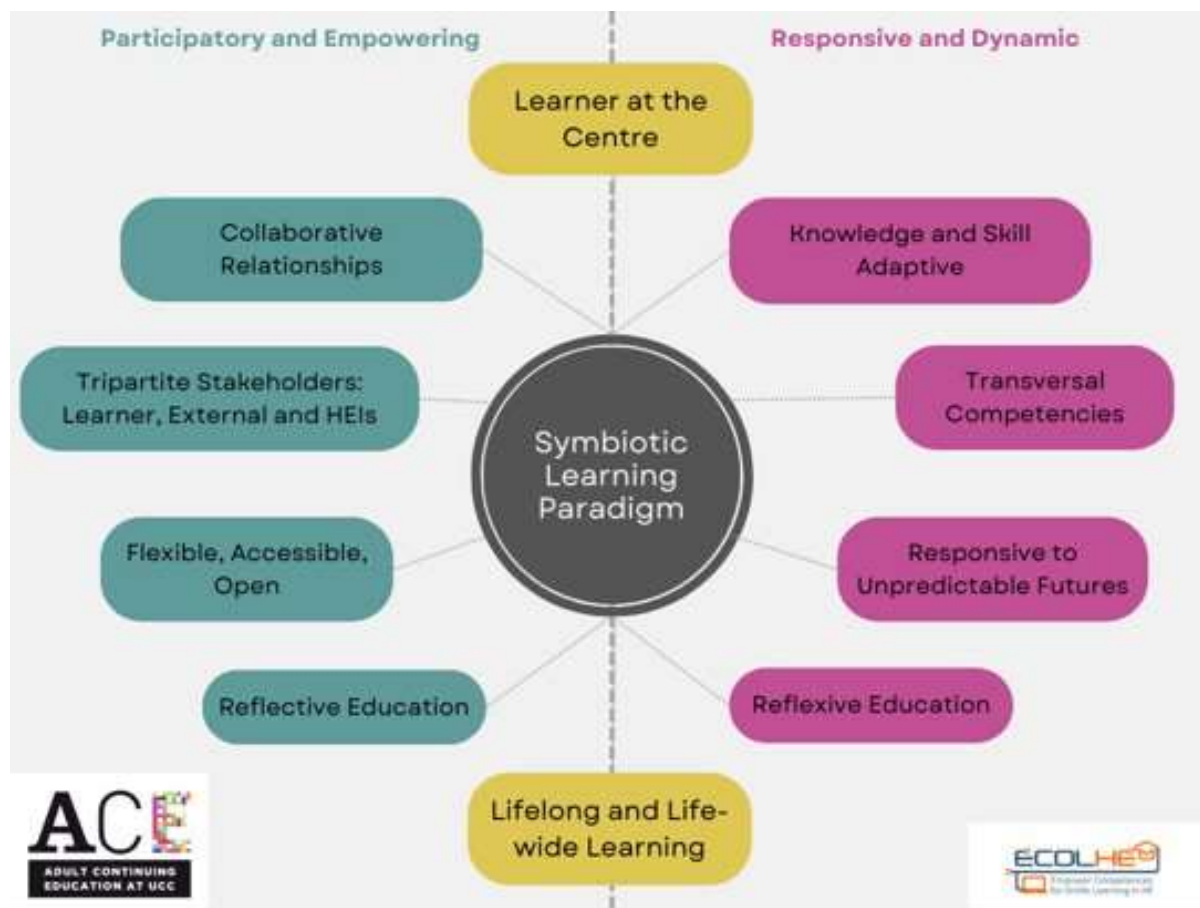8) Reflexive Education

Fig. 2. Symbiotic Learning Paradigm – Themes, Concepts & Elements (Version 3)

These eight elements have been grouped into two themes that emerged 'Participatory & Empowering' and 'Responsive & Dynamic.' The qualitative indicators used to self-assess the SLP process during the research activities have also been refined based on the partner's evaluations and form part of the **Guide for Implementing SLP - part of the ECOLHE Research Output 104 Symbiotic Learning Paradigm and can be accessed from the ECOLHE Project website**. This guide is an open access resource for any higher education institutions wanting to use SLP as an innovative and piloted approach to designing lifelong learning curricula. Each partner when engaging with SLP added to our depth of understanding of it as a curriculum design approach. They used terms and concepts when writing up their reflections under the qualitative indicators, terms and concepts that we did not provide them with, but that emerged for them as important through engaging with SLP in their contexts. These are provided in the summary table here (Fig. 3) and we have used them to refine the design of the SLP approach. We are very grateful to our ECOLHE partners for sharing their valuable insights through their thoughtful and authentic engagement with the SLP approach.

ECOLHE Partner University	Key terms
Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (UOC)	Participation, empowerment, learners as stakeholders
Roma Tre University (RTR)	Learning to learn, transformative learning, sustainable approach, bottom-up process
Laurea University of Applied Sciences (LAU)	Valuing time for reflective discussion, clear frameworks, good facilitation
University of Patras (UPAT)	Strengthening the connection between HEIs, Market needs and Learners needs
Link Campus University (LCU)	Role of instructional designer, peer exchange
Adult Continuing Education (ACE)	Evolution of courses, learners as curriculum designers

Fig. 3. Table of key terms that emerged from the analysis of the ECOLHE partners' evaluative reports

In the continuing spirit of collaboration and co-design the above key terms are referenced in the developed conceptual understanding of SLP discussed throughout our chapter in the final project publication which is available on the **ECOLHE** website. For example, two terms that were central to the reflective discussion by UOC on their engagement with SLP were 'participation' and 'empowerment' and were mentioned by other participants also. However, taken in isolation they lose the depth of meaning attributed to them by our UOC partners in this extract:

"What enables inclusion is not only the SLP methodology itself, but **the decision to apply a model of participation and empowerment**. Therein lies the fundamental point. Obviously, a well-structured and clearly guided model helps to adequately apply the process, but **the initial decision has the power to change** the course design. The guidelines and structure of the model are essential to ensure the success of all the design process. And when **the disruptive vision of this process** is implemented, it is essential to guarantee its success, because **failure can promote a negative perception of stakeholders' active participation** in the curriculum design" (UOC).

Also, the meaningful insights from our UOC partners highlight the historic origins of ACE's practice, an Irish adult education practice borne from the community development principles of 'participation' and 'empowerment,' and positions SLP as a contemporary means to embed these principles in the design of higher education curricula (Ledwith, M. 2016). As highlighted by our UOC colleagues, it is the consistency of commitment to the approach from the outset that is the key to creating meaningful and authentic lifelong and life-wide learning opportunities in higher education. They also offer us a sound warning on the necessary commitment to the process to increase empowering participation in authentically collaborative relationships and we have heeded it and worked to develop a user guide that embeds these in the process. Keeping the learner at the centre of higher education processes requires us to design collaborative approaches that increase learner participation in all aspects of their learning and supports their empowerment to do so authentically.

LEARNER AT THE CENTRE

SLP challenges us to engage in a curriculum design approach that necessitates continually re-centralising the learner. Putting the learner at the centre is a constant challenge in curriculum design as it breaks from the traditional content-centred design approach that we are all familiar with. We need to challenge ourselves and our processes, critically reflect on each process to push the changes that are necessary to put the learner at the centre in any authentically humanistic way. The conditions for learner engagement in higher education processes require the HEI to be experienced as 'a site of democratic citizenship, as a learning community and as a critical institution' (HEA, 2016). SLP fosters debate and

enables learner participation in decision-making structures and processes. If genuine learner engagement is to happen then the learners need to feel a certain degree of 'loyalty' to the HEI and so the SLP workshops need to be facilitated as communities of practice to generate a sense of belonging (Lave and Wenger, 1991). HEIs are central to a culture of challenge and critical thinking and so we begin the SLP approach by honestly challenging our higher education culture and questioning our own assumptions so we can facilitate a more democratic and socially safe space of collaboration and co-design. As students 'need support in developing not only knowledge and skills but also attitudes and values, which can guide them towards ethical and responsible actions' (OECD, 2019), teaching staff need a more collaborative approach to designing and developing the curricula that can support the development of these attributes.

Through the piloting process of ECOLHE we have learned that SLP needs to be used regularly and utilised at all official times of curriculum design and development to keep the learner central. In the current system of higher education, curriculum design processes can often position the higher education staff as experts who consult with stakeholders, and learners can then subsequently be positioned as 'service users' who provide feedback (often with low response rates) on their learning experiences. SLP pushes us to challenge ourselves and our systems, to critically examine our processes, to be less paternalistic towards learners, and to actively collaborate with them in the decision-making processes of curriculum design. Freirean emancipatory education principles inform ACE's humanistic approach yet the formal systems in higher education do not always seamlessly match with this ethos, and we propose SLP as a way to bring adult education and lifelong learning principles directly into the higher education curriculum design process.

CONCLUSION

Through the ECOLHE project we have deepened our understanding of the central role of the learners to the approach. SLP is a participatory approach to curriculum design with the inclusion of learners as stakeholders in the design of their own curricula - not learners **and** stakeholders but learners **as** stakeholders. Through ECOLHE we know that engaging with SLP is a reflective process and it can be used effectively at any stage of the curriculum design process. It is a holistic approach that opens the university curriculum design processes to learners and external stakeholders. Centralising the learner in the curriculum design process requires a reflective approach that questions traditional HEI assumptions about their role and the learner's role in curriculum design. The collaborative relationships and processes of SLP need to be authentically designed and reflectively maintained if it is to be sustainable. The ECLOHE project allowed us to refine our curriculum design approach and we are very grateful for the efforts of our partners who engaged so authentically and meaningfully with the process in their own higher education contexts. The ECOLHE project allowed us to gain a much deeper understanding of SLP and we have made refining design changes in response to this. SLP has emerged from a unique teaching and learning space and is intended for use by institutions wanting to design curricula that provide lifelong and life-wide learning opportunities in higher education.

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