



Assessing the value of SCOTENS as a cross-border professional learning network in Ireland using the Wenger–Trayner value-creation framework

Clarke, L., Galvin, C., Campbell, M., Cowan, P., Hall, K., Magennis, G., O'Doherty, T., Purdy, N., & Abbott, L. (2020). Assessing the value of SCOTENS as a cross-border professional learning network in Ireland using the Wenger–Trayner value-creation framework. *Oxford Review of Education*, 47(1), 79-97. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2020.1835624>

[Link to publication record in Ulster University Research Portal](#)

Published in:
Oxford Review of Education

Publication Status:
Published online: 24/11/2020

DOI:
[10.1080/03054985.2020.1835624](https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2020.1835624)

Document Version
Author Accepted version

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Assessing the value of a Cross-Border professional learning network in Ireland, from the Good Friday Agreement to Brexit, *using a Wenger-Trayner framework*

1. Introduction

1.1 The evaluation imperative

SCoTENS (the Standing Conference on Teacher Education North and South) is a unique network of teacher educators from north and south of the border which separates Northern Ireland from the Republic of Ireland. SCoTENS was first conceived following the Belfast /Good Friday Agreement in 1998 (Coolahan, 2008, O'Doherty & Hall, 2018). The land border between the two polities has been a contentious division since its inception in 1921, particularly during the political turmoil and violence which led to the loss of over 3000 lives in the years leading up to the relative peace which developed following the signing of the Belfast /Good Friday Agreement (GFA). Although the implementation of EU regulations has gradually permitted the border to become invisible on the ground, there is very real concern that Brexit could resurrect unwelcome divisions which surround this divide (O'Toole 2018a, 2018b) and could damage the delicate cross-border partnerships which have flourished in its relative absence. Now in its fifteenth year, SCoTENS is facing into arrangements which look to have a range of unpredictable consequences for the work of this unique body. The organisation is currently funded by the Department of Education and Skills, Ireland (DES, ROI) and its member institutions. In the past government departments on both sides of the border supported the network: hopefully, this will apply again in the future. The members of SCoTENS and of its steering committee are drawn from the stakeholder institutions for teacher education across the island. We believe SCoTENS is the only network of its kind in the world operating across a contested border. Whilst its *raison d'être* lies in peace building, SCoTENS' objectives are focused primarily on cross-border co-operation for the enhancement of teacher education. SCoTENS organises an annual conference (including roundtables for doctoral researchers) and a cross-border student teacher exchange. It also provides seed-funding which supports collaboration between groups of teacher educators, in designing, developing and implementing small-scale, north / south research projects. The scale of achievement in all of this has been reported elsewhere (O'Doherty and Hall, 2018).

This paper reports on an on-going study into the challenges facing SCoTENS in a post-Brexit world and the articulation of its value as a unique, all-island network. Values and activities are of course intimately linked and present in both *tangible* and *intangible* form (Kaplan and Norton, 2004). Drawing on a *value-creation framework* (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner , 2015a; Wenger-Trayner *et al.*, 2017) based in social learning theory the SCoTENS steering committee designed a research tool which is discussed below. This committee (made up of senior staff representing institutions) may be understood as a *boundary object* at the boundaries between its constituent communities of practice (Wenger, 1998), which has been involved for some time now in a shared *professional learning journey* (Vanassche and Kelchtermans, 2016). By focusing systematically on what SCoTENS has done to date and specifically on the nature and detail of those activities through the voices and insights of those involved, the paper offers an authoritative reading of the organisation and its work.¹ Through an exploration of collective and personal narratives, this paper addresses the question of what counts as value for SCoTENS and why this is important not only for the organisation but also beyond.

Our evaluation of SCoTENS draws on an application of the Wenger-Trayner *value-creation framework* to this journey. Our use of this framework consists of a series of five inter-related, operational

¹ Prof Etienne Wenger-Trayner was keynote speaker and a participant in the SCoTENS conference in 2016. He has since advised the SCoTENS Committee on framing understandings of our work through a value-creation framework which led to this present paper.

dimensions of value, with strategic and enabling underpinnings. We address in particular the following dimensions of the framework in the discussion aspect of this paper:

- **Immediate & Potential Value** which refers to the experiences that people have when they engage with SCoTENS and the knowledge, insights, new relations, and so on, that result;
- **Applied & Realised Value** which concerns what SCoTENS has been able to achieve through its work and the difference the network has made in regard to better mutual understanding among teacher educators and revised praxis around teacher education in Ireland; and
- **Transformative Value** which foregrounds particularly significant changed and sustained practices and perspectives emerging from the activities of SCoTENS since it began its work.

2. Research Approach and Design

2.1 Research Context and Theoretical Framework

A number of considerations have been fundamental in shaping the decision to undertake a deep evaluation of SCoTENS and the direction that evaluation has taken. First, a review of SCoTENS undertaken five years ago by Professor John Furlong and a team from Oxford University suggested that it was advisable to revisit our priorities and practices as an organisation at regular intervals. The occasion of our 15th annual conference provided such an opportunity. Additionally, the collapse of the power-sharing government in Northern Ireland had a significant and unexpected consequence for the Conference funding stream; northern departments retrenched on all expenditure and despite representations from different sectors of the teacher education community in Northern Ireland, withdrew all northern funding in 2017. It has not yet been reinstated. Thankfully, the southern funding remains in place and SCoTENS has been able to grow its support base among teacher education interests to counteract to some degree this loss. It was a sobering moment, however, and emphasized the need to revisit our activities to find ways of validating and making more publicly visible the work that we do. We agreed that the timing was right for such an evaluation.

The SCoTENS steering committee members are educationalists from a variety of traditions and professional /practice backgrounds. It should be unsurprising then that we embraced the opportunity presented by the evaluation as a *learning* one, and that, epistemologically and conceptually, the study we designed builds on *professional learning research* (Vanassche and Kelchtermans, 2016) in an interpretative tradition, drawing on a *discourse-studies* design (Krzyżanowski and Forchtner, 2016; Braun and Clarke, 2006) and informed by a *social history* approach (Evans, 2008).

2.2 Research Method

2.2.1 The Wenger-Trayner Framework (2015a)

In line with our theoretical stance and the decision to view the research as an opportunity for a shared, professional learning journey, we needed to identify a method that would both facilitate and help structure the series of conversations necessary to foreground the practices, values and hopes that characterise individual and collective participation in the activities of SCoTENS since its formation. This would need to be sophisticated enough to capture the considerable nuances involved in SCoTENS' work and the diachronic nature of SCoTENS' development but also open enough to allow participants to hold comparable conversations around the full range of SCoTENS' activity; student exchange; research collaboration; seed-funding of small-scale north-south projects; the annual conference with its workshops, seminars, keynotes and networking opportunities; and so on.

Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015a) outline a framework where “knowledgeability” is developed through our relations not just within any single community of practice (which leads to “competence”) but in relation to a multiplicity of practices across a landscape, where boundaries of

practice are unavoidable. Such boundaries in such complex landscapes of practice are however always “interesting places” (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner, 2015a, p.18) offering the potential for boundary encounters, “brokering” at the edge of the landscape (Kubiak *et al.*, 2015), and boundary crossing leading to novel learning, innovation and progress not just for individuals but for communities. In this way boundaries are referred to as “learning assets”. Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015a) thus describe learning as a formative journey through a social landscape of practices, crossing boundaries, experiencing interactions; an identity-shaping trajectory through a landscape which at times can be welcoming but also at times exclusionary or marginalizing, producing experiences of identification but also of dis-identification.

Their evaluative framework serves as a boundary object to mediate meaning at the boundary between communities of practice. Within both the original and newer frameworks (see Figure 1) seven value-creation cycles are presented where engagement in social learning can produce *immediate value* such as enjoying the company of like-minded people; *potential value* such as insights, connections, or resources; *applied value* creatively drawing on these insights, connections, or resources to change what we do; *realised value* through changes in practice that make a difference to what matters; *transformative value* through the transformation of people’s identities or the broader environment; *strategic value* through engagement with relevant stakeholders; and *enabling value* where individuals learn how to enable social learning. Each of these is considered in more detail below.

More recently, Wenger-Trayner et al. (2017) proposed a variation on the original value-creation framework so that it can double as an evaluation template. They note that although the framework was originally intended to frame retrospective assessments of learning from communities of practice, some communities had also begun to use the framework to prospectively create a vision and plan their activities, setting aspirations, considering conditions, and establishing risks and mitigation strategies.

One of several myths that have developed around the idea of *communities of practice*, is that it is too difficult to measure impact. However, Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015b) say that this is ‘mostly false’ arguing that while it may be difficult to attribute 100% cause and effect (as in to attribute specific outcomes to the activities of a community of practice) it is possible to “build a good case using quantitative and qualitative data to measure different types of value created by the community” (p.6). Doing this involves tracing how members are changing their practice and improving performance. Drawing on the value creation framework summarised above/below, this constitutes our task in this project.

Value creation in the framework needs to be explored in the context of personal and collective narratives. Narratives provide an angle on what learning is taking place (or not) and thus what value is created (or not). The Wenger-Trayners talk about narratives as accounts and as aspirations, both of which have implications for our evaluation in relation to evidence to be assembled and examined. As accounts of what has happened and is happening in the everyday, ‘ground’ narratives are formative events that shape the community. From these narratives we were able to identify thematic accounts around aspects such as the formative events that have shaped SCoTENS, the activities that members engage in/interactions and experiences that characterise these, aspirations regarding networking/participating in SCoTENS activities, and understandings of success. These kinds of accounts unpack to a considerable degree expected/hoped for value. They also suggest that tensions between personal and collective narratives and between every-day and the aspirational narratives create a valuable space for learning.

INSERT: **Figure 1. Value Creation Cycles framework (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2015b)**

2.3 Research Questions and Methodology

The overarching research question was: *What is the value of SCoTENS for relevant stakeholders?* The study was in the context of personal and collective narratives, that is, the question ‘What counts as value to whom?’ had to be addressed. A qualitative, discursive-historical approach (Krzyzanowski and Forchtner, 2016) was chosen to capture views on the value of the SCoTENS programmes from across the widely diverse participants in the research. Utilising and adapting Wenger’s framework helped to ensure that responses would have more depth. The SCoTENS Committee designed prompt cards for each element of the framework based on discussions at the 2017 SCoTENS conference, when committee members, in discussion with Etienne Wenger, annotated the framework with what they considered to be key elements of value under each heading. After six months they reviewed the lists and decoded them to create two questions for six out of the seven elements which would be used as prompts to structure the participants’ stories.

The data collection involved seeking the views of stakeholders across a stratified sampling frame (see Table 1) who were invited to record their ‘SCoTENS Stories’ using a set of prompt cards based on each element of the framework. Where appropriate, the stories were collected from north-south pairings, for example two researchers who worked on a particular funded project together. The participants and their roles were as follows:

INSERT Table 1 near here. Stakeholder types, activities and paired/individual stories

The principal variables taken into account were gender and jurisdiction. In respect of gender, there were 16 females and 14 males (n=30). Concerning jurisdiction, there were 22 participants from the Republic of Ireland and 8 from Northern Ireland (n=30). (See Table 2).

INSERT Table 2 near here. Participants by gender and jurisdiction

Full ethical approval for the research was granted by a University College in Northern Ireland covering voluntary informed consent, the right to privacy, the right to withdraw without giving a reason, confidentiality in the processing of the data, and anonymity as far as possible in the report or any other modes of dissemination (BERA 2018).

Whilst the special quality of the interview remained, in that, it was designed for a specific purpose and was question-based (Cohen *et al.*, 2011, p.409), there was an awareness of the potential drawbacks of such an open-ended approach. For example, it was relatively unstructured, there could be no verbal prompts or probes to extend, develop or clarify points made by participants, and the absence of an interviewer meant that participants could stray from a particular point, or fail to identify which value they were discussing although it was largely clear from the context. Heron and O’Brien report similar challenges in their analogous Listening Rooms approach (Heron and O’Brien, 2019). However, it was felt that the potential advantages would outweigh these drawbacks. For instance, the participants had the freedom to discuss the cues on the prompt cards in a free-flowing manner and at their own pace. Additionally, the momentum could be sustained through two professional colleagues motivated to discuss common experiences.

Verbatim transcriptions of the digital audio files were provided by a professional transcriber with a confidentiality agreement in place. Krzyzanowski and Forchtner (2016) suggest that while there is no single, correct way to analyse and present qualitative data, a discourse-studies approach can offer valuable insights into both individualised and collective *agentic action* (Richardson, 2015) and also help unmask the institutional forces which support or inhibit such action. With this in mind, the data were described, patterns identified, and both similarities and differences generated (ibid, pp.538-9). In addition, Cohen *et al.* (2011) point out that qualitative analysis is “heavy on interpretation” of which there can be many versions which is both “their glory and their headache” (p.537). In this case, a

researcher analysed the transcripts by checking for accuracy, identifying and coding themes and sub-themes by reading and re-reading the data, interpreting and reporting emerging trends and issues (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Because of the relatively small number of participants overall and the small sub-groups, the data from the two pilot sessions were included in the main findings. Nonetheless, of course, caution must be exercised in the generalisation of findings because of small sample size.

3. Findings and Discussion

Findings are presented and discussed under headings drawing on the Wenger-Trayner (2015a) value-creation framework: immediate & potential; applied & realised; and transformative. This allows for some meaningful exploration of the many views and voices captured by the research.

3.1 Immediate & Potential Value

Value cycles / activities can produce Immediate & Potential Value for an organisation or network when they provide experiences that people can engage in order to generate knowledge, insights, new relations, and so on.

We see both a strong understanding of the need for this and a number of interesting examples of such engagements noted in the conversations between participants in SCoTENS activity, particularly among the founding members (FM) and secretariat (Sec) when they talk about the early days of the organisation. For instance, considerable value was seen to rest in getting the Education Departments in both jurisdictions to engage with, and fund, the initial SCoTENS programme. It meant unprecedented levels of direct contact across the border *with people beginning to look at the south for partnerships (FMn)*, as well as more openness in conversations about the nature of teacher education across the island. The success involved in gaining this funding was seen as having both individual and institutional value: with initial teacher education (ITE) programme leaders and institutional managers working together in the SCoTENS Committee, and younger colleagues meeting at conferences and in student teacher exchanges, thereby fostering professional development and cross-border insights:

... the immediate value was the impact of [bringing together] so many perspectives; people co-operating, people working hard, people engaging in research, people tossing out new ideas, that was the [resulting] environment. (FMs)

Similarly, the incorporation of SCoTENS as a cross-border network centred around the pragmatics of financial support for teacher education represented from a secretariat perspective *a very good example of cross-border co-operation and networking ... very much within our objective and our mission (Sec)*.

From the outset, there was evident commitment to share expertise to benefit north-south teacher education, and a *very collegial atmosphere (Sec)* that produced valuable outputs and outcomes. The more tangible of these would include the inaugural SCoTENS Conference, the first ventures into seed-funding and cross-border student teacher exchanges. The latter was seen by the student teacher respondents (ST) as offering huge potential to *experience very different classroom settings that supported professional development differently* and they valued particularly how their *confidence increased as they worked in a cross-border team, encountering different curricula, and [using] new teaching skills acquired during the practicum (STn,s)*. Additionally, the potential for conference proceedings as well as annual research and activity reports, all disseminated through the SCoTENS website, also represented a potential and very tangible archive of valuable educational resources.

The possibilities resulting from the annual conference and the introduction of the SCoTENS seed-funding scheme for small-scale, north-south research projects were among the most highly regarded activities by respondents. For the two conference participants (CP), meeting colleagues in a cross-national setting, networking and sharing views and experiences took centre stage. The SCoTENS

conference was described by one respondent as *a bridge to professional development* (CPn). It was also valued for providing an impetus to conduct cross-national educational research, with immediate and longer-term benefits such as engaging in professional dialogue, learning from more seasoned practitioners, finding common interests, and instigating subsequent funding applications. As one seed-funded respondent (SFR) noted:

For me as a fledgling researcher ... this was my first external funding application, my first funded project working with anybody. The fact that it was cross-border was a bonus ... the value of that, even in terms of my career has been enormous ... (SFRn).

This was echoed by their southern partner:

[Our] project ... evolved organically. ... The opportunity that we had to work closely on material that interested us both ... has been a real lynchpin of this project ... to bring together two perspectives which complement each other and, I think, our very strong pedagogical package. (SFRs).

It should not be too surprising then to note that the value of SCoTENS as an incipient community of practice was regarded as possibly the programme's most important feature for many of the respondents. One captures it particularly well when they noted that because of SCoTENS there was now *...an added value in recognising that there's a community of teacher educators out there (SFRn).*

For SCoTENS committee members (SC), all of the above were of course seen as important. However, it was notable that considerable value was also invested by committee respondents in *agentic collaboration* as a form of highly challenging professional development. This included: being involved in an organisation contributing to the peace process; learning from, and working with, a much wider community within teacher education than previously; and having a *unique platform (SCs)* for broader thinking about values and practices, thereby contributing to greater all-island vision. Clearly, the levels of connectedness that SCoTENS afforded were seen as of high value. As one committee member put it:

SCoTENS is non-competitive ... [it is] something that is inclusive, is inviting, and ... when you have small institutions ... it allows for breadth of vision, even across the island ... that's really valuable (SCs).

Another affordance relating to the Immediate & Potential value for SCoTENS committee member respondents concerned the simple reality of getting to know, understand and appreciate the often uniquely Irish practices and value bases of teacher education from a wider perspective. Learning about similarities and differences in educational practice at institutional level and, in one case, developing relationships at policy-making level, opened up opportunities for conversations around praxis and policies not otherwise possible. As one committee member noted: *Knowing a second jurisdiction ... wouldn't have happened without SCoTENS. It does change your way of thinking, and it bodes change. (SCn).* Considerable mention was also given to how being part of SCoTENS engendered trust, generated *reputational inspiration (SCn)* and – tellingly – fostered a *deep ideological commitment* [to value-based teacher education] (SCs) that helped in identifying and addressing sometimes hidden agendas related to teacher education reform:

There's a [new] collegiality there that politics doesn't enter into ... a level of trust because the agenda is shared. It is visible. It is out there.. ...people are deeply committed to working together across the nations ... to acknowledge that we're trying to do the same thing. (SCs)

3.2 Applied & Realised Value

The Wegner-Trayners' subtle distinction between Applied & Realised value propositions is an interesting one. *Applied value* results when learning from an organisation or a community's activities finds its way into speculative changes in practice and values – essentially, when the community learns

from its own outputs, using emerging ideas and new methods, and risks change based on that learning. *Realised value* emerges when those differences and changes start to take root and become part of the procedural, everyday knowledge of the organisation at an individual and collective level. In this way, the community or organisation moves towards some broader good, very much in the manner of a *professional learning journey* (Vanassche and Kelchtermans, 2016). Applied and realised value are, therefore, interconnected and even coupled aspects of that learning, with one often melding into the other. We observed several striking examples of this in the commentary by participants across the range of SCoTENS activities, but particularly in conversations between the various SCoTENS Committee members, and among SCoTENS seed-funding recipients.

Aspirations towards extending teacher education communities and networks, expanding cross-border connections, and building research partnerships were all mentioned by SCoTENS Committee respondents. All these can be seen as measures of success from a value creation perspective and represent considerable change on previous positions. For instance, one noted:

I can have conversations with people who I have now a sustained relationship with. It's beyond oneself ... there are people in my University for instance who have connections now with people in the north who wouldn't have them without SCoTENS ... (SCs)

Another commented:

SCoTENS has made me realise that we have a lot to learn from each other within Northern Ireland and within the island of Ireland and further afield [...]

about what we can do to make a student experience within teacher education more beneficial, more relevant, and possibly even more interesting. (SCn)

A third focused more on the experience of SCoTENS as a catalyst for growth as a researcher:

[SCoTENS] quite fundamentally [influenced] me in a number of regards ... it's made me a better researcher ... it's introduced me to these other voices, and other research perspectives ... (SCs).

In short, among SCoTENS Committee respondents there was a clear and consistent sense of what one jurisdiction could learn from the other to improve the student teacher experience, resulting from a growing awareness of teacher education both north and south. In addition, it was noted by several that participating in the breadth of SCoTENS activities allowed members to learn about policy-making which, in turn, affected education values and practice - *far, far beyond teacher education ... right across the education spectrum (SCs).*

Exploring the possibility of *doing things differently* is seen as an important indicator of applied value, as are increasing levels of technical skill and growing confidence in that skill. It was interesting then to note the near unanimity among SCoTENS seed-fund participants around participating in SCoTENS activities as a conditioning influence on the quality of their research practice. For example, most noted that their design and planning had improved, as had reflective practice and communication skills – all significant elements in improving as research practitioners. They reported now being more confident about conducting collaborative research with a cross-border colleague. Not only did SCoTENS provide (albeit limited) financial resources to support collaborations that would previously not have been conceivable, it also serviced intangibles such as allowing recipients to apply more confidently for external funding, providing practice spaces to learn about the research process, and developing better techniques to disseminate findings and outcomes more widely. One respondent noted a wholly unexpected outcome in that engaging in SCoTENS-funded small-scale projects allowed them and their project colleagues to change fundamentally how they taught research practice to their own students: *They're learning the protocols, the parameters, the methodologies and project management that we'd have done with those SCoTENS projects (SFRs).*

Among seed-fund recipients, SCoTENS created opportunities for realised value mainly by supporting sustained development and fostering among novice and newer researchers enduring confidence in themselves, which flowed into every aspect of their academic life; principally as a gradual shift in their teaching, research and general academic reference frames. Working with colleagues in different educational environments also constantly encouraged SCoTENS seed-fund recipients to query their own assumptions – *take a fresh look at things (SFRs)*. Additional realised value also resulted when – through SCoTENS activities such as the conference and doctoral roundtables – more experienced researchers and even conference keynote speakers proved willing to mentor less experienced colleagues by guiding and coaching for strategic planning and dissemination. In the words of one respondent, providing invaluable and enduring insights on ... *thinking about publications, thinking about conferences...(SFRn)*; two of the staple concerns in most young researchers' academic life.

In summary, SCoTENS works to be a professional learning nexus that fosters the testing-out and sharing of ideas and new understandings in teacher education. It does this through supporting criticality and a speculative approach to teacher education practice and values, while encouraging its members to risk change based on learning. The true value of this emerges when those SCoTENS sponsored differences and changes start to take root and become part of the procedural, everyday teacher-educator knowledge at an individual and collective level.

The observations, comments, and indicative responses noted above, suggest important Applied & Realised value gain on the part of the respondents. Applied value can be seen unequivocally in the sense that there clearly had to be deliberative decisions on the parts of the individuals concerned to find ways of bringing their learning into their home settings and fostering changes in understandings both personally and within personal praxis and more broadly within their institutional values and practices. Realised value can reasonably be read into our respondents' many allusions to the sustained and durable differences in their world that resulted from adopting the unique, all-island, professional learning stance encountered in and through SCoTENS. Taken together, this encapsulates the kind of culture that has evolved through SCoTENS – one permitting a learning journey to be traced from conversations, to collaborative actions and joint research; all leading to unmistakable changes in both pedagogical and research activity and value.

3.3 Transformative Value

Strong teacher education is widely acknowledged as a transformative, broadly reflective venture. It is interesting therefore to note the number of discernible references made by the research participants to this aspect of value provided by SCoTENS experiences – particularly among SCoTENS seed-fund recipients and student teachers who had taken part in SCoTENS north-south exchanges. Transformational is of course sometimes too readily applied to changes in practice and understanding. References to 'transformational' activity are widely used in relation to descriptions of teacher learning but not always problematized or well theorised. This has value but misses an opportunity to address deeper questions of identity development and professional growth (see for instance Glanz, 2016). One of the strengths of the Wenger-Trayners' framework is that it addresses this absence in some depth. In our deployment of their value framework, we drew heavily on ideas of the transformative as *raising practice and understandings to new levels in sustainable ways*, and on the connections that surface when experimentation in practice is explored in relation to the assumptions it challenges and the new perspectives on identity it generates.

The challenging of taken-for-granted assumptions about 'the other' and the embracing of opportunities to do things a little differently featured in several of the conversations among the SCoTENS seed-fund recipients. They saw the funding, though small in real terms, not only as a previously unavailable *impetus to conduct cross-border educational research (SFRs)*, with immediate

and longer-term benefits (such as engaging in professional dialogue, learning from each other, finding common interests, and instigating subsequent funding applications) but also as facilitating strongly transformative experiences in and of itself because of the nature of the research topics and the openness of SCoTENS to a rich variety of activities.

SCoTENS-funded research was seen by a number of respondents as a catalyst for a related shift in their teaching, research interest, and professional understandings. Working with colleagues in different educational environments was described as invaluable in the way it challenged these respondents to query their existing assumptions – ...[to] *take a fresh look at things* (SFRs) and so ...*make some [deep] changes happen* (SFRn). As mentioned earlier in the paper, SCoTENS seed-funding opened up opportunity to work with sometimes more experienced colleagues, and often in first externally funded contexts (SFRs/SFRn). Working with these previously unknown colleagues was recognised as having considerable professional impact; ... *Geographically close is sometimes culturally different, but it's amazing what can be done* (SFRs). And indeed the resulting SCoTENS catalogue of published research is more than ample testimony to this: to date, well over 100 such small-scale projects have been funded. Information about these projects including downloadable reports and related papers from those that are now complete can be found on the SCoTENS website.²

Two of the conditions Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015c) note for possibly transformative learning relate to the opportunity for 'blue-sky' type thinking and the more mundane possibility of exploratory funding following this. To a degree, SCoTENS seed-funding does so. It was interesting to note this struck a chord among respondents with one in particular speaking of the funding filling a gap – *a real lacuna in CPD in [teacher educator development]* (SFRs), and another noting how it made possible, for the first time *thinking about publications, thinking about conferences* (SFRn). Indeed, in these and various other ways the SCoTENS seed-funding initiative was seen by each of the nine seed-funded research participants as an invaluable bridge to professional development – offering variously personal and professional development opportunities very much in line with the aspirations of SCoTENS as an organisation and its founding principles. Within the context of the research for the present paper, both founding members spoke of their hopes for the value of the research projects and their potential transformative contribution to SCoTENS' teacher educators' professional identity; namely, fostering deeper understanding and appreciation of teacher education traditions across the island of Ireland through imaginative and defining research opportunities for professional growth, future careers, and reputations.

Acquiring a teacher's professional identity is best understood as a dynamic process – one that is not only influenced by individual personality and capacities, such as the ability to adapt to changing policy and social contexts (Beauchamp and Thomas, 2009; Schepens *et al.*, 2009) but also by externalities such as community endorsed aspirations like mutual respect, pride in shared values and quality of practice, and the conditions that support and foster these. Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015a) place opportunities for highly-developmental *exploratory work* and deliberate engagement with *boundary items* that enable *cross-boundary learning experiences* at the heart of the 'knowledgeability' that represents a transformative adaption of different perspectives and meanings (Wenger, 1998).

There are a number of strong indications from the findings that the student teachers involved in SCoTENS-sponsored cross-border teaching practice exchanges both experienced and valued such opportunities. The depth of any learning experience can best be gauged by the resulting commentary and action propositions on the part of the learner. Positive responses from participants included the changes in professional confidence they experienced due to mixing with and learning about and from those in another education system and from different pedagogical and cultural backgrounds (such as *Educate Together* schools). For instance, one student teacher observed that it was a revelation to be able to: *Go out and do something different, take a risk and if it doesn't work, you will still be fine at the*

² See <http://scotens.org/category/research/7-other-projects/>

end of it', rather than doing the same lesson or the same type of lesson every day [STs]. Another participant observed:

I think everybody [on the exchange] has had a brilliant experience, and has benefitted greatly from everything to do with it... Definitely, you should be given the experience to go out of your boundaries to somewhere else where you're not used to the curriculum, not used to the schooling system... it's something that you'll take with you throughout your career and your practice. ... [STn]

These and similar responses indicate a marked shift in understanding among the student teachers that came from being able to observe and experience different teaching methodologies. Respondents from both jurisdictions felt the exchange to be of defining value as it had the effect of generating greater confidence, self-belief, and openness to making provision for a range of different pupils.

This confidence translated into exploring new methods and approaches that participants felt otherwise they would most probably not have done. One spoke about how:

In our thinking and practice as student teachers, we've learned a completely different and new, exciting system... working so much with the people around you and helping [them] - trusting that they'll do their part if you do yours. It ...was a team effort the whole way through. [STs]

Another student teacher noted that the exchange opened up new and beneficial perspectives on how teaching and learning can be organised in classrooms and across school settings:

... having the opportunity to go down south and see how they teach ... their day-to-day structure is completely different from what I was used to which was brilliant, because I got to adapt to that, and I got to teach in different ways. ... I had to go into new depths ... 'OK, open to this idea, open to different ideas', and implement learning for all different children within the class in a new curriculum which was extremely beneficial. [STn]

It was, however, commentary from the exchange students in regard to a new awareness of and willingness to confront the same taken-for-granted assumptions about 'the other' and the embracing of opportunities to do things a little differently – points also made by SCoTENS seed-funded respondents – that registered most strongly with the researchers. The re-assessing of some fundamental assumptions – and opening up new and beneficial professional perspectives was particularly interesting. One student teacher noted: *...it is so needed, because whether you're in, say, all-Catholic or all-Protestant primary schools, that is not reality. Once you leave school that's not what you're going to be working in, and for people who have just come through an all-Catholic education, it's a complete shock. To be immersed in [social diversity] from such a young age is such a good experience [STn].*

Additionally, there was a valuable maturity notable in some of the observations regarding new understandings of the broader aspects of professionalism in teacher identity. For instance, one spoke about the need for SCoTENS to continue the exchange programme, because: *No matter what happens, teacher education both north and south kind of needs to move together. We are one really, we are all teachers, we are teaching the children of tomorrow [STs].* Another student teacher - having noted the potential damage BREXIT was already doing to professional mobility – observed that it would be a shame if opportunities to work and study in the south were lost. On their exchange they were pleasantly surprised to find: *There were teachers [in the southern placement schools] who had studied in Belfast ... it was still nice to see people from up here [in the north] getting that chance. I'd love to do that maybe if I ever got the chance to go down [south]. [STn]* Similarly, one southern exchange student noted that it was: *... an incredible experience to go from something that you're so comfortable with in your own environment [RoI] ... to somewhere where it's completely different. It shows that there [are] great relations there, that we can go and make new experiences. [STs]*

To a degree what we observed among the responses from SCoTENS seed-funded and student teacher exchange participants in the value-creation study embodies the types of conditions and opportunities that give rise to agentic actions that are arguably critical to transformative learning. In enabling the emergence of such transactional opportunities for developing professional identity, SCoTENS offers an important and unmatched value proposition on the island of Ireland.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

4.1 Discussion

The Wenger-Trayners' (2015a) Value Creation Framework with its focus on value creation was selected in order to examine how SCoTENS, as a unique, boundary-crossing, learning network, might be evaluated in its work to date and more importantly, going forward into the next decade. Simply put, the question was: *what is the value of SCoTENS for the membership?* Members ranged over leaders, committee members, founding members, student teachers on exchange, doctoral students, seed-funded research participants, and conference delegates. The study was in the context of personal and collective narratives, with attention to what counts as 'value' to whom.

The data gathered from educationalists both North and South who had engaged with the SCoTENS project over the past fifteen years, indicated interesting and perhaps, not surprising findings. In sum, participants attributed their engagement with SCoTENS with significant professional development and aligned the extent of their development with the level of interaction of professionals from across the North/South divide.

The key themes that emerged from the various Value Cycles embodied collaborative and supportive ideals:

- Mentoring and the idea of the extended hand from the Immediate Value cycle;
- Exposure to difference and the leading hand from the Potential Value cycle;
- Stimulating critical thinking and/or support in the Applied Value cycle; and,
- Empowerment to move beyond our 'comfort zones' in the Transformative Value cycle.

It is clear that those who engaged with this research process benefited professionally from their participation in SCoTENS and attributed this to the North/South dimension as evidenced by the theme of leadership together or leading hand-in-hand which was prevalent throughout the findings. This is the case for the various groups. The student teachers felt challenged and supported in adjusting to different curricula and teaching cultures. The doctoral students appreciated the opportunity to 'go public' with their work in a different jurisdiction although it might be noted this initiative had only been in place for two years when the evaluation began.

The larger group of teacher educators would appear to have benefited tremendously with particular merit attaching to research funding alliances. Of note in this latter respect is that the evidence would appear to fit two agendas – personal and collective. On the one hand academics found a forum for competitively-generated income, research activity and publication – a theme increasingly relevant for higher education staff on both sides of the Irish border in terms of professional and academic respect and promotional prospects. However, this personal benefit completely aligned with the collective in that only projects that promoted mutual understanding across both jurisdictions could be funded hence the corpus of work now available on the SCoTENS website and published variously in the professional and academic press bearing on this broad principle linked to teacher education.

Reflecting on the research process the authors acknowledge the usefulness of narrative within the Wenger-Trayner value-creation framework across the five value creation cycles to "measure" impact on a range of levels. We believe the adopted approach surfaced the complexity of the landscape we are working within on this island, the multiplicity of "mini-cultures" and the various communities of practice. The study allowed us to highlight and better understand the impact and value for a variety

of "members" including student teachers, seed-funding recipients, conference delegates, committee members, founding fathers. The study revealed the variety of "boundary encounters" which are diverse and undoubtedly "interesting places" and it demonstrated the usefulness of narrative as a tool for exploring experiences and perspectives.

It showed something of the challenges and limitations of our adopted framework too. We ask: was our evaluation positively skewed? It is noteworthy that there were no examples of dis-identification, tension, or conflict. Whether this is partially attributable to our approach is not possible to determine although it is a point we bear in mind for possible future work. What is a troubling issue in the current moment is the struggle with the Department of Education and Department for the Economy in Northern Ireland and the absence of the devolved legislative assembly. Civil servants are currently making decisions that impact SCoTENS. More particularly, discussion of two overarching values remain highly pertinent on our agendas as we move forward. One is the enabling value: agentic action in evidence by members through involvement with SCoTENS which on the basis of the evidence here is in good health. Another is the strategic value: continuity and change. Our greatest challenge here lies now in engaging with government stakeholders to convince them of the value of SCoTENS, as a "boundary object" where the boundary /border is more significant and potentially divisive than ever in light of the looming Brexit.

4.2 Conclusion

Readers outside Ireland would be forgiven for thinking that the empirical account offered in this paper is somewhat unremarkable. After all, on the face of it, is it not the positive account one might expect when peers and professional colleagues come together to work on projects pertaining to their professional lives, common interests, and settings? We suggest, however, that it is in fact quite remarkable, significant and inspiring for there has not been a tradition of formal academic and professional engagement across teacher education on both parts of this island. While there were undoubtedly examples of sharing and co-operation among academics, a case in point being the cross-jurisdictions Educational Studies Association of Ireland (ESAI) with its well-regarded academic journal and annual conference, there was no state/official support mechanism that enabled the two parts of the island to engage, and there was no official mechanism for bringing teachers, teacher educators and student teachers into dialogue together. Indeed it is far more likely that colleagues, north and south, have typically had more involvement with their counterparts in England, Scotland or Wales or elsewhere, than with their peers across the two parts of Ireland itself. Thus, the comparative lived experiences, educational practices and policies of those in our nearest jurisdiction remained mostly hidden until the late 1990s.

The co-operating and sharing that we have described in this paper derives from high level, ministerial official endorsement which is powerfully symbolic of the deep desire for on-going neighbourly collaboration and understanding. The opening up of conversation among 'the geographically close' if 'culturally different' is generating awareness of both difference and commonality, but, most importantly, generating trust, familiarity and mutual understanding. The different Wenger-Trayner values captured in the words of the participants point to the breaking down of boundaries and borders at a time when fears of old borders and new walls and barriers threaten the ease with which the new cross-border networks are now finally flourishing.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like thank Etienne Wenger-Trayner for his advice on methodology and on a final draft of this paper.

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