

## **Computational Approach to Inquiry Based Science Education**

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### **Introduction**

The paper sets out the context for the EU Seventh Framework 'Pathway to Inquiry Based Science Education' (IBSE) project. After the context has been outlined, the paper is organised into the following sections: 1. National situation with regard to Science Education. 2. Inquiry approaches promoted by Pathway. 3. Adopting IBSE into the Science Education Curriculum. 4. ICT in IBSE. 5. Reflection on IBSE.

### **Context**

The Pathway to Inquiry Based Science Education is a European Union Seventh Framework Project which started in January 2011 and will end in December 2013. The Pathway Consortium consists of experts in the area of science educational research, teacher communities, curriculum developers, policy makers, scientists and researchers who are involved in pioneering scientific research for the purpose of promoting effective widespread use of inquiry based science teaching approaches in primary and post-primary schools in Europe and beyond.

The Pathway Consortium consists of twenty- five partners, located in 15 European countries, in Russia and in USA (<http://www.pathway-project.eu/>). Dublin City University is one of the project partners. The plan is to carry out a large scale review of teacher education activities in 16 European countries, including Russia, within school environments, in teacher education centres and in science and research centres. A number of workshop sessions will take place over the duration of the project in response to Pathway's objective of building a group of practitioners of inquiry who will share leading practices in IBSE and influence policy development. It is envisaged that teachers with change management competences will act as change agents in their schools and help to facilitate the implementation of IBSE.

The project will be a step forward in the implementation of the recommendations of the Rocard Report 'A Renewed Pedagogy for the Future of Europe' (Rocard, et al., 2007). The use of inquiry based learning has been promoted as a pedagogy for improving science learning (Bybee, 2000, Savas et al. 2003, Hounsell & McCune, 2002) and of overcoming the declining interest of student in studying Science in higher education.

### **Section 1: The National Situation in Ireland with regard to Science Education**

As a first step we provide an overview of the national situation in Ireland with regard to Science education in primary and post primary education.

Science is an integral part of the Primary Curriculum in Ireland. The Primary Science curriculum is divided into two parts: a skills section and a content section. The focus is on learning by investigation which supports children in developing their skills of enquiry through observing, questioning, suggesting explanations, predicting outcomes, planning investigations or experiments in order to test out ideas and draw conclusions (NCCA,1999).The Content of the Primary Science Curriculum includes four strands: Living Things, Energy and Forces, Materials, Environmental Awareness and Care.

Students attending post primary schools between the ages of 12 to 15 study Junior Certificate Science. This is a combined course divided into three areas: Physics, Chemistry and Biology. Science is not a compulsory subject at post-primary level but many schools treat Junior Science as a core subject. Statistics from the Report of Task Force on Education of Maths and Science at Second Level (2010) indicate that over the past nine years on average 85.6% of the student cohort sit a Junior Certificate Science Examination. After three years students are assessed by way of the Junior Certificate Examination. The assessment involves a written examination and course work submission. Students can choose to do a Higher level or Ordinary level examination depending on their ability and the advice of their teacher. Figures from the Task Force Report indicate that approximately 70% of students study for the Higher level examination.

Senior level students (ages 16–18) are offered Physics, Chemistry, Biology, Agricultural Science and Physics and Chemistry as separate subject options. The choice varies from school to school. Students are usually advised to study at least one Science subject. The uptake of Science subjects at Senior level however shows a different picture. Biology has a student uptake of below 50% whereas both Physics and Chemistry have student uptakes of around 13.5% (Task Force Report, 2010). It is a stated aim of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment to increase the student uptake of Physics and Chemistry at Senior Cycle to 20%. Students follow a two year programme for the Senior Cycle before taking the Leaving Certificate examination set by the Department of Education and Skills (DES).

Post primary schools are equipped with Science laboratories and many schools have a science demonstration room in addition to their Science laboratories. There is no provision for the employment of technicians or laboratory assistants and there is no specific provision for IBSE at post primary level although aspects of IBSE are mentioned in the Junior Science syllabus which is the focus of attention of Pathway Ireland.

### **Science Teacher Training**

Science Teachers are required to hold a Primary Science degree and a professional diploma in education. The degree must be obtained following a course of at least three years full time study, and carry at least 180 ECTS (European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System). The qualification in post primary teacher education must carry at least 60 ECTS. The practical element of this qualification requires a minimum of 200 hrs teaching in a relevant subject area.

Completing a suitable Teacher Education Degree at an approved College, provided the course is a least four years in duration and carries at least 240 ECTS, is an alternative way to train as a Science Teacher. Dublin City University offers a Bachelor of Science (BSc.) in Science Education and also a BSc. in Physical Education with Biology, University College Cork and NUI Maynooth also offer a BSc in Science Education and University of Limerick offers a BSc. Ed course. These courses meet the requirements for any person wishing to train as a Science teacher.

Teachers are required to register with the Teaching Council. The Teaching Council has a statutory requirement to maintain a register of teachers and to determine the entry requirements to the register. This process requires police vetting by An Garda Síochána. Degree subjects are important for registration and approval. An approved teacher of Biology at senior level must have Biology as a major subject in their degree (30% at a minimum). They also must provide evidence of subject areas studied and experimental work completed as well as the grades achieved. A candidate who is approved as a teacher of Senior Biology is automatically approved as a teacher of Junior Science. The system works in a similar way for teachers of Chemistry and Physics.

An induction Programme is offered to Newly Qualified Teachers (NQTs) and all NQTs are encouraged to participate in this induction programme.

Professional development programmes such as Masters in Education programmes are increasingly popular with teachers and are offered by a number of universities on a part-time basis to facilitate serving teachers. The Irish Science Teachers Association (ISTA) is a very active professional body in which many teachers of science participate and has proven to be a very useful means of professional development for Science teachers.

### Science Curriculum

The Science Junior Certificate Curriculum undertaken by Junior Students (ages 12-15) is divided into three main areas: Physics, Chemistry and Biology. (Adapted from National Council for Curriculum and Assessment Guidelines)

There are three sections in Biology.

1A Human Biology	Food: contents of food products, energy and growth, balanced diet Digestion: parts and functions of the digestive system, teeth Enzymes: enzyme action Aerobic Respiration: energy release and conversion, breathing, gas exchange and smoking Circulatory System: blood, heart, circulation and human pulse rate Excretion: lungs, kidneys and skin and their role in excretion
1B Human Biology	Skeletal system: role of skeleton, function of bone Muscular System: muscles, tendons, ligaments and joints, muscles and movement Sensory system: sense organs, nerves sensory and motor functions, eye and its structure and functions

	<p>Reproductive system: male and female systems, menstrual cycle, fertilization and pregnancy, contraception</p> <p>Genetics: inheritable and non inheritable characteristics, chromosomes and genes</p>
1C Animals, Plants and Microorganisms	<p>Living Things: variety, classification, identification, characteristics, cells, tissues, organs and systems.</p> <p>The Microscope: function of main parts, animal and plant cells</p> <p>Plant Structure: parts of a flowering plant and their function</p> <p>Transport in Plants: water and minerals, transpiration</p> <p>Photosynthesis: word equation, energy conversion, photo and geotropism</p> <p>Reproduction and Germination in Plants: sexual and asexual, pollination fertilisation and seed dispersal, conditions for germination</p> <p>Ecology: local habitat study, simple keys and instruments, variety and distribution of named organisms, food chains, adaptation, competition and interdependence, conservation, pollution and waste management.</p> <p>Microbiology and Biotechnology: examples of bacteria, fungi and viruses. Biotechnology in industry and medicine.</p>

Chemistry has three sections.

Classification of Substances	<p>Materials: states of matter, solids liquids and gases</p> <p>Mixtures: filtration, evaporation, distillation and paper chromatography</p> <p>Substances: Elements, compounds and mixtures, Periodic table, Metals and Non-metals</p> <p>Metals: elements, symbols, properties, alloys</p> <p>Non-metals: examples and symbols</p> <p>Mixtures and Compounds: Differences</p> <p>Water and Solutions: solvent, crystals solubility</p> <p>Acids and Bases: classification, pH scale, pH of common substances</p>
Air Oxygen Carbon Dioxide and Water	<p>Air and Oxygen: composition of air, preparation and properties of oxygen, combustion of carbon and magnesium</p> <p>Carbon and Carbon Dioxide: preparation and properties</p> <p>Water Hardness: dissolved solids, hardness types, water treatment</p> <p>Electrolysis of water</p> <p>Acids and Bases: names, reactions and production of salt</p>
Atomic Structure, reactions and compounds	<p>Basic atomic structure, Bonding, Rusting and Corrosion, Metals, Hydrocarbons and acid rain</p>

There are three sections in Physics.

Force and Energy	<p>Measurement: temperature, length, mass, time, volume, SI units, area, volume, density, velocity and acceleration            Density and Flotation: investigating flotation            Force and Moments: forces and effects, springs, friction, lubrication, centre of gravity, equilibrium, levers            Pressure: factors, fluids, atmospheric pressure weather            Work and Power: definitions units            Energy: units and definition, conservation, sources, renewable and non renewable, conservation</p>
Heat Light and Sound	<p>Heat: change of state, expansion            Heat Transfer: Conduction, Convection and radiation, heat and temp. Insulation            Light: sources and transmission, speed, shadows and colour, visible spectrum            Reflection and Refraction of Light            Sound: vibration, transmission, speed            Reflection of Sound and Hearing: echoes, ear hearing protection</p>
Magnetism, electricity and electronics	<p>Magnetism: attraction and repulsion, magnetic fields, earth and compass            Static Electricity: charges, effects, earthing            Current and Voltage: flow, measuring, voltage, resistance, ohms law, dc and ac, conductors and insulators, effects of electric current            Circuits: series and parallel, switch            Electricity and Home: mains, fuses and circuit breakers, wiring a plug, power rating, bills            Electronics: simple electronic devices and everyday applications</p>

It is recommended that 240-270 hours of class contact time, which is the equivalent of four class periods a week over 3 years of the Junior Cycle, are required to achieve the aims, objectives and learning outcomes of the syllabus. It is recommended that two class periods a week be devoted to student laboratory work and assignments.

At Senior Cycle (16-18) Biology, Chemistry, Physics, Physics and Chemistry (combined), Agricultural Science are offered as separate subjects and as subject choices. Students can choose to take an extra year, called Transition Year, at the beginning of Senior Cycle. This may involve the student studying Science subjects but with a locally devised curriculum.

## Section 2: Inquiry Approaches promoted by Pathway

### Essential Features of Inquiry

The Pathway Consortium understands that the following essential features need to be considered in order to move toward a more inquiry-oriented classroom.

- Learner engages in scientifically oriented questions.
- Learner gives priority to evidence in responding to questions.
- Learner formulates explanations from evidence.
- Learner connects explanations to scientific knowledge.
- Learner communicates and justifies explanations.

The core elements of the Pathway project's conceptualisation of IBSE are outlined in table.1 below.

Table 1: Inquiry Types for IBSE (adapted from National Research Council, USA, 2000)  
Inquiry types for IBSE

A. Structured	Strongly teacher-directed. Students follow their teacher's direction in pursuing a scientific investigation to produce some form of prescribed product, e.g. they investigate a question provided by the teacher through procedures that the teacher determines, and receive detailed step-by step instructions for each stage of their investigation.
B. Guided	More loosely scaffolded. Students take some responsibility for establishing the direction and methods of their inquiry. The teacher helps students to develop investigations, for example offering a pool of possible inquiry questions from which students select, and proposing guidelines on methods.
C. Open	Strongly student-directed. Students take the lead in establishing the inquiry question and methods, while benefiting from teacher support. For example, students initiate the inquiry process by generating scientific questions and take their own decisions about the design and conduct of the inquiry and the communication of results.
D. Coupled	A combination of two types of inquiry, for example a guided inquiry phase followed by an open inquiry phase.

### **Section 3: Adopting IBSE into the Science Education Curriculum**

Aspects of IBSE are already inherent in the Science curriculum of the post-primary Junior Cycle as planning, investigations, critiquing experiments, searching for information, debating with peers and forming coherent arguments are all part of the Junior Science Syllabus. However, only planning investigations and forming coherent arguments are assessed.

At Junior Cycle, the practical nature of the curriculum and the method of assessment allow space for IBSE to be incorporated into the curriculum. Junior Cycle assessment in Science involves a final written examination (65%) along with two Course Reports. Coursework A (10%) is a record of completion of prescribed practical investigations and Coursework B (25%) is a report on two specified investigations undertaken in the third year. Students also are given the option of submitting a report on an investigation of their own choice that meets the criteria.

For the past ten years Science has been part of the Primary Curriculum and IBSE has become quite common at primary level. However, IBSE is not the usual approach taken by teachers. There are many and varied reasons for this but in an examination driven system the concept of inquiry is not always given the attention it deserves. Indeed, it is evident from our review of the national context that there is a need for professional development in the use of IBSE approaches to support the Science curriculum.

### **Section 4: ICT in IBSE**

In this section we explore the possibilities that digital technologies offer to support pedagogical approaches to IBSE. We recognise that professional development programmes should provide the educational space for teachers to become familiar with inquiry-based approaches and come to an understanding of the implications of inquiry ideas for themselves as learners and teachers.

The Pathway group has already identified a number of initiatives in teacher education and Continuing Professional Development (CPD) in Science education that report on the effective use of digital technologies in teacher education especially the use of video to support reflection (Rushton, Lotter and Singer, 2011); videoconferencing for distance-learning programmes for CPD (Pringle et al. 2010); the use of an online discussion forums for creating a community of enquiry among science students (McMahon, 2010); the use of Microsoft SharePoint portals to facilitate interaction between learning communities comprising teachers, graduate-student mentors, teacher educators and scientists (Stuessy and Metty, 2007) and the successful face-to-face and online interaction between second and third level educators for the promotion of science (Garvey, 2002, Farren, 2008). We are particularly interested in implementing and evaluating the innovative use of eLearning tools (supported by relevant resources) that promote critical thinking, creativity, learning by doing and experiential learning.

Our approach to professional development reflects emergent thinking within education about the need for educators to research their own teaching. This is the approach taken by the Masters in Education and Training Management (eLearning) in DCU and enables a shift of focus from imparting knowledge about inquiry based learning and technology to the practical examination and use of innovative methods of applying technology to the inquiry process. Some measureable research outcomes can already be seen in the number of evidence-based workplace accounts published from researchers associated with Dublin City University (Farren, Whitehead, Bognar, 2011) and Crotty (2011). It is within this context, that we aim to forward the idea of practitioner-led change at a European level.

### **Pathway Workshops supporting IBSE**

The focus of the workshops that we have run to date and the workshops that we will facilitate in the future is on the use of interactive, dynamic computing and how it enables new visualizations in math, biology, physics and chemistry. An inquiry approach was key to the facilitation of these workshops. Aligned with our Partner Institute, the Shodor Educational Foundation located in Durham, North Carolina, USA, we apply the power of interactive computing to reach a deeper understanding of math and science and their role in understanding the world.

#### ***Workshop 1: Discovering and Promoting Inquiry in the Sciences through Computational Thinking***

A workshop on Discovering and Promoting Inquiry in the Sciences through Computational Thinking took place at Dublin City University on February 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> 2012. The purpose of the workshop was to expose participants to and inspire them with, new teaching methods, resources and applications to use computational models in their classroom work. The workshop was led by Dr. Robert M. Panoff, President and Executive Director of Shodor and the National Computational Science Institute with the assistance of 5 US pre-service teachers.

The Shodor Foundation (<http://www.shodor.org/>) is a 'non profit' education and research organisation working to advance science and maths education, through the use of modelling and simulation technologies. The Foundation is responsible for the training of computational scientists and the improvement of awareness of computational issues in the sciences. Shodor provides curriculum materials for K-12, undergraduate and graduate levels. Shodor provides access to the Computational Science Reference Desk (CSERD), which aims to help students learn about computational science and supports teachers to incorporate this approach into the classroom activities.

Twenty post-primary teachers participated in the two-day workshop at DCU during the February half-term break. Representatives from the National Centre for Technology in Education (NCTE), the National Centre for Curriculum Assessment and Education Centres (NCCA) and Education Centres also attended the workshop.



Four sessions were run on each of the two days. These sessions involved looking at the tools, models and simulations of Shodor and the National Science Digital Library along with other online resources. The following topics were covered over the course of the workshop:

- Different types of Inquiry.
- Inquiry through Computational Thinking.
- Online resources.
- Inquiry through modeling in Science across the Curriculum.
- Exploration of Inquiry through modeling in Science in your own area.
- Encouraging Inquiry and Understanding through Modeling.
- Developing and assessing Inquiry through small Group Projects.

The main Pathway co-coordinator, Professor Franz Bogner from the University of Bayreuth in Germany presented an overview of the Pathway project.. The reader is advised to access the presentation at <http://www4.dcu.ie/cwlel/news.shtml> in order to get a fuller understanding of the Pathway project. The Pathway co-coordinator from the European Schoolnet, Belgium, Dr. Agueda Gras-Velazquez presented Scientix - the European projects and resources for science and maths teachers. Scientix was created to disseminate public funded project results beyond the individuals directly involved, and to ensure these results remained available beyond the lifetime of the projects. In addition, Scientix makes available animations, simulations and lesson guides for teachers across Europe, and also provides information on training, news and upcoming events. Furthermore, Scientix offers the possibility for science teachers to interact with other like-minded teachers through online forums.

Robert Panoff, Shodor Institute, introduced the workshop participants to Computational Science Education (<http://shodor.org/talks/ct-ibse/cmplsci2.html>) and gave examples of how Computational Science supports the different models of inquiry. These resources can be accessed at <http://shodor.org/talks/ct-ibse/thinking.html>. He used examples of simulations and models from the Shodor website to demonstrate examples of open, seeded and guided inquiry. (<http://shodor.org/talks/ct-ibse/model2.html>)

The participants were introduced to interactivate, (<http://www.shodor.org/interactivate/>) a set of free online Java based tools activities for the exploration of specific concepts in science and maths. The Multi-Function Data Flyer is an example of one of the activities. This activity allows the user to plot a set of (x,y) ordered pairs and graph a function on the same coordinate plane. The applet allows the manipulation of a function of the form  $y = f(x)$ . Using slider bars one can manipulate the function to change the constant values and view the effects of those changes.

[http://www.shodor.org/interactivate/activities/MultiFunctionDataFly /](http://www.shodor.org/interactivate/activities/MultiFunctionDataFly/)

The workshop also explored the creation of models and simulations as well as showing the existing models and simulations on the Shodor website. To this end participants were introduced to Vensim simulation software and Agent Sheets authoring software.

Vensim (PLE) is free for educational use. ([www.vensim.com](http://www.vensim.com)) Users can use this software to build models and then vary inputs and observe the subsequent results. The Shodor website has extensive tutorials on using Vensim (<http://www.shodor.org/tutorials/vensim/pre.php>) as well as a number of models built using Vensim ([shodor.org/talks/ncsi/vensim](http://shodor.org/talks/ncsi/vensim))

Agent Sheets software can be used to create models and simulations. The user creates agents and gives them a behaviour and then runs simulations. ([http://shodor.org/tutorials/agentSheets/Intro\\_Agentsheets](http://shodor.org/tutorials/agentSheets/Intro_Agentsheets)). Dr Panoff also demonstrated to participants how Microsoft Excel could be used as “an interactive thinking tool”

Examples and Tutorials can be accessed at <http://www.shodor.org/talks/ncsi/excel/>

## **Workshop 2: Racing Academy**

An example of an educational activity based on an inquiry- based approach that we contributed is Racing Academy. The Workshop was attended by a number of serving 2<sup>nd</sup> Level Science teachers within the Irish education system.

### **Racing Academy Serious Game**

The game covers aspects of Newton’s second law, interpretation of graphs, friction, gear ratios and mechanical advantage/velocity ratios and scientific inquiry. At its simplest level it provides an opportunity for students to encounter scientific phenomena in the context of automobile engineering. The main aim of the Game is to encourage students to talk about science and engineering activity in constructive ways. The Game involves students in selecting components to build and race a drag racing car as part of a computer game. The students then compete in the game against an AI racer. Racing Academy has been successfully used with different age ranges from 13 years of age to Masters degree level in Mechanical Engineering although it was originally designed for 14-18 year old students.

Racing academy is a downloadable game that models in real time how real cars behave and react. ([www.racing-academy.org](http://www.racing-academy.org)). The games engine has the capacity to allow users to manipulate up to 1000 parameters of their engines. Students can set parameters such as engine, tyres and suspension in order to maximise the performance of their vehicles.

The activity allows students to work in groups to design their own vehicle and engage with the underlying physics. The game has a facility to review performances and can generate graphs such as distance versus time and speed versus time for individual performances. This allows students to redesign and improve the performance of their vehicles.

A video about its use is available on: <http://www2.futurelab.org.uk/projects/racing-academy>

The application can be accessed at

[www.lateralvisions.com/Racing\\_Academy/JISC\\_Prototype.aspx](http://www.lateralvisions.com/Racing_Academy/JISC_Prototype.aspx)

In terms of the way forward from the 2012 workshops (Computational Thinking and Racing Academy) one of Dr Panoff's maxims is certainly very pertinent: *Right Answer = Wrong Answer + Corrections.*

## **Section 5: Reflections**

In this paper we have outlined the nature and purpose of the Pathway IBSE project. It aims to promote effective use of inquiry based teaching approaches in Science education in the context of post-primary schools across Europe. Science as inquiry has come to the fore in Science education in recent years, and is seen as crucial in supporting the uptake of Science in higher education and by implication, of developing economies in Europe,

The context of this paper is the promotion of Science education in Ireland. The national situation with regard to Science education is discussed. Key features of inquiry-based teaching are outlined and the suggestion is that some aspects of IBSE are already inherent in the Science curriculum. However, we argue that professional development is urgently needed in order that IBSE can be integrated into teaching and learning. To this end, several workshops were organised for educators with the aim of supporting them in IBSE approaches. We will continue to support teachers to make use of digital technologies in IBSE through our participation in the Competitiveness and Innovation Framework Programme (CIP) project, 'A World of eLearning tools and resources for Scientific Disciplines' in order to stimulate and evaluate innovative use of existing eLearning tools and resources (e.g. interactive simulations, educational games, VR and AR applications, modelling and data analysis tools, eScience applications, as well as, digital resources from research centres, science centres and museums) for scientific disciplines. In this way we hope to further the implementation of the 'Digital Agenda for Europe' and in particular Action 68 "Mainstream eLearning in national policies for the modernisation of education and training, including in curricula, assessment of learning outcomes and the professional development of teaching and trainers".

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