

Beyond the Classroom: Staying Connected in ELT

by Orla Ni Sheaghda

In March 2020, the English Language Teaching (ELT) sector got turned upside down when the Covid-19 pandemic struck Ireland. Many schools had to move online overnight and reduce their number of classes due to travel restrictions imposed on international students. This placed significant economic strain on teachers who suddenly found themselves with fewer teaching hours or in some cases, none at all. The pandemic proved challenging for the entire ELT sector with many dedicated teachers and staff changing careers to gain financial stability, myself included.

As the sector recovers and rejuvenates, with students returning to Ireland, this also provides an opportunity for academic managers to re-engage with past staff members.

By sharing my own experience, it may inspire others who left the ELT sector during the pandemic to find a way to reconnect and hopefully provide some ideas for academic managers who may want to reach out to former teachers.

How can we keep the door open beyond the classroom?

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Career Change

Almost two years ago I left my position as Student Services Manager in Frances King to pursue a career in eLearning. I'm no stranger to switching careers. Before doing my CELT course, I spent four and a half years training and working as an accountant, a role that just wasn't for me. I left my job and retrained as an English Language Teacher, joining Grafton College in October 2017 where I fell in love with teaching. When Grafton closed in December 2018, I joined Frances King dividing my time between teaching and placing students with host families.

As with every other school in Ireland, Frances King struggled during the Covid-19 pandemic. I was working on reduced hours which meant less money coming in each month and being constantly worried about bills and rent. So, I had to make the difficult decision to give up doing something I loved for financial security. In April 2021, I left Frances King and ultimately the ELT sector to join the eLearning Team at the Citizens Information Board.

Moving from ELT to eLearning

There are a lot of similarities between eLearning and English Language Teaching which has helped me to transition smoothly from one to the other.

My current role is rooted in learning and development so I have been able to bring a lot of transferable skills from English Language Teaching. Designing a course in eLearning follows a similar pedagogical approach to planning an effective and engaging class for English language students.

As with any good lesson plan, you need to outline the learning objectives for the eLearning course by considering the question –“What are the key takeaways for learners?”

This then informs the structure and content of the script and how information should be presented in the lesson. Any good English class will include a range of activities

to suit different learning styles and the same is true of eLearning. A well-designed 40-minute lesson should include theory, case study examples, knowledge check questions to keep the learner engaged and short video or audio clips as appropriate, as well as a visual design that enhances the content.

Where eLearning falls short is the lack of interaction with the learners. I have never met the people that I have designed these courses for, nor am I likely to. Instead of planning weekly lessons for a class of 15, I design courses with a long shelf-life for almost 12,000 people in different parts of the country. There is no opportunity to develop a rapport with the learners or for them to share their experiences with each other.

This is the thing I miss most about English Language Teaching; getting to know students, developing friendships and learning about their culture. Ask any teacher who has since left and they will tell you the same. The students make the class.

However, when you factor in the extra work that goes into planning lessons and curating materials, pining for a lost connection with students isn't enough to draw me away from a career that is as equally fulfilling, more stable and provides a better work-life balance.

The same will be true of a lot of teachers and staff who left the ELT sector during the pandemic. If they have found a stable job which allows them to use and develop their skills and build a meaningful career, they may be unwilling to give that up and return to a job which many lost overnight.

However, that doesn't mean that they are ready to abandon the world of ELT altogether. I can't see myself returning to the classroom but I have tried to find other ways to stay connected.

Ways to stay connected in ELT

- **Friends** – I am still friends with many of my students and former colleagues. One of my close friends is currently teaching in Abu Dhabi and two others work in the same language school in Dublin. The four of us try to meet up at least two or three times a year to catch up, swap stories and reminisce about our time working together. For me, this is the most meaningful way to stay connected to the world of English Language Teaching.
- **Social Media** – A great way to stay connected to a school, even after you have left it, is to engage with them on Social media. I taught in Linguaviva for a few months before I changed career so I regularly interact with them on Instagram. It's nice to see photos of staff and students that I recognise and it keeps the connection to the school. They also frequently post questions, polls and mini-quizzes to their stories. These are usually directed at students but there's no reason why staff can't participate as well. It's a quick, fun and simple way to stay involved with a school even after you've left.
- **Activity Programme** – The activity programme is the perfect opportunity for managers to encourage former staff to continue to be involved in the school, even if they are no longer teaching. A musical teacher will more than likely have brought their guitar to class once or twice, so why not ask them to host a music night in the school. If one of your teachers plays Gaelic football, or any other sport, get them to teach the students how to play.
- **CV Workshops** – Students usually appreciate advice when it comes to job hunting, writing CVs and doing interviews in English. If you know a teacher who has since changed career, invite them to give a talk about their work or do a CV workshop with your students. They're in the best position to advise students on what to expect and how to prepare their CVs. They may even be willing to do a few mock interviews for some speaking practice.
- **ELT conferences** – Taking part in conferences and the ELTed events are great for staying connected to the wider ELT network. The coffee breaks are just as important as the talks as it's a chance to chat to other like-minded ELT professionals and form new connections. One of the best things about conferences is the opportunity to learn from your peers and get different perspectives. Present on a topic you're interested in, even if it's not related to teaching. I spoke about my experience in eLearning at the ELTed event in May 2022 which sparked the idea for this article.
- **Write a learning resource** – Start small and share a simple activity that worked well with your students, for example a listening activity based on your favourite song. You could also create a cultural lesson for St. Patrick's Day. During the pandemic, I wrote an activity book on learning English through Irish Culture and contributed a number of articles to another one on ELT in Ireland. It was a fantastic way for me to revisit and enhance some of my old lessons and create new ones for other teachers to use, even if I never get to try them myself.

Conclusion

There are plenty of options for staying connected in ELT, whether you are a teacher who recently left or a manager looking to reconnect with former staff members. The key is to find a meaningful way to stay involved – through transferable skills, personal relationships, sharing a talent or writing on a topic of expertise. Once you've found a way that appeals to you, take the first step to re-establish the connection and go from there.

About the Author:

Orla Ni Sheaghdha is an eLearning Executive Officer with the Citizens Information Board. She worked as an English Language Teacher for 4 years and still strives to stay connected to the sector by taking part in ELT conferences and contributing articles.

