Chapter 5 Theories in support of evaluating and developing courses

Mary Thorpe

Overview

The ability to provide convincing evidence of the quality of students' learning and the outcomes of course teaching are now considered part of professional practice. This view of professionalism in teaching in higher education is sufficiently widespread that we may forget how recently it has become accepted.

However, for teachers in higher education (HE) the current emphasis on quality assurance (QA) and accountability may obscure the fact that evaluation of teaching has been promoted by activists in the field for 30 years and more. The role and procedures of this educational evaluation have an important contribution to make to course review and to the development of teaching and learning in higher education. There has been a continuing interest from the seventies onwards in evaluation of teaching in higher education, admittedly on a small scale and often restricted to innovative programmes. The move to a mass system of higher education has resurfaced issues about what kinds of information are really useful indicators of effective learning, and what should be the purpose of qualitative measurement. It has also prompted renewed thinking about how evaluation affects educational change and what might be the role of teachers in this.

However, this chapter is not about accountability or QA at the institutional level. It is about how course review and evaluation can enable teachers to find out more about the effects of their teaching on student learning and develop their teaching in ways which will be productive for their students' learning. It introduces perspectives on evaluation that fit with the concerns of teachers, and provides examples of teachers evaluating their own practice using appropriate methods, integrated within a process of continuing course development.

You may already have met the ideas of Kolb and Schön, both of whom stress the role of reflection in learning. If you have been studying the materials that connect with this pack, you will be familiar with Schön's ideas of professional practice as requiring reflection in the midst of action, in order to respond to the situation and to create a productive experience for the student. Course review and evaluation generally offer procedures for the more extended forms of reflection that can happen after action and lead in to planning for future action. Evaluation can bring together reflection in and after action, with empirical evidence from sources as diverse as examination results and student focus groups, in order to inform and 'ground' our views about what was worthwhile in our teaching and what was less so and ought to be changed or developed.

This kind of evaluation ought to be recognised and fostered in any institutional quality assurance system, because it will 'build in' quality to the ongoing processes of the institution. But it is not generated by identical concerns. Its focus is on understanding the day-to-day reality of teaching and student learning and on supporting a process of continual learning and improvement by the teacher - 'professional learning', as Schön describes it (1983).
The key questions

1. *Why should teachers evaluate their own courses?*

   The issue of whether and what to evaluate is discussed in relation to responsibilities for course review and improvement of student learning. Teachers in higher education are well placed to undertake ‘close up’ studies of teaching and learning in context.

2. *What might teacher evaluation look like?*

   Teachers can build on their deep knowledge of the HE context to develop understanding of what happens and why in teaching and learning. Both qualitative and quantitative methods have a place in such studies. In addition to data collection, teachers can reflect on the events and outcomes of everyday teaching interactions in order to identify areas of strength and areas for improvement.

3. *Are there models of teacher evaluation in practice?*

   There is no single desirable model, but the familiar procedures of drawing on relevant literature, selection of appropriate methods, careful reporting and reflection on findings are a valuable framework to follow. Building on existing studies of student learning is particularly valuable. Collaborative projects can bring the desired resources and skills together, and formal reports can ensure that superficial conclusions are avoided.

4. *What is the particular value of action research?*

   Action research stresses continuing cycles of planning, action, evaluation and reflection. Peer groups of teachers can work collaboratively within the action research approach, and current examples show how students can become involved in a programme of regular review and improvement of practice.

Aim of this chapter

The aim of this chapter is to review some accounts of evaluation from a variety of traditions that show why evaluation is worthwhile, interesting and productive for teachers in higher education. These accounts derive not from current methodologies of QA but from ideas about how to promote learning, how to carry out a systematic investigation of the results, how to reflect on the experience and use the results, and perhaps also how to communicate that process and its outcomes to one’s peers.

Taking in turn each extract introduced in this chapter, the first is from an introduction to ‘illuminative evaluation’, a text which highlights the importance of ‘close up’ study of the teaching and learning context, and paves the way for giving a strong role to teachers as evaluators of their own teaching context. It emphasises that evaluation should support decision making and practical change in teaching and learning, and should start with the perceptions and actions of teachers and students.

The second extract is a reflective account of a particular teaching episode, where the design of the course was driven by an application of the Kolb model to students’ appreciation of what they might need to learn in order to communicate effectively as engineers, and why. Evaluation in this case takes the form of an analytical description which identifies key features of
the teaching and fosters reflection by the teacher on what he had learned that could be applied to his teaching in the future.

The third extract is a journal article written by both teachers and educational specialists who collaborated to introduce peer tutoring of a particular kind and evaluate the first year’s implementation. Although data collection over and above the usual course results was organised, the model is accessible to most teachers for use where innovation or issues justify additional costs in time and staffing. This is an example that illustrates the value of integrating literature review with some straightforward descriptive statistics on student reactions. Deliberate development of new teaching approaches requires careful investigation and review of the results of previous innovations, as well as following one’s hunches.

The fourth and fifth extracts are included in order to explain and exemplify action research, a model that fits well with the motivations and circumstances of teachers evaluating their own courses. It is clear that there is no rigid format for action research, but the key point is a cycle of planned action, investigations, reflections and then new action undertaken in the practical context, collaboratively with other teachers, if possible. The fifth extract offers a variety of do-able investigations, undertaken in the action research mode, that could be adapted to the requirements of many different issues and contexts for evaluation.

The context: course development not research

In considering teachers as evaluators of their own practice, there is likely to be concern about the viability of adding a research dimension to an already pressured existence. That is not being advocated here. What is advocated is that teachers apply the research skills and research orientation fostered by their own discipline to the actions and interactions of their daily teaching and contact with students. This course also gives access to research into, and evidence about, student learning which you may choose to use, selectively, in the evaluation approaches you develop. The co-author of one of the leading texts on evaluation (Jenkins, 1978) once referred to evaluation by teachers as depending more upon ‘an intelligent use of existing skills and competences than on “learning” the tricks of some alleged definitive paradigm, be it positivist research or whatever’ (Jenkins, 1978). That is precisely the approach advocated here. A crash course in educational research would not, in any event, be appropriate. What we do need is a framework within which to understand how practitioners can use evaluation for their own appropriate professional ends, and some models for how to begin and where to look for more in-depth work.

Many universities also generate student feedback as a routine measure of the satisfaction levels or strengths and weaknesses of whole programmes, courses and services. At their best, such systems can offer evidence of trends and indications of quality in teaching provision. These approaches, however, may be too crude to reveal much, if anything, about the quality of student learning. Evaluation by teachers can complement these large-scale and provider-focused surveys by exploring student learning practices and outcomes in more depth.

5.1 Why should teachers evaluate their own courses?

A quick answer to this question – and one that is far more serious than it might seem – is that teachers must evaluate their own practice because
researchers cannot do it for them. Teachers might hope for educational research to come up with definitive answers about how to teach which they could then apply with predictable effect and without requiring evaluation and further development. But this would correspond to the kind of ‘technical rationality’ model which Schön and others have shown does not account for how professionals act effectively in the practice context.

A second reason for teachers to do their own evaluation relates to the different orientations and outcomes of professional research and evaluation versus the interests and needs of teachers. There have been criticisms of educational evaluation and research for decades because it is perceived as remote from practice and unhelpful in relation to the decision making and action required. While this criticism is not always justified, one of the early critiques established an alternative model of evaluation that has much to offer teachers themselves. This model has come to be called ‘illuminative evaluation’, after the paper written by Parlett and Hamilton in 1972 entitled, ‘Evaluation as illumination: a new approach to the study of innovatory programmes’. It is an approach that has helped to justify and promote a genre of evaluation that has potential value for practitioners keen to review and to develop their own courses.

The 1972 paper identified the influence of educational contexts as crucial in understanding teaching and learning, and properly the focus of evaluation. However, many evaluations had been designed to ‘factor out’ the influence of context and to work within a positivist tradition of experimental methods, psychometric testing and complex statistical manipulation. Many critics and users of educational evaluation have also felt that these methods were responsible for what Parlett referred to as ‘the appalling gulf that usually exists between educational reality and educational research’.

Parlett (with Miller as co-author) also wrote about the effects of assessment in leading to differences between students in terms of cue-seeking behaviour, as cited in Pack 3 of this series which focuses on assessment.

Parlett and Hamilton's paper referred to the positivist approach as 'the agricultural-botany paradigm' and they compared and contrasted it with their preferred alternative, which would aim to understand educational realities before measuring them:

The most common form of agricultural-botany type evaluation is presented as an assessment of the effectiveness of an innovation by examining whether or not it has reached required standards on pre-specified criteria. Students – rather like plant crops – are given pre-tests (the seedlings are weighed or measured) and then submitted to different experiences (treatment conditions). Subsequently, after a period of time, their attainment (growth or yield) is measured to indicate the relative efficiency of the methods (fertilizers) used. Studies of this kind are designed to yield data of one particular type i.e. 'objective' numerical data that permit statistical analyses. Isolated variables like IQ, social class, test scores, personality profiles and attitude ratings are codified and processed to indicate the efficiency of new curricula, media or methods.

Although traditional forms of evaluation have been criticized in this way, little attempt has been made to develop alternative models. The model described here, illuminative evaluation, takes account of the wider contexts in which
educational programs function. Its primary concern is with description and interpretation rather than measurement and prediction. It stands unambiguously within the alternative anthropological paradigm. The aims of illuminative evaluation are to study the innovatory program: how it operates; how it is influenced by the various ... situations in which it is applied; what those directly concerned regard as its advantages and disadvantages; and how students' intellectual tasks and academic experiences are most affected. It aims to discover and document what it is like to be participating in the scheme, whether as teacher or (student) (ed.) and, in addition, to discern and discuss the innovation's most significant features, recurring concomitants, and critical processes.

(Parlett and Hamilton, 1972, pp. 2-4, 8-9)

Illuminative evaluation is an approach that has come to be commonly associated with qualitative evaluation. But a careful reading of the original paper shows that quantitative measures were not excluded. The methodological approach was to be 'both adaptable and eclectic' (Parlett and Hamilton, 1972, p. 15) with the problem defining the method used not vice versa – appropriate methodology, in effect: 'Observation, interviews with participants (students, instructors, administrators and others), questionnaires, and analysis of documents and background information are all combined to help "illuminate" problems, issues and significant program features' (Parlett and Hamilton, 1972, p. 1).

The distinctive feature of illuminative evaluation, however, is that it involves 'close up' studies of the implementation of teaching and learning and evidence which has high validity to those who practice within the educational institutions being evaluated. Although formulated over 20 years ago, it offers a cogent rationale for the kinds of evaluation which teachers in higher education are well placed to undertake. Since the seventies, it has provided a rationale for a new genre of evaluation which aspires to understand reality before attempting to measure it.

The first extract in this chapter is a paper titled 'Rethinking motivation' by Malcolm Parlett, one of the authors of 'Evaluation as illumination'. 'Rethinking motivation' was a paper (also written in 1977) for presentation at the Society for Research in Higher Education Annual Conference. You may be surprised at the degree of frustration it expresses, but it is easy to forget how dominant was the positivist view at that time. It is taken from a collection in which Parlett describes how the 'Evaluation as illumination' paper that he and Hamilton wrote was submitted in 1972 to the Harvard Educational Review and was not accepted for publication. Meanwhile, the Centre for Research in Educational Sciences at Edinburgh University had received requests 'at an astonishing rate' for the paper which expressed not only the widespread dissatisfaction with traditional approaches to evaluation but outlined an alternative. This reading is still relevant, and relevant to teachers as much as to researchers. In a brief space, it focuses on issues and questions that are of direct importance to the practical goals of teaching and learning, and suggests that the focus of evaluation should be properly on the learning context or 'milieu'.

In Extract 5.1, Parlett applies illuminative evaluation to the higher education context. He uses the concept of 'motivation' as an illustration of the failure (in his view) of mainstream educational research of the time to
generate understanding and conceptual analysis which can be used by teachers. The concept of ‘motivation’ is important for the case in point. It is a concept developed and explored through positivist educational research that has been used as a kind of ‘dustbin’ or repository for everything that could not be pinned down to the cognitive and the measurable. Its use has obscured rather than helped to ‘address the practical concerns and puzzling uncertainties that daily confront teaching staff’ (Parlett, 1977, p.144).

As you read, you may note in the discussion of the interviews of 49 staff at Edinburgh how similar to today’s themes are those listed as current in the very early 1970s – staff feeling students do not participate enough in tutorials, should be more independent, and so on. Parlett, later in the extract, cites a study with Miller at another British university where the students feel that their lecturers are too remote or bureaucratic. Increasing class size and reduced per capita funding may have sharpened the key issues for research, but looking back to the early 1970s, there are more similarities than differences in our concerns.
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Parlett’s frustration with research, taking the perspective of those ‘who have the tasks of actually instructing, stimulating, and organizing the educational shop’, arises from its irrelevance and lack of utility. He introduces the concept of the learning milieu as the total social, physical and curricular environment in which students work and carry out their educational and social lives. His critique of the ‘objective’ methods of evaluation and research is that they lead researchers to treat the effects of the learning milieu as ‘noise rather than signal’. Parlett’s view was that ‘new strategies of close-up study of educational processes’ were required, and it is easy to see in his account how teachers in higher education would have a very important role in studies of that kind.

Illuminative evaluation, for example, begins with a stage where the evaluator familiarises himself/herself with the day-to-day reality of the setting, noting common ways of referring to things, characteristic behaviour, group norms, and so on. Participant observation of this kind is the bedrock for devising what to study in more detail and which questions should be the focus for explanation. Such an approach would, for example, allow access to features of what is the hidden as well as the overt curriculum in any learning context. These terms were introduced by Snyder in his research on American college campuses, as a means of distinguishing between the formal curriculum and ‘the hidden curriculum with its latent, covert tasks that students (and others) infer as the basis for the rewards in the particular setting’ (Snyder, 1971).

The illuminative evaluation approach has obvious value for teachers themselves who are already inside their learning milieu and in a position to observe and highlight its processes and ways of shaping teaching and learning. Teachers may need to sharpen their powers of observation and reflection, but with care, this can be done. Sharing perspectives with others would also help prevent the risk of observation being too restricted by the teacher’s own perspective.

The first activity of this chapter builds on this possibility by asking you to reflect on the learning milieu within your own institution. The value of doing so might be a helpful context for evaluating your own course, and seeing its place in a wider frame, and from a student perspective. Parlett offers us a reminder of the way in which the larger structures of the institution can override smaller scale change at the level of the course – remember his story of the physics lecturer in the United States who had been an unwitting ‘pawn within a far bigger system’.

Activity 5.1 Your students’ learning milieu

How would you characterise the learning milieu within which your students work? What features would you list as having a powerful effect on students’ learning experience? What clues might there be in your students’ written assignments that they are putting their efforts into giving you what they think will get them high grades rather than trying to understand the subject? Do you, or does your institutional context, reward the cue seekers or do anything to help the ‘cue deaf’ (Miller and Parlett, 1998, p. 31).

Since part of the power of the social context is that it becomes ‘normality’, it might help to adopt a mental strategy of role play: imagine that you, as the observer, are a colleague from an institution with very different structures and student populations, or a new appointment to your institution with a background in
industry. Having decided on a feasible persona in order to bring 'fresh eyes' to your familiar learning milieu, make a note of key features, using the matrix below if that is helpful.

If possible, discuss this with a colleague whose views you would value. You might try thinking of it as a way of identifying those aspects of the milieu which would support making desired changes to your course, and on the other hand, those which might undermine or inhibit such change.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Features of the learning context</th>
<th>Positive</th>
<th>Negative</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Structure of curriculum</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Assessment regime</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Staffing arrangements</td>
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<tr>
<td>Physical environment on campus</td>
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<tr>
<td>Adequacy of learning resources</td>
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<td>Quality of interpersonal interaction</td>
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<td>– staff to staff</td>
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Although you might have found it self-evident that the learning context shapes students' responses, evaluations often lose sight of this. It is only too easy to focus on the immediate goals of a course and forget that students' reactions may be more a product of the wider context, than the particularities in which you are interested. Parlett's challenge was to the researcher who seeks to 'factor out' the influence of contextual diversity through the application of statistical techniques of sampling and so on, which obviates the need to take contexts seriously. However, teacher evaluators can be prone to 'forget' what they know only too well in mistakenly following the apparent style and procedures of educational research. Teachers do not become exempt from criticism as evaluators solely by virtue of the fact that they are teachers.

Sensitivity to the process of learning, as opposed to contextual factors, can also be fostered by familiarity with appropriate areas of the research literature. Theory can be used to engage with the recognisable phenomena of teaching and learning: for example a discussion of memory and how we remember could raise questions about how we structure and pace particular courses. Parlett's attack is not on educational theory _per se_, but rather on the ways it is sometimes used to say too much about the laboratory setting and too little about the realities of teaching and learning in institutional contexts.
5.2 What might teacher evaluation look like?

It is but a short step from winning the argument that context is the stuff of educational evaluation – not ‘noise in the system’ but what it should be about – to arguing that teachers themselves should evaluate their own teaching in order to meet their own legitimate professional needs. The insider does not necessarily hold all the answers, but the ‘taken for granted’ knowledge of insiders is key to understanding. Close-up study of educational processes has brought in methods of portrayal and qualitative investigation that bring teachers’ and students’ perceptions of educational reality to the foreground.

This approach to evaluation offers teachers a range of tools and practices. These can be used to review the effectiveness of course design and to explore whether and how learning outcomes have been achieved.

Close observation of the teaching context and reflection on learning outcomes obviously work well with illuminative evaluation approaches. The next extract is from one of the authors in this field who has done just that over a lifetime’s teaching in higher education. Cowan’s account is of an activity which he set for his students where he sought to encourage a change in their attitudes about what it takes to communicate successfully as an engineer. He created a learning context that would foster motivation to learn to communicate better. He did not assume ‘motivation’ to be an unalterable attribute of his students, but something he could influence through the experiences he could create for his students. He engaged them in an activity that was explicitly designed to demonstrate their existing abilities as well as where they fell short of agreed standards. He would have worked on this goal in any case but used a particular method, in part because his reflections on how to orientate his students towards their task had been influenced by Kolb’s model of the role of reflection in learning.
EXTRACT 5.2
CREATING A CONSTRUCTIVE OCCASION FOR REFLECTION-FOR-ACTION

John Cowan
I have included this extract because it demonstrates a form of course design where changing student attitudes was tackled in a very deliberate way. The lecturer designed experiences for students through which they would discover that they did indeed need to put effort into improving their skills of communication. The lecturer was doubtless influenced by knowing previous generations of such students and their reactions, but also by his own thinking and reading about how learning happens at all, as well as the particular challenge of learning how to communicate better.

Why, in addition, might it have been important to write up the activity, as has been done in this account? In thinking about this question, I focused particularly on the last paragraph.

**Activity 5.2 Reflecting on one session**

Choose a session or class which you set up or had a hand in designing and which you remember in some detail. Write a couple of paragraphs on the key events of the session and any messages these might have for either:

1. your implicit ideas about how students learn the outcome or objective which was the focus of the session; or
2. changes you would make to how you run this session in future, and why.

The point of the task is to experience the stimulus that writing or some form of organised recording can give to our powers of remembering and analysis. Some lecturers suggest keeping a teaching log or diary as a support for analysis and reflection on day-to-day events. Cowan's account is, of course, carefully shaped to make a good read, but a less polished account could have achieved the most important goal here which was to check out all the details of what happened during the session – the feelings of the students and how these feelings acted at one point as a barrier, while later, the frustrations and surprise changed students' orientation to what they would need to do and to learn in future. The importance of how the activity was managed also came over – the control of who did what when, and what was or was not allowed. *All these details would be important as a reminder of the practical management of events which was essential to ensure that the session succeeded and would need to be retained if it were repeated.*

But the final paragraph was also important because it explained what was at issue in the example. It led to articulation of key features in both the process that students had to engage in, and in the kind of generalisations about learning that might influence the lecturer's future thinking about teaching and learning.

First, we have the reminder that this was an activity with a successful design from the point of view of promoting student learning. It generated intrinsic feedback that surprised the students and caused them to revise their earlier attitudes. The students had the direct evidence of their own experience to force them to revise their own over-confident estimates of their ability to communicate, without need of any 'special pleading' or rationalisations from their lecturers.
Second, the account brought the lecturer back to the Kolb model as one of his continuing intellectual and professional concerns, prompting him to argue that a valuable outcome might be achieved with only one movement round the cycle. He does not have to come to a definite conclusion here but, by raising the thought explicitly, he creates an idea that might feed back into some practical teaching activities in future – thus beginning the cycle of teaching, evaluation and re-teaching all over again.

5.3 Are there models of teacher evaluation in practice?

On occasion, specific changes or innovations introduced into teaching create a need for more formal evaluation, and perhaps even for publication of the results. The next extract is a case in point, where lecturers at the University of New South Wales carried out an evaluation of peer tutoring of a CAD package. It also illustrates the value of collaborating with ‘outsiders’, in this case with the Professional Development Centre, which conducted a more formal questionnaire-based survey than might have been feasible ‘in-house’.

Reflection 5.1 What is the value of evaluation?

As you read Extract 5.3 by Magin and Churches, I suggest that you note any evidence of the value of carrying out and reporting an evaluation of the kind they did. For example it is reported that there was ‘a consensus amongst the teaching staff [ ... ] that the peer tutoring exercise had worked well’. Why did the authors need to know more than that? What has this evaluation given the department and the individuals concerned, over and above that?

Perhaps we should note in passing that publication is of course important for both personal advancement and research assessment, and one of the reasons why evaluation is undertaken. However, the article does reveal other positive outcomes from the exercise and these are the focus of the question.
EXTRACT 5.3
PEER TUTORING IN ENGINEERING DESIGN: A CASE STUDY

D. J. Magin and A. E. Churches
Table 1  Perceptions of usefulness of peer tutoring: tutored students (n=63) and peer tutors (n=31)

Table 2  Perceived effectiveness of peer tutoring approach as a method of instruction
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The article begins with a selective account of practitioner and research studies of peer tutoring. This review enables a sharper understanding of the precise nature of what the Engineering School are attempting with their scheme. Distinctions between mentoring and proctoring enable them and us to appreciate both that there are differences in the educational significance of different types of peer tutoring, and that these might affect the outcomes of the different approaches. Keller-type personalised system of instruction, for example, is not the kind of interaction that this case study is about. Chapter 1 of this pack, ‘Course design’ outlines the PSI introduced by Keller, who needed to find a way of teaching very large numbers of students in an under-resourced context. He converted the course into a series of units on which students were tested before they could move on. Successful students act as ‘proctors’, marking the tests and giving remedial tuition. The subsequent development of this approach included revisions to the use of ‘proctors’ and evaluation of outcomes, which, as Chapter 1 emphasises, provide a challenge to the view that frequent testing always fosters surface learning.

The value of reflection on the relevant literature is that it enables the innovators, as well as ourselves as colleagues seeking to learn from the work of others, to see where what is being done is a replication of or a variant on an earlier course design. In this case we are introduced to a particular variant of the generic ‘peer tutoring’ terminology. Literature review also sharpens the preparation for implementation of the innovation, since there are some key differences between the learning milieu of the case study students, and those cases recorded in the literature. These students for example could not be rewarded for improving their skills of communication while acting as tutors, since their course does not have that as one of its goals. Nor were they to be paid. Their involvement could only be justified in terms of appeals to their goodwill (there were no practical alternatives to asking them to pass on their skills acquired previously) and sense of fairness to their fellow students.

In effect this prior reading enabled identification of some of the key features of the learning milieu, and appreciation that this might lead to outcomes different from those of earlier schemes where credit or payment was offered to peer tutors. In so far as evaluation prompts a return to the literature, it can bring a more focused appreciation among teachers of what is distinctive about their activities and highlight what is relevant in the learning milieu in relation to evaluating outcomes.

We see for example the way in which the Goodlad and Hirst theories of learning are reflected upon and modified. They feed into the process of interpretation of the student responses, which we are invited to see as more than mere head counts of preference, of the ‘50 per cent wanted x whereas only 10 per cent preferred y’ kind.

We can thus distinguish between the many positive responses from tutees about benefits, evidence of three ‘conditions for learning’: interaction, learning climate and empathic understanding. Similarly the less positive reaction of the tutors can be placed into the context already identified – it is not surprising to find a rather lukewarm response on the benefit of time spent, when they were being required to do so on grounds of goodwill and altruism.

In this way, evaluation by various means offered the department a better foundation for understanding the nature of the interaction they were setting up, and the significance of its outcomes. This created a surer
foundation on which to develop peer tutoring in future – an important issue since it is common to find that circumstances change from year to year. Schemes have to be adapted to take such change into account. A full understanding of why something worked, as well as its limitations, is likely to reduce the always present risk of making such changes, only to find that new sets of problems are created. That can never wholly be avoided of course, but the 'close-up study' of literature and learner involvement is a better basis than 'consensus among colleagues' alone.

What you may have noticed is that the survey methods used rely on not much more than descriptive statistics in terms of percentage responses to particular questions. A shade more critical reflection would have been desirable here. We can work out that while roughly three-quarters of the tutors respond, less than one-third of the tutees do so. We can hardly assume that the tutees therefore constitute a representative sample. A comment on the characteristics of who returned the questionnaires, or reassurance that respondents did indeed cover many of the key features of the student body, would have been desirable. Without this, we ought to question the reporting of responses as convincing evidence that they are a reliable indication of student views as a whole, for example the comment that 'both peer tutors and tutees claim that peer tutoring is a more effective learning method than tutoring by teaching staff'. I do not believe we have been presented with quite enough evidence to entirely justify such a claim.

5.4 What is the particular value of the action research model?

The realities of professional practice do not for most people allow time for major efforts of data collection or evaluation on a regular basis. However, action research, the subject of this concluding section, is a model which offers a form of evaluation which can be integrated with the routines of professional teaching.

The term 'action research' has been used loosely to cover any form of teacher involvement in evaluation. However some commentators reserve the term for collaborative and sustained efforts of action, observation, data collection, reflection and renewed action – a cycle of planned action followed by enquiry, reflection and new planning. Some have also argued that democratic collaboration is an essential feature of the model. Carr and Kemmis (1986) for example recognise varieties of forms of action research but argue for the particular value of collective effort driven by teachers themselves, where improved practice is the goal and democratic procedures are an integral feature of how the research proceeds.

They offer a definition which brings these aspects together:

Action research is simply a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own practices, their understanding of these practices and the situations in which the practices are carried out.

They identify Lewin as the originator of the model and build upon his method of a self-reflective spiral of cycles of planning, acting, observing and reflecting. They argue that action research gives proper weight to both social conditions and to the ideas of participants, without privileging either. They reject (as in the Parlett extract earlier) methods that treat educational phenomena as objects to which experimental procedures can be applied. Equally, they reject methods which only consider practitioners' intentions, perspectives, values and understandings. They contest the
rationalist view that 'ideas alone guide action, and that changed ideas can produce different social or educational action[ ... ] action researchers reject the view that transformations of consciousness are sufficient to produce transformations of social reality' (Carr and Kemmis, 1986, p. 181).

Carr and Kemmis's elaboration of the dialectical relationship between ideas and social practices is the subject of the next extract. Their valuation of the action research approach derives from its orientation to action for change as well as to its capacity for critique. Although the extract suggests that a diversity of research methods might be appropriate to its goals, it leaves discussion of such methods implicit.

I have therefore grouped this reading with another extract from Cowan, which gives a number of examples of how to evaluate practical instances of planned innovations in courses. Across the materials and packs you have been reading, Cowan's writing brings together the high value he places on reflective strategies for students and his personal commitment to reflection as a professional teacher.

As you work through the Carr and Kemmis extract, you might like to note implications for your own context in terms of their emphasis on collaboration in all phases of the research process. You might also find it useful to note those methods that might be of use in your own context, from the various case studies outlined in the Cowan extract.
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EXTRACT 5.5
HOW CAN SUCH INNOVATIONS BE EVALUATED?

John Cowan

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One of the most interesting things in reading through the Cowan examples immediately after the Carr and Kemmis extract, is the number of times Cowan talks of collaborative evaluation directly with students. It provides an effective reminder that in the context of higher education, collaboration ought to include students as well as colleagues. Students can be involved in collecting data, in interpreting the reasons or circumstances behind particular findings, and in deciding what changes to a course would be appropriate. At a minimum, information about what has been done with their feedback ought to be provided to students, in recognition of their efforts and encouragement for the next time feedback is required.

**Activity 5.3 Action research in action**

From the two Cowan examples given, select the one that you found the most interesting or was a method you have not used before. Identify a module or teaching activity to which you could apply it for purposes of evaluation/action research. Identify the learning outcome(s) that you want to find out more about. Suggest how you might use the method or approach – doubtless with modifications for your particular context – to achieve evidence about the learning outcome and/or the effectiveness of your intervention.

What difficulties might you have in putting this into practice in your context? Can you identify potential barriers:

1. in relation to your university’s milieu as the context for your course example?

2. in relation to your own thinking and ways of doing things as a teacher currently?

I feel sure that the barriers to practical evaluation and action research came to mind quickly and powerfully. The hard part is to suggest how they might be tackled. The Lewinian approach was to work at the level of the group or community and to engage in a series of action research cycles – planning, ‘fact finding’, reflection and more planning and action. The aim was to create a community of enquirers ‘committed to learning about and understanding the problems and effects of their own strategic action, and the improvement of this strategic action in practice’ (Carr and Kemmis, 1986, p. 164). Such communities are not easily constructed, but with electronic communications available generally in higher education, it is more possible than ever before to work within a virtual community of practitioners with shared concerns. As Cowan exemplifies, working with one or more partners who share at least some of the frustrations and potentials of the immediate learning milieu is a powerful support for making evaluation a regular part of professional teaching. Such partnerships might also come about within the regular contexts of meetings for purposes of course organisation and review.
Conclusion

It can be daunting to take the first step towards incorporating methods of evaluation or action research into one's practice. However, the popularity of Kolb and Schön's work suggests that many find the emphasis on reflection resonates with their own preferences about professional development. A reflective orientation is also one of the most important elements in an action research model, and thus reflection on practice provides a helpful foundation. Reflective accounts of one's own teaching and students' learning can be used to build up a more organised and thought-through account of teaching and its effectiveness for student learning. Empirical data collection - often thought of as the most time-consuming aspect of evaluation-is not necessarily an essential prerequisite.

I have drawn upon Cowan's examples for pithy illustration of what can be done. Giving priority to implementation and the teacher's perspective, Cowan provides many narratives about how he started and what impelled him to continue. He summarises the early stages thus:

In my developmental stage, I

- concentrated on trying to find out how my students learned;
- kept my students fully informed, and carried them with me;
- took risks, and experimented with different ways of teaching;
- formed constructive partnerships with kindred spirits, usually only in one such partnership at a time;
- searched for people, and ideas and textbooks, which might give me inspiration or useful ideas;
- published, spoke, earned a reputation, and made contacts in consequence.

(Cowan, 1998, p. 110)

Whether or not you are in your 'developmental stage', such a list offers a realistic set of tactics for making progress with your own approach to evaluation. Many people's first efforts at evaluation involve an ambitious questionnaire design and data collection on a scale that might stress a team let alone one person. This is unwise, and may deter the individual from ever 'dabbling' in the practice again. Remember that the goal of teacher evaluation is to serve practice through challenging thinking and bringing in fresh ideas. The most productive beginning is likely to be one which enables you to maintain evaluation as a regular part of your teaching practice, using methods which meet the ethical and practical guidelines of your own institution, and one which increases your own interest and enjoyment in teaching.
References


Cornwall, M. (1980) Students as Teachers: peer teaching in higher education, Amsterdam, COWO, University of Amsterdam.


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