REFLECTIVE QUALITY DEVELOPMENT FOR TEACHERS AND TRAINERS THROUGH SELF EVALUATION

REFLECTIVE EVALUATION

(SECOND COUNTRY REPORT)

(WALES)

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1   Introduction and context

The tool was piloted with two groups. The first was a group of trainee Design and Technology teachers on the Post Graduate Certificate in Education course at the University of Newport. The second group was less homogenous and consisted of teacher trainers from a range of establishments with responsibility for initial and continuing education.

The reason for choosing these groups was threefold.

Firstly, self reflection and self evaluation is a core element of all initial teacher training in Wales and one which many students find difficult or of little value. We felt that The Reflective Evaluation tool may be useful in this context and wanted feedback from the students themselves and also from the teacher trainers. Secondly, we had easy access to the groups which was entirely pragmatic. Thirdly 'CVET' teachers are not really an identifiable group in Wales.

The reality is that teachers in VET schools are responsible primarily for IVET. Most VET schools will offer short CVET courses targeted at employees in a particular sector but will, in the majority of cases, use the staff whose primary role is IVET. Neither term is in common use in the UK – very few VET teachers or managers would use the term and most would not understand it as there is no formal distinction between the two.

In the case of the staff group, individual subjects were given a brief explanation about the history and rationale of the project, given the url and asked to browse the site. They were told that they did not actually have to fill in 'answers' unless they thought this was necessary to inform their feedback.

The students were involved in a general discussion about the 'reflection' element of their course – what the purpose of it was, what they found difficult, what they found useful, techniques they used etc. Afterwards it was suggested that they might like to try out the tool to see whether it helped them. No information was provided on the history or purpose of the project as it was felt that the tool should 'stand alone' and be self explanatory, nor was any direction given as to which questions they should attempt, in what order or over what time period. However, they were asked to answer some of the questions they found interesting. No guidance was given as to how many questions they should attempt because it was assumed that different students would spend different amounts of time thinking about the questions and typing in the answers. They were asked to keep a note of how long they spent browsing, the approximate length of time they spent answering questions and how many times they used the tool.

Debriefing with teacher trainers was done by telephone using semi structured interviews focusing on how they thought they could use the tool with students and what they thought of the content at a technical level. Debriefing with students was done informally by talking to

small groups of them over a drink. The emphasis was on how the relevance and usefulness of the tool could be improved in terms of both form and content. In addition the debriefing prompted valuable discussions about their current reflection practices, their perceptions of the usefulness of reflection and tried to identify other occasions and material that stimulated reflection. (Many of these ideas were then built into the tool – see below.) During the course of the debriefing there was considerable discussion on which questions they had found interesting. Because none of them had looked at all the questions, this prompted some students to then look at questions they had not previously seen because it was suggested by others that a particular question was 'good'. In addition, during the debriefing, we asked all students to check out questions that we felt typified certain 'types' of question to see whether there was a consensus or whether choices were idiosyncratic. Finally, (and unplanned), one group of four were asked to look at two questions as a group and we monitored the quality am depth of the discussion that followed.

2   Results and Observations

We have divided these up into 'Content' and 'Form' because the audience for each was different. The researchers were more concerned with the feedback on content and the software developer more with form. Interestingly, the subjects did not make this distinction so sharply and in many cases could not. Several pointed out that the two were indistinguishable; a 'boring' question which was presented in an interesting way was more likely to get good feedback that an interesting question which was not. A clear example of 'the medium is the message'.

2.1   Content: bad news

Too many questions, repetitive questions

The version of the tool that was piloted overwhelmed both staff and students in terms of the number of questions. Although they had not been told they did not need to look at all of them, some had decided to approach the task systematically and had worked their way through an entire section and got very bored. Those that randomly browsed also thought there were too many but many kept on going hoping that they would find something else that interested them. "It was all a bit daunting!"

Also, at the pilot stage, some of the levels in some sections were not populated at all so although there were overall too many questions, there were still instances where subjects hit an 'empty' cell and this was frustrating.

Not enough 'rich' questions.

All the students and most of the staff agreed that although they started by reading every question they hit, they quickly started skipping over those that only had text.

"I just liked the pretty ones!"

" I stopped on the ones with pictures or sound or where there were colours even though the questions themselves might not have been as interesting !"

"I wish I had just been able to go to the interesting [i.e.picture/sound/video] ones instead of having to browse loads of questions to find them"

This feedback has had an impact on the way the tool developed. Firstly pictures, video and sound were added to far more questions. Secondly the functionality of the software was increased so that icons were added to the questions indicating what type of file was included making it possible for users to select all the video questions or all the audio questions or to mix and match them.

Levels are confusing and repetitive

Most users did not understand the how the levels worked and why they were necessary. There was confusion as to whether the departmental / institutional / system level questions were to be answered only by staff operating at that level or by all users reflecting on issues at all levels. This was an issue of concern previously identified by the researchers which was borne out it practice. Also, because some of the questions were similar at the different levels, they were seen to be repetitive and having responded to a question at one level, users were less likely to respond to it at a different level.

"Didn't really have a clue what all those shaded rings were about – I went up and down one colour and there were all the same questions."

One trainer pointed out that the 'departmental' level was based on the typical organization of a VET school or university but that many training centres did not have departments.

Too many knowledge based questions - not enough on reflection

A lot of the questions were seen as checking the users knowledge base, more a form of self assessment rather than as an aid to evaluation.

"Is this a quiz?"

Other questions were asking users to think through tasks or were seen as coded ways of providing facts and information.

"Some questions were good as teaching aids and introducing, for example, new terms and ideas or asking users to tick the 'right' boxes but I'm not sure this is about reflection. If you mix them all up, aren't you rather clouding the message about what reflection is – and why it is an important activity in its own right?" [teacher trainer] Some of dimensions confusing

There are probably as many different ways of grouping or categorising areas of a teacher's work as there are people who have tried to do it. There is no 'right way' and the Reflektiv Evaluation team designed categories they thought were useful. However, several people disliked the categories and found them confusing because either they did not match the reality of their work or, more significantly, did not match their personal categorisation system.

"Are they [the categories] needed at all? Is this how teachers think?"

If the tool was to be developed further, it might be that abandoning the categories and finding a different way of tagging questions so that users could build up their own folksonomies might be a better way.

What do other people think?

Most of the users were very curious to find out how their answers compared with others. The facility to do this exists on the tool but at the time of testing, there had been no previous users so there were no responses to view. This will sort itself out in time with regular use but it should be a priority for the project team to populate the 'answer' page so that users interest is maintained.

The pilot group were mainly young teachers and used to using social software – interaction with others, comparing your answers with others, sending comments to others is an expectation for the Facebook generation!

2.2 Content: Good news

Some of the questions were very good

Although opinion varied as to what questions individuals found interesting, there was broad agreement that the multi-media questions were perceived as more interesting even if the question itself was not. For example, the addition of photographs, even if illustrative rather than as an essential part of the question, increases the interest value of the question and makes it more likely to be selected.

"I liked the variety of topics"

"Some of the questions really made you think."The 'fun' questions were the most popular

Almost all users preferred the 'fun' questions rather than the ones to do with 'facts'. There was also a preference for questions which were to do with values, attitudes and feelings rather than ones to do with knowledge. Surprisingly, questions not directly related to teaching were the most popular. So, "What sort of punishment / reward did you most hate / value as a child?" was seen as more interesting than "How do you give feedback to students in your class?". The first is a question which genuinely prompts reflection but then requires a second stage of reflecting on how the nature of their response impacts on their practice.

The second question needs no reflection, simply memory. This two-stage reflection process needs exploring.

First time anyone has provided a tool for reflection rather than just being told to do it

In Wales and the rest of the UK, on most initial teacher training (ITT) courses, reflection on practice is a formalised requirement. Typically this takes the form of keeping a personal diary, a web log or similar. In addition, students are expected to evaluate their performance in the classroom. However, there is often little in the way of practical support or tools and techniques to help. Perhaps this is because there is an assumption that reflection is in some way a 'natural' process that does not need to be taught.

"They tell you that you have to do all this reflection stuff but no one tells you what to do."

"We have to keep a diary but I haven't a clue what sort of things they expect me to write."

Users can dip in and dip out.

Users liked the fact that they could log on and log off when they pleased, that there was no fixed order for completing the questions or indeed any obligation to complete any of them. The lack of prescription was one of its best features and this could be enhanced in the future by building in functionality for the users to customise their own pathways through the programme.

Good for stimulating group discussion

Although the Reflektiv Evaluation tool was designed for individual users, teacher trainers felt that it provided useful material to stimulate group discussion. This in fact proved to be the case during the debriefing on the pilot. The group discussion about 'preferred questions' necessitated revisiting some of the questions (using a projector and big screen) and some of the questions provoked a lot of debate.

Again, future developments could allow teacher trainers or other group facilitators to customise their own presentations. There has already been progress in that direction by the establishment of 'pathways' which trainers and facilitators can set up to guide a set of users through a particular range of questions. The project team can also organise pre-set pathways for a range of users or user-situation

3   Form

This section focusses on the design and use of the software rather than on the content and materials.

3.1   Bad news

There were only three negative comments received and one of the issues was inextricably linked to content.

Firstly, users said that they got bored with having to go back to the beginning after each question.

"It gets tedious having to back to the start every time – very time consuming. Not sure how you do this but it would be quicker if you could leap straight from question to question."

Secondly, and closely related to the last point and to a criticism of the content, people found the levels confusing and difficult to navigate.

Finally, lots of respondents made a plea for those questions with music, pictures, audio etc to be pre-identified so that they could go straight to those. This has been discussed in more detail above and since the pilot this feature has been added. In addition, a lot of the early questions, which were included in the pilot, have either been removed or enriched with multimedia.

3.2   Good news

Overall the students were very happy with the tool. The user interface was judged as being easy to use, easy to navigate, colourful and flexible so no real recommendations for changing anything other than maybe stripping out anything not strictly necessary.

4 Issues arising from the testing

In addition to the feedback the pilot was designed to collect, several other issues emerged spontaneously during the discussions with groups of students and with individuals. These are not presented as either 'good' or 'bad', simply interesting points that might inform future work.

Personal vs 'institutional' value of tool; prescription or autonomy?

Teacher trainers could see the value of the tool to the teacher training department. It was generally felt that student teachers needed to be guided through this process to maximise its relevance and usefulness. For example, students could be asked to complete so many questions a week and enter the answers in their diaries or send copies of the questions and answers to their tutor. It was suggested that an email facility would be useful. Alternatively, students could be directed towards particular questions which complimented the issues being dealt with on their course or work placement.

The opposite position is that this was a tool designed to be used by individuals and future functionality should focus on increasing the freedom of the user to adapt the tool to their own needs, for example, making it capable of being integrated within a personal learning environment.

It may be that user autonomy and institutional control can co-exist – there is a case for both in this particular context of teacher training. However, there may be tensions when further developments of the tool are planned.

Tool stands alone without content

The aim of the Reflektiv Evaluation project was to design an electronic tool to stimulate reflection. There are two component parts; the software itself which has been customised for this project and the content. At the moment the tool has been populated with material by the project team whereas in the future its greatest value may be that teachers can use it to generate their own questions for their own students.

The tool, stripped of its content, is actually a really useful, simple and sophisticated bit of middleware which can be repurposed and reused in a different context that has nothing to do with reflection or evaluation. We should not forget this.

How do we manage the tool after the project?

Clearly the tool is sustainable after the project period, primarily as it allows teachers to add content themselves. However, some decisions need to be made about hosting the tool, and whether both questions and answers should be moderated in the future and if so by whom. There are also some more general questions about control and direction .

Mapping teacher 'natural' reflection process

During the piloting, student teachers made the point that they were constantly being told to 'reflect' and 'evaluate'.

"To be honest the diary is just a chore – every week you think what can I make up this week!"

"I fill in my diary in one go just before I hand it in..."

"We spend so much time reflecting and evaluating it doesn't leave much time to do anything to reflect on."

"A lot of navel gazing goes on."

They were then asked whether they thought they would spend time reflecting if this was not a structured activity. There was a unanimous response that they would. This seemed inconsistent with their reluctance to participate in activities designed to promote reflection or the attitude that reflection was actually a waste of time.

"We have to do it [reflection] but mostly you make it up - there is a difference between reflection you have to do and real reflection for yourself"

The only other conclusion is that the existing structures and materials do not stimulate reflection and may even mitigate against it.

Students were then asked what actually prompted them to reflect or under what circumstances did they find themselves reflecting. The following list of comments was compiled – in no particular order.

"Newspaper headlines"

"A very good or a very bad lesson"

"Chance remarks by students"

"Responding to non-teachers who complain about education in the pub"

"Talking to other trainee teachers"

"Performance in the classroom"

"Feedback from others – the whole class, individual pupils, colleagues."

"I suppose I reflect most when I have to defend my profession! It forces you to think when you get attacked over things like 'teachers get too much holiday' "

"Non-classroom work" (Planning lessons, subject content, materials and resources, marking etc)

"Relationships with other people"

"Education in general - the wider view. What's all this lot about?"

"Getting drunk and philosophical!"

"It's about how you feel about things and how you feel about yourself [not what you know about things]"

Students were then asked what sort of questions would they like to see included in the tool. Two useful suggestions were

"Two-sides of a debate questions – if you don't know what the issues are on both sides – it's a stimulus to start thinking

" A today's 'hot topic' - just one topical question with its own button."

As a result of this feedback new styles of questions were incorporated – for example, pictures of newspaper headlines, pictures of people arguing in a pub etc.

With the benefit of hindsight, this may have been a better way of starting the project than writing a report on reflection and evaluation at national level. Establishing the needs of the end user prior to building the tool rather than building the tool on an academic model could have produced better results quicker.