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SEDA Ltd

Woburn House,
20 - 24 Tavistock Square
London WC1H 9HF
Tel 020 7380 6767
Fax 020 7387 2655
E-mail office@seda.ac.uk

More information about SEDA's activities can be found on our website:

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Thinking with data

Glynis Cousin, Higher Education Council

This article is based on a keynote given at the SEDA Conference, Liverpool, 2006.

What a difference a preposition makes

The paradigm wars in educational research have much to do with wrangles about how or whether we think *from* data. If we shift our language a little to express the idea of thinking *with* data, it might help us to honour the various ways in which researchers come to know and to avoid dogmatic defences of our own methodological choices. This shift could be a helpful move for educational developers because typically they work with colleagues who adhere to a diversity of cultures of inquiry which influence how they regard pedagogical research.

Finding fools' gold

Firstly, we need to modify the claims of the so-called 'gold standard' in research methods, namely randomised control trials (RCT). To take one unhappy case, victims of thalidomide are likely to see RCTs as far from golden. While trials showed that thalidomide cured morning sickness, they failed to show up the devastating side effects its use would have on the unborn child. What we need to conclude from both the more successful running of these trials as well as the problematic moments for this method is that it's a way of attempting to shed light on the effectiveness of treatments, not the only way, not always the best way. As such, the key weakness in this research framework does not so much reside in its inherent difficulties to handle a complexity of human and contextual variables as in its arrogant claims to be King of Methodologies. Arrogance is never a good basis for generating understandings. But equally, contesting RCTs (and its siblings like quasi-experimental design) without respecting the careful efforts of its proponents to discover effective and/or safe interventions provides a similar block on understanding because it otherises the rejected paradigm as bad/wrong. Otherising, of course, does not facilitate communication and, as such, it threatens a purpose of research to extend our understandings through dialogue.

Awkward fumbling

Another idea that needs defeating and which is often connected to the insistence that RCTs are the gold standard concerns the view that 'reliable' research builds on past findings on a rising curve. Although his discussion centres on ethnographic cultural analysis, I think Geertz's (1973) responses to this kind of question are worth quoting at length:

'Studies do build on other studies, not in the sense that they take up where the others leave off, but in the sense that, better informed and better conceptualised, they plunge more deeply into the same things. Every serious cultural analysis starts from a sheer beginning and ends where it manages to get before exhausting its intellectual impulse. Previously discovered facts are mobilised, previously developed concepts used, previously formulated hypotheses tried out; but the movement is not

Graham Alsop

Kingston University

Fran Beaton

University of Kent

Dr Stephen Bostock FSEDA

Keele University

Professor Anthony Brand

Anglia Ruskin University

Helen Gale

University of Wolverhampton

Dr Michelle Haynes

Middlesex University

Dr Lesly Huxley

University of Bristol

Steve Outram

The Higher Education Academy

Professor David Ross

University of Paisley

Rachel Segal

The Higher Education Academy

**Professor Lorraine Stefani
FSEDA**

Auckland University, NZ

Professor Bob Thackwray

Leadership Foundation for
Higher Education

Professor James Wisdom

Higher Education Consultant

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from already proven theorems to newly proven ones, it is from an awkward fumbling for the most elementary understanding to a supported claim that one has achieved that and surpassed it. A study is an advance if it is more incisive – whatever that may mean – than those that preceded it; but it less stands on their shoulders than, challenged and challenging, runs by their side. (my emphasis)

Geertz's shift from 'building on' to 'running by' provides a way of regarding the purpose of research that complements my case for thinking *with* data. If we can think of research, any research, as running by the side of other kinds of research, sometimes capable of being more 'incisive', sometimes needing to be discarded like so many shavings from a woodcarver's creative effort, we can perhaps provide the basis for more conversations across paradigms to replace the otherising of 'enemy' methodologies. This 'running by' also resonates with Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) plea for a vocabulary of 'addition' rather than of replacement, of 'and, and, and' rather than of either/or. Metaphorically speaking, a rhizome rather than a tree.

It would help communication among researchers if we agreed with Geertz's notion of each research effort as finally 'exhausting its intellectual impulse' since this accepts a shelf life to our endeavours and perhaps to the methodology we are using. Sadly, some researchers stick to their paradigm a bit like political fanatics stick to their sect, denying that intellectual exhaustion is ever possible for their chosen perspective.

You say quantitative, I say qualitative

A key way in which the paradigm war is expressed is through the privileging of quantitative over qualitative or *vice versa*. These are false oppositions because there are strong elements of the quantitative in the qualitative in that qualitative researchers look for occurrences, absences and patterns in their data. Trashing quantitative researchers – usually with the charges of 'positivist' or 'empiricist' – can be naive as well as rude. It is not empiricist to engage with the empirical though sometimes the difference between the two is unacknowledged by qualitative researchers. Moreover, while there are important debates to be had about objectivist understandings of material reality, these charges are often thrown at quantitative researchers who are well aware that their work is one of interpretation rather than of Science with a large S. Good number crunchers know about the limits of statistical analysis as well as its scope. They know, for instance, that survey questions and Likert scales do not provide straightforward readings of a phenomenon. But they do feel that statistical analysis is often a very good way of throwing light on a question. Of course, quantitative findings are not able to tell the full story and like any data form, they can tell misleading ones. But it is worth remembering that even the most innumerate of us cannot make sense of our daily world without some concern for the quantitative dimension in our lives. Numbers are an invaluable source of intelligence and thinking with them is one way of generating understandings.

On the other side of the fence, a number of quantitative researchers feel that going wide is the only way to respond to a research question; either they disdain qualitative research for its inability to be 'statistically significant' or they concede to it a secondary role as an illustrative adjunct to quantitative research like the cherry on the cake. This concession is often made with hints at a gendered vocabulary that separates the quantitative boys (robust, hard or pure science) from the qualitative girls (soft science and humanities, local, practical). Getting away from this implied hierarchy means seeing quantitative and qualitative research respectively as having diverse capabilities: quantitative research makes meaning from what is apparently readable from the material world; this can be at the simple but vital level of measuring the scale of a phenomenon to the statistical analysis of survey findings.

What's in a wink?

Qualitative researchers own the problem of interpreting winks as described by Ryle and famously discussed in Geertz (1973). In a playful discussion on the difficulties

of reading meaning into human activities, Ryle proposes that the mere observation of a wink cannot tell you whether it is an involuntary physical reflex or a form of communication; and if it is a form of communication, what is its symbolic meaning given the cultural context in which it occurs and even if that context can be understood, how can we know that the wink is not a satirical subversion of its usual cultural meaning? And so forth. To get to the bottom of this winking, argued Ryle and Geertz, we need 'thick description'. This means attending to a phenomenon in terms of time, effort and reflexive distancing. For an anthropologist like Geertz this entails replacing colonial gazing at cultural differences for intelligent thinking *with* differences; such thinking crucially includes consideration of one's own cultural understandings and the impact they have on the interpretations made (the 'colonial gaze' in our field may concern the developer/developed or the academic/student binaries). Above all, generating the kinds of understandings described by Geertz requires sustained time in the field, of 'being there', of daily walking and thinking with the data.

Rich pictures

The notion of thick description has been adopted by many qualitative researchers to describe the capabilities of their work to go deep rather than wide. Since most of us in higher educational research are unlikely to get the time and space to do the kind of deep ethnography Geertz describes, I propose that we graft from the concept of thick description one of a 'rich picture'. This grafting allows me to plead an open mind to the usefulness of all kinds of data in order to build up a picture so long as it is accompanied by an acknowledgement that research findings are never simply the equivalent of our empirical findings. Without this

acknowledgement, data or its transformed state into 'evidence' is privileged as the key source of intelligence; this is a form of empiricism, write Holmes *et al.* (2006) which:

'fetishises the object at the expense of the human subject, for whom this world has a vital significance and meaning in the first place. An evidence-based, empirical world view is dangerously reductive insofar as it negates the personal and interpersonal significance and meaning of a world that is first and foremost a relational world, and not a fixed set of objects, partes extra partes.'

Whereas thinking *from* data empowers data with the capacity to parade as evidence independently of our relationship with it, thinking *with* data acknowledges that what we bring to the research enterprise is a combination of our scholarship, experience, passions, interpretive repertoires and empirical data (though of course some cultures of inquiry do not handle empirical data). It is in this way that we can respect all research efforts as ways of thinking *with* data while sustaining doubt for truth claims made by those who remain insistent that their data can 'tell' them what is happening, independently of human disturbance.

In sum

I am not proposing a romantic pluralism in which we refuse the debates about knowledge claims, reliability and so forth. That would undermine the advancement of understandings about research activity through critique. Rather I am suggesting that we give equal value to the efforts of researchers to think with their data, whatever its source. This would mean refusing the claim that truths derive from thinking from the data, as if an inert pile of interview data, field notes or statistics had the agency to yield truth independently of human intervention. It would reduce the privileged place of evidence while valuing the enormous stimulus data, whether visual, audio, numerical or textual, often provides for our thinking. It would give our own thinking, experience and scholarship an equal place with that of our data in generating fresh understandings. The only gold standard we need agree on with this perspective is that of researching with creativity, openness, integrity and respect for fellow researchers.

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Dr Glynis Cousin is a Senior Adviser at the Higher Education Academy.

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Hearing the student voice: Enhancing academic professional development through the involvement of students

Fiona Campbell, Napier University

'There should be more listening to the students: it's free information, free guidance for the university. More listening would create more participation, more involvement, more interest from students.' (Third year undergraduate)

But why should we listen more to students? Don't we teach them? Don't we ask them to complete questionnaires? Don't we survey them regularly?

But do we provide meaningful opportunities for them to reflect on aspects of their learning experiences, explore issues with their peers and raise issues which impact on their learning? And do we hear what they say and use it to make improvements? And do we, as educational developers, harness these student voices to inform academic professional development with the aim of enhancing learning, teaching and assessment practices?

This article examines the extent to which the student voice is used within academic professional development, discusses the impact of its use on both the staff and students involved and reports on current activities investigating the effective employment of this strategy within higher education.

Do educational developers use the student voice within academic professional development?

At Napier University, the student voice has been used for a number of years within staff conferences which are held twice-yearly on key aspects of learning, teaching and assessment practice. Usually employed at the start of the day, the original purpose of using student voices – heard through a

range of mechanisms – was to bring participants (typically 120 staff from schools and services across the university) quickly to a shared platform of awareness of the themes to be addressed during the day. However it became obvious that hearing the student voices was achieving much more than that: staff were stimulated by what they heard the students say – and how it was said – and engaged enthusiastically in addressing the issues they had raised during the course of the conference.

To investigate our experience further – and with the help of a SEDA small grant in 2004 – a review of the literature in this area was carried out to ascertain the extent to which the student voice was being used within academic professional development and the impact it had. The review concluded that students were involved, but only to a small extent and mainly peripherally or indirectly. Examples of this involvement included contributions to staff development materials and student association presentations at staff induction. However, a few valuable examples of more central involvement were found including student involvement in co-facilitating, participation and role play activities at staff development workshops for academic staff within inter-professional, problem-based learning, and enquiry-based learning. Much interesting work was particularly reported within medical education and the value of involving students in this area was recognised by Parsell (2000): 'giving students a voice...is crucial if we are to achieve the quality of medical education that everyone wants for the future'.

The literature review was followed by an investigation of practice within the university sector with all educational

development units or their equivalent which asked about the extent of their use of students within professional development. Although there was an awareness of the potential of using the student voice, results confirmed the findings from the literature: there was limited activity and most of it was confined to peripheral activities. This echoed with Asmar's (1999) conclusion that: 'the bringing together of faculty and students for discussion of the processes of teaching and learning in which they are jointly involved (rather than the usual focus on the content of the curriculum) is as rare as it is valuable'.

What impact does involving students in academic professional development have on staff?

The investigation also examined the reported effect on staff of involving students in professional development. Many of the practitioners who were using the student voice directly within professional development emphasised that the student involvement was a key factor in the impact of these sessions:

- O'Neill and Wyness (2005) concluded 'examining students' own words can reveal the meaning of learning experiences'
- Duffy and O'Neill (2003), believing that students should participate in the development of staff who were going to facilitate their learning, used students in a range of core workshops for staff with heavy student involvement in problem-based learning workshops. Anonymous evaluations of the workshops revealed that 76% of staff indicated that student involvement was the most useful aspect of these sessions

- Ballantyne (2000) involved students and staff in jointly identifying academic development needs and collaborating on the creation of staff development resources intended to meet those needs. He concluded, ‘if the quality of teaching and learning is to be addressed in any real sense in our universities, the need to look at teaching and learning from the students’ perspective must be recognised’
- Asmar (1999) used students in an innovative workshop to encourage cross-cultural teaching and found ‘faculty are surprisingly (even touchingly) impressed by what the students reveal, once the students are given both an opportunity and a supportive environment’
- King (2006) involved students and staff in a residential workshop focusing on enterprise and entrepreneurship and was able to demonstrate immediate positive reactions in addition to longer-term impact on staff in terms of both curricula changes and personal benefits
- Verrill and Worden (2006) explored with students their perceptions of good teaching and issues which could help (or hinder) their learning for use for a range of staff development purposes and concluded that ‘the student voice is the motor which drives reflective staff development’.

Among the reported views of staff participating in these and similar interventions were:

- ‘Great idea having a student on the team...I felt the process was from the bottom up not the top down...’
- ‘Students’ input was invaluable, students must be included in the process’
- ‘Having students there expressing their views and telling of their experience, made the whole thing much more concrete and immediate’
- ‘I can empathise more readily with students’
- ‘The thing that struck me most profoundly was the comments of the students. I found it very enlightening’
- ‘It helped to translate some of the things I had been thinking/writing

about into the domain of practice’

- ‘The insights I have gained as an academic are considerable. [The project] provided some obvious indicators of ways to frame academic practice’
- ‘Powerful stuff. Memorable portrayal of student voices. Let them speak. Listen!’
- ‘The statistics and experiences we talk about relate to real people’
- ‘The student involvement caught my attention and made me listen to what was being said. It felt more immediate and effective in getting the message over than having a member of staff presenting anecdotal evidence’
- ‘Without empirical evidence we’re left with guesswork and even if our guesses are good, we can’t know all the ways that students experience their learning’.

What impact does involving students in academic professional development have on students?

Practitioners also reported a positive impact on the students involved in contributing to academic professional development. Duffy and O’Neill (2003) concluded that ‘an unforeseen consequence (was that the experience) has been very positive for the students and has had an impact on their approach to the course and their discussions with fellow students’.

Among the reported student views from the literature and investigation of practice were:

- ‘[I gained] a feeling of accomplishment and relevance, people listened to what I had to say’
- ‘I found the interaction between staff and students very beneficial’
- ‘The interaction between staff and students was something I’ve never really encountered before to that extent. Experienced opinions and fresh ideas combined to some interesting results’.

So why are students asked to contribute their views so engaged? Why does the process motivate them to learn?

First, when appropriate mechanisms are used to facilitate students to focus

and reflect meaningfully on their learning experience – often with their peers – and express their views in a considered way, they are able to provide clear-minded, thought-through and well-argued analyses of their experience. Students appreciate these opportunities and question the value of more common practices of obtaining feedback on their learning experiences, complaining of questionnaire fatigue and overload, and survey saturation.

Secondly, when students perceive that their views are valued by their institution and that they are regarded as partners in the learning and teaching process they become more motivated. The QAA Report (2005), *Outcomes from institutional audit: Student representation and feedback arrangements*, reports that a virtuous circle exists in which improvements to feedback arrangements have a positive impact on the engagement of students.

Thirdly, when students see the direct benefit of their contribution through changes realised during the course of their programme of study they feel energised and encouraged to learn.

The QAA Report highlights a number of good practices in place in some HEIs where the above three processes are at work and the student voice:

- is heard through the development of a range of opportunities for student participation
- is acted upon to enhance the student experience
- and is responded to – the completion of the feedback loop – through the provision of the outcomes and impact of their contribution to the students.

This resonates with an extensive study on the impact of consultation and participation on students at school in which Fielding (2002) claims that it can offer them a stronger sense of:

- membership so that students feel more positive about their school
- respect and self-worth so that students feel more positive about themselves
- self as learner so that students are able to manage their own progress in learning

- agency so that students realise they can have impact on things that matter at their school.

How can the student voice contribute to academic professional development?

So why are staff so affected by hearing – within professional development contexts – the views of the very students with whom they come into contact on a regular basis?

As described above, using effective means of capturing their voices enables students engaged in this process to contribute a wealth of fresh, relevant and profound information. Listening staff are often surprised when they hear the student perspective and their perception of their experiences as learners. As Ramsden (1988) has said: ‘good teaching means seeing learning through the learner’s eyes’. The insight which results from hearing students enables staff to effect enhancements in learning, teaching and assessment to benefit the students.

Further, the spoken word itself also allows an emotional connection between speaker and listener and the gap between what is said and what is heard is closed. Staff are engaged by hearing heartfelt, strongly-held views. ‘Listening to student stories can have a transformative impact for the hearer enabling a shift in values and valences. It enables empathy by awakening what is ordinarily not heard, enabling staff to wear another’s shoes and see things from their perspective’ (Alterio, 2003).

Given the reported benefits to students, staff and institutions who have engaged in this practice, it is surprising that the involvement of students in academic professional development is not more widespread. Certainly, the investigation within the sector yielded much awareness of the potential benefits with responses to the question concerning the involvement of students in academic professional development including the following:

- ‘No – but I have plans’
- ‘No, hadn’t thought about this but

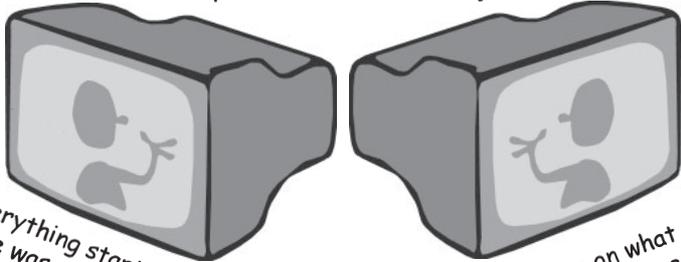
- am now’
- ‘No, but we might think about it now!’
- ‘I am really interested in this’
- ‘I had never thought about this before and can’t believe we use students so little’.

So why are student used so little? Are educational developers concerned about how to find effective ways to open this channel of communication between staff and students? Are there too few models of good practice in the domain? Are there concerns about practical, resource and, particularly, ethical issues relating to the use of the student voice?

How can the involvement of students within academic professional development be promoted?

To address these questions and with funding from a Higher Education Academy Subject Centre ESCalate development grant (2006), a collaborative project involving four universities across the UK (Central England, Leeds Metropolitan, Napier and Westminster) has been established. The team is developing case studies of good practice in a variety of areas which will be evaluated to determine impact among students and staff. Illustrations of some of these case studies are included here.

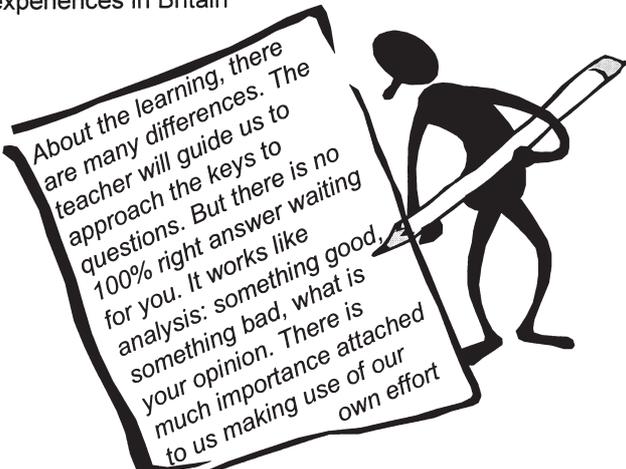
Staff conference on the first year experience:
Delegates discuss video diaries of students’ early experiences at university



“Everything started so quickly and there was so much information - I felt overwhelmed. But it’s begun to make sense now - especially as a lecturer took the time to check that everything was going okay. And that gave me to ask some things that were worrying me.”

“An early discussion on what would have been very helpful. The lecturers keep going on that university writing is so different. Okay, different but in what way?”

Staff seminar on international student experience:
Staff discuss mock letters from current international students written home about their educational experiences in Britain



About the learning, there are many differences. The teacher will guide us to approach the keys to questions. But there is no 100% right answer waiting for you. It works like analysis: something good, something bad, what is your opinion. There is much importance attached to us making use of our own effort

This year our lecturer made us criticise our own essays first and give ourselves marks and the she gave us feedback on particular issues. That feedback helps you focus on how to get a better mark.

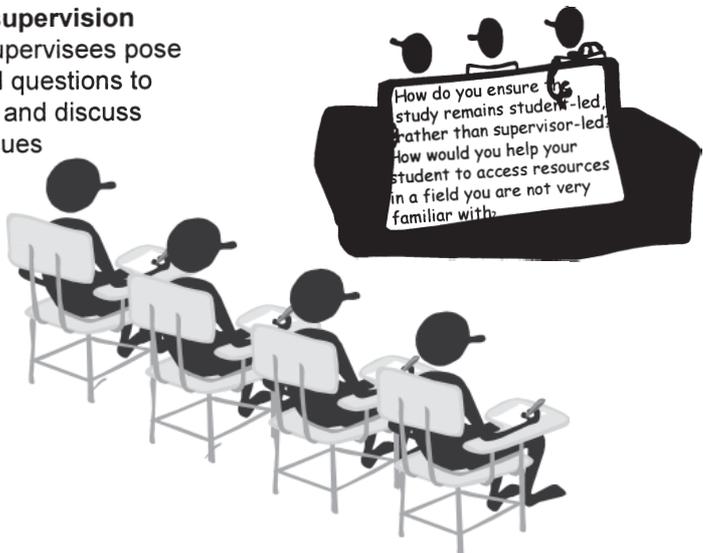
Online PG Certificate course for academic staff – assessment module:
Participants observe recording of student focus group discussion of their experiences of assessment

But I feel the feedback narrows your field of interest. The feedback we get is very good at helping you pass your exams, but we're not being taught how to explore a topic, to really get into your subject.



Research supervision seminar: supervisees pose anonymised questions to supervisors and discuss resulting issues

How do you ensure the study remains student-led, rather than supervisor-led?
How would you help your student to access resources in a field you are not very familiar with?



Related issues are also being considered, particularly how to produce a safe environment for students to contribute. All results will be disseminated to the sector.

The team has developed templates enabling each case study to be outlined and evaluated in uniform ways to establish the impact on both students and staff and to facilitate dissemination. Importantly, the staff evaluation seeks to discover the extent to which staff found the professional development a positive experience and any changes to their practice they commit to as a result – the two criteria identified by Rust (1998) as measures of the impact of professional development interventions.

In addition to the case studies being developed by the project team, a number of individuals who are engaged in using the student voice have agreed to contribute case studies using the project templates.

Among the planned dissemination mechanisms are three project events planned for 2007 where the team hopes to report on findings, showcase examples of developed case studies and discuss implementation issues:

- London – regional one-day workshop on 1 March 2007
- Leeds – regional one-day workshop on 23 March 2007
- Glasgow – national event on 9 May 2007 at which Norman Sharp, Director of QAA Scotland, will provide a keynote. This day will

precede the SEDA conference on 10-11 May and be held at the same venue.

For further information about the events (and how to book), project progress and plans and how you can contribute, visit the project website at: <http://www.napier.ac.uk/studentvoices>.

The project team aims, through their developmental, evaluative and dissemination activities to facilitate educational developers using students more within academic development practice and to encourage staff to achieve what Mann (2006) has described – paraphrasing George Eliot – as ‘getting close to the roar that lies on the other side of the silence of the classroom, for it is only in that roar that we can begin to develop an understanding of the lived experience of individuals within classroom contexts’.

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Fiona Campbell is an Academic Development Adviser at Napier University, and a member of *Hearing the Student Voice* project.

Weighing pigs or handling Hansel? Making feedback fit for purpose

Mark Huxham, Shirley Earl, Phyllis Laybourn, Norrie Brown, Sandra Cairncross and Morag Gray, Napier University

Introduction

How should we measure the quality of teaching, and who should do the measuring? These questions are guaranteed to raise the blood pressure of academics, wary of quality assurance processes that generate work without generating quality. As the cliché puts it: weighing the pig won't make it grow (but it might allow the ranking of the farm in a national league table). In fact, processes designed to evaluate the quality of teaching could be worse than the cliché suggests; at least weighing the pig should give you an indication of its growth rate, even if it does not necessarily enhance it. But suppose an evaluative process measures the wrong thing? Like the witch in Hansel and Gretel, who is fooled into feeling the chicken bone to measure how fat and juicy the little boy has grown, we may be using evaluative methods that give information that is irrelevant for our purposes.

Cynicism about the evaluation of teaching quality, in particular about the collection of student views on teaching, is commonly reported. Penny (2003, p. 399) describes the collection of student feedback data as 'one of the most sensitive, divisive and political [issues] in education'. Students doubt whether their views make a difference. Staff are suspicious of political and management agenda, and are 'fed up with the way in which the life of students and academics is now dominated by numbers, statistics, graphs and tables that claim to measure our successes or failures' (Bassnett, 2006, p.54). This coincides with an expansion of the evaluation of teaching at many levels, driven by the 'student as customer' model; collecting student feedback on teaching and the learning experience is a routine part of quality processes in most universities, and now occurs on a national

scale through the National Student Survey. Given the huge effort devoted to collecting student feedback and the evident anxiety and cynicism it can provoke, it is timely to consider again exactly why we are doing it and what methods should be used.

Student evaluations commonly provide information for three main audiences: a) Teachers, who can use the information to improve their teaching, b) Managers, who can use the information for accountability and in promotion and tenure decisions, c) Students, who can use the information when choosing modules and courses. A perfect system for collecting feedback would meet the needs of each of these, but the real systems in fallible faculties will probably favour some audiences over others. Brennan and Williams (2004, p.17) reviewed the collection of student feedback in the UK and found that questionnaires 'are by far the most commonly used mechanism'. But does this dominance of questionnaires imply a particular kind of feedback, which serves some purposes better than others? Students and academics agree that the primary purpose of collecting student feedback should be to improve teaching and the student experience (Chen and Hoshower, 2003; Penny, 2003; Spencer and Schmelkin, 2002); this is a view that is surely welcomed and endorsed by all educational developers. But our current methods of collecting feedback might not always achieve this.

Napier Research Methods

Collaborative work at Napier University, funded by a SEDA small grant, has been looking at the effects of the medium on

the message. We were interested in whether the instrument we used to collect student feedback would substantially affect the data produced, and what the strengths and weaknesses of different methods were. In particular, we wanted to compare the results from the standard 'end of module' questionnaire used at Napier with different approaches. The questionnaire has 25 closed answer questions (as well as optional open answer questions on the back) and is similar to those used in many other universities (Brennan and Williams, 2004). Results from the questionnaire are used as part of the formal quality assurance processes in the university.

We used three different evaluation methodologies to act as comparators with the questionnaire data. These reflected our various areas of expertise and were chosen to represent a range of costs and philosophies, from rapid, representative but 'surface' approaches to more 'deep' qualitative methods:

- 1) Rapid semi-structured feedback – students were asked to individually write answers to the following three questions: a) what do you like about this module? b) What do you dislike about this module? c) What changes would you suggest making to this module?
- 2) H forms – the H form is a simple evaluation tool that can be used with individuals or more commonly (as in this case) with groups, which was developed for use in 'participatory rural appraisal' exercises (Guy and Inglis, 1999). It consists of an 'H' shape drawn on paper, with the question to be addressed written at the top, one side reserved for positive comments, one for negative, and the middle section for means of improvement. In the current work it was used with groups of four to five students addressing the question 'what do you think of this module?'
- 3) Focus groups – groups of four or five students were recruited and interviewed for around 20 minutes, following a semi-structured format, on the topic of 'what did you think about this module?'

Seven different first and second year modules from four different schools in the university were selected. For methods 1 and 2, the classes were randomly divided into equal halves, with one half asked to complete the module questionnaire and the other the designated evaluation method. Because the focus groups could be run with only relatively small numbers of students, modules using this methodology were divided unequally. In each case the questionnaire and comparator evaluation were conducted either simultaneously or as closely as possible to one another.

Results

Feedback was obtained from 366 students; three modules used the rapid feedback method, three used focus groups and one H forms. Hence many data were collected and we will attempt a summary of only some of it here, emphasising the key points. The rapid feedback methodology allows a relatively straightforward comparison with the questionnaire data. Student responses to each question were categorised and then ranked in frequency of occurrence. These were then compared with the questionnaire responses for the

relevant class, ranked according to the score achieved. For example, the top ten responses given to the question 'what do you like about this module?' are shown against the top ten questionnaire responses for each of the three relevant modules in Figure 1. Shading on this figure indicates where the question on the questionnaire addressed the same (or very similar) category of issue as that identified by the rapid response evaluation; for example, there were three issues in common identified in module b, and the issue ranked top in the rapid feedback came second in the questionnaire. Similar comparisons were made with the data from the other methodologies.

Discussion

Not surprisingly, the evaluation methods varied widely in the effort required – focus groups in particular are time-consuming. They also varied in the kinds of data produced, and in the ease with which these data could be compared with the quantitative results of the questionnaire. However, two generalities did emerge:

1. Commensurability

Many of the issues raised by the comparator methods were not commensurable with the standard questionnaire; there was simply no question referring to the issue. This is illustrated in Figure 1, showing only three, three and one commensurable issues for a, b and c respectively. This was often because student responses in the comparator methods were highly specific to parts of the module in question. For example, students often praised (or condemned) particular staff, subjects or lessons:

'I did not like the ----- part of this module, because I feel like I am too busy writing things down to listen to what the lecturer is saying.'

'I really liked the method of teaching, ----- 's class in particular was very interesting and well taught. It was fast flowing and maintained interest.'

Students also commonly commented on timetabling and accommodation issues, which are not covered by the questionnaire apart from in a very general question:

'Would be good to have the heating on in ----- , it's freezing in there!'

'Have six hours of classes in ----- on a Thursday which is hard going.'

'No more 9am starts. 10am and there would be fewer absences.'

2. Weighting

Whilst many topics were not shared between the questionnaire and comparator methods, those that were in common were often given very different rankings by students. For example, the statement 'I was clear how the module content related to the aims and learning outcomes' on the module questionnaire scored in the top ten for each of the three modules in Figure 1. However, this statement

had no equivalent in the open ended positive comments from the students collected with the comparator methods; although students thought the modules did well in this respect, they did not think it important enough to comment on when given the choice. As Figure 1 demonstrates, the questionnaire scores often showed rather little variation between questions, whilst there was large variance in the emphasis (measured as frequency of response) given to topics in the comparator method. The latter thus gives a much better guide to students' priorities.

Conclusions

Asking students about the same module using different methods gives different results, or at least different emphases. The key contrast between the questionnaire and the other methods was that the latter used open ended questions that allowed students to state their concerns in their own words. Although greater depth and nuance was achieved using focus groups compared with rapid feedback, the types of issues identified were the same. The academics involved found the qualitative feedback more useful than the questionnaire data, whilst the students also commented on their preference for methods other than questionnaires. So why do most universities rely so heavily on questionnaires, and often privilege questionnaire results over those of other methods (Brennan and Williams, 2004)? The obvious answer is that questionnaire data can easily be transformed into summative scores used in quality and accountability processes. Educationalists long ago recognised the distinction between summative and formative assessment. We have developed a broad consensus, based on sound research, that formative aspects of assessment should be encouraged. This is despite the forces of inertia, tradition and political pressure that emphasise only summative rigour. Perhaps it is time to recognise that evaluation too can be both summative and formative, and to argue our case for formative methods?

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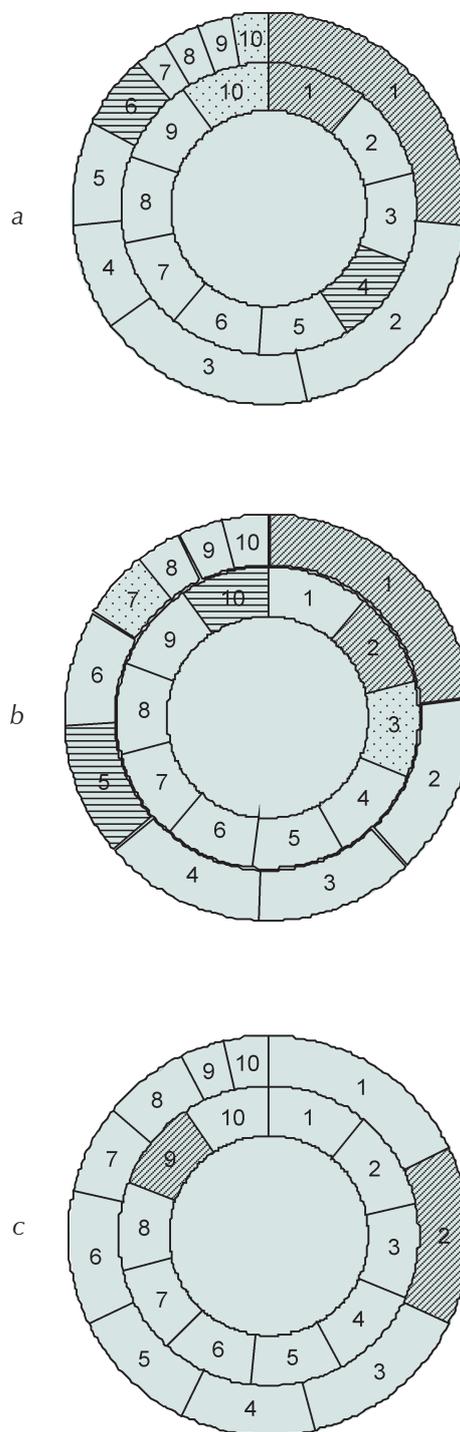
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Figure 1. Responses from three modules (a, b and c) comparing questionnaire (inner ring) with rapid semi-structured (outer ring) feedback. Numbers give the ranking of each issue; issues in common between the two methods share the same shading.



Shirley Earl is Head of Learning and Teaching Development, **Morag Gray** is Associate Dean (Academic Development) in the Faculty of Health, Life and Social Sciences, **Sandra Cairncross** is Associate Dean (Quality and Customer Services) in the Faculty of Engineering, Computing and Creative Industries, and **Mark Huxham**, **Phyllis Laybourn** and **Norrie Brown** are academic staff, all at Napier University.

Conference Report: researching and evaluating PDP and e-portfolios

International Seminar organised by the Centre for Recording Achievement in association with the Higher Education Academy, the Joint Information Services Committee (JISC), the SURF Foundation (Netherlands) and the Inter/National Coalition for Electronic Portfolio Research, at The Oxford Belfry, 9-11 October 2006.

Janet Strivens, Centre for Recording Achievement

The idea for this seminar grew directly out of the experiences of practitioners in UK Higher Education involved with the implementation of personal development planning (PDP) across the sector. As the target date (September 2005) for full implementation of the QAA Guidelines¹ approached, the Centre for Recording Achievement (CRA)² carried out a survey of progress and needs³ and this revealed that the development of a sound evidence base for PDP practice was one of the top four priorities for practitioners working within the sector⁴. Many of these practitioners work closely with, or are themselves, educational developers and as such they appreciate the importance of well-founded evidence to give educationally persuasive support to PDP implementation.

During 2006 the CRA ran a series of workshops around the UK aimed at building research and evaluation capacity and sharing practice. The International Seminar was seen as both a further opportunity for this and a chance to review the state of the evidence so far⁵. Of course, PDP practice has a particular status in the UK as a policy-driven initiative and much practice is entirely paper-based⁶. However, we were well aware that many of the issues and concerns (including the search for a sound evidence base) were shared by colleagues in the e-portfolio world. Both the Academy and JISC have developed good working relationships, particularly in the US and the Netherlands, with such colleagues, and this seminar was also an opportunity to focus these relationships around common research agenda.

The whole seminar was a pleasure to plan and organise: the organising committee (John Peters, Rob Ward and Janet Strivens⁷) was delighted with the response to the call for papers and positively overwhelmed by the interest in attending. Over the three days, over 120 people attended, of whom 80 were fully residential. The CRA has a strong track record of running stimulating, interactive, exhausting conferences but we saw this as a slight departure from our usual events: John's experience of organising (and Janet's of attending) SEDA conferences also had a strong influence on our planning. International meetings can sometimes lack a sense of community outside the actual sessions: here, delegates commented on the opportunities for networking and the development of conversations both within sessions and continuing into the breaks. To foster this sense of sharing common agenda we had deliberately built time into the programme for delegates to meet in 'base groups'. We were aware that these don't always work as planned and sometimes the slot is seen as a chance to take a much-needed break, but in this context they worked extremely well.

We chose the keynote speakers partly to represent the three key locations we expected the delegates to be drawn from, but they also offered, by virtue of their very different roles within their own HE systems and institutions, three very different 'takes' on the PDP/e-portfolio worlds.

Kathleen Yancey is one of the co-founders, with Barbara and Darren Cambridge, of the Inter/National Coalition for e-Portfolio Research. Since 2003 this coalition has successfully drawn together more than 30 HEIs in three separate cohorts, to

engage in both individual and collaborative research around e-portfolio development, support each other and share their practice and findings. Two UK HEIs are taking part in the most recent cohort.

However, Kathleen's own background is as a professor of English and more particularly writing (much more commonly offered as a subject in its own right in US universities). A strong thread through her published work charts her engagement with portfolios to stimulate, enhance and celebrate students' developing powers to express themselves effectively in different genres and to find their own voice. In Oxford she explored a series of metaphors of the role portfolios could play in developing community engagement and integration of learning across disciplinary boundaries, drawing on the work of the Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas.

Wijnand Aalderinck from Windlesheim University is well known to UK colleagues in JISC and ALT as the co-chair (with Marij Veugelers) of the steering group of NL Portfolio, one of the special interest groups of the SURF Foundation in the Netherlands⁸. He emphasised the strong commitment within much of Dutch HE to competence-based education and student-centred learning; commitments which provided a foundation to e-portfolio development, but noted the potential tensions between administrative and pedagogical processes. He described the systematic review of research on portfolios in Dutch higher education already carried out by Erik Driessen and Danae Bodewes of the University of Maastricht. An important finding from this review is that 'coaching' is essential to realise the value of e-

portfolio processes, but we know little so far about the profile of the ideal coach⁹. Acceptability of the tools and procedures to both staff and students is also vital.

Wijnand then described the 'maturity model' of e-portfolio implementation developed by Wilfred Rubens and Alex Kempes, which looks at how organisations make use of e-portfolio functionality on a developing scale which would tend towards giving students greater freedom and control over the planning of their own educational programme. He concluded with a brief list of the small-scale projects which SURF is currently funding in this area and a positive assessment of the value of continuing international collaboration in this field.

The UK was represented by Professor Patricia Broadfoot, the recently-appointed Vice-Chancellor of the University of Gloucester. Patricia reminded us of her long association with this area of interest, dating back to the PRAISE project¹⁰ in the mid 1980s. Taking as her theme 'empowering the learner', she reviewed what has been established in the interim as the key conditions for effective learning in a 21st century context. She touched on both characteristics of the teacher-learner relationship and qualities of the learners themselves, stressing the importance of the Assessment for Learning work associated with Paul Black and Dylan William.

Finally, she spent some time describing the work she has been most recently involved with at Bristol, in collaboration with Guy Claxton, on 'learning power'. The ELLI project¹¹ has identified seven characteristics of effective learners which include both cognitive and 'dispositional' factors; it has developed an inventory to help teachers formatively assess their pupils and there are materials for classroom use to develop these characteristics – ELLI is not a static model of factors affecting learning but assumes we can help learners develop greater learning power.

Around the keynote sessions on days one and two were 12 workshops and 28 paper presentations in seven parallel sessions. While recognising

that participants, very few of whom would have described themselves as primarily educational researchers, would be keen to describe their practice, the organising committee had tried hard to encourage presenters to focus very clearly on research/evaluation questions, methods of data collection and any findings from their practice. We felt that those who had submitted papers responded very positively to our suggestions, sometimes making valiant efforts to re-frame and re-analyse the evaluations which they had been involved with. A picture emerged of a growing sophistication of understanding of both the importance of and the problems besetting the evaluation of an initiative such as PDP, which is policy-driven (at least in the UK) at the institutional level, but holds the potential for a profound shift in pedagogy affecting every teacher and student.

We deliberately left the final morning free from paper sessions so we could attempt to reflect on what we had heard, summarise our collective understanding and identify an agenda for progress. Signs from the gods were not auspicious: during John Peters' account of the Summer 2006 series of workshops the heavens opened, thunder and lightning triggered a power cut and fire alarm and those delegates who had obediently evacuated through the French windows returned a quarter of an hour later looking distinctly damp and bedraggled. It says much for their sterling qualities of character that the ensuing discussions were vigorous and challenging.

We asked the audience to help us identify what was already secure knowledge in this area (if anything) and what were the community's research priorities. Suggestions came thick and fast, asking questions about effects on learning, effects of linking the PDP process to assessment, how audiences shape portfolios, the effects of using different electronic tools, disciplinary differences, cultural factors in relation to engagement and expectations, useful typologies of both PDP and e-portfolios and much, much more. The huge interest in high-quality research and evaluation within this community has clear

implications for educational developers in support for evaluation training and active participation in evaluations.

As if in token of the international community's recognition of the value of further collaborative research, the final activity of the seminar was to launch a fourth cohort of the Inter/National Coalition for Electronic Portfolio Research as part of the overall e-portfolio research initiative. This will be led from Europe and aimed predominantly at European participants; more details will be available shortly from the CRA.

If you would like to know more about the event, the CRA website holds most of the materials at: <http://www.recordingachievement.org/special/default.asp> (accessed 11 January 2007). Contributions from presenters are still being added to this site.

Notes

¹ The QAA Guidelines for HE Progress Files can be found at: <http://qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/progressFiles/guidelines/progfile2001.asp>

² CRA is a registered educational charity and an Associate Centre of the Higher Education Academy. It is the sector-recognised organisation with a brief from the Higher Education Academy to support Personal Development Planning and e-portfolio developments across the HE sector. See <http://www.recordingachievement.org>

³ The report from this survey, called *Progress files: Are we achieving our goal?* can be found on the CRA website at: <http://www.recordingachievement.org/downloads/PFWorkingPaper.pdf>

⁴ Such an emphasis was also picked up by the UK group looking at issues of measuring and recording student achievement (the Burgess Group) which noted in its Scoping Report (2004) that 'there should continue to be evaluation of the impact of [sic] learning and the representation of learning and achievement of different

forms of Personal Development Planning.'

⁵ It was also a follow-on from two previous activities with an international dimension: an interdisciplinary meeting in Washington DC in October 2004 on e-portfolio developments to which UK delegates were invited by the (unfortunately now defunct) American Association for Higher Education; and a return event sponsored by the HEA and JISC at Goodenough College in London in October 2005. This last event, in turn, had already led to the widening of the Inter/National Coalition for Electronic Portfolio Research to include Canadian and UK institutions.

⁶ On behalf of HEA, the CRA recently carried out a survey of current usage and practice in relation to e-portfolios, with special attention to the use of electronic systems to support the implementation of personal development planning. The findings from this survey suggest that the majority of UK HEIs are already using or seriously considering using some form of electronic support for their PDP process, although this may not yet be an e-portfolio system.

⁷ Rob is the Director of CRA, Janet is the Senior Associate Director and John is the Associate Director for Research and Evaluation.

⁸ <http://e-learning.surf.nl/portfolio>

⁹ It would probably be more common in the UK environment to use the term mentoring although coaching seems to be gaining currency in this context.

¹⁰ Pilot Records of Achievement in Schools Evaluation (Patricia Broadfoot, Mary James, Desmond Nuttall and Barry Stierer, 1988).

¹¹ See <http://www.ellionline.co.uk/> and <http://www.bris.ac.uk/education/enterprise/elli/background>.

Janet Strivens is Senior Associate Director at the Centre for Recording Achievement.

Supporting learning and teaching innovation and building research capacity using an e-portfolio at Wolverhampton University

Barbara Maiden, Brian Penfold, Tracy McCoy, Linsey Duncan-Pitt and Julie Hughes, University of Wolverhampton

Introduction

When asked to write this paper for *Educational Developments* following the SEDA conference we were struck with a dilemma; how best to represent the multi-vocal and complex nature of our research group within a linear text format? As a previous writing group our writing space was an online collaborative e-portfolio and weblog. As a staff group who are geographically distant, occupying four different campuses, an online writing 'space' (Figure 1) has been the sixth member of our research group. For without the spaces for writing and reflection upon our professional practices, both literal and metaphorical, we would not be a research community at all.

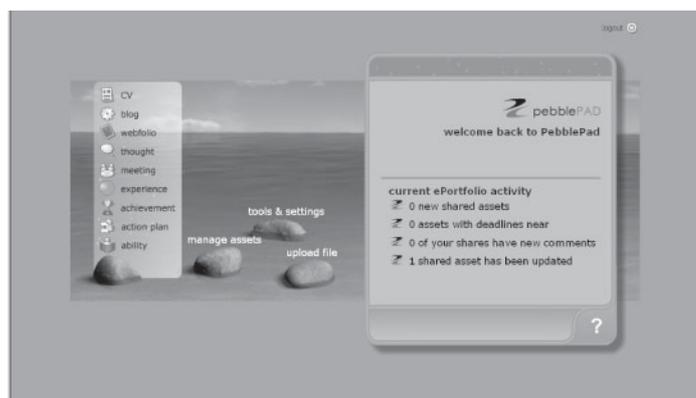


Figure 1

So it is not incidental that this piece of writing grew out of our collaborative 'safe' space – our e-portfolio. Our stories of professional mentoring across schools and disciplines grew outside of institutional structures and, we believe, offer exciting models for future staff development. This paper will narrate the development of the group, drawing specifically upon two of the member's experiences; firstly as an individual mentee and then as school mentor, to offer suggestions on how this model of staff development might be applied in other contexts.

The constituency of the University of Wolverhampton e-portfolio user group (epug) research cluster is drawn from five schools, the School of Health (SoH), Wolverhampton Business School (WBS), the School of Computing and Information Technology (SCIT), the School of Education (SED) and the School of Art and Design (SAD).

The genesis of the group has its roots in a shared interest and enthusiasm for embracing new technology to both foster and enable the development of on-line communities in order to promote and sustain challenging, though rigorously supported/mentored on-line learning environments. Early adopters of new technology and/or approaches to teaching can sometimes find themselves isolated and/or even dismissed by colleagues preferring to stick to tried and tested methodologies, or who are fearful of change and the implications this might have on their work load and/or their

professional practice and independence.

Happily for this group of aspiring researchers, e-portfolio building software was being developed and piloted at our institution. This software, pebblePAD, (www.pebblepad.co.uk) which was developed by Pebble Learning and the University of Wolverhampton, offered both students and staff the opportunity to use the tools within to initiate and build communities and to record and reflect upon practice. During the development phase of pebblePAD a small staff user group was established to provide an opportunity for users to meet face-to-face and share their concerns and desires/wish lists for the new technology. It was at the second annual conference of this group in 2005 that the research cluster was founded based on a common ideology: that in order to better understand the processes and approaches involved in on-line learning and reflection we too should make direct use of the tools within in order to gain insight into the experience of our students.

Furthermore, individually, we had found that our own students spoke warmly of the ways in which they felt supported by the communities of practice that we had established on-line for them and with them and we wanted to experience this for ourselves since we felt rather isolated within our schools where research tended to have a subject-specific focus rather than one of teaching and learning. Some of the group have a specific remit for the dissemination and promotion of e-portfolio building within their schools and this proved most useful in providing the initial impetus for the group. Linsey Duncan-Pitt (SoH) and Julie Hughes (SED) were instrumental in developing our first models through their use of weblogs and shared webfolios. As confidence within the group has grown, so its dynamic has changed and the current phase has moved into a period where all are equal pilots in a shared journey and exploration of our group and individual practices. Communities cannot exist without people and it was with this in mind that each member of the cluster independently sought to embed themselves within the online communities they were seeking to establish (for the benefit of their tutees/students). Active and sustained participation within the various fora, chat rooms, blogs *etc.* was a fundamental ingredient to the instigation, nurturing and sustaining of each of the on-line learning communities that were developing.

Barbara's story – experience as a Mentee – working on the fringes

As a University teacher with many years experience I was excited by the possibilities that were presented for enhancing the reflective skills of both undergraduate and postgraduate students by the adoption and integration of the e-portfolio into the Business Studies curriculum. A key problem I had experienced with both undergraduate and postgraduate students undertaking research projects was the difficulty of engaging meaningfully with large numbers in the cohorts where they all had different needs and times when they required support from me as the tutor. When they were asked to reflect on their own learning throughout the research project, their observations were often superficial and written in retrospect rather than discussing

meaningful insights which occurred during their activities. On first being introduced to the e-portfolio, pebblePAD, I could begin to visualise a range of possibilities for interactive dialogue not only with me as the tutor, but within a community of student practice.

Whilst I felt confident with my general IT skills and had used the VLE for some limited dialogic activities, working initially with the pebblePAD technology offered a more dynamic interface where I was likely to develop a more intense relationship with students. At the initial stages where I was attempting to develop my technological skills and explore the pedagogic possibilities that might be employed, I experienced considerable isolation as I could find no other colleagues in my own school who were as excited about the potential of the e-portfolio. Fortunately, I was able to make contact with a group of more experienced users who were further along in their e-portfolio exploration. And it was through this contact, sometimes face-to-face, sometimes through a shared blog or individual assets, that I began to feel that I could successfully integrate the new technology to good effect into my modules.

The complexity of the mentoring process has been discussed in the education literature, often in the context of career development and leadership rather than in the e-support and empowerment of colleagues across the boundaries of the organisation (Challon *et al.*, 2005). Shea's mentoring model (2002) provides a useful insight into how my practice was reviewed, developed and improved. Support from my e-mentor enabled me firstly to grasp the reality that I needed to have realistic goals, and try out just one or two possibilities initially. My mentor's willingness and availability to listen and share information, both face-to-face and on-line, gave me an opportunity to talk about my emotions and share the highs and lows of my interventions. We were able to share and discuss strategies in our own community of practice as teachers and explore options which were appropriate to my particular academic context.

In retrospect, I can see how powerful a process this informal networked mentoring has been for me as an individual lecturer. I might have given up long ago had it not been for this collaborative, supportive and informal structure where I felt respect and trust was a two-way process.

Linsey's story – using an e-mentoring approach to introduce an e-portfolio 'culture'

One of the ways in which the Centre for Excellence in Learning and Teaching supports staff who are effective practitioners to disseminate good practice is through buying out of time to enable the practitioner to take a step back and focus on sharing their experiences both within and without their departments. The value of this in terms of development work cannot be overestimated, not just in terms of the opportunities to work within one's own context but in terms of the added value of working with other disciplines and learning from the approach of others. I found this experience valuable in shaping my ideas when formulating a strategy for implementing e-portfolio use in a large School of Health.

Healthcare education programmes have a long tradition of using portfolios to evidence the integration of theory to

practice and the opportunity to develop portfolios that are personalised, rich with reflection on experience and that benefit from the collaborative tools associated with electronic media was extremely motivating. We have noted elsewhere the value of using methods of evidencing where professional dialogue is fostered and our adoption of a mentoring approach arises from our professional values (Duncan-Pitt and Sutherland, 2006; Hulme and Hughes, 2006). My colleagues have discussed the value of being part of a supportive community of practice and I can endorse this. For me the challenge of introducing a transformative and indeed potentially disruptive technology (Garrison and Anderson, 2000) was and still is assisted greatly by the solidarity gained from the group and its breadth of professional knowledge.

The context of my work is a large School of Health which offers a vast range of courses from undergraduate nursing and midwifery to advanced and specialist practitioners at the leading edge of new ways of providing healthcare services. The large numbers of staff working in a diverse range of disciplines seemed to call for a mentoring model of development working within specialisms.

McNaught *et al.* (2006) identified the complexity of successful adoption of e-learning and suggested some universal factors related to widespread use of e-learning which were considered in relation to the implementation of a strategy for pedagogically sound integration of e-portfolio within the School. In particular we recognised the resource implications in terms of training and ongoing support for staff. A mentoring strategy was developed to address issues such as the isolation that is experienced by innovators working within groups without a strong culture of technology use, and the competing pressures of working in an ever-changing healthcare economy and with students whose needs are complex and teacher-intensive. The intention was to create a group of e-mentors who would then support a small number of colleagues working within their own speciality in conjunction with a staff development programme centred on specific pedagogical application of the technology, as well as the corporate, more generic programme. It was recognised that the integration of the e-portfolio into the curriculum would require teams to engage with a number of issues pertinent to their own specialisms and that a one-sized approach would not fit all potential users.

Thirty staff were trained as e-mentors at three workshops in March, April and May, 2006. The programme consisted of a two-day workshop away from the workplace during which the participants were immersed in the use of the technology. The workshops involved an overnight stay and all meals were provided so that the attendees could bond together and maximise their involvement without the distractions of their work base. Engagement with the technology was intensive, stimulated by the comfortable surroundings and discussion went on into the evening as well as through meal-breaks. All of the workshops evaluated positively with staff commenting that they felt valued and supported. The workshops were funded using HEFCE funding which had been allocated to each School in the University.

Following the workshops, the participants were required to identify, by negotiation with their line manager, three colleagues to mentor during the academic year 2006-7. To support their work 30 hours of remission from teaching was matched by 30 preparation hours as agreed with senior management. Workshops were provided in the first semester delivered by the e-portfolio coordinator and supported by some of the e-mentors using their allocated time.

Interim evaluation

Although we are in the early stages of the programme issues have arisen which have required a change in delivery. The workshops were poorly attended despite being well publicised and offered on an afternoon when there were few student classes, and various reasons for this have emerged.

One barrier to attendance was the reluctance of staff to expose what they perceived to be weaknesses in IT skills to staff that were outside of their main work-group and so for semester 2 the basis of workshops will change and instead will be offered on a whole team basis rather than an open staff workshop. The mentors' role will centre more on supporting small action learning sets arising from these workshops.

Significantly, where there was enthusiasm and support from the immediate line manager of the staff the attendance was better and the implementation following the workshops was higher. This seemed to be the most significant factor affecting the uptake of the technology. This supports the observations of Overton (2005), who found in her study that staff were most influenced by line managers in their adoption of technology and least influenced by training departments. Few line managers expressed an interest in or attended training or promoted this within their teams. This is now being addressed through embedding in the curriculum and planned integration into staff appraisal.

An example of the success of the mentoring approach was seen within the midwifery team. The small size of the team, a strong collegiate approach across the team and line manager engagement produced a whole curriculum innovation with the faster adopters mentoring and supporting the slower adopters.

Positively, a critical mass of innovation has developed which has provided enough evidence to stimulate a more strategic approach to integrating the e-portfolio into the undergraduate curriculum, and this will provide imperatives for staff to engage with the staff mentoring programme so that we can explore some of the more disruptive influences of the e-portfolio: those which challenge the teacher assumptions about student-centred learning (Norton *et al.*, 2005).

Further adventures and pebble pals?

Our e-portfolio research and innovation group is committed to exploring further the exciting disruptive possibilities offered by a new technology such as an e-portfolio. As a group we are growing in size and, we hope, in influence, as our University considers the role of e-learning on a wider strategic level. What has emerged from the experience of

being mentor/mentee is the vital role of peer and institutional support for innovation and the need to support risk-taking communities so that staff feel less isolated and more eager to embrace the challenges and delights of technology to support learning, teaching, assessment and research. As a group of individuals we have begun to influence policy and practice in our respective schools and we are convinced that our safe thinking and writing space, the e-portfolio, and the peer-mentor community created within it, have been instrumental in our development as teachers and researchers.

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Barbara Maiden, Tracy McCoy, and Linsey Duncan-Pitt are senior lecturers, and **Julie Hughes** and **Brian Penfold** are principal lecturers, at the University of Wolverhampton.

Casting the Learning Net: the use of iPods in Learning and Teaching

Lorraine Stefani, University of Auckland



Introduction

Just as you thought you were keeping abreast of the key developments linked to enhancing learning and teaching, another technological solution pops up – namely the 'podcast'. In the same way as 'blogging' appeared to gain universal appeal for the moderately 'techno-literate' and found its way into the 'classroom', podcasting and the use of iPods or equivalent MP3 devices are set to do the same. A blog is a web page made up of brief, frequently updated entries that are arranged chronologically like a journal. The purposes of blogs vary greatly, from links and commentary about other sites, to news, diaries, photos, poetry, mini essays and even fiction in progress – (Hargis and Wilson, 2006). Blogs are potentially good sources of information for students, albeit that

caution must be exercised over the variable quality of the material. Blogs have even been used in conjunction with developing e-portfolios, to facilitate collaborative learning within student groups (Lohnes, 2003).

Podcasting is a way of broadcasting information via the internet in a manner analogous to an audio blog, which is a web log read aloud. The audio material could be presentations, lectures, revision guides, etc. Given that many students will have an iPod or MP3 device, podcasting offers tremendous potential for educational use. Digital audio is cheap and simple to produce and manipulate due to the availability of basic sound recording and playback hardware and software in homes and educational institutions (Chan and Lee, 2005). Some universities, particularly in the USA

(e.g. Duke University) recently distributed 20 gigabyte iPods to its 1650 new students pre-loaded with orientation information.

The increasing use of technology for educational purposes has generally been accompanied by the rhetoric of 24/7 access and 'anytime any place learning'. The widespread popularity of portable media players such as MP3 devices, mobile phones and personal digital assistants (PDAs) will in fact help realise the vision of anytime, any place, mobile learning.

Smart tools, but what about the learning?

The range of possible podcast teaching and learning activities is boundless, probably limited only by the imagination and creative synergy of the learners and the facilitators of

learning. Enthusiasts of technology – any technology – suggest that podcasts will enrich the quality of learning and help to promote personalised learning. Some examples being given of the use of podcasts include:

- Creating audio- and video-based material for learning ‘on demand’
- Provision of differential materials that can be modified to the abilities, needs and motivation of identified student groups
- Creating learning activities within the curriculum grounded in an emerging technology which is integral to the communications revolution. (Jobbins, 2006)

As is the case with most ‘emerging technologies’ being introduced into learning and teaching contexts, there is very little underpinning research to inform us on the pedagogical outcomes for podcasts. However, based on existing research on learning Hargis and Wilson (2006) believe podcasting can promise a unique approach to improving foundational approaches to information processing and conceptual learning. They suggest that conceptual learning requires multiple inputs, time between inputs, guidance, reflection, facilitation and subsequent quality control of ideas. On the other hand, a report from the Scottish Council for Educational Technology, as long ago as 1994, suggests that while audio is an extremely powerful technology for learning and teaching, its weakness is that it is not an ideal medium for conveying details and facts. Facts and figures will not be recalled well after listening to a 30-minute audiotape, but general opinions and arguments will be remembered well. A huge advantage of podcasts is that being MP3 files, they can be transferred to a variety of mobile devices and therefore can be listened to on the move – anytime, any place – thus making mobile learning (m-learning) a real possibility. A pilot study on the use of podcasts at Charles Sturt University to support foundational learning is based on the following theses:

- Short pre-class listening segments, delivered through podcasting are more effective than (Web or print-based) pre-class reading in addressing students’

preconceptions and anxiety, and

- Podcasting of such audio material can be easily integrated into the professional practice of most university teachers. (Chan and Lee, 2005)

Chan and Lee report positively on the student response to a series of weekly 3-5 minute talkback radio-style ‘shows’, with two or more students from the current or previous cohort of first-year information technology undergraduates holding discussions on pertinent issues related to the subject and its content in a relaxed and informal style. The lecturer and other subject matter experts are sometimes brought in as ‘guest speakers’ to offer insight into or clarification of the more difficult topics and issues. The purpose of these podcasts is to help alleviate the anxiety of students commencing the courses, about the subject, their own learning abilities, scheduling of classes and assessment. Based on their own literature searches, they believe that this model is similar to what Gee (1992, 1996) terms ‘socialising students into the discourse of a subject’.

A more extensive analysis of the academic use of the iPod has been carried out at the Center for Institutional Technology at Duke University. There the academic uses of iPod devices fall into five major categories:

- Course content dissemination tool – portable access to course content such as lectures, songs, speeches, and foreign language content
- Classroom recording tool – capturing lectures, class discussions, verbal feedback
- Field recording tool – capturing field notes, interviews, environmental sounds and audio data
- Study support tool – repeated listening and repetition of commercial and original audio content such as music, audio books, rehearsals and vocabulary lists
- File storage and transfer – simple transfer or backup mechanism, particularly for large media files.

The researchers at Duke University

report on both the benefits and limitations of academic iPod use. With respect to the benefits, in addition to the issues of convenience, flexibility and ease of use, the research indicates greater student engagement and interest in class discussions, laboratory work, field research and independent projects – and enhanced support for individual learning preferences and needs. These are all extremely positive attributes given that a constant goal for colleges and universities is enhancement of student learning. As might be expected with any technological innovation, there are problems and challenges. The research at Duke University identifies the following issues:

- Significant challenges in integrating multiple systems for content storage, access, sharing and distribution with one another and with existing technology infrastructure
- Absence of systems for bulk purchase or licensing of commercial MP3 audio content for academic use
- No mechanism for input other than synchronisation, lack of instructor tools for combining text and audio
- Limited pre-existing documentation and training resources (particularly for PC users)
- Recordings made on the iPod were not of sufficient quality for use in some academic contexts
- Lack of awareness or accurate knowledge of iPod functionality and academic applications among faculty and students.

Significantly, these challenges and barriers could probably be determined for any new technology until there is a ‘critical mass’ of users in any organisation or institution – and as always, there is a need for training and development in the academic use of the iPod or MP3 devices.

However, from the reported student feedback, clearly the students just love the iPod, e.g., ‘I loved being able to listen to the lectures at my convenience, to be able to listen to difficult portions several times, and just hear the material again – while working out or running other errands

– and I think the value of listening to the lectures showed through with a high score on the first exam’.

What better indication of the value of convenience, portability, flexibility – mobile learning – and foundational and conceptual learning could we ask for? The full report of the Duke University iPod First Year Experience Final Evaluation can be accessed from: <http://www.duke.edu/ipod/>.

Other key features of podcasts include:

- The use of Really Simple Syndication (RSS) technology to subscribe to a ‘feed’ to automatically receive updates. These could be bulletins or news flashes, or they could be radio programmes or lectures. A service increasingly offered by commercial broadcasters such as the BBC, O’Hear (2005) describes podcasting as ‘radio’ content which a listener subscribes to via the internet. Once subscribed, the listener receives a new podcast as soon as it is available, which can then be played either on a computer or portable MP3 player at a time that suits the listener
- Accessing and (with some devices creating) files whenever and wherever the user wishes. This is part of the mobile computing aspect of MP3 players. In some further education colleges it has allowed catering students to send to their tutors on-the-job recordings of their culinary achievements via mobile phone (by creating MP3 files of their thoughts and still and video images of the product)
- Reaching international audiences at much faster speeds compared to radio/television which is geographically limited. This is an aspect held in common with many other forms of online publishing. It has been particularly important in allowing wide access to music by unpublished artists
- Saving and archiving of podcasts by the user. The players usually allow creation of ‘play lists’ which group related recordings according to the preferences and instructions of the user. Players also allow

users to search for recordings by date, title, artist or recent use. The MP3 player becomes in this way an ultra-portable repository of audio recordings. These recordings could include lectures.

Get podcasting or else!

If there was ever any doubt that students entering college or university will arrive with a high degree of technical know-how, this is dispelled by increasingly innovative initiatives in schools. For example, pupils at Musselburgh Grammar School in East Lothian, Scotland, produced ‘podcast’ coverage of a one-day music event held on the school’s grounds. Children aged 12-13, with the help of older pupils and teachers, wrote and produced the MGS Podcast, as an entertainment and information show for the school and wider community. This podcast project is thought to be the first ever UK school podcast and was short-listed for the New Stateman New Media Award (O’Hear, 2005).

The *Seattle Times* (October 2005) also reports on teachers using iPods as educational tools, with children in elementary schools making podcasts. More informal uses are in learning languages, e.g. learning conversational Italian by downloading the tutorials onto an MP3 player. Distance learning has a history of successful use of audio in teaching. Podcasts are in one sense simply the latest manifestation of this (Stefani, Mason and Pegler, 2007).

Campbell (2005) points out that there are a few technicalities in podcasting which need to be addressed. However, these relate to uploading and encoding rather than recording and listening. So for most students the technology is very easy to use. It’s the staff who need to keep up to date on the latest technology favoured by our students!

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Lorraine Stefani is Director of the Centre for Academic Development at the University of Auckland.

The National Student Survey. Just another hurdle to justify our crust?

Philip Sullivan, De Montfort University

Introduction

Who would have imagined in the spring of 2003 that the views of the nation's students would have such an influence on the ranking of universities and colleges in 2007 and beyond? Few people could have foreseen how the National Student Survey (NSS) would develop, or predicted the scope of its use. Some misunderstood its purpose and continue to do so; the farsighted saw it as a good fit in strategic planning and an opportunity to have sound information for good use; others viewed it as a flavour of the month that would disappear. This article follows the pilot and introduction of the NSS at 'Wessex University', which at the beginning had all of these approaches operating simultaneously. The university is a creation of the author; it is used to gather together and retell conversations and information gained. This article is based on conversations in a number of institutions and agencies and experience of good practice in the American state university sector.

Confidence has grown in the NSS, and virtually all institutions take part, though even today some institutions avoid the NSS and their accountability for millions of pounds received from public taxation. In contrast, the NSS is now a main measure of Wessex University's annual review, and key in its planning and improvement processes. Arriving at this point in four years was not easy; personal and cultural change had to take place at all levels. This is a theme of this article.

The NSS's originators will be sad to learn that some people at Wessex planned to use it to pinpoint recalcitrant staff. This is another theme.

The NSS designers are likely to be satisfied if institutions and forthcoming students use the material just to inform their decisions, but the certainty is that it will achieve much more. As Wessex found, it will prompt:

- cultural change
- the need for some institutions to review their vision and values
- a rethink of staff relationships.

These three strategic factors were unexpected and potent benefits of the NSS at Wessex. This is the university's story.

The beginning

In 2003 Wessex University was selected as one of twenty-four institutions to pilot the NSS. Its VC, Professor Ray Banner, was enthusiastic about the NSS from the beginning.

The following observations, however, show how close the

NSS came to failure at Wessex and how good management practice intervened to transform its use into one of the university's strongest assets. These observations start in the VC's meeting room in early 2003, where heads and directors were making preparations to discuss the pilot. Most attendees arrived with an open mind concerning the NSS; conversely, for example, Head of Department Professor Harry Ivan planned to use its results to put pressure on staff. Similarly, directors Vincent Rose and Mary Ewins were convinced that many people in higher education were work-shy and that NSS results would isolate low achievers. Mary felt that the results would help close unruly departments. The misuse of statistics to justify prejudices was a tendency at Wessex.

Professor Banner opened the meeting with:

'At last we are going to have student feedback from across the university which is consistent and, I think this is critical, which can be compared with other universities and colleges.'

'But if we use this information to threaten our staff the university will pay a terrible price. A value of this university is that we care for each other, and it is about to have its sternest test on the national stage. Let others abandon their values and feature in the media, not us.'

The two directors, Professor Ivan and some others remained silent. The remainder were greatly encouraged by the VC's opening remarks.

The first pilot

To some people's relief the first pilot at Wessex was not the success that the VC expected. The return average was well below the target at 31%. Many staff took the opportunity to offer their expert view of why the NSS would not work.

The exception was the Law Department where the Head, Dr Kanta Sharma, has a quotation on her office wall which reads:

'There is great tolerance of failure here, but there is no tolerance for not trying.'

While the results of the Law School were generally good and the response rate was 74%, student comments for assessment and feedback were negative and were reflected in the scores. It was during the Law School's NSS review meeting that the university's relationship with the survey began to change; and the meeting marked a turning point for the VC. Dr Sharma summarised the department's results and, focusing on assessment and feedback, said to the many

staff attending 'How can I help you to put this right?' An open discussion followed.

At Professor Ivan's departmental NSS review he berated staff. The VC, who attended most reviews, was taken aback by the opposing approaches. The value 'We care for each other' had little currency in this and some other departments.

The second pilot

Much had been done to make improvements since the first pilot: library opening hours had been increased, timetabling, handout production, staff training, student feedback, course assessment and feedback timelines introduced, and much more had received attention; yet overall the university's rating had gone down and the response rate fell to 19%. That said, in common with a number of institutions the second pilot relied on paper and on-line responses only; the first pilot had an agency telephoning graduates as well. The Department of Law once again stood out with its response rate, generally good results and an improved score in assessment and feedback.

Professor Banner consulted Dr Sharma; he wanted to know what the Department of Law was doing that others were not. The following approximation of their conversation was another key point in the university's transformation in its use of the NSS.

The VC opened the discussion by asking Dr Sharma what she thought the university was doing wrong. Dr Sharma responded that it was not 'what', but 'how' and took a paper from her case to illustrate her explanation. The paper had a diagram showing a Lego-like building with three layers of foundation stones, four supporting pillars and a roof. It came from a HEFCE supported conference; the learning from it had been used by the department for some time. Dr Sharma took out a blank sheet and started to draw the bottom part of the diagram, adding 'NSS data' to the top of the building's foundations.



On a personal level Dr Sharma said to the VC: 'Ray, you asked us all to improve our courses and student satisfaction ratings, but the supporting foundations were not in place. Take a look at the first foundation stone – a common vision and values. If the university is to achieve good results in the NSS, and in any other set of measures for that matter, we have to have staff working together in one direction. Staff had virtually no part in shaping the university vision and values, even after the fuzzy consultation period, so why should they respect them?'

Next is mutual trust. The fact is, Ray, that if we have happy staff we will have happy students; it is as simple as that. But too many departments here suffer aggressive management; we are reaping what we have sown.'

The VC asked Dr Sharma to continue. 'So far, Ray, staff have conflicting views of what this university is for, we have staff pulling in opposite directions and some areas are managed by fear. In a climate like ours management with facts is near impossible. Have you not noticed the reluctance of many staff to quantify anything and how data disappears in committees? In some departments data are used to threaten staff – remember what you said at our first NSS meeting about not threatening staff? This university is full of good people, but when the likes of Harry, Mary, Vincent and others are let loose staff keep their heads down and make sure that critical data and facts are lost.'

The potential benefits of the NSS for this university are enormous, but until the foundations are sorted out we will never do well from the students' point of view, or be able to manage data properly.'

Professor Banner: 'Well that was pretty damning. Is there any good news?'

Dr Sharma: 'The good news is that putting it right is not difficult, but it takes time and leadership, particularly from you.'

The NSS at Wessex 2005 – 2006

Professor Banner and his staff did put things right. Firstly, they started with a university-wide revisit to the vision and values. Secondly, the Law Department's quotation, 'There is great tolerance of failure here, but there is no tolerance for not trying', was made real with a culture of support spearheaded by the VC himself. And thirdly, a simple and effective balanced scorecard was designed by staff with the NSS results as a key field. Departments themselves entered data, of all kinds, without any of the fear that had characterised the recent past. It was in this atmosphere that the next stage of improvements was undertaken by a staff with self-belief and pride in their university.

The 2005 Wessex results were satisfactory, with response rates acceptable in most subjects, and the university was placed in the eighties in the NSS order of overall scores. In 2006 the response rate increased and the university was raised fifteen places through well targeted improvements informed by the 2005 quantitative data, student comments, and by aligning some of the internal student feedback systems with the NSS.

The NSS had prompted profound change at Wessex and helped make it a better place to study and work. Staff looked forward to the 2007 results.

League tables: Wessex University plays the game

Many institutions realised immediately that NSS results on their own can be made into league tables; Wessex's prospectus and other promotional material have used selected ones to good effect. They also realised that quite small improvements in scores, even 0.1 or 0.2 overall, will take the university several places up these charts. Similarly, tables made by the education press are sensitive to small improvements in scores. By targeting effort and resources to

improve scores, Professor Banner took satisfaction in manipulating the press for a change, though the big satisfaction was in knowing that student education at Wessex was getting better year on year.

Could the NSS be improved?

It is in the nature of things that the NSS can be improved; hardly surprising for such a young service. A division starts with the question of how? The web site will be redesigned to improve access and clarity; and hopefully to make comparisons between institutions, and subjects within and between institutions a lot easier. The use of bar charts, as well as statistics, to show comparative yearly results and trends over years at a glance would be appreciated by many.

Most institutions find the student comments very useful; anecdotally, more useful than the statistics. While few find difficulty in having the statistics published, there is an irrational and very British reserve in having the comments published.

In many American universities, where NSS-like surveys have been part of what they do for years, complimentary and critical comments are published, except of course for the personal and profane. And as un-publishable NSS comments comprise less than 10% of the total there is a compelling case to make available the useful 90%. A view on this by Northwest Missouri State University president Dean Hubbard is based on decades of experience; he says:

'I found a long time ago that the problems that arise from total openness are far fewer, and they are easier to deal with, than the problems that arise from trying to hide information. And if there is a problem we can argue what the issue is and how to address it, rather than argue about whether we are covering up. I don't like to be the focus of an argument; I'd rather have the focus be how to improve something.'

Opinion is divided on whether the NSS asks too many or too few questions. Those who want more argue that increased detail will highlight areas for improvement with greater accuracy, offer improved cross-referencing, and more evidence for debate. On the other hand the argument for fewer questions is based on the opinion that some questions are too much alike and are a test for students' attention span. It is argued that too much information is generated, which gets bogged down in committees, and that even more questions would fuel the mistake of equating complexity with thoroughness.

Whichever view prevails, the survey designers may find the advice of HEFCE's Steve Egan concerning measurement useful: *'Measure the vital few, the ones that tell you something that you need to know'*, to which Dean Hubbard adds reassuringly *'...and if a measure is not giving you useful information, get rid of it'*.

This raises the point of whether the survey asks the right questions. The consensus on this appears to be broadly, yes. But there is an omission. Question 22, *'Overall, I am satisfied with the quality of the course'*, is useful, but it side-steps the

crunch questions of:

'If I had my time again I would choose:

(A) this institution, and

(B) this course.'

Some institutions would exert pressure to prevent these questions being asked, perhaps in part because they do not want to hear the results; but for those that are positive about listening to students they are arguably the most important satisfaction indicators of all.

Just another hurdle to justify our crust?

Another hurdle? No one said that the NSS would be easy. It takes a lot of effort to get it right. It is about preparing students for the NSS and embedding the notion of open critical information into the culture of an institution, with the belief that it is a good thing; and including NSS results in the institution's decision-informing processes. Dean Hubbard, again, captured the value of this feedback when he said: *'You either want to know what's going on or you want to keep it all a mystery.'* Keeping it all a mystery is the antithesis of the NSS.

Justify our crust? Accountability is no stranger to institutions or any part of public sector work. If students are the final arbiters of quality then their view of how staff, courses and institutions are doing is valuable knowledge. There should be no problem with this; one has to look very hard to find a member of staff who does not come to work to do a good job. Higher education in this country is full of good people who want to be successful, to do their best for their students, colleagues and their institutions. Let the sector celebrate and show this to the world. And where institutions get it badly wrong or can make some improvements as a result of what students say, let them celebrate the fact that improvements can be made.

Finally, consider those who do not take the NSS seriously and do not use the wealth of its results to improve. Whatever one thinks of the NSS, it is certain that its student ratings and rankings will be very different in ten years time; and being a big name will not insulate a university from a student market that is changing at an incredible rate.

Postscript: Vincent, Mary and Harry?

It was a shock for Vincent and Mary to find that the VC actually believed in the values of the university and lived by them. They assumed that a values statement was a HEFCE requirement, and that the university did not actually have to do it. Once exposed, Vincent and Mary lasted about a year; aggressive management had no place in Professor Banner's executive. Fortunately, there are lots of Ray Banner-like VCs around. And Harry? Harry is still there. How a greater force than a VC changed him and to view the approach that Wessex uses to make changes informed by NSS results, see <http://catpages.nwmissouri.edu/m/lgmf/index.html>. Click 'documents' and then 'Leading and Managing Change'.

Origins of this article

As mentioned at the outset, this article is based on

conversations in a number of institutions and agencies and experience of good practice in the American state university sector. The knowledge gained served to reveal the greater value of the NSS and how, in the right hands, it will contribute to the continuous improvement of higher education. Part of the answer to the question of the value of the NSS is that it all depends. It all depends on the culture of the institution. Command and control cultures will use the NSS to fail; cultures of mutual support will keep moving forward. The choice is with the leadership of institutions.

If readers would like a copy of the full 'Lego-like' diagram please email the author. For information on how the NSS works, statistics, and reports concerning the NSS see the TQI web site and the HEFCE site <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/learning/nss/>. The report by Paula Surridge (http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rdreports/2006/rd22_06/) is especially interesting.

Professor Philip Sullivan is a management consultant and QAA institutional auditor, currently based at De Montfort University (email: psullivan@dmu.ac.uk).

Benchmarking e-learning - a beginner's guide

Stephen Bostock, FSEDA, Keele University

If you have recently found yourself being given a questionnaire, having a telephone conversation, or attending a focus group about your institution's use of e-learning, then it is probably as a result of the 'benchmarking e-learning' exercise being led by the HE Academy and the JISC.¹ 'Benchmark' originally meant a physical mark used as a starting point or standard from which progress would be measured.² We are now familiar with the QAA use of the term 'subject benchmark', *i.e.* statements that 'set out expectations about standards of degrees in a range of subject areas'.³ Although, in some sense, created by the discipline communities, they are nonetheless an external prescription of what programmes *should* contain. In contrast, benchmarking e-learning in the current exercise is not prescriptive or standards-setting; it is descriptive, reflective and comparative. Or so it should be.

After a pilot phase in early 2006, some 40 institutions are taking part in 'Phase 1' of the exercise from October 2006 to April 2007. It aims to: 'Provide institutions with an opportunity to participate in an externally-driven process of reflection and analysis of their current e-learning provision, processes, and practice, using a recognised methodology.'¹ An important question is, which recognised methodology?

Paul Bacsich, one of the Academy's e-learning benchmarking consultants,

reviewed five benchmark self-assessment toolkits⁴, four from the USA and Australasia and one UK tool based on the FENTO Information and Learning Technology standards at the National Learning Network.⁵ The Wikipedia entry for *Benchmarking e-learning*⁶ lists eleven methods. Some of the features of these methods are:

- Levels of institutional development or maturity, from initial experience through to some sort of widespread, successful use of e-learning
- Degree of strategic alignment of the use of IT in teaching and learning with the institutional strategy
- Criteria, often grouped in categories
- Metrics, numerical indicators of processes or outcomes.

Some methodologies hail back to work done in the 1990s at the Sloan School of Management at MIT on how businesses had successfully deployed IT – or not (Scott Morton, 1991, in Wills⁷). The so-called MIT90s model considers five factors: strategy, structure, management processes, roles and skills, and technology. Organisational structures, management processes and staff skills together mediate between the actual technologies employed and the achievement of institutional strategy. From the same school of work comes another pervasive idea, the 'maturity model' of five stages of development in the adoption of technology, moving from initial 'evolutionary' stages of localised, *ad hoc* use, through to

'revolutionary' stages of pervasive embedding of information technology and innovation in its uses. Work in the 1970s and 1980s had established a four-phase maturity model.⁸ Attractive though a linear phase-model of institutional development in e-learning may be, it fails to take account of the variety of missions and strategies institutions have, so it is unlikely to be consistent with the criterion of strategic alignment and should be viewed with suspicion.

Criteria are listed in various degrees of detail in different schemes. In EADTU⁹, for example, the five criteria are curriculum design, course design, course delivery, services to students and staff, and management and institutional strategies. The ELTI scheme¹⁰ was developed from the TLTP EFFECTS project that led to SEDA's ELT award in the professional development framework. It uses twelve criteria: profile of learning and teaching, profile of learning technologies, recognition and reward, research and development, information and communications technology (ICT) infrastructure, support for learning technologies, funding, administrative systems, staff ICT skills, student ICT skills, digital learning resources, networks and collaborations. Other schemes have far more criteria or questions; all are trying to provide a net of questions that will capture what is important in the effective use of technology for learning.

Of the four methodologies currently being used in Phase 1 of the JISC/HEA project, the majority of universities have chosen to use the scheme developed over years by the Association of Commonwealth Universities¹¹ for reviewing and developing university management in general. This methodology is offered in partnership with the Observatory on Borderless Higher Education (OBHE). About a dozen universities in each of two groups have agreed to (anonymously) pool their institutional reviews of e-learning and share their findings with others in a confidential setting. A consultant guides the review process, which involves consulting a wide range of stakeholders across the institution, from students to learning technologists to senior managers, about a series of questions: how institutional e-learning strategy is developed; how e-learning supports institutional collaborations; how e-learning is managed; how e-learning resources are controlled and value is assessed; how appropriate service delivery is achieved; how the needs of staff and students are met; and how e-learning is evaluated. This information is condensed into an Institutional Review Document for sharing.

My institution is one of those using the OBHE/ACU methodology. With excellent support from our consultant, a core group of half a dozen people have distributed questionnaires and held interviews. Three people (including myself) have tried to

synthesise these disparate views and existing institutional documents into a coherent review. It has been difficult (i) to gather data and (ii) synthesise it while doing justice to the views of those who contributed to it. This is very much work in progress and we are looking ahead to discussing both the process and its results with our collaborating institutions.

To attempt to draw a conclusion, even while still embroiled in the process, benchmarking e-learning is a fluid, even bubbling, area of work. The sources of its hot springs include organisational development work in both the university and business sectors, and staff development work in learning technology. It will probably not matter much which particular methodology we use for this institutional review, as long as all the important stakeholders can make a contribution and an honest, comprehensive account can be compiled for sharing with other institutions in 'mutual benchmarking'. That is, the process will be valuable as long as it is analytical and reflective rather than being a measurement against a prescriptive model of how every university should be developing its uses of technology. Finally, if you haven't received that questionnaire yet, you will do.

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Stephen Bostock, FSEDA, is Advisor for Technology and E-Learning at Keele University.

The engCETL change journey: encouraging engagement with pedagogic research

Sue Morón-García and **Fiona Lamb**, Loughborough University

Introduction

At the engineering Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (engCETL) at Loughborough University we are involved in taking academics on a 'change journey'. We want them to engage with pedagogic research, not only subject-specific research, and move from being teacher-focused to being student-focused, as illustrated in Figure 1. We believe that an incremental approach is effective in taking our academics on a 'change journey' by engaging

them in small steps that progress them in the right direction. While initially this might involve major diversions and engagement at a very low level, the key is to establish a relationship and to promote the benefits gained by those academics who do so. We hope that this will eventually result in fulfilling one of our aims: 'to embed a cultural change that promotes a reflective and evidence-based approach to teaching.'

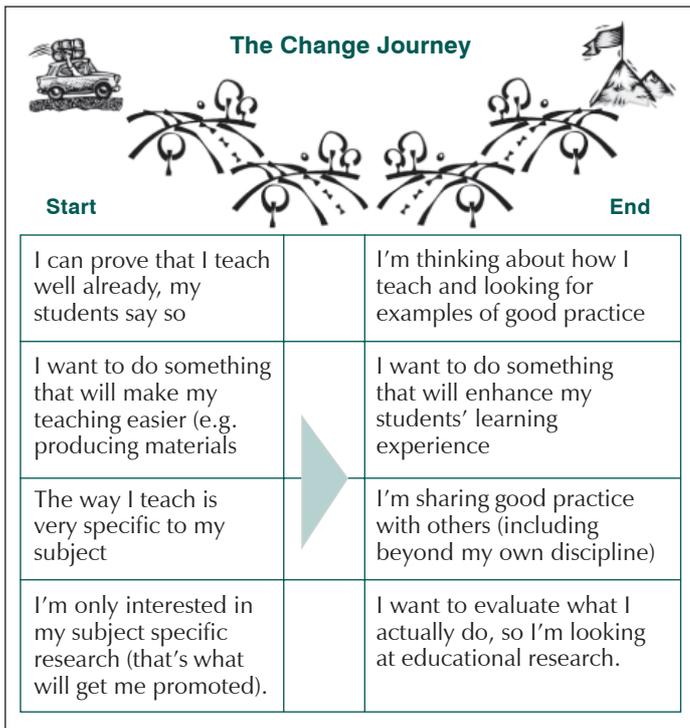


Figure 1: The engCETL Change Journey

The origins of engCETL

We already know an incremental approach works as this is how the engCETL was created. Towards the end of 1997, the Faculty of Engineering at Loughborough realised that it was beginning to employ a number of staff who were working in the area of learning and teaching support, mainly learning technology development. It took the then bold step of deciding to base all these staff together with the aim of creating a critical mass of expertise and avoiding duplication. The Faculty wrote the resulting support centre into its strategy and committed to funding three core staff members, but in order to survive in the long term the centre was tasked with bringing in its own teaching and learning derived income.

This support centre evolved into the Engineering Education Centre (EEC) and the Faculty also came to host The Higher Education Academy's Engineering Subject Centre. Then in March 2005 the EEC formed a key element in the formation of the CETL, which now works across seven engineering-related departments in three faculties and has links with Loughborough's Professional Development central support unit. Our location (and our name) means that we are strongly identified with engineering. This perceived ownership and understood status of learning and teaching teams is one of issues we explored with the participants at this year's SEDA Spring Conference when we asked them to consider how they engage with academics, why, and whether they had any suggestions to help us progress on our journey.

SEDA Spring Conference 2006

We began by role-playing two conversations which Sue, the pedagogic researcher in the engCETL, had recently had with academics. The aim was to illustrate how far we still have to go in explaining the value of sharing strategies and ideas

across departments and in helping academics understand that what they do with their students is about learning not just the use of tools.

We suggested three topics for discussion:

- the *awards and rewards* on offer to academics
- the *support* on offer to academics and
- the *perceived ownership and understood status* of the learning and teaching team or centre.

We asked participants to consider for each topic:

- what would engage an academic
- why this would engage an academic with the educational developer or researcher and
- how this would move us forward on our change journey.

Following this exercise we shared our thoughts and responses to those questions with participants and had a general discussion about our categories and ways to engage with academics. Participants did not think there were any missing categories but they did think it was important to appeal to academics' self-interest at some level. This could mean starting from where they are and finding out what is interesting and important to them, in other words being people-centred. This observation was underlined by some of the additional comments (see below) which focused on the ownership of developments and fitting with the existing culture.

The most usual ways participants said they engaged with academics was through *award and reward* and these included awards and prizes for excellence, spotting examples of good practice and nominating those academics for awards and rewards. Participants had commented most around the idea of *ownership and status* which some had interpreted as the ownership and status of academics' teaching and learning work and others had interpreted as the ownership and status of the support unit in relation to the institution and faculty or department it supports (our understanding when we set up the task); these were interestingly different interpretations. The things participants said about ownership and status were that:

- academics have to feel that they own their development and be able to learn from and be open to learning from their colleagues
- educational developers have to be seen as credible people
- the sort of support available has to fit with the type of institutional, faculty or departmental culture in existence and
- one way to do this was to work collaboratively with the department and concentrate on academics' subject needs.

Participants said that one *support* thing that was perhaps lacking in current practice was being available to help academics write up their experience, something we definitely aim to do.

Sue Morón-García is a Research Associate, and **Fiona Lamb** is the Associate Director of the engCETL, at Loughborough University.

Book Review

Blended Learning and Online Tutoring: a good practice guide

By Janet MacDonald

Gower Publishing Company, 2006, 191 pages,
paperback, ISBN 0 566 08659 X, £25.

There is little surprising or startling in Janet MacDonald's *Blended Learning and Online Tutoring* but its strength is in offering a new generation of practitioners something new and inspiring whilst more experienced colleagues will be reassured and less lonely in their practice. As Learning and Teaching Co-ordinator for the Open University in Scotland, with particular responsibility for blended learning, a doctorate in online course design and assessment, and wide experience both as an online student and tutor, Dr. MacDonald is well qualified to share her insights into blended learning.

There is great value in this overview of examples and reflections from students and practitioners engaged in both distance and campus programmes in thirteen different countries. Written in an unambiguous and straightforward descriptive style, the stress is on the pragmatic and realistically achievable. There is significant scope to learn from the practical ideas for implementation of blended strategies, including asynchronous and synchronous tutoring, appropriate assessment for blended learners, and the development needs of tutors in flexible modes of delivery.

The pressures on universities to increase their student numbers, and the ubiquitous nature of much information technology have led, almost organically, to the increased adoption of so called 'blended learning'. Strategies for delivering campus-based and distance learning courses have converged, but those who have attempted to reproduce what they perceive to be, mostly inaccurately, the Open University model, have frequently been disappointed.

MacDonald makes clear that the apparent 'efficiencies' of the stand-alone online media approach are illusionary and provides rich examples of tutor supported learning approaches to prove her point. The focus is on the mentoring and supporting of the networked learner or networks of learners, on campus or at a distance. MacDonald suggests rightly that the precise nature of the 'blend' is a function of the learning communities' needs and not something that can be mechanistically applied in the abstract. Serving academics with existing programmes may therefore benefit more from the opportunity to reflect on the experience of others, than staff looking forward to new programmes hoping to find a 'blend'.

The book is well structured with summaries at the end of each chapter and inset boxes with self declared 'bright ideas' and case studies. Pragmatic and reflective throughout,

MacDonald intelligently uses examples, quotations and commentary from fifty different case studies which will provoke the reader to ask questions as well as directly seek answers.

Structured in three parts, the first concentrates on current practice in blended learning, placing the Open University experience in a broader context of Europe and Australasia. The second part explores asynchronous and synchronous online tutoring with an illustration of various practical tools and methods. The 'handy techniques' in the titles of chapters seven and nine do not confine the 'handiness' to these chapters alone; the work is full of 'I must try that' moments.

The third and final part of the book focuses on the development of 'independent learners' and in many ways is the most thought provoking. Not only is the need to encourage learners to become E-Investigators, E-Writers and E-Communicators and Collaborators illustrated, but the need for staff to mirror and match these development processes is also captured rather well in the very last chapter entitled 'staff development for blended learning'. Technology is developing all the time, and the book already wants for some examples of effective integration, for example, blogs, wikis or alternative virtual reality learning spaces. It is also disappointing that, with the variety in the case studies represented, there is little discussion of the cultural differences in expectation and experience of blended learning approaches.

There is an argument for starting the book by reading the last chapter first, but this is a book that can be read on a train journey from Edinburgh to London with time for reflection. Janet MacDonald is realistic about the opportunities and challenges for practitioners in making the 'blend' work, but also convincing in her suggestion that doing so presents genuine benefits for the student experience. Worth taking a train journey and sitting in the quiet coach.

Simon Atkinson, is Head of eLearning in the Centre for Learning Development at the University of Hull.

Notice to Publishers

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Rachel Segal

Book Review Editor,
c/o The Higher Education Academy,
Innovation Way,
York Science Park,
Heslington, York YO10 5BR

Email: rachel.segal@heacademy.ac.uk
or office@seda.ac.uk

The new SEDA PDF award in External Examining

Stephen Bostock FSEDA, Keele University and **Carol Maynard**, Liverpool John Moores University

External Examining is a new award in SEDA's Professional Development Framework (PDF), aimed at existing External Examiners within a higher education context. Approved by the PDF Committee in principle in 2005, a first pilot course was held in the first half of 2006. We will describe the award, the experience of the pilot course, and its potential value to institutions. This account draws on the SEDA award documentation, the pilot course handbook, and the evaluative comments of the course assessor.

This award is aimed at both new and experienced external examiners for taught programmes in higher education (but not research degrees), as part of an induction or as a formal recognition of their professional practice in this area. External examiners may be examining at various educational levels. While some are appointed primarily for their disciplinary expertise, others will have been appointed on the basis of their professional or practice-based expertise. The award accommodates these diverse contexts of external examining.

As in all PDF awards, participants on programmes recognised for the PDF-EE will have shown how their work is informed by the SEDA values:

1. an understanding of how people learn
2. scholarship, professionalism and ethical practice
3. working in and developing learning communities
4. working effectively with diversity and promoting inclusivity
5. continuing reflection on professional practice
6. developing people and processes.

Participants must also have demonstrated the PDF Core Development Outcomes, being able to:

1. identify their own professional development goals, directions or priorities
2. plan for their initial and/or continuing professional development
3. undertake appropriate development activities
4. review their development and practice, and the relations between them.

The award Specialist Outcomes of the PDF-EE are that award recipients will be able to:

5. describe the role and responsibilities of the External Examiner
6. apply to their external examining practice relevant national/local policy, strategy, disciplinary, professional, legal and regulatory considerations
7. verify that assessment practices are rigorous, fair, and maintain academic standards in relation to the specified award
8. deliver cogent and constructive feedback, including reports addressing issues of academic standards, student achievement and assessment practice
9. appraise their own professional practice development in relation to external examining drawing on a broad range of evaluative methods.

The PDF Committee approved a pilot course at Keele University, *Developing Practice in External Examining*, through the normal course recognition process. The course was not institutionally accredited and it had no explicit level or credits associated with it. It ran from January to July 2006 with members of the PDF committee being the participants, all of whom had considerable experience as external examiners. Carol Maynard, also on the committee, was the course assessor. Each participant was assigned another

participant as a mentor who would comment on their writing and evidence, and monitor their progress.

An initial half-day meeting reviewed the course design, discussed issues of confidentiality, and practised using WebCT for the purposes of the course. Discussions between each participant and their mentor helped them draft a personal learning plan addressing the core outcomes 1 and 2, and the likely evidence for the other outcomes and for the SEDA values. Thereafter, every two or three weeks, participants were to add a piece of reflective writing of about 1000 words to their online portfolio, addressing each of the specialist outcomes in turn. Portfolios were readable by other participants and online discussion topics were created for each specialist outcome. The course provided electronic access to some relevant documents such as those at the Quality Assurance Agency and the HE Academy.

Towards the end, participants wrote a reflection addressing their current and future continuing professional development as external examiners (outcomes 3 and 4) and a commentary on how the SEDA values informed their practice as described in the portfolio. At the end of the course, the assessor had access to all the portfolios and completed a report on each one for its author. In the event, three participants finished the course successfully and will be awarded a PDF-EE certificate.

The above description may imply the course was straightforward, even easy. Not so. Of the five people who originally expressed an interest in participating, three completed the course, and course completion was delayed by a month. All the participants found it challenging to examine and reflect upon their own external examining practice, both in

the quality audit role and the more developmental role. A mentoring system had been set up but participation in this process was not uniform. The online discussions were quite sparse, as might be expected with small numbers. One conclusion is that anyone who is an external examiner is likely to be very busy, and it is difficult to maintain a steady momentum without face-to-face meetings; more short face-to-face sessions may have helped. The schedule may have been too tight and spreading the activity over a longer period may be appropriate. In general, it will be challenging to design sustained courses for external examiners if we require them to be online learners, like their students!

The following issues arose out of the assessment process that will be considered by the PDF committee:

- the first specialist outcomes, 5 and 6, overlapped. Separating the explanation of the institutional role from the national/regional requirements and policies did not seem to be helpful although participants did try to do this
- there are also similarities between generic outcome 4 and specialist outcome 9, although context-specific examples were given to show the difference between them
- it was not clear to what degree participants should have drawn on

research literature to inform their writing. All participants did this but to varying degrees. This made it quite difficult to gauge the academic level. While this course had no explicit academic level, the SEDA value of scholarship requires a certain minimum use of the literature.

As one might expect (from members of the PDF committee!), some effective practice was evident in the portfolios. All participants showed excellent commitment to the values – this was evidenced throughout their written submissions as well as in separate mapping documents. There was strong use of experience to inform discussion, and one participant used a critical incident to help structure reflections, which worked particularly well. All the participants reflected on the importance of having strong interpersonal skills for being an effective external examiner but it was noted that these had not been considered in any training or guidance provided.

Despite initiatives on external examining at the HE Academy and in SEDA's PDF, external examining remains a neglected area. External examiners operate as employees of the institution at which they externally examine, and induction practices vary. Their home institution, where they

have one, is not involved and may feel no responsibility for CPD for a function performed elsewhere. However, external examining, as well as being the apparent guardian of standards across the sector, has an under-recognised developmental function for assessment. External examiners are critical friends to programmes and departments, often bringing to bear a broad experience. We suggest that this leadership role falls into level 3 of the national Standards Framework, indicating its value to both the contracting and the home institution. It would be in the interests of both to develop and recognise good practice in external examining, through more substantial inductions and development at contracting institutions, and through the CPD frameworks of home institutions. In both cases, the PDF-EE would form a flexible basis for development and recognition.

If you are interested in developing a programme for external examiners or having SEDA recognition of an existing one, contact the SEDA office.

Stephen Bostock, FSEDA, is Advisor for Technology and E-Learning at Keele University, and **Carol Maynard** is a Professional Standards Coordinator/Programme Leader at Liverpool John Moores University.

Information for Contributors

The Editorial Committee of *Educational Developments* welcomes contributions on any aspect of staff and educational development likely to be of interest to readers.

Submission of an article to *Educational Developments* implies that it has not been published elsewhere and that it is not currently being considered by any other publisher or editor.

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Editorial

This edition of *Educational Developments* describes, once again, activities and ideas at the 'cutting edge' of professional practice. Three themes might be identified – pedagogic research; using new technologies in teaching; and quality management. In *Thinking with data*, Glynis Cousin has written up her enormously well-received keynote given to the SEDA Conference in Liverpool 2006 about undertaking pedagogic research. At the heart of her discussion is a carefully prepared argument, informed by a wide reading of the area, that adopting dogmatic positions in relation to research paradigms is to deny the richness that comes from allowing different research methodologies a legitimate space in relation to shared research topics. This is endorsed by the article from Mark Huxham *et al.* who describe the projects they are undertaking to examine the different results that are obtained by gaining student feedback using different feedback methods. Using three different methods 366 students on seven modules were involved in giving feedback to their tutors. Both students and staff preferred qualitative methods rather than quantitative surveys, leaving us with the question – why do we use quantitative methods so much? The answer, according to the authors, is that institutions use the data summatively for quality and accountability purposes rather than using the data formatively. The article by Fiona Campbell, *Hearing the Student Voice: Enhancing academic professional development through the involvement of students* does just that. The article describes the processes by which, following a successful bid for a SEDA small grant, a literature review was completed on using the student voice in academic development. This was followed by an investigation of practice within educational development units (or equivalent). This, in turn, leads to a discussion of the impact of using students in academic development and ways of doing it. **Readers may like to note to that the SEDA Executive has approved a further round of SEDA small grants – the topic will be around accessibility and diversity – watch this space!**

The research theme is picked up once more with two related articles. The first is a conference report from Janet Strivens (Centre for Recording Achievement and University of Liverpool) describing the very successful International Seminar on researching and evaluating PDP and e-portfolios. There seems to be a strong case for arguing that e-portfolios are now becoming a global endeavour and evidence on how to develop and use them effectively is urgently needed. Such evidence is reported by Barbara Maiden *et al.* in the discussion of their work using pebblePAD. Indeed, the authors start their article by describing the dilemma they had in 'capturing' their ways of working in a linear way. This challenge of developing effective pedagogies for the new generation of interactive digital technologies is also picked up in Lorraine Stefani's

article on using iPods and podcasting. Undoubtedly, one of the quality criteria for a successful *Educational Developments* article is whether we would wish to photocopy it to circulate – this is definitely such a piece! (As are the other substantive articles in this edition).

There are two articles which address quality management – the one by Philip Sullivan is a 'factional' account of different experiences he has had of the National Student Survey as an organisational development consultant. Stephen Bostock and Carol Maynard describe the new SEDA PDF Award in External Examining to add to the comprehensive SEDA suite of PDF activities.

And finally, to return to the research theme, Sue Morón-García and Fiona Lamb describe the ways in which the engCETL at Loughborough has the goal of inculcating a cultural change to develop reflective and evidence based approaches to teaching.

Dr Lesly Huxley is Director of the Institute for Learning and Research Technology at the University of Bristol; **Professor Bob Thackwray** is Director of Membership and Organisational Development at the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education; and **Steve Outram** is Senior Adviser at the Higher Education Academy.

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