

Development of Good Practice

A pilot study based upon formative evaluations

This project set out to study the potential of methods of formative evaluation, including but not restricted to, student feedback, which seek to identify scope and possibility for improvements in existing practice. Where possible, such approaches hope to bring about developments for the benefit of the cohort of students from whom feedback and information have been obtained.

The final reports from 21 different settings within four main discipline areas offer resounding endorsement of the value of this activity. They emerge from experiments with formative evaluation devised by teachers with a concern for learning and learners, in whose practice one might be forgiven for expecting there would be less than average scope for development. Yet the clear testimony is that all concerned found ways in which their practice could be enhanced - of which they had not been aware, and which had not been receiving their attention, before they and their students engaged with formative evaluation.

The consultant who suggested various possibilities to those willing to explore the potential of formative evaluation summarised the reported outcomes as follows:

- **It works!** Certainly some of the adapted approaches devised by the university teachers who signed up for the project were demanding of time – both on the part of students and the staff. Part of that may have been due to over-enthusiasm, part to coping with a new activity and demand, part to the range of suggestions for change unearthed on a “first pass” through the process. Admittedly two case studies report lack of success with method – but these involved lack of success from which constructive findings about both methodology and rationale emerge.
- **It proved worthwhile.** The overall and enthusiastic verdict from the teachers concerned was that they had found the effort worthwhile and rewarding in its outcomes. Report after report identifies information which was unexpected and welcomed; and consequent decisions for change made by those concerned, who saw the developments as enhancement of the student learning experience. All intend to continue, without benefit of the funding or support of the project.
- **It’s transferable.** Although four widely different discipline areas, and modules at various levels, were encompassed, the final reports describe methods – and possible findings – which are remarkable in *not* being discipline specific.
- **It stimulates creative thinking about learning.** The case studies make it clear that the formative evaluations led to much thinking and rethinking about curricula, methods of teaching, and approaches to learning – on the part of both teachers and students.
- **It can lead to a more constructive partnership between teachers and learners.** Some case studies report heartening partnerships in exploring the nature of the learning and teaching relationship, and in planning to enhance it.
- **It is welcomed by learners.** Many reports mention the somewhat apathetic response of students to institutions’ end of semester questionnaires with their mainly summative function; and the contrasting enthusiasm generated for activities which clearly had a formative purposes.
- **It can become an integral part of the learner/teacher relationship.** Many case studies report students and teachers approaching formative evaluation as a bridge towards enhancement of practice and experience.

This modest but successful pilot surely raises some important questions for a sector which is committed to seek enhancement of quality. The concentration so far has been on the identification and dissemination of good practice – to be taken up by someone other than the originator, and through the efforts of the quality system. There seems to be high potential in also encouraging and enabling teachers to exercise and demonstrate directly their stewardship of quality and standards, as self-evaluation at various levels so increasingly demands. This project shows how that can be done by enabling teachers to find for themselves and with their students, worthwhile ways of developing their own practices. On the evidence of this pilot, formative evaluation offers teachers that opportunity – to good effect.

The need for swift and effective formative evaluation is especially important in the present circumstances. The advent of virtual learning environments and other curriculum changes require teachers, as well as learners, to grapple with new demands – and possibilities. A strategy which facilitates a co-operative and constructive approach, with some immediate returns for learners and teachers, is thus especially welcome – and indeed necessary.

Further, it is important, perhaps especially to uncertain and challenged teachers, to identify not only what requires reconsideration, but also what is being successful – *and why*. Many case studies report the value of information which endorses present practice, and explains what in it is valued by the students. This is not data which is often forthcoming from staff/student committees which can (regrettably) concentrate on issues requiring attention; nor even from summative end-of-semester questionnaires.

The project highlights a number of issues to be considered as these innovations progress:

- The allocation of time for formative evaluation, by students as well as teachers, needs to be scheduled and budgeted in – and should not, in an established situation, make excessive demands
- The joint ownership of information and reactions should lead to constructive dialogue, and not unilateral decision-making by staff
- Where more than one teacher is involved, it is critical to establish trusting relationships within which feedback about problems can be handled
- Second time round, different methods or at least different emphases will be appropriate, as many of the matters identified first time round will have received effective attention
- The usefulness of mixed method approaches has been illustrated in some case studies, and should be further explored.

In the reports to the project team, those who offered their case studies frankly reported what had emerged from them, in terms of matters which they or their students deemed worthy of attention. That data was important, of course, because it illustrated and confirmed the worth of the methods used. However writers were promised at the outset that the accounts prepared for publication in the public domain would be stripped of such particular data, and of the name of the institution and department or school - and would concentrate on what the writer had to report collegially about the methods used, and their effectiveness. This anonymising has been applied – but where writers are willing to pass on more information, a contact name has been included.