

Evaluation for new learning contexts – how can it be ‘fit for purpose’?

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ABSTRACT

Evaluation methods used by most Higher Education courses are still dominated by demands for the collection of quantifiable data which can be used for Quality Assurance purposes. Contemporary course development around the adoption of technologies needs to query the pervasiveness of this approach to evaluation. This paper argues for the potentials of narrative evaluation methods to enhance the learner experience. The focus is on the benefits of narrative methods within e-learning contexts, by which learners participate in dialogic evaluation practices as part of their course. It is argued that such approaches are relevant to the needs of practitioners and learners in contemporary contexts, and should feature within course design.

INTRODUCTION

Evaluation is frequently one of the last aspects of practitioner development and policy-change to be addressed in the adoption of technologies in Higher Education courses. Russell (2007) argues that mainstream practices have been dominated by modernist views of what evaluation as an activity is (Schwandt, 1997), so that, until recently, “the central focus of any evaluation is the collection of evidence to inform judgements about the value of a particular social practice” (p. 1). Historically, a ‘student satisfaction’ model has dominated approaches to evaluation conducted by HE practitioners (Ramsden, 2005; Richardson, 2005; Jara and Mohamad, 2007) particularly in e-learning, mixed-mode and distance contexts, where close engagement with qualitative analyses of experience can be more difficult to achieve, due to rare or non-existent face to face contact between learners and tutors. There is reliance on survey means of evaluating learners’ experiences by gauging ‘satisfaction’ against learning and other objectives. This has continued to steer evaluation approaches, particularly since it is so readily facilitated through the availability of electronic survey tools within learning environments, like WebCT, or through software like Question Mark or Survey Monkey. Such approaches are consistent with the concept of evaluation as primarily a measure of Quality Assurance (QA) against pre-selected criteria, in line with the practices carried out by the national student satisfaction survey for The Higher Education Funding Council (SurrIDGE, 2007).

Contemporary course development around the adoption of technologies needs to query the pervasiveness of these evaluation practices. It has been argued that there are fundamental shifts in the nature of the ‘educational transaction’ (Garrison and Anderson, 2003, p. 13, drawing on Dewey, 1938) made possible by engaging with technologies. Such a shift involves greater ‘student control’ over their learning as a ‘pedagogical advantage’ (Laurillard, 2002), bringing about knowledge-creating opportunities which involve students in actively constructing the contexts of their learning in collaborative ways (Sharples, 2007;

Jones, 2002) and taking ownership of learning processes (Hall, 2008). If these shifts are accepted, there is a case for accompanying shifts in the tools and practices by which altered learning experiences can be evaluated, understood, and included within revised definitions of what constitutes practitioner knowledge. Within this context, staff development for HE practitioners needs to address how evaluation which is ‘fit for purpose’ can be achieved as part of pedagogical practice. This was a consideration for staff development as part the Institute of Education (IoE) Higher Education-funded project ‘From Pedagogic Research to Embedded e-learning’ (PREEL) 2007-8. The project set out to build on the existing e-learning research base at the IoE, using it to inform the development of e-learning within teaching practice and course design. Staff development as part of the project was based on the principle that understanding learner experiences within new learning practices needs to be a core consideration of course development and pedagogy. In particular, ‘embedding evaluation’ was suggested as playing a key role. This paper examines four key questions which informed the evaluation focus of staff development in the PREEL project, and which arose from the e-learners research projects (Daly et al 2006 and 2007a) on which it was based:

- What are the purposes of evaluation in e-learning contexts?
- What are the implications for altered practitioner and learner roles?
- What can narrative approaches to evaluation offer practitioners and learners?
- How can evaluation be embedded within course design?

Underpinning these questions is a reassessment of ‘meaningful’ evaluation in contemporary course design, with a focus on the centrality of *dialogue* as a foundation for understanding and enhancing learner experiences.

WHAT ARE THE PURPOSES OF EVALUATION IN E-LEARNING CONTEXTS?

Learning contexts involving technologies demand a reassessment of the three influential ‘conceptual frameworks’ for evaluation outlined by Chelimsky (1997):

- Evaluation for accountability (e.g. measuring results or efficiency)
- Evaluation for development (eg. providing evaluative help to strengthen institutions)
- Evaluation for knowledge (e.g. obtaining a deeper understanding in some specific area or policy field) (p. 100).

Chelimsky’s frameworks have traditionally underpinned evaluation models in Higher Education and commercial and policy-making contexts, but always carried the proviso that evaluation purposes are not necessarily so clear-cut or readily distinguished, and that evaluation needs to be evolving and responsive to the particular contexts and purposes in which it takes place.

Approaches to evaluation examined within the PREEL project, were premised on a further conceptual framework, derived from research findings (Daly et al 2006, 2007b) which are consistent with broader theoretical moves in the field. This is to do with the notion that evaluation *as a practice* has a potential for making a qualitative impact on learning, and that the relationship between evaluation activity and the quality of students’ learning is an

area in need of further investigation. Cross-institutional research has informed Russell's (2007) call for a new definition of evaluation within e-learning contexts:

An alternative view of evaluation redefines evaluation as a social practice in itself and so the emphasis becomes as much on the value of the substantive processes of evaluation as on the product (data) elicited by the evaluation ... the role of evaluation is not only to provide data for institutions and practitioners for quality improvement and accountability purposes, and to add to our body of knowledge about e-learning ... but is also to engage learner and teacher in a situated practice of understanding (p. 2).

This reflects shifts in evaluation within a learning-focused society, in which e-learning has brought about a review of understandings of what it is to learn, how learners can best be supported to participate in formal education contexts, and of transformed learning and teaching roles. Central to this shift is the focus on *dialogue* as being at the heart of meaningful evaluation practice.

Russell's call reflects a shift in the values underpinning the reasons for conducting evaluation:

E-*valu*-ation, as the term implies, involves not only collecting descriptive information ...but also using something called "values" to (a) determine what information should be collected and (b) draw explicitly evaluative inferences from the data ... research can tell us "what's so" but only evaluation can tell us "so what" (Davidson, 2005, p. xi).

The 'so what' factor is essential to querying evaluation practice, in terms of considering the values which drive the adoption of new technologies in course design. It can be argued that evaluation practices, if they are to be meaningful, need to be more closely linked to the purposes of higher education, and the ways in which, in such a context, both learners and practitioners are involved in a social practice which is high-stakes. Learner experiences occur in contexts which are often new and experimental for both tutors and students. A spectrum of responses is needed – including new tools, institution-level support for new QA procedures, and revisions to the concept of an 'evaluation cycle' – by which practitioners can be knowledgeable about and responsive to learners' experiences. The development of evaluation as a social practice which supports learning is part of this spectrum. It necessitates practitioner reassessment of the values which steer their relationship with evaluation, as part of asking – what is evaluation for?

Levy (2006) has argued that, in a new relationship between practitioners and learners in e-learning contexts, a focus on learning processes is a major area for future change, and that HE courses have not yet really begun to address this. Historically, course development around the adoption of technologies has prioritized the need for practitioners to develop e-content, learn about student accessibility and participation via different tools, and design tasks to ensure learning objectives can be met. All of these are, of course, vital to ensuring that universities fulfill their part of the educational transaction. A focus on the e-learners themselves however, and on their experiences of learning within altered conditions for learning, has lagged behind, as have tools and practices for understanding this. This has been recognized in recent years by the call for institutions to focus on the 'primacy of improving the student learning experience' (Higher Education Academy *Strategic Plan*

2005 – 2015) and in initiatives such as the research and development work of the Joint Information Services Committee (JISC) *Understanding my learning* since 2005.

WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS FOR ALTERED PRACTITIONER AND LEARNER ROLES?

Two research projects (Daly et al 2006 and 2007a) on e-learners' experiences were the basis for staff development sessions on evaluation for the PREEL project. They concluded that meaningful evaluation practices support learning as process-focused. The implications for evaluation which is fit for 'the knowledge age' (Andriessen et al, 2003) are considerable. Evaluation is proposed as a process of inquiry. By this, practitioners and students are enabled to reflect on a variety of learner experiences (e.g. experiences with tools, tasks, tutor and peer interaction). The learner narratives which are created involve more than 'logging' experience. Narrative methods involve capturing, articulating and communicating experience – crucially, the 'experience of the experience' is altered by revisiting it and making it shareable with others (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). By such practices, participants articulate how they learn to be learners within new technological contexts, and how they develop identities as 'e-learners', with consequences for participation in lifelong learning (Daly et al, 2007b). Evaluation needs to reflect that the experience of learning can be expected to take place within contexts of continual change. The learner is developing an orientation towards learning, learning how to 'be' an e-learner, how to forge relations of various types which constitute their learning – relations with other learners whom they may never or rarely meet, with whom they share in the collaborative construction of knowledge; with the experience of online content of various sorts; with group-forged knowledge, all of which involve constant re-making of identities, both individual and collective, and challenge understandings of knowledge-building processes. Such processes have been described as 'sociogenic' (Koschmann, 2003), meaning the ways in which people learn by appropriating the social and technological resources available to them. Sociogenic learning involves the learners in processes of context-making (Sharples, 2007) by which they appropriate a range of resources, both social and technological, to learn and to make sense of and take responsibility for the learning experience. Effectively, they steer the practices which are involved in their learning. Such a concept of learning with technologies awards a high degree of agency to learners – they create the conditions of their learning, by tacit as well as explicit ways of engaging with learning processes, particularly in online learning communities. Whatever the aims of particular courses offered in HEIs, there is evidence that considerable learning is going on which is not course-specific or content-oriented (Sharples, 2007; Daly et al, 2007b; Levy, 2006).

Given these perspectives on the ways in which e-learners engage with their learning, there is a need for evaluation practices by which the educational transaction can be better understood, thus enabling tutors to understand the impact of their practices, and the impact made by the learners themselves, on learning. The implications for evaluation as a dialogic practice are significant. It has been acknowledged that course development has been relatively uninformed by studies of learner experiences (Sharpe et al, 2005; Conole et al, 2008) and that practitioner development needs to incorporate meaningful engagement with the experiences of the learners themselves. Survey tools based around exit models serve

QA and accountability purposes, but do little to help us understand the learning processes our students are experiencing. They help maintain separate learner and teacher roles in the evaluation process – evaluation is ‘done’ to learners by expert ‘others’ – who can be course tutors, leaders, administrators or outside experts, depending on the aims of evaluation based on accountability (‘value for money’), institutional review, course development and pedagogical change. This is within a modernist perspective of what evaluation actually is and *is for* (Schwandt, 1997) – the collection of objectified evidence to inform judgements that can then be used by educational practitioners to inform their practice. The separating out of learner, teacher and evaluator roles is appropriate to certain purposes, where dialogue with outsiders can be constructive and involves other forms of knowledge-sharing (for example involving institutional review, external accountability and strategic forward-planning). It is less appropriate however, to meaningful evaluation which is intended to inform practitioners *and* learners about the learning, and to help shape it. ‘Student satisfaction’ approaches based on quantitative analyses will not do for this, and their purpose has never been to address in any deep way the experiential aspects of participating in a course. This mattered less (perhaps) where face to face channels allowed tutors informal and ‘off the record’ means of gauging how the students were experiencing the course. Learning with technologies allows for more complex relations between learners, tutors and learning practices, particularly where e-learning facilitates learning at a distance, the wider distribution of tutors, intensive collaborative learning with peers who are not well known, and the capacity to develop online personas which can present challenges for the tutor in gauging how a learner is actually experiencing the course.

In a process-oriented focus on learning, a shift is needed to dialogic practices which reflect the needs of both learners and practitioners in terms of enhancing the learning experience. Evaluation for learning emerges as a new way of conceptualizing evaluation practice as impacting on learning itself. It is dialogic, and requires both learners and practitioners to engage in shared exploration of how the learning is going and what it takes to be an effective learner.

The PREEL project recognized that staff development for future course design needs to include a focus on understanding e-learner experiences. Practitioners need to consider the diversity of these experiences, and how they will be able to find out what it will be like for learners to participate in their courses. Otherwise, development is driven by other factors which are undoubtedly important (e.g. policy and QA considerations), but can dominate development while practitioners strive to keep pace with changing factors in the world of e-learning, for example:

- Keeping up with technology
- Widening participation
- Increasing student numbers
- Providing QA data for external audiences
- Keeping costs down.

It means asserting that understanding learner experiences is a core consideration for course design, and taking a stance on this in the context of other drivers for existing evaluation practices. ‘Taking a stance’ has also been called for in a paper published by PREEL (Briefing paper 3), which argues that course teams “need to expand their sense of

ownership and control over the quality assurance procedures being used in on-line courses to increase the usefulness of these mechanisms for the course teams themselves” (p. 3). Although this argument is made with reference to explicit QA purposes, the core point in re-conceptualising practitioner roles is the same – there is a real need for practitioners to engage with meaningful practices which lead to deeper knowledge and understanding of what happens to the learners. Practitioners live with the legacy of positivist paradigms in e-learning research, in which learners’ engagement with their learning has been gauged mostly by focusing on counting or categorising behavioural or linguistic patterns as an indication of significant participation and of learning itself. There are numerous studies which use methods which make ‘experiences’ readily quantifiable and relatively easy to identify, but offer little in-depth analysis of the complex phenomenon of learner experience in a socio-interactive context¹. Luckin et al (2001) have pointed out that practitioners perceive coherence in their learning designs where students may not. Getting an account which captures the learner’s voice has been argued to be an effective way of gaining less distorted insights into their experiences from the learners themselves (Creanor et al 2006). There is a need for qualitative methods which can address the social and experiential complexities of e-learning, and this is where narrative evaluation methods have the potential to meet both learner and practitioner needs.

WHAT CAN NARRATIVE APPROACHES TO EVALUATION OFFER PRACTITIONERS AND LEARNERS?

Until recently (Creanor et al, 2006; Conole, 2008), the contribution of learner narratives to evaluation data about learner experiences has been neglected. This is despite the growing interest in narrative evaluation methods within medical practitioner development (Greenhalgh et al, 2005; Greenhalgh, 2006), based on the conviction, borrowed from research in the social sciences, that they have the flexibility that is necessary to capture and record the complexities of human experiential phenomena (Elliott, 2005; Czarniaswska, 2004). Narrative is a way of engaging qualitatively with experiential data. Cortazzi (2001) has argued that narrative can enable understanding of learning experiences from the dual perspective, of both the learner and the researcher (or evaluator/practitioner in this case). For the learner, constructing narratives is a way to “organise and interpret experience and communicate it memorably in social contexts. In several ways, narratives make sense and give coherence to our personal and professional lives” (ibid., p. 1). Thus the learners’ narratives provide accounts in which they have organised their experience of participating in particular ways, to make it meaningful to them and communicable and comprehensible to the practitioner in dialogic contexts, including online fora, online commentaries and focus groups and interviews. The participants’ narratives of their learning offer their unique interpretations of it as a lived practice, that is both individual and social. There are

¹ E.g. Rovai (2003) and McGorry (2003) have developed evaluation methods based on data collected from learners. McGorry’s scale, used to gauge students’ experiences, collects data based on self-report. Using a numerical mean derived from Lickert scales to indicate what is happening in the online forum is only a very reduced interpretation of the experience of learning however. Rovai categorises evaluation ‘types’ and focuses on ‘input’ ‘process’ ‘output’ and ‘impact’ to help structure an analysis of the student experience. ‘Process’ is the tricky part of this, which is the only ‘type’ to do with the actual learning that is happening and how it is happening.

challenges however, in working with narratives as evaluation data, as indicated by Cortazzi, which involve addressing the 'believability' of narrative, and the validity of qualitative interpretation of narratives. The interpretation of learner narratives draws on the significance of Bruner's (1985) work on 'the meaning of experience' and his arguments for 'believability'. He argues that narrative orders our experience, or 'filters' the world as we encounter it. He asserts the value of 'verisimilitude' or 'truth-likeness' within the narratives which individuals construct in order to organise their experiences in order to make sense of them. The sense – or meaning – of such a narrative is rooted in its 'believability' rather than the absolute authenticity of events. Factual accuracy is less important than the understandings which are derived from engaging with the narrative. It offers a very different kind of evaluation tool therefore, for understanding the student experience, from survey analysis techniques. Narratives can contain internal contradictions and inconsistencies. Evaluation, as a practice, does not necessarily set out to discover the 'truth' about learner experiences. Rather, participants engage with their experiences by remembering and revisiting them, and reordering their meanings by narrative means to make them expressible and comprehensible. They thus achieve dialogue with both themselves and with those who share their narratives, the course tutors and their peers.

In the PREEL project staff development sessions, examples of learner narratives were discussed, collected by two projects which piloted narrative methods with e-learners on three masters level courses (for a detailed account of the methods, see Daly et al, 2007b). The narrative data consisted of digital video capture of spoken individual and group talk, and extracts from online commentaries and online 'think aloud'. Narratives had been collected from students at key moments in their engagement with their first online modules (after their first online discussions, half way through the modules, and towards the end of their first online modules). They were invited to narrate their experiences, both individually and within a group. Narratives were constructed both face to face and online, through narrative interviews, online commentaries and a 'think aloud' online activity, and within online and face to face focus groups. Findings suggested there are benefits to participants of narrating their experiences concurrent with their studying. In summary, they:

- teach each other about how the course works (more effectively than getting information from handbooks and online, or listening to the tutor);
- take on 'teacherly' roles and voice appreciation for others' input;
- assume responsibility for the conduct of online discussions, by debating their desirable features and the merits of different forms of online writing;
- develop a respect for the differences between learners in the group, and recognize that choices exist for individuals in how they participate;
- consider how they feel about people who respond little;
- compare their anxieties and misunderstandings, establishing a sense of shared support and acknowledge the difficulties that arise where it fails to develop;
- engage in meta-level discussion about how their own learning is going, and how it is connected to the learning of others;
- review assumptions about the relationships between each other and think in more complex ways about how relationships affect learning.

Within the research, a narrative approach served a twin purpose with these learners, in affecting the quality of engagement with the course, and in providing evaluation data about

how it was being experienced. An important point which emerged from the e-learners' studies is that narratives as evaluation data resist any kind of simplistic equation between what the learners tell us, and what might look like 'best' practice in course design. Evaluation as dialogue is not aimed at establishing a causal relationship between evaluation data and improving the learning experience, by modifying tasks for example. Its impact on the learning experience is achieved by an ongoing dialogic approach which will not often result in any kind of consensus about the learning experience. For example, narrative data from two project participants, involved in a focus group conducted during a face to face teaching day, demonstrate the diversity of experiences of online discussion, and opposing views of effective participation in the course:

I'm used to talking to people when I haven't a clue who they are, so...I find it pretty easy to talk to people online. I was more nervous coming today, having not met anyone than I was chatting online and discussing issues. (Participant A)

Whereas I felt more comfortable because I wanted to get the non-verbal feedback. Because when you're talking to somebody you're getting that feedback all the time, aren't you? You're nodding at me now because you understand what I'm saying, whereas when you're doing that online you don't know whether they're understanding you at all. (Participant B)

Neither of the participants changes their viewpoint (i.e. this is not about engineering 'ideal' responses or experiences), but they are able to see it as part of a spectrum of shared learning experiences which involve identities. The dialogue provides validation of their differences, and confirmation of diversity as a core shared learning resource. A direct connection is suggested between developing dialogic evaluation practices and learning by Greenhalgh's (2006) argument that "... intra-group discussion about what a particular story *means* fuels the learning cycle" (p. 40). The process is essentially one of *active* engagement in the evaluation of experiences, and is driven by the learners' priorities, the possibilities of 'different endings' to their stories of learning, and peer augmentation of the narratives so that new understandings are made possible for both the teller and the listeners – the stories in fact, become shared social material for meta-learning as a collective practice.

HOW CAN EVALUATION BE EMBEDDED WITHIN COURSE DESIGN?

The narratives can be rich, detailed, candid and diverse. They cannot be readily collected as a bolt-on to participation in the course. The process requires tutors to be committed to the evaluation process, and it requires evaluation activity to be conducted concurrent with course participation. The point is to engage with meta-learning. The dialogue can enable all parties to participate in 'context-making' by articulating and thus affecting their real or projected identities as learners (or tutors), establishing the conditions for their learning, and in being explicit about its features. Evaluation becomes part of the sociogenic process, and the learners learn to appropriate dialogic practices as part of those 'resources' (Koschmann, 2003) which have been argued to constitute learning in contemporary contexts. This is what the e-learners projects came to define as 'embedded' evaluation.

Evaluation which is 'embedded' or *concurrent* with study, can establish a reciprocal relationship between tutor and students around how the learning is going (Levy, 2006). The

need for a focus on meta-learning in learning environments supported by technologies has been highlighted by Levy, who suggests that development within the 'process' domain of knowledge (learning to learn) impacts positively on e-learners' progress within the subject or content domain. Such considerations of evaluation processes as educational interventions in their own right however, do not seem to have shaped evaluation practices which accompany the widening adoption of e-learning design, tools and environments. This widening adoption brings challenges, to do with finding the time for such activities, as well as of the adjustments needed to altered participatory roles for practitioners and learners. These are fundamental to considerations of what constitutes relevant learning practices within e-adoption. A dilemma which emerged from the e-learners projects was finding time for meaningful evaluation – can the allocation of curriculum space and learner time to such practices be justified? Meaningful evaluation practices take time and commitment on the part of course designers and tutors. The learners themselves need to be convinced that such embedded practices are a productive use of their learning time. Narratives need to be collected at strategic moments within the course, deemed to be important to retaining student participation, and maintaining or improving quality in collaborative learning processes. Tutor judgement is important for deciding these moments, and the most appropriate questions to be asked, as well as deciding the modes for eliciting narratives. A high degree of tutor responsibility and commitment is demanded for the effective development of such evaluation practices. This is more likely to be achieved as part of growing practitioner knowledge and practice rather than via institution-level demands from common evaluation procedures. The imperative for a content-focused curriculum which achieves subject-oriented objectives is still very strong in most courses. It must be recognised that evaluation is still part of an ongoing evolution of practices around learning with technologies.

A shift in focus can be detected in the recent encouragement by JISC towards the collection of narrative evaluation data, "collecting data from learners is basically about having useful dialogues with them.... Useful dialogues with learners involve a negotiation between what you want to find out, and what learners want to say" (Beetham, 2007). Russell (2007) however, is sceptical of approaches to dialogic engagement with learners which are driven by extrinsic needs to collect evaluation data rather than genuine opportunities for rich shared engagement with evaluation narratives involving tutors and students. In other words, where the fundamental pedagogical shift does not really happen. Short-cuts due to time pressures, and token attempts at dialogue are unlikely to make much impact. This is quite different from the notion of 'embeddedness'. Russell argues "The emphasis is on evaluation as a means of data collection; the value of evaluation is seen to be the product it elicits rather than the process itself" (p. 2). A process orientation towards evaluation has been promoted in other fields involving technologies – e.g. Hall's work on inclusion involving creative projects with young people. She argues that when evaluation is seen as part of a wider *creative* process, it builds around natural points in the learning process which are of core evaluative value, and thus "it extends ownership...all involved become experts in refining their own practice" (Hall 2008). These distinctions are important to developing evaluation as a genuinely meaningful practice. It implies far-reaching changes to practitioner and learner roles. The potential for disruption to established pedagogical practices in many cases cannot be underestimated. But it is only by addressing these issues

that evaluation can play its full part in harnessing the potentials of new forms of 'educational transaction' made possible by technologies.

CONCLUSION

The argument proposed in developing narrative evaluation approaches, is a conception that dialogic practice impacts directly on the learning experience. Evaluation is not seen as the collection and utilization of an objectified body of knowledge about what is happening to the learners. As such, it makes demands on both tutors and learners to be active participants in reviewing and articulating the learning process. It requires practitioner knowledge to include developing strategies for eliciting contextualized learner narratives, both online and face to face, according to course design. Course design thus implies and embeds within it 'evaluation design'. It is an involved practice, and one which is able to respond to contexts of continual change in learning practices involving technologies. The most fundamental challenge is for evaluation to be meaningful and 'fit for purpose' in learning contexts which are likely to change faster than a traditional 'evaluation cycle' can take effect. The whole concept of a 'cycle' of evaluation is in fact, challenged in new contexts, and the focus on evaluation as an ongoing social practice becomes more relevant to meeting the needs of learners and practitioners.

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