

Making sense and ascribing value

Or, to put it another way, assessment and evaluation (we shall come to impact later)

NB This was originally written for the ipda Bulletin as my last column before standing down as Chair of the International Professional Development Association.

Years ago I taught a masters module on assessment and evaluation. I taught it in two countries. I always began with the concepts represented by the words. I would wax lyrical about the concepts being connected, even overlapping, but made sure to emphasise the differences. When, I would say, we are assessing we are making sense of things, even critical sense of things. When we are evaluating we are moving towards ascribing a value to what we have just made sense of. How easy it can be to delude yourself into thinking that as a teacher you have cut through all the confusion and clarified the minds of your students by the use of just a few clever sounding phrases.

I was aware that in some countries the concept of evaluation held sway while in other countries the concept of assessment was paramount; and also that the concepts of formative and summative assessment lurk with intent to cause confusion and spoil the clarity. What I was not prepared for was that the languages and professional context of the students in one of the countries in which I was teaching did not help them to understand the concept of assessment as I was defining it. So, there was I teaching confidently in English to, I thought, a room of fully engaged, respectful nicely nodding heads that all 'got it'. Most of them went away smiling and I was convinced that after my brilliant teaching and the various activities I had arranged for them they would produce super assignments complete with appropriate analyses of relevant examples from their professional experience.

I can only blame myself for careless and insufficient preparation. I had given too little regard to what could happen when a student left the cultural context of my classroom to return to the cultural context of the classroom of their normal professional life. The concept of assessment (especially when formative) evaporated in the transition. It was not a word they used. Evaluation, however, was a very familiar word: for them it meant setting children a test and marking it out of ten or a hundred: very straightforward, easy to organise, little to dispute and professionally reassuring, if only in the short term. Reading the assignments I came close to that very human response: blaming my students. But really it was me who had failed to examine the professional expectations laid upon them. I took more trouble the next time.

My point? There are three.

Professional engagement

One point is that, just as for children, the teacher/deliverer/provider/facilitator of professional learning cannot/must not/should not assume that the learners come without context, beliefs, constraints, experience and values of their own. You and they may think that students are in your classroom to simply learn new theory to which, in the words of David Hamilton, they must genuflect. In fact, as professionals, they are there to *engage* with theory, policy, each other and you. I remember a student once setting up Paolo Friere almost as an educational deity that we should all worship. 'By the way', I asked, 'how do you think he would have managed teaching in your school?'. In other words, use your experience, expertise and values to help make sense of and place a value on theory, policy and your teacher. Regurgitation of the words of the wise is not the way to do this, no matter how wise those words might be. I think this student was under the impression that I graded assignments according to the number of wise words that could be regurgitated in an essay.

Rushing to judgment

Another point is that there is a strong desire by some people to rush to place a grade value on learning. During a job interview a local politician once asked me a very erudite sounding question about how I would evaluate a project. Having just read Walter Werner I went into overdrive about situational sense making and critical sense making. I noticed her puzzled face so stopped and asked her if she felt I was answering her question. 'Just tell me', she said, 'is it any good?'. 'It is good', I said but too late, the damage was done and I did not get the job. I still wish, however, that politicians did not demand that learning be graded, scored, measured and weighed quite so quickly and did not assume that the results told them everything of value about what was being learned. For me the professional lives of educators are diminished when all they are expected to do is to teach and test and teach and test and teach and test. It does not do much for children and students either though it can be made to look as though it does.

Impact

So, third point, how ought we to deal with that awkward concept of impact? At times it seems that every politician on the planet with an interest in education is obsessed with discovering the impact of everything, including the impact of professional learning for educators. The danger is that they will only spend CPD money on teachers if they see that it leads to high scores from children and other students: higher than last year's scores and higher than the scores from other countries. Without high and ever climbing scores teachers are condemned to take the blame and wear a very sticky label screaming 'failure'.

Why grades?

For almost ten years in England it was possible to evaluate the impact of the work of universities providing masters degrees and doctorates for schoolteachers without having to grade it. It was necessary to make sense of it,

even to construct judgment on it, but there were no 'A's or 'B's or 'C's or Ones or Twos or Threes. To see the model for this and its background do look at Resources on the ipda website (www.ipda.org.uk). I am afraid that I have used there a set of initials (PPD) that require explaining. They stand for postgraduate professional development (masters and doctorates).

Too many politicians appear to believe that if a schoolteacher finishes a course on Friday the performance of their children must automatically improve on the following Monday. By some miracle we managed to persuade them that in order to ascribe value to professional learning we must take time and trouble to make sense of it and that the connection between a course undertaken by a teacher and the performance of children was unlikely to be short and direct and included a lot of unpredictable variables.

We now have three broad concepts to play with: assessment, evaluation and impact. For people dedicated to education I believe that we must be on our guard when they are, as they easily can be, turned into killer concepts. We must work hard to show how rich in meaning they are and how far-reaching can be the benefits when we allow ourselves to examine intangible and unexpected evidence for unintended outcomes. Narrowing professional learning to make it easier to weigh and measure is no way to discover educational penicillin.

Valete

This has been my last column as chair of ipda. If you have been, thank you for reading them. (See the note at the top).