

Evaluating the impact of professional learning in education: constructing judgments serving whose interest?

It is often the case that evaluation is not even thought about until the end of a programme or project or event. The people who should be providing the feedback and filling in the forms then become reluctant to take it seriously because by this stage evaluation is unwanted extra work just when it is time to go home. Meanwhile, those who realised too late that they are responsible for reporting the evaluation begin to panic and look for any evidence that tells a good story, thereby breaking a fundamental law of evaluation: never, ever, ever, ever look *for* evidence of what you hoped, or are required, to see; always look *amongst* the evidence that has been generated in order to decide what is significant. And, while you are about it, it is important to remember that just because evidence is strong does not mean that it is significant.

In order to get a grip on this business of evaluation I suppose we should sort out the meaning of some technical words and phrases and the order in which it is sensible to use them. It is very easy to get into a muddle. Included in this list are: *input, output, black boxes and outcome or impact; analysis, assessment and evaluation; and context or environment, needs analysis, baselines, intended outcomes, expected evidence, planned activities, monitoring, critical reviewing or reflecting, outcome claiming and further action planning*. We may also have to come to terms with phrases such as '*situational sense-making*' and '*critical sense-making*'. And then there is the matter of *stance* or *perspective* which implies that when you approach the business of evaluation you will be bringing with you previously constructed and internalised values, some of which you may not even be aware of.

That is quite a list. It illustrates how easy it is to become confused when attempting to answer the seemingly straightforward question: 'Is it good?'. But this is an essay trying to stimulate conversation. I am trying to avoid making it look like a toolkit for carrying out evaluation or a glossary. I shall not, therefore, simply plough through the words and phrases. Nevertheless, it will be useful to be a bit systematic when discussing the evaluation of impact (for a start it can help to think of impact and outcome as the same thing).

In what follows I have drafted a few preliminary principles and discussed some of the obstacles that may have to be overcome on the road to useful evaluation. I also propose a design specification for a framework to evaluate the impact of the professional learning of educators; and offer some notion of what the components of such a framework might look like. I have written elsewhere in

more detail on this subject but throughout this essay I try to keep in mind the subtitle, *constructing judgments serving whose interests?* At the end I present concepts, questions, prompts, propositions and some thoughts on perspectives that I hope will stimulate some critical conversation. By then I may have dealt with some of the terms listed above; but first let us examine some basic principles.

Principle One: Criticality

Evaluation of impact without criticality is a pretty shallow business. Do you remember teachers writing in your school reports phrases such as 'well done' or 'could do better' or 'needs to work harder' or, more frequently perhaps, qualifiers of the word satisfactory such as 'very satisfactory', 'most satisfactory', 'almost satisfactory', 'not satisfactory' and 'unsatisfactory'? If the words were positive and looked as though they would play well to the impatiently waiting parental audience you might have experienced a brief moment of pleasure; or of fear if they were negative words. But if you or your parents were interested in obtaining information that could support progress such words and phrases had very little use. What you and your parents were getting were unexplained, un-mediated, unsupported value judgments; in other words, you were getting evaluation without any criticality. The fact that the judgments may have been accurate is not at issue. What is at issue is that those who wish to sit in judgment and make a statement about the value of a person, a programme, a project or an institution should be prepared to work at explaining themselves. It is in the interests of all parties that they do.

We not only need evaluation reports (particularly those reports that claim to judge the impact of professional learning) to describe the key features of what is being observed but also to identify and explain the critical factors at work.

It is insufficient to simply seek to discover and report on, for example, the nature of a project or to read an outline of its structure. Even identifying the functions carried out by all of the participants in a project is not enough. We also need to know the processes leading to the taking of decisions and the points in its structure that have yielded to particular pressures: what, in other words, sets or can change or sustain the direction of a project; and we need to know how its purposes and priorities have been chosen, how they relate to the context within which it operates and how they have, perhaps, been changed.

We should be careful to avoid the bad example of quality standards and kite marking systems (some of them recognised globally) that limit themselves to asking one major question: 'Are you doing what you say you are doing?'. If the answer is 'yes' organisations are awarded the kite mark. You may have driven behind a van wearing a logo proclaiming the approved quality of a company. But little, if any, consideration may be given to the suitability, appropriateness or

worthiness of its chosen purpose. Organisations and businesses can set themselves a really low level of performance and have a dysfunctional relationship with the environment within which they operate but, providing that they can demonstrate that they are doing what they set out to do, they can still achieve the desired label (a bit like professional National Standards perhaps).

Evaluation that ignores consideration of purpose and context and confines itself to questions of 'yes' or 'no' has less chance of being useful; just like those old school reports: spurious, short-term satisfaction or dissatisfaction are all that are on offer.

For these reasons it becomes essential to examine critically any given, received or imposed model for the evaluation of impact such as that provided by the Training and Development Agency for schools (TDA). We should look at the kind of questions being asked. We should also consider in whose interests the evaluation is being carried out.

Principle Two: Transparency

It is quite likely that not everything can be discovered. Being clear about what is not clear is, however, very important. One of the most telling things that can happen to an organisation under scrutiny by an external body is not the discovery that it did not know something important about itself but that it had in place no means of ever finding out. That implies that it did not consider the need to explore the unknown to be important. And should an evaluator, whether internal or external, collude in hiding ignorance any report that they make will be devalued.

This is not to say that an evaluation report which refers to unclear or even unknown areas has no value; just the opposite. Being clear about the unclear and unknown is to be fair to the reader; it establishes limitations and boundaries to any claim for value; and there is a greater likelihood that our trust in such a report will be well-founded. We shall know where to establish and how to build upon foundations; and we shall know where any conclusions can be no more than tentative. After all, evaluations are commissioned in order to *discover* and *clarify* what is unknown and unclear. Evaluators must, therefore, admit when they have not completely *uncovered* or *clarified* what they have found; and they should certainly be unafraid to say what they have not found.

Principle Three: Independent Authorship

The scope of evaluation can be limited; its purpose can be narrowly or poorly defined; and the process of commissioning evaluation can constrain enquiry. Evaluation can be carried out internally in fulfilment of a self-defined need or in

response to an external requirement. There may be pressures to persuade the genie of uncomfortable and unwanted evidence back into the bottle; and the livelihood of evaluators may depend upon those commissioning the report. There are, therefore, issues concerning the independence of evaluators.

I am not suggesting that the commissioners of evaluation reports should only hire sadists; but there comes a point at which, having established the rules of engagement, evaluators must get on with the job unhindered by any second guessing and with an understanding that, subject to any need for factual correction or re-calibration of plans, they will be able to write as independent authors. They may do a poor job, a mediocre job or a good job but they will not do any kind of useful job if they have at their elbow someone telling them what they should be writing.

The introduction of the concept of *impact* can create unwelcome pressure, especially if the concept has been externally defined to fulfil a poorly constructed or misunderstood purpose. Suppose that, for example, a school is evaluated for how it sets about achieving its publicly declared purpose of improving the learning of the pupils for whom it is responsible. We would be unlikely to dispute that the purpose of the school should be to improve learning. If, however, the external body that has been given the task of carrying out the subsequent evaluation has interpreted the purpose as obtaining better test scores we are likely to have a problem. The connection between improving learning and the generation of better test scores is by no means straightforward or free from dispute. They are not necessarily the same thing. The conclusions to evaluation reports can be totally misleading in such a case. The reputation of schools, colleges, local authorities, universities and teachers can rest upon an inadequate interpretation of purpose and upon poorly interrogated evidence.

The freedom of evaluators should extend to consideration of the unexpected, the unintended, the unplanned, the unclear and the unregulated; and care should be taken to critically examine the basic purpose whether it has been internally generated or externally imposed.

More on impact

That is enough on basic principles for now. We can go on for ever drafting and redrafting such things. I said earlier that this is an essay not a toolkit but it is not possible to discuss evaluation, particularly evaluation of impact, without a sense of system so now I want to look at evaluation with the notion of the impact of professional learning in education more prominently in mind. And since there is so much advice out there on the subject of evaluating impact I think it best to offer some thoughts for you to discuss or dispute on how things should work.

There is a considerable danger that the usefulness and value of professional learning for all interested parties will be diminished if the concept of impact is defined too early and too simplistically. It should be a very rich concept and its evolving definition will draw upon the varied experience of a large number of professionals working and learning in education. It is, therefore, of great importance that we use the process of evaluating impact to articulate what professional learning signifies. Any definition of the impact of professional learning should not simply be in terms of raw numerical targets but in terms of the benefit to the practice of professionals, their colleagues, the learners for whom they are responsible and society.

Without narrative numbers mislead. With narrative numbers can mislead even more.

Providing narrative that does not mislead requires us to work harder at making critical sense of professional learning. The evaluation of impact should enhance and give expression to the voice of professionals.

A danger to be avoided is to mistake *output* for *outcome*. To know what impact has been made is to know what has happened; in other words, to know the outcome of something. Output is like evidence. It only signifies as outcome or impact after it has been subject to critical questioning.

A rationale for interrogating professional learning prior to its evaluation

It is sensible to begin by working out how we come to know what we think we need to know, understand and do. In our business I guess that this should be done on two levels. The first is institutional: the school or local authority or college or university or project. The second is the individual professional or small groups of professionals.

The needs of institutions for professional learning are likely to be driven by target setting and the fulfilment of policy. Making sense of the needs of individuals and small groups of individuals, although it is not disconnected from institutional need, is often more dynamic and involves interpersonal skills; just like teaching in fact. We have a lot of sense-making to undertake if the professional learning needs of individuals are not to be brushed aside in the rush to implement policy and reach targets.

There is always pressure to simplify the process of making sense of professional learning needs and to link them very tightly to national targets, expectations and standards.

It might also be wise to remember that before policy can be formulated or our approach to its implementation decided upon we should have some idea of our underlying values. Expressing our professional learning needs without considering our values is to build without foundation; or, maybe, to build upon the foundations laid by others according to their blueprint.

Now I want to be even more systematic and to talk about frameworks.

Draft design specification for a framework to evaluate the impact of professional learning

Adopting a framework for evaluating the impact of professional learning will be crucial if professional educators and the organisations for which they work are to benefit from professional learning.

Frameworks are usually there to support something. They can be a set of arguments each relating logically to the others so that when combined they constitute a powerful and coherent school of thought. They can also be used to train plants to grow in desired directions (and not to grow in un-desired directions). So a frame can both support and constrain.

We sometimes talk of 'framing' questions so that they elicit a desired response. This can be good or bad. What we might intend to be a climbing frame may become a prison as it sets limits to, and begins to shape, behaviour. In the case of the evaluation of impact it would be the failure to ask critical questions or only to ask questions that favour a special interest that closes the prison doors.

Frames do not have to be square in shape. They may curve. In the business of professional learning we often hear the word 'loop' used to describe the process that is followed from start to finish: a nice neat circle that completes what is sometimes called a 'learning cycle'. The framework that I am offering here is not designed to be a loop because that would imply an end point; it is, instead, an unending spiral that continuously leads into new professional learning.

By the way, we who are in the business of making sense of professional learning make a lot of use of the word 'developing' or 'development'. You may have noticed that I prefer the word 'learning'. Development may imply that we grow according to someone's plan: that we are judged to be successful when we can demonstrate that we have fulfilled the plan set out for us. Sometimes we think the plan is ours but it isn't. Learning implies that the unexpected is allowed to happen; that when we find something unexpected it will be examined critically to decide on its significance; and that unintended outcomes arising from unexpected evidence can be drawn attention to and celebrated. Using the word 'learning' also implies that the expected and intended can be critically examined and may be shown to be of less significance than when first thought of.

Working like this helps to counter the weight and pressure of external interests. It may even change the minds of those that desire simplistic solutions.

A design specification for a framework should require it to:

- be adaptable for individual teachers, groups of teachers working collaboratively and all professionals, organisations and institutions working in education;
- support professional learning whether or not it is accredited;
- enable critical reflection;
- help to make sense of professional learning that takes the form of planned events;
- enable participants to evaluate the significance of normal and unplanned professional life and any unexpected evidence for unintended professional learning; and
- open up professional learning rather than constrain it.

Now I want to proceed from a draft specification to a draft blueprint for building a framework.

Building a framework

A basic framework for the evaluation of the impact of professional learning should include at least the following components chosen to encourage a natural process of planning, making sense of or reflecting on what has happened and then looking forward again.

It should be seen as a spiral leading to further professional learning.

It is a sense-making instrument not a pass/fail examination.

1. Needs analysis

It is important that professional learning needs are analysed prior to making any statement about context or establishing a baseline. A simple list of needs compiled without thought may result in poor quality professional learning and an unsatisfactory evaluation.

Analysis allows participants to distinguish the different sources of professional learning needs; to perceive more clearly the difference between personal, institutional and governmentally defined needs; to be more realistic; and to avoid setting themselves up for failure.

2. Context and baseline setting

Without knowledge of the context for professional learning and the baseline from which it proceeds the eventual evaluation will be of diminished use.

3. Intended professional outcomes and expected evidence

The words 'intended' and 'expected' are chosen deliberately because, although it is important to have a good idea of what might be achieved and what evidence might look like, good quality evaluation allows for a natural, non-prescriptive learning process. Thinking about intentions and expectations will help with any necessary planning but without prescribing what is acceptable as evidence. Lists are useful here as aids to later critical reflection on or review or interrogation of *actual* professional learning (see 4 below and ***Getting up close and personal with the evidence*** later).

4. Review of evidence for impact

It is fundamentally unsound to look *for* evidence of meeting targets. Professional learning is so varied and full of the unexpected that the evidence it generates must be thoroughly examined for its nature, strength and significance before any reliable and supportable claim can be made for it. This means that full consideration should be given to the examination of unexpected evidence in order to see if it signifies any valuable unintended outcomes. Look *amongst* evidence.

5. Follow up plans

On the basis of this evaluation of the impact of professional learning, where next?

Perspectives

It is helpful to make use of at least three perspectives when evaluating. I have chosen the following three to begin with because it seems to me that they represent the major forces that need to be kept in balance in order to maintain a sane professional life.

1. The first is the **regulatory/official/inspection perspective**. If you look at how schools, colleges and universities (and the professionals within them) operate they cannot go far without looking at themselves from this point of view. This perspective provides the professional facts of life for most of us.
2. The second is the **professional perspective**. Much of this may be found in school or college or university policy documents but it's really about people wanting to improve for no other reason than professional pride (though this begs the question of how to define 'improvement').
3. The third is the **academic/theoretical perspective**. Theory can help to shine a light on practice and practice can challenge and construct theory.

Maintaining perspectives should help to ensure that the interests of one group do not dominate. There are, of course, other perspectives. You can make use of what is known from the past to achieve an historical perspective. You can look at things from the points of view of children, young people, adult learners, parents and other professionals; you can make use of various philosophical, political, psychological and sociological perspectives; and when you examine the context within which you are working economic factors such as industry and employment opportunities come into play. The list of perspectives can be very long.

One-dimensional evaluation may satisfy someone looking for a headline or a soundbite but the business of making sense of professional learning, especially its impact, is complex. Professional learning provides a rich source of knowledge. Evaluating it merely in order to produce a desired result that satisfies government is un-professional; even anti-professional. All results should be arrived at having been examined critically. To use one perspective is to be uncritical.

Getting up close and personal with the evidence

Lets assume that you have set yourself some intended professional outcomes and now want to reflect upon what has happened over, say, a year so that you can say something useful about impact.

In order to help the process of making sense of what professional learning has taken place you may find it helpful to take each of your intended outcomes for professional impact (**Building a Framework item 3**) in turn and, making full use of the evidence that you have assembled, ask yourself the questions listed below.

Questions

Q1. Did I achieve any of my Intended Professional Outcomes as designed?

In other words, was the definition of what you wanted to achieve very accurate and was the expected evidence generated entirely as predicted? How can you tell that this is so? Is there any evidence to support this? **What professional impact does the evidence signify?**

Q2. Does what I wanted to achieve now look as though it should be re-defined? Do you know and understand it better now? How would you define it now? What evidence can support this? **What professional impact does the evidence signify?**

Q3. Did what I wanted to achieve turn out to be impractical? In other words, were there strong, though perhaps unforeseen, professional reasons why it could not happen? What evidence supports you saying this? **What professional impact does the evidence signify?**

Q4. Did I achieve more than expected? In other words, did you go further than hoped or, perhaps, this Intended Professional Outcome actually encapsulated far more skills, knowledge, understanding and experience than you could see at the outset? What evidence supports this? **What professional impact does the evidence signify?**

Q5. Was this Intended Professional Outcome really not for me? In other words, is it a sign of good professional development if it is possible to identify what you are not so good at? On what basis can you say this? **What professional impact does this evidence signify?**

Q6. I did not get round to addressing this Intended Professional Outcome but should it continue to be a target for next year? In other words, although you did little on it this year or have good reasons for not achieving it, might it be an idea to carry it forward? What tells you that this is a good idea? **What professional impact does the evidence signify?**

Q7. Having responded to the questions above, now ask yourself if you have any unexpected evidence for unintended impact. If you do, make reference to it, make a list of what you believe has been achieved like this and, again, answer the question: **what professional impact does this evidence signify?**

Concepts and further Critical Questions

I know that I said that we should not wait until the end to think about evaluation: if it is to be effective it should be systematic and, therefore, part of how we work all the time. However, if you have been carrying out some evaluation recently and

fancy asking yourself some searching last minute questions before you type in the final full-stop of your report you might try the following.

1. Systematic sense-making

Does your approach to evaluation demonstrate a systematic examination of knowledge? Do you organise and manage the way that you set out to discover new professional knowledge? Is your evidence usefully presented or described? And, most of all, do you examine and explain its significance?

2. Professional environment or context or circumstances

Do you have a critical awareness of and insight to the current professional environment? In other words, does your approach to evaluation show that you use more than one perspective or is it simply a record of what has happened without any thought about the circumstances in which you operate?

3. Rigour

Are your techniques for finding things out rigorous? In other words, do you formulate and ask searching questions? Do you consider unexpected evidence? Do you ask serious questions about what the evidence means? Do you identify and test assumptions?

4. Assertion

Do you obtain well-grounded support for what you claim? In other words, is what you claim based merely upon assertion or is it backed up by critically examined evidence (even if the evidence was unexpected or a description of how a colleague felt after doing something for the first time).

5. Voice

Is there a clear professional voice coming through all of your evaluative words? In other words, does evaluation represent individuals, groups or a whole school of professionals whose interests, concerns, plans and thinking are apparent? And to whom is the voice directed?

6. Professional learning journey

Is there potential for further learning? In other words, is evaluation the end of a story or part of a journey?

And three concluding propositions to stimulate critical conversation

1. Evaluation of professional learning should not be a pass/fail exercise

In other words it is not a test of how closely you or your school or your college or university met targets but rather a test of how seriously you have examined what has happened to you or your school or your college or university in terms of professional learning.

2. Society Needs Thinking Professionals in Thinking Schools, Colleges and Universities

In other words there is poor value in having professionals and institutions that work only in the interests of others and have no minds of their own. Remember the sub-title to this essay.

3. It is not evidence of best professional performance we need but evidence that best illustrates significant professional learning

In other words by only aiming at the target and dismissing and failing to examine everything else we shall fail to see the significance of what can be learned from so-called failure and miss the chance of discovering professional penicillin.

Now, was that good for you?