



Getting Started with Evaluating Impact

Benefits and challenges when evaluating impact - Transcript

Interviewee

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What are the benefits of evaluating impact for teachers and their learners?

Benefits of evaluating impact, really, it's wide ranging, certainly on our learners, because it enables us to understand that complex phenomenon of learning itself. And it enables us to do that in more depth, and in very focused ways. It also helps us as teachers, because it's about developing our own professional expertise. If we come to one of the, at the moment, very popular areas to be investigated, which is feedback to students, then understanding feedback in more depth, is a really fascinating exercise. So, one of my students, for example, is researching into using video for feedback. So, rather than reading and writing and responding to essays, what he's doing for his research project is a five minute video feedback using free software, which is downloaded, and the students are password protected, to get into their own feedback account. And it's like a one to one supervision, and it has been absolutely fascinating to see the results. And clearly students are appreciating this, and they're responding, because they're talking about the feedback they're getting. So, that kind of approach is really important.

If you had to suggest one way a teacher could evaluate the impact of their practice on student learning, what would it be?

One way of evaluation? That's a really tough question to ask. And there isn't a quick fix, I don't think that there's a single thing that I can point to that you would say 'And here's your top tip.' Because actually that would be really unhelpful, because it's about thinking about a plan, it's about thinking about where do I want to go with this, and what do I want to know, and what do I want to achieve?

Looking at impact as a formal investigation is something that's about horses for courses, it's about fitness for purpose, it's all of those kinds of phrases. So, if you are looking to create a huge amount of data, and you're looking to share it on a generalisable kind of platform, and you're looking to make it a large project that speaks to a number of people, then probably yes, you need to formalise it. But most research, the vast majority of research that's undertaken, isn't like that, it's informal, it's qualitative, it's looking at small numbers. It's not looking to generalise across, across classrooms, or across schools, it's teachers looking to understand their own teaching and learning, and generating their own personal stories.

Generalisability is interesting, because a lot of people are very fixated on that. But in fact, most knowledge in education is like case law, it's an accretion of understanding. It's not a single correct answer that can be applied elsewhere. It doesn't work like that. We know we're social constructivists is the term isn't it, that we build knowledge? So, we share knowledge as well. And this sharing of knowledge, David Hargreaves who

was a Professor here at Cambridge, had a really nice phrase for this, this problem, if you like, of sharing knowledge. He called it 'sticky knowledge'. So, he said "If you look around any staffroom, anywhere indeed where there's a group of teachers, you're going to find there are 200 to 300 years' worth of knowledge of experience. But it never gets shared, because there's no frame for doing that, there's no forum for discussion. And so, in order to get rid of this sticky knowledge, in order to share, this becomes the opportunity to talk to others about your findings." So, the impact, the informal impact, is a really powerful thing to have.

What have you seen teachers focus on, when exploring impact?

Just about every range of things that you can think of. So, teachers are really interested in the learners, in the students that they're working with. So, there's impact being looked at in terms of say student motivation for example. They're also interested in their own teaching, so impact also looking back at themselves as teachers. So, if I make this change, what kind of qualitative difference does this make in my classroom? There are teachers looking at school policy, and there are teachers looking at the wider governmental policy impact of work on the classroom.

Looking at motivation is really quite difficult, because it's a kind of nebulous thing. And when you look at students who are motivated, there are such a wide range of events that do that. But one that comes to mind in particular was a teacher who was teaching History, and with the sixth form, and he decided that he wanted to motivate his students to become independent learners. Now this is a big kind of thing at the moment, and everybody is interested in independent learning. But he wanted to mix it up with a sense of ownership, and he wanted to mix it up with a sense of progression to university, so knowing how to learn. And so, in his lesson which happened to fall on the Wednesday afternoon, a double lesson, last lessons he sent them home. And he sent them home to work online, with him back in school. And he set them a series of tasks, and they had to come back to him as individuals, and as pairs, and as small groups. And so, he gave them a choice in how to handle this. But he also gave them a sense of ownership. Ownership over knowledge, ownership over the way that they could approach this, and ownership over the ways in which they could work as teams. And he then evaluated through focus group, and individual interviews, to find how that had changed their attitude.

And it was extraordinary, because they came back with a wild enthusiasm for working in this way, felt that they had been trusted as adults, and felt themselves to be prepared to work differently, to be more effective, but also to go to a university and feel I've got a taste of how this should be.