

ONE VISION, MANY EYES

A SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVIST APPROACH TO EMBEDDING FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT AND EVALUATION IN A SECONDARY SCHOOL

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of Doctor of Education (Generic Route)**

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ABSTRACT

The theoretical framework for this empirical study extends a trail of thinking from a social constructivist view of learning to the areas of assessment, evaluation and leadership. The relationship between social constructivist learning principles, formative approaches to assessment and evaluation, and collaborative leadership styles is explored and discussed. Learning and teaching developments in secondary schools have often fragmented the intrinsic elements of learning, teaching, assessment, evaluation and leadership. As Palmer (2007) so aptly puts it: '*...we think the world apart.*' (p. 64). This study seeks to 'think education together' by taking a more integrated perspective.

The aims of this study were to add to the body of knowledge in the area of assessment and evaluation through the adoption of the aforementioned integrated perspective, develop formative assessment and evaluation policies and practices in a secondary school to the extent that they are embedded in the school's working culture and paradigm, and finally to chart the means by which change has been achieved.

The research is argued to be located in the critical paradigm, adopts an action research methodology in which the researcher assumes a participatory, practitioner researcher role in conducting an ethnographic case study of a secondary school. A social constructivist theme was retained throughout the research design and although both quantitative and qualitative data were gathered, the study was conducted within an interpretative framework informed by symbolic interactionism.

Data were gathered via a multi-method approach that included focus groups and semi-structured interviews, observation and accompanying field notes, document and classroom artefact analysis, and non-inferential statistics. Focus groups were used to check data sources, confirm interpretations, develop and disseminate new ideas and approaches, and refine developments based on feedback received. This process was informed by Gladwell's (2000) notion of ideas taking on the qualities of viruses which in turn develop into epidemics.

Participants' early reluctance to accept a need to change was overcome through an initial 'internal' audit of current policy and practice relating to learning, teaching, assessment and evaluation, the results of which confirmed the 'external' judgements made by OfSTED and the Local Authority (LA) in terms of the need for the school to develop formative approaches to assessment and evaluation.

A purposively selected assessment and evaluation focus group showed a commitment to formative ways of working, and was instrumental in defining and refining new policies for assessment and evaluation in collaboration with other focus groups, non-focus group colleagues, pupils and parents. Additional focus groups for pupil behavioural aspects and mentoring were embraced by the research rather than discouraged in order to retain an integrated 'real world' perspective.

The aims of the study are shown to have been met in that new formative ways of working are now embedded in assessment policy and practice and the researcher has developed a new approach to whole school leadership. This study proposes a new way of thinking that embraces paradox rather than preserving divisions. Moreover, it argues a case for transformative education being reliant on taking this stance. The study also presents a picture of leadership and research based on co-existence and proposes a new 'Stenhouseian' philosophy where research becomes the basis for leadership.

CONTENTS

Abstract.....	2
Contents.....	4
List of Figures.....	7
Acknowledgements.....	9
Introduction.....	10
(a) The Problem.....	10
(b) The Researcher and Views Shaping the Research.....	14
(i) Biography.....	14
(ii) Views Shaping the Research.....	16
(c) The Approach.....	19
Part 1 Literature Review - What the Theory Suggests.....	20
(a) Learning and Teaching.....	21
(b) Assessment.....	30
(c) Evaluation.....	44
(d) Change – Leadership and Management.....	52
Part 2 Practical Implications.....	64
(a) Learning and Teaching.....	65
(b) Assessment.....	65
(c) Evaluation.....	67
(d) Change – Leadership and Management.....	68
Part 3 Research Methodology.....	71
(a) Similar Studies – Treading the Well Worn Path.....	72
(b) Methodology.....	73
(i) Rationale for the Research.....	73

	(ii)	Rationale for Working in the Critical Paradigm.....	74
	(iii)	Choice of Methodology.....	81
		* Action Research.....	81
		* A Critical Review of Action Research.....	84
	(iv)	Methodological Issues.....	88
		* Access to Data Sources.....	88
		* Ethical Considerations.....	88
	(v)	Methods Used.....	89
		* Focus Groups and Semi-Structured Interviews.....	91
		* Observation.....	100
		* Document Analysis and Classroom Artefacts.....	101
		* Non-inferential Statistics.....	102
	(vi)	Validity and Reliability or..Credibility, Dependability, Trustworthiness and Transferability - The Search for ‘Truth’.....	104
	(vii)	Reflexivity and the Narrative.....	105
	Part 4	Fieldwork (Presentation and Discussion).....	110
(a)		The Starting Point.....	111
		(i) Assessment and Evaluation Policy and Practice at the Beginning of the Project.....	111
		(ii) Associated Culture and Paradigm.....	129
(b)		Cultural Recognition and Paradigm.....	131
		(i) What are we About?.....	133
		(ii) Change of Culture/Paradigm?.....	144
		(iii).....Change of Policy?	144
		(iv)Change of Practice?.....	145
(c)		Emerging Assessment and Evaluation Policy.....	146
(d)		Dissemination.....	146
		(i) Refining the ‘Virus’ and Agreeing the Policy.....	147
		(ii) Starting the ‘Epidemic’.....	149
(e)		Leadership and Change – Focus Groups and the Power of the Few.	150
		(i) Embedding Policy and Practice.....	153
		(ii) Mutating the ‘Virus’ and Controlling new ‘Epidemics’ ..	157

(f)	New Policy <i>in Practice</i>	161
	(i) Indicators of Formative Assessment and Evaluation Policy Being Embedded in Practice.....	161
	Part 5 Conclusion.....	166
(a)	Reflections on the Processes and Outcomes in Relation to my Research Aims and the Literature and Research in Parts 1 and 3.....	167
(b)	A Critical View of the Research Project.....	171
	(i).....Lessons Learned and the Next Steps in the School’s Evolutionary Journey.....	172
	Part 6 Appendices.....	177
	Part 7 References.....	255

LIST OF FIGURES

Fig. 1	Aspects of Behaviourism.....	22
Fig. 2	Constructivist View of Learning.....	24
Fig. 3	Integrated Model of Learning.....	25
Fig. 4	Social Interaction in the Learning Process.....	27
Fig. 5	Characteristics of Education in the Industrial and Information Ages.....	53
Fig. 6	The Sigmoid Curve.....	55
Fig. 7	Central Group Co-ordinating Work at a Whole School, Working Group and Individual Teacher Level	60
Fig. 8	Proliferation of Centers Model.....	60
Fig. 9	Comparison of the Three Main Paradigms – A ‘Personal’ Framework.....	77
Fig. 10	Action Research Cycle.....	82
Fig. 11	Research Method Overview.....	90
Fig. 12	Discursive Formations and the Deployment of Focus Groups Over Time.....	94
Fig. 13	Pattern of Classroom Based Formative Assessment Practices at Beginning of Research (October 2007) (i).....	118
Fig. 14	Pattern of Classroom Based Formative Assessment Practices at Beginning of Research (October 2007) (ii).....	118
Fig. 15	Achievement and Standards in Your Subject.....	125

Fig. 16	Pattern of Classroom Based Formative Assessment Practices at End of Research (October 2008) (i).....	163
Fig. 17	Pattern of Classroom Based Formative Assessment Practices at End of Research (October 2008) (ii).....	163
Fig. 18	Comparative Graph Showing Trend from October 2007 to October 2008.....	164

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