



Self evaluation as a sensory activity

John MacBeath explores what lies at the heart of self-evaluation. He calls for teachers to re-claim this territory and to develop fluid evaluation skills that do justice to the dynamic nature of their schools.

What do policy makers, researchers and practitioners have in common? All work in an educational world of separation, a plethora of policies and related practices which each have a mindset of their own. Assessment for learning, thinking skills, pupil voice, co-operative learning, self evaluation, development planning all come pre-packaged as discrete elements, requiring teachers to make the connections, typically without a little help from their friends.

Yet teaching and learning are seamless activities. In an ideal world, and in the world of the best classrooms, teaching meets learning and virtually everything else is integral to that relationship. Virtually every initiative that comes down the line from one or other policy source can be traced to the meeting point in the classroom between teachers' hopes and aspirations for their pupils on the one hand and, on the other, pupils' prior experience, their instinctive desire to learn, their willingness to be surprised and excited. That natural born curiosity to find out, to explore the world is, however, all too often inhibited not least by two decades of policies that constrain both learners

and those dedicated to help them learn. And it is here that self evaluation begins.

■ ■ ■ Whose evaluation?

Teachers are natural self evaluators and their classrooms are saturated with evaluative questioning, reflecting, decision-making and endless simultaneous activity which risks spilling into chaos without some form of discipline, evaluation of obstacles to learning, consideration of available options and thoughtful interventions. It is often researchers who sit in classrooms and attempt to make sense of the complexity and underlying dynamic of classroom life. It is inspectors who assume responsibility for making quick judgements about quality and effectiveness. And so it is that the embedded process of systematic reflection and professional judgement is taken out of the hands of teachers and formalised, ritualised and, all too often, deprofessionalised.

Of course it is a Romantic gloss to portray teaching and learning as a vibrant empowering process imbued with reflective critical self evaluation, yet that is what the best of educational activity aspires to. Without self evaluation

the Eureka moments are lost. Without self evaluation the low points, the critical incidents, the disasters are destined to be relived over and over again.

■ ■ ■ Asking the big questions

In the English language we have two words where many other languages have only one. We make a distinction between assessment and evaluation. The former we apply to the judgements we make about pupils' learning, a diagnostic, formative and summative process. The latter describes a process of standing back and making sense of what we are doing. Is our assessment actually formative? Do children learn more or less when we give them marks and grades? What can I learn from pupils about the impact of assessment and the effectiveness of my teaching? What am I learning about learning? How do I record and reflect on the highs and lows, successes and failures? What aspects of classroom might I research more systematically? What might my pupils focus on as researchers? How could I write my classroom story, for my colleagues? For a parent? For a visiting inspectors?

The quality of classrooms life can be measured in very large part through the extent to which questions such as these become a routine part of 'the way we do things round here'. The quality of a school is measured by the extent to which it addresses the big educational questions and infuses the dialogue that occurs in staffrooms, lunch halls, in staff meetings and in senior management team discussions. What is (to quote Lawrence Lightfoot) the tenor of 'the essential conversation' that takes place between parents and teachers on formal occasions such as parent-teacher meetings and on less formal occasions when teachers and parents meet? Thinking about, and talking about, the nature of the talk is hallmark of a self aware, intelligent school. It is not an approach that polices language or is vigilant in spotting the politically incorrect use of words. Nor is it intolerant of the need for teachers to share their frustrations and let off steam. But it is a form of dialogue that aims to deepen mutual understanding of the power of language we use in and out of the classroom, alert to how it shapes, enhances and constrains how we think, how we behave and the what kinds of message our verbal intercourse sends to pupils, parents and outside visitors.

■ ■ ■ Time for real reflection?

Teachers engage in a lot of self talk. They are critical self evaluators. They engage in self evaluation a hundred plus times a day. They do it on the journey into school and they do it on the way home. They do it while driving, while walking, and sometimes while sleeping. They do it moment by moment in the classroom. They make intuitive judgements on the spur of the moment with little time for weighing choices of action. All of that is so busy and energy consuming that there is little space left for a more systematic continuous composition of, and retelling of, the story. So that studied reflective and analytic work finds a home in further study, diploma, certificate, Masters and PhD programmes, in away days, workshops and conferences, and in professional programmes such as the NUT's Learning Circles initiative for example. But these are often discrete events which do not always transfer back into the impatient busywork of school routine, into a ruthlessly cumulative curriculum and attendant assessment.

■ ■ ■ Nimble evaluation

The challenge that policy has yet to embrace is the real nature of teachers' work and professional lives, what teaching and learning look like from the bottom up rather than simply from the top down, a worm's eye view not just a bird's eye view. Policy has to grasp that pupils' learning and teachers' learning are integrally connected and that teachers' learning feeds from, and feeds into the way the school learns. It is this complexity and dynamic that is the missing ingredient in ritualised and formulaic approaches to self evaluation, the box ticking and form filling that makes it such an onerous and tedious process for teachers and school leaders. Grasping the complexity and dynamic of school as a living growing entity is what Arnold Tomkins, a New York administrator wrote about over a century ago:

The organisation of the school must be kept mobile to its inner life. To one who is accustomed to wind up the machine and trust it to run for fixed periods, this constantly shifting shape of things will seem unsafe and troublesome. And troublesome it is, for no fixed plan can be followed; no two schools are alike; and the same school is shifting, requiring constant attention and nimble judgement on the part of the school leader. (1895: 4).

■■■ The dynamic image

Keeping a school mobile to its inner life is what self evaluation is about, a continuing process of questioning, surmise, analysis and ongoing conversations. Unlike the occasional audit or ritual completion of the SEF, the life of a school is captured most vividly and authentically by a moving image rather than in a snapshot, illuminating a continuing dynamic. Headteachers interviewed for a current research project on recruitment and retention frequently said that one of the things that kept them going was the surprise of the unexpected, each day different from the day before. Schools are restless places in which everybody is on the move. Nothing stays the same. You never step into the same river twice.

This might seem to give pause in respect of evaluation techniques such as photo evaluation in which pupils armed with cameras take pictures of places and events which, for them, tell a story of their school. However, like the best of self evaluation tools, images of school life captured through different lenses have a dynamic quality. They are not summative statements but assessments for learning. They function as a tin opener, opening up questions, promoting discussion, probing what lies outside the frame and how any given image might be reframed. 'Reframing', a concept owed to Bolman and Deal is what self evaluation is about. That is, a continuing critical questioning of practice which puts a new frame around what teachers see, what they hear, what they attend to and what they do.

■■■ Attuning teachers' evaluative senses

When Eliot Eisner wrote about the Enlightened Eye he contrasted those who saw everything and saw nothing with connoisseurs - people who knew how and where to focus and how to winnow out the significant from the insignificant. We might add to Eisner's terminology the attuned ear - the ability to listen to the space between words, to what is not said as well as what is said and how it is said. Self evaluation is a way of tuning in to the multiple voices, finding the 'bandwidth' on which messages are carried and can be heard. How do people think and talk about their work? What messages would a casual visitor

pick up from the conversations that take place in reception areas, public spaces and what they do to make their practice explicit and discussable

Few, if any, self evaluation protocols include the sense of smell. But it is an ethos indicator advocated by Andy Cosslett, the CEO of the Inter-Continental Hotel Group. What does your hotel smell like?, he asks his managers. He points to how little formal recognition we give to one of our most powerful senses. We pick up smells at a subliminal level and tend to underestimate how powerfully it affects our attitudes to places we visit. However, we only need to count up how much TV advertising time is given over to air fresheners, sprays, deodorants and the estate agent's advice to keep coffee brewing when selling your house, to realise its influence on attitudes. When pupil voice in self evaluation was introduced in Scotland in the early 1990s toilets were one of the primary foci of pupils' concerns and investigations, smell being one component in the general antipathy to the toilet environment. Rather than dismissing this as a marginal or trivial issue HMI in Scotland in the early 1990s took the issue very seriously and made toilets an integral focus of inspection and self evaluation. Since then many schools have given a high priority to refurbishment and monitoring of toilets as both a practical and symbolic demonstration of creating a people friendly and responsive environment.

■■■ Teachers reclaiming self-evaluation

Self evaluation as a sensory activity perhaps stretches the imagination but it is a deeply human activity. It has been hijacked and turned into a mechanistic operation and in the process lost its human and pedagogic qualities. The territory must be reclaimed by teachers while it is the job of senior leaders to encourage this form of storytelling, making it a priority in CPD, assembling the many stories into a grand narrative of quality and equality. And when the inspectors call, the head reminds them that Ofsted guidelines explicitly state that the SEF is NOT self evaluation and refer them ex-Ofsted Chief David Bell's plea for schools to be imaginative and innovative in telling their own story.