

“Assessment challenges for teachers as researchers”

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2001) is a United States Act of Congress which supports standards-based education reform that is dependent upon believing in establishing high standards for achieving measurable goals to improve individual student learning outcome achievements. The Act emphasises the notion of *evidence-based education*, which is seen to embrace:

- Use of learning and teaching strategies which have been informed by scientific research.
- Commitment to ongoing research and evaluations.
- Facilitating short- and long-term classroom-based studies to explore conditions needed for the collection, evaluation and publication of high-quality Action-research data.

Evidence-based learning and teaching embraces a collection of educational practices that predicate student success. It is suggested that teachers want to be effective and *make a difference* through quality practice and ACER (2006) declared that:

Educational effectiveness for all students is crucially dependent on the provision of *quality teaching* by competent teachers who are equipped with effective, evidence-based teaching strategies that *work*, and the maintenance of high teaching standards via strategic professional development at all levels of schooling. (p. 2)

One element of quality teaching provision is assessment for, and of learning, noting that Groundwater-Smith, Ewing & Le Cornu (2006) suggested:

...assessment innovation lags far behind that of curriculum innovation precisely because

teachers have felt confident rethinking the latter but they have been uncertain about how to proceed with the former. The interaction between the two has broken down. The assessment practices are still rooted in a transmission model of teaching in spite of that model having less currency... (pp. 273-4)

In accepting both these researcher commentary sets, a degree of priority significance could be attached to the actual *classroom climate* in which all or any assessment enhancements are to be explored for further development. McLeod & Reynolds (2007) affirmed classroom climate importance when they stated:

A positive environment is often understood as a caring, safe and supportive classroom. Students, parents and teachers recognise the value of a positive classroom environment. (p. 55)

Once a positive classroom climate has been established, assessment options may be investigated through classroom-based inquiry: enter the **Teacher as Researcher**.

Assessment innovations and refinements may be conceived very effectively in the crucible of learning itself: the classroom. What is needed may be little more than creative flair applied to existing assessment tools and formats, or there may be entirely original assessment initiatives waiting to be unfolded. Although not a new concept for some, teachers conducting their own classroom inquiries to inform their own practice and share with a wider audience may be a radical thought for others. Until quite recently, teacher education programs have not usually incorporated formal research skills, ethics and methodology training in already crowded curricula and courses offered across Australia. A significant number of those have certainly had *reflective practice* as a theme or outcome which positions them well to take the next step, since reflective practice is a pre-

cursor to progression into evidence-based teaching, including assessment and evaluation components.

Teachers aspiring to progress in this way will therefore need to simultaneously engage with two assessment areas:

1. Assessment for, and of learning related to the Australian Curriculum, International Baccalaureate and other parallel curricula or guidelines.
2. Assessment of their teacher as researcher investigations and publication by peers, institutional academics, parents, students and educational administrators.

This dual process may be quite exciting for some, yet daunting for others to contemplate. Where scant research experience or skills exist, 'researcher's block' (akin to 'writer's block') may present as a barrier to the necessary immersion in vital, informing and highly desirable classroom-based research. Such a real or perceived barrier could occur at a number of levels for teachers, depending on their actual classroom experience and familiarity with research processes. For example, a recent pre-service teacher graduate, being both a beginning teacher and a beginning researcher, may be internalising many questions at best, self-doubt and apprehension at worst.

A number of suggestions are offered as a basic skill-set for empowering classroom-based research that also needs to address dual demands of curricula and professional development assessments. When embarking upon a research process, teachers will be required to reposition themselves differently as *knowledge workers* and make adjustments to their resulting modified teaching roles.

They may choose to relocate themselves in an inquiry-based discourse that focuses on teaching as knowledge production, rather than reproduction through the work of research communities, and thereby risk working in isolation as has traditionally been the case (Reeves, 2000). The suggested skill-set invites *teachers as researchers* to make time for collaboration and sustained critical reflection about their practice and the contexts of their practices, as they engage in the duality of

assessment of self and others. This will require educational orientations that are shaped by a basic philosophy which continuously questions and transforms teaching practice, curriculum implementation, assessment and evaluation. It moves beyond measurement into the domain of deeper understanding and insight about the confluence of teaching, student engagement and learning outcomes. Further, it celebrates teacher capacity to base judgments on empirical evidence rather than on tacit knowledge as assessment, and critique of self and others becomes integral to classroom discourse.

The suggested skill-set required by teachers as they shift their focus from transmission and measurement to critique and reconstruction will enable teachers to:

- Critique and transform the taken-for-granted nature of the assessment of self and others
- Facilitate the examining of social and cultural constructs of classroom study in relation to assessment
- Enable transformative action and learning improvement
- Improve professional practices to better understand assessment of self and others
- Recognise the uniqueness of the interplay between context, teacher and student
- Generate assessment data at three levels: program, teacher and student.

There is a plethora of reference material regarding research design and types of methodology, and it is not the intention of this paper to pursue those aspects of inquiry, but rather to share some practical ideas for emergent *teachers as researchers* embarking upon the process of classroom-based research. In no specific sequence, the following experience-based suggestions are made:

1. Identify the research question or statement.
2. Draft a mind-map, concept-map or flowchart to help differentiate between major and minor concepts, suggest the likely explorations required, evaluate potential concept interest levels, identify and clarify any vague or veiled concepts, reduce concepts to small details and ideas,

generate keyword or glossary production, and assist students select Personal Inquiry themes.

3. Collect evidence from resources that might be useful to the research project.
4. Do not forget to **immediately record** the full reference details of any evidence so gathered.
5. Sort evidentiary references into on-line (post-2005) and print-based (post-2001) with a balance of both media being seen as appropriate. This view may be moderated in favour of more on-line content once its academic rigour is improved.
6. Find a mentor from within the school, a colleague to proof-read and evaluate, and/or another colleague willing to act as a research assistant. Having company on the journey can be very productive and reassuring during *tough times* in research practice.
7. Reflect, reflect and reflect: continuously explore the project approach and progress, pedagogy, student participation levels, the classroom climate, the whole school learning environment and Learning Triad (student, family and teacher) connections.
8. Make frequent observations and notes during the process. Avoid relying on memory.
9. Communicate effectively with all parties involved, especially participating students.
10. Discuss the evidence-based inquiries with the students and their families as opportunities arise, since transparency can be a powerful ally. The more involvement, the more ownership and the more likely that healthy participation activity rates will be achieved.
11. Keep it simple! In the beginning, identify a focus that provides a challenge and is manageable at that time. Build from one small positive outcome to tackle others: as teacher confidence grows, so too will competence in research skills.

In summary, the concept of dual assessment (or evaluation) in classroom-based research need not be daunting. Each forms part of any inquiry learning journey, and their direct connection to learning and research outcomes actually helps provide project direction.

A number of supportive and contemporary classroom-based research resources exist, including:

Anderson, G.L., & Nihlen, A.S. (2007). *Studying your own school, 2nd edition*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Elton-Chalcraft, S., Hansen, A., & Twiselton, S. (2008). *Doing classroom research: A step-by-step guide for student teachers*. Maidenhead, UK: Open University Press.

Koshy, V. (2010). *Action research for improving educational practice, 2nd edition*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd.

McIntosh, P. (2010). *Action research and reflective practice*. Oxford, UK: Routledge.

McNamara, O. (Ed.)(2002). *Becoming an evidence-based practitioner*. London, UK: Routledge.

References

ACER (2006). Evidence –based assessment. Sourced on-line from

<http://homepage.mac.com/planclos/portfolio.html> Accessed 08 July 2011

Groundwater-Smith, S., Ewing, R., and Le Cornu, R. (2006). *Teaching challenges and dilemmas, 3rd edition*. Melbourne: Thomson.

McLeod, J.H., and Reynolds, R. (2007). *Quality teaching for quality learning*. Melbourne: Thomson Social Science Press.

NCLB (2001). No Child Left Behind (the Elementary and Secondary Education) Act. Washington, DC: United States Department of Education.

Reeves, T.C. (2000). Alternative assessment approaches for online learning environments in higher

education. *Journal of Educational Computing Research*, 23(1), 101-111.