

POLITICISING EVALUATIVE FEEDBACK:
A CASE STUDY FROM TEACHING
IN A HIGHER DEGREE VIA OPEN LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on teaching master's level units in Early Childhood

offered for open learning via the use of audiographics conferencing. Evaluation has been an integral component of this teaching project over the last three years. The first year of the project produced evaluative data which raised a number of issues, both technological and pedagogical, which were addressed in the second year of the project. Using Smith's (1993) characterisation of empowerment (as self growth, as collaborative action and as political action/struggle and working broadly within an Action Research approach (as an example of critical education research), the teaching project members have focussed on consolidating the self growth focus of the first year and the collaborative action of the second year, as well as on engaging in political action in 1996. Such action raises issues within the university in terms of how the institution will continue to sustain

innovations such as this teaching project and to encourage a wider use of the project's principles and practices in master's level teaching generally. It is in this sense that the paper reports on politicising evaluative data as a means of building new partnerships based on understanding by university administrators of the sorts of supports necessary to stimulate and maintain innovative practices which are geared towards such policy areas as equity and quality.

This paper is not about audiographics conferencing per se; nor is it about the specifics of Early Childhood content and approaches associated with the master's level units. Rather, the focus of the paper uses these as a context for considering how evaluative data may be politicised. The data have not been collected and analysed just for the sake of evaluation; rather they have been used as a platform for:

- ` curriculum decision-making at the classroom level;
- ` accountability in terms of funding expended on the projects; and
- ` advocating for maintaining, sustaining and extending support for the ongoing use of the technology.

Project Team members have developed a sense of empowerment at each of these levels. We try to unpack this sense of empowerment; and as we do, we demonstrate the use of conversation as a significant strategy in our approach to evaluation. In so doing, we elicit a number of observations about politicising evaluative data.

INTRODUCTION

This paper is set within the context of teaching master's level units in Early Childhood via open learning with the use of audiographics technology. More broadly, these units are taught in this way as a means of addressing university concerns about and commitment to notions of quality and equity relative to teaching and learning in higher education.

It is important to note at the outset that the focus of this paper is on an exploration of the notion of politicising evaluative feedback. The context and nature of the teaching of the master's level units is

the topic of other papers (see, for example, Halliwell, et al, 1994 and 1995; Perry et al, 1996, and Rossiter et al, 1996). Suffice it to say that the teaching of the master's level units has been the focus of a series of three projects over three years, supported by the University's (Queensland University of Technology - QUT) Teaching/Learning Large Grants Scheme. The projects have been set within the University's priorities associated with quality and equity in teaching and learning; the Faculty of Education's development of its Master of Education course in a variety of modes under the broad umbrella of open learning; meeting the needs of a geographically dispersed clientele, most of them women, for the Early Childhood units in the Master's course; and the willingness of Early Childhood staff to grasp the opportunities of newly-available technology as a way of addressing these contextual challenges.

The technology used in the three projects is known as audiographics - a mix of telephone and interactive computer conferencing. When the projects began, we noted that people viewed and used the technology largely within an expositional pedagogical framework. It is worth noting that the Project Team members were strongly committed to a pedagogy that focussed on dialogical approaches which encouraged a

critical analysis of ideas. From the outset, the interface of the technology with the pedagogy has been a site for contestation and challenge.

The university has invested considerable funding to the teaching of these units through its Teaching and Learning Development Large Grants Scheme over the last three years. It saw that the projects were making a serious attempt to address its priorities and goals for quality teaching and learning in higher education. The School of Early Childhood and the Division of Academic Affairs have also invested significantly in the teaching of these units. While a partnership always existed in this broader sense, it was the process of politicising evaluative data that strengthened relationships among the various players.

With contextual factors relating to notions of quality and equity, it is easy to see why evaluation has been an important and integral part of teaching these units. Evaluation, then, has always been seen as an ongoing part of the teaching of these units, and so it is important to begin this paper with a statement about how evaluation is defined and what part it has played in the project associated with teaching these units.

The paper continues with a brief overview of the projects and an analysis of emerging issues and associated actions as stories of participants' involvement were compiled and shared. The analysis uses Smith's (1993) conceptualisation of three forms of empowerment through critical education research and brings the paper to the point where Project Team members converse about the issues associated with politicising evaluative data in the three projects. The paper concludes with an invitation to join us in continuing the conversation.

It is important to note that this paper does not include the data as originally collected. Rather, the paper talks about the data in terms of how we conversed about and analysed the data as a basis for using it in a variety of forums. Much of the data referred to in this paper relate to feedback from staff who taught in the various units associated with the projects, although feedback from students was useful in confirming and elaborating staff feedback.

DEFINING EVALUATION AND THE ROLE IT HAS PLAYED IN THE PROJECTS

Evaluation runs the risk in many of our endeavours of being underemphasised and undervalued. On many occasions, it is seen as something to add on to a curriculum development process - in more recent times, as something to do with accountability and quality measures. In this view, there may be a perception that the harder-nosed the data you can produce, the more accountable you will be seen to be in the eyes of power groups who provide opportunities or funding or

both!

This, of course, presents only one side of what evaluation is. A view of evaluation in a summative sense is only half the picture. The formative side of evaluation is an ongoing phenomenon, and, ideally, a curriculum development process is one that begins and continues with an emphasis on evaluation.

Evaluation, then, is both an integral and an ongoing part of any curriculum development process, and Stufflebeam's (1973) definition provides a basis for taking this view:

Evaluation is the process of delineating, obtaining and providing useful information for judging decision alternatives. (page 129)

Such alternatives would be seen to apply to all stages of a curriculum development. Halliwell (1982) believes that when we say we are evaluating something, we mean that we are making judgements about its worth, and that we have some criteria for making these judgements. Stake (1975), Kemmis, (1986), Nixon (1990) and Simons (1992) define and elaborate evaluation in similar terms.

We have, therefore, taken a view of evaluating the teaching of these Master's level units where evaluation is seen as setting out to improve, not to prove - it is a way of collecting and analysing useful data that provide an informed platform for ongoing decision-making about change efforts. Part of this informed platform, it should be noted, is also associated with demonstrating accountability in change efforts.

Evaluative data will always have a political dimension in the sense that the data have the potential to empower the self to gain insights upon which to improve practice; to share positive experiences and outcomes as well as ongoing issues with others about practice (bringing in the possibilities for collaboration); and to collaborate with others in exerting influence in relevant forums as a means of supporting and sustaining transformations of practice (see Smith, 1993).

Politicising evaluative data is not meant to convey the idea that there is something devious or sinister about the collection, analysis and sharing/dissemination/acting upon these data. If ethical matters are going to be brought into play, taken seriously and implemented, then quite the reverse is true. After all, if evaluation is about making judgements, there must be professionally defensible criteria to guide the making of those judgements. It is from these criteria that ethical practice in politicising evaluative data would derive.

This does not mean that the handling of evaluative data will be a bland sanitised process - rather it will be confronting and critiquing on the one hand and collaborative and constructive on the other.

Thinking of evaluation in the way outlined above, and incorporating notions of politicising evaluative data provided a basis for thinking of the projects as examples of Action Research in emancipatory terms (Kemmis, 1994). In essence the three projects have formed ongoing

cycles of Action Research and in emancipatory terms, they have been empowering of the participants and transforming of both the practice and the context of the practice.

Our analysis of the data occurred largely through a series of critical conversations, and what we then did with the messages coming from those conversations was the politicising of the evaluative data. Ethical matters came into play to ensure that the critical conversations and the emerging messages did not compromise what the original data in their raw form were telling us.

TELLING THE STORY OF THE PROJECTS - A BRIEF OVERVIEW

1994 - Empowerment as self-growth

The major theme emerging in 1994 was the interface of technology and pedagogy. This was extremely value-laden. The strong commitment of Early Childhood staff to dialogical approaches which encouraged the critical analysis of ideas produced an equally strong resolve not to be governed by the technology. Staff were educators and not technicians - and they vigorously began making recommendations for technical support from the University in order for the technology to be a conduit through which what was pedagogically valued could be successfully implemented. At the level of self, empowerment was not so much associated with becoming technical experts as with advocating for a working environment that was technically sophisticated - one that staff could plug into and use within their pedagogical framework.

Empowerment was very much at the level of self-growth. Tied to this was a developing confidence for staff to argue from a platform that was grounded in the day-to-day issues of classroom practice which were emerging from the interface of technology with pedagogy.

1995 - Empowerment as both self-growth and collaborative action

The theme of 1994 continued into 1995, and began to include other Early Childhood colleagues. Again the interface of pedagogy and technology occupied attention, and with the involvement of more colleagues, the need for support in order to sustain momentum was emphasised. Thus, empowerment was continuing to occur at the level of self and was broadening to include others in collaborative action - firstly, in the form of a grant application for a third year; and secondly, in the form of advocacy to relevant university personnel (both of which were successful). Along with the collaboration, team members continued to make the effort to share in relevant professional forums. The growing body of information about the two projects was becoming known and

respected across the University, evidenced, for example, by an invitation to speak about the projects at a University-wide Committee meeting. The reputation of the projects was also spreading as evidenced in increasing enrolments and consistently positive feedback from students. The sense of empowerment was growing and being strengthened.

The confidence evident in 1994 continued in 1995 and it stimulated a willingness in staff to be involved in the issues associated with both classroom practice and the heady sphere of policy as it impacted upon practice. Such growing confidence was related to the increased number of staff who were becoming involved and confronting the same sorts of issues.

1996 - Empowerment as self-growth, collaborative action and political action

During 1996, much of what had been trialled in 1994 and 1995 was continuing, with staff reporting greater levels of confidence in plugging into the technology and making it fit their pedagogical

preferences. The project emphasis in 1996 has been on staff development which has facilitated a continuing climate for empowerment at the levels of self and of others. The project has also incorporated notions of political action in the form of advocacy to personnel at policy and funding levels, resulting in additional support from the Early Childhood School and the Pro Vice Chancellor (Academic) during the year. Arrangements which would appear to indicate that the University is institutionalising the outcomes from work over the last three years without the dependence on a fourth large-scale Teaching/Learning Development Grant were also developing. Sharing about the projects continued in professional forums, both within and outside the University, as evidenced by some of the entries in the list of references.

The experiences of 1994 and 1995 (including the successes) consolidated the confidence into a platform for political action. Strategies for communicating messages to significant others were being learned and refined. They were also enjoying a measure of effectiveness and success. Together, the confidence, the working together, the experiences and the successes brought a sense of empowerment to use the evaluative data in a politically astute and professionally constructive manner.

NOTE: Extracts from the projects' documentation will be circulated at the paper presentation.

TALKING ABOUT THE PROJECT IN-HOUSE

There is a storehouse of data in the form of completed surveys, teaching evaluations, interviews on an individual and group basis and

reflective journals from both staff and students. It is not the purpose of this paper to present these data in detail. Rather, we thought, as members of the team involved in the three projects to talk (see Thompson, 1994) about the insights and perspectives we have gained from being immersed in the three projects and from being both the generators and collectors of much of the evaluative data, and certainly from being the tellers and analysers of the stories emerging from the data. Such a conversation, we believed, would capture something of the emotion involved in such projects - an element sometimes overlooked in evaluation, and one certainly looked upon with some suspicion by those who might see evaluation as a process of strictly-controlled research. Within the context of the conversations, nevertheless, we always tried to stay within the boundaries of what the data were saying.

Conversation, then, was a way of capturing the stories that are closely associated with the evaluative data; of critiquing the events, contexts and outcomes of the projects; of (re)constructing the team's position and practice; and of advocating for ways of sustaining momentum, i.e. politicising the evaluative data. Such an approach was seen to be appropriate given our person-oriented views about curriculum (both generally and as it relates to Early Childhood curriculum) and our preferred pedagogy in higher education; and so it was developed loosely within a framework of thinking informed by Gough's (1994) ideas about narrative.

Here is an edited version of a conversation which we had very recently. (Note that it has not been so severely edited as to destroy the conversational tone.) We invite you a little later to join in the conversation. We record Rosemary's apology for being unable to be part of this conversation; and acknowledge her significant contribution to the life of the three projects.

Firstly, Gail reflects on the way evaluation has been an ongoing part of the project and what role she feels it has played.

IAN: Gail, if you'd just like to offer some comments about the way evaluation's been an ongoing part of the project and what role you think evaluation has played over the three years.

GAIL: I guess what comes to mind is the issue, well actually not in the first year, but in the second year, of identifying measurable outcomes in the evaluation. My memory is that, we, as a team, were all committed to the idea that it was a study of perceptions of experiences. It was through that, that we'd find out the things we needed to know, but this was confounded by a strong message coming through that we had to provide some information in terms of measurable outcomes.

IAN: This was the hard nosed bit, wasn't it?

GAIL: Yes, and I know that, in the second year, that exercised a lot of our time trying to think through how we could reach the goals that we believed were important and also conform to other expectations without a heavy focus on measured outcomes.

IAN: And we seemed to survive that didn't we? Is there anything in terms of our survival of that which particularly comes to mind?

GAIL: Well I suppose that in a sense having to answer that question made us have to think through and be much more explicit about the goals of the evaluation and why we were doing the sorts of things we were doing. Another thing that comes through for me is, that people invoke these notions of measurable outcomes and you think there is no room to manoeuvre. In some way if you answer their questions, or answer what they're asking for without falling into the trap of subverting what you're trying to do, it nearly always ends up being acceptable. It's more than their saying a measurable outcome. What they really mean is evidence that you have systematically addressed the goals that you set for the project.

IAN: And we certainly had to do that anyway, in accountability terms as far as writing interim and annual reports but I think at the same time, the fact that we were raising very real issues captured people's attention. I think that perhaps the invitation that you got to the Teaching and Learning Committee late last year to talk about the project was probably an indication that the University had bought our argument.

GAIL: Yes 'cause that was in the year that they were pressing for the measurable outcomes. We've never been, even though people had said this is the agenda we're working under, we have never been criticised or, we still got grants even though we haven't come up with quantifiable things.

Secondly, we all talk about the emerging issues from the evaluative data and how we have politicised the data

IAN: Yes. Let's move on. We might just come back to Darien and see if there are any pools of data that are particularly relevant in terms of what appear to be the emerging issues. First of all about the interface of technological and pedagogical issues. What sorts of advances would you say the project has made in terms of say the conceptual level, addressing that interface of technological and pedagogical issues?

GAIL: What's clearly most at the front of my mind at the present time is the fact that we took the notion of, and we worked under this theme

of seminar teaching and critical analysis of ideas. Those were the two

themes and it was, when we went back to look at our data, (for example, Sue trying to find a segment in a video that supported that), that led us to come back to looking at our own themes and the practices that were associated with that and to look more closely at the links between slogans used for something and evidence in practice.

IAN: I suppose another way, too, is the way in which you've always resisted being swamped by the technology.

GAIL: Yes and again the evaluative stance we took made us able to do that better because, I'm thinking, the reflective conversations we had, just like this one, that helped us become more sensitive to, or interpret at a deeper level some of the things that were going on. I mean the difficulty in keeping the pedagogy to the surface instead of the technology would have been a minor irritation if we weren't involved in an evaluative exercise of looking at how it all worked and how it might work in a mainstream sense. I remember in our first year that this surfaced as an issue at the end of the year, through our discussions, you know, as more than just a minor irritation but something that is a systematic force in our culture at the present time. And another one that came through there was the systematic way in which an instructional mode of teaching and learning was embedded in all the routines that you used. So there was the technology as the innovation rather than pedagogy and secondly the taken-for-granted notion that instruction was, remember right at the beginning (when I was sort of thinking, looking behind me, when those people down at Mary Street were saying how highly innovative we were I was trying to figure out what they were talking about) when perhaps it was the pedagogy that was seen as something new. And mostly it was for them, that we weren't teaching in the way that they knew about.

IAN: And that became apparent to them in terms of that one day training thing that we went to when we made it clear to the trainers that we wanted the technology to fit our pedagogy and not vice versa. It was as you and Rosemary started to build competence and confidence that started to draw people like Sue and Ann and other people in to recognising that this was a technology that had possibilities to, if you like, be a vehicle for the pedagogy which you were valuing and maybe, Sue, you might like to come in and make a comment about how you started to become more drawn into the process.

SUE: Well we were definitely overshadowed by the technology to start with and, even though we didn't want to compromise our teaching and learning approach, we had to begin and it took some time for us to gain some confidence with the technology in order to, in fact it probably took about the second time we taught our unit in this way. The first time we taught it, I think we didn't feel comfortable with the way in which the technology invaded the teaching/learning environment that we wanted to create. We felt more in control of that the second time we taught it, which of course was a year later and we felt more confident

that the teaching learning environment that we wanted to create was more under our control and less under the control of the technology. And after having taught it for the second year and finding the technology more reliable and being more comfortable with the teaching/learning environment, we were able to create the sort of teaching/learning environment we wanted. In 1997 as part of the audiographic program, I'll probably move that along a little further because of the confidence that I now have to perhaps draw away from some of the graphic supports that I've been used to providing and go more towards the supports that Rosemary and Gail have been using for some time. So less reliant, if you like, on the old overhead projector

type material because of the confidence in being able to create that talking/learning/sharing/critical analysis of ideas environment that we're striving for. . . . Increasingly, I didn't feel entirely alone and I know Ann didn't because she had that technical person to support her and Meg was here, so we both felt supported within the limits of what was possible with the technology but still the technology dominated.

GAIL: My feelings between the first and second year. The first year we had feedback from the technical people that we were innovative but also they were interested and supportive. The second year, I felt a certain impatience from the person with what we were trying to do and I was interested that the other project that got under way that year it was much more of an instructional one. They changed the telephones to ones that suited more of an 'in the class' environment and that made it difficult for us. The telephone was more obtrusive than the polycom device which we used in 1994. There were things like that.

SUE: That's interesting you say that because the year that you're talking about which was your second year was our first year. In reference to the support of the Open Learning Centre, that was the year that Ann was left in the lurch on a number of occasions to get the whole thing set up and going herself, and I'm wondering whether that wasn't because the reason that you just gave then about frustration by the people there wanting to support different ways from what we wanted to teach.

GAIL: I don't think they were aware of that either. Again that for me, through the evaluation and thinking about these sorts of things, many bits surface like that. I think that was the desire of the support staff and the other people working in the infrastructures to have things operating in some sort of routine that was settled and known and that they could plan ahead for. Sorts of feedback I got indicated that it would be much better if you could download your slides at the same time.

SUE: It's another practical application of that. In the first year

that Ann and I did it our routine, the structure of what we did was highly structured and organised and sequenced and I think, it may be something to do with that, but it's also made more complex by our insecurity of working with the technology and I don't think it's either two independently. I think it's a combination of both factors.

IAN: Now let's move on. And I suppose we could make a statement something like, however high falutin the conceptual level of thinking is in relation to this, it comes back to the need for on-the-ground support to make it all happen. Now we've just been talking about support that's sensitive to the sort of thing that you value in your teaching, so in terms of the way we've been collecting insights over the three years and moving on to make decisions and so on, what are the sorts of the things that the evaluative data have done in terms of highlighting the need for institutional support? And there are some ideas here in terms of day to day practice at the level of staff development, at the level of equipment and technical backup, and at the university-wide level of input from other relevant sections?

GAIL: There's one comment that I'd make. I think that one of the things that the support staff and the professional staff will say is, in the earlier phases they felt as if the project ought to be fitting in with the priorities that they had with their existing work load and that in a sense there's a lack of co-operation from other support areas who didn't appreciate exactly where we're coming from and what the

other pressures in their lives were about.

In terms of the evaluation, I'd want to emphasise the story telling, the collecting of actual examples and that's where I find that letter from our workshops this year so significant. It's not just that it's funny and well written, but it was such a good example of a little vignette that tells you about what it's like from an academic's point of view and I think we have used that quite successfully, not only in the written report of the evaluation but I think probably you also, have become able to tell little stories about what life's like which is, well how do we know, anyway, we've been fairly successful in getting our message across.

IAN: And that comes back to what you were saying earlier about the university push in the second year to produce measurable outcomes and I think that, in this particular paper, what we're highlighting is that we had collected a lot of data. It's been done in a qualitative way but a lot of that data has come from a variety of sources, whether it's been through discussions like this one, or whether it's been through conversations with teaching teams, whether it's been you going and talking with students, or with coordinators in Open Learning Centres. I think that the data, we would have to say, even though some people would say it's very subjective, is that it's also very emotional and

passionate; and powerful, therefore, in getting messages across. I think that probably at this stage last year, perhaps a little bit later, the beginning of this year when we started surfacing some of the things that you were just talking about and Sue was talking about in terms of frustrations with different groups linking together to give that on-the-ground support, that made us feel very passionate about what could the institution do to support that, and I think that's what lead us to write the letter to the Pro Vice Chancellor (Academic). Maybe, Gail you might just like to comment a little bit about that.

GAIL: I'm not quite sure which is the significant bit for this project. We wrote our report in '95 and at that point, we all held an assumption. We never discussed it. We just assumed that eventually, once the division of information services realised what our needs were, someone from computing would be assigned to work on the project. It took us some time to realise until we went through a series of E Mail messages and discussions, with people like MB that, in fact, this wasn't part of their whole brief. Therefore it wasn't going to happen.

DARIEN: I'm not sure if this is relevant and I think it's come to light more recently, but it seems to me that a project of this nature that grew out of the Faculty of Education, is placed in a somewhat different position than a project that may have grown out of one of the Science Faculties, Engineering, or one of the other Faculties that has traditionally had more money, not just grant money that could be devoted to supporting these sorts of projects and I think that was part of the institutional response if you like. When an innovation or a trial of this nature is supported to some extent, and certainly it was through the Teaching/Learning Development Grant scheme there would seem to be a responsibility on the part of the Faculty to support it as much as they could. Now some Faculties are in a better position to do that in the sense of what funding and support they have within the Faculty than others and, in that sense, I think the institutional response is undergoing a re-evaluation in terms of how it might be supporting more consistently. I think this may be a good example of a project that was, if you like, in that transition phase. It had demonstrated certain positive outcomes and certainly it was a very valuable experience from an institutional point of view in terms of what we were learning about the experience, but it was really highlighting that one policy across

the campuses would have been helpful.

GAIL: That for me, in terms of this politicising the evaluation again highlights the ways in which these discussions here or in meetings with various decision makers have been very important. We hit that problem early in the funding of the projects. In everyone's head were traditional ways of thinking about money. So we had Open Learning Units which meant that the people in our Faculty said it doesn't cost you anything to do things by print. We were breaking new ground in

terms of teaching units to off-campus students which did not rely on the traditional print materials.

IAN: And I think that's been an interesting extension of work that we're doing in other spheres in terms of our emphasis on narrative. Narrative isn't just about telling a story, it's really talking about that story and trying if you like to deconstruct that story and to work out what are the underlying assumptions. Are they worthwhile assumptions, or aren't they? Are they useful in terms of promoting what it was we valued and wanted to do?

SUE: Can I make some comments from the micro level in relation to institutional support and day to day practice. Even though the institution might not recognise it in terms of valuable outcomes or measurable outcomes or however those things are measured, the support that was provided for individuals at the level of playing around with the technology was significant from my perspective. For example, the commitment of Gail in getting a person like Meg so that we could play around with the technology and getting through those institutional barriers that exist was very significant for me. Getting Powerpoint on our own machines is another mechanism which is supporting the staff but it's very difficult to get through those barriers in order to get things like Powerpoint on our machines in our offices. Even though I had it at home before we had it in our office, the support that was provided by Meg for me at home when I was playing around enabled the institution to benefit because that support then made me utilise that technology for other professional development work that I was engaged in with the teachers and those are the sorts of spin offs that I don't think are recognised in a project like this by the university.

GAIL: The other thing is that through the narrative form, you are making connections there which are real in their lives and if the university wants people to become more technologically oriented, they're only going to get it, I believe, if they do that. They become aware that you need all that sort of support. It's not a quantifying of how many training sessions or how many people. It's the way you use the people.

The benefits that we get from telling the story with some of the people that I was working with, the students and the support and professional staff both from QUT and outside, and it was a mechanism to break down the barrier when there was a problem. It was better than trying to in some way neutralise the problem by trying to quantify it as a measurable outcome or effect. This is the story of how person X had to cope in the situation and it was a very powerful mechanism to actually encourage people to see another point of view and I think that, not only was it a useful mechanism for gathering the data, but also it was a way of getting our messages across. It was all to do with how we actually used the stories, as it were, to build bridges between the various groups.

DARIEN: So, it's good for communication. As you write reflectively, or in this case, talk reflectively you extend beyond the micro and you

make all these connections out and you see, bit by bit, right through to the institution of how that affects you. If you don't do this reflective exercise on experience you never realise this.

SUE: I think what I was saying about professional development before is a good example of that and I didn't mean my own professional development, I was meaning the professional development of others as well as my own professional development. I was meaning, too, the professional development programs that I've provided to teachers. For example, you think this technology is something which many teachers find very daunting. I think that in this context an added advantage is that I come from Early Childhood and I'm female. Many of the teachers we work with are females who consider technology to be out of their domain and out of their reach and to see someone from an early Childhood background working with technology in that way is not only good for the institution, but it's good for a lot of things that we are on about in Early Childhood.

GAIL: I look at the story from a number of the students as well who are out there who were saying that regardless of what the course was about, they felt that they were gaining something in terms of their own professional enhancement because they were learning about communication technology which they thought was going to be important in the future for them whatever career or whatever sort of social situation they found themselves in. It was almost as if there was a second stream there in terms of what they were, how they were gaining benefit in the learning from the course. . . .

Could I just go back to the Pro Vice Chancellor (Academic) bit and link it with a discussion I had with GR a week ago. I'd need to go back and look at the letter that was written to check how right I am, but I feel that in that letter, rather than the dry sort of "we knew those things", we did view the narrative form which was a transcription of a conversation that shaped the letter, and then I went to a meeting with the Pro Vice Chancellors (Academic and Information Services). The conversation at this meeting was recorded and the transcription tells the story of our evaluative data being persuasive, at least to the people with an orientation towards wanting to support the projects. I talked to GR just last week about next year and that we would need support again, and he was interested and receptive to the story. However, we got off onto other things beyond money and we started talking about the need for liaison among academic staff and support services personnel. You could see he was starting to see the needs from our perspective.

DARIEN: From my perspective, I see that on a number of occasions we're dealing with two different cultures and that is really one of the institutional challenges to be able to bring those cultures together and often the support groups or professional groups in computing or administration or some of the technical areas of support have come from a culture that values the bureaucratic-type thing - efficiency, accountability, stream-lining - and making the process, if you like, as efficient as possible. Coming in and seeing, perhaps the academic or research culture, we find that there are a lot of other variables in there which really indicate that other things are there. When we worked together on a project of this nature, we really got to know that there are conflicting forces. That is part of the process of telling stories and understanding different perspectives and really having someone there who has the vision to keep the overall goal of where we're trying to go up front with everyone concerned. Keeping that to the front, but when we're dealing with some of the technical administrative support areas, there are times when we're really not

dealing with a person that we need. We are dealing with perhaps the operator on the ground rather than the supervisor above, and it's the supervisor above who is really still passing on those messages of efficiency. And particularly in these projects, which in a sense are looking at an open or a flexible or a distance type of philosophy in terms of how it's operating, there is quite a strong culture that suggests that the quality programs are the ones that are planned, controlled, and the materials are excellent and they've had the best input possible, they've treated, if you like, in a sort of production mode. You know, we must go through this phase and then we move onto this phase and there's quality control all the way along and that particular mode that people, such as Gail and Sue, who are exploring the way that technology might be meeting the particular sort of teaching/learning paradigm which you're coming from, find that impossible, that production mode, an impossible mode to work in.

GAIL: Can I just pick up on that. At the conference I was invited to in April, which was looking at flexible learning. I was surprised to find that I was hearing a message which was different from the conference I had been to the year before at the same venue. At this one, there were many papers from technical people coming to realise that there's a culture that they had to deal with. Every time someone said something about, we've got to examine the culture in which we're doing these things, there would be a sort of responsive noise in the audience which made me feel happy, because a paper that I was going to do towards the end of the conference was hitting that same sort of theme.

Thirdly, we consider how well have we politicised evaluative data

IAN: I think there have been some challenges through the years to that culture and I think we'd agree that we have been part of this process,

if we were looking at how well we've politicised evaluative data. I mean, obviously, time will tell, but I think the indications are there.

If you look at the way in which the work has progressed through the years. For example in 1994, I suppose it was an initiating phase where, I think the success was that at an institutional level there was an acceptance of the idea and that led to the '95 phase, which I would call the supporting phase where the focus was moving on to the greater acceptance of the idea at the implementational level; and then in 1996, the emphasis of the grant was on, if you like, both supporting and sustaining the idea and its implementation to the point where hopefully it would become institutionalised. I think that sort of pattern, through the use of the evaluative data, to I suppose campaign for things has been successful. And, whether, you know, we've been ethical is probably better for somebody else to look on and make a judgement, but I think that one thing that comes through very strongly, is that we have never swayed from (in terms of particularly the people teaching), is the value position in terms of what you were talking about as the teaching/learning paradigm. I've just noted some ideas down here that might just be things that we could pull out of this story that we've told this morning. I mean, all along the way, there's been a lot of other things that we've used. I mean there's been the development of the M.Ed. and the way the Faculty has used the M.Ed., and we've seen ourselves go down the Open Learning line. It's certainly been something that your School has been really wanting to see as another example of the School being a trail blazer. I've seen that through the process there's been a thread of frustration and along side that a thread of empowerment and that is associated with a focus on values which both present a challenge to you as well as an opportunity to contest what might, some of the institutional barriers have been in getting things are done.

GAIL: Could I interrupt you there? It's in relation to what you're just saying about the M.Ed. which, you know, had an Open Learning policy. We were embedded in that but much of the thrust within the Faculty was the development/delivery model which we chose not to take. We got money, but then we chose to do things our way whether or not we got the faculty money for it. That's put very crudely but we never did try to fit the agenda. It was just lucky that when we wanted money we got it from the grants.

IAN: The point is that there were those things happening that we capitalised on and didn't necessarily accept but used them as levers if you like. The whole notion of confidence that Sue brought up in terms of initially being overshadowed and then moving to a confident level and that brings in the whole area of support at both macro and micro levels. There's a whole level of feedback through narrative and conversation which I suppose has qualities of connectiveness and persuasiveness which then can move into a notion of communication which, hopefully, will have impact on both policy and practice. Gail,

you have always been so astute in capitalising on every opportunity to share our work and to keep the ongoing needs very much in the minds of the "right" people.

GAIL: There are some insights that we could talk more about in relation to that. For example, the process of telling a story is so important, I think.

IAN: O.K. Then the last thing I noted is in terms of cultural change and transformation in terms of moving from the initiating phase where the idea is accepted to the point where the idea is sustained and extended at the institutional level. I thought that out of something like that, which grows out of that really could be maybe a set of propositions that we could end the paper with.

GAIL: About our evaluation?

IAN: Yes. So it really won't be so much on the evaluative data per se like the substance of it but the way in which we've used it as a basis for decision making and politicising I suppose. Accountability, advocacy - those sorts of things.

SUE: Just doing this session we've had for nearly an hour has been most useful. It has helped me get an insight into what we have done. There's always that argument about whether we made it up or not, but I think we have sufficient data and analysis of those data as worthwhile evidence to support the conversations we have had and the messages we have derived from these conversations to take to other forums. I think this morning's conversation has reminded me and us of why we've gone along this track and what we've done with all that information.

IAN: You could sort of mount an argument against all of this in terms of subjectivity and whether it's trustworthy or valid, if you wanted to use those terms which I don't really think they're appropriate to use in this sort of approach anyway. I think that there is enough evidence sitting in the institution that now, sort of stands by itself, irrespective of what we say in a conversation like this. It's there!

SUE: I think we've just really engaged in a process of triangulating the data anyway.

IAN: Yes. If you want to use that term. And I think, Sue, there was so much about our approach that gave an air of authenticity and credibility to our work, that we didn't have to think of validations

strategies as another thing to do. In a sense they were built in.

GAIL: The only other comment I'd want to make is about using these stories in social situations which then causes other people to take on

the ideas. The importance of capturing somebody else's understanding to the point, especially if they're in powerful positions to the point where they then see it as being knowledge upon which they'll act is one of the powerful things we've done with sharing the evaluative data in this way.

IAN: That's interesting you say that because I think in this whole project we haven't been content with just writing a report or writing a memo to someone. It's always been followed up hasn't it and now, for example, I thought it was interesting in terms of what you said just a little while ago about the meeting that followed up the memo to the Pro Vice Chancellor (Academic) was actually transcribed. You know, that's really, I think very interesting in that other people are perhaps looking on and seeing that this is a very effective way of operating.

GAIL: And the facts that we have continued to win grants and that we have been successful at School and University levels in gaining additional financial support of significant proportions speak for themselves.

Fourthly, we ask ourselves what lessons could we draw at this stage about politicising evaluative data in these projects. Some observations (and it is important to note that they are only observations!) about politicising evaluative data which seem to emerge from the conversation are as follows: (Note that these observations are made from the conversation and have been agreed to by all those taking part in the conversation.)

The context is one that has both enabling and blocking factors. Such a context does produce feelings of both frustration, impatience and even anger on the one hand and feelings of excitement, enthusiasm and empowerment on the other. It would appear that the Early Childhood members of the team had a strong commitment to a vision that valued dialogical approaches which encouraged a critical analysis of ideas. At the same time, they were adventurous and willing to take the risk of using a newly-available technology, taking advantage of other contextual factors within the University relating to quality and access, etc. They were both clear about their VALUE POSITION and committed to SEIZING WHAT OPPORTUNITIES WERE AVAILABLE. In situational analysis terms, they were gathering evaluative data which they used as a source of empowerment through, for example, applying for and obtaining a large scale grant to support the first project in 1994. Partnership operated at the level of the University providing an opportunity and of the project team seizing that opportunity.

CONFIDENCE was something that grew from an ongoing resolve to value the

preferred pedagogical position and to advocate for ways of supporting staff to implement this position via the technology. In part, confidence was engendered by the presence and contribution of a highly-skilled technical assistant whose continuing employment depended on strong advocacy by team members. Partnerships began to grow in terms of more colleagues working together, and at the same time areas were being identified in which the concept of partnership needed to be established or strengthened beyond the simple provision of opportunity

by those "in power" and the seizing of opportunity by the "rank and file".

Within this emerging confidence, there developed a sense of power in that the evaluative data that were being accumulated could be used to tell a powerful story of the projects' experiences and outcomes. The power was turned into a living dynamic through conversation becoming the significant medium for analysing the data and reporting it as AUTHENTIC FEEDBACK in appropriate forums. For example, the concern to provide "hard nosed" data did not turn into a problem as members of the team exercised their confidence and sense of power in conversing with significant others in passionate and persuasive terms. The feedback was given in the stories "warts and all". Technical glitches, panic, feelings of frustration, insecurity and anger all have a place in the stories. The power came from an amalgam of emotions, both positive and negative. Ethically, we were convinced that we had to tell it as it was. In retrospect, we believe that this approach gave credibility to the stories, and never did we feel disadvantaged by telling it the way it was. In a sense we were bringing several things including our growing confidence that we could have a say and make a difference; that we were beginning to have an impact in shaping policy and practice in relation to the provision of University-wide technical support; and the commitment to bringing valid and trustworthy data to the ongoing discussions.

Feedback, largely through conversation, gave a connectedness to what it was that the team was trying to achieve and what the contextual demands, priorities and possibilities of the University were. ASTUTE COMMUNICATION was significant in politicising the evaluative data and becoming an iterative process in which issues associated with both policy and practice were being addressed. By the third project, the dynamic and interactive messiness of trying something new and attempting to have it accepted and institutionalised was most apparent. Partnerships were developing between the policy, support and academic sections of the University, and again, the willingness to share in a range of forums (particularly outside the University) sent a message to the University that here were projects which were attracting considerable interest and contributing to the University's profile in such areas as quality and equity.

The messy process mentioned above is really a process of CULTURAL CHANGE, and what the three projects together have been is an example of transforming self, others and the context. The process of cultural change may be characterised within the three forms of empowerment used above to give a brief overview of the projects. The process gave us the opportunity to strengthen the developing partnerships through a growing understanding of the patterns of relationships that were not happening, but could, as a means of supporting and sustaining efforts to enhance the quality of teaching and learning in higher degrees.

YOUR BECOMING PART OF THE CONVERSATION

Politicising evaluative data, then, is an empowering process that has the capacity to transform. In engaging in the politicisation of evaluative data, it is worth thinking about the following aspects:

Our value position;

Our willingness to seize opportunities;

Our growing level of confidence;

Our willingness to be passionate and persuasive in taking our authentic feedback to significant others;

Our ability to make connections through the dynamic of astute communication;

Our awareness that we are contributing to a process of cultural change;
and

Our contribution to developing partnerships through understanding the patterns of relationships and the potential for strengthening these relationships as a means of better supporting and sustaining efforts to enhance quality teaching and learning.

Ethical matters, of course, are most important and must be brought into play. Such matters tie in with our value position which is not so much associated with empowerment for the sake of power but with empowerment to implement, critically review and reconstruct that intimate dynamic among our own pedagogical passion, the people with whom we work and our institutional (and broader sectoral and society) contexts.

Your perspectives on the ideas we have developed so far would be appreciated, and we end this paper with an invitation for you to engage in the conversation with us.

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1. THE CONTEXT

Teaching Master's level units in Early Childhood, using audiographics technology

A series of three University Large Scale Teaching/Learning Development Grants has supported the projects over three years

Accountability has always been a consideration via Reference Groups, Interim and Final reports

Evaluation has always been an integral part of the projects, not only

because of the demands of accountability but because of our commitment to evaluation as being inextricably entwined with teaching and learning.

THE FOCUS HERE, THOUGH, IS ON POLITICISING EVALUATIVE DATA - See Prologue.

2. DEFINING EVALUATION

See pages 4 and 5 of the paper.

Evaluative data will always have a political dimension in the sense that the data have the potential to empower the self to gain insights upon which to improve practice; to share positive experiences and outcomes as well as ongoing issues with others about practice (bringing in the possibilities for collaboration); and to collaborate with others in exerting influence in relevant forums as a means of supporting and sustaining transformations of practice (see Smith, 1993).

Thinking of evaluation in the way outlined above, and incorporating notions of politicising evaluative data provided a basis for thinking of the projects as examples of Action Research in emancipatory terms (Kemmis, 1994). In essence the three projects have been ongoing cycles of Action Research and in emancipatory terms, they have been empowering of the participants and transforming of both the practice and the context of the practice.

Our analysis of the data occurred largely through a series of critical

conversations, and it was what we then did with the messages coming out of those conversations was the politicising of the evaluative data. Ethical matters came into play to ensure that the critical conversations and the emerging messages did not compromise what the original data in their raw form were telling us.

3. TELLING THE STORY - A BRIEF OVERVIEW

See pages 5 and 6 of the paper.

Conversation, then, was a way of capturing the stories that are closely associated with the evaluative data; of critiquing the events, contexts

and outcomes of the projects; of (re)constructing the team's position and practice; and of advocating for ways of sustaining momentum, i.e. politicising the evaluative data. Such an approach was seen to be appropriate given our person-oriented views about curriculum (both generally and as it relates to Early Childhood curriculum) and our preferred pedagogy in higher education; and so it was developed loosely within a framework of thinking informed by Gough's ideas about narrative.

4. TELLING THE STORY

See Pages 6 -12 of the paper

Firstly, Gail reflects on the way evaluation has been an ongoing part of the project and what role she feels it has played.

Secondly, we all talk about the emerging issues from the evaluative data and how we have politicised the data

Thirdly, we consider how well have we politicised evaluative data

Fourthly, we ask ourselves what lessons could we draw at this stage about politicising evaluative data in these projects. Some observations (and it is important to note that they are only observations!) about politicising evaluative data which seem to emerge from the conversation are as follows: (Note that these observations are made from the conversation and have been agreed to by all those taking part in the conversation.)

5. SOME OBSERVATIONS TO THINK ABOUT

See pages 13 - 14 of the paper

Our value position;

Our willingness to seize opportunities;

Our growing level of confidence;

Our willingness to be passionate and persuasive in taking our authentic feedback to significant others;

Our ability to make connections through the dynamic of astute communication;

Our awareness that we are contributing to a process of cultural change;
and

Our contribution to developing partnerships through understanding the patterns of relationships and the potential for strengthening these relationships as a means of better supporting and sustaining efforts to enhance quality teaching and learning.

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