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Can you teach an old dog new tricks?

Re-envisioning evaluation practice in higher education

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Student-led evaluation: an unchallenged orthodoxy?

- Student feedback in higher education has ancient roots, but has found renewed contemporary purpose in marketised and massified higher education

- Since mid-1980's, student-led evaluation has evolved as a powerful indicator in conceptions of higher education quality

- Emerged as a formidable mediator for assessing teaching quality, course design and promotional merit

- Is to be institutionalised as a potent basis for future higher education ratings schemas and related performance funding

Source:
http://www.flickr.com/photos/stochasticlyme/2848447047/

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Why subject student evaluation to critical enquiry?

- Is volatile, eliciting disproportionate responses

- It has a powerful and shaping impact on teaching approaches shaping student sense of what the institution sees as valuable and accountable to their opinion

- Negotiates the complex and conflicting ecologies of quality assurance, quality enhancement and pedagogic innovation

- Is subjected to considerable academic scepticism (and even hostility) and is generally held in low regard by students (because of perceived inaction)

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Student based evaluation remains contestable...

- Founded primarily on a narrow quantitative questionnaires and interpretive rating scales

- Is prone to a range of inherent bias such as between core and elective, small and large classes, accessible and difficult curricula, charismatic and non-performative (Schunk, Kember, Gibbs)

- Highly sensitive to context and timing of its administering

- Casts students as capable judges of discriminating teaching and course quality

- Is largely uncontested and of divergent impact on individual academics

# An alternative model of higher education evaluation

- Centred on an action research model - qualitative paradigm

- Provides progressive insights into the what is enhancing and impeding student learning at a program level

- Draws directly on a much broader range of sources of intelligence, such as learning experiences, assessment and professional judgment - reflection

- Designed to encourage more collaborative and open peer dialogue at global (rather than individual) level

- Driven by developmental motive to enact (and further evaluate) changes in teaching, learning activities and assessment

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Standard Evaluation versus Learning Evaluation Model

Approach	Standard evaluation model	Learning Evaluation model
Form of data	Primarily quantitative	Primarily qualitative
Data Sources	Student opinion	Broad range of intelligence
Method	Deficit-focussed	Developmental-continuous
Level	Subject level/ teaching-focussed	Program level/ learning focussed
Teacher role	Largely peripheral	Essential
Use	Remedial action	Program development
Dynamic	Accumulated	Enacted and re-evaluated

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Learning Evaluation: Design fundamentals

- Designed around the specific evolution and aspirations of the program

- Specific design adopted for each program

- Data generated 'formally' (wiki/blog, learning questionnaires, alternative approaches) and 'informally' (experiences, engagement, peer interaction, assessment)

- As data is centred on student learning, all data is shared and open to all stakeholders

- Teachers continue to use individual quantitative surveys

- Research, broad analysis and evaluative process facilitated by academic developer

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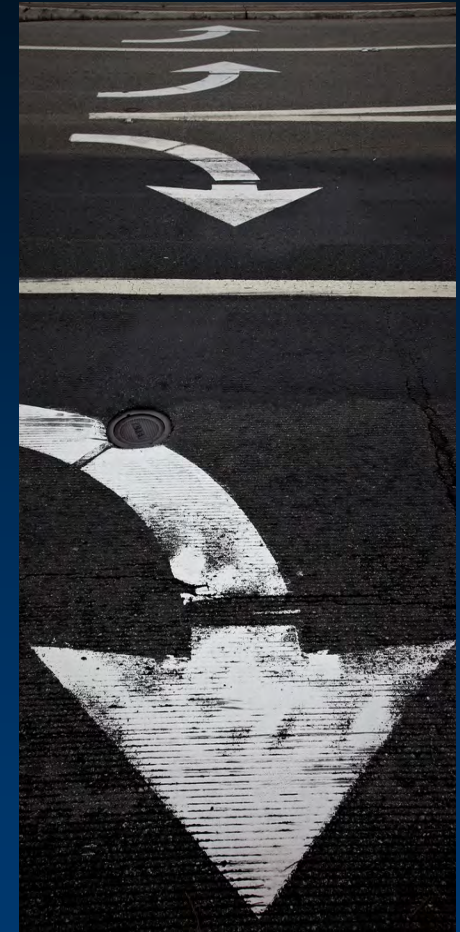
Learning Evaluation Model

Stage One: Assessing what to evaluate identifying the areas that would be most usefully evaluated in the upcoming program

Stage Two: Ongoing evaluation and peer dialogue – continuous evaluation and dialogue

Stage Three: Student evaluation of learning – assessing student experience of learning via qualitative online questionnaire

Stage Four: Analysis of evaluative outcomes using thematic coding including the preparation of a comprehensive program (or sub-program evaluation report)

Stage Five: Collaborative identification of future approaches and strategies for integration, identification of professional development

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Pilot: Case Study One - Evaluating a maturing postgraduate program (delivered in a blended mode)

- Engaged 24 teachers and 42 students across four subjects in Graduate Certificate program

- Key research questions defined in preliminary workshop around learning enablers, impediments, activities, assessment, feedback and general views

- Teachers formally contributed via Mahara based blog (posts n=36) and students via learning questionnaires (n=112)

- Data thematically coded and evaluation report produced (around 4000 words) highlighting key outcomes and program/course development issues to consider in workshop

- Two day workshop considered this formal data and informal professional reflections and benchmarked alternatives

- Twelve substantial changes identified to be enacted , four to be progressed in other forums

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Pilot: Case Study Two - Evaluating a new postgraduate simulated professional practice program

- Engaged 16 teachers and approximately 90 students across six subjects in a professional practice element of professional studies

- As the program was new and involved radical redesign, key research questions were defined as part of the implementation phase. Centred on learning enablers, impediments, simulated activities, technology and assessment

- Teachers formally contributed via weekly forums and students via learning questionnaires and semi structured interviews (n=129)

- Data thematically coded evaluation report produced (around 5000 words) and related tag cloud highlighting key outcomes and program/course development issues to consider

- One day workshop considered this formal data and informal professional reflections and benchmarked alternatives

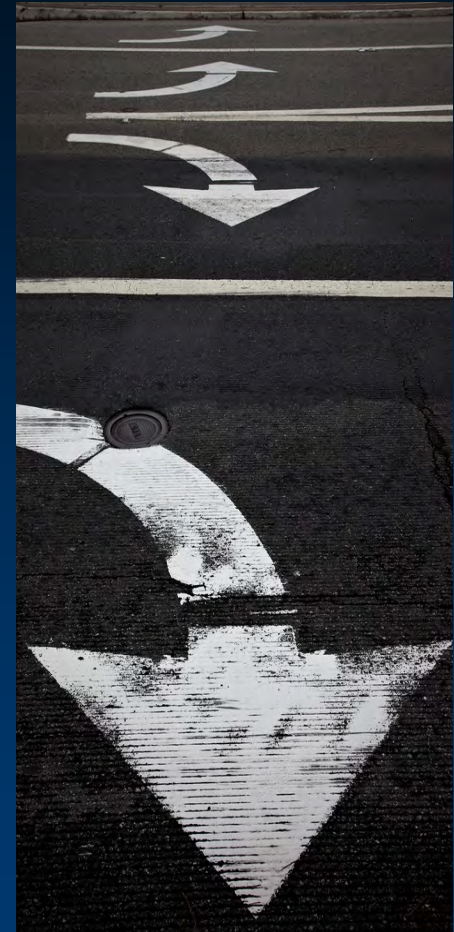- Eighteen substantial changes identified to be enacted , range of others to be progressed in other forums

Key Outcomes in pilots….

- **Stronger student engagement** than staff engagement in data collection phase

- Vast majority of data orientated to **program level evaluation**

- Generally **high level of teacher engagement** in analysis and deliberation phase

- Initial analysis suggests **support for the model**, noting more productive focus, action orientation, professional regard, collaborative dialogue and personal developmental impact

- **Limitations:** resources to facilitate, levels of ongoing data, institutional desire for the quantitative and impossibility of many productive enhancement options

Summary

- More complex learning environments demand more complex forms of evaluation

- The object of student evaluation needs to be the effectiveness of student learning activity

- Student opinion is an important source of insight about their own learning, however this needs to be actively mediated and understood in professional debate

- More collaborative forms of professional peer engagement and benchmarked evaluation of collective practice offer the prospect of expansive and sustainable development

Source: http://www.flickr.com/photos/martintaylor/3972031826