Editorial

The Nature and Value of Professional Inquiry

This 'assessment and feedback' special issue of the Practitioner Research in Higher Education (PRHE) journal presents several 'professional inquiry' type projects. In using the term 'professional inquiry' I generally mean a process with three broad steps, first university teachers developing a research question, second generating and analysing data, and third, reporting their findings and taking action (Boyd & White, 2018). Professional inquiry provides a powerful alternative to the kind of pragmatic, but severely limited, evaluation methods often used top-down in managerial contexts in higher education, for example relying on student evaluative feedback surveys and simplistic analysis of grades. Deciding what and how to teach requires of teachers a level of educational research literacy, but that involves professional judgment informed by practical experience, tacit and situated knowledge as well as engagement with relevant literature (Boyd, 2021). A university teacher must consider different sources of knowledge, understand their modes of production, and their value in decision-making, and so arguably must develop 'epistemic insight' (Heikkilä and Hermansen, 2024).

The concept and process of professional inquiry has been developed for many years as part of schoolteacher initial education and professional development. It often borrows, in terms of design, ethics, and methods, from practitioner research and educational action research approaches (Baumfield, Hall and Wall, 2017). Although a professional inquiry may often begin with a nagging issue, something that is concerning a teacher or even better a teaching team, referred to as a 'stone in your shoe' (Baumfield, Hall and Wall 2015), it is important that it is developed into a practicable research question. This process requires critical engagement with teachers' practical wisdom and local ways of working as well as with relevant literature, and an accessible traditional education research guide is useful (For example: Punch and Oancea, 2018). Ideally professional inquiry is collaborative and owned by the teaching team. I would argue that even when the initial issue is raised by managers or even an external review, the process of developing the research question can allow the teaching team to come to own the project. It is important to appreciate the values-based nature of education and developing a research question that involves your professional values, especially those related to social justice, will increase the motivation of teacher researchers and the power of the study (Glenn et al., 2023). It is worth noting that the first paper in this special issue on assessment and feedback uses an 'off the peg' design for professional inquiry, while the others develop their own professional inquiry design.

In their project Julia Rodriguez Garcia, Anna Green and Tom Mariner initially used the Transforming the Experience of Students through Assessment (TESTA) methodology to identify significant issues before moving strongly towards programme focused assessment. TESTA provides an off the peg design for a professional inquiry, it is interesting to see how long it has lasted and how attractive and perhaps reassuring it seems to managers and teaching teams as a package.

The definition and meaning of 'authentic assessment' is somewhat contested and is interpreted differently across subject disciplines and professional fields but usually has some element of 'real world' and some connection to employability. In the Humanities Ruth Larsen, Robin Sims and Ian Whitehead investigate the impact of English and History undergraduate students preparing presentations for a public conference as an example of authentic assessment and claim to find transformative outcomes.

Collaborative grading of student work and then debating the grade, which may occur in teaching team workshops or as part of second marking and moderation, is time-consuming and often difficult to arrange in terms of time and place. As an alternative, Tom Mayer, evaluates the implementation of a 'self-access, automatic package of training materials that can be flexibly deployed via a learning management system'. The terms he uses such as 'rationalising subjectivity' and 'marker standardisation' stand in stark contrast to alternatives such as 'developing a shared sense of academic standards' and perhaps hint at a dystopian future.

Working with first year undergraduate Social Care students in Ireland, Alison Merrotsy, William Carey and Tom O'Mahony investigate student experiences of giving and receiving peer feedback. An interesting finding was that students gained confidence in their own ability to give useful feedback but lost considerable confidence in the ability of other students to provide it.

In an evaluation of introducing a 'feedback loop' activity with language students across four programmes, Ana Maria Ducasse; Kathryn Hill; Kerry Mullan, Jing Qi, Jindan Ni, Maki Yoshida and Maya Fujioka found positive impact in terms of learner agency but also unexpected differences in implementation and outcomes.

By developing and evaluating a tool that enables students to learn through 'collaborative annotation' of course materials, Mark P. McCormack, Melat Tecle and John G. Keating gained confidence in the value of the approach. Their ambition is to pursue further development of technology to enhance student learning.

Investigating the perceptions of students Martyn Quigley and Emma Whitt consider the 'perfect' assessment and feedback and generated data in focus groups to which they applied thematic analysis. Their findings provide some insight into student perspectives.

In a study of assessment related experiences of first year undergraduate students in Education Sciences based in Switzerland, Céline Girardet considers how a continuous assessment approach influences anxiety. By continuous assessment she means assessment '…designed to integrate diverse interrelated tasks that serve both formative and summative assessment purposes' but perhaps significantly this is influenced by assessment for learning and so includes self and peer assessment activities. The findings offer strategies to reduce unnecessary anxiety whilst maintaining appropriate tension to promote development of self-regulated learning.

Arguably much informal verbal feedback to students is ignored or at least under-researched because it takes place in small group discussions. Based on a critical review of relevant literature through the lens of feedback, Dai Hounsell considers the potential impact of such verbal feedback to students and, because it takes place within a small group, its possibilities for vicarious learning.

With increasing interest in compassionate pedagogy in higher education, Samantha Wilkinson provides a useful critical reflection on her provision of audio feedback to students. She argues that making the emotional labour involved more visible has significant benefits and moves audio feedback beyond being merely another administrative task.

Based in the challenging context of higher education in South Africa, Pryah Mahabeer investigates inclusive pedagogical and assessment practices for visually impaired students. Dr Mahabeer uses a powerful narrative case study, of a student teacher and her tutor, to complement a thorough and critical review of relevant literature. This significant paper tackles an important social justice issue and proposes practical recommendations for universities to make a shift from deficit-based to an asset-based approach.

Working in Switzerland, Céline Girardet considers the formulation of peer feedback with a focus on its affective impact. Her analysis emphasises the need to train students to provide positive suggestions to their peers on how to improve the work.

The collection of professional inquiries in this special issue demonstrate the potential of a professional inquiry approach to enhancement of teaching, learning and assessment in higher education. Adopting such an approach in a meaningful and effective way requires a confident, collaborative, cultural, instructional leadership approach by institutional managers and academic developers.

References

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