Case study 5: Developing data-focused self-evaluation at departmental level in the UK educational system

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Summary of the case study

The New Relationship with Schools requires all UK schools to engage in self-assessment. NALA (National Association of Language Advisers) is developing an online tool kit for use in MFL departments. The tool kit is intended for members of the association to use in in-service training, support and advice. The open-ended design allows colleagues to see how best to fit their work to teachers' perceived needs in identifying quality issues, interpreting evidence and deciding the best action to take. By starting with practical, "hands-on" approaches, the aim is to encourage further development in reflective professionalism through self-evaluation at departmental level.

Description of context

Teams of Modern Foreign Language (MFL) teachers in UK secondary schools work in a professional context where outcomes from exams and tests are used nationally and politically to compare schools. Every "school improvement plan" has to focus on their relative performance in terms of "standards of attainment" and identify improvements. Changes in national inspection require school self-evaluation to relate its improvement activity to its impact on results. MFL departments are now facing the challenge of developing their own self-evaluation techniques and procedures to identify and prioritise strategic change management.

What we needed to do and why we did it

Members of NALA work with MFL teachers at various levels. Most members are experienced in inspection-related and local authority monitoring at whole-school level. In the changing context of school self-evaluation, NALA wanted to support its members in their work on self-evaluation at departmental and classroom level.

Main purpose (what we wanted to achieve)

NALA asked its working group to design a tool kit approach mainly for members to adapt to the perceived needs of specific groups of teachers in in-service training, in-school advice and ongoing support.

Action taken (stages and procedures)

Defining the approach
We wanted to make our approach as "developmental" as possible. Principles of "reflective practice" informed our initial outline. This tended to involve a good deal of "clarification" before we felt able to pin down the practical "hands-on" design of a tool kit we knew our members and their colleagues would be able to adapt to their own purposes. We chose the title "Let us show you how good they are".

Developing the framework
This core focus on learners' progress and achievement has remained central throughout our development work. This puts the learners centre-stage, rather than data and statistics. All the many facets and aspects of our work as language teachers relate entirely to the learners' experience and the benefit they derive, not simply end results. An experimental approach led to the "key questions" design to the tool kit we are developing. Flexibility means that the whole tool kit can be accessed as appropriate to different circumstances and varying experience in self-evaluation.

Designing the tool kit as an online resource
Developed very much with flexibility of access and ease of application in mind, the online framework focuses on what is vital (a "QuickStart" self-evaluation) as a lead into more in-depth analysis led by the key questions: what counts (using data); what works (appraising provision); what matters (taking stakeholders' views into account); what action (prioritising action for effective change); and what impact (evaluating the effects of action taken)? To view the tool kit in its latest state of development, go to www.practicalinclusion.org.uk/nala.

Developing and uploading "tools"
Developing and uploading "tools" develops with lessons learned, especially the need to focus on what is specific to languages learning, rather than generic to any subject. To date, we have the combined experience of analysing results and the monitoring from members working in local authorities. As our work progresses and piloting gets under way, we will be looking to develop tools relating to different aspects of provision, learners' experience and stakeholders' views to inform our strategies both to train, advise and support as well as to develop quality provision and practice in schools.

Developing self-evaluation experience

NALA exists to draw together and combine the professional expertise of its members. This works through national and regional networks, as well as through the members only website. Developing self-evaluation experience has to find its place alongside many other competing pressures on both members in NALA and teachers/MFL subject co-ordinators in schools. Piloting and developmental work will continue, new tools will be tried out and our combined self-evaluation experience will grow. Through the online tool kit, we trust that members will be able to share and learn, contributing to the quality of languages learning in our schools.

Main outcomes

■ An accessible, flexible and developmental framework in tool kit form.

■ A practical and grounded approach to self-evaluation through key questions.

■ The basis for updating and developing the tool kit as experience grows.

Main conclusions

■ It is vital to clarify a working and grounded approach for "hands-on" practical approaches to self-evaluation if colleagues, nervous of evaluation, can confidently build skills.

■ Flexibility of access and application are fundamental to developing effective self-evaluation approaches to match different circumstances and varying experience.

■ We recognise that we have yet to see how well proactive, developmental approaches to self-evaluation can be developed in our highly performative context.

■ Developing and trialling tools specifically matched to the intrinsic issues facing languages teaching and learning relies on combined professional experience and critical judgment.