7 : MONITORING AND EVALUATION

The term "evaluation" can have three different meanings for us. First, it may refer to evaluating individual students and so deciding whether they should pass or fail part or all of their course. Second, it may refer to the process of checking how well a programme is working and seeking information which will enable us to improve it. This is sometimes referred to as formative evaluation where the intention is to inform the programme managers. Third, in contrast, summative evaluation refers to a summing up, often carried out at the end of a programme or after it has worked through one of its stages. The aim of summative evaluation is to answer broad questions about its success and failure.

Naturally all three kinds of evaluation overlap. The success or failure of individual students has a bearing on both formative and summative evaluation; the measures we use to inform ourselves about a programme as it is going along can be of help to those doing summative evaluation at the end. For all three kinds we need to keep in mind the key question: how do our trainees perform in their own classrooms?

For all three kinds of evaluation we need, too, to ask how they should be carried out and who should do them.

Assessment of students

There is no essential difference between assessing students who are following a course at a distance and those who are following a similar course within a college. In teacher education we are, for either group, often concerned both with our students'

knowledge of their subject matter and with their
performance as classroom teachers. The former is
easier to measure than the latter. There are
particular difficulties for us if we cannot visit our
trainees in their classrooms in order to supervise
their classroom work and development. But these
problems are no more severe for us than for any
institution whose students go out to work in widely
scattered schools.

Where we are concerned with students' knowledge and
understanding, we may even be at an advantage if we
teach them through correspondence courses, for such
courses lead to the production of a lot of written
material by students; as we saw, distance-teaching
institutions usually maintain detailed records so that
we can see how well students perform on their written
work. The teacher-training staff in Swaziland were
sufficiently convinced of the value of this kind of
assessment that they used it rather than having a
formal end-of-course examination. "Certificates are
awarded at the end of the course by recommendation to
the Ministry of Education, not by examinations. The
reasons for this are that, after three in-college
courses, the grading of 120 worksheets, and perhaps 7
or 8 visits to the teacher at his or her place of work,
the staff of the project really know their students...
In any case who believes that ability to pass an
examination makes a good, devoted teacher?"* (The
disadvantage of this approach is that it makes
comparison with traditional training more difficult:
the Swaziland teachers received only the Primary
Teachers' Lower Certificate while full-time students
were able to get a higher qualification.)

In Tanzania, on the other hand, students came together
for a six-week residential course at the end of their
training programme. During this course they took
written examinations and had their teaching practice
assessed in schools nearby.

Thus, in our first sense of the word, evaluation is an
activity carried out by the staff of a college using

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* C H Green (no date) The story of the in-service
teacher training project of Swaziland (mimeo)

distance education in exactly the same way as the staff of any other college of education.

Assessing the project

In developing a distance-teaching project we need to ask a series of questions about our audience, our methods, and the materials we use to teach students. If the project is large enough, there are merits in setting up a separate evaluation unit in order to carry out this kind of preliminary research. Even quite small institutions, like the Botswana Extension College or the Lesotho Distance Teaching Centre, found that it was worth having a separate evaluation unit to inform the colleges about their courses and their methods of working. A small group of people, charged with the job of evaluation, can develop skills and can maintain a balance between involvement and detachment which will lend weight to their findings. A research or evaluation section of this kind usually has one or two research workers with a background in the social sciences together with a small number of field workers who can make enquiries in the field, administer questionnaires, and carry out tests on materials or student reactions to them. If you cannot establish a unit like that within your own organisation, then similar tasks will fall to the staff who are working on the project. In either case the job of evaluation is a necessary one; unless we have some way of assessing how good our training is, then we may work ineffectively, waste our trainees' time, and supply the schools with teachers who cannot do their job.

The first job that will fall to research staff, or educational staff with a responsibility for research, is at the planning stage; it is to look at the nature of the audience for distance teaching and learn what we can about their background knowledge and about difficulties they will face in learning. Many projects start with a survey of potential students' knowledge, attitudes and practices. If we are training teachers, they are often a more clearly defined group of students than many others and much of this information may be available from ministry of education reports and statistics. It will still probably be of value to us if we can spend some time interviewing students and learning more about their approach to education at the outset.

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As we saw in Chapter 3, the next main research job comes when we begin to prepare teaching materials. A job for research workers is to try out samples of the materials in order to see whether people understand them. Where courses are illustrated, it is also important to check that illustrations convey the message which the authors intended. If at all possible, we should test the materials with groups of people who are very similar to our eventual target audience. This may not be possible and we may need to fall back on some alternative. We may be able to test materials in a school, or in an existing college, even though we know that the people attending these institutions are slightly different from our own eventual audience. And, when we are testing readability, we can do some tests for ourselves without using a group of potential students. Appendix 3 discusses readability tests in more detail.

As soon as our courses are launched, it is much easier to get information about how well they are working. Some of this information will, as we saw in Chapter 2, flow in to us automatically so that our monitoring can be based on our own records. Marks awarded, and a note of student reactions, will tell us about lessons which are particularly easy or particularly difficult or confusing. If we ask students to tell us how long they spent on a particular lesson and record this information with their marks, we will have a further check on those which are too difficult or too easy. Similarly, as students work their way through to the end of a year or the end of a course, we can feed in results of any assessment made of students and use that information to help evaluate the materials which they studied.

In monitoring our work, we need to consider the whole range of methods that we use and not merely the quality of the materials. It is worth assessing the use made by students of all the elements in our teaching programme – seminars, meetings with other students, radio, short courses, as well as print – in order to see what improvements we can make to them. And, in this assessment, we should consider not only the separate components of the course but also its impact on classroom teaching. A consistent programme of monitoring, whether carried out by a separate research

unit or by the educational staff of the college generally, should yield rich benefits for the students and for the staff themselves.

Summative evaluation

It is more difficult to sum up the effect of a programme than to discover how it is working and improve it. If we limit ourselves to questions about the numbers of students who have passed through our system, and the qualifications awarded to them, then we cannot convince the sceptic who sees distance teaching as a poor substitute for face-to-face education, or temper the enthusiasm of reformers who overstate their case. But if we want to assess trainees performance in the schools, then we are forced to ask more difficult though more important research questions. In particular we need, as we saw, to ask about trainees' classroom work: there is a job to be done here using the techniques for assessing teacher behaviour in the classroom which have been developed for conventional education.

There is one further difficulty in comparing distance teaching with orthodox programmes of teacher education. In order to make firm statements about the comparative value of a distance teaching programme and an orthodox one, we need to compare our students with a similar group who have trained in the orthodox way. And, where we have groups of students following different kinds of courses, the groups are often different in other ways, such as the age and experience of the trainees. These difficulties mean that, in practice most summative evaluations of distance teaching programmes for teachers have stopped short at looking at examination results. The absence of research on trainees' classroom activity restricts our knowledge about the effectiveness of distance education for teacher training. And so, while summative evaluation which goes beyond looking at examination results is difficult, it remains important, whether done by a research section or by the educational staff of the institution.

There may be conflicting demands for formative and summative evaluation from those working on research. If there are, then the pressures will be to concentrate

on the formative in order to improve a programme as it is running. There may be a role here for a separate group of researchers or evaluators. If an external group of research workers are to play a part in helping to develop our work, then summative evaluation is the most appropriate role for them.

Summary

1. We can distinguish between evaluating individual students, formative evaluation which helps shape our programme and summative evaluation which assesses its results.

2. The assessment of students is similar to assessment in a conventional college of education.

3. To gain information on students, on teaching methods and on materials there are advantages in setting up a small research or evaluation unit.

4. Key questions for researchers, evaluators or academic staff concern:

   4.1 whether the trainees teach well as a result of following their courses;

   4.2 students and their background;

   4.3 the probable effectiveness of teaching materials as they are being written;

   4.4 the assessment of materials as they are used;

   4.5 assessment of teaching methods.

5. Summative evaluation is important, difficult, seldom done and potentially something with which an outside agency could help.