Towards a Model for the Self-evaluation of Teaching and Learning in Schools: A Pilot Study in Design and Technology

Marshall Hughes
B.Ed, MA

Sha Tin College, Hong Kong

Abstract
Sha Tin College received a full OFSTED Inspection in November 1995. Whilst the institution was found to be 'an outstandingly successful school',[1] one of the key recommendations of the report was to strengthen the process for monitoring and evaluation 'by systematically reviewing provision and performance within subject departments.'[2] In an attempt to strengthen the school's culture of self-review and improvement, a model for the internal evaluation of teaching and learning was developed and trialed in the department of design and technology.

The evolution of the adopted model

When the question of self-evaluation was first raised and discussed at a full staff meeting the proposed model was still tentative; it was thought that each department would identify its own focus from the Teaching and Learning Policy and the Senior Management Team would help to monitor and evaluate the area(s) chosen through classroom observation and attendance at departmental meetings.

'Indicators of Excellence' (i.e. success criteria) would be identified and then 'Observable Features' (empirical evidence) would be established. The Senior Management Team would work with departments to decide on ways of gathering evaluative evidence.

At this meeting, the staff actually suggested that a common focus should be set by the Senior Management Team for the whole school, thus standardising the process and giving it a slightly 'harder edge'. It was also felt that such an approach might be more manageable and less unwieldy. At a subsequent Curriculum Committee meeting the single focus of 'Differentiation' was agreed upon because this was seen as central to good teaching and learning. Within this general focus, departments would have flexibility to look at different aspects of the school's differentiation policy. From all of the above discussion, the final form of the model emerged.

Aim

The aim is 'to provide a clear diagnosis of how teaching and learning can be more effective. Without this diagnosis, 'school improvement', 'raising standards', 'target setting' and 'pursuing excellence' are simply exhortations. they reflect aspirations but do not specify what should be done, and how.'[3]

Principles

The process should be:

- constructive
- positive
- open and transparent
- a learning process for all.

It should NOT be:

- critical
- threatening
- intimidating.

The process also differs from the OFSTED model in that it is rooted in the school's specific aims and policies, as opposed to an externally generated checklist of criteria.

The process

STEP 1. Senior Management Team met with design and technology department to decide on Indicators of Excellence, Observable Features and the years or key stages to be evaluated. (*see Figure 1*).

STEP 2. Head of Department and Senior Management Team 'link' person met to discuss agreed data collection methods. (*see below*)

STEP 3. Staff agreed on the classes to be observed over a two-week period. (Additional observations can be requested if lessons are felt to be atypical)

STEP 4. Guidelines for questioning students (if appropriate) were agreed and each teacher nominated two students from each class for interview by the Senior Management Team.

STEP 5. Data Collection
Twenty Key Stage 3 lessons were observed by individuals from the Senior Managment Team, with each of the five participating teachers being seen for two doubles. Staff insisted that the observers were 'hands on' and actually got involved with the children. The lessons covered classes in Years 7, 8 and 9. The Observable Features were sought but not numerically 'logged'. Six students from each year group were interviewed either during or after the lessons. Their design folders were viewed and they were asked the following questions.

Observable Features 1. Students tackle tasks confidently and independently

1. Are you usually clear about the purpose of the lesson?
2. Do you usually feel confident enough to work without direct supervision once a task has been demonstrated?

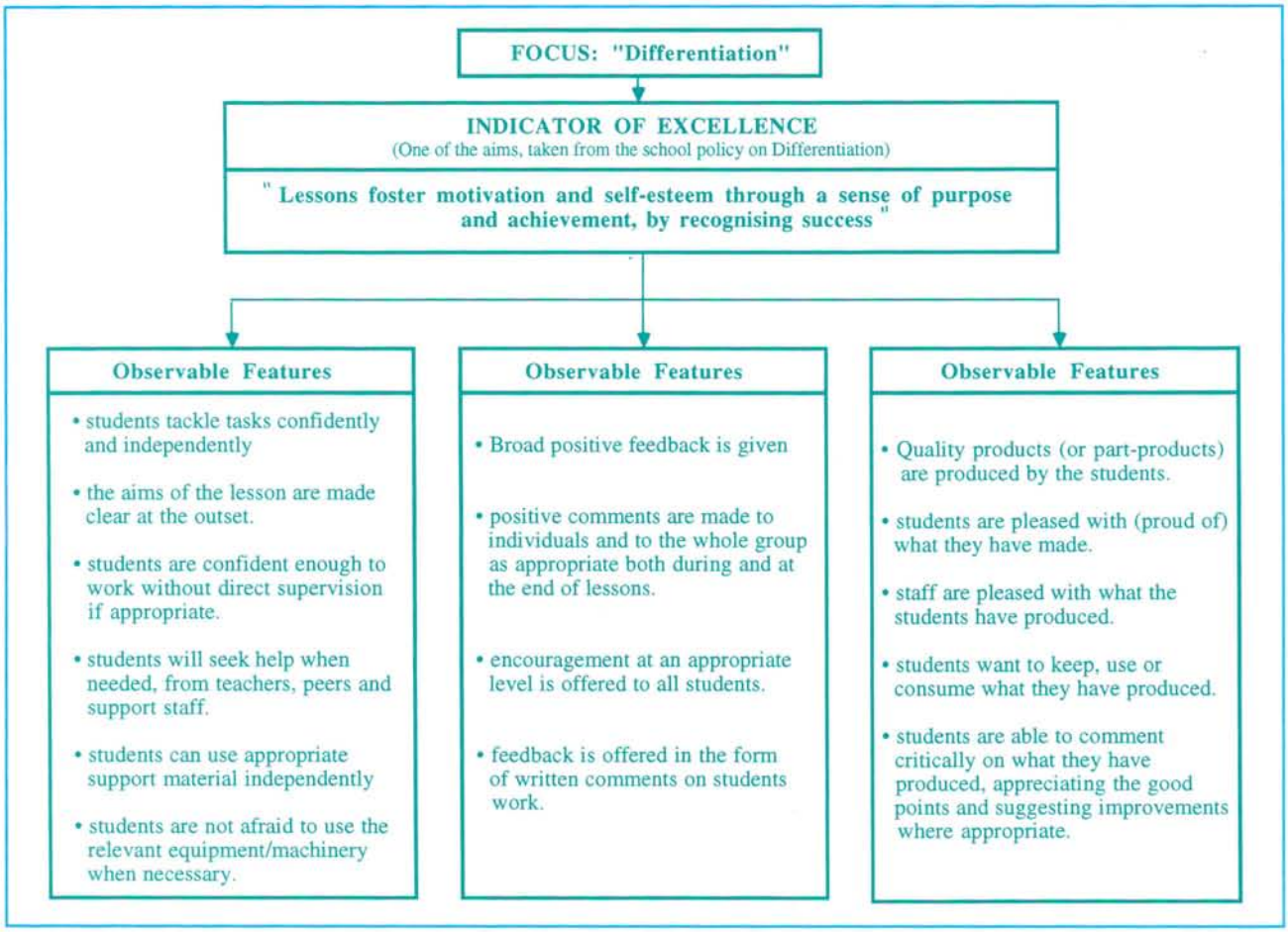

Figure 1

3. Are you happy to get help if you need it from:
   - your teacher?
   - your friend?
   - a technician?
4. If you need any materials, are you happy to get them and use them on your own, if you know where/how?
5. Are you happy to use equipment and machinery when you need to, assuming instruction has been given?

Observable Feature 2. Broad positive feedback is given

1. In what ways does your teacher encourage you?

Observable Feature 3. Quality products (or part products) are produced by the students

1. Are you pleased with/proud of what you have made?
2. What are the good points about what you have made?
3. Is there anything you would like to do to improve it?
4. Do you usually want to keep/use/eat what you have produced?

STEP 6. Feedback
Brief oral feedback was given to the teacher, immediately after every lesson. A draft written report was given to the head of department within one week of the final observation. No teachers were mentioned by name.

The report was amended through negotiation then circulated to staff for discussion at an extraordinary departmental meeting to:

- discuss findings
- draw up targets for the next two years
- provide SMT with feedback on the process.

Outcome

The final report was a two page document with appendices. It contained a four point summary which commented very positively on quality of lessons, relationships, student response and learning environment. The final section contained five recommendations for follow-up and improvement and these are being built into the department's Development

Plan to be addressed over the next two year cycle.

The Senior Management Team found the experience to be an enlightening and very rewarding one; the Principal commented later that the exercise had reinforced in the minds of the Senior Management Team 'the central place of the subject in the core curriculum'.

Far from being intimidated by the scheme, the teachers actually welcomed the opportunity for the Senior Management Team to become involved in the lessons and to witness first hand the skills, energy and commitment required to deliver design and technology. There was unanimous agreement that the pilot had been as instructive, but far less stressful than an external inspection. Staff were also pleased that many of the Observable Features were very subject specific. This opportunity to 'customise' the process will also apply to other departments who undergo evaluation. The students clearly enjoyed having the Senior Management Team working with them and those who were interviewed spoke honestly and openly.

Points for further consideration

The scope of the pilot study was deliberately restricted so as to be manageable. In the light of our experiences it was felt that one or two additional Indicators of Excellence (with the resulting Observable Features) could have been covered by the process.

In the course of conversation with the students, discussion inevitably strayed outside the defined parameters of the study. The Senior Management Team must be aware of this and ensure that the report stays strictly within the established framework.

Consideration needs to be given as to how serious or highly sensitive matters will be dealt with if these emerge during an observation.

The presence of a Senior Management Team observer in a busy, dynamic design and technology class was not found to be at all intrusive. However, this may not be the case in a more static classroom setting and observation may therefore need to be handled differently.

Conclusion

The pilot study was sufficiently successful for the school to extend the scheme to all other departments over a two year rolling programme, at which point the scheme itself will be re-evaluated.

Within the limited scope of the study, our stated aim 'to provide a clear diagnosis of how teaching and learning can be more effective' was met. OFSTED sees internal and external evaluation as complementary and recommends that 'school self-evaluation should be conducted annually in the interval between inspections.'[4] However, in international schools overseas, OFSTED inspection is an expensive and logistically difficult exercise. It may well be that for such schools, a refined model of self-inspection with a more limited component of external validation is a better approach to pursue. Clearly, more research needs to be done in this area. The pilot was certainly felt to be a much less stressful, more effective and positive approach than the deficit model of snapshot external inspections every five or six years.

References

1. English Schools Foundation (1996) Ofsted Inspection Report: Sha Tin College, page 5. Inspection Services Unit, Manchester Metropolitan University.

2. English Schools Foundation (1996) Ofsted Inspection Report: Sha Tin College, page 7. Inspection Services Unit, Manchester Metropolitan University.

3. Office for Standards in Education (1998) School Evaluation Matters, page 5, para.11

4. Office for Standards in Education (1998) School Evaluation Matters, page 7, para.16

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Ruth Collins, Tracey Cowell and David Cottam for their work on the pilot and its documentation, much of which was helpful in the preparation of this paper.