Evaluation as inquiry into the value of everything: aims/content as well as all methods (teaching method and assessment method)

By the "value" of everything we refer not merely to its effectiveness (did it work as we hoped?) or its efficiency (did it work as well as other ways would?) or its economics (did it work affordably and without serious avoidable wastage?) but also to its intrinsic value- did it work at a standard or quality that we are prepared to accept and be proud of?

The notion of evaluation in education necessarily invokes the question of standards- standards for aims and content, standards for teaching and standards for assessment. It demands that we ask such questions as "Was this a proper and worthwhile aim to have?" "How was this content justified?" "Is this a kind of teaching and assessment that can qualify as excellent and, if so, by what - and whose-standsards?"

Therefore evaluation, by definition, logically connects with everything that comprises teaching and learning. That much is uncontentious and part of conventional evaluation ideology.

What more need be said from a student learning perspective?

More possibly can be said, and it relates to a particular understanding of what "good teaching" comprises. Ramsden (p.217) says "good teachers are always evaluating themselves". That carries the echo of an argument we have previously made with regards to Teaching Method and Assessment Method - the argument for an integral view. Integral to a notion of what it means to be a good teacher, Ramsden is saying, is that s/he will be more or less constantly evaluating themselves.

This "Evaluation", if conceived (as it often is) as an external process applied in order to "judge" teaching and teachers is- even in that bureaucratic and managerial manifestation - an attempt to do from
the outside the very thing that good teachers are doing and how, every day they teach from the inside.

Ramsden goes further, and argues (p.219) that "the lessons learned about effective teaching from an examination of how students perceive it should be applied to the process of evaluating and improving instruction….there is an exact parallel between (the satisfactory methods widely used for) measuring teaching quality and unsatisfactory ways of assessing students.

The student learning perspective calls on us to take into account how students perceive our intentions as teachers and assessors; it calls on evaluators to take into account how teachers perceive the institution's intentions towards them in evaluation processes. It urges us in assessing students to use methods that will contribute to better student learning, which is far more valuable than reliable and accurate grades and marks. It likewise urges us in evaluating teaching to use methods that will contribute to the actual development of teaching, which is far more significant than merely collecting valid and accurate data about staff performances.

### Aim 2

1- hours

- Examine how your own views of learning might inform the approach you will take to the development of evaluation methods
- Broaden your familiarity with the higher education literature regarding the development of evaluation methods

### Topic #2.1

Whilst it is no doubt possible, by drawing a very long bow, to take the several previously discussed historical theories of learning and connect them in turn with one's approaches to evaluation of teaching, in this writer's view the less tedious and more directly productive approach would be to use the challenge as opportunity to add to the earlier listing of learning theories.

Such a stance directly implies that something might have been missing from that list and the missing theory of learning is that which would deal with how professionals learn from practice. A theory of that kind might, with not too much trouble, be subsumed under Experiential Learning theory; or possibly also under Adult Learning, which we mentioned under Humanistic Theories. It might on the other hand deserve recognition in its own right, and that is what we shall do here.

The most influential statement of this theory is that of the late Donald Schö, in *The Reflective Practitioner* (1983; Basic Books). A very short guide to this is given below.

### Study

**How Professionals Learn from Practice**

[quotations are from *The Reflective Practitioner*]

"...both ordinary people and professional practitioners often think about what they are doing, sometimes even while doing it. Stimulated by surprise, they turn thought back onto action and on the knowing which is implicit in action. They may ask themselves for example, "What features do I notice when I recognise this thing? What are the criteria by which I make this judgement? What procedures am I enacting when I perform this skill? How am I framing the problem that I am trying to solve?" Usually reflection on knowing-in-action goes together with reflection on the stuff at hand….it is this entire process of reflection-in-action which is central to the "art" by which practitioners sometimes deal with situations of uncertainty, instability, uniqueness and value-conflict….

…professional specialisation can have negative effects. In the individual, a high degree of specialisation can lead to a parochial narrowness of vision…as a practice becomes more repetitive and routine, and as knowing-in-practice becomes increasingly tacit and spontaneous, the practitioner may miss important opportunities to think about what he is doing. He may find that …he is drawn into patterns of error which he cannot correct. And if he learns, as often happens, to be selectively inattentive to phenomena that do not fit the categories of his knowing-in-action, then he may suffer from boredom or "burn-out" and afflict his clients with the consequences of his narrowness and rigidity….
A practitioners do reflect on practice while they are in the midst of it. Here they reflect-in-action…Reflection -in-action….is central to the art through which practitioners sometimes cope with the troublesome "divergent" situations of practice.

When the phenomenon at hand eludes the ordinary categories of knowledge-in-practice, presenting itself as unique or unstable, the practitioner may surface and criticise his initial understanding of the phenomenon, construct a new description of it, and test the new description by an on-the-spot experiment. Sometimes he arrives at a new theory of the phenomenon by articulating a feeling he has about it…

When he is confronted by demands that seem incompatible or inconsistent, he may respond by reflecting on the appreciations which he and others have brought to the situation. Conscious of a dilemma, he may attribute it to the way in which he has set his problem, or even to the way he has framed his role. He may then find a way of integrating, or choosing among, the values at stake in the situation…

When someone reflects-in-action, he becomes a researcher in the practice context. He is not dependent on the categories of established theory and technique, but constructs a new theory of the unique case. His inquiry is not limited to a deliberation about means which depend on a prior agreement about ends. He does not keep means and ends separate, but defines them interactively as he frames a problematic situation. He does not separate thinking from doing, ratiocinating his way to a decision which he must later convert into action. Because his experimenting is a kind of action, implementation is built into his inquiry. This reflection-in-action can proceed, even in situations of uncertainty or uniqueness, because it is not bound by the dichotomies of Technical Rationality.

Although reflection-in-action is an extraordinary process, it is not a rare event. Indeed for some reflective practitioners it is the core of practice…. (However) Many practitioners, locked into a view of themselves as technical experts, find nothing in the world of practice to occasion reflection. They have become too skilful at techniques of selective inattention, junk categories, and situational control, techniques which they use to preserve the constancy of their knowledge-in-practice. For them, uncertainty is a threat’ its admission is a sign or weakness. Others, more inclined towards and adept at reflection-in-action, nevertheless feel profoundly uneasy because they cannot say what they know how to do, cannot justify its quality or rigour. For these reasons, the study of reflection-in-action is critically important”.

(pp 50-69, selections only)

Reading these words of Donald Schö, one might well ask whether he may be speaking about some important aspects of phenomenon Ramsden has in mind when he says "good teachers are always evaluating themselves". That may indeed be the case, if we take Schö's criticisms of the totally "Technical Rational" practitioner who operates from well-grounded rules, for whom uncertainty is a threat, who suffers from boredom and "burn-out" and who inflicts his or her own narrowness and rigidity on their clients.

Evaluation of teaching, viewed in this way as reflective practice, is the practice of the art of thinking about when one is doing, "giving reasons for it" to oneself, questioning even one's most secure beliefs in the light of evidence that is constantly being gained by inquiry into the effects of one's teaching on one's students. That, to our mind, represents the starting-point for the appreciation of evaluation from the student learning perspective.

Read

Locate any reputable short text on the evaluation of teaching or use 253 Ideas…., skim-read it, inspect its overall recommendations and the stance it adopts, to see what extent it represents evaluation of teaching as a form of critically reflective practice.

One recommended text is:

### Aim 3

**2-hours**

- Understand how- in what ways- the contemporary work on a student learning perspective (of which Ramsden's work is offered as an example) substantially enhances our ability to understand the place of evaluation in scholarly teaching, and to make important distinctions regarding the kinds of evaluation carried out in our institutions.

### Topic #3

**Preamble to studying Ramsden's Chapter 11**

Also consult, for comparison, any currently used or recommended documents about evaluation methods in your own institution. Critically appraise them against Ramsden's ideas.

It must be clearly understood that we are not trying to somehow equate evaluation with the habit of reflection. The general notion of "reflective thought" is vastly broader in its field of coverage than evaluative matters alone. We have no hesitation in agreeing that, by and large, to be thoughtful (ie reflective) is a better thing than not to be- to do things thoughtlessly. And, also in agreeing that, the more we consider substantial and significant matters in professional practice, it becomes increasingly important that one should engage in things thoughtfully, that is reflectively.

But, important though the *quality of thought* might be, what our work in this section requires is that we attend to the object of thought- **what it is that we decide to reflect upon**. It would be a caricature, but one can imagine with little difficulty a person endlessly obsessed with thinking about what they are doing -during and after it- and getting nowhere- in fact being decreasingly productive and increasingly dissatisfied. It is a dangerous fallacy to think that by waving the magic wand of "reflection" (unqualified) we can solve the problems of enhancing the quality of professional practice.

A student learning perspective requires that we take seriously **what things are most important** to seriously reflect upon in teaching. A teacher may, in an appropriate manner, reflect upon his or her own performance skills- not a bad thing to do. Or on the institutional constraints upon their teaching, and how they might get around or rise above them- also a very good thing. Nevertheless, the reflective teacher who adopts a student learning perspective will be concerned, regardless of which other things arise to occupy their reflective time, with one central matter: **What has been the effect of my teaching on the quality of my students' learning?**

Once we adopt that stance, the connection between (this kind of) reflection and the evaluation of teaching becomes crystal clear. As does the importance of Ramsden's dictum "good teachers are always evaluating themselves". Expanding and rephrasing that dictum, we might equally well say "good teachers are always reflecting upon the likely effects of their teaching upon the quality of their students' learning".

One final step remains in opening up this topic. Between "thinking seriously about" some phenomenon, and the phenomenon itself, there is a gap; the data gap. Phenomena do not "speak" to us directly in ways that enable this quality of careful thought to be carried out; we have to interrogate them. We have to "frame" the problem as one of finding out - collecting, and being open to an awareness of- appropriate kinds of evidence about our students' learning. With that evidence on hand, reflective thought can take place and be maximally productive.
The task of understanding teacher evaluation from a student learning perspective thus becomes - at its central point- one of choosing what to observe, what to inquire into, what to ask, what to collect, what to perceive, what to be aware of, in regard to our students and their learning. That "realm of awareness" includes all three of the "P" elements in our earlier model- Presage evidences; Process evidences and Product evidences. All combine to give us a rich data-field for analysis and contemplation.

At the same time of course, the scholarly teacher is also being subjected to pressures of evaluation for other purposes and of other kinds. Ramsden's chapter 11 makes some of the key distinctions amongst these. The point of benefit in the student learning perspective is that it heightens our awareness of the need to ask one crucial question of all those other institutional and personal evaluation pressures; by what means can I turn this evaluation exercise I am required to undertake, into something that will enhance my understanding of my students and their learning, and give me some additional means of improving my teaching so as to enhance the quality of their learning in future?

Read

Ramsden, Chapter 11

Some matters to look for ideas about, as you read….

- There is very wide general literature on evaluating teaching in higher education, dating from at least the 'sixties when student surveys were first experimented with. There is probably no topic on which more words are spent in advancing, attacking, and defence, than evaluation, particularly the student surveys issue. It is highly disputed and not at all yet a "stable" of "mature" area of theory and practice. Notice Ramsden's skeptical stance in his section. "The strange lure of the student rating instrument".

- Another issue of possible confusion but not much attention is the distinction (or even whether and how a distinction can be made) between "teaching" and "subjects-course-programs" in evaluation practice. Can one somehow evaluate a teacher's work in complete isolation from the question of the quality of the course he or she is given to teach? Can one evaluate a course, subject or program, in total isolation from the question of how well, or badly, teachers have implemented it in a given year? These are rich issues to debate amongst colleagues.

- A third issue (there are plenty more) has already been foreshadowed above: how does one collect, interpret and consider evidence in such a way as to make it possible to know what one should do to get better outcomes in future? That is the problem of the link between evaluation and the improvement of teaching.

Lee Shulman has suggested that a new concept of "validity" should be used in conjunction with the instruments used in evaluating teaching (such as student ratings instruments). Whatever other kinds of validity the psychometricians want to attribute to such instruments, Shulman argues, there is a kind of validity that ought to profoundly concern those of us who work in higher education. It stems from the question of whether or not the use of a particular approach (such as student evaluations of teaching) actually leads to systemic change for the better- improvement- in universities. If it doesn't, Shulman says, then whatever else the measurement pundits say about how great heir questionnaires and surveys are, none of them are worth the paper they're written on. It's seriously invalid- not worth taking seriously- unless it has the right consequences. Listen to Shulman's case in his own words:-

"Traditionally four types of validity have been used (within the Scientific/Psychological model of instruments for measuring teaching excellence): Content validity; Construct validity; Predictive validity and Concurrent validity.

A fifth type of validity - Face Validity- which for example says that a driving test should resemble a situation in which someone is actually engaged in driving a motor vehicle-has commonly been disdained, despite its obvious importance.

The new type of validity (a "radically different concept" which has been evolved) …has been called Consequential or Systemic Validity. This approach considers outcomes to be crucial. Its principle is that there is an obligation to demonstrate that if a given form of evaluation is employed in, for example, an educational setting, it will lead to improvement of the system itself. In practical terms, this would mean in a teacher appraisal situation, that any test designer to distinguish good from bad teachers would need to be sent back to the drawing board unless
its use demonstrably led to better teaching. (underlining mine).

This sort of approach has not been seen previously as a true measure of validity, but it is important that we are not constrained by current theories of measurement which in a teacher appraisal situation might end to lead towards nothing more than the use of observation, instruments, tick boxes and tests.\(^1\)

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<td><strong>Additional resources for your own evaluation planning:</strong></td>
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<td>Some of these (eg the &quot;Minute Paper&quot;) have become much praised and widely used; others probably deserve to be. Look over the book, which is intelligently organised, and choose some items to try in your own teaching.</td>
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<td>One of the interesting things about this North American approach is the way it unselfconsciously mixes together aspects of student learning outcomes (what we have talked about here, under &quot;Evaluation&quot;). The question about the relationship between these two has previously been raised in these sections. Ask yourself what you think about your answer to that question after you have studied Angelo and Cross.</td>
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| Aim 5 2-hours |
| **Study relevant parts of the Discipline based literature that provide accounts of or recommendations for teaching evaluation within your own discipline, and critically appraise this from a student learning perspective.** |

| Topic #5 & Task |
| By this time you will have identified a group of journals or books that address teaching and learning in your own disciplinary field, or a cognate area. |
| As before, your goal is to locate and critically read a few papers or chapters that appear, from their titles, to be likely to address, recommend, critiques or evaluate, some method or approach or strategies for evaluating teaching. |
| Read whatever you can find, and summarise what position the respective authors appear to take about teaching methods. |
| Think about what, provided you could get the arguments together, would be a useful and provocative title for a piece you might some day decide to write and submit for publication in your own disciplinary area, that would challenge, critique or further extend understanding of how evaluation should be carried out in your own field of teaching. Make it an article that would draw upon your own dissatisfactions, both arising from experience in the classroom and from the readings you have undertaken in this module. Make a preliminary list of the points you might cover in that article. Show it to others; compare and discuss. |

| Aim 6 2-hours |
| **Reflection** |
| • Bring together the new ideas from this Section and relate them to your own present position, your current perspective on, or your stance towards the choice of evaluation methods in your discipline or scholarly field; |
| • Try to come to some interim conclusion, regarding where you stand about the question of how to evaluate within your disciplinary field and the particular setting you are in; |

And relate this to how you believe your institutional managers and academic leaders would most probably view the issue from their perspective.

### Read

As preamble to the reflection task, we suggest you read pages 166-174 of Prosser & Trigwell.

This is the place where the authors summarise the main challenges of their book. It is significant that the recurring word they use to describe the state of mind of the "good teacher" is the term "awareness". As you read, note this recurring term, and consider its implications, such as:

- What are the different ways by which we can, in a professional practice, "become aware" of things?
- Which of those ways by which people can "become aware" of things include perception -seeing or discovering for oneself what is actually happening?
- In what way might "evaluating teaching" be well-characterised as "a way of becoming aware of things in my own teaching" or of "perceiving what was previously hidden from me"?

To this writer, the closing chapter of Prosser & Trigwell, although not titled such, is in fact a chapter on the conceptual base for evaluating teaching.

Consider that proposal as you read, and choose your own response to it.

### Task

Start your reflective work by simply making notes on the evaluation task in general, using these two columns as a guide:

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<th>Some things I want to know when I evaluate my own teaching</th>
<th>Ways to conduct evaluations, so that I can find out this particular thing I want to know</th>
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Having completed that, scrutinise your intentions and your methods closely from a student learning perspective. Look back over your work in this module and decide upon the key question(s) you need to ask to test whether an evaluation strategy is going to be consistent with that perspective. Then apply that criterion (those criteria) to your answers, and make further adjustments as needed.

On the matter of criteria by which to appraise an evaluation practice, the best approach by far would be to have a discussion with others in your group, pool ideas, criticise them, and come to a personal conclusion about the ones you will use (which may be different from those others decide to use).

Finally, look back at what you wrote in Topic/Task #5 above, regarding current views on evaluation in your own disciplinary field, as revealed by some of the literature you have read. Let this reflective task suggest possible extensions, changes and further developments in the list of points and the arguments you would use to support them in the article you were (hypothetically) planning to write.