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EVALUATION ON THE RUN

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Educational evaluators can all be relied upon, if they don't drop dead, defect or seize up, to provide some information about the educational activity they have been engaged to study. And that's all you can say about all educational evaluators. The species, although recent in origin and still few in number, is remarkably varied. This was not true of the first generation, however. They agreed with the people who paid them that what was needed by way of information was some accurate assessments of the effects on learners of trying to teach them something. The early technology of evaluation was exclusively devoted to this end. All went well until they found that the learners didn't usually learn what they were supposed to learn, or didn't all learn the same things. This was damned inconvenient, because people began to ask why, and the evaluators couldn't help them because they had confined their efforts to what was learned.

By the time the second generation came along (we're part of it) everything about evaluation had become problematic - who it is for, what information is relevant, what methods are appropriate, who should do it. On this last point, the National Programme decided that we should do it, or at least part of it. Not such a big part, actually, although it's costing them £94,000 and taking four people three years. The Programme is saturated with evaluative activity, even discounting ourselves and John Fielden (how does he cope with inflation?). Projects are required to carry out evaluations of their work, and these are linked to the appraisals of the governing Programme Committee via mid-term evaluations orchestrated by Hooper. In terms of the evaluation of individual projects, we act as an additional resource, sometimes helping projects to design or carry out their evaluations, sometimes providing accounts of their work for them, for Hooper, and for the Committee. It's important to note (at least we think it is) that these UNCAL accounts are invariably seen first by the project, and usually modified to take account of their comments. We do no 'secret' evaluation reports to the Programme managers about what's going on in the projects, and go out of our way to avoid being labelled as 'centre spies'. (Television addicts may have realised that our acronym is a pun on this very point). Nor do we, in these accounts, offer conclusions about the worth of the project, or make recommendations as to whether or not it deserves further support. That is for others to decide. Our job is to ensure, as best we can, that they have the information they recognise as relevant and adequate for such decisions.

What else do we do? Well, we provide a check for the outside world on the self-reports and claims made by Programme participants. Richard refers above to his interim report, 'Two Years On'. At the moment we're rushing to finish 'The Programme at Two', which is an UNCAL companion to 'Two Years On', and a critique of it. I say 'rushing' with some feeling, because we always seem to be rushing to keep up with Hooper, whose managerial style is breathtakingly fast. The problem of late delivery is one that dogs all evaluators because by definition they come after. It helps if the pace of action is leisurely, or sporadic, but Hooper shows no signs of flagging, so evaluation 'on the run' is our lot.

What else? We take perspectives across the whole range of projects, identifying and exploring issues of concern to participants and outsiders - issues like the educational values and effects of CAL, problems of institutionalisation and transferability, or the role of the computer. So does Hooper - in 'The Programme at Two' we offer alternative analyses of the issues and an outsider's view of the Programme as an entity. Our immediate purpose here is to inform the review of Programme and project policy, in the longer term we hope to enhance public understanding of the potential and limitations of this new educational tool.

Finally, we see our job as telling the story of the National Programme in a way that will make its work accessible to the judgement of interested people at large. That story will not consist, as the first evaluators might have written it, only of student scores, though it may such data. But 'education' is not an off-shore island inhabited by monofunctional creatures called teachers and learners, and ruled by 'disciplines'. It is an activity much like any other, engaged in by people who bring to bear upon its conduct the passions and needs that flow from their complex experience of the personal, social and political worlds in which that activity is inextricably embedded. Discrepancies between 'script' and 'performance' are rooted in this reality.

The story should be interesting, as well as instructive. Unfortunately, we missed the beginning, and can't stay to the end; but then, in an important sense, that's true for everyone. Only Richard's computers are here to stay!

TES July 18th 1975.