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# Conference Reports 1988

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## As the Dust Settles

While the academic and other excitements of BERA '88 are discussed elsewhere, I should like on behalf of the Conference Organising Committee to comment on some domestic aspects of the event. Firstly however, we should like to thank BERA for coming to UEA this year; we consider it an honour, and have enjoyed the opportunity to welcome so many distinguished participants here. It was good that we received such a variety of significant and topical contributions, and we have had many favourable comments on the overall presentation and balance of the programme.

What follows is to reply to other points raised by some participants, and possibly to enable next year's organisers at Newcastle University to benefit from our experience. We are conscious that arrangements were not entirely to everyone's taste, but our primary concern was always to keep overheads, and therefore fees, to the minimum. The difficulties some people had in getting even that degree of funding seem to justify this. An optional Conference Buffet, rather than a formal dinner, was part of this aim; however its lack of substance disappointed us too when we saw it, and the incessant rain lent a further glum note to the occasion. We should have included at least a glass of wine, but had been misled by promises of another publishers' reception beforehand, which did not happen.

Having no name tags was a conscious decision on the grounds that people don't like wearing them (even though wanting others to). On balance, though, they probably do make life easier for everyone. The absence of a participants list in the Handbook arose out of the one real problem we have had in arranging this conference, and one that is 99% avoidable: **people do not register as requested!** Annual conferences, like a family Christmas, are not impromptu events, and anyone catering for either needs to know who is coming. By mid-August we were supposed to provide 'final' numbers to various sources at UEA for everything we needed, from beds to handbooks. After that, everything we ordered would have to be paid for, and any underestimates would result in hassle and uneconomic top-up arrangements at the last minute.

In the event, Conference dawned with almost 50

actually programmed contributors and one symposium leader still unaccounted for, and the suspicion that many other participants would just turn up each day. Over 40 did, many wanting accommodation — which UEA, heavily committed to OU and other gatherings, managed to provide. It also led us to hold back programmes for promised speakers, who never turned up, and re-print for casual arrivals. All this makes a nonsense of budgets — and participants lists, which surely need to be accurate if worth having.

So please, everyone, try and organise your registration in good time next year, (and symposium leaders — be realistic about which of your named team will actually materialise, and ask them to register too). Conference funds cannot stretch to endless letters and phone calls to remind people.

Now it's over to you, Newcastle — and good luck!

Claire Burge,  
*University of East Anglia*

## Life History and Biographical Approaches in the Study of Teachers' Lives and Work

The vagaries of scheduling placed this symposium uncomfortably astride the Friday evening dinner break. It's a measure of the contemporary interest in teacher (auto)biography that a respectable proportion of the participants heroically returned for the second session.

The four presentations were interestingly diverse in their specific concerns, yet united in their opposition to those kinds of research which portray teachers as unstuck in place or time: as interchangeable placeholders who leave their histories, hopes, fears and fantasies outside the school gates.

Patricia Sikes had been catching up with a cohort of teachers who started their careers in an innovatory humanities department, fifteen years or so ago. How were those idealistic '68ers' coping in today's cold climate? Had they been able to sustain their value systems and their practices across the fragmentation of that original teacher culture? Patricia found parallels with Louis Smith's Kensington studies in the USA.

Mary Lou Holly had been helping teachers to explore their own personal and professional lives through auto-biographical journal writing. Extracts from journals, logs and other ingenious devices for encouraging auto-biographical reflection demonstrated the struggles and the triumphs of teachers engaged — seriously yet playfully — in the task of getting to grips with their own practices.

Maggie MacLure addressed the question of methodology, and noted that everyday life is saturated with auto-biographical accounts. Comparing such 'secular' acts with the life history interview or quasi-'conversation', she proposed an approach that would recognise the diversity of selves that are invoked in auto-biography as practice.

Alan Marr, in the last presentation, reviewed the history of life history research, and challenged contemporary work for its conservative and static view of the relations between action, identity and institutions. Alan argued for a hermeneutic approach which would capture the ways in which, in the research process, both researcher and participant(s) create 'new knowledge and new selves'.

In her summary and discussion, Jennifer Nias drew together key themes from the four presentations, and provided a provocative starting point for a more general discussion.

I think it would be fair to say that by the end of the session we had begun to get a clearer idea of both the potential and the problematics inherent in biographical research.

Maggie McLure,  
*University of East Anglia.*

## **Records of Achievement Symposium**

The symposium included presentations by National and Local Evaluators of pilot Profiling and RoA schemes. Mary James, Barry Stierer, Patricia Broadfoot and Desmond Nuttall presented some of the findings of the recently completed three year National Evaluation of Pilot Records of Achievement in Schools project (PRAISE). Topics covered included curriculum implications of Records of Achievement; evidence emerging about the processes of recording; equal opportunities issues in Records of Achievement; and aspects of quality assurance provision. Emerging insights from the local evaluations of the DES-funded pilot schemes included a presentation by David Bridges on the Suffolk scheme; by Harry Torrance on 'Teacher intentions and pupil experience' in the Dorset pilot scheme; by Sherrell Andrews on pupils' views of Records of Achievement as they leave school in Essex; and by Ray Sumner on some of the more general problems of conducting local evaluations. Emerging insights from the parallel 'Profiling in

TVEI' national evaluation were also reported by Bridget Baines.

The rich variety of insights for both policy and practice which emerged from these presentations was addressed by Bob Stake as rapporteur. His remarks focussed particularly on the problems of quality control and credibility.

Patricia Broadfoot,  
*University of Bristol*

## **The Theory and Practice of Action Research**

The general aim of the symposium was to raise some critical questions about the conduct of action research and to ask, in particular, whether contemporary action research practice was maintaining contact with the theory of action research developed by Stenhouse et al in the 1960's.

Two discussion papers were presented. The first 'Whatever Happened to Action Research?' (Wilf Carr) suggested that one of the main theoretical claims made for educational action research — that it provides a radical alternative to positivism — has not, in practice, been vindicated and that, as a result, action research constantly runs the risk of relapsing into old positivist ways. The second paper 'Action Research: Institutional Involvement or a Means of Enquiry for those of Little Power' (Clem Adelman) argued that one of the theoretical aims of action research — to change institutionalised schooling has not been practically confronted and that, as a result, much of what now passes for action-research is involuted and self-serving.

The papers provoked a wide ranging discussion about a variety of methodological, ethical and practical issues. Does action research define a distinctive research method or a distinctive view of teaching? Has action research been 'hijacked' by the academic establishment? Does action research confront 'positivism' as a research methodology or as an educational ideology? Should action research be linked to award-bearing courses? Needless to say, no clear answers to these questions emerged. What, perhaps did emerge from the symposium was a clearer understanding of why developments in the practice of action research need to be informed by an on-going theoretical debate in which questions such as these can be addressed.

Wilfred Carr,  
*University of Sheffield*

## **Performance Indicators: What the world needs now?**

In the presentation entitled 'Historical Perspectives: Great performance indicators of the past' Gordon Hogg drew attention to the history

of attempts to assess groups of pupils drawing on evidence from the US as well as the UK. Particular attention was paid to the best known example: the Revised Code of 1862 and subsequent years, generally denoted as an attempt to create a system of 'payment by results'.

Lessons drawn from this incursion into history, apart from the common epithet 'The more we learn from history, the more we learn that we do not learn from history', were the need to keep an open mind and to ask the right questions about the effects of systems on teachers, students and schools.

**Dick Hazelwood** presented a reanalysis of data collected in the course of careful monitoring of TVEI. Emphasising the importance of PROCESS variables in systems containing Performance Indicators, he described a scale developed to measure 'student-centredness' and related scores on this scale to examination results and to the interest students expressed in their schoolwork. In schools where the students perceived the teaching to be 'student centred', higher levels of enjoyment were reported and there were no statistically significant effects on examination results.

**Peter Tymms** discussed the question: 'How can Performance Indicator damage be limited?' Some of the dangers associated with the introduction of Performance Indicators were discussed both in terms of how schools may react to their introduction and in terms of the fairness and stability of some of the statistics used as indicators. The use of Hierarchical Linear models was considered and the warning that we might be dealing with chaotic systems provided a thoroughly modern note to the presentation.

**Carol Fitz-Gibbon** spoke of the criteria which should be applied to any database being developed for the monitoring of performance and of the need to create appropriate management strategies if performance monitoring was to be beneficial.

Carol Fitz-Gibbon,  
*University of Newcastle upon Tyne*

## **A Comparative Review of Issues in Student Assessment**

The symposium arose out of previous meetings of ECAP, an international network of professionals involved in the assessment of education and concerned about contemporary trends in assessment policy. The network is coordinated by Bob Stake, and is a coalition of test specialists, curriculum theorists and evaluators, who share reservations about increasing political and administrative reliance on measurement technologies as a means of improving education.

Bob Stake led off by reporting a survey of teacher views of the impact of standardised tests on their

work. The response was generally positive, teachers reporting adequate alignment among public aspiration, goal statements, instruction and testing. Stake challenged the validity of the teachers' view of educational quality as expressed in their responses, and argued that the problem lay in our limited competence in assessing the effects of assessment. He called for effort on the part of the research community, and particularly curriculum experts, to produce more adequate representations of the educational process.

Les McLean followed Stake with an overview of assessment policy in Canada, contrasting three States, one with a high emphasis on standardised tests, one with none, and one with a mix of tests and continuous assessment. None, he said, were satisfied with their policy as a means of improving the quality of schooling. Les went on to argue that teachers do not use tests to improve their teaching and that so long as testing and teaching remain disconnected tests are more harmful than helpful to the cause of education. Descriptive assessment offered a potentially helpful alternative.

Desmond Nuttall then gave an overview of assessment in the United Kingdom, focussing on the Baker plan for age-related testing. He offered qualified approval to the TGAT recommendation of standardised assessment tasks, but foresaw possibly insuperable obstacles to its implementation. He endorsed McLean's support for descriptive assessment, but questioned the survival of records of achievement within a test-dominated assessment policy.

This last point was picked up by the first respondent, Patricia Broadfoot, who gave an account of the Records of Achievement Project, and underlined the incompatibility of descriptive and comparative assessment. The second respondent, Ian Stronach, took us back to Stake's theme of the importance of representing what an education is. He talked about the semantic loss between that and the notion of schooling that assessment typically represents, adding that Stake's own survey instrument expressed some of that loss.

Barry MacDonald,  
*University of East Anglia*

## **New Approaches to the Assessment of Professional Skills**

The appearance at BERA of a symposium like this, embodying both international and cross-occupational perspectives on professional skills, represents a confluence of diverse trends and interests within the research community. The work of Donald Schon on the epistemology of professional practice has highlighted what some see to be a crisis of confidence in professional

education across the board, and has encouraged a comparative review of generic professional skills. During the same period, roughly the last ten years, educational researchers have had, and taken, opportunities to ply their expertise in unfamiliar territory — across the social services generally and in industry, where the quality and effectiveness of training courses has become a prominent concern. Within the education sector questions of teacher competence and a new emphasis on performance appraisal have also served to focus interest on what constitutes teaching skills, and how such skills may be demonstrated. Researchers from different, and previously parochialised domains of practice, have recently been comparing notes on how to assess what is coming to be seen as the core skill of all professionals — how to make difficult decisions in conditions of uncertainty. The symposium, which juxtaposed new developments in the assessment of clinical skills in medicine, case-embedded action in street duty policing, and instructional skills in classroom teaching, was a further opportunity to compare notes.

Against a background of cognitive testing of medical students and inadequate attention to practical skills, Beth Saunders and David Swanson gave an account and critique of OSCE (Objective Structured Clinical Examinations), a new type of simulated patient care examination involving multiple stations and standardised patients. Although the notion of the 'standardised patient' proved easy fodder for the wits in the audience, further discussion of the problems (at least in the USA) of devising impartial means of determining and ranking clinical competence in a highly competitive profession tended to reinforce the speakers' interest in exploring the psychometric properties and predictive validity of this approach to assessment.

The OSCE model has recently attracted the attention of police trainers, but John Elliott who has been involved for some years in developing a new system of police probationer training in England and Wales, took another tack, rejecting both conventional task analysis and theoretical models of practice requirements as bases for assessment, in favour of behavioural event interviewing, a research approach deriving from work on occupational assessment in the USA. (In passing, it is interesting to note in this respect that OSCE originated in Dundee). John reported some preliminary research aimed at identifying generic competencies of street duty policing, and claimed that they had yielded a basis for designing and assessing new forms of training experience.

Finally, Les Tickle gave us an account of how trainee teachers are assessed in terms of classroom skills, criticised the minimalist framework governing definitions of basic competence, and took a similar line to that of Elliott in arguing

for better research evidence of the decisions, judgments and actions of teachers in specific case contexts.

The presentations, amplified by Maggie McLure and David Cohen in their responses, provoked animated interchanges with the audience, the discussion as a whole compounding rather than reducing the complexity of the problems of assessment in this field. One message for the research community echoed a call by Bob Stake in another BERA symposium on assessment — the need for better representations of the services whose competent delivery we attempt to secure through assessment processes.

Barry McDonald,  
*University of East Anglia*

## **The Beginning Writing Enquiry**

This symposium was a report of a classroom based research project carried out by teachers based in Norfolk and Suffolk into the processes of writing done by children of 5-9 years of age. Apart from its subject matter it was felt to be a useful model of collaboration between lecturers and serving teachers engaged in action research. In this venture the expertise of teachers was acknowledged, the research was carried out under normal classroom conditions by teachers and the research design itself evolved through discussion with them.

The contributors, including serving teachers indicated the progression in writing which had been tentatively identified. A model of writing development deriving from the data collected was described. The implications for teaching including the value of close observation and collaboration with children during the process of writing were suggested. Finally the evolving model of writing development was discussed in more detail and placed in the context of current work in the field.

The audience for this symposium was not large. The competition was fierce and the popularity of performance indicators as an alternative were evident. Nevertheless those who attended were interactive and extremely helpful. In particular, the comments of the discussant — Terry Phillips from the University of East Anglia — were invaluable in the light of forthcoming publication.

Dierdre Pettitt,  
*University of Durham*

## **Teacher Professional Development**

The symposium considered the current GRIST context and aspirations for areas of 'professional growth' to be determined by teachers. Some

founding principles of Teachers' Centres were described as a desirable basis on which to build core values and programmes of professional development. A research project conducted by seconded teachers was reported, setting out the aspirations of teachers in one LEA for their own development and defining ways in which these aspirations might be realised. Cooperation and collaboration, words key in recent in-school INSET, were considered critically and some of their origins were traced in industrial management. The optimistic views of action research and the possibility of using teacher induction as a foundation for developing reflective practice were tempered by a presentation on the experiences of student and probationary teachers — particularly the way they are sometimes treated by experienced colleagues.

Les Tickle, *University of East Anglia*;

John Jennings, *Norfolk LEA*;

Maxine Wood, *Catton Grove Middle School*;

Gwen Wallace, *Derbyshire College of H.E.*

Mary Louise Holly, *Kent State University*

## **IT/Education**

The symposium was organized by John Benyon and Hughie Mackay (1) to bring together technologists and social scientists/educationalists; and (2) to stimulate a move towards a new paradigm of IT/Education which incorporates theory from outside Education (e.g. media/cultural studies and the sociology of technology).

The wide range of papers delivered during the day provided a good insight into the important current debates in the UK on computers in classrooms. Both the morning and afternoon sessions stimulated discussion and succeeded in facilitating a dialogue between those who viewed microcomputers in a predominantly technicist way and those who raised issues about the nature and purpose of computer literacy and its

relationship to gender. The symposium was important in putting forward the need for a research based approach to the introduction of IT in schools

John Benyon,  
*The Polytechnic of Wales*

## **Performance Indicators and the Effectiveness of Schooling**

The symposium addressed issues related to the current moves to establish various types of performance indicators for schooling. Most of the presentations drew upon developments that have been evident in the recent school effectiveness literature. The primary issues addressed by the participants included the problems of assessing school performance from aggregate data, the role of adjustments for intake differences among schools, alternative statistical models for performance indicators, and the relationship of performance indicators to programmes of school improvement.

Papers were presented by Peter Cuttance, Edinburgh University — 'Performance indicators and school effectiveness'; Desmond Nuttall, ILEA Research and Statistics Branch — 'Presenting examination results school-by-school'; John Gray, Sheffield University — 'Breaking out of the straight-jacket of performance measurement'; Dougal Hutchison & Ian Shagen, NFER — 'School-level indicators and performance: some findings from the APU surveys'; Paul McGee, London Borough of Croydon — 'The use of data envelopment analysis in Croydon'; and Geoffrey Woodhouse and Harvey Goldstein, Institute of Education, London University — 'Performance indicators and the need for non-aggregated data'. Brian Wilcox, Sheffield Education Authority was the discussant for the symposium.

Peter Cuttance,  
*Edinburgh University*