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CONES: Compulsory Online Named Evaluations by Students – to quantify, evaluate and reflect?

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Abstract

This article considers the use of Compulsory Online Named Evaluations by Students, (CONES) as a method to achieve 100 percent response rates, of benefit for university accountability, as well as encourage meaningful evaluation and reflection on modules and professional practices by student teachers.

In addition, it is suggested that the freedom of opportunity for student teachers to complete the CONES at a preferred time within a given submission period, (one month) does not necessarily affect the quality or quantity of reflection. In order to develop student teachers' reflections on personal professional practice, within evaluations, it is proposed that greater use of scaffolding is included within future iterations of CONES.

The research took place in a public university within the north of England working with an opportunity sample composed of eighty, first year student teachers on a Bachelor of Arts, with Honours Primary Education degree leading to Qualified Teacher Status, (QTS).

Keywords: Anonymity; compulsory; evaluation; online; professional practice; reflection; student teacher.

Introduction

In recent years evaluations by student teachers, (sometimes referred to as 'Trainees', (Carter 2015) or 'Pre-service' teachers, (Gelfuso 2016), have increasingly been used as Key Performance Indicators, (KPIs), for degree programmes as a whole, individual academic modules and professional practice generally, (BIS 2011; Smith and Morris 2012). There is, however, no clear consensus of opinion as to whether such evaluations should be anonymous or not anonymous; online or paper-based; compulsory or voluntary. Within literature, for each justification of a mode of evaluation there is generally a counter argument (Canada Association of Teachers 2006; Capa-Aydin 2016, Fike et al. 2010, Risquez et al. 2015; Sutcliffe et al. 2014; Tucker 2014).

A key feature of professional courses leading to Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) in England is accountability, for example to the Office for Standards in Education, (Ofsted) and the National College for Teaching and Leadership, (NCTL). This accountability requires educational establishments to provide data which demonstrates impact on student teachers' practice and ultimately upon their pupils' learning. For such organisations the required data is principally of a quantitative nature. Whilst quantitative evidence may inform the Key Information Set (KIS) data, (<https://unistats.direct.gov.uk/find-out-more/key-information-set>), it arguably does not provide sufficient detail for meaningful course development.

Taking some of these factors into consideration, a team working within a taught module for a degree course in Initial Teacher Education, (ITE), carried out a pilot study to investigate a student evaluation for a specific, subject-related, new initiative as well as observations of professional practice. It was decided to make the evaluation an online, compulsory, (but ungraded) element of assessment. This paper considers the use of these 'Compulsory, Online Named Evaluations by Students' (CONES) as a way to increase response rates in order not only to enhance the validity of quantitative data but more importantly, to encourage student teachers' constructive, professional reflection on both school-based experience and their own learning, (Carter 2015) as well as 'draw developmental conclusions', (Wright 2008 p. 79). The CONES therefore aimed to have a dual purpose.

The Research

The research took place following a school-based learning experience within a primary setting (with children aged 4 - 11years), designed to promote the use of Systematic Synthetic Phonics (SSP) in early reading, (Rose 2006) and to observe and reflect upon generic professional practices such as behaviour management and learning environments, (DfE 2013). The research used an opportunity sample composed of four groups of twenty, first year student teachers on a Bachelor of Arts, with Honours Primary Education degree leading to Qualified Teacher Status, (QTS), in a university within the north of England. Each student group attended the primary school for one morning. The students' academic abilities, as reflected in their Year 1 assignments to date, spanned a range from Lower Second to high First classification.

Following their practical, school-based experience, students were required to fill in the CONES (Compulsory, Online Named Evaluation by Students) via Google Forms, (Google Apps for Education) to be completed by the final session of the module one month later. A rationale and instructions for completing the evaluation, including the hyperlink to the Google Form, were sent following each group visit and subsequently, reminders were emailed on several occasions to encourage all student teachers to participate within the required time-frame. Whilst the students were expected to complete the CONES as part of normal practices, they had the right to withdraw from the research at any time and without giving a reason.

The Google Form interface used for the CONES included five questions using linear response scales rated 1 (low) to 5 (high) each supported by a question requiring a free-form qualitative comment to justify the given score. It allowed the use of precise technical language associated with features of good practice linked to the teaching of SSP, for example, 'phoneme', 'grapheme' and professional knowledge, such as 'behaviour management' strategies.

Figure 1. Example of a linear response scale question:

Has the experience enhanced your knowledge and understanding of Systematic Synthetic Phonics?

1 2 3 4 5

1 is low 5 is high

Figure 2. Example of a supported free-form comment question:

In what ways has the experience enhanced your knowledge and understanding of SSP?

(E.g. enunciation of phonemes; pace of teaching and learning; use of specific resources; learning tasks; ability grouping; other ...)

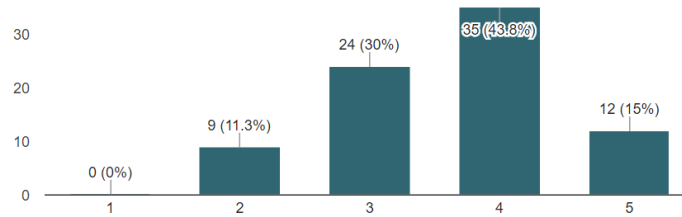
Long-answer text
.....

Data Analysis

The response rate for the CONES was, not unsurprisingly given it was a compulsory component for module completion, 100%.

Has the experience enhanced your knowledge and understanding of behaviour management strategies?

(80 responses)

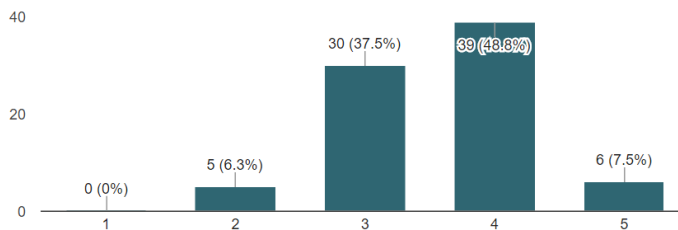


Quantitative questions and response data

The responses to the quantitative questions were analysed for satisfaction using the 1 (low) to 5 (high) scales with results displayed in graphical form.

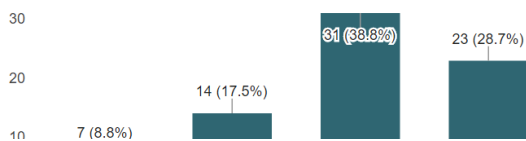
Figure 3. Bar charts presenting responses to the linear response questions rating 1 (low) to 5 (high) within the CONE

How would you rate the experience overall? (80 responses)



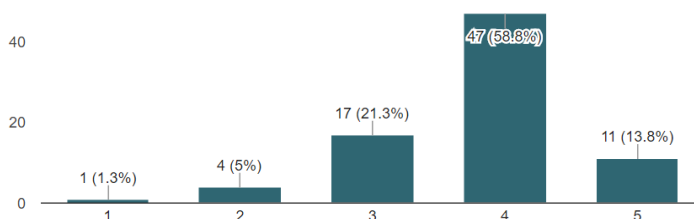
Has the experience enhanced your knowledge and understanding of Systematic Synthetic Phonics?

(80 responses)



Has the experience enhanced your awareness of positive learning environments?

(80 responses)



The qualitative responses were analysed for common themes, to inform both course development and student subject knowledge.

Discussion

The debate concerning the value and ethics involved in anonymous versus named evaluations is ongoing, (Tucker 2014; Sutcliffe et al. 2014). The requirement for the compulsory, online evaluations to be named, (CONES) was a conscious decision in order to ensure all students participated and thus achieve the 100% response rate. In addition, the lack of anonymity was to encourage professional, critical reflection, so important for student teachers (Carter 2014). The Teachers' Standards, against which all student teachers are assessed, requires trainees and teachers to be able to 'communicate effectively with parents with regard to pupils' achievements and well-being', (DfE 2013, p.8); such comments may be of a sensitive nature so having an opportunity to develop an ability to adopt appropriate phrasing could be viewed as an additional benefit to the use of CONES.

Analysis of the students' responses included consideration of practical aspects, such as when most students actually chose to complete the reflective evaluation; how students approached each section - in terms of making a choice on the rating scale in comparison with their qualitative comments - as well as identifying key themes in what the students chose to highlight and of what they were unaware or omitted.

The When: Timing for completion of the Compulsory, Online Named Evaluations by Students

Despite the CONES being a compulsory, (but ungraded) element of the module assessment, 50% of the students had not completed the evaluation two days prior to the assessment deadline and 20% submitted within the final twelve-hour period. This could suggest that rather than completing the CONES in what might be considered a timely and thoughtful way - as soon as possible following the experience so as not to lose the detail - students were perhaps more tuned into the mechanics of an assignment deadline, (Armstrong et al 1997, Gafni and Geri 2010) and on first inspection this could seem counter-intuitive to reflective practice. An alternative view might be an acknowledgement that there are multiple ways to approach tasks and it cannot reasonably be concluded that those who waited until the formal deadline were any less or more reflective than those who completed it immediately after. Indeed it is possible that, for many students, reflection requires a period of almost sub-conscious thought similar to the 'incubation period' described within literature on processes used to promote creativity (Ritter and Dijksterhuis 2014). The following examples illustrate this hypothesis:

Student AE, who was the first to complete the CONES, stated *'I found it useful to see how the school divided the children into ability groups across the three Year 1 classes as I had never seen that before in previous placement schools.'* This statement is considered principally descriptive rather than reflective of practice.

Student TD (second to complete) wrote *'I will ensure my planning follows the structure of 'Review', 'Teach', 'Practise and Apply'. Also I believe my sessions*

will be more successful if I use a variety of activities ... The shared area between the three classes was impressive since it strengthened a sense of community in the school.' This includes a degree of reflection on both specific subject knowledge and of wider practices. This reflective quality is further exemplified by Student DC, who completed the CONES mid-way through the time-period, *'I will ensure that there are explicit learning objectives for each well-planned session. I will use resources and social interaction to practise phonemes during carpet time. I will also use 'Talk for learning' in order to reinforce children's knowledge and as a method of formative assessment.'*

In comparison, Student HE, who also completed the CONES mid-way through the time parameter, wrote comments which were brief throughout and lacked specificity or reflection. In response to identifying key ideas, aspects or skills to incorporate into planning phonics sessions, Student HE simply wrote *'Use of resources.'*

Student CL, who completed the CONES within an hour of the submission deadline, used specific subject related terminology with confidence: *'The use of oral segmentation and encoding to help the children spell words ... Ensuring the lesson is fast paced and split up into the four stages of revisit, teach, practise and apply.'* Student WL, also completing within an hour of submission, included teacher-related terms within concise reflection: *'Teacher used positive reinforcement and made sure all children were engaged.'*

When comparing the numerical values given by students for 'satisfaction' on the linear response scales, with the quantity of writing within the qualitative free form answers and the timing for submission, no trends could be identified. Certainly, within the month available for submission it did not appear that the degree of reflection within responses was dependent upon the time of completion.

The How: Comparison of quantitative data and qualitative responses

As is evident within the student responses given above, there was great variety in how students responded both in terms of the breadth and depth of reflections within the qualitative comments and also in conjunction with their choice of value on the linear response scale. Initial analysis of the quantitative data revealed that only 35% of students thought that the experience had 'enhanced their knowledge' of SSP; 31% were ambivalent and a further 21% indicated that they felt the experience had had little impact. This first impression of 52% of students not valuing the experience, at times contradicted the data from the qualitative free-form responses.

Student CJ gave a low score (1) on the overall rating value for how the experience had enhanced knowledge and understanding of phonics. Yet qualitative free-form responses listed many key ideas, aspects and skills that would be incorporated into future planning for the teaching of phonics, as a result of the school experience. Similarly, student MC gave a positive score on whether the experience had enhanced knowledge and understanding of behaviour management strategies and yet was unable to identify strategies in place. MC stated that *'Little behaviour management was necessary as the classroom was controlled.'* It had been anticipated that the students would be able to state in what ways the teacher established effective behaviour

management. However, student MC was seemingly unaware that a good teacher is not necessarily the one to be seen to deal with poor behaviour but may instead have established procedures and positive relationships including peer support, praise and reward systems, engaging tasks, or encouraging positive mindsets, (Dwek, 2017) such that poor behaviour does not occur in the first place.

Although the CONES used for this project gave prompts for some questions, these were brief and anticipated a greater level of student knowledge than in fact was evident in many of the completed evaluations. This raises the question as to whether a Year 1 student teacher, with limited practical professional experience and training, could be in a position to recognise what might be regarded as good practice without specific and focused guidance or scaffolding, (Wood, Bruner and Ross, 1976; Carter, 2015; Houston, 2016).

When considering what the students chose to highlight, what they omitted or were simply unaware of, it also became clear that the choice of certain lead words could potentially deflect or distort from what they may otherwise have written. After all, the experience may not have 'enhanced' student teachers' understanding if they had previously acquired good knowledge, for example, in university taught sessions or in previous work experience. This is exemplified by student DC who gave a low score (1) on the overall rating value when considering the impact of the experience and said *'I already had a good knowledge of phonics and so I didn't learn from this experience specifically'*. It was arguably the use of the word 'enhance' in the response statement that caused this apparent mis-match.

Thus, in order to address these apparent contradictions, quantitative data should not be used in isolation. The contextualisation of quantitative data is imperative if information within a CONES is to inform accurately module and course development as well as promote reflection and enrich students' professional identities.

Conclusion

The CONES was a required assessment component. Knowing that 100% of students had responded to the CONES enabled tutors to feel that the overarching quantitative data, so often used in England for accountability and to inform KIS data, was valid and could inform planning and development for the next cohort in terms of related key aspects of subject knowledge and practical arrangements.

Since the CONES was a required assessment component, responses were not anonymous. Even though the evaluations could be attributed to individuals, this did not seem to affect the willingness of students to write honestly, even when expressing negative views or low levels of satisfaction. Responses demonstrated that many students had the ability, and confidence, to complete the CONES with criticality and in a professional manner.

The timing available for students to complete the CONES appeared not to affect the quality or quantity of reflection. Comparable written qualitative responses

were identified immediately following the experience, up to minutes before the deadline and throughout the completion period.

However, the researchers found that the qualitative free-form responses included a number of comments which led to questions as to whether Year 1 students with limited practical professional experience and training, could be in a position to recognise what might be regarded as good practice relating to SSP and professional attributes and then make subjective, sometimes critical comments upon these. It was acknowledged that more work would be needed to scaffold student teachers' ability to develop their own practice and to encourage a deeper level of critical reflection. This led the researchers to recognise that the CONES as a construct to encourage both reflection and evaluation would need greater emphasis when introduced to a cohort of new students and would require explicit sign-posting to provide a range of attributes listing the features which good practice might encompass. Furthermore, students' (mis) understanding of key words used in evaluations and the potential negative impact this can have, must continue to be an ongoing area of research, (Sutcliffe et al. 2014).

Hence it became clear that for Year 1 students a more scaffolded approach would be beneficial if an intention of the CONES was to develop reflective practices, in addition to providing data for accountability purposes.

Although the research was based on a sample of only 80 student teachers representing one cohort, in one English university, the findings from this pilot suggest that further research on the use of CONES would be beneficial. In particular, research is planned to investigate modified CONES which include a greater use of scaffolding to promote and develop deeper, professional, critical reflection. The research will not only include analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data from the CONES but will be underpinned by use of semi-structured interviews to consider further the characteristics of 'Compulsory Online Named Evaluations by Students' - to quantify, evaluate and reflect.

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