7 Teachers as self-agents of change

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Agency, in the sense of 'agent of change', is a key concept and process that needs to be thoroughly understood if effective and sustained change in assessment practice is to be established. A variety of dimensions of agency come under the umbrella terms, bottom-up and top-down (dealt with comprehensively in the preceding two chapters). This chapter considers different types of agency but extends the bottom-up notion specifically into how teachers themselves are imperative to the successful development of teacher assessment in any school. Importantly, any expression of self-agency should be assured of external support whether outside the classroom and within the school, or external to the school. The chapter also emphasizes the importance of self-agency in creating a school culture of readiness to consider and embrace change where appropriate.

Introduction

The concept of 'agent of change' came into regular usage in the education community following Fullan's *Change Forces* book, published in 1993. In this brief but widely read work, he popularized notions of change that made sense to a broad range of educationalists including teachers and researchers. Drawing on existing practice and research, he made snappy generalizations, which had the ring of experiential truth about them. To quote just a few, his lessons from the 'new paradigm of change' (1993, p 21) enabled him to claim that 'Neither centralization nor decentralization works' when it comes to the pursuit of sustained change; that 'Connection with the wider environment is critical for success' in ensuring change does not become isolated and avails of all possible support; and finally that 'Every person is a change agent'. Inevitably any discussion of educational change will rehearse these and other generalizations. However, as a central

theme in the pursuit of change in assessment practice, the work of the ARIA study suggests that the concept and operational dimensions of agency need to be thoroughly understood if optimal conditions for appropriate, effective and sustained change in assessment practice are to be established.

Conceptions of agency

There are two common understandings of the term 'agent': someone who is an advocate and promotes the interests of another person or organization, or someone who goes further than this and undertakes actions on behalf of another person or organization. These two senses of an agent of change can be broadened in education to include agents that are not people; for example, peer pressure, public opinion and professional learning, which are perhaps better described as processes.

What is common to any form of agent, however, is the role that it plays as an intermediary between the status quo and a proposed new approach. In education, for example, the target may be an established practice or method, upon which someone or something is acting to change. In the present context, change agents might be said to be operating at the interface between external and teacher assessment in schools. While there may be significant differences in the extent to which school systems engage with teacher assessment, with it being noticeably less integrated in the school system in England than in the systems in Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland, the direction of change across the UK is towards more teacher assessment (see Chapter 3).

There are some notable agents that could compete for the title of 'most significant' in this process, such as the growth in professional recognition that assessment, as far as possible, should contribute to learning; that is, it should have a formative influence. With external summative assessments (e.g. GCSEs) rarely used in this manner, the trend is partly explained by the fact that teacher assessment is held to be much more amenable to formative usage. Other front-runner agents might include the growing awareness that too much testing may have a counterproductive effect on learning outcomes for many students, or that testing for purposes other than individual outcomes is arguably a gross misuse of assessment. Prime among these latter purposes is 'accountability', in which assessments of individual students' performance are used primarily to appraise teacher and school performance. There are many other candidates for agency, varying from the demonstrable but not widely appreciated extent of unreliability in external test scores to the equally demonstrable and more widely appreciated value of appropriate feedback in support of learning.

Unpacking how a system changes, therefore, is not a simple process and depends crucially on how well chosen the change agents are.

Approaching the issue from a different direction, it is worth exploring what or who might be the textbook change agents in education systems. The list is fairly succinct: teachers, school management/managers and local authority personnel might dominate the 'people' variant of agency while government policy and new knowledge (from research, etc.) might form the vanguard of the 'process' variant. Viewing the process of change from this perspective introduces another facet of agency. If the agent of change is different from the operational subject of the change, there is the likelihood that it is a 'top-down'-driven model of change.

Top-down, bottom-up or something in between?

Approaches to professional development and learning have been set out comprehensively in Chapter 6 and this section focuses more on the agency of the desired changes than the model of professional development. Changing classroom practice by policy decree (e.g. subject to regulation and subsequent monitoring) or by the 'supported pressure' of professional development programmes and appropriate resource provision, would describe top-down approaches normally associated with a centralized agency. Sometimes these can be very effective. For example, school development planning was originally a mandated change in the mid-1990s but is now a firmly embedded process in the vast majority of schools. Any grumbles about imposition are far outweighed by the recognition of the benefits to be gained. On the other hand, repeated attempts to kick start information and communications technology (ICT) integration in classroom practice, through major funding of training, have had a much more patchy and, in some notable instances, ineffectual impact. A particularly well-researched UK-wide programme, the NOF (New Opportunities Fund), sponsored programme for teachers, has attracted criticism arising from evaluations by Preston (2004) and OFSTED (2002) for England and Wales, Galanouli et al. (2004) for Northern Ireland, and Conlon (2004) and Kirkwood et al. (2000) for Scotland.

The other traditional perspective on change agency is 'bottom-up'. In this mode the change is promoted and brought to action by those who give it its operational focus. If classroom practice is the change context, then the most obvious bottom-up agent is the classroom teacher. Generally speaking, change in such circumstances will arise as a result of some specific stimulus such as peer dialogue or personal research and reading. There are circumstances too in which students can act as the bottom-up change agent. These include the process known as 'pester power'; the

students know and appreciate what one teacher does and they lobby another teacher to adopt the same approach. The student bottom-up process may also be initiated as a result of being asked (pupil consultation, pupil voice) about any improvements in their classroom experience that they feel could be made.

Another feature of the top-down versus bottom-up analysis revolves around the theory versus practice debate (see Chapter 6). Should an external agent provide the teachers with a practical introduction to an innovative, or at least new to them, classroom process? Arguably, this allows the teachers to see the desirable change in action before trying it out themselves. A deeper understanding through reflection and consideration of the theory and literature may then be attended to later. A counter-view might be that there should be an introduction to the concepts that form the change focus, along with the research and reports from schools that provide evidence of its efficacy, before the teachers try it out for themselves. In the former possibility the external agent could be the teacher in the next classroom (a type of peer agency, more 'sideways' than specifically top-down) or in both cases it could be the promotion of professional learning through exposure to professional development activities provided by a local authority (more explicitly top-down).

In this debate about which should come first, the theory or the practice, there are shades of what Sfard (1998) has called the acquisition versus participation metaphors of learning. Applied to professional learning, the distinction implies a choice between designing participative practical experiences prior to promoting reflection and deeper assimilation of the principles, theories and concepts, and an acquisition design in which the teachers are relatively passive and in extreme cases are told what to do, perhaps through regulation or policy demands but certainly in a top-down form. The research literature offers no dependable conclusions on the debate as to which is better. And in a large majority of the initiatives studied in ARIA, the process was considerably more organic than either of these restricted approaches, with circumstance and opportunity determining the blending of the different issues and approaches.

Self-agency as a key to change

An alternative to the choice of theory first or practice-first arises from self-reflection or individual professional learning in which teachers act as their own agency of change, a variant of bottom-up. This might come about through 'picking up' relevant ideas from professional dialogue or from reading the professional and academic literature on the potential benefits of the proposed changes. They then either seek support or have a go

themselves. In the latter case, the self-agency is unambiguous; the teachers themselves derive the impetus for change from their own professional reading, reflection and collegial interaction. Self-agency is a powerful device in fostering change because it draws on self-motivation. It may arise in the manner just mentioned (self-reflection, reading, etc.) or it might be 'sparked off' by charismatic colleagues or initiatives sponsored by either local authorities or central government acting as awareness-raising agents. What appears strongly to be the case throughout the projects examined under the auspices of the ARIA study (see Chapter 6) is that unless teachers are committed through self-agency to any particular change, the prospects for successful dissemination and professional learning, leading to its sustained practice, are likely to be slim.

What has also been obvious from the ARIA work is that agency, while requiring a considerable degree of initial and ongoing self-agency, also requires external dimensions of support. Support conventionally ranges from awareness-raising, in the form of information and advice, to direct interventions including professional development events, which themselves are supported by appropriate resources and funding such as time out of school. The varieties of support in between include school-based staff development, peer support and whole school development planning processes.

Awareness and 'hearts and minds' as elements of readiness

Looking at agency from a teacher-as-learner perspective; that is, with a focus directly on teachers as primary agents in sponsoring and assimilating changes in their own practice, it is reasonable to apply some of the principles we know about learners and their motivation. Paraphrasing Black et al. (2003: 78), planners need to begin any change process by carefully locating the teachers' base position. A self-administered analysis of needs suggests itself as the sensible way forward, to ensure change conditions are as tailored as possible to the individual. However, no needs analysis, whether by the teachers for themselves or by others for the teachers, could hope to be effective or purposeful if the teachers are not sufficiently aware of the change issues and their potential. Common sense would identify some degree of readiness to be influenced as preferable to a cold-calling sales approach with no prior warning or preparation.

In the majority of initiatives aiming at change in assessment, awareness-raising forms a major part of the initial stages. The outcomes of prior research will often provide the rationale and act as a form of agency in promoting change. There seems little doubt, for example, that

Black and Wiliam's timely review (1998a) of the educational potential of appropriate formative (classroom) assessment lit the touch paper of radical reflection on the role of assessment in pedagogy and learning. Other major publications had made similar claims some years before (e.g. Crooks, 1988; Sadler, 1989), though arguably on less robust bases. However, the prevailing circumstances of ever more testing, league tables and top-down educational ideologies provided a fertile environment for Black and Wiliam's ideas to find an audience, prompting the rapid growth of interest and engagement by the teaching community in an alternative paradigm of assessment.

The effect may be likened to credible research providing teachers with room to manoeuvre beyond the confines of their established practice, a warrant for them to experiment and try out new approaches. Awareness of the potential for improved student motivation and attainment has spread like wildfire over the period since Black and Wiliam's (1998a) publication, and has enabled several national initiatives to be undertaken in assessment policy and practice. Examples include the assessment is for learning (AiFL) programme in Scotland and the Northern Ireland Revised Curriculum with its integrated assessment for learning policy (see Chapter 3).

Holmes et al. (2007) have placed the need for good awareness of the potential benefits firmly at the base of any professional learning development (see Figure 7.1). Simply put, teachers must know and understand the context and purpose of change sufficiently to evaluate their own needs **Fig. 7.1**

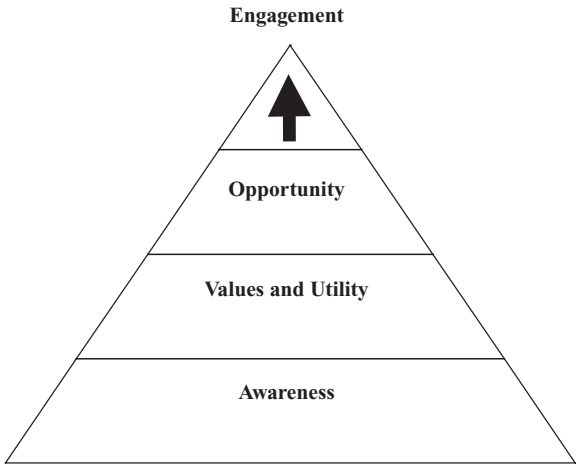

Figure 7.1 The foundational importance of awareness for initiating professional learning (reproduced with permission from Holmes et al., 2007)

and hopefully to develop the desire to adopt the proposed change. The model then moves through stages in which the teachers' values and the perceived utility of the change converge and are in sympathy with adopting it. The necessary opportunities for professional learning and practice to be grasped as teachers move to full engagement.

It seems almost trite to observe that the prospect of effective change will be considerably disadvantaged if it comes completely 'out of the blue'. Regardless of how the change situation might proceed, this model therefore argues that the initiating agent must be an awareness of the change context. But how do we characterize the stage between knowing about something (awareness) and preparing to do something about it (seeking or grasping the opportunity)?

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In the Holmes et al. (2007) (see Figure 7.1), the next stage of the building of readiness to learn and change is 'values and utility'. Awareness-raising alone would quickly founder if in fact the teachers concerned are not particularly supportive of the changes being proposed; if they see no benefit or value for themselves or if they cannot envisage any utility in supporting their teaching. Such circumstances can create substantial counter-agency influences.

For example, following on a process of awareness-raising, some teachers may develop educational or even philosophical objections to the proposed changes and some may also manifest a degree of antipathy towards them, perhaps arising from a variety of not uncommon perspectives or conditions. In the projects studied through ARIA, these have included workload concerns ('change means more work'), insufficient knowledge or understanding of the change process and its intentions, or an uncertainty about whether the changes will bring benefits to them or their students. Where change demands new skills, the problems associated with confidence, competence and time to develop the skills can all conspire to act as counter-agencies. Professional 'face' can also be a countervailing force if the perception of a deficit in skills – 'I have a need' or perhaps worse: 'They *[policy makers, the Inspectorate etc]* think I have a need' – is made a feature of the justification for change.

Awareness-raising alone will also founder if there is no attempt made to bring the teachers on board. Arguably, what seems to be as important as awareness in being an early element in the plan of a change process, is that the teachers should be positively disposed to learning something new and to undertaking personal development in it. This 'hearts and minds' predisposition, a willingness and readiness to reflect on one's own practice, to learn and to change it, is probably key to the success of any change and may therefore constitute a general rather than a specific condition. It is not difficult to conceive of teachers who are resistant to change *per se*; that is, the nature of the change has no bearing on their negative reaction.

If these teachers represent anything other than a small proportion of the community being exposed to a change, the change itself could be seriously confounded.

Generally speaking there is an argument that says we should collectively aim to create a culture of professional reflection and pursuit of improvement that can sustain continuous improvement and changed practice. However, for specific change contexts, there needs to be a well-formed plan of action to develop a positive disposition to the change in question. This means the convergence of the teachers' values with a recognition of the utility of the change to produce a strong self-agency, which then drives the process on to the third level of Figure 7.1 in which opportunities for change are grasped.

Counter-productive agency

In the absence of strong espousal (hearts and minds), several conditions and processes can amount in their effect to counter-productive agency in a change context.

For example, the requirement for compliance with a top-down policy, whether within a school or from an external body, may lead to a downgrading of the perceived value of the practice that forms the focus of the change. An example might be a senior management team (SMT) requirement that every teacher should begin each lesson with a WALT (We Are Learning To) board. Though intended to be the outcome of a teacher and a class sharing learning objectives, it may quickly become a must-do that is presented to the class with the minimum of discourse. Even worse, it may merely tick a box when a member of the senior management team calls to monitor its usage. When the compliance monitoring fades, this minimal engagement will also tend to become erratic until it fades away completely.

Indifference is a condition that also has the potential for counter-productive agency. If a change is adopted simply because it is relatively easy to adopt and is not perceived as a particularly useful activity, it has little prospect of being sustained. It may be the case that good experience arising from indifferent motives can ultimately stimulate a more positive espousal but it is more likely a doomed endeavour.

Unilateralism is a process that can promote both productive and counterproductive agency. The enthusiasm of the lone innovator can inspire some colleagues or repel others. Similarly, top-down diktats, whether from school managers or external authorities, will almost always fuel resentment, especially if the changes are perceived to be under-resourced or to encroach on professional judgement or personal time.

Conclusion

Self-agency is a powerful element in ensuring the success of teacher assessment in schools. If teachers have the evidence that teacher assessment will improve their pupils' learning, and that there will be consequent benefits for themselves and their teaching, they will respond positively. Schools and others wishing to develop teacher assessment must strive to cultivate and capture this self-agency if the changes are to be assimilated into sustainable practice.

Questions for reflection

1. In introducing an innovation in assessment
   a. What approaches might be adopted to promote purposeful and effective agency among teachers?
   b. What possible implications might there be to promote agency amongst learners?
   c. In what ways might agency be an issue for other groups; for example, policy makers, parents?
2. Reflecting on a recent innovation, to what extent was the importance of agency built into the design of the innovation? What strategies were used in practice?