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Information and communication technology: models of evaluation in France

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Abstract

This paper aims at analyzing the evaluation of information and communication technology (ICT) in educational settings in France. First, it focuses on some characteristics of the French educational system and analyzes the trend towards a more decentralized management of education, which raises several important issues, including the trend for central evaluation to evolve from control to communication. Secondly, we define our view of ICT and evaluation. Then we present an overview of evaluation at the national level and European level and discuss some of the main research approaches in France concerning students' learning, learning instruments, and teachers' communities. Finally, some perspectives for the future of ICT evaluation are proposed.

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1. Introduction

As information and communication technology (ICT) keeps spreading in educational systems of industrialized countries, different stakeholders (local and national authorities, school boards, parents, etc.) have a growing interest in the issue of evaluating its uses. However, evaluating ICT in education is a complex issue, which raises many questions. What is the purpose of the evaluation? Who demands it? What should be evaluated: software, student learning and educational projects? What will the evaluation be about: learning with ICT or from ICT, assessing learning using ICT or assessing learning with ICT (Mc Dougall, 2001)? What are the stakes? How can a reliable evaluation be conducted, especially in complex situations such as technology use supporting collaborative learning?

Any evaluation of ICT usage in education depends on its educational uses as defined by society. In France, two main aims can be identified: (1) educating students to use ICT in responsible ways and to become fully active citizens, aware

of the social and cultural implications of the new technologies; and, (2) ensuring that the development of ICT in education contributes to the modernization and improvement of society (Eurydice, 2001a). The first aim leads to providing students with new types of situations and learning activities embedded in the curriculum. The second aim deals with educational technology and poses instructional design problems. In practice, there is often confusion between these aims, which obfuscates the problem of evaluating ICT use in education. The concept of ICT evaluation in education is deeply anchored in the cultural tradition and educational organization of a country. This implies going further into the analysis by taking into account issues specific to French culture.

2. Main features of the French educational context

French tradition is anchored in a complex web of historical facts and traditions and the education system is still rather centralized. Teachers (especially primary teachers) played a very important political role in the late 19th century and in the beginning of the 20th, contributing to the creation of a national education system and a secular

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republic. After having passed a competitive examination, teachers become civil servants of the state and receive tenure. Curricula and syllabi (for each level and for each subject matter) are determined at the national level, and each teacher, as a civil servant, has a responsibility to respect these guidelines. However, teachers traditionally have the freedom to adopt their own pedagogical style.

Teachers have been trained and prepared in specific institutions called Instituts Universitaires de Formation des Maîtres (IUFM) since 1991.¹ When they pass their examination, a position is proposed on a national basis for a secondary teacher and on a regional basis for a primary teacher. It can be considered that the country has a tradition of central control but a recent and rather fragile culture of evaluation.

There is a complex teacher-evaluation system with several hierarchies, responsible for overseeing school life and teachers' pedagogical activities. Every year, a secondary teacher's administrative performance is evaluated by the school principal. A second assessment, based on the pedagogical style, is carried out by an individual evaluator's (*inspecteur*) observations. The stakes are relatively low, since the vast majority of teachers have tenure. In fact, for many secondary teachers, inspections are probably like a ritual happening sporadically, about every 5 years. The mission of the *inspecteur* has evolved in the last 20 years, from playing the role of an evaluator to a facilitator actively participating in teacher training and teacher community development. *Inspecteurs* serve also as guarantors of the correct functioning of the educational system.

During the past 30 years there has been a steady move towards a more decentralized management of education. Local authorities are financially in charge of educational buildings and materials, but have no responsibility for pedagogical activities. For example, they pay for computers, networks and Internet access. This implies important investments in education and the local authorities naturally want to understand the impact of these investments. They are in fact not only interested in schools but also in hospitals, employment and so on. They favor infrastructure solutions responding to perceived needs. The Internet and the sharing of resources provide indicators of ICT usage in schools (e.g. access to services, CD-ROMs, and so on), but no indications of pedagogical renewal are available.

Local political authorities are now in a position to decide the amount of funding they will invest in educational reforms and the kind of infrastructure they will install. From a governmental point of view, evaluation tends to evolve from control to communication in order to bring new stakeholders data about what is really going on and, hopefully, to convince them to move forward.

France is a country with a long tradition of debate and, sometimes, confrontation, particularly in educational matters. Often, central governing bodies have to take practical

decisions on matters where the law gives no clear answers and where no consensus exists. Successive secretaries of state for education (*Ministres de l'éducation nationale*) have asked prominent personalities to lead temporary missions on controversial points. For example, Antoine Prost, a famous historian, recently headed a task force about research in education, which proposed new orientations, recommending in particular that survey-like research be developed. One of the rather peripheral remarks proposed that ICT research should not have priority, which exerted a real influence on the National Institute for Pedagogical Research policy (INRP—Institut National de Recherche Pédagogique) (Prost, 2001).

A recent report (Pair, 2001) distinguishes between three aims of evaluation: for diagnosis, for training and forecasting, and for assessment. It should be noted that even though individual assessment is well developed, there is no tradition for assessing the administrative units that make up the educational system in France.

One of the characteristics of the current situation may be the emergence of different *observatoires* and institutions devoted to evaluations; the different directorates of the government install *observatoires* to evaluate different aspects of the educational system. A High Council of Education Evaluation was also created in 2000. Quite interestingly, this council is not in charge of evaluating the French educational system, but of evaluating its evaluation system.²

3. ICT and education

It should be mentioned that France is, along with the UK and the USA, among the first countries to introduce ICT in education; public policies regarding audio–visual aids were launched after World War II and policies concerning informatics were introduced in 1970. Uses of ICT in education may be classified in four categories: as a subject area, as a support system for subject areas, as an educational technology, and as information management. The first three categories are elaborated below.

3.1. ICT as a subject

About 20 years ago, *informatique* (information technology or informatics) emerged as a school subject and played an important part in the integration of ICT in schools (Baron & Bruillard, 1996). Now, the necessity for students to acquire competencies in information management is widely acknowledged but, apart from some specific courses in vocational schools, ICT is no longer considered a school subject. However, at the lower secondary level (grades 6–9), ICT is emphasized in two subject areas: technology and documentation.

¹ <http://www.iufm.education.fr>

² <http://cisad.adc.education.fr/hcee/>

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