

Evaluating public legal education: where we are now and where we want to get to



In its 2007 Report *Developing capable citizens: the role of public legal education*¹, the PLEAS Task Force identified a number of crucial obstacles to the growth of PLE. One of these was a failure to develop the good practices essential to quality in PLE provision:

*PLE providers have not been able to develop good practice and use it to raise the overall quality of PLE initiatives across the board. The main reason for this is that there has been so little of the systematic evaluation of PLE initiatives essential to the identification of good practice. Evaluations of PLE are found only in some better-resourced initiatives but are rarely known about or drawn on by other practitioners.*²

When we look at notions of ‘comprehensive evaluation’ we find a broadly shared core of definitions that describe evaluation as including monitoring, process evaluation, cost-benefit assessments, and impact evaluation. Each of these is in some ways distinct from the others. For example, monitoring looks at whether a project is being implemented as it was intended and ensures feedback and adjustments across the life of the project. Process evaluation focuses on problems in the delivery of the product or service – is it doing what it says on the tin? Value-for-money evaluations assess project costs, including ideally the costs of alternative uses of the same resources. And impact evaluation looks at effects on its target audiences, and whether these effects can be attributed to the project’s activities. At its best, impact evaluation also explores unintended consequences, whether positive or negative, on audiences.

The PLEAS report also touched on the particular difficulties that evaluation of PLE initiatives present³. PLE is about effecting changes in attitudes, confidence, behaviours, and capabilities, and changes in any or all of these are famously difficult to assess, and perhaps even more difficult to attribute to a specific programme or project. In tackling the task of developing better PLE evaluation, we are taking on the difficult issue of measuring outcomes.

So how is PLE evaluation today? What is happening? Well, it seems that the picture we find today is little different from that identified by the Task Force. Most evaluation, where undertaken, falls into the categories of monitoring and process evaluation. Internationally there has been a fair amount of process evaluation, and we find in other countries the same concerns about an inability to demonstrate impact that Plenet sees as its core evaluation task now.

¹ http://www.pleas.org.uk/news_852-6107-1056.html

² Pleas task force report: *Developing capable citizens: the role of public legal education* p20

³ Ibid

Concerns about how well a project works in its own terms and core information about outputs are of course extremely important. Projects also tend to undertake various forms of user assessment, either through 'feedback' the time of the delivery of the programme (at the end of a 'session') or later through user and intermediary interviews and discussions, after perhaps a period of involvement in or contact with the project's outputs or products.

But the process and output-related aspects of evaluation are for the most part no different for PLE than for other projects that seek to effect social and personal changes. And there is a wealth of literature on these kinds of evaluation, which we hope, in the near future, to link in to the Plenet website. For this reason, in the current phase of the development of PLE evaluation Plenet will focus on what is distinctive about PLE evaluation. To help to enable good practice in PLE we understand what is unique about PLE and how to evaluate that uniqueness. If we can do this, we will strengthen our ability to get to grips with good practice and communicate that knowledge to other practitioners who will in turn improve their own PLE practices.

Understanding how PLE might achieve its goal of much greater 'legal capability' will require more than the creation of new tools for project evaluation. To reach a situation where we are able to design and implement projects or programmes that we are more confident will succeed in promoting legal capability will also necessitate at the very least dipping into disciplines such as theories of learning, and of how social and personal changes occur in people's lives.

We will need to better understand the 'legally capable citizen'. We can learn from other subjects, for example, research undertaken to study indebtedness has proposed the notion of debt 'domains' in which people have different levels of knowledge and skills. Assessment of these capabilities gives a more predictive understanding of how people can move out of debt. There is a need for a parallel stream of PLE development on these broader more academic and theoretical issues.

To grow in its current phase, PLE needs to demonstrate its value as a tool for helping to achieve outcomes that originate in other work or concerns. What we mean by this is that we are not trying in this phase to create 'pure' PLE projects unrelated to other social agendas. For example, we will not be seeking to identify particular groups that need to know more or do more about some aspect of legal capability, but rather we will ask how PLE can contribute to, say, reducing the difficulties experienced by young homeless people or to helping new arrivals to the UK to find their way around in our society. And so PLE evaluation goals will form only one part of the goals of wider projects.

Two additional health checks. Plenet is committed to developing evaluation tools that are useable and affordable. Outcomes evaluation can be costly, and it is often the case that resources to fund PLE evaluation are limited. And small-scale evaluations - the most affordable kind - are notoriously dismissed as 'unrepresentative'. Plenet will bear both of these factors in mind in its development work over the coming months and years. By testing the products as they develop, we can ensure that we do not create perfect, unaffordable evaluation tools that no-one can afford to use.

John Seargeant
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