Observation Skills in Psychology

Phase 2: 2004

Second report from External Evaluator
Professor Margaret Harris
Royal Holloway, University of London

Aim of the evaluation

The aims of the end of year evaluation are as follows:

• To guide the progress of the project
• To ensure that monies are properly spent and that the project is carried out in accordance with the project plan
• To ensure that the goals of the project are achieved
• To revisit the appropriateness of the project goals and plans as the project unfolds
• To inform future educational development work

Ongoing monitoring of the project and provision of guidance

During the course of 2004, I had a meeting with the Project Directors (Professor Vicky Lewis and John Oates) and the Project Manager (Sue Martin) to review the progress of the project and to consider plans for the next stages of development. I also attended a joint meeting of the consortium project team and the steering committee in January and a meeting of the steering committee in November.

In addition to the meetings, I have received detailed written reports about the progress of the project and the Annual Report 2004.

Progress of the project over 2004

The Annual Report is very clear and thorough and it provides an honest account of the achievements of the project over the last year. As in the previous years, the report highlights the close consultation that has been carried out with members of the consortium and the extensive dissemination that has been undertaken.

The main achievements in 2004 were:

• Refinement of the undergraduate version of fOCUS to remove the familiarisation unit so that users could find out how to use the software as the need arose.
• Completion of two units in Observation Methods for undergraduates to explain the principles of (1) Reliability and Validity and (2) Coding; and production of associated course booklets.
• Development and production of a version of fOCUS for Clinical Trainees that incorporates two units on (1) Opening and Closing Sessions and (2) Note-taking.
The development of fOCUS for clinical trainees has been the major undertaking for 2004. The two units that have been produced are very carefully structured and they address important issues for clinical trainees. The booklets for each unit are very easy to follow and the chosen activities have been designed to generate discussion.

Initial feedback from trainees and trainers has been very positive and this reflects the fact that the fOCUS team engaged in extended consultation with leaders of DClinPsych training both before and during the development of the materials. This strand of the project has proved to be a great success.

The two units for the undergraduate version of fOCUS are well structured and they both address core topics in observational methodology. The removal of the familiarisation units and the reflective exercise make the software more attractive to students but the careful structuring of the two units means that key skills will still be acquired and practiced.

**Dissemination**

The Annual Report details the dissemination that has taken place during the year. This continues to be excellent with the team making use of both articles and workshops.

**Overall evaluation of the project**

The second year of the project has been very successful. The development of an independent clinical psychology version of fOCUS has been particularly important for the project and I look forward to receiving further reports from sessions with trainees.

The developments of the undergraduate version have made fOCUS easier to use and the supporting documentation provides teachers of methods courses with excellent materials for the teaching of core concepts in observational methods.

After two years, the project has already achieved more than was originally proposed and the project team is to be congratulated for this. I do, however, have one concern about the project that relates to resources.

The considerable success of this project can be directly attributed to the dedication of the course team. In the original proposal, it was intended that Open University teaching staff, particularly John Oates, be released from some of their duties in order to enable them to spend time on this project. This has not proved possible and it seems unlikely that the situation will change in the final year of the project as the specialist nature of Open University teaching is such that it is very difficult for someone unfamiliar with the system to replace faculty members on an ad hoc basis. Accordingly, I think it is very important that the goals for the final year of the project do not place undue demands on the members of the fOCUS team who are full-time OU teaching staff.
Developments in Phase 3

- In the final year of the project it will be important to concentrate on consolidating and extending existing uses of fOCUS rather than undertaking new ventures such as the development of new assets or the extension to users groups outside Psychology.

- So far, the main use of the undergraduate version of fOCUS has been for teaching research methods to first years. However, the software has been used successfully by a postgraduate at the University of Portsmouth to analyse primate behaviour and this suggests that fOCUS can be used as a research tool as well as for teaching.

- The ESRC 1+3 model for PhD training provides an important opportunity for the incorporation of fOCUS into postgraduate training. There are also a number of MSc courses where fOCUS would be a useful tool. The aim would be to teach students how to use fOCUS in their own research. This would involve students incorporating their own assets into fOCUS and developing their own coding systems. The experience of the student at Portsmouth shows that this is already possible and so relatively little work would need to be done to take this forward in Phase 3. It is also possible that fOCUS could be used by final year undergraduates who wished to use observational methods in their individual projects.

- As part of the general move to make fOCUS a flexible tool that can be developed for individual research, it would be useful to consider simplifying the appearance of the screen so that the software is easier for new users. I know that there are already some outline plans to do this and I would recommend that these be pursued as this work can be contracted out and will not make undue demands on the OU teaching staff.

- Another possible development would be for fOCUS to move to a point where teachers and trainers can add in their own assets and develop their own lessons.

- There is also more scope for the use of fOCUS within the Open University itself. One course within the Education faculty (EK310) is currently using fOCUS in its presentation and another [ED209] is developing fOCUS for use in the course. However, it seems highly likely that courses outside the faculty could also make use of the software as it is ideal for students who are learning at home.

Margaret Harris 19 June 2007