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Alternative assessment for learner engagement in a climate of performativity: lessons from an English case study

David James* and Jonathan Simmons

University of the West of England, Bristol, UK

In many education systems, young peoples' 'disaffection' is increasingly equated with non-participation in education, training and employment. There is also an expectation that educational activity can provide a key response to this situation. Drawing upon a case study of a successful development project based in Bristol, England which utilized an 'alternative' assessment regime in raising the participation and attainments of young people defined as disengaged from schooling, the paper considers a series of key issues. These include: the nature of the provision; the difficulties of understanding and evaluating it in a climate of performativity; a distinctive concept of learning promoted by the assessment practices; and the role of individual and networked professional mediation in creating the 'space' for the initiative. The paper concludes that the case study project represents a 'marriage of convenience' between the expectations of a culture of performativity and, on the other hand, a horizontal community of practice which provides a strong professional framework for action, and that there are implications for both practice and policy.

Introduction

This paper is concerned with assessment processes and outcomes in educational provision that is aimed at 'disaffected'¹ young people—or rather, those whose relationship with conventional schooling might be termed one of 'disengagement'.² In many countries, educational activity is seen as a primary means through which to re-engage young people who are disaffected (Goodman, 1999; Council of European Union, 2004). Despite considerable variation in the way that this term is understood amongst academics and policy-makers (MacDonald, 1997), there are nevertheless some strong trends in contemporary usage. In Europe, and specifically in the UK, the

* Corresponding author. Faculty of Education, University of the West of England, Bristol, Frenchay Campus, Bristol BS16 1QY, UK. Email: David.James@uwe.ac.uk

concept of disaffection is usually framed by a general discourse of social exclusion, with a focus on the association of factors like homelessness, unemployment and low educational attainment with other sources of multiple disadvantage such as disrupted families and poverty. Disaffection is sometimes linked to non-participation by young people in the conventional means of political expression (European Commission, 2001), but it is most often equated with non-participation in education, training or employment. Such non-participation is 'characterised in a circular fashion as both the consequence and generator of youth disaffection' (Sandford *et al.*, 2006, p. 254). Sandford *et al.* also point to the emergence of a more nuanced understanding of disaffection and disengagement as localized and heterogeneous and as located within certain of the key transitions made by young people (e.g. from education to the labour market) (see for example Baldwin *et al.*, 1997).

Although disaffection is so often equated with non-participation, there is also a great deal that happens *within* schooling that is taken as indicative of disaffection. Rising figures on truancy and school exclusions in the UK have caused particular alarm in recent years. For some observers, the move to prescription and centralization of the curriculum is at the core of rising staff and pupil disaffection (e.g. Riley, 1998). For others, pupil disaffection is exacerbated by 'shifts in the culture of teaching associated with managerialism, target setting and league tables' which have reduced the amount of time teachers can give to pastoral work, disproportionately affecting the most vulnerable pupils (Vulliamy & Webb, 2003, p. 280). Schools are seen, then, as places that generate disaffection and simultaneously as places that can provide solutions to it (Sandford *et al.*, 2006).

In this paper we are principally concerned with three issues that are raised by the widespread acceptance that educational activity (and therefore, assessment) has a role to play in responding positively to disaffection. Firstly, we are concerned with practical and conceptual questions, such as the form that such educational activity might take and how it can be organized and arranged, particularly in terms of the forms of assessment used. Secondly, we wish to draw attention to some of the difficulties, in a climate of performativity, of understanding and evaluating the processes and outcomes of such activity. Thirdly, and combined with these two issues, we wish to consider the way that a specific assessment regime promotes certain ideas about the nature of learning, and we look briefly at both individual and networked professional mediation in the process of offering alternative assessment to a group of young people.

The analysis here draws upon a case study of provision that was successful in its re-engagement of young people whose relationship with schooling had become disengaged. The provision took the form of a regionally focused development project and its evaluation in Bristol, England, funded by the Learning and Skills Council. This initiative made use of a particular assessment regime (The Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network—ASDAN), parts of which are designed to be used with disengaged learners in a range of settings, within, outside and beyond formal schooling. The project was specifically intended to increase participation and raise attainment of 14–19-year-olds across the city, though as we explain below, it was also underpinned by a range of other aims and practices that pervade the culture of

ASDAN, and these are significant in weighing up the quality of processes and outcomes.

A note on the UK context

There is now a long history of concern in the UK about the success with which education systems ‘deliver’ a labour force that is sufficiently well-equipped to meet the expectations of employers and the needs of the economy. This is sometimes accompanied by concerns about what education could do differently so as to increase social cohesion (Colley, Wahlberg & James, 2007). For example, in addition to celebrating a range of improvements in primary and secondary schooling, a recent UK Government White Paper, *14–19 Education and Skills*, repeated a familiar lament:

Numbers staying on post-16 have improved but are still too low—far down the international league table. Many employers are not satisfied with the basic skills of school leavers going directly into jobs. Some young people drift outside education, employment or training between the ages of 16 and 19. The most able young people are not as fully stretched as they could be. (Department for Education and Skills, 2005, p. 4)

Amongst many related issues, the White Paper mentioned a link between school truancy and later criminal behaviour. It drew attention to the low credibility and status of vocational qualifications and their lack of a distinctive identity. It set out a ‘significant programme of change’ spread over the period 2005 to 2015 (p. 93) and a series of new proposals to bring about improvements. The current general academic school qualifications (GCSEs: the General Certificate of Secondary Education) would be retained as ‘cornerstones of the new system’ (p. 6). New ‘specialised Diplomas’ would be made available at levels 1, 2 and 3,³ and employers would be ‘put in the lead’ through new bodies called Sector Skills Councils. The ‘functional elements’ in the study of English and mathematics would gain a new emphasis, and the achievement and attainment figures, by which schools are compared, would be ‘toughened’. These and other changes were to be underpinned by ‘a sharp accountability framework’ (p. 86).

Part of the same document concerned itself with ‘engaging all young people’. The headline promise was to ‘... provide more opportunities and incentives for teenagers who have not achieved level 2 by 16 to do so post-16 and support them in achieving level 1 or entry level qualifications as steps on the way’ (Department for Education and Skills, 2005, p. 6). The rationale was as follows:

The economic and social costs of young people being in the NEET [not in education, employment or training] group are high and they are the young people who we most need to re-engage in education and training. At the end of 2003, around 9% of 16–18 year olds were estimated to be NEET at 16, 17 and 18—with a further 4% in the group at two out of three of these ages ... Part of the solution will be to offer these young people qualifications and a curriculum that they want to pursue post-16 ... (Department for Education and Skills, 2005, p. 67)

A recent paper from the Scottish Executive (2006) presented an even more forthright position with regard to this group of young people, setting out an intention to ‘eradicate

the problem'. The category 'not in education, employment or training' amounts to a dominant contemporary operationalization of the concept 'disaffected'.

The case study project and its evaluation

The development project was located in Bristol, a local authority at the bottom of the GCSE league tables.⁴ Entitled *Increasing Participation and Attainment levels of 14–19 Year Olds in the West of England*, the project commenced in October 2002 and concluded in August 2004, with its main activity in the 17-month period from January 2003 to May 2004. It was funded by the Learning and Skills Council (West of England) (LSC)⁵ and was managed and operated by the Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network (ASDAN), an educational charity.⁶ The project had one overall aim, which was to *make a significant contribution to the LSC strategic objective of enabling 85% of young people in the region to attain a Level 2 qualification by the age of 19*. It also had a series of objectives, closely linked to this aim, covering staff training for all participating establishments (schools, colleges, off-site provision and training providers, including employers offering on-the-job training) in the West of England region, and the enabling of the target group to attain a level 2 qualification.

ASDAN represents a particular type of curriculum and assessment, and it is worth describing these in some detail. Its roots are in the curriculum development model promoted by the UK Schools Council from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s, in teacher-devised public examinations in secondary education, and in a 'social and community' interpretation of the Training and Vocational Educational Initiative of the early 1980s (Yeomans, 1996). It has at times been declared to be in opposition to centralized control of the curriculum (see Crombie-White, 1995, 1996). It was developed by three regional consortia of teachers (in the English counties of Devon, Avon and Berkshire) in the late 1980s and grew rapidly during the early 1990s, both in terms of numbers of learners registered and in the range of programmes and qualifications available. It now serves some 4,500 centres, and its qualifications are approved by the Secretary of State for Education under Section 96 of the Learning and Skills Act 2000. Key national reviews, including the Dearing review of 16–19 qualifications (Dearing, 1996), and the Tomlinson review (Tomlinson, 2004), have referred in positive terms to the capacity of ASDAN programmes and qualifications to recognise and reward a broader range of achievements than most mainstream provision. ASDAN declares that the common features of its programmes and qualifications are that:

- They are learner centred, offering opportunities for a negotiated curriculum which is modular and activity based;
- They encourage candidates to develop responsibility for their own learning through a process of action planning and review;
- They assist in the personal and social development of the individual through a focus on Key Skills for which the QCA (Qualifications Curriculum Authority) national standards provide a template for assessment and accreditation;

- They recognise achievement across the school/college curriculum, as well as in the home, the community and the world of work. (ASDAN, 2007)

For learners and providers, the process of working with ASDAN is essentially one of identifying learning goals in the form of ‘challenges’ and tasks within topics or areas of interest. Activities are often collaborative and always include the production of evidence of completion, using a range of media. This evidence is subject to both internal and external moderation and verification (see QCA, 2006).

Whilst they do depend on a form of criterion referencing, ASDAN programmes and qualifications also embody a particular construction of achievement that departs from mainstream assessment regimes in the extent to which it is continually professionally reconstructed, a theme taken up later in this paper. For now, three other points are worth noting. The first is that over the last few years, ASDAN awards have increasingly gained recognition by ‘mainstream’ systems. Examples of this include: the admission to the National Qualifications Framework of ASDAN’s Certificate of Personal Effectiveness, and the calibration by Government agencies of its equivalence to various widely known general academic qualifications; the inclusion of ASDAN achievements in the Schools and Colleges Achievement and Attainment Tables; the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service acceptance of a points value contributing to university entrance qualification for ASDAN level 3 (Brockington, 2006). It will be interesting to see to what extent such recognition of equivalence leads to changes in perceptions of *status*, given the continued cultural reliance, in England particularly, on the ‘known’ general academic qualifications as the benchmark for all other qualifications (see Torrance *et al.*, 2005, pp. 10–15). Secondly, as the examples just given imply, ASDAN programmes and qualifications are in no sense confined to the ‘less academic’ or to those ‘disengaged from schooling’ amongst young people. On the contrary, they appeal to (and are used by) a wide range of learners (including adults). Thirdly, there is growing international interest in ASDAN and plans to offer versions of the programmes in several European countries, particularly to learners who do not do well through mainstream assessment.

The development project was evaluated by the University of the West of England, Bristol and a report was produced in September 2004 (James & Hamilton, 2004). Subsequently, ASDAN and the LSC commissioned a small-scale qualitative research study as an extension to the evaluation, focusing on a small number of providers and learners in order to develop a more intimate understanding of practices and the nature and consequences of engagement with ASDAN activity, materials and processes. This took place between November 2004 and April 2005 and a report was produced in May 2005 (James & Simmons, 2005). Taken together, the main evaluation and its extension utilized a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods, drawing upon:

- Survey returns from 27 providers, detailing as far as possible attainments, attendance, reading age, exclusions, outcomes and a range of other information for over 600 young people, in some cases offering ‘baseline’ measurements against which project outcomes could then be compared;

- Observation forms from 25 providers, offering a range of experience related to the project but with a particular focus on changes observed in young people during their association with it;
- Fifteen in-depth interviews with key staff across a sample of providers. These were chosen to reflect the range of providers—school-based, college-based, youth service, private trainers and other schemes;
- Six telephone interviews with key staff to explore specific points;
- Interviews with 29 participating young people located with 15 of the providers;
- Analysis of documents, including a range of materials generated by ASDAN, some generated by individual staff, student portfolios and other work, general correspondence, and LSC documentation;
- Observation of three ASDAN workshops for providers and four project review meetings.

The evaluation was independent of ASDAN, though relied in part on data gathered by ASDAN itself in monitoring its work. Whilst there were usually opportunities for triangulation of qualitative data, the quantitative elements inevitably relied on key staff in each provider gaining access to secondary data, with very limited scope for verification. The variation in the capacity of individuals, even in schools, to supply information on prior attainments, or attendance for each of the learners within the project was much greater than expected. Furthermore, for some of the non-school providers it was a matter of principle to disregard most information about individual learner history, because they wished to offer the young people in their care a ‘clean slate’. Together, these factors meant that there were many gaps in the quantitative data.

In keeping with the tenets of the ‘democratic’ (MacDonald, 1987), and ‘case study’ (House, 1980; Stake, 1980, 2005) approaches in evaluation, the work focused on activities as much as on intentions. Accordingly, there were two categories of ‘main findings’ within the evaluation. The first related directly to the stated aims and objectives of the development project, and the extent to which these were fulfilled, whilst also pointing to an important area of ambiguity within them. The second took the form of commentary on what else might be learnt from the evaluation. This included both substantive and methodological issues. Yet both categories of findings are also of use and interest well beyond the original temporal and geographical location. We suggest that the development project and its outcomes can function as a *critical case* in the sense that it permits a level of insight and logical inference for analysis, policy and practice in other settings (see Flyvbjerg, 2006).

Raising attainment and participation—the project in terms of its aims and objectives

As already mentioned, the project set out to *make a significant contribution to the LSC strategic objective of enabling 85% of young people in the region to attain a Level 2 qualification by the age of 19*. It encompassed 616 young people working within 25 providers,

of whom 17 were secondary schools (the others were a mixture of established and new training providers of various kinds, a Further Education College, a youth service, and a pupil referral unit for pupils excluded (i.e. expelled) from school).

Taking the 25 providers as a whole, the end of the project period saw learners gaining 145 Entry-level outcomes, 88 Level-1 outcomes, and 7 Level-2 outcomes. In most cases there was evidence that these outcomes would not have been attained without the existence of the project. With 23 of the 25 providers there was also clear evidence of other significant outcomes, including raised levels of confidence, marked positive changes in social skills, and other positive spin-offs for study and life. In nine of the 25 providers there was particularly strong evidence of progression.

There is not the space here to go into detail with regard to all the objectives of the development project. There was a high degree of agreement across learners and participating staff in their assessment of the strengths of ASDAN materials and systems. These were valued most highly for:

- their flexibility (particularly in terms of pace and timing);
- their compatibility with a range of curricula and pedagogic practices;
- their capacity to tap in to the interests of learners;
- their capacity to instill good study habits;
- the sense of achievement they made possible;
- the development of confidence, independence and self-esteem that they seemed to help foster in young people;
- the relatively clear opportunities they offered for progression.

The evaluation came to the view that these characteristics were pivotal in the success of the development project. However, it also concluded that it was important not to see ASDAN systems and materials in a technocratic way, as a free-standing 'fix' or panacea. Factors like professional values, continuity of staffing and positive institutional support were also crucial to the successes with learners. Some staff felt strongly that ASDAN materials and systems provided them with a source of legitimation for working in ways that were at odds with dominant systems and assumptions. For these staff, ASDAN materials and systems had an affinity with core professional values and a sense of autonomy that other areas of their practice did not fully acknowledge or realize. There are interesting similarities here with the external sources of professional sustenance discussed by Colley *et al.* in relation to staff in further education colleges (Colley, James & Dilment, 2007) .

It is worth making specific mention of the fifth and sixth objectives of the project. The fifth was *to have enabled the target group of young people to achieve a level 2 qualification*. If this was taken to mean the completion of a recognised level 2 qualification within the project period, then the project (with only 7 [a mere 1%] of its 616 initial participants in this category) must be judged to have failed. If, however, the objective was taken in its wider sense (i.e. with the emphasis on *to have enabled*), then the project represented a considerable success. Given that the over arching aim specified 'by the age of 19', and that the majority of the young people involved had some years

to go before they reached this age, the evaluation report argued that this latter interpretation was the more reasonable one.

The sixth objective was *to have evaluated the impact on staying on rates and achievement levels*. As noted, there was good evidence of progression in nine of the 25 providers, and some evidence in most of them. Highly successful participation, of which clear progression was a feature, depended upon:

- particular professional values on the part of teachers or key staff;
- the quality and nature of relationships formed with young people;
- some predictability in the regularity and continuity of contact between staff and young people;
- a positive institutional acknowledgement of the work;
- clear location of responsibility for the work within an establishment;
- continuity of staffing.

The evaluation was persistent in trying to weigh up the extent to which certain processes and outcomes were generated by the project and would have been unlikely to have happened without it. The weight of evidence pointed clearly to overall success in this respect. Whilst the data from providers showed that attrition was high, there was no doubt that the project had a positive impact on the achievements and prospects of hundreds of young people, not least in terms of learning how to operate successfully in a framework that offered accreditation. A proportion of this positive impact was visible in the completion of awards that were themselves significant building blocks towards level 2 outcomes.

The limits of common-sense indicators

The evaluation had a role in ‘critical friendship’ to ASDAN in respect of building capacity and awareness in data collection and data handling and analysis, and in this role raised some interesting questions about the monitoring of activity. One of these concerned the validity and utility of certain indicators in relation to work with ‘disengaged’ client groups.

At the outset of the project, there was an intention to collect data on variables such as prior attendance, reading age and exclusions, then to compare this ‘baseline’ data with that collected for the same variables at the end of the project period. These variables were not seen as pivotal, but instead reflected a wish on the part of the organization to cast a wide net that would enhance knowledge of the learners and might suggest further avenues for study and analysis. We did also detect an organizational interest in generating the sort of ‘hard’ data that funders and new provider establishments might find convincing. In the event, 18 of the 25 providers were able to supply data that enabled some measure of changes in attendance within the project period. In ten of these, average attendance rates increased, though often these increases were very small, or reflected one or two dramatic individual shifts against a backdrop of small changes across a cohort. (Of the remaining eight, six showed minute or zero changes and two showed small decreases in average attendance). It

was only possible to compare changes in measured reading age in two providers, both of which showed dramatic increases in the cohort median scores (of 9 and 13 months respectively) accompanying the period of involvement in the project. In two providers there were marked reductions in the number of exclusions (of all types) during the period of the project.

Such things are worth knowing, but probably tell us little if removed from their specific context. The provision was not designed to raise reading age, though it is entirely plausible that reading age would increase alongside sustained engagement with ASDAN materials. The same could be said about school exclusions. With regard to attendance, even if the data were complete there would seem little point in collating them across the project to arrive at estimates of 'net effect on attendance'. The issue is one of logic rather than of the availability of data. It is best illustrated if we take one of the many specific instances where, in a school setting, a young person's attendance declined during the project period in comparison to a previous school record. Upon talking with the teacher and/or the young person in such cases, we learnt that the most significant point was that the young person *was still attending school at all*. In several such cases our evidence suggests that without the ASDAN programme, his or her school attendance would probably have ceased altogether. This knowledge makes fluctuations in attendance against a recent average 'baseline' of no consequence in the evaluation of the initiative. It also counsels against the averaging of trends in attendance, even within one cohort.

The matter is, however, even more complex, because 'attendance' has a wide range of meanings. In one school we were, unexpectedly, able to compare 'ASDAN attendance' with other contemporaneous school sessions, and this reflected positively on 'ASDAN sessions'. However, it was impossible to use this measure in other schools, and it was clearly inappropriate in the non-school settings. Several providers involved in the project made a point of *not knowing* about school backgrounds, including attendance, of the young people they worked with (the 'clean slate' idea mentioned earlier). One large training provider's records expressed attendance as a percentage in relation to an initial contract made individually with each young person. The evaluation came to the view that whilst in every case, changes in attendance were *relevant*, the range of practices meant it would have been a mistake to treat the data as comparable between different providers. The apparent simplicity of attendance as a quantitative indicator of the success or failure of such provision is illusory.

The texture of learning and assessment

All the young people we interviewed and observed were outside mainstream schooling as conventionally understood. Some had been excluded and/or had a history of truancy, and were now with other kinds of providers. Others were still in school, but attending few or no conventional lessons, and meeting separately as an 'ASDAN group'. We were particularly interested in the nature of learning and assessment for these young people and the staff working with them. In most cases, young people

were in closely tutored workshop settings with between six and 10 learners working with a tutor. Relationships were characterized by regular individual attention, nurturing, trust and mutual respect and care. As one tutor put it, ‘the young people were being listened to, where normally no-one listens to them’. Of course, working with ASDAN materials did not guarantee such characteristics would be present, though we would argue that the materials and the assumptions built into them had a strong affinity with both humanistic and ‘multiple intelligence’ concepts of learners and learning (cf. Gardner, 1983; Rogers, 1983). Young people are to some extent put into the driving seat so that they can construct activities which demonstrate progress against criteria that they have agreed with staff, and staff repeatedly pointed to examples of the rising confidence of young people that resulted from this.

We spent some time looking at the portfolios of evidence kept by the young people we interviewed, and spoke with them about what they had done. Most of the recording of activity took the form of photographs and captions, but we saw a wide range of other documents they had generated or used (including questionnaires, interview checklists, calculations, storyboards, maps, diagrams, plans, some extended writing, often of a ‘diary’ nature). We were struck by a contrast between these documents and many of the more conventional tasks we had seen used in schools and colleges. Where assessed coursework usually consists of lengthy pieces aimed at testing some knowledge, understanding or skill against criteria, the portfolio of items appeared to function first and foremost as a *proxy for experience*. That is, the portfolio was treated as evidence that:

- certain processes had been undergone;
- a problem had been identified and solved;
- information had been gathered to assist in making a decision then taken;
- there had been a period of sustained effort to realize a plan or event;
- some knowledge, understanding or skill had been developed;
- the young person could do something of clear worth that they could not do before.

In addition, the portfolio was often taken to signify and celebrate ‘distance travelled’, or a movement towards greater confidence, awareness and engagement with someone or something new. Some of the examples we saw dealt with personally pressing issues to do with housing, consumer rights, gaining employment, health and caring for children. Others centred on recording aspects of trips or visits to new people and places. As we looked through some of the portfolios with young people, we were struck by the pleasure they seemed to have taken in the activities—and indeed in recalling them. Negative experiences of conventional school work were a constant point of contrast. The young people generally expressed pride in their work, though there were a couple of exceptions. One did suggest that he was ‘just going through the motions’ in response to tutor suggestions.

We were struck by three features that distinguished ASDAN work from other school work in the eyes of the young people themselves. Firstly, they were unanimous in their dislike for writing and in their preference for lessons in which they were active. ASDAN work often did not have to involve much writing, and the emphasis was on

practical activities, both inside and outside school. Secondly, many told us that the activities had real relevance to their lives. Thirdly, many of them valued the team-based nature of ASDAN work, arguing that this was in contrast to the individualized and competitive nature of the mainstream school curriculum. The young people recognized that different individuals brought different qualities to a joint process. Overall, our data strongly suggest that young people valued and appreciated the *practicality*, the *personal relevance* and the *collective nature* of the ASDAN work that they had done.

This point is particularly interesting in relation to the most fundamental of differences in how learning is conceived. In a recent and well-known overview, Sfard (1998) distinguished between the *acquisition* and *participation* metaphors that are prevalent in policy, practice and in the analysis of learning activity. She argued that both metaphors are necessary, but also that the acquisition one often dominates thinking. Arguably, schooling continues to be caught in systems that champion and celebrate an individual acquisition notion of learning. If they are, this is likely to add to the relative advantage of those pupils who are 'more academic' and can succeed in assessment processes that require isolated individual written performances. By the same token, pupils who find these assessment processes more difficult are likely to be progressively disadvantaged. The irony here, following the work of Lave and Wenger (1991) on *situated learning* and on *communities of practice*, is that most work and life situations require learning as *participation*: that is, learning at work and in other settings is most commonly a collective process in which individuals shift from a peripheral to a more central position as they get used to doing things in conjunction with others. The young people's positive views on their ASDAN work can be understood as acknowledging this important difference in what *counts* as learning, and, at the same time, as an expression of the marginalization they had felt within mainstream provision.

In one setting where provision was structured around 'Entry to Employment' (e2e),⁷ young people had participated in a Defra⁸ sponsored conference event in which they had designed and presented information to a large audience (using *Powerpoint* computer software) on the views that they and other young people held on environmental issues. The activity was recorded in portfolios through photographs and short written notes as one of their ASDAN *challenges*, thereby contributing towards an award. The staff member concerned spoke of the remarkable effect this whole event had had on the self confidence of several of the young people. On another occasion, the Asian tsunami had been used by the same group as the basis for topical work, also with great success. This led us to question how such work might differ from a 'project' within a subject-based lesson in a school. Importantly, the tsunami project was not a vehicle for other curricular purposes (as it might in a Geography GCSE⁹ class, for example). For a time, and at very short notice, the tsunami *became* the curriculum. This example has a good fit with Hargreaves' list of 15 criteria for a *project*, which he argues is the approach that brings institutional learning closest to apprentice-style or situated learning. In this view, projects must deal with authentic issues, involve active participation, responsibility, planning, mistakes, ownership and

team-work, amongst other things. Hargreaves argues that most so-called projects in mainstream schooling do not deserve the label because they fail to meet the majority of these criteria (Hargreaves, 2004, pp. 29–31).

Research-based writing on assessment has also pointed out that contemporary public systems of accountability promote and legitimate some types of learning activity, assessment and outcome much more than others (Hayward *et al.*, 2005; James, 2005). One particularly insightful piece of work explores how the use of written standard English in South African classrooms positions different learners, and how new criteria and means of assessment which reflect more realistically the complexities of meaning-making could have a marked positive effect on equity (Newfield *et al.*, 2003). In the UK context, recent work has hinted at the enormity of the task of getting different kinds of learning outcomes to be regarded as legitimate:

If ... the learning outcomes in which we are interested are dynamic, shifting, and sometimes original or unique, we need a new methodology for assessment, perhaps drawing more on ethnographic and peer-review approaches in social science, appreciation and connoisseurship in the arts, and advocacy, testimony and judgement in law ... The first challenge would be to convince stakeholders that the existing models no longer serve us well; the second would be to convince them that alternatives are available or feasible to develop. (James & Brown, 2005, pp. 19–20)

We would suggest that the QCA recognition of ASDAN awards does demonstrate a willingness on the part of a government agency to see as legitimate a broader range of outcomes for learning, albeit in a limited and closely controlled manner. The requirement upon schools in England since September 2004, to make explicit the work-relatedness of the curriculum, is likely to encourage further creative thinking and utilization of the materials and processes that ASDAN offers, though this may be in tension with other demands faced by schools.

The importance of the *practicality*, *personal relevance* and *collective nature* of ASDAN-related work was underlined for us in two further instances. In one of the schools, the tutor was in a position to compare groups year-on-year:

Last year's group had been together since year 7.¹⁰ This group has just been thrown together at the beginning of Year 10. They don't really know each other. They're getting to, they're better than they were.

He went on to suggest that group cohesion was important for everyone's progress. In another school, working in groups on projects was seen as *the* distinguishing feature of ASDAN by all the parties. As one young person put it, 'because you are doing things instead of just sitting down working ... it's more discussing things with people'. The only positive comparison with other lessons that this young person could draw was with science where they sometimes did experiments. He went on to sum up the benefits and disadvantages of such group work like this:

Well, the good thing is you hear other people's points of view, which is important. Your mates become handy for you, when you're doing the course. One of the bad things, some people ... don't feel up for it, but you have to get them in the mood, so you have to leave them on the side, but not left out, but they are aware that they can't be bothered to get involved with the lesson. (School-based learner)

Arguably, this is a sophisticated statement about the nature of learning and the benefits and responsibilities that come with participation in a community of practice.

Professionalism, paradox and the mediation of targets

ASDAN materials and systems provided a balance between flexibility and structure that the practitioners found attractive and useful. A youth worker described in detail how the materials were ‘a two-way thing’: they were, at one and the same time, a vehicle that focused staff planning *and* a framework for responding to learner interests and needs. Several of the providers we interviewed gained confidence from their knowledge of the breadth of activities that ASDAN awards had recognized in the past, or spoke of having been reassured on this front during workshops with, or telephone enquiries to, the ASDAN offices. Many of the skills they wished to help develop (such as map reading, participating in discussion, dealing with people in authority, taking responsibility, using the telephone, interviewing someone, using equipment, managing money, using reference sources, completing forms, participating in community work) fitted comfortably into the ASDAN framework. The youth worker mentioned above also described how the portfolios provided a central focus and how the young people had said that they had done more work in a brief period of participation than they ‘ever did’ at school. Here and in other settings, action planning and reviewing were the most difficult parts of the process for the young people.

In one of the schools, the ‘work-related curriculum’ was partially structured around trips and visits. Here, ASDAN materials offered a useful framework for thinking about interesting and worthwhile excursions and for making the most of the trips in recorded evidence of some sort. The tutor’s own passion here was to challenge the narrow geographical experience of many of the group, and he was keen that the young people concerned, most of whom lived on a housing estate on the edge of Bristol, should see and understand more of ‘their own city’. Without the ASDAN-linked programme of activity, the young people here would have been expected to follow conventional general academic programmes, which both they and the staff thought would provide them with fewer genuinely educative opportunities.

The initiative discussed here was clearly target-driven, and it is no surprise that the regional Learning and Skills Council funded something that was so closely allied to their own policy goals. However, it is also clear that, having initiated the activity, the overarching target was of limited use for judging the nature and degree of the successes of the initiative. The development project appears to have successfully harnessed the energies and enthusiasms of a diverse group of providers whilst also being characterized by an overall coherence. This relationship of the target to the activities is important, if also a little paradoxical. What our analysis suggests is that such targets are best treated as general aims rather than as a mechanism for accountability. This has parallels with Wallace and Hoyle’s (2005) broader point about the need for ‘temperate’ policy in education which recognizes the fundamental ambiguity of the work and which acknowledges the necessity of higher levels of trust in educational professionals.

Both the level of trust and the acknowledgement of ambiguity mentioned above are at odds with most analyses of what is happening in education across many parts of the world. Education is increasingly concerned with the performance and performativity of teachers, students and managers (Gleeson & Husbands, 2003, p. 500), and in the grip of markets and managerialism, a set of beliefs in which ambiguity has no place. Arguably, targets are one of the technologies through which the culture of performativity is made to displace the state-centred, public welfare tradition of educational provision (Brown *et al.*, 1996; see also Simkins, 2000; Ball, 2003; Mulcahy, 2004). They are also here to stay: the White Paper (DfES, 2005) promises a continuation of such targets as one of the elements that go to make up a 'sharp accountability framework' for new reforms.

We would argue that the project *Increasing Participation and Attainment Levels of 14–19 Year Olds in the West of England* was successful because it relied on processes of *mediation* between (on the one hand) a specific, funded target (and on the other) a network of professionals with a high degree of shared values and purpose. This 'horizontal community of practice' (Torrance *et al.*, 2005, p. 77) functioned as a support network for the 'principled infidelity' (Wallace & Hoyle, 2005) of practitioners. It also functioned as an organisational memory for the rich variety of circumstances, individuals, interpretations, perceptions and needs that make up the worlds of the particular providers and the particular groups of 'disengaged' learners. The significance of this process of mediation becomes even clearer in the light of two recent independent reviews of learning and assessment in the UK. The first of these, the *Nuffield Review of 14–19 Education and Training* (Hayward *et al.*, 2005), has noted the failure of recent policy to articulate its aims (pp. 24–25) and the 'widespread dismay at centralised management of teaching through targets, assessment and inspections' (p. 41). It also points to the necessity of recognizing the curriculum as a 'creative act' rather than as 'something handed on', arguing for teachers who are 'curriculum developers' instead of 'transmitters' (p. 38). As a coordinated network of professionals, ASDAN adds up to a rather unusual assessment regime because it appears to sustain precisely those areas signalled as in being danger by the Nuffield Review.

Secondly, in their study of the impact of different modes of assessment in the learning and skills sector, Torrance *et al.* (2005, p. 18) describe how the reality of 'assessment in action' combines 'three intersecting forms or levels of activity', namely 'assessment theory and methodology', 'QCA and awarding body regulations, responsibilities and procedures', and 'practices in colleges and workplaces'. They suggest that Wenger's notions of reification and participation (Wenger, 1998)—and how these are always both present and mutually defining—can assist in seeing the relationships between the three forms or levels. At the same time, however, Torrance *et al.* (2005) point to the prominence of central prescription in the 'vertical community of practice' that connects (for example) a senior figure in an awarding body to a tutor and a learner in a particular setting. Having studied a cross-section of assessment practices, they argue for a re-examination of the balance between compliance with national standards, and appropriate *in situ* interpretation of them, suggesting that the

latter is where efforts at capacity-building should now be directed (Torrance *et al.*, 2005, pp. 3, 8–19). ASDAN appears to offer such capacity-building. It is highly distinctive for its strong *horizontal* community of practice, which provides geographically dispersed providers with points of anchorage, interconnection, belonging and control, and with a peer-validated way of working.

Conclusion

We began this paper by drawing attention to the way that education is widely regarded as a site for a positive response to ‘disaffection’, and we signalled a number of issues that this raises. We contend that the development project discussed constituted a marriage of convenience between a performative culture and a particular, distinctive formation of the public service values based on the needs of clients as interpreted and formulated by professionals, which performativity is often said to displace. The case study illuminates the practical significance of a strongly *professional* response to disengaged young people and also something of the mechanisms that support and maintain it. This is in keeping with Torrance’s argument that any extension of authentic assessment, intended to influence teaching, could not rely solely on the dissemination of principles and exemplary material but would also need ‘extensive scope for local adaptation, development and implementation’ (Torrance, 1995, p. 156). It brings us to a further sense in which the case described has a high potential significance. Current policy discourse in the UK about improving public services of all kinds posits a two-pronged approach: public services are to be improved by combining the existing approach of top-down targets with an increase in opportunities for the ‘bottom-up’ idea of ‘choice and voice’ of users (see Miliband, 2006). Whilst having all the appearance of a progressive move, this reduces the idea of professionalism to little more than doing a good job in line with a specification. In other words, it denies the space for precisely those activities and actions that led to the success of the project *Increasing Participation and Attainment levels of 14–19 Year Olds in the West of England* and other similar initiatives. To measure the outcomes of the project only in the terms of the original target would be to render as invisible the nature and quality of the learning and assessment activities and, indeed, what made them possible.

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Notes

1. ‘Disaffection’ is suggestive of homogeneity across whole swathes of young people who are in reality differentiated by such things as gender, social class, location, disability and ethnicity. ‘Labelling a section of the population of young people as “disaffected” because of their

relationship to the mainstream of education, work and training helps us to identify a problem, but it should not blind us to the complexity and diversity of the causes that lie behind it' (Steer, 2000, p. 2). Although some writers take pains to illustrate that 'disaffection' can only be understood in relation to a multiplicity of overlapping causes and circumstances, from the most individualised to the most structural (Machell, 1999), the term continues to imply that an attitudinal negativity within young people is 'the problem'. Research has shown that this is far too simplistic a reading (Williamson, 1998, p. 78; Steer, 2000, pp. 9–13).

2. We prefer the term disengagement to disaffection, though both terms carry some risk of implying that where there is 'a problem', it must always ultimately lie with individual deficits in pupils or students. Fredricks *et al.* (2004) define 'student engagement' as the simultaneous cognitive, emotional and behavioural investment of an individual student in classroom work. This is no doubt helpful for the exploration of some pedagogic issues, but our use of engagement/disengagement in the present paper is necessarily more broadly based. We wish to draw attention to the *relationship* between a young person and a 'mainstream' activity such as school, college, work or training. The point is that *either or both* of the key parties may have perceptions that warrant the term being used. Moreover, a young person may be disengaged from one setting (e.g. school or college) and engaged in another (e.g. family, work, community) *at the same time*. This use of the term keeps open the idea that schooling does not merely react to individuals and their differences, but is also a process of the *production* of ability, values and occupational directions (Furlong, 1991).
3. Levels 1, 2 and 3 refer to the first three main categories in the National Qualifications Framework for England, Wales and Northern Ireland, overseen by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority. Those not in formal education training or employment and adults returning to learning can also pursue 'Entry Levels' below Level 1; Janet Looney's paper in this special issue gives more details of these. See also <http://www.qca.org.uk/downloads/qca-06-2298-nqf-web.pdf> (accessed November 2006).
4. Described in a newspaper report as follows: 'This year's bottom authority is Bristol, where only one in three students gained five good GCSEs last summer. It is now the only authority in England where less than 40 per cent of students achieved this standard' (Halpin, 2006).
5. The development project was one of a number of initiatives funded by the West of England Learning and Skills Council and relates to that organization's target to 'increase the number of learners achieving level 2 after age 16 by 749, or 26%'. The LSC *Annual Plan* for 2003–4 also stated: 'We have contracted with ASDAN to increase the percentage of young people gaining recognised level-2 qualifications. The aim is to target young people who are not motivated by existing provision and who have little or no interest in learning but who are still at school. The programme offers alternatives to GCSE courses that will motivate these learners to succeed. Many schools in the West of England already use ASDAN and we plan to expand this across all institutions working with learners aged between 14 and 19' (LSCWE, 2003, p. 35). The original ASDAN proposal to LSC reiterated the need to work with young people still in school, but also stated the need to work with those in colleges and youth provision. Furthermore, it argued that there was a need to target young people who had left school/college and entered employment or training without having achieved a level 2 qualification.
6. 'ASDAN was formally established as an educational charity in 1991. The stated purpose of the charity is "to promote the personal and social development of learners through the achievement of ASDAN Awards, so as to enhance their self esteem, their aspirations and their contribution to the community". ASDAN programmes and qualifications blend activity-based curriculum enrichment with a framework for the development, assessment and accreditation of key skills and other personal and social skills, with emphasis on negotiation, co-operation and rewarding achievement'. See ASDAN web pages http://www.asdan.org.uk/national_status.php?osCsid=f8c57f7859ae9a076fe7a967460c8526 (accessed July 2006).
7. 'e2e is a dynamic new programme of learning that will support young people in building their confidence, their basic or key skills and their employability in order that they can access

- employment either when they move out of e2e or after further training'. (See <http://www.include.org.uk/e2e.htm>, accessed September 2006).
8. Defra is The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, a United Kingdom government department.
 9. 'GCSE' stands for General Certificate of Secondary Education, which is the most common general academic qualification at levels 1 and 2.
 10. Year 7 pupils are in their first year of secondary schooling, and most are 11 years old.

Notes on contributors

David James is professor of education at the University of the West of England, Bristol, UK. Formerly a social sciences teacher in further education, he has researched and published widely on teaching, learning and assessment in further and higher education, and on the theory-as-method of Bourdieu. His most recent book *Improving Learning Cultures in Further Education* (Routledge, 2007, with Biesta) is one of the outcomes of a large ESRC TLRP project which he co-directed.

Jonathan Simmons is director of the Academic Development Programme (for academic staff new to the university) and Education School Scheme director at the University of the West of England, Bristol, UK. He has taught on and managed both full-time and part-time programmes of teacher training for further education as well as working in staff development roles in several FE colleges. He has also worked for the Learning & Skills Development Agency (now QIA) in curriculum and management development.

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