



FaSMEd Independent Ethical Advisor: Vivienne Marie Baumfield
Centre for Research in Professional Learning
Graduate School of Education
University of Exeter

The FaSMEd project aims and methods

Working with partners across eight countries, FaSMEd looks at how technology can be used in formative assessment by teachers to help raise attainment levels among the lowest achieving students. It is an international 'learning project' bringing together partners who have developed research-informed pedagogical interventions in science and mathematics to explore how to adapt and develop their implementation at scale. The project uses design study as its scientific strategy and is, therefore, committed to an iterative, collaborative, process-focused approach with the engagement of participants in systematic reflection and evaluation throughout its development. The initial proposal recognised that the necessity of translating the ideas and methods of the international partners across local contexts and then extrapolating general principles would be one of the most important outcomes of the project whilst also presenting the greatest challenges. In particular, differences in definitions, policies and practices regarding the identification of 'low attaining' students and models of teacher professionalism entail potential issues in the co-ordination of the parts into a meaningful whole and a test of the project's consensual principles. The strategy identified to address the anticipated areas of difficulty at the inception of the project was to adopt a 'redesign' stance (Ruthven, 2010) by building on existing practices and



research and inviting active participation in a project-wide mediation of issues regarding implementation in local contexts as they arise.

The FaSMEd project governance structure and ethical framework

The forum for resolving emerging risks and disputes is the Steering Group (SG) consisting of the Coordinator, the Deputy Coordinator and the Principal Investigator representing each international partner. The SG meets formally at every Project Meeting to oversee the overall legal, contractual, ethical, financial and administrative management of the consortium. External advice is accessed through the Strategic Advisory Committee and the Evaluation Team both of which are fully appraised of emerging issues on a regular basis and invited to suggest possible courses of action for consideration by the SG. FaSMEd also appointed an Independent Ethics Advisor to oversee, monitor and complete two formal reports, Ethical Reviews, on how the requirements are met and in general on the progress made in order to meet these requirements. The Advisor attends the Strategic Advisory Team meetings and consortium wide events such as the launch conference.

The project co-ordinating team based at Newcastle University work to the guidelines established by the National Research Ethics Service (NRES) and the obtained ethical approval for the FaSMEd project after submitting a detailed application to Newcastle University's Research Ethics Committee. In addition, the co-ordinating team are members of BERA (British Educational Research Association), the professional organisation for educational researchers in the UK, which has



excellent ethical guidelines and procedures that we adhere to. BERA's Guidelines unequivocally recognize and celebrate the diversity of approaches in educational research. They promote respect for all those who engage with it: researchers and participants, academics and professional practitioners, commissioning bodies and those who use the research. They are not rules and regulations but do represent the tenets of best ethical practice that have served our community of researchers well in the past and will continue to do so in the future. (Please see www.bera.ac.uk/system/files/3/BERA-Ethical-Guidelines-2011.pdf). As part of the consortium agreement, each international partner obtained ethical approval for their work from their respective institution, which is documented and monitored through the management work package. In the case of the South African partners, they are affiliated to Stellenbosch University and also adhere to the British Educational Research Association (BERA) guidelines to ensure consistency.

Some classroom intervention activities in teaching sessions have been filmed by a sub-contractor in order to capture some of the interactions that take place. In accordance with the ethical guidelines in place, permission was negotiated and agreed at a local level according to the school's policy and procedure. Good practice relating to research with partners in developing countries has also been observed and the SA partner plays a major role in developing its own approach to the project to mitigate the imposition of inappropriate Eurocentric values. Plans are also built into the project for participants to have the opportunity to visit South African classrooms to develop an understanding of the context for education in developing countries.



Ethos of the project

In addition to the scientific design of the project and the insistence on close adherence to ethical frameworks, FaSMEd also has the benefit of a strong ethos built on the experience of the co-ordinating team. As researchers based in the Research Centre for Learning and Teaching (CfLAT) at Newcastle University, they have a proven track record of working in authentic partnerships in collaborative projects. They have expertise in developing “soft-links” between participants as the best guarantee for a continuous flow of information in an environment of mutual trust. FaSMEd combines the use of formal means of communication (eg newsletters) with the extensive use of electronic media (eg project webpage with file sharing capabilities); in particular, the use of Skype to maintain personal contact and promote a community of inquiry.

Sharing Perspectives to Mediate Understanding

Issues emerging at the inception stage of the project although not unanticipated did pose an early test for the principles and mode of working in FaSMEd. As the minutes of a Strategic Advisory Committee meeting report, discussions at the Inception Meeting when the partners met together as a group for the first time, had revealed varying interpretations of key educational concepts in the previously agreed Work Packages. Differences included the intended audience/purpose of the prototype toolkit and the impact of research cultures on approaches to engagement in the professional development of teachers. Whilst such issues were germane to the production of knowledge of the translation of approaches across local contexts, they



could jeopardise the viability of the research process. FaSMEd as a community of researchers proved equal to the task and in keeping with the ethos of the project, devised a problem solving approach based on sharing perspectives and providing a research informed body of evidence to assist in the contextualization of experiences in practice. Participants took responsibility for researching and writing 'position papers' to clarify whole project understandings. Drawing upon key areas of expertise, partners volunteered to draft individual papers with two other partners taking responsibility for reviewing the paper and providing feedback to inform subsequent revisions. It was also agreed that the Strategic Advisory Committee could provide the impetus for webinar discussions to promote a community of inquiry to explore emerging issues and seek a basis for shared understanding across the different research cultures and national contexts.

Additional steps to mediate understanding through enhanced communication and 'soft links' in this first period include the convening of face-to-face meetings to address issues. In April 2015, a meeting convened in Lyon focused on building mutual understanding with regards to the intervention cases (WP 4). The Lyon meeting produced outcomes that assisted with the scientific management of FaSMEd by agreeing on case study analysis and developing data collection tools. Subsequently, a meeting with a sub-group of a selected number of partners in Germany focused on developing a shared framework for analysis of the toolkit. The meetings are in line with the principle of being a 'learning project' and have proven to be effective in alleviating any potentially disruptions and have helped in directing the trajectory of the project. The additional costs, however, have implications for the financial management of the



project and the requirement for benefits and costs to be scrutinized carefully acts as both a check and a balance to the realization of the principles guiding the research.

The Next Stage for FaSMEd

The strategy in the first period of the FaSMEd project has been to discuss issues as they arise openly and honestly and to maintain an emphasis on collaborative inquiry using multiple channels for communication. In the second period of FaSMEd the proposals for evaluation to support reflection on the principles and criteria that are pivotal to the scientific rigour and the ethos of collaboration could be explored. Taking steps to make more use of the project website and intranet to facilitate a community of inquiry could offset some of the cost of additional meetings. The experiences of participants in the EU SATORI project (<http://satoriproject.eu/>) could form the basis of a model suitable for FaSMEd. The SATORI project was discussed at the meeting in Germany and the criteria for evaluating engagement and the processes of participation, particularly fair deliberation, iteration and criticalness, will be very relevant in the next stages. The drawing out of lessons from the analysis of cases to furnish guidance for the professional development of teachers will require recognition of differences in the promotion of shared understanding in a notoriously complex area. As researchers in the field of formative assessment acknowledge:

We believe, therefore, that we have made two important steps: clarifying what should be the priority for teacher professional development, and what form that professional development should take. What we have been surprised to learn, however, is that the third step—actually getting schools to prioritize



professional development—appears to be more difficult than either of the first two, and this will be a priority for our future work. (www.dylanwiliam.org)

Report written 15th September 2015