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Walking the assessment tightrope

Beth R. Crisp and Pam Green Lister

Introduction

For many people, one of the thrills of going to the circus is the spectacle of the tightrope walker who aims to walk a considerable distance on nothing more than a thin wire, with the ground many metres below. Considerable skill is required, as there is a very fine line between remaining balanced and falling off. As educators, we have over the years come to view our roles in overseeing the assessment process as requiring the exacting skills and knowledge of the tightrope walker, balancing differing functions and forms of assessment with demands on time.

In this chapter, we will explore some of the key issues around assessment which we as educators of social work and social policy students find ourselves grappling with. These issues are:

- What is the purpose of assessment?
- What is an assessment strategy and how do we develop one?
- What are some forms of assessment which we might consider?
- What is the place of peer assessment and self-assessment in our courses?
- The importance of feedback to students.
- Implementation issues.

The purpose of assessment

Sometimes in jest, our students suggest to us that we set them assessment tasks because we do not believe they have enough to do in their already busy lives.
Similarly, around the corridors of higher education institutions, academics feeling weighed down by piles of marking are sometimes heard to complain about how much time they must devote to assessment processes. Given the amount of time devoted to assessment by both students and academics, we need first to consider the purposes of assessment.

The assessment of students in higher education performs a number of functions, which may not always be compatible. As teachers we would like to think that the assessment tasks we set are also learning tasks, so that learning and assessment become aligned, rather than being somewhat independent of each other (Biggs, 2003). The notion of alignment is not only pedagogically sound but likely to have resonance with students who, when faced with demands beyond their courses (e.g. financial survival), and, given a choice between learning and assessment tasks, tend to devote their time to the latter. The reality is that assessment tasks provide an incentive for students to engage with some aspects of course content and enable them to demonstrate their acquired knowledge and understanding of particular subject matter or mastery of certain skills.

The role of the assessor involves determining the level of competence displayed in undertaking the task and, ideally, offering feedback on future learning needs (Rowntree, 1987). Assessment also provides grading for students’ work, allowing comparison of performance across a class, and across the curriculum for individual students. The subsequent gaining of a degree or professional qualification depends on students successfully completing a set of specified assessment tasks across the curriculum. As such, there may be stakeholders beyond the higher education institution, such as employers, regulatory bodies or clients, who see the assessment process as being akin to certification or professional gatekeeping (Younes, 1998). In professional courses such as social work, assessment will be associated with notions such as fitness to practice and eligibility for professional registration as a social worker with the new social care councils in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

In terms of gatekeeping, assessment tasks may not only restrict who gains certification on exiting an educational programme but also who is admitted. Requirements by some care councils that students admitted to social work programmes have achieved specified levels of literacy and numeracy require appropriate assessment tasks to determine equivalence for those entrants who have not achieved formal qualifications in these areas.

In addition to gatekeeping, assessment clearly has a vital role to play in the ongoing development of learning and teaching strategies. It can be crucial in determining what, why and how students learn (Brown et al., 1997). Furthermore, in an era when evaluation of teaching is often reduced to student satisfaction surveys, critical reflection on work submitted for assessment can serve as an alternative method of evaluating the success of teaching.
Building an assessment strategy

In an ideal world, an assessment strategy would outline the types of assessment to be used and provide a rationale for every component of a course. However, the use of shared modules across courses in higher education institutions or numerous combinations of electives can place limits on the ability of a course team to develop a comprehensive assessment strategy (Knight, 2000). Shared modules, whether compulsory or elective, may be established for pragmatic reasons (e.g. it is more economical to have one unit taught to students from several courses than repeated to small groups) or ideological reasons (e.g. to facilitate interdisciplinary learning). Thus it may only be possible for a teaching team to control the assessment strategy for the units that they themselves teach and assess.

There are other constraints on the development of an assessment strategy. Institutions or faculties may have established principles and policies around assessment, to which programmes and modules contained therein must conform (Mutch and Brown, 2001; Yorke, 2001). For example, institutional requirements that all work be joint marked potentially limits use of class presentations as a formal assessment task unless a panel of assessors can attend all presentations. In relation to peer assessment by students, a case might have to be made for this to be accepted as equivalent to a second marker.

Institutional requirements undoubtedly underpin the suggestion that 'British students are probably the most assessed in Europe' (Mutch and Brown, 2001: 10). Therefore, before considering the assignments for individual modules, the question should be addressed as to what is feasible for students to do in a year. Having too many assessment tasks and not enough time to do each one are not uncommon problems. In developing a programme-wide strategy, a further question is whether each module needs its own separate piece of assessment or whether some assessment tasks can be developed which can simultaneously assess student learning in multiple parts of their courses.

Accrediting bodies may also place constraints on an overall assessment strategy, by requiring that specific knowledge and/or skills be assessed within programmes. Yet even without such external demands, it is worth considering whether a range of skills is being tested across a programme or if students are always asked to do the same tasks, e.g. writing essays. In the United Kingdom, the benchmarking statements for both social policy and social work (QAA, 2000) suggest that students should undertake assessment tasks that demonstrate a range of abilities and skills. This is consistent with the expectations of employers (and other stakeholders) who expect graduates in these disciplines to have a range of skills.

Assessment strategies may also disadvantage some students. For example, if all the assignments are written tasks, a student with dyslexia may be disadvantaged; a strong emphasis on examinations may disadvantage students who are victims of trauma or who for some other reason are unable to think as quickly
as may be required in a three-hour unseen examination. In contrast, it has been suggested that some computer-based assessments may enable visually impaired students to be assessed in the same room as the rest of the class, rather than separately, which is the typical experience of such students (Wiles, 2002). Taking account of the needs of students with specific learning needs can be an opportunity to review the assessment procedures not just for particular students but for all students in a course (McCarthy and Hurst, 2001). The underlying issues of diversity, inclusion and equality are addressed in Chapter 4.

Having considered the core elements necessary to develop an overall assessment strategy, we will now review the issues in developing an assessment strategy for individual modules (although in practice this order is often inverted). Assessment methods play a large part in determining what students learn:

If we test students for factual recall, then they will memorize a set of facts. If we test them for their ability to analyze relationships, then they will begin to learn to think critically. If we assess how well they can apply classroom material to concrete problems, then they will learn to do that.

(Wergin, 1988: 5)

Obviously, the content of modules and the learning objectives should guide the development of the assessment tasks, so the fit of the assessment tasks to the learning outcomes is essential. Summative assessment, which usually takes place at the end of a module, ostensibly has the objective of grading students; formative assessment, which occurs during a course, places greater emphasis on facilitating student learning (Cree, 2000). These divergent aims may conflict:

An emphasis on outcomes, for example, may be at odds with the idea of incremental learning and process-based assessment . . . If the learning objectives are to open students' minds and broaden their experience, then the chosen assessment methods will be very different from those that set out to assess a specific piece of knowledge or skill.

(Cree, 2000: 30)

The stage at which the assessment task is set within the overall programme is also important. For example, the role of the first piece of written work in a course may be as much about assessing general skills (e.g. library use, writing style, referencing) as about content or knowledge. Furthermore, it could be more appropriate to offer new undergraduate students several short pieces of assessment, whereas a single longer piece of work may be appropriate for honours or postgraduate students. For students whose course involves a placement, this experience can be utilized in subsequent assessment tasks.

In both individual assignments and the overall assessment strategy, it is important that criteria for assessment are made explicit and provided to both
students and co-markers prior to beginning work on the tasks. While the need to make criteria explicit may be obvious when peer or self-assessment is to be utilized, all students should know how they are to be assessed. Information about assessment criteria should also include details as to what students may expect by way of feedback (see the section on feedback later in the chapter).

The mode of teaching may also influence assessment possibilities. Indeed, as we have mentioned earlier, learning and assessment activities should be aligned (Biggs, 2003). Thus for example, if our objectives are for students to learn a set of facts, then both learning and assessment modes need to reflect this. This is likely to involve a different set of learning and assessment tasks than might be used if our objective is to develop students’ understanding and ability to critique theories or policies.

There also needs to be alignment between the mode of teaching and assessment tasks. For example, group projects may be more easily facilitated for students who attend classes together than for distance students. Some distance education students may be required to complete more written assessment tasks than their on-campus colleagues, although students at a distance have arguably as much, if not more, need to develop their presentation skills. However, it is possible for most distance learners to produce a presentation on audio or video-tape (Crisp, 1999) or via a telephone conference.

Whatever methods are chosen, these must, prior to the task being set, be deemed appropriate in respect of the skills, knowledge etc. to be assessed, and take into account the known needs of students, including disabilities or family commitments (if a course has been particularly designed for students for whom this is an issue). Finally, an assessment strategy should include an evaluation component, including scrutiny of completed assignments to determine whether they were effective in assessing the learning outcomes specified. While external examiners undoubtedly have an important role in respect of scrutinizing assessment, this does not absolve individual assessors from the responsibility of undertaking their own evaluations.

Different forms of assessment

It has been estimated that essays or reports marked by tutors or unseen timed exams form at least 90 per cent of the assessment tasks on a typical degree programme in the United Kingdom (Brown and Glasner, 1999). After reviewing some of the issues raised by these forms of assessment, we consider some of the alternatives.

Essays

In some higher education settings assessment and essays are almost synonymous, so the question ‘Have you set the assessment?’ is taken to mean ‘Have
you set the essay questions? Educators of social science students regularly set essay questions and, for some students, essays are a familiar task, involving searching for information and developing a coherent written argument that demonstrates their understanding of the issue under discussion. A typical essay does not require students to find time to collaborate with others, nor to access sources of information beyond the university library. As such, an essay can be done at a time to suit busy students. Able students may use the essay structure somewhat creatively as a means of expression.

Essays also have a number of shortcomings as an assessment method. A common criticism is that this is not a form of writing for which there is much demand beyond educational institutions. A more critical question is whether the skills of writing an essay help one write reports, position papers or other documents which social work or social policy graduates might be expected to produce in their working life. Furthermore, while plagiarism has long been an issue in higher education, the ease with which unscrupulous social science students, at least in the US (and probably in the UK), are able to purchase essays over the Internet (Gibelman et al., 1999) is further grounds for actively considering whether an essay is the most appropriate form of assessment. Even without the possibility of purchasing essays, various forms of cheating are common in written work submitted for assessment (Franklyn-Stokes and Newstead, 1995; Ashworth et al., 1997). While there are now a growing number of services to detect plagiarism (e.g. the Joint Information Systems Committee Plagiarism Advisory Service), this undoubtedly adds to the assessment workload.

Examinations

Examinations are perceived by students to offer fewer opportunities for cheating (Franklyn-Stokes and Newstead, 1995), and cheating in exams is considered to be a far more serious offence than cheating in written assignments (Ashworth et al., 1997). However, some critical reflection on the potential and limitations of examinations as a method of assessment is required.

Written examinations may take a number of formats. They may involve students writing a number of short essays, answering several short-answer questions, or numerous multiple-choice questions. Typically, there is a finite time for students to produce their answers, and they may or may not have access to other resources (e.g. notes or books). One variant which more closely simulates the future employment of both social policy and social work graduates is the ‘take home’ exam, in which students are provided with one or more questions at a given time and required to submit their answers within a few days. This format is based on the assumption that the ability to access resources and produce timely written responses is more important than being able to regurgitate facts and scribble down as much as one can in a set time.

Although not uncommon in social policy courses, many social work academics are reluctant to use written exams to assess core social work theory
and knowledge. Written exams are most likely to be reserved for assessing acquisition of knowledge in psychology (Dillenberger et al., 1997), law (Henderson et al., 2002) or research methods (e.g. Sieppert and Krysik, 1996; Petracchi and Patchner, 2001). Yet social workers often have to make decisions rapidly, and exams can arguably simulate this aspect of professional life. There may be an argument for exams in particular aspects of social work courses, e.g. to assess crisis intervention or assessment skills. 'Clients' could be presented to students live in the examination room or on video, or a written summary of the client's presenting problems could be made available. Students could then be asked a series of short-answer questions as to how they would deal with the client on the basis of the information provided to them, or be asked to conduct an interview with a 'client' (Petricchi, 1999).

A focus on the ability to present an argument to experts or colleagues (Butler and Coleman, 1997) has resulted in proposals for students to be assessed on their oral presentation rather than their writing skills. While oral exams or vivas feature in the examination of PhDs in the United Kingdom, they can also be used for assessing coursework for lower qualifications, although this potential is often not realized.

An oral examination of legal knowledge

Students undertaking a training programme to become an Approved Social Worker (mental health officer) in one English higher education institution are assessed on their knowledge of law by means of an oral examination. This lasts between half and three-quarters of an hour during which time students present a case to the assessment panel (two tutors and one practising approved social worker) in which they discuss the legal issues emerging from a case they have been involved in, and answer questions about legislation. All exams are tape-recorded. The rationale is that practising social workers need to be able to recall and discuss legal issues in high pressure situations.

(Henderson et al., 2002)

Portfolios

The development of portfolios has been used to document social work students' developing knowledge and competence over the course in specific subjects such as group work (Marotta et al., 2000) and community organizing (Gutierrez and Alvarez, 2000) and can also be used for assessing educational placements undertaken by both social work and social policy students. This format is particularly suitable for assessing student learning when the evidence of their learning is presented in several and potentially disparate
ways. For example, students could present evidence of their involvement in a local campaign, such as background research, briefing papers, press releases and letters they have written. Other evidence might include copies of media coverage, minutes of meetings, and references or testimonials written by others. As some of the materials may originally have been produced for reasons other than the student’s assessment, a statement from students in which they introduce the materials and discuss what learning is represented by the contents is likely to be crucial.

While students may choose the contents of their portfolios, this can be prescribed. Most students have no experience of developing portfolios and need clear guidelines to enable them to complete them in a manner which is timely and remains an active method of learning rather than just another task to be completed (Taylor et al., 1999).

Notwithstanding their potential, portfolios can be a problematic method of assessment. Low inter-rater reliability has been found between markers (Black, 1993, in Risler, 1999) and further difficulties arise from lack of verification and the production of unwieldy material not clearly related to predetermined competences, often included if the guidelines are unclear (Edwards and Kinsey, 1999). Moreover, the effort required to both produce and assess portfolios suggests this is a time-consuming activity (Edwards and Kinsey, 1999; Horwath and Shardlow, 2000).

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**Portfolio with learning contract for distance education students in a practice teacher course**

Candidates for the CCETSW Award in Practice Teaching at the University of Sheffield were required to develop a learning agreement with their tutor, detailing how they would meet their learning objectives. There was considerable scope for negotiation as to what the portfolio would comprise. Target dates were set for submission of the various components for formative feedback. Students were allowed to submit all pieces of portfolio work in stages prior to the final assessment for formative assessment, rather than to be graded.

(Horwath and Shardlow, 2000)

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**Proposals**

The development of proposals is often used to assess research methods courses (e.g. Walsh, 1998; Crisp, 1999); this could also be used to assess understanding of the processes and issues in planning and developing interventions which seek to address social problems in the local community (e.g. Moxley and Thrasher,
1996; Hollister and McGee, 2000). Such proposals might be preparation for projects subsequently undertaken, or may be a standalone assignment that enables students to demonstrate their ability to integrate and apply a range of skills and theoretical knowledge in a practical task similar to one that they may have to undertake after graduation. A cohort of students, required to develop a proposal to benefit their local community, reported that this increased their understanding and ability to plan and develop new social programmes, including writing grant applications (Moxley and Thrasher, 1996).

**Topics of student proposals which seek to address social problems in local communities**

- domestic violence;
- community support of adults with a mental illness;
- homelessness;
- community support for aged persons;
- school retention in minority ethnic communities.

(Moxley and Thrasher, 1996)

**Other written tasks**

Reports of work undertaken by students are useful in assessing learning in both university-based and placement settings. Carrying out a small-scale piece of research by collecting their own original data or sourcing existing data (e.g. from local authorities or the Office for National Statistics) and preparing a report on the findings may require students to reflect on differences between their findings and what they have read.

While lengthy written tasks enable students to demonstrate their understanding of complex phenomena, the audiences to which graduates in social work and social policy write are often busy people looking for something succinct. An assignment set by one of us required postgraduate students to prepare an abstract of a paper they had read in no more than 250 words. After years of writing lengthy essays, some class members said they found it difficult to write so succinctly.

One problem with the process of writing essays and reports is that often students will just skim over books and articles until they find a point that appears to suit their line of argument. Sometimes this results in quotes being taken out of context and utterly misconstrued. If our aim is to get students to read in depth, then we need to set assessment tasks that encourage this. There may be a key book which takes an interesting or controversial line that may have caught the public imagination through the media. Asking students to write a critical review of such a text not only requires them to have read it
from cover to cover, but also to have read more broadly to develop their own critique.

**Short written assignment for level 1 social policy students**

Level 1 social policy students at the University of Surrey are assessed in a one-hour multiple-choice and short-answer written exam along with two short pieces of written work, each of 800 words. The aim of the written pieces is to encourage students to write clear and concise answers to set questions. The first is set early in the semester; it is hoped that prompt feedback will facilitate growth in student confidence. The timing also enables staff to identify potential problems early on when there may still be time to address them prior to the final exam.

(Driver, undated)

**Peer assessment and self-assessment**

Peer assessment and self-assessment have been proposed as strategies for enhancing learning; this fits with the development of reflective learning and critical thinking (e.g. Burgess *et al.*, 1999; Baldwin, 2000; Gutierrez and Alvarez, 2000). Proponents claim they develop students’ capacities to assess themselves, to make judgements about their learning (and that of their peers) and to evaluate what has been learnt. Further benefits include redressing the balance of power between staff and students, developing anti-oppressive practice and the process of lifelong learning, and facilitating students to take specific responsibility for monitoring and making judgements about their own learning (Burgess *et al.*, 1999).

A common misunderstanding is that peer assessment and self-assessment are necessarily alternative to assessment by staff. In some cases, students complete assessment tasks such as giving presentations or producing reports, and are formally involved in the processes of grading and/or providing feedback in addition to staff. This use of peer assessment and self-assessment can be seen as a ‘value-added extra’ (Cree, 2000: 30) rather than as an alternative to conventional assessment.

Students typically need considerable guidance to enable them to assess their own work or that completed by their peers, so structured instruments may be used (e.g. Gutierrez and Alvarez, 2000). Alternatively, groups of students may devise their assessment exercises or use less structured reporting mechanisms such as reflective diaries or learning logs (Burgess *et al.*, 1999). As university guidelines generally preclude students assigning their final grade for a unit of
study (Burgess et al., 1999), students’ self- and peer assessments must be reviewed by their teachers. Interestingly when this does occur, academics often comment that students are much harder on themselves and their peers than their teachers would have been.

Evaluations of self-assessment have primarily been concerned with its use as a method of learning rather than an assessment tool. An evaluation of this method undertaken in three English sites suggests the implementation of self-assessment requires both planning and ongoing monitoring. Prior to implementation, academic staff may require training, including their role as facilitators/tutors/markers, in addition to orienting students to this approach. Consideration must be given to the selection of the self-assessment instruments or tasks, ensuring a balance between complexity and the time required for completion. The extent to which self-assessment is used across the curriculum should also be considered as repeated use may result in self-assessment fatigue (Burgess et al., 1999). Furthermore, it be may be inappropriate to incorporate self-assessment in the early stages of a course as there are likely to be too many unknowns for students to be able to fully engage with the self-assessment activity (Waldman et al., 1999; Baldwin, 2000).

Feedback

Although feedback to students on their assessed work has been described as ‘the life-blood of learning’ (Rowntree, 1987: 24), insufficient thought may be given as to how and what form this should take. Departmental or programme policies may determine that written feedback is provided within a set timeframe, and there may be proformas which provide a structured format. It is crucial, however, that each assignment is assessed against the specific criteria that are set, rather than students receiving generalized comments.

To build student confidence and assist learning, it is usually recommended that feedback should start with identification of strengths and positive points. Only then should the problems be raised, and it is important to do this in a way which emphasizes that it is the work presented which is problematic rather than the person who submitted it for assessment. Feedback should be constructive, so that if the student was asked to do a similar task again, they would have some ideas as to what they should do differently. The timing is also crucial, especially for formative assessments, if the feedback is to assist students to evaluate their progress and plan for future learning (Cree, 2000).

There are instances when assessors may wonder whether the student who has submitted work has some form of undiagnosed learning disability such as dyslexia. While work submitted should be assessed as it stands, occasionally we would seek advice from the university’s specialist learning advisers prior to providing feedback. This may mean the written feedback to the student includes an invitation to discuss their work with the assessor.
Formative assessment using email

Social work students at Liverpool John Moores University are introduced to the concept of social work assessment through the use of an interactive case study. Students are emailed a task sheet to complete, which includes questions about the hypotheses they have developed, and what they perceive to be the issues. Students submit the completed task sheet by email. Each student is responded to individually, and the total response of the group is collated and emailed back to all students with an analysis, commenting on the group performance. This provides same day feedback to both students and teacher.

(Clifford, 2003)

Unlike written assignments that are generally returned to students with feedback, many higher education institutions have policies of not returning examination scripts. While there are many who consider this to be a considerable drawback of exams as an assessment method, there are others who have no such qualms. For example:

Recently the notion of returning marked examination scripts to students so they can obtain feedback and improve has been discussed. This will be a very time-consuming activity. It assumes that students will benefit from the feedback and their learning will improve. Before embarking on this path, it would be prudent to run a series of well-controlled experiments to check costs and benefits of the procedure for lecturers and students.

(Brown, 2001: 17)

Certainly short timelines for marking end-of-year exams can render it difficult for assessors to spend time giving any constructive feedback to students but, when no other assessment methods are used, this can lead to students receiving no feedback except for their marks. While this may fulfil the purpose of assessment as determining level of achievement, the developmental aspects of the assessment process are lost.

Conclusion

Developing and implementing appropriate processes for assessing student learning might be likened to walking a tightrope, since many different issues need to be balanced, such as the different functions of assessment, the need for rigour and yet clarity, the need for progression during a programme, and the needs of both students and staff in terms of timing, and it is not hard to
lose one's balance. No single form of assessment is either universally appropriate or without some shortcomings. Furthermore, considerable skill is required to develop the most appropriate set of assessment tasks for a group of students which takes into account the many parameters such as learning outcomes, learning needs, subject matter, stage and type of students, and institutional requirements.

The task of identifying appropriate assessment methods is made more difficult given that rigorous evidence of effectiveness is often scant or non-existent (e.g. Desai, 2000; Hollister and McGee, 2000; Marotta et al., 2000). It is critical that assessment methods can reliably discriminate between students who have met the grade and those who have not (Visvesaran, 2000) but this is not often considered in evaluations of assessment. More commonly, published evaluations of assessment methods report positive feedback from students (e.g. Montalvo, 1999). These say much about the acceptability of the task but not necessarily whether it is an effective or appropriate way of determining if students have acquired particular knowledge or developed specified competencies.

Another issue for further consideration is that many of the more innovative forms of assessment proposed in the literature seem very time intensive for both students and assessors. While we have an ethical duty to our students to ensure that the time required to complete assessable tasks is realistic, our own limits as educators must be recognized (Burgess et al., 1999; Knight, 2000). Many interesting published accounts of assessment methods involved classes no larger than 20 or 25 students in a year (e.g. Butler and Coleman, 1997; Gutierrez and Alvarez, 2000; Marotta et al., 2000). Yet many social policy and social work educators do not have the luxury of such small cohorts of students and must balance assessment of large numbers of students with a myriad of other responsibilities.

It is probably inevitable that the development of assessment strategies for modules and course programmes will involve compromises. Our task as educators is to be informed as to the implications of the various choices available to us, and, when necessary, to have the courage of the tightrope walker and not just stick to traditional, if questionable, approaches to assessment.