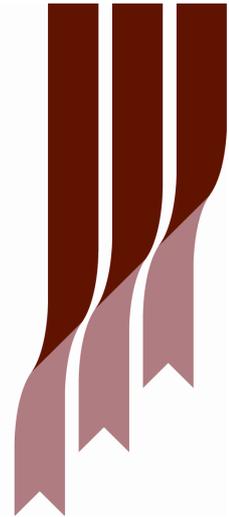


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INTEGRATED ASSESSMENT

New Assessment Methods

Literature review
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Introduction

The assessment of students in higher education performs a number of functions, some of which may not always be compatible with each other. Traditionally, the role of the assessor has involved 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 prescribed curriculum. As such, there may be stakeholders beyond the higher education institution, such as employers, regulatory bodies or clients, who believe the assessment process as being akin to certification or professional gatekeeping (Younes, 1998). In professional courses such as social work, passing certain assessment tasks may be associated with notions such as fitness to practice and eligibility for professional registration as a social worker with the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC) or similar bodies in England, Northern Ireland and Wales, and beyond the United Kingdom.

In terms of gatekeeping, assessment tasks may not only restrict who gains certification on exiting an educational programme, but also who is admitted in the first place. For example, requirements by registration authorities that students admitted to social work programmes have achieved specified levels of literacy and numeracy will require appropriate assessment tasks to determine equivalence for those entrants who have not achieved formal qualifications in these areas. Entry point assessments may also be used to determine whether credit should be granted on the basis of prior learning or experience (Slater, 2000) or to identify areas in which additional training may be required (Shera, 2001)

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, Bull and Pendlebury, 1997) and there is increasing recognition of the necessity to align learning and assessment tasks, so that learning and assessment become aligned rather than being somewhat independent of each other (Biggs, 2003). 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.

The nature of assessment has changed considerably since the 1970s, and is ongoing. The key changes have included moves from written examinations to coursework assignments and more emphasis on student participation in assessment (self and peer assessments), processes rather than products, and on competencies rather than content (Brown et al., 1997). Even the more traditional forms of assessment such as essays and examinations have undergone considerable innovations. Yet, in practice these seemingly radical changes may be more a wish list than a statement of fact. In actuality, some new forms of assessment, such as self and peer assessment may simply have been added onto rather than replaced more traditional modes of assessment (Cree, 2000).

Changes to assessment in social work tend to reflect changes in higher education more widely such as the emergence of competency based and modular approaches to learning, as well more proceduralised assessment processes necessary to cope with higher numbers of students (Cree, 2000). There is considerable divergence of opinion amongst the social work education community in the United Kingdom as to whether such changes actually benefit social work students and their learning (eg Clark, 1997; Ford and Hayes, 1996; O'Hagan, 1997; Shardlow and Doel, 1996). There have also been concerns expressed as to whether some new forms of assessment are actually capable of achieving the learning they claim to facilitate Boud, 1999; Entwistle, 1990; Taylor, 1993).

This report was commissioned by the Scottish Institute for Excellence in Social Work Education (SIESWE) as a resource on assessment for the development of the new social work degree in Scotland and provides an overview of the current literature on assessment methods being utilised in social work education both in the United Kingdom and beyond. This report begins by reviewing the various methods of assessment in social work education which were found in the literature. We then go on to explore the developing literature on the involvement of persons other than social work academics, such as students and service users, in the assessment process. Finally, we consider the importance of developing an assessment strategy which might incorporate these various different forms of assessment.

Method

To identify recent literature about methods of assessment in social work education, we searched an on-line version of the *Social Services Abstracts* examining abstracts from 1996 to those entered onto this database at the time of the search in October 2003. Based on our previous experiences of research in social work education, it was anticipated that the literature we were searching would be most likely identified using this database. Nevertheless, as some relevant literature may not have been abstracted in this database, five additional databases were searched in October 2003 from 1999 onwards. These were:

- *ASSIA (Applied Social Sciences Indexes & Abstracts)*;
- *BIDS IBSS (Bath Information and Data Services: International Bibliography of the Social Sciences)*;
- *ERIC (Education Abstracts)*;
- *Inside (British Library)*; and
- *Sociological Abstracts*.

Due to time restrictions and financial considerations, the searches were restricted to documents in the English language. Each database search was conducted using the broadest possible parameters to ensure that all recent, relevant literature was identified. In all databases, records with the words *assess* (or any derivative, for example, assessing or assessment) and *social work* were examined. All articles which were considered relevant were then sought.

We supplemented database searches with a manual search, covering the same parameters from 1996 to 2003, of recent monographs and social work journals, held by the University of Glasgow and in our private libraries, which we know have published articles on social work education in recent years. The journals reviewed were:

- *Advances in Social Work and Welfare Education*;
- *Australian Social Work*;
- *British Journal of Social Work*;
- *European Journal of Social Work*;
- *Issues in Social Work Education*;
- *Journal of Social Work Practice*;
- *Practice*;
- *Research on Social Work Practice*; and
- *Social Work Education*.

Any relevant additional materials on assessment methods identified from the bibliographies of articles and books located through either the electronic or manual searches were also sought.

In addition to these searches of published material, electronic searches were undertaken to identify relevant unpublished and web-based materials, sometimes known as 'grey literature'. In particular, there was an extensive search of the website of the Social Policy and Social Work Learning and Teaching Support Network (SWAPltsn) which includes links to a range of resources in social work education including case studies, conference papers and archived electronic discussion lists.

Some of the above searches revealed information about methods of assessment used in cognate disciplines such as social policy and the health sciences and some of this literature is also included in this review.

Methods of assessment

It has been estimated that the assessment tasks which form at least 90 percent of a typical degree programme in the United Kingdom are essays and/ or reports marked by tutors or unseen exams with a time constraint (Brown and Glasner, 1999). While many social work programmes utilise a more diverse set of assessment methods than is typical in higher education in the United Kingdom, essays and exams continue to be widely used, and therefore we will review the current literature on these forms of assessment before considering alternatives.

Essays

Educators of social science students regularly set essay questions, and for students, essays are a familiar task, involving searching for information and developing a coherent written argument which demonstrates their understanding of the issue under discussion.

Many schools of social work require some form of essay as part of the admissions process into a programme of social work education. It has been proposed that similar tasks could be required both at admission and prior to graduation, on the basis that “comparisons between the two essays might well reveal areas of growth, knowledge and expertise” (Cournoyer, 2001: 141). This may require changes to the admissions procedures:

The nature of the essay assignment and the assessment criteria used to assess them should be well constructed to match school goals and program objectives to best serve the function of student-learning assessment. For instance, rather than an autobiographical statement, applicants might be provided a case scenario to analyze. Towards the end of the program, graduating students could be asked to repeat the process with an analogous case situation.

(Cournoyer, 2001: 141)

Alternately, some form of essay in which students reflect on and integrate the various strands of their learning can occur at key milestones within a programme of social work education. For example, social work students at the University of East London write a 1500 word “reflective learning essay” at the end of year one of the DipSW in which they reflect on their learning for the year (Simpson, Thompson and Wailey, 2000). One might surmise that essays in which students reflect on their own learning are less subject to issues of plagiarism than more traditional essays, but there is no evidence to support such assertions.

Essays have a number of shortcomings as an assessment method. A common criticism is that an essay is not a form of writing for which there is much demand beyond educational institutions. However perhaps the more critical question is whether the skills of writing an essay help one write reports or position papers or other written documents which social work graduates might be expected to produce in their working life. Furthermore, plagiarism has long been an issue in higher education, but the ease with which unscrupulous social science students are able to

purchase 'off-the-shelf' or 'custom-written' essays over the internet (Gibelman, Gelman and Fast, 1999) is a further reason for considering whether an essay is in fact the most appropriate form of assessment for an aspect of a social work programme. Gibelman et al (1999) purchased two papers through the internet on the same welfare history topic as they had set for their students. The two purchased papers (one 'off-the-shelf' and one 'custom-written' at the request of the purchaser) along a paper presented by a real student in their class were each graded by 11 academic social workers from other institutions, blind as to the circumstances in which the papers had been obtained. The legitimate paper was graded between 30 and 96, and while the student paper was graded higher overall, some markers assigned similar grades to all papers, suggesting that the marking of essays is a highly subjective act. Yet even without the possibility of purchasing essays, various forms of cheating are common in written work submitted for assessment (Ashworth, Bannister and Thorne, 1997; Franklyn-Stokes and Newstead, 1995). There are now a growing number of computer programmes which assessors may use to try and detect plagiarism, although use of these undoubtedly adds to the workloads of assessors if more than a sample of essays is checked by such means.

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). Nevertheless, many social work academics seem to have problems with written exams for assessing core social work theory and knowledge, with any written exams most likely to be reserved for assessing acquisition of knowledge in psychology (Dillenberger, Godina and Burton, 1997), law (Henderson, Lloyd and Scott, 2002), or research methods (eg Petracchi and Patchner, 2001; Sieppert and Krysik, 1996).

In contrast to the United Kingdom, many undergraduate social work programmes in the USA require students to take a standardised test of undergraduate achievement in social work (Noble and Stretch, 2002). For example, in addition to exams for particular components of the curriculum, The University of Tennessee at Knoxville had a final 100 item multiple-choice exam for their bachelors degree in social work. End of programme exams can also be compared with exams sat at entry to the course to gain some overall measure of learning over a degree programme (Cournoyer, 2001).

Written examinations come in a range of types and may involve students writing a number of short essays or 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 (eg notes or books) to assist them. As social workers often have to make decisions rapidly, exams can arguably simulate this aspect of professional life. There may well be some argument for exams in particular aspects of social work courses, eg to assess crisis intervention or assessment skills. 'Clients' could be presented to students live in the exam room, on video or a written summary of the client's presenting problems can be written down. Students can 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' (Petracchi, 1999).

One variant which more closely simulates the future employment of 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 form of examination is based on the assumption that rather than being able to regurgitate facts and scribble down as much as one can in an hour or three, it is the ability to access resources and produce timely written responses which is of importance. An example of this is at one English university where social work students were given a set of case papers at 9.30 am on the day of the examination and told they could do what they wished during the morning except talk to a social work tutor. From 2.00 to 4.00 pm they answered five unseen questions about the case under examination conditions:

The intention of the examination was to represent the situation where a Practice Teacher asks the student to look at a file or referral and to come to supervision that afternoon prepared to discuss initiating contact. Questions were asked about the likely concerns of the service-users and the social worker, what additional information might be sought, and how a first interview might be planned. Although the use of examinations in the assessment of professional education has been criticised, we find two main advantages. Firstly, insisting that the questions were answered under examination conditions meant that the written answers were the student's own work. Secondly, the ability to write meaningfully under pressure, using language sensitively and accurately, is transferable to a number of 'real-life' social work situations.

(Leveridge, 2003: 326)

The ability to present an argument to experts or colleagues (Butler and Coleman, 1997) has resulted in proposals that in some instances students are assessed on their oral presentations rather than on their ability to produce a written document. While oral exams or vivas are a feature of the examination process of PhDs in the United Kingdom, these can also be used for assessing coursework undertaken for lower qualifications, although this potential is often not realized. For example, 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 (comprising two tutors and one practicing approved social worker) in which they discuss the legal issues emerging from a case they have been involved in, as well as answering questions about legislation from the panel. All exams are tape-recorded. The rationale for the oral assessment is that practicing social workers need to be able to recall and discuss legal issues in high pressure situations (Henderson et al., 2002).

While written and oral exams have been used to assess knowledge, practical exams have been used to assess social work practice skills. There is some evidence to suggest that use of professional actors has been found to be effective in assessing communication skills of medical students with simulated patients and likely also be effective with social work students. In one documented case, social work students were provided with information about their 'client' (acting students) and given half an

hour to prepare for an assessment interview. The interviews were videotaped and students were required to review and assess their practice, and submit both their videotape and critique of their practice for assessment. High exam grades and positive feedback from a cohort of 25 students is cited as evidence of both effective learning and assessment (Petracchi, 1999). Whether use of actors is feasible when there are much larger numbers of students, or if actors must be paid instead of acting students who were also able to use the videotape towards their own assessment requirements, are questions which would need to be considered further by those educators wanting to include practical exams as a method of assessment in their courses.

Computer-based testing in research methods has been proposed due to benefits for both examiners and students over traditional paper and pencil tests. For examiners, it is claimed there is less time required for marking as the computer can score multiple choice answers, greater standardisation of answers, improved security of exams and the potential to generate a different exam for every student by generating a random set of questions from an item bank. The proposers of this method (Sieppert and Krysik, 1996) cite previous research indicating that computer-based testing produces similar results to paper and pencil testing methods. They also claim that benefits for students include prompt feedback by providing a count of correct answers and providing students with an opportunity to keep improving their score until the end of the exam period. It may also be possible for students to schedule the exam for a time which is most suitable to them.

When a class of 41 social work students rated computer-based testing, most (36/41) agreed that the method of testing was able to assess their knowledge of required readings, and the majority agreed the technique adequately assessed their knowledge of research concepts. However, only 15/41 considered the computer adequately assessed their problem solving skills. The students were almost evenly divided as to whether they felt that computer-based testing would be appropriate in other parts of the social work curriculum (Sieppert and Krysik, 1996).

In addition to questions of appropriateness, a number of other issues must be addressed by those wanting to go down the path of computerised testing. Computerised tests are generally more expensive to construct than traditional paper and pencil tests and requires educators to have substantial computer skills. A further requirement is access to appropriate software and hardware for all students to take exam electronically. There is also the possibility of the computer “crashing” midway through the exam or long response times from the computer (Sieppert and Krysik, 1996).

Whatever form exams take, it is important that they appropriately reflect the skills or knowledge to be assessed. In many states of the USA, social workers must not only pass their degree requirements but sit a licensure exam to ensure they possess the basic knowledge requires for professional practice. A recent study (Black and Whelley, 1999) found a wide disparity between the academic standards articulated by the Council on Social Work Education and the content of the licencing exams. Curricular elements which were viewed as critical to social work education and professional practice were not proportionally represented in the licensure exam.

We have mentioned earlier the importance of aligning learning and assessment tasks. A common criticism of examinations is that this may not occur. 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 the situation of students receiving no feedback except for their final marks. While this may fulfil the purpose of assessment as determining level of achievement, the developmental aspects of the assessment process are lost.

Coursework assignments

While lengthy essays or reports enable students to demonstrate their understanding of complex phenomena, the audiences to which graduates in social work write are often busy people who are looking for something succinct. An example of an assignment which values succinctness is in the Level 1 social policy course at the University of Surrey Roehampton. During the term, students submit two short pieces of written work, each around 800 words long. The aim of the written pieces is to encourage students to write clear and concise answers to set questions. The first of these comes early in the semester, and it is hoped that early submission along with prompt feedback will facilitate growth in student confidence. This timing also enables staff to identify potential problems early on in the semester when there may still be time to address these prior to the final exam (Driver, undated).

The potential for prompt formative feedback is an advantage which short coursework assignments have over longer assignments. Nevertheless, any feedback needs to be constructive, so that if the student were 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). An example of rapid formative feedback is at Liverpool John Moores University where social work students 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 what kind of hypotheses they can develop and what they perceive to be the issues in this case. At the end of the session, 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 of it,

commenting on how this group performs as compared with previous groups. This provides same day feedback to both students and teacher (Clifford, 2003). Short course-work assignments submitted on-line have also been reported in the literature at the University of Strathclyde in Scotland and in the USA at the University of Michigan (Department of Health, 2003).

In addition to providing timely feedback, a series of coursework assignments may be less daunting to students than a single assignment at the end of term. For example, in one research methods course, brief assignments, each focusing on a different statistical procedure have been set as both learning and assessment tasks for students in an introductory social statistics course, taught using a statistical training package. A pre-test post-test design found decreases in mathematical anxiety as measured on the adapted Mathematical Anxiety Rating Scale (MARS-R) (Forte, 1998) but it is unclear whether this is related to the method of teaching or assessment.

A further advantage of coursework assignments is in fostering collaborative working. There claimed to be evidence that by working together, students have a higher level of achievement. Hence, it may be appropriate for students to be assessed as a group rather than individually (Steiner, Layne, Brzuzy and Gerdes, 1999) although there is arguably a case that permitting students not to participate in in-class assessments is consistent with the principles of anti-oppressive practice (Valentine and Freeman, 2000). Indeed, it has been suggested that the need to assess students individually is potentially a barrier to the development of empowering methods of education which utilise small group learning (Taylor, 1996).

While short coursework assignments have a number of advantages as outlined above, it is important that brevity does not result in assignments which are meaningless to students. A key complaint of Scottish residential child care workers undertaking SVQs was that many of the assessment tasks they were required to undertake involved writing logs which “was quite demeaning or trivial” (Heron and Chakrabarti, 2002:189).

While students may consider written assignments less relevant than practice based assignments (Heron and Chakrabarti, 2002), written assignments which require engagement with practice may be viewed more favourably by students. One method of assessment takes account of this issue is critical incident analyses.

Analysing critical incidents has been used effectively for students to demonstrate their learning in field placements (Davies and Kinloch, 2000) but also has potential application for classroom based aspects of the curriculum. For example, understanding the critical events in people’s lives can lead to greater understanding of the life experiences of others, especially those from people from other racial groups. Therefore, in one American course in cross-cultural social work, students interview someone from a different racial group about the critical incidents in their lives which influenced ethn racial identity and write a report of their findings. This method of assessment has received positive feedback from participating students (Montalvo, 1999).

Journals and learning logs

'Journals', 'learning logs' and 'reflective diaries' are seemingly interchangeable terms to denote a written assessment task used in a wide range of courses within social work programmes, both in respect of classroom-based learning and practice learning. Not only is it claimed that these can encourage students to develop learning skills, but the written logs which are accessed by educators may lead to improvements in the learning and teaching environment (Baldwin, 2000).

In the classroom, the use of journals has been a feature of courses about anti-discriminatory practice (Razack, 1999) and cultural diversity (Harris, 1997). These tend to be used as a teaching method to encourage students to explore their feelings as well as make sense of theories around cultural, ethnic and racial differences. It would seem important that the assessment criteria for such assignments do not penalise students who take the risk and admit that they have feelings which are not politically correct or conflict with contemporary social work values.

Learning logs have also been used to provide a medium for reflecting on learning in a group task (Baldwin, 2000) and as a method of assessment for a course in groupwork. After each class, students were required to write a journal entry in which they reflected on their issues associated with the course including group dynamics, course content and reading. An integrative paper at the end of this course was based on the journal entries and provided an opportunity for students to demonstrate their understanding of the stages of group development. It has been claimed that this approach enables a close integration of teaching and learning activities (Marotta, Peters and Paliokas, 2000). For similar reasons, learning logs have been used to assess students' involvement in a social action project:

Grading is one of the most difficult tasks in conducting such a hands-on course. Part of the purpose of transforming the class into a field experience is to allow the real world to dictate the requirements of and standards for the students' work, a process essential in each student's movement towards professional identity. In addition, the role of the instructor in assigning individual grades may discourage the class from functioning collaboratively as a committee, task force, or team. We have addressed these concerns by basing the course grades on the level of each student's effort to contribute to the group project and on the accuracy and insight of the student's logs.

(Raber and Richter, 1999: 85-86)

It should not be assumed that students will be familiar with the requirements of writing journals or learning logs, particularly if these require a component of reflective writing. Hence, a journal writing group was conducted at the University of Bristol to facilitate development of reflective writing skills (Burgess, Baldwin, Dalrymple and Thomas, 1999). Another way of facilitating this form of assessment is to give the task some degree of structure as occurred at the University of the West of England where a reflective diary has been incorporated into a number of classroom based modules in social work:

A suggested pro-forma for the reflective diary was devised, which students were given at the end of each session. For the first few weeks of the module students were given time during the session to discuss the headings on the

diary sheets, to share those thoughts that they felt able to share within the group, and to start writing comments for themselves on their own sheets. The headings were broadly divided into two parts: suggestions for reflection and suggestions for evaluation. In the first part students were encouraged to:

- Make a note of something they found particularly interesting about the session;
- Say why they found it interesting;
- Consider how it connected with their own life experiences.

In the evaluation, a number of questions were posed.

- How do you think you might use this learning to inform your practice as a social worker?
- In what ways do you think service users will benefit from your learning?
- Identify how your learning adds to your understanding of 'good' social work practice.

(Burgess et al., 1999: 139)

Observation

Observations of students are frequently used in the assessment of practice learning in social work. This applies both to students on qualifying courses and practice teachers who are seeking accreditation as part of a practice teaching award. It has been proposed that:

The overall aim of using direct observation in social work education is primarily to enhance the quality of service to clients by increasing the range of learning opportunities available to both student and practice teacher. ... observation in placement provides opportunities for practice teachers to explore the development of knowledge, values and skills at different points in the placement. Both student and practice teacher will be able to decide where to focus their energies in terms of learning priorities, eg does a student need greater help with 'interactional skills', 'pacing' and structuring the interview, or looking at strategies for involving and empowering clients more effectively? With such a wide range of material being generated, it is not only necessary to prioritise the material chosen but also to be clear about the main areas of learning which have been identified. The issue of giving and receiving feedback is therefore an important part of planning such observations, since the student will need both an immediate response after the session (even if this is can only be relatively limited) and more thoroughly and considered discussion at a later supervision session.

(Tanner and le Riche, 1995: 72)

While the above quote demonstrates the use of observation in providing formative feedback, the observation of social work students is a widely held requirement of summative assessments of practice learning. While in many cases, these will be made by practice teachers (Cowburn, Nelson and Williams, 2000), in some programmes the observations are made by university staff who on their visits to agencies (Kemp, 2001; Maxwell, 1999).

Although the majority of the literature about observation as a method of assessment in social work relates to practice learning, there may also be potential for use in the classroom. One proposal is that tutors may observe groups working in class to determine the extent of individual contributions in group projects (Young, undated).

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 groupwork (Marotta et al., 2000), community organizing (Gutierrez and Alvarez, 2000) and practice learning (Slater, 1996). Furthermore, instead of being used to evaluate learning in a segment of a programme, portfolios can also be used to demonstrate student learning over an entire degree programme (Cournoyer, 2001). While portfolios have often been used to demonstrate student achievement of competence, another option is for students to develop a portfolio of practice resources:

Students are required to begin the construction of a personal set of social work law and social welfare law materials appropriate to their personal interests. This is to be written and presented together with a critical discussion of the methods (organisational and editorial) and skills employed. Assessment will test understanding of range and status of 'law' materials for social work practice and the acquisition of initial skills necessary for this task. Candidates will be expected to demonstrate each of the learning outcomes in their assessment task.

(Preston-Shoot, 2003: 476)

The portfolio format is particularly suitable for assessing student learning when the evidence of their learning is presented in several and potentially disparate ways. Moreover, it has been argued that portfolios can enable students to demonstrate complex and multiple levels of learning (Gutierrez and Alvarez, 2000). Yet, many students have no experience of developing portfolios prior to becoming a social work student, and need clear guidelines to enable them to complete them in a manner which is both timely and remain an active method of learning rather than just another task to be completed (Taylor, Thomas and Sage, 1999). Without clear guidance, portfolios can easily result in a lack of clarity as to what they are aiming to demonstrate:

They seem to throw in everything but the kitchen sink. Although they show evidence of a great deal of hard work and high standards of practice, it is difficult to pull out key elements which evidence that the requirements for the award have been met.

(Slater, 1996: 199)

Within prescribed guidelines there may however be some room for negotiation. For example, candidates for the CCETSW Award in Practice Teaching at the University of Sheffield were required to develop a learning agreement which could be agreed to by their tutor, which would detail how they would meet their learning objectives. While the development of a portfolio was a required assessment task, there was considerable scope for negotiation as to what this would comprise, and target dates for

submission of the various components for formative feedback. The programme allowed students to submit all pieces of portfolio work in stages prior to the final assessment. These pieces of work were not marked or graded as pass or fail but rather treated as formative assessments. Comments were given to students to allow them to modify their submissions prior to the submission of the complete portfolio (Horwath and Shardlow, 2000).

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

Presentations

The ability to present an argument to experts or colleagues (Butler and Coleman, 1997) or to discuss ideas in a forum (Crisp, 1999) has resulted in proposals that there may be occasions within their training when social work students are assessed on their oral presentations rather than on their ability to produce a written document. Other forms of presentations may include field trips, Powerpoint presentations and community simulations (Gutierrez and Alvarez, 2000).

One form of presentation, which is a feature of many academic and professional conferences, but which is only recently gaining acceptance as an assessment method are poster presentations. As students can see others' work, the process of assessment coincides with a shared learning environment. Posters are presented and marked in class time, providing rapid feedback. Furthermore, posters provide students with an opportunity to develop professional presentation skills. This form of presentation may be less threatening than an oral presentation. Poster requires visual presentation skills, which differ from traditional written tasks. At Anglia Polytechnic, the poster is only an optional form of assessment and some students continue to choose written assessment tasks (Akister, Bannon and Mullender-Lock, 2000).

Proposals

Development of proposals is often used as a method of assessment for research methods courses (eg Crisp, 1999; Walsh, 1998), but 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 (eg Hollister and McGee, 2000; Moxley and Thrasher, 1996). While the proposals can be the preparatory work for projects subsequently undertaken, development of a proposal can be a standalone piece of assessable work that enables students to demonstrate their ability to integrate and apply a range of skills and theoretical knowledge in a practical task similar to that which they may have to undertake after graduation.

Positive feedback from one cohort of students who were required to develop a proposal that would benefit their local community, was that this increased their understanding and ability to plan and develop new social programmes, including writing grant applications. The topics on which these students developed proposals included domestic violence, community support of adults with a mental illness, homelessness, community support for aged persons and school retention in minority ethnic communities (Moxley and Thrasher, 1996).

Reports of work undertaken

Reports of work undertaken have wide utility for assessing learning in both university-based and placement settings. Carrying out a small scale piece of research in which students either collect their own original data or source existing data (eg 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 own findings and what they have read.

In one American social work programme where students took courses in research and practice concurrently with their practice learning in an agency setting, an integrated assignment involving students developing and carrying out a piece of research in the agency has been developed to enhance students' understanding of the relationship between research and practice. While most students were able to conduct the research and write a report, an alternative assignment had to be set for a few students where it proved impossible to undertake the proposed research within their agency (Walsh, 1998).

A more feasible approach to conducting research and reporting on it, which does not rely on agency based practice learning opportunities is for students to undertake research projects for which they are also the subjects. For example, one class of American MSW students, some of whom were classroom based and others who received instruction at a remote site via interactive televised teaching, wrote research papers which gave them an opportunity to evaluate the different teaching methods while concurrently serving as the subjects in their own evaluation. By researching their own learning experiences, the research paper was a topic on which the students had knowledge and it also enabled students to explore issues of evaluation from the perspective of both the researcher and the researched (Petracchi and Patchner, 2001).

Although dissertations and theses are used in many qualifying social work programmes, these are rarely mentioned in the literature, and even then the references we noted were in passing with little detail (Glezakos and Lee, 2001; SWAPItsn, undated). One Canadian paper provides guidance on the marking of doctoral dissertations in social work (Shera, 2001).

Standardised instruments

A series of standardised instruments were administered to a group of Australian social work students at the beginning and end of a unit which aimed to enhance their critical

thinking skills (Plath, English, Conners and Beveridge, 1999). In Boston, O'Hare and Collins (1997) have proposed a 33-item standardised scale for measuring social work practice skills which was developed with social work students in mind. However, how it might be used to assess practice learning is less clear. While such instruments may be an alternative to more traditional forms of assessment, it is crucial that they have demonstrated reliability and validity, and not favour some students due to their gender or cultural background (Plath et al., 1999).

Whereas most of the assessment methods reviewed were concerned with diagnosing the learning of individual students, it has been proposed that a self-efficacy measure administered at the beginning and end of a unit enables social work educators to assess the impact of their teaching for the class as a whole. The use of a brief nine-item instrument which measures research self efficacy has been proposed on the basis that students who have high self efficacy at the end of a research methods course are more likely to undertake research after graduation as a social worker. The proposers of this method of assessment (Holden, Barker, Meenaghan and Rosenberg, 1999) contend that self efficacy measures have previously been used in the assessment of skill development in disciplines such as rehabilitation, nursing and counselling psychology.

Involvement of persons other than social work academics in the assessment process

Academics from other disciplines

Increasing moves to include inter-professional education on the agenda of qualifying social work programmes, brings up the question as to the extent to which academics from disciplines other than social work can participate in the assessment of social work students. For example, early discussions between social work and nursing educators at the University of Staffordshire who were planning a module of joint teaching was that feedback on formative assessment tasks would be provided to students by the facilitator of their group, irrespective of whether their facilitator is from the same or different discipline. However, in respect of summative assessment it was anticipated that social work staff would deal with the social work students' assignments and nursing staff with the nursing students' assignments. The rationale for this was noted as being due to the professional requirements of the different training programmes involved in the joint teaching (Moss, 2003).

Perceptions of limitations as to the extent that academics may be involved in the assessment of students from disciplines other than their own may be inaccurate. For example, students in a joint nursing and social work course at South Bank University could find their practice being assessed by either a social work or nursing academic. However, when any concerns were expressed, both disciplines were actively involved in the assessment process (Davis, Rendell and Sims, 2000).

Practice teachers

While agency-based practice teachers play a key role in the assessment of practice learning in the United Kingdom, in some countries, assessments of practice are done by university staff visiting the agency. Assessment of practice learning often includes a combination of an assessment of student performance and of submissions made by the student in the form of reports or seminar presentations. While some schools of social work give greater weight when assigning a final mark to the performance assessment (and consequently assessment by practice teachers), in others it is the students' reports and presentations (usually marked by university staff) which determine the majority of marks assigned for a placement (Maxwell, 1999).

A lack of, or minimal, involvement in the assessment process might be interpreted as reflecting a belief that practice teachers do not have sufficient expertise to assess students. Even in the United Kingdom, which has somewhat of a tradition of training programmes for practice teaching, there have been doubts raised as to the ability of practice teachers to competently perform their assessment duties. One English study of prospective practice teachers found that many of those with pre-DipSW qualifications did not have adequate knowledge of anti-discriminatory practice and reflective skills, yet were required to assess students on these criteria (Ellis and Thorpe, 1999). Likewise, many practice teachers have been found to have insufficient knowledge of social work law to assess students' competence of

understanding legislation and working within legislative frameworks (Preston-Shoot, 2003).

Even if practice teachers are competent, students may not perceive them to be objective when it comes to observing practice. Observations of students by practice teachers assume objectivity by the observer. While practice teachers may feel more or less positively about what they observe than does the student, students may feel their actions have been misconstrued. Furthermore, the power dynamics may leave students feeling they have no recourse to challenge observations which they do not consider to be objective (Cowburn et al., 2000).

Where practice teachers are involved in assessing students, it is usual for there to be some input or discussion with university staff prior to completion of the process. While this typically involves visits by academics to practice agencies, video conferencing has been used effectively at the University of Wales-Bangor for some placement meetings to plan and review practice learning (Collins, Guttridge and James., 1999). When preparing assessment reports, practice teachers may also take into account verbal or written comments provided by others, but this does not necessarily occur on a routine basis even when on-site supervisors have been named in a working agreement (Burgess and Phillips, 2000).

Students

Peer assessment and self assessment have been proposed as strategies for enhancing learning which fits with the development of reflective learning and critical thinking (eg Baldwin, 2000; Burgess et al., 1999; Gutierrez and Alvarez, 2000). Indeed it has been claimed that:

We cannot expect students to become competent professionals unless they learn to be actively involved in constructing and reconstructing notions of good practice as they proceed.

(Boud, 1999: 122)

Proponents of self and peer assessments claim they focus on the students' capacities to assess themselves, to make judgements about their learning (and that of their peers) and to evaluate what has been learnt. Further claimed benefits include redressing the balance of power between staff and students, developing anti-oppressive practice and the process of life-long learning, and facilitating students to take specific responsibility for monitoring and making judgements about their own learning (Burgess et al., 1999). In the case of group assignments, this might involve members of a group determining how marks allocated should be divided amongst group members (Young, undated).

A common misunderstanding is that peer assessment and self assessment are necessarily alternative forms of assessment. In some cases, students complete assessment tasks such as giving presentations or producing reports, with the difference being that in addition, either the student themselves or other students are formally involved in the processes of grading and/or providing feedback. This use of

peer 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 which may lead to structured instruments being used (eg 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). One interesting example of self-assessment involved students in a course on racism and oppression being given a blank audiotape and an interview guide and required to discuss their experiences of racism after the first class. Near the end of the semester, the tapes are returned and students are required to reflect on how their responses to racism had changed over the course in a written paper, using the tape as a baseline measure (Millstein, 1997).

There is some debate as to whether assessments conducted by students can be used for formal assessment (Boud, 1999). Notwithstanding claims that if there is no formal assessment, there may be a lack of motivation for students to complete self or peer assessment tasks (Baldwin, 2000), university guidelines generally preclude students assigning the final grade for a unit of study (Burgess et al., 1999). Therefore, one must presume that students’ self and peer assessments must then 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. Nevertheless, it has been argued that self assessment does not necessarily lead to students’ better understanding the university’s formal assessment practices (Baldwin, 2000). Furthermore, unless staff do review assessments completed by students, there may be resentment from students who perceive they are doing the job of their teachers, (Boud, 1999).

Notwithstanding the issues of university guidelines and student expectations, it has been suggested that it is not the role of social work programmes to assess ability to reflect (Iyer, 1999). Moreover, there may in fact be a tension between assessment and reflection:

Assessment involves the presentation of one’s best work, of putting a good case forward, emphasising what one knows, not what one doesn’t yet know. Reflection, on the other hand, is about exploration, focusing on a lack of understanding, questioning, probing discrepancies and so on. There is always the danger that assessment will obliterate the very practices of reflection which courses aim to promote. The assessment discourse celebrates certainty; reflection thrives on doubt.

(Boud, 1999: 123)

Evaluations of self assessment in three English social work programmes suggest that the implementation requires both planning and ongoing monitoring. Prior to implementation, academic staff may require training around the use of self assessment tasks, including their own role as facilitators/ tutors/ markers, in addition to orienting students to this method of working. Careful consideration must also be taken around the selection of the actual self-assessment instruments or tasks to be undertaken ensuring a balance between complexity and the amount of time required to complete the tasks. The extent to which self assessment is used across the curriculum should also be considered as repeated self-assessment for every module may result in

assessment fatigue (Burgess et al., 1999). Furthermore, it may be inappropriate to incorporate self-assessment in the early stages of a course as there is likely to be too many unknowns for students to be able to fully engage with the self-assessment activity (Baldwin, 2000; Waldman, Glover and King, 1999).

Service users

In recent years, the involvement of service users in student assessment has been explored in a number of papers originating in the United Kingdom. Mostly these relate to the assessment of practice learning. Indeed, it has even been suggested that reports of practice learning should not be accepted by providers of qualifying social work programmes which do not include mention of service user feedback (Edwards, 2003).

A study of 90 English practice teachers found that 86 percent responded positively to the question of whether they should seek the views of service users when preparing assessment reports on students, and 81 percent had in fact done so. Of the remainder, some were open to using service user feedback if it was offered (Shennan, 1998). Practice teachers who do incorporate service user views into student assessments have noted that these often confirm their own observations (Cuming and Wilkins, 2000; Shennan, 1998).

However, as to what is considered to be service user input and how this is sought, there is much less agreement. While a few practice teachers use structured questionnaires to obtain service user views on students, this is more often sought through informal conversations. Still other practice teachers consider the interactions they observe between students and clients as incorporating service user views into assessment (Shennan, 1998).

Some practice teachers have raised concerns about service user feedback. On the one hand, clients may be overly positive about the student. Service user feedback may reflect a student's popularity rather than their competence. Furthermore, some service users may be too tolerant to poor student performance (Thomas, 2002). As one respondent in Shennan's study wrote:

People have been too keen to say that everything was brilliant. They perhaps perceive that the assessment is hanging on their view and don't want to be responsible for failing the student.

(Shennan, 1998: 414)

Alternately, service users who have gripes with an agency may project these onto individual students, especially when service users perceive unwanted decisions to have been made or the agency is not able to meet their expectations. Another scenario is that service users may be prejudiced against students because of their youth or gender (Shennan, 1998; Thomas, 2002).

Proper criteria is needed for assessment or feedback from service users. Unsolicited feedback from a single individual in a group situation may not reflect the views of other service users (Thomas, 2002). One approach to obtaining service user feedback

is to 1) indicate that their views will be sought by the practice teacher at the outset, and 2) for the feedback to be sought in a structured way which relates to competences which the student must demonstrate in a placement (Cuming and Wilkins, 2000). Others however have suggested a flexible approach is needed to obtaining feedback (Edwards, 2003).

Irrespective of how feedback is sought, it is important that service users know how any feedback they provide will be used (Edwards, 2003). Indeed, this would seem essential if service users are able to give informed consent for their involvement in the assessment process (Kemp, 2001). Furthermore, it has been proposed that

Service users cannot become participants in the assessment of students if they are powerless to influence the process.

(Kemp, 2001: 536)

Unless the parameters are carefully delineated, service users and practice teachers may develop quite different understandings as to the involvement of service users. For example, one recent study of practice teachers found that “the service user was seen as involved in the assessment process, but having no responsibility for it” (Edwards, 2003: 344). As such, practice teachers might discount the input of some service users into the assessment process, with many believing that the final say as to its inclusion in an assessment of student practice should lie with the practice teacher (Thomas, 2002). Consequently, the role of the practice teacher can be viewed as contextualising the various bits of feedback received, including that from service users (Cuming and Wilkins, 2000; Edwards, 2003).

The input of service users need not be limited to assessments of practice learning in agency settings. One approach to learning and teaching which has been used with nursing students at Kings College London are client review presentations. This involves students presenting anonymised presentations of cases that they have been involved with, to a group which includes other students, academic staff members and service users or members of service user groups. Following the presentation, everybody present has an opportunity to provide feedback to the presenting student from their perspective (Frisby, 2001).

The involvement of service users at Kings involved far more than issuing an invitation to local service user groups. Service user groups were invited to nominate members who could contribute to the course planning and these individuals were paid for their involvements at the same rates as professionals. Agreements were also developed in relation to training, supervision and support of service users, standards of involvement and accountability (Frisby, 2001).

Assessment strategy

Over a qualifying course in social work, students will be assessed many times, by a range of people, and usually involving a range of assessment tasks. This reflects the range of learning outcomes in respect of knowledge, skills and values that are expected from newly qualified social workers. Some authors have suggested that assessment processes should also be able to assess the attitudes of social work students, although there is little guidance as to how this could occur (Deacon, 2000; Sullivan, 1999). This is consistent with the notion that assessment of social work students is not only an academic exercise but also about professional credentialing:

Potentially, assessment of social work students can safeguard both professional standards, service users and the general public. Inevitably some students will not be able to meet the required level of practice. ...

Justice both needs to be done and needs to be seen to be done. This requires programmes to give attention, both to criteria against which students are to be judged, and also to the structures, procedures and processes which underpin assessment.

(Cowburn et al., 2000: 635-636)

This suggests the need for an assessment strategy, which in addition to considering structures, procedures and processes, should outline the different types of assessment to be used and rationale for use of these in every component of a student's course. Development of an assessment strategy can lead to a focus as to what the overall aims of a programme should be, i.e. what sort of graduates a programme wishes to produce (Gingerich, Kaye and Bailey, 1999).

In developing an assessment strategy, programme providers need to take into account their institution's established principles and policies around assessment, to which programmes and modules contained therein must conform (Mutch and Brown, 2001; Yorke, 2001). For example, there may be a requirement that some assessment takes the form of an exam (Burgess et al., 1999). Conversely, institutional requirements that all work be joint marked, potentially limits use of class presentations as a formal assessment task unless it is possible in advance to timetable a panel of assessors to attend all presentations or for the presentations to be recorded. Alternatively, peer assessments made by other students would require to be accepted as being equivalent to a second member of academic staff being involved in the assessment process. Thus, one issue which needs to be addressed in an assessment strategy is who will be involved in the assessment of students.

Institutional requirements undoubtedly underpin the current situation in which it has been suggested that "British students are probably the most assessed in Europe" (Mutch and Brown, 2001: 10). Therefore, before considering the assessment strategy of individual modules, the question of what is feasible for students to do in a year, should be addressed. Having too many assessment tasks overall, and not enough time to do each one, are not uncommon problems. However, assignments which require integration of knowledge have been advocated as promoting student learning over assignments which focus narrowly on one aspect of the curriculum (Sokolec, 2001).

The requirements of accrediting bodies may also place constraints on an overall assessment strategy, by requiring that specific knowledge and/ or skills be assessed within an overall programme. Alternatively, they may require that a range of skills be tested across a programme through a diverse range of assessment tasks. For example, in the United Kingdom, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (2000) has noted the need for social work students to have the opportunity to undertake assessment tasks which demonstrates 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 groups of students. For example, an assessment strategy involving all written tasks may disadvantage a student with dyslexia, or 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 exam. Similarly, it has been suggested that some computer-based assessment tasks may enable a visually impaired student to be assessed in the same exam room as the rest of the class, rather than in a separate room 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). To this end, Crawshaw has identified the following issues which she argues need to be taken into account if a disabled student was granted permission to make a presentation to the class rather than submit a piece of written assessment:

- The need for clear guidelines, including whether or not the group has to agree to it;
- The need for the session to be videoed for second marking and external examining purposes;
- The need for marking criteria comparable to those for written assignments;
- The need to make decisions about the number of assignments that could be completed in this way by any one student;
- The need to make decisions about the number of assignments that could be completed in this way by the group as a whole;
- The need to decide whether such an assessment system would only be open to disabled students or non-disabled students too;
- The implications for anonymous marking.

(Crawshaw, 2002: 511)

Having considered some core elements necessary to the development of an overall assessment strategy, we will now consider some of 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. Alignment of the assessment tasks to the learning outcomes is of course essential in planning assessment strategies (Biggs, 2003). Assessments which involve application of knowledge to a case rather than a demonstration of knowledge per se are often favoured in social work education (Preston-Shoot, Roberts and Vernon, 1998). These different objectives are likely to require differential assessment tasks.

Assessment tasks must also be achievable. In particular, competence based assessments should not require students to have to manufacture situations in order to demonstrate competences (Heron and Chakrabarti, 2002).

The stage at which the assessment task is set within the overall programme is also important. For example, it could be more appropriate to offer new undergraduate students a number of short pieces of assessment, whereas a single longer piece of work may be deemed appropriate for honours or postgraduate students.

Reviews of literature such as this one have significant limitations and we recognise that the documents we have reviewed may provide a somewhat different picture of assessment in social work education than is actually occurring. Furthermore, no single form of assessment (whether or not identified in this review) is either universally appropriate or without some shortcomings. The task of identifying appropriate assessment methods is made more difficult given that rigorous evidence of effectiveness is often scant or nonexistent (eg 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 (eg 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 some of the more innovative forms of assessment which have been proposed seem very time intensive for both students and assessors. Furthermore, many interesting published accounts of assessment methods involved classes no larger than 20 or 25 students in a year (eg Butler and Coleman, 1997; Gutierrez and Alvarez, 2000; Marotta et al., 2000). Yet many 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.

Once assessment tasks have been selected, it is important that criteria for assessment are made explicit prior to students beginning work on the assessment 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.

Finally, an assessment strategy should include an evaluation component including scrutinisation of completed assessment tasks to determine whether they actually were an effective and appropriate method of assessment (Garcia and Floyd, 2002). While external examiners undoubtedly have an important role with regards scrutinisation

and evaluation of assessment processes, this does not remove the need for individual assessors to undertake their own evaluations of the assessment process.

It is hoped that reviews such as this one will encourage those involved in the development of new social work programmes to further consider some of the emerging literature on assessment in social work education, including the implications of what is currently being proposed. Nevertheless, it is probably inevitable that the development of assessment strategies for social work programmes will involve compromises.

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