Reflections on Assessing practice based learning in FHSC

Assessment is crucial on all our courses but on practice-based programmes, particular issues arise because of the need to assess practice and to work with external agencies who may be involved in assessing students. As Shakespeare (2006) explains assessment must satisfy different bodies – the University itself (so students are ‘fit for award’), but also the regulatory bodies (‘fit for practice’) and the employers (‘fit for purpose’).

Assessment plays a vital role in the learning process. This role has long been recognised in the Open University’s inclusion of learning activities throughout, offering opportunities for students to self-assess (see Shakespeare and Jones, 2006). Beyond self-assessment, assignments and examinations can be said to drive the learning insofar as what is assessed tends to be what is learnt. This is not simply because students take an instrumental approach to their studies but because what we assess indicates to learners what is valued in the course. They may learn other aspects as well – for example the nature of study or the sort of learner they are. But the material that they process, work on and ‘make their own’ is the material they need to write essays, pass exams and succeed in their practice placements. A concrete illustration of this is in the use of online forums where Macdonald (2006) claims that the best way to ensure participation is to award marks for participation.

This means that discussions about the assessment strategy of the course need to be embedded into the way course teams think about the course from the start, how they make decisions about the learning outcomes and how they prioritise the content. If material is not assessed it often won’t be read and certainly not processed to the same extent.

One decision course teams must tackle is when, and how much, to assess. The role of assessment in learning would suggest that learners benefit from regular exercises which encourage them to process the course ideas and which provide feedback on their learning. The fact that learning and assessment are inextricably linked challenges claims about ‘over-assessment’ on courses or of ‘too many TMAs’. But there are other pressures on decisions about assessment such as the cost of setting and marking the exercises. The issue of managing the workload generated by portfolio marking was explored by Strivens’ (2006) CETL investigation through interviews with portfolio markers on health care courses at eight universities. This led to the identification of twelve strategies used to minimise the work, including peer assessment, sampling and integrating the assessment process into the time allocated for teaching.). Anecdotal evidence suggests a few students may also make course choices on the basis of assessment strategies.

Apart from decisions about when they will assess, course teams also need to decide what they will access. External bodies may influence such decisions – a government push for degrees to include number skills, group work and information technology or a professional body wanting work with older people to be included. Courses must be seen to meet the
standards, competencies and proficiencies required by professional and statutory bodies. On courses covering both health and social care there may be a push to ensure both professions are equally represented in the assessment strategy. Internally, with the faculty’s push toward a more programme-based curriculum course, assessment needs to be seen to accord with that of other courses, at both lower and higher levels to reflect progression. The FHSC Assessment Audit (Harkes and Shakespeare, 2007) found that recommended word allowance of assignments tended to increase as the student moved through the faculty’s three undergraduate levels. But there were few discernible differences in the process words used in assignment titles at the different levels (for example ‘discuss’, ‘describe’), apart from a greater tendency for third level courses to include the words ‘critically’ and ‘analyse’. Shakespeare and Jones’ (2006) pedagogical audit produced similar findings about the lack of difference in learning outcomes at the different levels of courses, apart from the increased use of ‘critically and ‘critical’ at third level.

Decisions also need making about the format of the assessment – how learning may be demonstrated, evidenced and submitted for grading. Again this is a crucial decision since the way a task is framed may well dictate the learning that occurs. An essay by its essence requires students to learn to construct an argument, to consider alternative perspectives and to order and evidence their points. If carefully worded, an essay question can help students learn to look at social and health issues from different viewpoints – those of the service user, the worker or the management. As such essays may be particularly valuable in supporting students new to study and new to reflecting on their practice, allowing them to interrogate the familiar from different angles. K101’s use of essays for its assignments shows a commitment to this view of the essay as an ideal vehicle for structuring learning. Although essay writing is the dominant form of written assessment in our faculty, (Harkes and Shakespeare, 2007) there has been little evaluation of how successful it is as a vehicle for learning in the CETL work. One exception to this is the work of Donahue et al (2009) who are used genre theory to explore the extent of match between K101 assignment questions, guidance notes, student responses and tutor marking. They identify the demands on students to move between the individualised case studies and the abstract and generalised course concepts in order to be successful in terms of their marks. The writers suggest that this reflects a wider requirement in the field of health and care where students seek to apply academic ideas and generalised good practice solutions to individual and unique experiences.

Another example of how the format of the task can structure the learning comes from K101’s use of grids for the part b element of the assignments where students typically watch a video clip and then assess the practice. The grid format allows for two examples to be compared on the same criteria so that the student is able to move from specific case studies to generalisations. Following grid activities the student is encouraged to reflect on how grids can be used in their studies to organise the way they compare and contrast case studies (Wilson and Barnes, 2010). On K214 the design of the portfolio is geared to encouraging students to use it as a long-term tool which will help them reflect on their personal goals and career progression as well as to record and evidence their learning on the course (Harris, 2007).
On higher level courses students encounter other formats – reports, memos and portfolios and other writing genres, including reflective writing on personal experience. Reflective writing in particular has been the subject of several CETL investigations. Pettit and Shakespeare’s (2009) cross-faculty study looks at how assessment tasks which ask students to write about practice are managed by course teams, tutors and students. They concluded that differences in how such writing is marked are based on faculty custom and not just a result of the different academic domains but are rooted in faculty custom and practice. Even on the same course it is notoriously difficult to get markers to agree on what constitutes ‘good’ reflective writing in our faculty. For example one of the first courses presented in FHSC - *K663, Roles and Relationships* - encountered particular problems in trying to standardise marking in an end-of-course reflective writing task. One issue that commonly arose in such meetings was whether students could reflect well on poor practice and if so how this should be rewarded. In the CETL investigations, White (2007) has carried out a small scale investigation looking at her own practice in giving feedback on reflective writing to see how far she was able to help childminders develop their practice, whilst Rai (2008) reports a CETL-PBPL workshop held in 2008 to explore how students can manage the emotions which can arise from students focusing on their practice in order to write reflectively. Even students with considerable academic experience may struggle with assessment requiring them to reflect on practice. Some of the foundation degree students in Kubiak et al’s study (2008) reported confidence in their academic ability and in their practice but struggled to merge the two into successful reflective writing.

Reflection on practice need not necessarily be restricted to those courses requiring students to be in practice. On open access courses the faculty has long used audio and visual material to create scenarios which allow students to reflect on the practice of others – as in the part b practice skills elements of assignments on K100 *Understanding Health and Social Care*. The faculty’s first course, *K668 Mental Handicap: Changing Perspectives*, used both visual material and project work to encourage non-sponsored students to reflect on practice. Harkes and Shakespeare (2007) suggest that such use of reflection in assessment could be mapped across the faculty to allow for consistent linking between open and closed courses which would help articulate how our awards meet the requirements of external bodies.

Whatever the genre students are likely to arrive at the writing task with a vast range of writing competencies. Our open access policy means our students may have very little experience of different writing genres and almost no understanding of what is valued in academic writing. The Faculty has recognised this through its provision of a resource bank guiding students through generic skills such as avoiding plagiarism, referencing and using appropriate language. On some courses such as K101, writing skills work is embedded in the course itself with extensive use made of Northedge’s (2005) Good Study Guide. We need to also prepare our students for the range of writing styles and formats they will be required to use in their professional roles. A CETL investigation by Rai and Lillis (2009) looks at the writing demands made of qualified social workers and how academic and work contexts can prepare them for professional writing.
The advances in information technology have seen changes in the way assessment is carried out. Some of this is largely cosmetic – the use of electronic rather than paper assignments. Other changes can improve the way the teaching points are put across as in the use of online number skills work and through interactive quizzes and iCMAs (Marsh, Waights and Wylie, 2010). But the development of the internet also allows for changes in the nature of the learning – for example the K101 online project which creates opportunities for students to work in teams and produce a group report (Wilson and Barnes, 2010). Previously some faculties in the University allowed for such groupwork at residential schools but this is a relatively new development for FHSC which has never used the residential school model. However, there is the opportunity now to carry out assessed groupwork at day workshops which is then subsequently followed through in online forums.

Conversely information technology can obstruct learning through assessment if students are unfamiliar with the medium used so that the exercise becomes as much one of being able to use the tool as being able to address the content. For example in exploring the use of portfolios in assessment Alan Clarke’s (2007) CETL investigation identifies issues around helping with technical difficulties and points to the importance of proactive support and phone contact. The FHSC Resource Bank website ePortfolios - getting started with MyStuff is available for students learning to navigate the tool. So when introducing a new technology into the assessment process the course team need to consider not just how it can be produced but how students and tutors can be supported in using the tool in their own environments often far removed from the support systems and opportunities for easy access to software and hardware which exist at the central campus.

Course teams will also want to consider whether they will include an examination as part of their assessment strategy. At the time of the FHSC’ assessment audit, over half of the faculty’s courses included an examination, relying almost entirely on the model of a three hour paper with three equally weighted essay questions (Harkes and Shakespeare, 2007). There are of course arguments for and against an exam. It can be the one way of validating that the work being assessed is the student’s own – answering increasing concerns in the academic world about the dangers of plagiarism. Advocates of the examination also point to the potential for students of integrating their learning as they prepare for assessment which draws from across the course. Some stakeholders too may welcome the inclusion of an examination feeling it reinforces the status of the award and provides proof of academic standards. Set against there is some anecdotal evidence that at least a few students may be reluctant to choose a course with an examination at the end. For some students the fear of ‘going blank’ in an exam is realised and the examination in such situations may be a poor test of a student’s learning. K101’s strategy of allowing students to take in a summary sheet of notes may help to overcome this blanking. Because the students are restricted in the amount of words they can put on the sheets it encourages the skill of condensing many months study into its salient points – to identify the core messages of the course.

Examinations are not the only format which students may approach with trepidation. Holland and Bucklee’s (2008) CETL investigation explored how the students move from seeing the portfolio as an unfamiliar and threatening object (a ‘foe’) to becoming attached to it (as a ‘friend’) and recognising the role it has played in their learning. This begs the question of
how far we articulate to students what they gain from the different types of assessment they do. Do students ‘know’ that the essay will help them structure their thinking, that the report helps them write more concisely, or that the reflective writing assignment is not just an end in itself to earn marks but rather is a process which will inform their practice throughout their career? Students too exist in a peer community which may pull in opposite ways to what course teams want to happen with the assessment process. For example in Kubiak et al’s (2008) interviews with foundation degree students some reported feeling demotivated by others who took a more instrumental approach to the course:

“My colleague never did any of the activities, just the TMAs. It’s hard to study when you know your colleague isn’t doing the stuff you work hard at.” (p 26)

From the above, many of the CETL investigations have looked at the challenges and solutions to supporting students in written assessment tasks. But of course in practice-based courses on-site assessment plays a vital role in seeing if the student is ‘fit for practice’. There has been little attention to this aspect of assessment in the faculty investigations perhaps because it is often at arms length from the university – located in the workplace. However, Shakespeare and Webb (2007) used interviews with students and mentors to explore how judgements are made about professional competence. Their work explores the complexities of the student-mentor relationship - the role communication plays, the emotional work students must do and the way students and mentors articulate competence.

Assessment then needs to be seen as integral to the learning and involving complex decisions around when, how much, in what form and to achieve which outcomes. Consideration must be given to how students will be supported in developing the skills they need for completing the assessment successfully – both in terms of writing skills and in handling the technology demands of the work. The exploration of how practice is assessed on our programmes is relatively uncharted territory, at least in the CETL studies and requires further investigation. Work is also needed on how assessment can proceed in a progressive fashion across the faculty and how this progression can be made visible as a method of validating our awards. The CETL investigations have begun this process.

References

Note as indicated in the references some of the links are only available to OU staff


Practice Learning Topics
Practice-based Professional Learning, CETL
Fiona Barnes


Practice Learning Topics
Practice-based Professional Learning, CETL
Fiona Barnes

White, S. (2007) *Supporting reflective practice amongst early years practitioners* Available at:  

Wilson, A. and Barnes, F. (2010) *Structuring activities for learning on K101* Presentation at the eLearning Community of Practice event 26 April 2010 Available as power point and webcast at http://kn.open.ac.uk/workspace.cfm?wpid=9413 Accessed 29 April Only available to OU staff