

Assessment for Human Growth and Sociology Modules

In 2015 I attended a seminar at University of Derby by Phil Race on 'Assessment and Feedback'.

Among the many points raised the findings of his research had reached three conclusions that I found particularly striking:

- Written assignments are generally unreliable as a means of assessing students. One can never be certain who has written an assignment. Moreover written assignments are not effective at demonstrating the level of understanding that a student possesses.
- The marks given to written assignments are also unreliable, different lecturers will often give very different marks to similar pieces of work.
- Feedback to students needs to be provided as quickly as possible after the assessment task if students are to pay attention to it and make use of it.

Having attended the seminar I decided to re-think my assessments for the Human Growth and Sociology modules on the BA Social Work Programme. I decided that it would be possible to amend the assessment tasks so that students would undertake a 10 minute discussion with 2 tutors rather than submit a written assignment. The task itself would remain broadly similar, the difference being that the students would talk about the issues rather than write about them. I discussed my ideas with the Social Work programme team and the external examiner. They all agreed that the thinking was sound. Students who had previously undertaken the modules overwhelmingly took the view that they would have preferred the discussion model of assessment. A minor modification was applied for in respect of both modules and I was given the go ahead to make the changes.

So each student has been assessed using a 10 minute discussion during which they have responded to the assessment question. During each discussion the tutors have asked questions to clarify the level of understanding of each individual.

The findings of the experiment have been:

- Tutors are more confident about assessing the level of understanding a student possesses because discussion is a much more accurate means of assessment. The facility to ask probing questions as part of the process is a key factor here.
- There have been a greater number of students receiving very high grades because it is easier to determine those who have an exceptional grasp of a subject.
- Having two tutors engaged in each discussion means there is an immediate moderation process. Every student is assessed by two tutors rather than a small sample of assignments being examined by a moderator.
- It has been possible to schedule the discussions for each module over a two day period. This is less time consuming than marking written assignments and also means that feedback sheets can be immediately completed. Therefore students receive their grades and feedback much more quickly.
- Students are required to provide a set of notes and references from their planning and therefore they are required to engage in just as much preparation work as under the old system.

It was found to be effective to video record all of the discussions so that the external examiner could look at any assessment discussion when reviewing the grades and feedback given to individual students.

In terms of disadvantages there appear to be two issues:

- The method does not test written ability. Writing skills are important for any social worker. However there are a number of modules within the programme which do test this ability in various ways. So there is no fundamental loss of balance to the programme.
- The repetition involved in the assessments for the tutors is quite arduous. However this is no more so than the marking of written assignments. The fact that one has a partner tutor present throughout the process almost certainly makes marking mistakes less likely to occur.

Questions Raised Regarding This Model at University of Derby Learning and Teaching Conference July 2016

- When students are questioned and probed during the discussion are there standard questions asked to every student? *No this would appear to take away from the value of the model in that it allows spontaneous response to what has actually been said by students.*
- How is student stress handled given that it is a pressure situation? *Students are given extensive preparation guidance all the way through teaching during the module. On the day significant efforts are made to put students at ease. The External Examiner commented upon this having been very helpful. Ultimately Social Work students need to be able to present material confidently.*
- Might it have caused less stress to audio rather than video record? *One person failed and this appeared to be stress related. However the stress appeared to arise from the assessment itself rather than the nature of the recording mode.*
- Could feedback and marks to students be given immediately? *It appears necessary to have assessed the whole group before giving marks and feedbacks so that the tutors could have an overview for moderation purposes.*
- Could feedback be given to students online? *Yes a future development.*
- How were the students' notes and references taken into consideration with the marks? *They were used to back up the tutors' thinking. In practice we found that the better the presentation the better the notes and references. Ultimately the students were being assessed on their level of understanding and application.*
- Did some students do worse than might have been expected by using written assignment? *Yes it is thought that 2 out of 48 did worse but a much larger number did better. Again students will be tested by both written and oral methods over the course of the programme as a whole.*
- Do you think that this model is more suitable for students at a later stage of the programme? *Maybe Year 2 students fared a little better than Year 1 students. However the model appears appropriate for all stages if students are given appropriate guidance.*

Race, P (2015). Making Learning Happen. (Seminar at University of Derby). 25 March 2015

