Different forms of assessment

According to Race (1998) the most important thing lecturers do for their students is assess their work. There are many different forms of assessment used in higher education, and below the advantages and disadvantages of a few are discussed which may be relevant to social work and social policy students (adapted from Race 1998).

Examinations

Advantages	• Time-efficient • Cost-effective • Relatively easy to achieve equality of opportunity • Less plagiarism • Staff are familiar with exams • Encourages students to learn certain subject matter
Disadvantages	• Does not increase students' desire to learn • Students play the game of guessing the agenda, so that learning can be unfocused • For social work students in particular, experience of learning in situations is limited • Traditionally feedback is low • Does not help the theory/practice gap • Scripts are usually marked in a rush • Handwriting, neatness and presentation are also assessed and there is emphasis on exam technique rather than content • Staff marking the scripts become bored! • Difficult to be reliable when marked by different staff members • Encourages surface learning if exams questions are badly written • Does not measure teamwork, leadership, creativity and even lateral thinking

To get around some of the disadvantages listed above, it is suggested that exam questions are written in teams so that there is no ambiguity of language, and validity and reliability can be taken into account. Also, consider the module or unit's learning outcomes and remember to ensure all the outcomes are represented in the exam. Use short sentences and ensure the question layout is easy to follow. Write out an answer criteria for other markers and ensure that a timescale is agreed upon for script return. Finally, proof read your questions!

Essays

Advantages	• Allows for student individuality • Allows for demonstration of understanding of topic area • Assess writing style, a useful transferable skill
Disadvantages	• Can cause lack of equality as some students may never have been shown how to write essays well • Time consuming for staff to mark • Staff also find that the 'halo effect' is greater • Time consuming for the student • Subjective marking high

To overcome the disadvantages listed above, it is suggested that students are given essay writing help by exhibiting examples of good and bad practice. Be transparent in the marking criteria for the students so that they know what is expected of them, show what marks are allocated where if the question has several parts and give word limits. This helps to avoid the quantity versus quality issue! Finally, offer relevant feedback and think about writing a statement of common mistakes - this can minimise the time spent writing similar comments on different student essays.

Portfolios

Advantages	• Contains evidence reflecting a wide range of skills and attributes • Can reflect student development and illustrate student progression • Can reflect attitudes and values • Aids in job searching
Disadvantages	• Time consuming for staff marking them • Difficult to ensure reliability between staff • Can encourage cheating re ownership of work

It is important that all students being assessed by this means must have a shared understanding of the level expected of their work. It is good practice to show students relevant examples and suggest a proposed format, including suggesting a physical size, as this will help your back! If the nature of the evidence needed from students is transparent, this can aid the marking and go towards reliability between staff. Also preparing a marking proforma for all staff should help. As portfolio building is usually time consuming, offer interim assessment opportunities so that students can receive advice on whether the evidence they are assembling is appropriate. Consider assessing the portfolios as a team, with each giving comments, as this aids feedback for students.

Project Work

Advantages	• Allows students to develop their strategies for taking on research • Helps link theory to practice • Students learn time management (or not!)

Disadvantages	• Time consuming for student and for marking staff • Usually students are not offered opportunities to redeem themselves if they fail to finish the project or fail to meet the deadline.

Projects are an ideal assessment tool for social work and social policy students as the learning by doing can be relevant to their work or future work experience. It is advisable that the learning outcomes are negotiated with individual students as each project is different, but encourage different topic areas and disciplines which will allow students to demonstrate the integration of their learning. By letting the students select their own projects, scope for negotiation and discussion of learning outcomes can lead to matching marking criteria. Do remember to involve information and library services so that students will be able to access relevant resources.

Work Based Learning

Advantages	• Future employers are likely to be interested in students' work-related competencies more than academic performance • Bridges the theory/practice gap • Encourages employers to play an active part in student assessment
Disadvantages	• Reliability difficult as placements tend to be individual • Some students have better workplace opportunity to provide evidence of potential while others may be constrained into relatively routine work practices

Increasing use is being made of assessment based on students in their workplace and care must be taken to ensure that consistency of equity in practice is offered from each workplace or placement. Involve the employers themselves in the assessment process, so that they will not only feel part of the process, but also understand what is expected of them, and the student. Do assess different placements differently in that some students will have a good experience, while others may have an unsatisfactory experience. Consider using mentors if staff are available and willing in the workplace. Use of a reflective journal personalises the student learning experience and although there are issues of confidentiality, negotiate ground rules with the employer/student/mentor and tutor. Portfolios are a valid way to assess work based learning and these should be considered. Indeed, Crisp and Green Lister (2001) point out that on reviewing social work education literature there seems to be far less emphasis on assessment of classroom-based learning than of learning in field settings.

Reviews and Annotated Bibliographies

Advantages	• Encourages an active learning approach • Aids revision for project work and/or exams • Aids critical analysis skills • Aids research writing by reviewing papers and articles • Allows students to be aware of different kinds of publication

Disadvantages	• Individualistic • Does the institution have enough resources to allow a large number of students undertaking this form of assignment all at once? • Can be a lonely activity

As this type of assignment can be regarded as lonely for the student, it could be suggested that this is undertaken as group work. A way of allowing ownership is to negotiate areas of student interest, but don't forget suggesting that students review existing reviews to produce identifying features of good practice. Encourage high-level intellectual activity by aiding student to see that reviewing is not just a matter of summarising. Setting tight parameters and a word-limit will produce more reliability for markers. Again, as in project work, allow library and information staff to become involved so that resources are allocated equally and consider involving these staff as markers, so that students are offered additional feedback. Some tutors suggest this form of assessment is ideal as a formative group task and aids students' search strategies.

Self and peer assessment

Self assessment (SA) involves students taking responsibility for monitoring and making judgements about aspects of their own learning. It can be broken down into two stages (Boud): Identifying standards and/or criteria to apply to an understanding of subject content and making judgements about the extent to which they have met these criteria and standards.

'*Self assessment'* can be a way of assessing the product of learning but it is a learning process in itself. It is a way of improving student learning by passing on skills of evaluation and critical judgement to students. In this sense the term 'self evaluation' may be more appropriate since it is about developing students' ability to make judgements about the quality of material. Thus SA can be both formative and summative.

'Peer assessment' can likewise be both formative and summative, and can be a useful way of enabling students to think critically about their own work. For peer assessment it is essential to develop clear guidelines about giving feedback to others.

Why introduce SA and PA?

Self and Peer assessment may

1. help students become critical about their own work
2. enable students to develop their learning and assessment skills whilst engaged on them rather than afterwards
3. provide a structure for discussion about quality of work
4. help students understand the subjective nature of judgements in assessment in many arenas, which can only be substantiated by reference to other work
5. be used as evidence of standards engagement in process of assessment

Ground Rules for giving Feedback

These can be developed with students, but should cover the following points

1. It is best for students to make comments about their own strengths and weaknesses before hearing/receiving other people's views
2. Identify strengths of work first, before moving on to areas for improvement

3. Try to make comments descriptive rather than evaluative
4. Give feedback based on concrete behaviour/examples rather than giving a general impression
5. Back up comments with evidence
6. Make sure the feedback can be clearly understood

Group work

Advantages	• the development of a range of skills such as chairing, organisation, group/interpersonal work and peer tutoring • ability to work in a team is one of the most important qualities looked for by most employers • team work encourages creative thinking • assessing groupwork saves assessment time •
Disadvantages	• how to be fair to the individual members of the group and recognise their individual contributions • assessment of product and/or process •

Assessing group work may be done in two ways:

* Group moderated marks
* Inclusion of an individual component marked by the tutor

Group moderated marks

a) Share-out

The simplest way to operate this approach is to take the mark the group project has been given, multiply it by the number in the group, and leave the group to share out that total number of marks between them. For example, a group of four with a project mark of 55 might share out the 220 marks: 65, 60, 50, 45.

b) Controlled peer assessment

This approach gives group members the responsibility for allocating a percentage of the total marks available to each individual. The group grade might count as 80% of the student's overall mark and the remaining marks are derived from an assessment by each of their peers. Each member of the group marks all the other members out of twenty, against set criteria. The marks for each individual are then totalled and averaged. The resulting mark is then added to the group mark to give the individual's final total.

A variation is to leave the group mark as 100% and make this peer assessment a moderation mark averaging out within a band, say +/- 10%, so that for every plus mark awarded to one group member a negative mark has to be awarded to another. So, for example, a group of four with a group mark of 60% can only award 65% to one member if they are prepared to give another 55%.

Individual component in group work

Using this model, an additional mark is given for an individual component of the work, assessed by the tutor. This is then added to the group mark so that each group member can end up with a different total mark.

a) Contracting

If the project can be broken down readily into distinct areas, it may be possible for members of the group to contract individually at the beginning to determine what each will take responsibility for. They can then be marked individually on the basis of the extent to which they have fulfilled their part of the contract.

b) Observation

This observation may be at first or second hand, depending on the nature of the project. It may be possible for the tutor to observe the group at work. Individual contributions can be noted to provide evidence for an 'individual contribution' mark. Alternatively, the group can be required to keep minutes of all their meetings (possibly taking it in turns), noting who attended, and who agreed to do what, and who in fact did what. This record can then provide the tutor with the necessary evidence of the distribution of responsibility. Project logs or dairies can serve the same function.

c) Individual reflection

You might get each individual to reflect on the process of working in a team. The questions below provide a simple framework for this record.

Assessing your team
1. What working methods were adopted, and why? Did working practices change?
2. How did your team form? What roles did individuals adopt, and why?
3. Describe two 'critical incidents' which occurred in your team. What was the significance of these incidents?
4. How effective was your team, and how you do you know?
5. If you were to tackle another task in the same team, how would you behave differently, and why?

You can use these reflections either as a source of information on which to base your 'individual contribution' marks, or you can mark the piece of writing itself, for its quality of reflection and its analysis of the workings of the group.

d) Viva

It does not take very long in a viva before you get quite a clear picture of the individual's contribution to the work of the group. In order to ensure fairness, it may be appropriate to have a set of basic questions which are common to all groups, but careful probing by an experienced tutor with secondary questions should make it possible to identify passengers and other non-contributors. You can then give an individual grade.

e) Project exam question

A compulsory question which relates directly to the project in the final course examination will ensure that those who contributed most to the project will be best placed to answer the

question well. These students will be individually rewarded, even though all the members of the group got the same mark for the project itself.

Conclusion

All forms of assessment have limitations, either for students or marking staff. There is more on assessment in the benchmarking statements for both social work and social policy.

Care must be taken that assessment is not only carried out using one criterion, such as cost-effectiveness. Assessment of students should be appropriate to the discipline, and allow for the diversity of the student profile. There is a continuing argument that there is too much assessment in higher education which encourages assessment-led students, rather than learning-led students. Consideration could also be given to assessing your students on competence as well as content. Above all, assessment should be:

- Valid
- Reliable and consistent
- Diverse
- Transparent
- Useful to ensure student learning is enhanced
- Promoting deep learning.

References

Boud

Race, P (1998) *The Lecturer's Toolkit* 2nd Edition London: Kogan Page Ltd