**Liverpool John Moores University**

School of Sport Studies, Leisure and Nutrition

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Improving assessment and feedback practice:

Captains of assessment

**Keeping the ship on course: the role of assessment captain**

Every assessed task where more than one person is involved in assessment needs a captain. Where you are assessing something on your own, you are your own captain and crew. However, it is never advisable for any assessor to sail alone in uncharted waters. Everyone needs back up, and even if you are designing, implementing and quality assessing your own assessment tasks, it’s a good idea to have a critical friend to turn to, to check the reasonableness of your approach and practice (a Pilot?).

**Why have a captain?**

To ensure the effective maintenance of standards and inter-assessor reliability, university assessors working in teams need to ensure that for each assignment (or exam question, or group of exam questions) there is someone who takes overall responsibility for quality assurance and enhancement. External examiners, quality assurers, PSRBs and students all express concern if they think people are interpreting criteria differently or marking to different standards.

**Who is the captain?**

The captain for an assignment does not have to be the hierarchically most senior person. But this role is not for a novice assessor nor for someone very new to the team, working context or the institution. It is a significant role, ideally one for a volunteer, but in any case, one that is undertaken scrupulously and meticulously. To make the system work well, the work of assessment captains needs to be spread out across teams so that it doesn't all fall on a single individual. The assessment captain doesn't have to be an assessment expert (although being one certainly builds expertise!)

**What is the captain's job?**

The captain has 5 key roles.

**1. Planning**

Prior to setting the assignment or other assessed task, the captain needs to interrogate the learning outcomes to check what the course documentation says students will be able to know and do at the end of the module/ course/ programme and where this aligns with PSRB and university requirements (for example about Personal Development Planning). This then forms the basis of the assessment design and will help you frame the wording of the assessment criteria. There is always a balance to be achieved by being sufficiently clear to enable students to understand what is required of them without over-specifying and adopting really reductionist approaches.

It’s important at this stage to familiarise yourself with your university’s specific requirements too, about such matters as word count and equivalence, to ensure compliance and avoid disasters!

Next it is important to look at what else is going on in the way of assessment on the module/ course/ programme to avoid replicating the same forms of assessment endlessly, and to ensure there aren’t too many competing assignments due to be submitted on the same date. Then the choice of methods can be made (e.g. Essay, poster, unseen time-constrained exam, MCQ, report, portfolio, presentation, blog, reflective account etc.) that fits the purpose of this particular assignment (e.g. to test fitness-to-practice, to build early confidence, to gauge the level of achievement, to help students know how they can improve etc.). The next stage is to consider agency. Is this something that the assessor needs to use his/her personal judgement to assess or could it be self-marked or use computer assisted assessment? Can peers be involved? Or employers, service users, placement supervisors etc.? And in terms of timing, can the feedback from this assignment reasonably feed forward into the next assignment? And to what extent is this a purely or substantially formative assessment, where the key purpose is changing students practice and performance next time? Or is it principally an end-point summative assessment, where the key aim is to make judgments about standards of achievement?

It is a requirement in UK HEIs that you take account of students’ disabilities and special needs so at the planning stage you should consider reasonable adjustments to ensure your assessment is inclusive. It’s much cheaper and easier to plan these at this stage than to try and sort them out at the last minute. This might mean, for example, offering audio alternatives to written tasks for students with visual impairments or dyslexia, or ensuring that students with chronic fatigue syndrome or arthritis aren't expected to stand for long periods of time. 

At the planning stage, depending on the size and status of the task, it is a good idea to consider piloting the assignment. Large scale national systems require this, but as a minimum, even for a relatively small task, it’s a good idea to share plans with colleagues and even students to analyse risks, and look how best to avoid or mitigate them. How would you cope for example if one of your co-assessors became ill during the assessment period? Or if the hall you had booked for your poster display turned out to be double booked?

**2. Briefing**

As assessment captain, one of your key tasks is to make sure everyone who marks with you has the same expectations and is working to the same standards. The criteria might have seemed self-explanatory to you, but can be ambiguous to your co-assessors. This makes it really important to have a dialogue (live or virtual) about what each criterion means with your co assessors and to come up with indicators of the level of achievement necessary to achieve at each grade, which may in turn form a marking rubric. A written briefing is better than nothing, but a half hour chat or Skype meeting with co-assessors can save hours later.

Students undertaking the task also need a briefing which gives them a chance to really get to grips with what they are being asked to do, and how they can achieve highly. This works best if students can see some real examples of good and not-so-good work from former students, which might be written text, videos or artefacts. Such a discussion should offer dialogic opportunities for students to ask questions and check understanding. They need to be able to get a measure of their own achievement while they are actually producing it, rather than much later at the marking stage, as Sadler would argue.

**3. Checking**

Some universities offer more support to assessors than others. It is normal for admin staff to book and set out exam rooms for example, but for other types of assessment there might be a bigger role for the captain in ensuring that everything necessary is provided for a practical task for example, or to book display boards and venues for a poster assignment. Prior to the date of the assessment it is worthwhile for the captain to check that everything is on course and shipshape (avoiding for example the awful example of the exam paper reproduced for candidates, hand annotated with correct solutions!)

**4. Moderating**

Once the assignment has been completed by students, the assessor’s task is even more crucial. Having briefed your co-assessors at the outset, it saves trouble and tears later if there are opportunities mid-assessment for everyone involved in assessing this work, to check they are ‘on the same page’. This doesn't have to be a labour intensive or arduous task but could include:

* Asking a new assessor to show you their top and lowest marked assignments so far, as well as any they are not sure about;
* Having a Skype meeting with all co-assessors to similarly share and compare and discuss any dilemmas;
* Asking everyone marking to do so on the same day or days in the same room with chats at the breaks to compare notes.

Achieving good inter-assessor reliability with even a small team is hard work, but using these techniques helps to build a shared understanding of standards. This is likely to make your external examiners and university registry staff very happy and you too will feel more confident in your module/ course/ programme practice if students challenge the fairness of their assessment. You don’t need to keep formal records of such activities, but an email summary of what you’ve done, together with any key shared learning points, is good practice anyway and provides an audit trail for quality assurance purposes.

**5. Reviewing**

Once the marking and moderating is complete, the captain’s role includes making sure all marks are put on the university system/ database and ensuring that these are readily available for exam boards or similar. A good assessment captain will then pause before pouring themselves a cup of tea/ glass of wine and reflect on what went well or badly, so that such learning can feed into the next run of the assignment. This would form the basis of the action plan for the next session, together with any plans to enhance the assignment, based on learning from this particular voyage. Then it really is time for that tot of rum! (Other beverages are available!).