**Sheffield University: Assuring shared standards and reliability in assessment for novice assessors: making sure we are on the right lines**

**Sally Brown 25th May 2017**

*Adapted from materials prepared by me for Anglia Ruskin University’s Anglia Assessment Album* http://www.anglia.ac.uk/anglia-learning-and-teaching/good-teaching-practice-and-innovation/assessment-and-feedback/anglia-assessment-album

**New to assessment: discussion**

**Focus**

* **How can a university help those new to assessment to become competent assessors who can confidently made evidence-based judgments on the student work they assess?**
* **What steps should a new assessor take when assessing early in their academic careers to ensure they do so well?**
* **What kinds of feedback can help students improve on future assignments?**

**Expert perspectives: what do we know?**

**Doing assessment well is highly important not only because it impacts so substantially on student achievements, but because it is an important locus of directing student effort and focus (Price et al, 2012, Brown and Race, 2012).** Students’ lives and careers after graduation can be heavily impacted by poor assessment experiences, and these often link to student drop-out and failure to achieve potential. (Yorke and Longden, 2004). Universities therefore have a commitment to students and the new assessors themselves to make the process of learning to assess well as positive and as effective as possible. Poor quality and unreliable outcomes are the inevitable result of leaving new assessors to learn on-the-job without support.

**Assessment is a complex task, and it takes experience to get it right, so early support is essential to ensure you become competent to assess (QAA, 2013**). The HEA ‘A Marked Improvement’ project` (HEA, 2012) emphasised the importance of ‘support mechanisms such as mentoring to help staff build confidence in the formation and reliability of their assessment judgments’ (Tenet B6.2) and it’s important to recognise that assessment can never be precise (Tenet 3). Even highly experienced assessors often fail to agree completely on a mark, so it isn’t sensible to agonise about the margins between 66% and 67%.

**Giving feedback is crucial to enable students to learn from this assignment and move confidently on to the next assignment (Nicol and McFarlane Dick, 2006).** The purpose of feedback is to help students improve performance and change their practices to ensure they make the grade, rather than criticising them personally, so comments should focus on the work and how to make it better rather than personal comments (Boud, 2007).  
  
**Review practice: what can we do?**

**Making choices:** For each assignment, the assessor needs to decide:

***Why are you assessing***: what is the purpose of this assignment? (to build confidence, to ensure standards are met, to help students know what they need to do to improve, to give a final grade?)

***What exactly is it being assessed?*** Process or product? Work in progress or final result? Theory and/or practice?

***How should you assess*:** what are the most appropriate approaches and methods to use? (Exams, MCQs, essays, portfolios, posters, case studies, oral exams, computer simulations, patchwork texts?)

***Who are the best agents for assessment?*** (tutors, peers, students themselves, employers, practice supervisors etc.).

***When should you be assessing?*** Early on to gauge progress? Mid-point to highlight issues? End point to assure standards have been met? Incrementally to allow a progressive build-up of achievement?

Together these comprise a ‘Fit for purpose’ approach to assessment (Brown, 2015), meaning that assessment design is thoughtfully integrated into programmes, with a rationale for the appropriateness of the purposes, methodology, agency, orientation and timing of each assignment.

As a starting point, when designing new assignments, start by scrutinising the course outcomes and make sure you are mapping student performance against what is expected of them (these are usually described as ‘Learning Outcomes’). From these, it is then possible to determine the criteria for assessment to ensure alignment, coverage and appropriate weighting of marks. Next it is necessary to check assessment plans against Professional, Subject and Regulatory Bodies, Quality Assurance Agency and Anglia Ruskin University assessment regulations to ensure compliance with them. It’s wise to check with more experienced colleagues about any aspects of assessment that you find puzzling or problematic.

**Starting to mark**

* Review assignments against criteria after an initial read through and make really basic judgements: does this match the criteria brilliantly, well, adequately, just about, or not at all? This would enable you to start evaluating within five broad bands, and then marks can be assigned accordingly on a second read.
* when you are doing this for the first time, it’s best to assess alongside an experienced marker who can show you the ropes and help you build confidence that you are marking to the right standard.   
  Aim to show to a more experienced marker early on some examples of your top graded assignments, a couple of reasonable ones in the middle of the mark scale and a couple if you can of work that you think just doesn't merit a pass so you can gauge standards together and check you aren't being over or under generous in your marking.
* Don’t expect marks to conform to normal distribution curves unless you have a cohort of thousands.
* Work systematically and logically and don’t work too long when you are tired (experts advise no more than three hour stretches including little breaks);
* As you become more confident, continue to consult peers so you are steadily building shared standards within your subject community (HEA, 2012, *op cit*).

**Giving feedback that helps students improve.**

Marking, that is, making judgments on students work that result in a grade letter or number is important, but equally so is giving feedback that changes their practices for the better on future assignments. See other elements in the Anglia assessment Album, particularly **Reconceptualising feedback**, but some preliminary advice would include:

* Focus your comments on specific steps students can take to make their work better (so for example, don’t just write References! Beside unreferenced work, but point students towards guidance on how your part of the university prefers articles, books, websites and other publications to be acknowledged and referenced;
* Ensure that the comments you make are sufficient in quantity to enable students to follow what you are advocating, but not so extensive that you exhaust yourself and students;
* Use the format that your part of the university expects markers to use for giving feedback (e.g. online, using proformas or rubrics, orally, face-to-face, by email and so on);
* Make sure you mark and return work with feedback within the required turnaround time.
* Remember always that the recipients of your feedback are real people and consider the impact your critique will have on them. It’s important to challenge all students to improve but not to undermine confidence in early-stage learners and those with low self-confidence and esteem.

**New to assessment: marking activity**

This activity is designed to help people who might never have assessed before to practise doing an assessment, matching examples to criteria and making evaluative judgments about what marks to award. In the first stage participants in the workshop should be asked individually to look at these two examples of critical reflection and decide what mark they would award the against the assessment criteria. Then in pairs or threes, they should compare outcomes and prepare thoughts to contribute to a whole group plenary discussion.

**Background to the task**

In the first-semester, first-year undergraduate students on this course are all classified as mature, having entered the programme through a bridging course which requires them to have experience of working as a care assistant or nursing assistant prior to enrolling full-time. Their course includes blocks of study time and short placements on wards in local hospitals.

**Assignment briefing given to students**

“Reflecting on your first semester on the BSc Nursing, write a 500-word (excluding references) critical reflection on one critical incident you have experienced while undertaking your placement on a ward, and for that particular occasion:

* Describe the events as you understood them;
* Describe your feelings about this event;
* Outline what you have learned from this event about yourself and your chosen profession;
* Given a similar situation in the future, what would you do the same and what would you do differently?
* In what ways do the theories you’ve learned on the course help you to make sense of what you’ve observed on placement?
* What do you now feel you need to do to help you be effective as a student and ultimately as a nurse?”

**Criteria:**

1. (30 marks) Ability to identify a relevant incident within your placement and to address it appropriately by demonstrating a commitment to professional practice.
2. (20 marks) presentation and clarity of writing including grammar, punctuation, spelling and fluency as well as accurate referencing of relevant current literature.
3. (50 marks) The ability to think critically, reflecting both in action (at the time of the incident but drawing on past experience or learning) and on action (after the event, for the purpose of learning more).

**Aru**

I am doing a nursing degree having spent five years working first as a care assistant and later as a nursing assistant. I'm really enjoying studying at University but I find it really hard, particularly in managing doing the studying alongside looking after my kids and caring for my 90-year-old mum. Getting hold of the required reading isn't hard as lots is available on the VLE and on the web but making time to read it and make sense of it is much harder. My principal difficulty is understanding what the tutors really want of us. I often put in hours and hours of work without any real idea of what I'm supposed to achieve. By the time, I've made the kids their tea and checked on my mum, it's often very late before I get my notes out. It is hard because I often try to fit in some paid shifts on my old ward to help cover the bills on top of my placement. It's quite nice because sometimes I can see on the ward some of the things I've been learning about in college and that kind of brings everything together.

Last week I was nursing an old lady on the geriatric ward at St Mary’s. She was in a very poor way because she was dehydrated and kept blacking out. I felt really upset about it as I wouldn’t have let my mum get into that state. You have to encourage them to drink, not just leave a cup of tea in front of them and then take it away when it gets cold. It is very clear when you read about dehydration that when patients don’t drink much they quite often get disorientated and actually get too confused to drink (Campbell, 1971, Norton et al, 1962) That’s how this lady had got and her urine was dark brown. I felt like giving the trolley woman a real ticking off for just taking the full cup away without mentioning it to anyone but I thought that might make trouble. But I did mention it to the senior nurse on duty as I was worried she might get even worse. What I did at the time was to sit down with the lady when the trolley came around and talked to her and pretended to drink myself and she watched me then had little sips herself. Learning from this time, on any ward I work on in the future I will always watch out for the old people who aren’t drinking. I might even end up specialising in nursing old people.

To be effective as a student and a nurse I need to make more time for my studies and to get better at going to the library. At the moment, I mainly rely on the internet at home for most of the stuff I need as trying to fit in browsing among the books just isn’t going to happen, not with all I have to do. (500 words)

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**Tena**

Working on a geriatric ward has been a real challenge to me as I haven’t spent much time previously around elderly people and in the past I felt somewhat intimidated by the idea, worried about the smells and the confusion. I started six weeks ago on my placement on a 48-bed ward, with six sections each with eight patients. My duties have involved accompanying the senior nurse on ward rounds, taking regular temperatire and blood pressure checks and helping some of the patients to eat and drink, which is crucial to helping them thrive. I was fascinated to read an article about the importance of hydration and I learned a great deal from it. Nowadays I always make a mental note to watch how much each patient is eating and drinking after each meal and reporting it if I feel someone is not getting what they need. I know from looking after my own sick children that it isn’t just a matter of telling them to do it: they often take pursuasion to even lift a cup.

My own attitude has changed a lot since I started on this ward. I’ve stopped worrying so much about the les pleasant bits, and encouraged by my mentor, started to think of all the pateints as indivudals, not just ‘Bed 7 by the window’ or ‘the asmatic diabetic’.

I was very upset when one of the older men fell as I was trying to help him to the toilet. I didn’t know what to do. I treid to lift him up but he was very hevy and I wasn’t strong enough and he fell back with me falling beside him which really hurt. I stayed calm, but another time I would get him comfortable and call for help rather than risk hurting him twice. When I went off shift, I watched a video our tutor had recommended in one of the lectures about safe lifting which taught me some valuable things which can I apply on another occasion, partivl;arly about how to avoid self-injury when lifting and the incident made me realise that I’ve got plenty to learn before I become a qualified nurse because before you start you think lots things are just common sense but actually I realise that there’s lots of research about what works and what doesn’t that can help you with your job, even mundane little things. But I also think its about becoming confiedent yourself. If I hadn’t been worried about being shouted at for him falling, I might have handles the situation better. And that would have been beter for the patient too. But it’s all learning isn’t it.

As a student I found it hard to knuckle down at first and found it difficult to believe how much work you are expected to do on this course but now I’ve got into the swing of it, I make a point of finding half an hour a day just to jot things down in my learning journal so that I don’t forget important things like the advice given to me by my ward manger. She gave me some exercises to do to help me strengthen my lower back and I’ve been doing those every day. Reading textbooks and looking things up on the internet is not something that I was very used to, in fact I didn’t think of myself as very good with computers before I started the course but now I really like following ideas up on Google scholar rather than just going onto Wikipedia like I used to

**Reviewing the activity**

The examples have been designed so that neither is either completely disastrous or stupendously good. Both have their flaws and it is in discussing the flaws that the facilitator can help proto-assessors recognise that assessment is a complex, nuanced and demanding process, requiring the exercise of judgment by the assessors with outcomes that are rarely clear-cut. In discussing what marks have been given, it is likely that these will vary significantly across the whole group, which can give rise to conversations about how best to ensure inter-assessor reliability and how to ensure everyone is marking to the same standard. A task involving assessment critical thinking was chosen as it is an area which both students and assessors often find challenging: (Brookfield (1987) and Bryan (2015) are both illuminating in this area).

**Marking discussion**

The two examples both show strengths and weaknesses, in terms of the criteria:

1. Ability to identify a relevant issue and to address it appropriately by demonstrating a commitment to professional practice.

Both examples identified a relevant issue, but Tena was much more specific about context and professional duties and Aru spent a whole paragraph on matters that were only tangentially relevant to the incident. Both showed a commitment to professional practice and demonstrating professional values including empathy and a commitment to patients’ safety and well-being, but only Aru directly addressed the issue.

1. Presentation and clarity of writing including grammar, punctuation, spelling and fluency as well as accurate referencing of relevant current literature.

Only Aru referred to any literature in the field, and did so accurately, using the required Harvard format, but two of the three references were very dated and apparently gleaned from internet surfing. Only the third one was really relevant to the incident she described. Neither of them is strong in relating their experience to theory in the field. Aru is accurate in spelling and punctuation and exactly to word count, while Tena has spelling/proof reading errors, long sentences and her text is uncounted (but actually close to 600 words long). The tone of both is rather conversational and both lack logical sequencing, although Tena has clearly looked at the prompt questions and ensured that each is addressed.

1. The ability to think critically, reflecting both in action (at the time of the incident but drawing on past experience or learning) and on action (after the event, for the purpose of learning more).

Both examples show some evidence of being able to think critically and both are obviously committed to their chosen professions. Tena has taken a more thoughtful and in-depth approach to reflection while Aru has made more use of her prior experience to underpin her thinking.

At the end of the exercise it is likely to be useful to get participants to compare grades and to vote where either, both or neither had reached a minimum threshold, that is the pass mark of 40%. Experienced assessors who have piloted this task have shown some consensus, but the actual mark have diverged significantly.

**Level two discussion**

The following questions are designed to get participants thinking even more deeply about how they tackle assessment:

1. If you were setting this assignment, what advice would you give students on how to do it well? For example, you might well point out that to get full marks, students need to address all of the bullet points in the briefing and to demonstrate each element of the criteria, but what other advice would you give?
2. It doesn’t anywhere specify in the brief how strict the assessor should be about the fact that Tena is nearly 20% over the permitted word length. What are your responsibilities as a marker? Should there be a penalty for writing too much? According to your university guidelines, should you even mark it?
3. What feedback would you give to Aru and Tena to help them become better at critical thinking? Is there specific advice on what to do or what not to do you would give to either or both?
4. What impact would it have on students if you gave them this exercise, or one very like it for them to practise with before they started working on it? What benefit might there be in letting students see strong, mediocre, borderline and failed assignments from a previous year with the opportunity to discuss their strengths and weaknesses in class or virtually?

**Plenary**

If your participants are complete novices, it may be helpful in the last part of the session to discuss with them how to cope with actually making decisions about the first assignments they have to mark, particularly the importance of finding an experienced assessor to work alongside while learning the ropes, and also to point them towards **the Anglia Assessment Album ‘New to assessment’ snapshot,** which has lots of helpful advice.

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