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Assessment of A Service-Learning Programmme

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Assessment of A Service-Learning Programme

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WITH WHAT JUDGEMENTS YE JUDGE, YE SHALL BE JUDGED...

Shakespeare, Measure for Measure

IN THE SUMMER, 1994, *NSEE Quarterly,* I described the design and setting up of a new service-learning course at Roehampton Institute, London, England. The innovatory nature of this course was determined by its academic availability in the undergraduate curriculum. In this article, I want to examine the assessment methods and criteria. Why was it decided to provide a rigorous system of assessment and to assess the reflective work produced rather than directly assess the agency experience? There are three main reasons:

■ One flows from the imperatives of international capitalism in its post-industrial phase. As public expenditure pressures increase, governments require higher education institutions to justify their expenditures. Total education spending by central and local governments in England in 1993–94 was £ 26,255 million which represents a real rise in expenditure of 28% compared to 1979–80. Also, since the mid-1980s, education spending has risen from 4.7% GNP to 5.5% GNP, which is a staggering rise of 17% albeit as a direct result of recession (Department for Education, 1994). For the last 20 years education has come under the critical eye of politicians and economic pundits who demand that all institutions give value for money. As a result there has developed a greater concern not just with assessing academic content of courses, but with developing capacities and skills which are seen as important by employers in an expanding global economy. Many of the taken-for-granted transferable skills of a liberal education have been put under the microscope. Institutions now have to be accountable for what they do in ever greater detail.

The development of this trend in the early 1990s is most marked in English higher education in the new student allocation arrangements set in place by the Higher Education Funding Council for England. Since the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act, accountability has also been strengthened following the setting up of a central quality agency — the Higher Education Quality Council.

■ The local institutional educational imperatives framed within national standards of academic rigour which required any new course to conform to the existing standards of assessment, but, in practice, require innovatory courses to pass muster at a higher level than traditional courses. This expresses the general requirement of summative assessment which is a socially accepted and demanded measure of what has been achieved by each student on a course.

■ The educational justification which, at rock bottom and despite the distracting political and economic factors, is fundamental to the process. Assessment is essential to the whole educational process because only through it can teaching and learning for any individual student or any set of students effectively take place. This attends particularly to the requirements of formative assessment which is used to convert the ongoing assessments and interactions between staff and students into genuine learning experiences. Formative assessment is also used to focus on the programme itself as a kind of action research. Follman, Watkins, and Wilkes put the point clearly:

> Formative evaluation focuses on program (sic) and project strengths and weaknesses, reactions and perceptions of participants, and data related to change and improvement. Information derived from formative evaluation is used to adapt and improve the service-learning program (sic) as it progresses (p. 74, 1994).

It is important to note, as Brown and Knight remind us in their book, *Assessing Learners in Higher Education* (Chapters 2 & 3, 1994), that the summative and formative assessments describe different purposes of assessment but may share the same methods. To a large extent this is true in the case of this course where the final grade becomes part of the overall degree classification and is recorded on transcripts. As will be shown below, the final grade arises out of what are essentially formative, course-work assessments.

Form of Assessment: Brown and Knight also emphasize the importance of developing sound principles of assessment. This course pays particular attention to the adoption of both a range of assessment methods and assessment of the multiple achievements of students. No particular method of assessment in current use is necessarily the best or indeed the most appropriate way to assess learning or competencies. The adoption of different methods brings a richness to any assessment system which seeks to respond to the multiple talents of students.

The main problem with the multiple assessment approach is in weighting the different elements. Beyond the straight, statistical response of standardisation to this dilemma is the view emphasized by Brown and Knight that assessment is a moral activity. In the case of assessing multiple achievements we have to choose which non-cognitive elements of personal and inter-personal qualities to assess. These qualities are normally identified as certain kinds of outcomes, and are neither self-evident nor a matter of common agreement. They are a matter of values and choice through which multiple kinds of futures can be constructed.

The course assessment is based on course and placement attendance involving direct participation leading to reflection and conclusions. The agency reports on the student's attendance, degree of participation, willingness to help, and attitudes to agency staff and clients.

The written reflective work is contained within a student placement file

which is produced alongside the experience. The file is made up of four parts: an initial orientation paper (unmarked); a set of critical incident papers (30%); a structural analysis of the placement agency and its relation to the wider society (30%); and a concluding paper drawing links between experience, academic learning, and personal development (40%).

Students are also encouraged to write an unseen diary to help chart their experience and progress and to provide field notes for their reflective work. These field notes have proved an invaluable *aide memoire* in the compiling of the main papers and have helped give a solid scientific quality to the evidence used.

The orientation paper encourages students to reflect on their motives and expectations at the starting point of the course. It provides a rich source of discussion with tutors and other students.

The next element of the assessment introduces the student to constructive critical incident analysis. Students are invited to take incidents which sufficiently challenge them as persons and to describe and analyse what happened. Significant attention is given to detachment from the emotional responses which mark out a critical incident from the more normal challenges of everyday life. Students have to learn to be honest with themselves as they contemplate the range of emotions which are often evoked by the challenges of agency experience. After recording their responses, students leave sufficient time to allow their emotions to subside and their presence of critical mind to re-emerge before they analyse the whole incident in which they played so crucial a role. These incidents and the associated reflective and group work may be usefully typified as Deweyian learning "situations."

In the third part of the assessment, the students are required to provide a structured analysis of the agency and to consider its relationship to the wider society. In this section students need to get under the sociological, organisational, economic, and managerial skin of the agency and to understand how it fits in with the wider society and its political culture. They need to attend to the following questions: What is the mission statement of the agency and how does it perceive itself? What is the history of the agency and how does the present direction of the agency affect the way it now explains its development? How is it organised and managed in order to meet its objectives and serve the needs of its clients? To what extent are workers and clients involved in these decisions? Who are the clients and what are the conditions which lead them to the agency? What others benefit from the agency's work? Are there any suitable case studies which may be used to illustrate the point? What kind of people work in the agency and what are their qualifications and experience? What do they actually do and what training do they receive? What did the student actually do to help the agency? How is the work of the agency monitored and evaluated? What other agencies are involved in this process? Where does the funding come from and how is it actually spent? What is the role played by the agency in the wider society and what are the links with the state and local governments? How important has the agency been in the rise of the British welfare state? What challenges are facing the agency at the present time and how might the agency better face the future?

The final paper is an exploration of the link between the agency experience, the concurrent academic learning which has taken place, and personal growth. In this paper, students will be expected to revisit their orientation statement, diary, and previous papers. In addition, they will be expected to revisit thoughtfully the aims, objectives, and learning outcomes of the course, and to consider the theoretical approaches to service and experiential learning in light of their experiences. This section is concluded in two modes, first in a tentative reflection on personal growth and, second, in an evaluation of the course and its delivery. The formative work takes place during the weekly seminars and workshops, and in individual tutorials.

Assessment Criteria cover both general academic and course-specific criteria and related course outcomes.

The written work is assessed according to normal general academic criteria and grades are given accordingly, with the following taken into account:

■ *Quality of discussion and arguments*: The clarity of thought; the logic and coherence of argument and analysis, evaluation, and conclusions of the work; an understanding of concepts and issues; the quality of imagination and the originality of approach.

■ *Theory*: The attention given, where appropriate, to theory, perspectives, and views; the development of a sound grasp of the nature and rationale of service-learning; consideration and discussion of competing views and perspectives.

■ *Relevance*: Matters chosen for discussion in light of the discourse, and student justifications for choice.

■ *Evidence of reading, referencing, and bibliography*: The use made of texts, the quality of general reading, and the use made of research in the discussion.

■ *Quality of style and presentation*: The appropriateness of the writing style and quality of the presentation, essential to the communication of ideas and insights.

■ *Length of work*: Acceptance and use of appropriate length of work as imposed by the disciplines.

The written work is also assessed according to a number of other abilities, capacities, and skills directly related to service-learning.

■ *Openness*: Ability to show and communicate an openness in themselves in written and group work.

■ *Responsibility*: Capacity for developing personal, course-based agendas in the agencies.

■ *Observation skills*: Systematic observation of the social interaction within the placement setting and student's reactions to it.

■ *Recording skills*: Systematic and effective recording of what is observed and experienced.

■ *Heuristic analysis*: Ability to analyse the placement experience in a detached manner which draws clear links between the experience, self-development, and academic learning. In the Deweyian sense to "situationise" the whole learning.

■ *Dissemination*: Ability to discuss and to disseminate what is being learnt to fellow students and to learn from others in group situations.

■ *Agency analysis*: Analysis of the agency's mission, function, and organisation in relation to clients and the wider society.

Conclusions: In light of current practice at Roehampton Institute, there is every reason to firm up the assessment of competencies and course outcomes by elaborating the ongoing,

The National Society for Experiential Education in collaboration with the University of Vermont's Center for Service-Learning has published *Service-Learning Reader: Reflections and Perspectives on Service*, an interdisciplinary anthology for use in college classrooms. Topics covered include Roots of Service, Global Awareness, Selfhood and Society, and Interaction, Reflection, and Dialogue. The *Reader* features 35 articles from authors such as Paulo Freire, Tim Stanton, Nel Noddings, Martin Luther King, Jr., Robert Coles, Ram Dass, Alexis de Tocqueville, Deepak Chopra, and Robert Bellah. Cost: $38 plus shipping and handling. Discount for NSEE members: $28 plus shipping and handling. Discounts for orders of 15 or more.

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their children. We also have a very interesting official experience sometimes in Brazil and also in other countries. For me, it is not difficult to find good examples of good educational practice all over the world. What should be fantastic is that we increase the quantity of good experience. We change our way to understand education as a search for freedom, for authenticity of people.

For me the central question is that we cannot import solutions from other cultures. But we can recreate them. For example, I never thought my philosophical ideas could be literally translated into other cultures. But we can have different ways of understanding my speech, my dreams. The question for me is how is experience to be re-made, reconstructed. Experiences cannot be exported, they have to be reconstructed.

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Assessment

formative assessment to include precise statements about what has actually been achieved by students through a system of profiling. This would lock the students into a supportive cycle of feedback and self-evaluation geared towards active improvement. The counterbalance to this development on the resource side is the Government's intention to move education in the United Kingdom towards a mass system of higher education. But perhaps this is, after all, only another challenge to the educators of the late 20th century to rethink the role and form of education for the next century. It is our belief that service-learning has a vital role to play in this debate.

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—The Editor

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