



An Aligned Assessment to Promote Learning About Collaboration Between Health and Care Professionals

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The MSc in Inter-professional Studies at the University of Wales Institute Cardiff was launched in 1992, and currently offers three pathways in 'Health', 'Learning Disability' and 'Quality Assurance'. The students attending the MSc programme are part-time and have professional posts in e.g. nursing, social work, dentistry, occupational therapy, etc.

All students take a core module entitled 'Inter-professional Workshops' (IPW). This module aims to develop a critical understanding of, and relevant skills for, collaboration across the health and social care professions.

The principal aims of the module are:

- to provide students with relevant knowledge about collaborative activity and the skills to up-date such knowledge independently. Developing skills in the presentation of such knowledge is also important
- to enable students to analyse the processes and actions that occur when diverse professional groups collaborate and to apply such understanding

to the development of appropriate procedures to facilitate collaboration

- to teach students how to evaluate their personal contribution to collaborative working experiences, in order that this can inform their working practice.

When designing the module it was evident that more 'traditional' methods (e.g. essay, exam) would not be sufficient to test whether students had achieved the required knowledge and skills. Moreover, the assessment, in addition to being a good indicator of achievement, needed to be integrated in a way that was meaningful to the students and furthered their learning rather than being viewed as simply burdensome and a necessary evil. Past experience showed that, owing to their considerable commitments, students often withdrew from the programme at the point of assessment if not purposefully engaged in the activity.

After much deliberation the eventual assessment strategy employed four different elements. Although this may, at first sight, appear

rather onerous, their integration with one another and with the learning strategy compensated for the number of elements. The overall approach sought to achieve a 'constructive alignment' between learning and assessment. This refers to ensuring that '... the teaching methods used and the assessment tasks are aligned to the learning activities assumed in the intended outcomes' (Biggs, 2002). The 'trick' to achieving such alignment appears deceptively simple; according to Biggs it is 'to make sure the assessment tasks mirror what you intended them to learn'.

Briefly, the module is delivered over a period of eight months. During this time students attend two weekend workshops and participate in a number of exercises and discussions related to inter-professional collaboration and teamwork theory. In the first of these workshops they are divided into two workgroups and set a group task to be undertaken between workshops. Each group is required to agree an inter-professional topic that all group members find relevant and to research this topic throughout the module and finally present an analysis of the topic as a group.

The module is assessed through each group presenting a portfolio of evidence of how they worked together (20%) and a joint presentation of their topic (30%). Each student also completes an individual essay reflecting on their group experience and critically discussing some key issues in inter-professional collaboration (40%). Finally, within their groups,

students undertake a peer review of one another in terms of their contribution to the group activity (10%). This is carefully structured and facilitated by the module leader to ensure that it is a constructive learning experience for everyone.

The portfolio allows an ongoing record and final assessment of the process of the workgroup and thus demonstrates how procedures are employed to improve collaboration between participants. The presentation demonstrates their ability to collate, interpret and convey this knowledge and to do so co-operatively. The reflective essay allows an analysis of group processes and consideration of their significance to individual work situations. Finally the peer review, although only 10% of the assessment, is extremely useful in sensitively discussing individual contributions and learning needs when collaborating with others. Thus, although all focused on the same task, each element tests a different aspect of the learning outcomes.

The module has been delivered in this form for four years with a recent development being the introduction of computer-mediated communication to supplement the work groups' collaborative processes (see Connor, 2003, for further details). Some groups have used transcripts of their online discussions to provide evidence of reflection and analysis. The use of the discussion board has allowed greater flexibility for students (owing to the asynchronicity afforded) and greater transparency of the group process for the tutor. The next stage

will be to develop the assessment criteria within the portfolio element to formally utilize the visibility of the online communication.

Implementation

As with all innovations in assessment, implementation issues have been numerous and within this short account only a few can be briefly mentioned. They concern students' own doubts about an unfamiliar approach, issues of group size, student absence and 'freeloading'.

Students were initially somewhat sceptical about the benefits of the group project, particularly when told that they were expected to decide their own topic, and earlier groups put considerable pressure on the tutor to be 'given' the topic to explore. However, all groups have eventually recognized the value of the learning achieved through participation in the process of negotiating a topic with colleagues. Far greater explication of the reasons for the topic not being set by the tutor together with an explicit input on negotiation processes and skills has helped.

Student withdrawals, although infrequent, also cause some alarm with students being concerned about group imbalances. For example, a group that has an eventual size of 4 sometimes feels disadvantaged compared to a group that has an eventual size of 6. A 'size isn't everything' reassurance that quality, rather than volume is the key to portfolio evidence together with

discussions of the pros and cons of relating in small or larger groups has been necessary to allay fears.

The thorny problem of how to deal with a student who is not available for the presentation itself but has contributed fully to the group process and preparation has not arisen in actuality, but has been discussed by the course team and with external examiners. It has been agreed that should this occur, and provided the role the student would have taken can be adequately demonstrated, they would still receive the group mark.

A related issue is that of the possibility of a student 'freeloading' within the group. This hasn't occurred, but regular progress reviews, the visibility of online work and the possibility of tutor intervention probably influence this.

The reliability of group assessment has been questioned (e.g. Race, 2001) and this has, in part, influenced the decision to diversify the assessment tasks. However, there is a strong feeling in the course team that the benefits of including group assessment far outweigh any such concern.

On a positive note, although time intensive in the design stage, the group project is a more efficient means of assessing in the long term, a significant factor given tutors' concerns about the assessment workload. More importantly the project, through its requirement to work in an inter-professional group, increases assessment validity.

Both students and external examiners have consistently evaluated the learning and assessment as valuable. The success of the module owes a great deal to the alignment of the assessment strategy with students' learning needs and the validity of the methods used.

& Teaching in Higher Education — ILTHE) and has been involved in a number of research projects concerned with inter-professional education on both undergraduate and postgraduate programmes.

References

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Keywords

Inter-professional, assessment, collaborative, integrated

Biography

Colleen Connor is Head of the Centre for Inter-professional Studies at UWIC and also manages quality enhancement activity across the university. She is an Accreditor for the Higher Education Academy (formerly the Institute for Learning