CeLTHE

ASSESSMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Motto: “Complete Freedom is when I will not have to announce my plans to others.

Partial Freedom is when I have to announce them a good time in advance.

Slavery is when others tell me in advance what I will do.

(Nadolny, S. 2002:.43; my own translation)

“How can I assess qualities rather than isolated skills?”

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1. INTRODUCTION

The role of assessment has been a matter of particular concern in the re-validation of the BA in Curative Education (BACE): a programme offered in partnership between the Camphill-Rudolf Steiner-Schools (CRSS) and the University of Aberdeen (UA). One of our main concerns has been how to find the right balance between continuing to develop the essential personal and professional qualities of a Curative Educator, which lie at the heart of the Camphill ethos, and demonstrating that the knowledge and skills acquired have reached an adequate academic level. In this paper I will analyse and reflect on aspects of this process and ask how far there has been an improvement on old practice. I am approaching this task from my perspective as Camphill Course Co-ordinator of the BACE and I will draw on experiences gained from my involvement in the design of the Programme, the individual courses and methods of assessment.

2. GENERAL ASPECTS

In order to improve student learning and teaching at Universities many models and theories of assessment have been developed, only a few of which I can do justice to in this paper. I have therefore selected a few approaches which are relevant to my own practice. In relation to assessment most authors see the following questions as important: ‘Why?’ ‘How?’ ‘Who for?’ and ‘What?’

The last question usually relates to the quality of a student’s learning (see Biggs, 1999). There seems to be overall agreement on how to assess the learning of theory but I detect a more uncertain approach to assessing practice based or experiential learning that may be because these are relatively new concepts in higher education. However, they now seem to be more and more accepted as integral and innovative elements (Warner & McGill, 1989).
The question: ‘Who for?’ is often seen in relation to the students or the teachers and their responsibility and accountability to future employers (Brown & Knight, 1994). I am surprised at the exclusion of one group of stakeholders which is particularly affected by the quality of assessment: namely, all those who will receive the services of students who have successfully graduated, whether as doctors, nurses, teachers or Curative Educators.

The concepts of validity, reliability and transparency appear in most writings and I will turn to these later (Biggs, 1999). Biggs emphasises the importance of the constructive alignment of the curriculum in his work and focuses on learning objectives and outcomes. Whilst I accept their value and importance, I have a concern, especially in relation to vocationally oriented programmes like the BACE; is there not a danger that fixed learning outcomes might hinder the development of creativity, flexibility and intuitive practice, resulting in ‘slavery’ rather than ‘freedom’ of learning?

3. **THE ROLE OF LEARNING OUTCOMES IN PRACTICE ASSESSMENT**

Recalling the statement I made in my assignment on ‘Learning Styles’, that the aim of all learning is ‘to be able to deal with the unexpected with courage and creativity’, (see app.1) I wonder how one can establish appropriate learning outcomes and criteria for assessment?

3.1  **BA in Curative Education**

Two of the learning outcomes listed in the BACE Programme Specification are:

- ability to develop and demonstrate personal and professional values and attitudes of a Curative Teacher; and

- development of a flexible and creative attitude to practice.

And in ‘Creative Arts and Personal Development’, a student is expected to:
• evaluate the process of personal development; and

• find appropriate responses to change.

These may be seen more as objectives than outcomes. But much depends on the formulation of criteria. Which criteria can encapsulate such concepts such as empathy, creativity, curiosity, commitment, love, courage, and intuition? These are, surely, qualities rather than skills. They can never be considered to be an end-result or in permanent possession but depend rather on ongoing endeavour and development.

Joyce (1996) states that ‘where students end up’ matters greatly. I would prefer to say: ‘where students are going to, matters greatly’. To return to my theme: do I, as assessor and teacher, have the right or obligation to demand prior notice of where my students want to go? Do I hand out a map with a fixed route, making no allowance for detours or shortcuts? Or do I allow for the ‘unintended outcomes’? (Biggs, 1999, 155). Am I open to finding and accepting what I have not looked for?

Teacher: How many diamonds have you got?
Student: I don’t have any diamonds.
Teacher: Then you fail!
Student: But you didn’t ask me about my jade” (Biggs, 1999, 156)

3.2 Divergent Assessment

Biggs (1999) has defined divergent as ‘generating alternatives, where the notion of being ‘correct’ gives way to broader assessments of value, such as aesthetic appeal, originality, usefulness, self-expression, creativity and so on. Divergent thinking is ‘open’.” (p.154). This definition could equally well apply to the term ‘intuitive’ which is the opposite of ‘convergent’. In this context Biggs proposes assessment by portfolio as a very suitable method: ‘I found plenty of divergent surprises in my students’ portfolios that conventional assessment would have missed.’ (p. 155) ‘Creative Arts and Personal Development’ is the only course in the BACE that is assessed by portfolio (see portf 1); it is relatively straightforward to assess students’
creativity in the collection of and reflections on artistic items. It would be worthwhile to explore this method in connection with some other courses.

3.3 The question of competence

These ‘divergent surprises’ are difficult to interpret as ‘skills’ in either academic or practical terms. Some authors prefer to speak about ‘competences’ - a concept, which is deemed to be better suited to the framework of divergent practice (Henry, 1989;35). But even that has its limits in the context of professional training where attitudes and qualities ideally transcend rules and set habits, as Pring has pointed out: ‘to be declared a competent teacher contains a mild criticism. One wants an imaginative, intelligent, enthusiastic teacher, too’ (Pring in Brown & Knight, 1994, 28). Brown and Knight suggest that many future employers look for evidence of personal and interpersonal qualities rather than cognitive and intellectual skills. I agree with this view, as long as the stakeholders I mentioned earlier are included. They go on to say that the process of deciding what to assess and of selecting relevant outcomes is ‘a moral activity’ (op.cit. 25). Unfortunately they do not develop their thinking here. I found this statement of interest and of relevance to my next section, where I will look at how students were assessed in the old Camphill Seminar, where assessment appeared to have had a more moral and holistic, than analytical, quality.

4. THE CAMPHILL SEMINAR IN CURATIVE EDUCATION (CSCE)

The CSCE started in 1950 as an initiative of Dr. Karl König, the founder of the Camphill Movement. It was a small in-house form of training for co-workers that was completely embedded in the life, work and ideals of the Camphill Community and was informed by the principles of Anthroposophy as formulated by Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925.) (see app.2)

As I have shown in my paper on Teaching Styles, the original content has been extended and developed, but not changed in its essentials. However, the teaching methods have undergone a significant transformation. In the process of developing the seminar into a BA Programme, the area most affected has been assessment.
Unfortunately I was unable to discover any written records of the original practice; therefore the following evidence is largely of an anecdotal character.

4.1 Creative Note Taking

Throughout the three-year seminar tutors and lecturers gave regular feedback and evaluation of both practice and written work. The written work consisted mainly of notes, which were not taken during the lectures, but written up later and from memory. This put a high demand on the powers of concentration and listening of the students as well as on the presentational skills and charisma of the lecturers in inspiring and motivating the students. One’s own critical reflection was not sought but I know from my own experience as a student, that the process of writing from memory helped me to digest and consolidate the received knowledge. Another requirement was that the notes should have an aesthetic and artistic quality – the use of colours and drawings was encouraged. This emphasis not only addressed cognitive and intellectual skills but also activated creative involvement, so that the whole person could engage with the topic as a result of which students were able to create their own highly distinctive personal textbook. (see portf.2)

Tutors who read these notes would make written comments and take their quality into account for the final assessment. Assessing the aesthetic quality of the notes must have disadvantaged some students, especially those with a pragmatist/choleric or activist/sanguine learning style. (see app.3) However, the content was given more weight than the mode of presentation.

While it is clear that this method did not foster analytical and critical reflection, I believe it was a more satisfying and enlivening way of recording and assembling knowledge and information than filing impersonal and standardised handouts from PowerPoint presentations. In saying that, I do not wish to dismiss this particular method, which definitely has its role and value. I do wonder, however, if including the artistic approach might not occasionally boost students’ joy and enthusiasm in learning?
4.2 The assessment circle

The most important assessment instrument was the ‘Final Seminar Talk’. All tutors, including practice teachers, personal tutors, and lecturers who had been involved with a student over the three years of the seminar, were present, as well as anybody else the student wanted to invite. It should be pointed out that those attending were also co-workers and had shared all aspects of community life with the student, not only in the seminar. The fact that this was a community event was symbolised by the fact that all the participants sat in a circle.

The usual procedure was for the student to be asked to describe his/her experiences, their strengths and weaknesses and to evaluate their learning of both theory and practice. After this oral self-assessment others would add their points of view and reflect on the student’s progress. The ensuing conversation established the final agreement as to whether or not to award the Camphill Diploma. My research has established that there were no written criteria, guidelines or learning outcomes to guide the proceedings. However, there seems to have been an unwritten framework within which a number of areas were considered:

- the quality of practice
- ability to engage in teamwork
- quality of note-taking and involvement in seminar activities
- recognition of relevance of anthroposophy
- extent of community involvement
- ability to deal independently and responsibly with a group of children with special needs.

The outcome of this event was summarised in a written ‘Appreciation’ that accompanied the Diploma. The Diploma simply indicated successful completion and listed all the courses in which the student had participated. (see portf. 3) Where a student did not meet these requirements the Diploma was not handed out but he/she was given opportunity to make up for missing elements, if s/he so desired.
The arrangement in a circle is significant in examining the process and quality of assessment for it reflects the seminar's title: ‘community as path of learning’. (see app.2) Just as the process of undertaking the seminar was a holistic community experience, so also was this final ceremony. The whole community was represented in a non-hierarchical way – students participating on equal terms. The fact that the term ‘appreciation’ was used points to a ‘moral’ quality in this form of assessment. Here was a sincere attempt to engage with the inner qualities and potential of the student, thus widening assessment methodology beyond more conventional parameters.

My mentor put it in these terms recently: ‘Assessment is usually reliant on the application of some set of ‘objectively determined’ criteria, whereas ‘appreciation’ stems perhaps more from intuitive feelings. For communities that attach as much, if not more, importance to the spiritual as the intellectual and physical development of the individual, the application of such criteria may be seen not only as irrelevant but damaging.’ This is a strong statement that was made in connection with certain concerns about future developments in Camphill. Nevertheless it adds a dimension to the ongoing discussion of assessment, which is often missing.

It could be argued that the ‘seminar talk’ in the assessment circle gave no more than formative feedback; the absence of written criteria and the ‘in-house’ setting seem to indicate this. The Camphill Diploma, however, was not handed out lightly and was widely recognized as a valid qualification. This is clear evidence of its summative character, although neither that term nor any conventional methods were used.

My own experience and that of others indicates that this arrangement had its drawbacks and these I will analyse in the next section.

4.3 Strengths and Weaknesses.

First, I would like to identify the strengths. Whilst the characteristics identified may seem innovative today, they have been established practice for us for many years. I therefore feel justified in asking whether the BACE team was right in abolishing them for the sake of adjusting to ‘mainstream’ practice?
The old way can be characterised as:

- holistic in the sense that it incorporated a spiritual dimension;
- divergent in that it allowed for future development; and
- pioneering for it entailed campus wide involvement

Joyce (1996) noted that: ‘student learning is a campus-wide responsibility...the aim over time is to involve people from across the educational community...
...Assessment is not a task for small groups of experts, but a collaborative activity’” (p. 2). According to my research this seems to be an innovative idea in Higher Education, and I was interested to realise that we have practised it for such a long time.

These elements, which contributed to the unique character of the Community Assessment, can also be seen as weaknesses.

There was the danger that the process and result were neither valid, reliable nor transparent, precisely because of the close community involvement. Through sharing life and work over three years in a close community setting, both positive and negative personal relationships and preconceptions were formed, which could influence the quality of assessment. In the absence of defined and written criteria the necessary objectivity could be missing. A very high level of professional detachment on the part of all participants was demanded, which was not always achieved.

There was also a lack of transparency. The unwritten criteria with which the tutor team worked were often not shared with the students. This had an unsettling effect because students were unsure of expectations and came to the event with anxiety and worry, especially those of a melancholic disposition who had a poor self-image. This is well illustrated by the following overheard comment: ‘Let’s go to the public execution!’ However, students were often surprised and pleased by the positive outcome, something they had not anticipated.
In a strange way this form of assessment usually lived up to its positive potential and in spite of an apparent lack of validity and reliability sound judgements about a student’s ability and aptitude to be a curative educator were usually made. I can present no hard evidence to support this view but it seems to be related to my thoughts on the spiritual aspects of the learning environment and intuitive practice, which transcend logic and fixed structures. It also confirms for me the ‘moral’ quality, which is less prominent in other assessment styles and calls to mind yet another quality - trust. This is rarely mentioned in the literature, for obvious reasons. Trust is subjective and as such is an unscientific and a dubious element to consider for most forms of assessment. Yet is it not an essential ingredient in a ‘co-operative learning environment’ (Hammond & Collins; 1991,22). Although one might ‘be suspicious of the objectivity and accuracy of all measures of student ability and conscious that human judgement is the most important element in every indicator of achievement’, (Ramsden, P.1992; 12) it is important to trust ‘human judgement’ as a foundation for valid assessment. This could be explored further in connection with the forming of learning organisations or communities. Angelo has identified the building of ‘shared trust’ as one of ‘Four Pillars of Transformative Assessment’ (Angelo, 2002; 3)(see portf.4)

Both these practices, creative note taking and the assessment circle, are no longer used, since the re-validation of the BACE in 2002. How are students now assessed?

5. THE BACE

5.1 Assessment of written work

Part of the assessment of each course within the BACE is a written assignment, which is summatively assessed using the CAS scale. I would like to cite as an example the ‘Introduction to Anthroposophical Curative Education’ course. I was part of the team responsible for designing the content and assessment of this course. (see portf.5)

How far did we achieve ‘constructive alignment’? (Biggs.1999). One of the aims set out in the Course Proposal was to ‘introduce the principles and ethos common to all
areas of curative education (e.g. the holistic approach of body, soul and spirit). This is reflected in the learning outcomes (3, 4, 7, 9, 12 and 13). For example:

‘Knowledge and understanding of principles and ethos of Camphill community living and how these support the individual with complex needs.’

‘Able to demonstrate respect for the value and uniqueness of each individual.’

Most of the teaching methods address these outcomes. For example:

‘Observation of the application of curative principles within community life.’

On the whole ‘constructive alignment’ would seem to have been achieved. I must add that this form of assessment has not yet been tested, given that this is a new course within the BACE. It will be interesting to see how students and markers will fare and what we will all learn from the experience.

Criterion 6 seems to have been an ‘unintended intuitive action’ on our part, as I cannot now recall that we were consciously planning for surprises:

‘Identifies key issues of personal importance and begins to reflect on how these have influenced personal development.’

This may appear to be vague and unclear, yet actually it allows for the ‘surprises’ or ‘desirable but unforeseen outcomes’ about which Biggs writes (1999,43). It gives students the chance to explore aspects, which are important to them, without demanding that they have to indicate ‘in advance what they will do’. At the same time it poses quite a high level challenge for Stage I students undertaking an Introductory Course. In fact when analysing the criteria I realised that quite a few seem to be asking for a higher level of involvement than might be expected of new students (e.g., ‘explores relationships’; ‘draws on knowledge to incorporate in discussion’; or ‘begins to reflect’). (see portf.6)
5.2 Practice Assessment

Stage I and II of the BACE are practice based and the practice is summatively assessed. Being aware of academic requirements and recent legislation on qualifications for care-workers, we aimed at formulating criteria that would provide clear evidence of achievements. For this we turned to the Scottish Credit and Qualification Framework and used the ‘Educational Studies’ Benchmarks as a guideline.

As indicated in the ‘Practice I Handbook’, practice is now assessed using a variety of instruments:

- mid Point Review (which is both formative and diagnostic)
- final Review (which is summative)
- student’s written self-evaluation
- student’s written Learning Journal
- written tutor report
- direct observation of practice
- feedback from personal and practice tutors (see portf.7)

Requirements and learning outcomes are grouped under the following headings:

- application of Theory and Knowledge to Practice
- values, Attitudes and Behaviours
- care of the Individual with Complex Needs
- observing, Recording and Care Planning
- communication, Team Working and Collaborative Practice
- reflection, Personal and Professional Development (see portf.7)

Given what I have said about the value of divergent assessment and room for individual and unforeseen development, these criteria might seem restrictive. On the other hand, the introduction of a ‘Working Agreement’, which was developed wit the
specific and holistic character of the BACE in mind, will hopefully eliminate the danger of putting students into a straightjacket.

The purpose of the working agreement is to adjust learning opportunities to the learning needs of the individual student and let these impact on the assessment. In this context I would like to make reference to Rudolf Steiner, who in 1898 posed the following, for his time probably utopian, challenge:

‘In relation to the endless differences between individualities, it is barbaric to demand that all students should study medicine for the same length of time…. And when it is demanded that every student must partake of a certain number of practical exercises, then one is creating through such a measure chains for individuals who want to go their own way.’ (Steiner, R. 1898; 16, my own translation).

Through the working agreement students are offered the possibility of choosing their own direction, as long as it relates to the given framework and is undertaken ‘with guidance, support and supervision’ (Practice Handbook, 12). This seems reasonable for Stage I students at the beginning of a four-year Programme at the end of which they will hopefully have reached a higher degree of autonomy and have developed the personal and professional skills as well as attitudes to know how and when to act out of ‘complete freedom’.

Although the Review of Practice still involves a group of tutors, the former setting of the Assessment Circle has been dropped. Has this change been an improvement?

5.3 New Assessment – loss or gain?

There is a strong case for arguing that the newly established practice assessment is an improvement and for the following reasons:

- clearer objectives and criteria;
- a more formal process;
- better recording leading to objective evidence;
- increased student involvement through written self-evaluation, based on learning journal; and
- increased transparency.
Once again it is important to note that this has not yet been tested in practice, so my evaluation is rather hypothetical. Although it seems right to consider these changes as improvements, I would like to suggest that an important element has been lost with the omission of the Assessment Circle. Even allowing for the possible pitfalls I feel that it could still enhance the overall quality of the assessment. The new way may well be more professional and efficient but it looks at only a limited range of all those aspects that lie on the student’s path to learning. Involvement in a wider framework of activities – cultural, artistic, and spiritual – is only indirectly addressed yet they are still the foundation for the essential ethos of Curative Education within the therapeutic setting of Camphill. The old way was in danger of over-emphasising this aspect and overlooking the professional skills of students if their community involvement was deemed to be insufficient.

Apart from this loss I feel justified in saying that the overall result is a gain. Aspects of our practice, which we have used without much reflection, have now become consciously used tools, others have been added and through evidence of students’ progress, assessment strategies have undergone a positive transformation with a consequent improvement in quality. Both students and tutors will benefit from these improvements. Having gained these insights into the development of assessment in the BACE, the obvious question now is: ‘What are the next steps?’

6. FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

One of the most important tasks is an ongoing one and that is to be constantly aware that in the process of change, improvement and responding to academic and legal requirements, we do not lose those values and practices that are unique to the ‘Camphill approach’, such as the original Assessment Circle. They should be seen as complementing ‘mainstream’ practices and stimulating dialogue and ongoing exchange.

It seems to be almost impossible to find objective criteria against which ‘unintended learning outcomes’, creativity or intuitive action can be summatively assessed. Yet these are essential qualities of the Curative Educator. Maybe the solution lies in a compromise, which would use the assessment circle as a more formative tool to assess
practice on a pass/fail basis in combination with summative assessment for other academic work?

Through studying about Learning Styles and Assessment Styles I have been made aware of the concept of the Learning Organisation or Community. It would be interesting to compare Camphill’s concept of ‘Community as Path of Learning’ with this new concept and to analyse how my statements and questions relating to aspects of the Learning Environment can be incorporated. This might contribute new insights and understanding to Camphill’s partnership with the University of Aberdeen, which is in the process of becoming a quite special, if not unique, Learning Community.

7. CONCLUSION

Through my efforts to understand and reflect on important aspects of assessment as such, and specifically in the context of the BACE, I realise that my original question: ‘How can I assess qualities rather than isolated skills?’ needs to be reformulated. The BACE is a practice based form of vocational training and the assessment of practice is one of the most essential concerns. Curative Educators need to acquire not only skills and competences but also inner qualities and attitudes that will allow them to work in a flexible, creative and intuitive way.

Whatever form of assessment is adopted – it needs to be manifold, creative and flexible, whilst at the same time responding to relevant and rigorous academic standards. I suggest that this can only be achieved through the collaboration of various people who can together come to a holistic and realistic understanding of the students’ ability and potential. Therefore my question has been reformulated: “How can we assess qualities rather than isolated skills?” This ‘we’ can be seen as a truly innovative concept: the usual term ‘campus’ including Camphill- as well as University tutors and also the residents in care of the students undertaking the BACE.

This form of assessment would rely on traditional and objective methods of measuring students’ achievements as well as on mutual trust in the moral and intuitive ability of the ‘we’ of the assessors to recognize and evaluate inner qualities of the students.

I am aware that I have raised many questions without giving a clear answer, but I hope that my deliberations will contribute to the ongoing task of finding answers and new, creative methods of assessment.
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