##### The Assessment of Work-Based Learning in Foundation Degrees

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**Introduction**

This article charts the review of assessment modes, appropriate to work-based learning, conducted as part of an ESCalate funded research study. The project has sought to investigate and develop approaches to the assessment of work-based learning in the context of the Foundation Degree for Teaching Assistants delivered at Bishop Grosseteste College, Lincoln and the University of Leicester. Considering a range of assessment approaches within a case study methodology, it has investigated best practice in the light of student experience, the existing literature on work-based assessments, and the particular demands of the Foundation Degree format. The project has built on the experience of the participating institutions in running a Foundation Degree, and related work-based courses, for Teaching Assistants since September 2001. Its principle aim has been to assess the effectiveness of the assessment approaches used so far, to revisit the rationale for these approaches and to recommend refinements or replacements.

## **The nature of work-based learning and models of course structure**

From the outset, the project team recognised the importance of developing a shared understanding of the nature of work-based learning and its key features. Gray (2001) has clearly articulated the scope of work-based learning to include learning *for* work , learning *at* work and learning *through* work. The Foundation Degree in Educational Studies for Teaching Assistants incorporates elements of the full range of work-based learning, but concentrates particularly on learning through work. Within the programme, work-based learning is a significant mechanism for learning. It focuses not only on discreet tasks to be carried out in the student’s workplace, but also expects high levels of reflection upon work practices. In this respect, work-based learning is a vital channel through which higher-order cognitive skills can be developed within students; in particular the ability to learn how to learn and the development of ‘reflective practitioner’ (Schon 1983) skills.

# Any assessment tool should be inextricably linked to course design, so the project enabled the team to reconsider models of course structure for work-based learning. Two basic models emerged:

## University/College designed modules which can be totally/partially delivered in the work place

## Students are given appropriate credit for what they do/have done in the work place (more appropriate for professional competency)

A variation on the first model has been used effectively within the Foundation Degree at Bishop Grosseteste College, and the centrality of work-based learning to the Foundation Degree programme is reflected in course documentation through statements relating to rationale, learning outcomes and assessment criteria (University of Leicester and Bishop Grosseteste College 2001). Work-based learning is stranded throughout all modules and is structured through tasks set by college tutors, to be completed in the student’s workplace. This demands a secure knowledge of the workplace context and of professional workplace knowledge by academic staff. High levels of evaluation and reflection are demanded from students and materials from the tasks also provide practical evidence for related written assignments and oral presentations. In this model, learning in the workplace is as much, if not more, about process as about output. To this effect, the model has academic credibility because it has at its centre the aim of developing higher order academic thinking and reflective skills.

The full integration of work-based learning within the academic programme is crucial for student success and academic credibility. A flexible approach is promoted, based upon a secure philosophy of education which values work-based learning, but without compromising bench marked standards. For example, the workplace is seen as a reflective ’linchpin’, enabling students to see theory in practice and develop their understanding of educational theory within their own work contexts.

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## The model demands understanding of workplace practice by all those involved in Foundation Degree delivery. Therefore, this fundamental principle requires high level partnership between academic institution, student and workplace.

# Assessing work-based learning

The particular features of a Foundation Degree (QAA 2004) demand an approach to assessment that is academically credible, but also appropriate to the particular needs of work-based learning, the students engaged in it and their workplaces. The challenge for assessment within Foundation Degrees is the need to balance competency-based assessment (output) with assessment of process (reflection and self-direction). The aim of the assessment is not only to assure quality of provision and achievement by its end, but to develop the student as a reflective practitioner. In addition this must be done within appropriate quality benchmark standards and/or professional standards, and with due regard for the workplace setting in order to promote an authentic context. However, Gray warns‘…there are inherent dangers in only assessing observed behaviours and reducing complex behaviours to a series of what could be construed as trivial tasks.’ Gray (2001:7).

The essential measurement criteria of validity, reliability and authenticity apply to the assessment of work-based learning as to any other form of learning. To this effect, these criteria have been used in critically appraising both current assessment practice within the Foundation Degree in Educational Studies for Teaching Assistants at Bishop Grosseteste College and new practice trialled during the course of an ESCalate funded project. However it was also crucial to recognise the unique nature of work-based learning and its assessment and, in particular, to acknowledge that:

* work-based learning centres on reflection about work practices and about the process of learning;
* work-based learning is more process-oriented than classroom-based learning, with stronger elements of action and problem solving;
* work-based learning in this context is not an ‘add-on’ to the programme being studied, but in fact is central to it.

This prompted the use of a wider definition of ‘validity’ than might be used for other forms of assessment. For example Lambert and Lines (2000) consider construct validity. This considers whether attributes or constructs (underlying skills) are being assessed and this closely mirrors the principles already outlined related to assessment of reflective skills and learning processes. In addition the work of Stobart and Gipps (1997) around unitary validity is cited by Lambert and Lines. This recognises that assessing validity also depends on how appropriately the results are used. This concept further highlights the importance of being clear about what the purpose of any assessment is and how it relates to the teaching and learning which has taken place.

As the project progressed, the team also considered issues of assessment practicalities, including tutor time in particular and the impact upon the workplace. In addition assessment weighting and student perceptions of equitability between modes of assessment were discussed and investigated.

Therefore, in ‘assessing the assessments’, the following questions were asked:

**Validity**: does the assessment measure what it was intended to measure (discrete module objectives and the ongoing process of student reflection)?

**Reliability**: is the assessment ‘stable’ and is there reliability between the judgements of assessors and across student cohorts?

**Authenticity**: is it certain the learner has produced the work?

**Contextual authenticity:** does the assessment acknowledge the practice of ‘real life’?

**Practicality:** is the assessment manageable for tutor, student and workplace?

An important feature of the Foundation Degree in Educational Studies for Teaching Assistants is the range of assessment modes used within the course. Indeed, students have commented that this is an attractive feature of the course. All students are mature and many have ‘non-traditional’ entry qualifications that rely heavily upon experience and competency in the work place rather than academic skills such as essay writing. To this effect 50% of work assessed currently is done through non-essay modes such as presentations and portfolios.

Following an initial survey amongst Foundation Degree students at one institution which sought to establish a student perspective on the effectiveness of assessment modes, the project developed as a case study. The key aim was to investigate the range of assessments on offer as part of the Foundation Degree in Educational Studies for Teaching Assistants and in particular their appropriateness for a work-based learning programme.

Current assessment practice uses the following written modes: essay, research report, portfolio, and literacy and numeracy tests. In addition the oral modes of presentation and viva are used. All of these forms of assessment were examined as part of the project, with the following new developments looked at in more detail:

* individual interview around a problem solving scenario;
* the range of assessed presentation modes – individual, group, peer assessment of presentations and online submission of a powerpoint presentation;
* portfolio – both with directed task content and student-led content, including a reflective learning journal.

Each form of assessment was ‘assessed’ for its validity, reliability, authenticity, contextual authenticity and practicality. Rankings of high, medium and low were used and then converted to scores or 3,2,1. In addition, qualitative data was gathered from students regarding their perceptions of how well the assessment modes capture reflective learning. These qualitative comments were paraphrased and coded positively and negatively, as follows:

+a) Effective assessment of module objectives

+b) Brings together module strands and promotes thinking/reflective practice

+c) Encourages analysis of role in school

+d) Reading around subjects improved knowledge and practice

+e) Generally makes links between college and school

+f) Self directed projects more valuable

+g) Weekly tasks directly link practice with theory

+h) Vehicle for self-assessment through questioning practice

+i) Evaluates learning process relevant to individual settings and situations

+j) Highlighted issues of subject knowledge

+k) Encourages focus on specific aspect of practice

+l) Observing peer presentations a useful form of development

-a) Sometimes quantity outweighed quality of reflection

-b) Difficult to highlight all connections between theory and practice in the set tasks

-c) Did not capture reflective learning/practice

Following this the two sets of scores were combined to form a summative ‘assessment of the assessments’, taking account of not only validity, reliability, authenticity, contextual authenticity and practicality, but also student perceptions. This resulted in the following rank order of assessments, with those at the top scoring most highly overall.

1. Research or project report
2. Essay
3. Presentation
4. Problem solving scenario
5. Portfolio of student-designed tasks
6. Portfolio of directed tasks
7. Tests

It was clear that where assessment criteria were clear and where students felt they were actively developing their practice and their reflection upon it, assessment was deemed ‘appropriate’. Students had a positive view of the range of assessment and appreciated the use of ‘non-traditional’ assessment modes which were often successful in capturing the reflective links between college and the work place. Interestingly, the portfolio was often not the most popular from of assessment because of the perceived volume of work associated with gathering portfolio evidence.

**Conclusion**

It is clear that diverse and innovative forms of assessment are wholly appropriate for work-based learning. In addition, the most appropriate and effective assessment modes are those where learning is situated in the workplace yet fully underpinned by rigorous academic scrutiny and reflection (for example, work-based research and investigative project work). There is scope for the further development of work in this area, including the investigation of additional assessment modes. In this respect the list of ways in which we assess work-based learning could be extended considerably, and could include the following, plus more:

* Essay
* Project report
* Action plan
* Individual presentation
* Group presentation
* Discussion
* Debate
* Display
* Problem solving scenario
* Interview simulation
* Examination
* Portfolio
* Student-led projects and learning contracts
* Online task

In addition, the work on assessment has helped to reconsider some aspects of the mentoring role, commonly associated with Foundation Degrees**.**Within the workplace, mentors must be supported in generating mentoring skills appropriate for the needs of Foundation Degree students. This may involve inducting mentors more fully in understanding the range of assessment modes and criteria used on Foundation Degrees. In addition, it is essential for all participants involved in work-based programmes to have a shared view of what work-based learning means in principle and practice, in order that the student experience is valid, effective and appropriate for work-based routes.

**References**

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