



Grading of practice portfolios by Practice Teachers at the University of Northampton

The marking and grading of practice portfolios by practice teachers began at the University of Northampton for both the BSc (Hons) and PG Diploma in Primary Health Care Nursing Programmes in 2003. Prior to this date practice portfolios were compiled as evidence of attainment of NMC competencies, with practice teachers 'signing off' competency achievement at the completion of the programme.

There was however a strong feeling among specialist tutors and practice teachers that as the programme consisted of 50% theory and 50% practice the practice element should be acknowledged within its own right. Although recognising that assessment may influence student learning in either a positive or a negative way, it was felt that concepts such as deep and surface approaches to learning needed to be considered (Biggs 2003, Ramsden 1992), and that the amount of work and effort students put into compiling their portfolios needed to be recognised.

A series of workshops between specialist tutors and practice teachers were organised to develop this initiative. This approach was based on studies by Gerrish et al (1997) and Phillips et al (2001) who identified that practice teachers needed to feel ownership in assessment strategies as this enhanced the validity and reliability of practice assessment. The outcome of these workshops was an inductive taxonomy that was mapped for consistency against specialist practice standards as outlined by the NMC (2001, 2002), and assessment descriptors to ensure practice assessment reflected competence at an appropriate academic level.

To support practice teachers in undertaking this role an infrastructure of training and continual support was implemented (Phillips 2000). This provided on-going dialogue and enabled practice teachers to enhance and develop their assessment skills. In the first year of implementation study days were scheduled at the end of each semester and practice teachers were asked to bring student portfolios and individual pieces of work within them to assess using the practice marking criteria. Although this was not a true reflection of the overall portfolio and final grade, it offered an opportunity for practice teachers to use the criteria, discuss and justify their marks with peers, and obtain support and encouragement from specialist tutors. It also promoted a sense of cohesiveness within the group as multi-disciplinary groups worked together to discuss issues raised and ensure reliability across specialisms.

An all day moderation meeting involving practice teachers and specialist tutors was organised following summative assessment, with the intention that all borderline and referred portfolios, plus 10% of the remainder with examples of all grades would be moderated. To facilitate this specialist tutors produced a grid identifying 1st markers and a moderator from an alternative Trust to enhance reliability and validity. In reality all portfolios were moderated with borderline and referred portfolios being further moderated by a practice teacher from an alternative speciality. Specialist tutors supported the process throughout, but only became actively involved when requested to do so.

Four years on the process is well developed with practice teachers effectively identifying and evaluating students' situated understanding and practical theory (Phillips et al 2000). Workshops on providing written feedback for students followed at a later stage. This developmental process has enhanced the skills and knowledge of practice teachers and has made for a more robust assessment strategy. A study day in the 3rd semester continues to be designated as an assessment workshop and follows the format previously identified. However many of the practice teachers have now formed their own action learning groups and/or clinical supervision related to teaching and learning practices, and those new to the assessment process are further supported in this way.

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