



E-learning at Liverpool John Moores University: A case study in learning and teaching about assessment

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Dr Derek Clifford is a senior lecturer in social work at Liverpool John Moores University. In 1997 he produced a CD-rom *Social Assessment: Applying Critical Auto/ Biographical Methods* which he has used with both Dip/SW students and employees of a local authority social work department, to facilitate learning about assessment. In this case study, Derek discusses the development and use of this CD-rom and also other ways in which he has incorporated e-learning into his teaching about assessment.

Origin of the project

In the mid 90's we had a visit from staff from Southampton University (SWAPItsn) and they said that we should be using our local facilities and thinking about how best to help students. I was particularly interested in using a disk that would illuminate issues about assessment. I had been developing an auto/biographical methodology for social assessment, but it is pretty hard to see how all the interrelated factors fit together and I thought the advantage of computerising it would be that you can easily refer to all sorts of different information in all sorts of ways. From talking to social work practice teachers, they were saying that students are quite good at data collection but they are struggling to know how to interpret it and put it all together. As I was writing a book on social assessment at the same time I thought would try and combine the two.²

My book focuses on five key concepts or principles of social assessment which need to be understood, internalised and applied in practice. Theoretical guidelines in other professions are similarly used. I contrast my basic principles in the book with four or five basic principles that some cognitive behaviouralists suggest as a basis for their way of making assessments.

They are similar, there are some overlaps, but they are not actually the same: the basic principles of social assessment (theoretically justified in the book) specifically integrate social and anti-oppressive values into the assessment methodology. One of the things I say about those principles is they should be in your head, so although potentially there is an infinite number of facts or data, the amount of data you might get to know in reality you may only have a very short space of time. In an emergency situation you might only have 30 minutes but the book argues that understanding the principles and having them in your head provides a guideline for practice. In some ways the developmental and ecological approach of the National Assessment Framework was anticipated, but in other ways I have argued that the principles provide a more fundamental underpinning for social work assessment.

I draw a lot upon the auto/biographical methods which Professor Liz Stanley at Manchester University has written about. Part of the trend to look at narrative and biography springs from such feminist sources and the concerns about the relationship between the personal and the political and the qualitative aspects of peoples lives. So for me the research methodology is not itself neutral but it is deliberately chosen because it is oriented towards understanding issues of power and domination in personal and family situations.

¹ This case study focuses learning and teaching of assessment for DipSW students at Liverpool John Moores University. For information about the training programme for local authority social work employees see Clifford, D., Burke, B., Feery, D. and Knox, C. (2002)

Combining key elements in training and research: Developing social work assessment theory and practice in partnership. *Social Work Education*, 21: 105-116.

² For further information about the Auto/ Biographical method see Clifford, D. (1998) *Social Assessment Theory and Practice*. Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited.

Purpose

The idea for the teaching sessions which include computerised materials on assessment is to introduce a range of basic assessment skills which will help students in their first placement.

It includes the use of both my own software package, and another package purchased by the university and used in conjunction to introduce students to basic ideas concerning assessment skills. An important part of my motivation is to help them to integrate their anti-oppressive values into the actual doing of assessment so that students don't have a values module in semester one and then forget about those values. Our aim is to get them to see how they have to be integrated. I don't see values as an 'add-on', they are absolutely fundamental to the methodology that is being used. There are therefore a number of specific aims and objectives for this part of the programme:

- Firstly, to help students to understand basic generic concepts in social assessment including ecological and developmental perspectives and particularly incorporating anti-oppressive values, using the five basic principles of a critical auto/biographical assessment methodology
- Secondly, to introduce students to basic generic skills of assessment. That includes paper skills and interviewing skills.
- Thirdly to help them to apply systematically the basic principles of assessment of a case study and get feedback from the lecturer, thus integrating theory and practice.

Students

I do the exercise with first year students who are about 3-4 months into their social work training. We have both undergraduate and postgraduate students in this module, about 20 students of each group making 40 in total. This is fairly early on in the course and prior to their first placement. It is about basic skills and basic analysing of problems and is not meant to be covering everything. The specifics of assessment relating to differing client groups are further developed in the second year when they are focussing on their particular routes. In the second year, students in the children and families stream for example will be looking more closely at the National Assessment Framework and the Looking After Children documentation.

Envisaged outcomes

There are a number of envisaged outcomes for students:

- Ability to understand a holistic anti-oppressive analysis of social situations
- Ability to deal with reflexive issues in assessment - that is, who they are, and how that affects this particular assessment.
- Ability to relate theoretical principles of assessment to a case study
- Ability to understand and use basic generic skills of assessment in the context of a case study.

Software contents

In my own CD-rom there is a set of individual, family, agency, and social lifelines so that you can look historically at what has happened to somebody's life along the horizontal axis, within concrete social contexts at different systemic levels. Along the vertical axis you can look at the social systems from the smallest to the largest that will be impacting, and have implications for the individual's life for any intervention that could be taken at any point in time.

An important aspect of the set of life lines, is that one of them represents the social worker, thus incorporating the idea of reflexivity into the software life map. Part of my idea was to represent a life map *in association with* the basic principles of assessment that I have drawn from social research methodology and the writings of various dominated social groups, such as the key principle of

reflexivity. Linking a life map that brings some of these things to life and enables you to analyse and think through what has been happening is a way of getting students to practice their analytical skills in a way as to what has been happening in the case and to hypothesize about what might, what the needs the strengths might be.

In addition the students are also able to access on the University intranet the Procare³ package, which has got lots of information and I make use of the section on assessment.

³For information about *ProCare: Computer assisted learning modules for health care and social work* see <http://www.chst.soton.ac.uk/procare> This is about basic assessment techniques. It covers genograms and interviewing skills and gives students extracts which they can look at.

Process

The session lasts at least for a whole day, and ideally should take longer (it has varied on our course, depending on logistical factors!). There is an introductory lecture setting out the programme for the day, introducing students to the software, going through some of the key issues and giving them lecture handouts. They then have a one and half hour session using my disk. Then we have another two hour session in the afternoon going through the Procare material. They can surf around this quite profitably for a good hour and a half, and students do.

They have a task sheet, in which I ask them about the five principles, and what they can pick up from this case study: what kind of hypotheses can they develop, and what are the issues?

The task sheet is written up on the same day, there and then. I email them the task sheet and some of them have it minimised on screen and when they see something in the case study they will maximise the task sheet and type what they had observed. Other people print it out and write on it.

Part of the task is to email (preferably) or send me the completed task sheet. I get instant feedback and they get instant feedback, also because I reply immediately to students who have emailed me with comments about how they have done the task. I also collate the total response of the group, and email them all with an analysis of it, commenting on how this group performs as compared with previous groups.

Being a social worker in employment involves having to collect and collate and select data and often the data is ensconced in big files. Students can all look at the same thing and, they all pick up different things. One of the things it illustrates, as I say in my introduction, is the variability of interpretation when you have the same information. Certain bits of information you can easily miss on this computerised case study but you can also miss them on files very easily. That is why it is an important exercise to make people aware of that and why I think it is important to have some kind of methodological checklist. Have they actually looked for example, at gender issues in this case? Have they looked at all of them? Have they looked at issues about disabilities in this case? Have you looked at hidden disabilities? They are asked to use the five principles to help them do it in a reasonably systematic way so that they are thinking through all the possible issues that there might be in this case.

Students can access both disks on the university intranet system so those who did not attend on the day may still be able to complete the exercise.

Support

It took 12-18 months to develop the CD-rom. I started off with a drawing of the things I would like to see. Then it had to go through negotiations with someone who could put it on and then he would have to negotiate technical problems and then comes back to me and say we haven't got enough money to do that but we could do this. I would have to redraw things, about 6 or 7 versions. There were quite a lot of hours spent on it. There was some support in the form of teaching relief for writing the book.

Course in action

From the feedback that I have got from students, all of them have been made to think about the basic principles in what they are getting from the case study. I think their response has been good and they have obviously stuck to the task very well. Recently, they were still going strong at the end of the class, and would have liked more time. They also appreciate the collation of feed back that I send back to them. I think that this feedback highlights for them that they only have their own experience to

draw on, and when they see the results and how they have done and how everybody else has done, they realise what they didn't think of when they were going through the case study. With the students I generally get very good responses to this overall approach. They stick to the task, they do it very seriously, it makes them think about how they make assessments.

When I was teaching Liverpool social workers (1996-2000) the feedback was also very positive. I think that the first time that I put it up it was a bit mixed because there were inevitably teething problems, technical problems and there was some positive response but also some understandable criticisms. By the time we had run it three or four times we had got the hang of it, and we knew how to handle it. Practising social workers said that they found it very useful, partly because it does mirror what good social work practice is about anyway.

Social work assessment is a form of social research that is under-regarded, under-theorized and that is part of what my book is about - to justify what good social workers are already doing, not telling them how to do it but drawing on those factors which they take into account as well as on research methodology which (critically) supports their approach.

Other e-learning possibilities for learning and teaching about assessment

In the second year in our children and families module the CCIS₄ materials are used and are very good. The system has child protection information, medical information, social research information and I have on numerous occasions used it with the case study in my software, because CCIS can help you look at what are risk factors for this case study. In this case study there is an older sibling that might well be causing problems for the younger daughter, so you can click on 'sibling abuse' and you get some information about it, a brief explanation and references.

I also utilise email for an anti-oppressive practice module where I regularly give an introductory lecture. I then ask students to first of all to go away either in very small groups or by themselves, do an exercise that I set them which requires them to answer to give me some understanding of what they make of the exercise in the light of the information and guidance I've given them in the lecture. Because it is about anti-oppressive values it also generally involves them thinking about themselves and how they personally respond to this issue. It is not something about which they tend to be forthcoming necessarily in a group situation but they are willing to email me back half a page of their own ideas. Quite often I can reply almost immediately to most of the students, and they are usually pleased to get an email back from me. In the afternoon I get them to sit in bigger groups to discuss a related issue and compare notes, what did each other make of this and why, and they finish off with a plenary and I feed back to them what the whole group have been emailing to me, what issues have come up and we can also compare between the groups. So there is a lot of interaction, discussion between themselves and between myself and them.

We have got Blackboard facilities, the virtual teaching environment, here at JMU. There are lots of things you can do with it such as synchronous discussion groups and asynchronous discussion groups. I tried to use a discussion group on the Blackboard system but students didn't like it. They would have to find a computer at 11 o'clock in the morning and log on, and there were never enough computers to go around, so you couldn't guarantee that all the students would even get a computer. Once they got on they were not very keen to reveal their innermost thoughts to the whole class because that is what it means. A synchronous discussion group on Blackboard is actually more public than an in-class discussion, but they were quite happy to email me as an individual with their thoughts. Once they have tested it out with me they are more confident of saying to the other students. The method I use does help to progress the discussion rather a lot in the following group sessions. On delicate issues that they don't want to be embarrassed about I just act in a supportive role as well as a critical role and say: '..well you have a lot to contribute here', and that seems to work well.

But using Blackboard as a virtual classroom came to a bit of a virtual halt because the students didn't like it.

Next steps

I explored various ways of developing the cd-rom and because I wasn't funded to any great extent, I was limited in what I could do. There are all sorts of other things I would love to be able to do, like being able to zoom in on particular items that are on the big life map. For example, if you wanted to know more about what was happening at the point at which a child is referred to hospital, it would be great if you could click on that and go to the consultant's or

⁴ For information about the *Child Care Information System* (CCIS) see <http://ipc.brookes.ac.uk/ccis.htm> the nurse's reports. You could make it much more sophisticated than it currently is, making it much more like a real life case where you are surrounded by all sorts of possibilities and you have to collect information, select what to use and then analyse it.

It is hard to get finance to further develop the software and update it. I can still use it to provide a historical perspective but I would love to integrate the National Assessment Framework and Looked After Children materials into it in a sophisticated way, not as a simple checklist, but to show how it interrelates. This would need money and time to develop further.

It would also be good to be able to develop the current programme in an interprofessional way. I have already deliberately included several different agencies but there was limited time and financial resources to bring out all the possibilities of this medium. Ideally I would like to see it used by different professionals so that social workers could share their understanding of social assessment with others, and be able to access via the same software the perspectives of other professions, (as suggested above, for example, the possibility of accessing reports from other professionals).

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