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# Assessment and Reflexivity in Family Therapy Training.

by

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## ABSTRACT

Educational contexts can be both enriched and impoverished by our relationship with learning and our 'identity stories' as learner's influence how we construct contexts for learning. Keenoy et al (2007 p 2) describe identity as a 'transient bridging concept' between the individual and society which is constructed...through "reflexive processes of naming, labelling, classifying and associating symbolic artefacts and social actors in a dialogical process of social definition and redefinition ...". Can methods of assessment be constructed to afford reflexive, dialogical learning opportunities? This paper outlines the design and methodology of a reflexive framework for the summative assessment of abilities used on the Intermediate Level course at Northumbria University.

## CONTEXT AND SETTING

In the earlier stages of family therapy training, student's stories of themselves as learners can appear as fixed and polarized positions:

Either: *'I need structure...to be told what to do... to be shown how to do it...to understand theory before I can do the practice*

or: *'I need to talk ideas through...to try them out myself...to practice before I can understand theory'*

What educational theories could inform the design of assessment methods to form a bridge connecting fixed 'identity stories' with a 'dialogical process of social definition and re-definition' (Keenoy et al 2007 p2). Kolb's (1984) adult learning model invites distinctions about how adults learn, describing discrete 'styles'. What meanings are 'brought forth' (Huffington and Fischer 1990) through these distinctions? Are learners invited into fixed positions by

and within 'styles'? Does a context of 'assessment' influence connection with linear and structural aspects of Kolb's model and how might other aspects be 'brought forth', which could afford connection with systemic and social constructionist resources?

## **RATIONALE**

How can assessment be both 'summative' and a reflexive, dialogical process? The exercise below was developed to combine both structural and constructionist processes to connect familiar with unfamiliar contexts. The process orients 'self' definitions towards 'relational responsibility' for learning within a collaborative community (Clandinin and Connelly 2000 p177, McNamee and Gergen 1999). The method invites 'relational reflexivity' within a learning context in a similar way that Burnham invites it in a therapeutic context (Burnham 1993, 2005).

## **DESCRIPTION OF ASSESSMENT METHOD**

### **FRAMEWORK**

- The assessment exercise is used twice over the Intermediate Year in the context of fortnightly group sessions.
- The first assessment episode takes place mid-way to evaluate learning up to that point and to plan for the remainder. It is completed in two stages, individually and in pairs (see Episode One).
- The second episode takes place towards the end of the course, reflecting on students 'Journeys' of learning (White 2002). It is done in two stages, individual and group/pairs activity (see Episode Two).

- Comparison Information from both exercises informs a report for the portfolio which includes facilitator and student voices.

## TOOLS

**Self-Rating Scale** invites students to rate their abilities (AFT Blue Book 2006 p8,9) on a scale from one to five as well as record comments.

**Work Based Learning Record** standardizes recording of the required hours of systemic practice. These are completed fortnightly and discussed in groups. Feedback is noted on the record.

## PROCESS

### Episode One - Midway Assessment Exercise

1. Students are invited to pre-review their WBL records and to bring a small selection to share and discuss.
2. In pairs, students share narratives about abilities.
3. Relationally reflexive questions might include the following:
  - I. *Tell a story about your current relationship with these abilities*
  - II. *How is this similar or different to stories that others' such as managers, clients, and colleagues might tell or have told about your relationship with these abilities?*
  - III. *How would you like to influence or coordinate these stories?*
  - IV. *How might you go about maintaining or repositioning yourself in relation to stories about your abilities within this/other learning communities?*
  - V. *How can we in this learning community contribute to this storying about your abilities?*
4. The Scale is completed individually and includes feedback
5. Students identify specific abilities as a future focus course and record these on the Scale.
6. Responses to 3.V are shared in the whole group and inform planning for the remainder of the course.

## **Episode Two – Final Assessment Exercise**

1. Students are invited to pre-review their Mid-Way exercise and WBL records.
2. Students are invited to share narratives about abilities, focusing on comparison of stories over time. This exercise may be undertaken in pairs as in Episode One.
3. Alternatively it may be a whole group exercise. In this instance, the facilitator invited a group 'sculpt' exploring students' relationships with their learning abilities over time from beginning of the course (THEN) at the end (NOW) and in the future (WHEN). At each stage, relational reflexivity is invited through questions (See 3.1-3.V)
7. The Scale is completed individually and includes feedback
8. The student's two self-rating scales are given for the facilitator as a resource to assess student's learning. The report is shared with students who add their own reflexive comments and the whole document is included in the portfolio.

## **EVALUATION OF THE EXERCISE**

In this exercise I have combined both structural and social constructionist practices as a 'bridging concept' (Keenoy et al 2007 p2) towards more constructionist positioning when assessing learning. In my experience of it, this process generated 'narrative flow' in the 're-definition' of learning identities for students. This resonates with students' evaluations as follows:

*"Assessment did not seem different or distinct but as connected to an organic whole and to be organic in that learning emerged from the assessment process itself. The assessment conversations were at the same time both part of developing a story about abilities and also one of the abilities which were being developed. We could not have become as reflexive, without the opportunities for reflection on stories about 'self' in multiple contexts."*

*"The assessment was like ivy or bark around a tree which creates its own environment for growth, life and the group".*

*"My assessment of myself and my abilities differed from that of my partner and this difference in voice helped me to tell a different story to myself than the one I had which undervalued my abilities."*

## **SUMMARY**

This exercise illustrates an example of how summative assessment strategies can be designed to reflect a social constructionist approach to learning. I have described an assessment framework which forms a bridge between structural and constructionist processes and allows 'identity stories' to emerge within a 'dialogical process of social definition and re-definition' (Keenoy et al 2007 p2). It demonstrates that movement towards more constructionist positioning in the summative assessment of learning can be formative for all participants in a way which extends learning.

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