

# METHODS FOR SOCIAL SCIENCES EDUCATION ASSESSMENT: A LITERATURE REVIEW

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## *Abstract*

One of the most important parts of social sciences education is student assessment. It comprises of a majority of time and effort from both the students and teachers in social sciences education. In order to effectively test the learning of vital concepts, and an evidence of reflection and critical analysis, teachers need to continuously review existing assessment methods and techniques. This is done so that students actively acquire the reasoning abilities and skills required for their jobs, either in the industry or academia. Although there is considerable research available on education assessment methods in general, little work is available on actual assessment techniques in the classroom. The aim of this article is to review the literature on assessment techniques and methods in social sciences education, both support and criticism.

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## Introduction

10 Social sciences education in many countries, including Pakistan, requires candidates to work on considerable academic theory, and to apply themselves to fieldwork in social intervention situations. The objective of this rigorous training regimen is to ensure students are well prepared to take on professional responsibilities upon completion of their education. One of the ways to ensure this competency is to evaluate students during their education through specially developed assessments that focus on social sciences. Not only do these assessments test for theoretical knowledge, they also check the ability of students to critically think about a situation, and to demonstrate reasoning ability. Sullivan (1999) expands this list by adding the assessment of the value system of the student. A lot of research has been conducted on assessing the field work of students (Garcia & Floyd, 1999; Risler, 1999; Sharp & Danbury, 1999). Even though examination of theoretical coursework absorbs substantial labors on from educators and the educated, it is rare to find actual research on the evaluation of course based assessment. This is a functional deficiency that needs to be addressed.

## Methodology

An online version of the *Social Services Abstracts* was a handful tool for me through which I searched and examined abstracts of all the past records available published around 1996 to 2010 describing *Social Work* education in order to identify recent literature about methods of assessment in social work. All the related articles were taken into consideration as well as a manual search was carried out of Social work journals and recent monographs I could access online and in libraries to support my point of view.

## Types of Assessment

A graduate social worker possesses numerous competencies or recommendation of knowledge and it is left to the imagination of the reader that how such

knowledge or competencies are to assessed prior to their graduation ( Vourlekis *et al.*, 2001). Though all the course content to be studied by the student and its description as well as all the related learning activities supporting to the course were taken into consideration but no suggested assessment methods of the course were mentioned as such ( Bolzan *et al.*, 2001; Dalton & Wright, 1999). A synopsis of what specific assessment methods found in literature is following as under.

### Class based Assignments

It was purposed for a range of subjects across the social work curriculum that a *cooperative learning strategy* is to be opted in order to enhance the learning capacity of both themselves and others which requires the involvement of the students working together in a group thereby achieving the similar goal. It was also noticed the students achievement level considerably goes up as they work together in a group for an assignment because they have an option from learning from each other prospective as well as it enhances their ability to work in a team. Hence, it may be appropriate for students to be assessed as a group rather than individually (Steiner *et al.*, 1999), however there is also a case that doesn't support or permit students to take part in any in-class assessments in consistent to the principals of anti- oppressive practice (Valentine & Freeman, 2000). Hence, it is certainly recommended that assessing a student individually is a possible threat to the development of empowering methods of education which requires group learning (Taylor, 1996).

### Critical Incident Analysis

Critical incident analysis is found to be quite successful and effective for students to exhibit their learning in filed placements (Davies & Kinloch, 2000) which is also a handful tool for the students to apply in the class based projects related to the curriculum. For suppose if a student is given an assignment of one American course in cross cultural social work to interview and write their findings on a student from different race or culture. This experience allows the interviewer to report findings of the significant and critical events taking place in other student's life

influencing ethno racial identity. Now the student is taking an insight of the important events of other student's life which leads to broaden their ability to understand and learn from the life experiences of others. This method of assessment has earned a great deal of appreciation and positive feedback from participant students and reports from student assignments are provided by author (Montalvo, 1999) for the reader's imagination.

### Essays

Essay is a medium which is commonly and extensively used to assess the social work students but on the contrary it is suggested that it can be a challenging form of assessment by American study (Gibelman *et al.*, 1999). In order to analyse the situation author purchased two papers, one of them was 'off the shelf' and other was 'custom written' as requested online along with the paper written by a real student, on the similar topics as it was set of other students. All the papers were graded by 11 academic social works, blind to fact in which he papers were obtained. Paper written by the real student obtained the highest marks over all on the other hand genuine paper was graded somewhere 30 to 96. Few markers were of the view that grading the paper is a subjective act therefore they assigned equal marks to all the papers. Given the fact that papers can be obtained or purchased online as well, Gibelman *et al.* (1999) is of the view that methods of assessment should be considered so that this cyber cheating (exams for example) is prevented.

### Examination

Examination is medium which is highly recommended and supported in order to the test the knowledge acquisition of students in subject areas such as psychology (Dillenburger *et al.*, 1997) and research methods (Petracchi & Patchner, 2001). It was suggested that examinations should be taken multiple times during a course rather than one-full summative exam at the end of the course and constant feedback should be provided to the student simultaneously for further improvement but only best scores should be included in the final assessment test (Dillenburger *et al.*, 1997).

Another enhanced way of taking examination was proposed; computer based testing, for the benefits of both students and examiner. Computer based testing is more secured, minimizes the time of marking as computer does most of the job in case of MCQs and an efficient way of generating different papers for each student. As per the proposers of this computer based testing (Sieppert & Krysik, 1996) pointed out that this method produces the similar results as the traditional way of testing. This method actually gives an opportunity to the student to have a quicker feedback on the count of each correct answer at the same time provides an option to keep improving their scores till the end of exam period and above all a student can participate in exam for a time which is most suitable for them.

In order to take students' point of view on this computer based method, a class of 41 social work students were taken into consideration. Majority of the students agreed to the fact that this method amply assessed their knowledge of research methods and their knowledge of required readings. On the other hand very few of the students considered that this method appropriately assessed their problem solving skills. All the students were evenly divided whether they supported the computer based testing method in other areas of their curriculum (Sieppert & Krysik, 1996).

There are certain pros and cons involved whenever a new method is adapted. Where computer based testing is considered highly advanced and efficient way of testing there were some issues which required immediate attention. Computer based testing is generally an expensive way of conducting exams rather than traditional way from construction to conducting.

For a construction of a paper it requires to have an access for appropriate software and hardware which may be an expensive tool then that of paper and pencil. All examiners should be computer literate enough to construct a paper adequately. Access to software and hardware for a student is another expensive mean as all the students have to take exams electronically. Not

to forget the fact that computer may crash midway or student may have to suffer a long response time from computer (*Sieppert & Krysik, 1996*).

Among the two types of exams in social science education, practical exams are generally used to assess field work skills and theoretical (traditional) exams are generally used to examine knowledge. Medical students are often trained for patient diagnosis using actors. This kind of practice should also be used in the case of social work students, who would then be able to effectively learn what it is like to talk to rural populations. According to Petracchi (1999), this kind of practice has yielded better results in learning. Naturally some funding will be required for this endeavour. Black and Whelley (1999) discovered that is a gap between practical and theoretical skills acquired by American students in social sciences education, and this leads to underperformance in the field.

### Journal

According to Razack (1999) and Harris (1997) journals are considered anti-discriminatory practice and cultural diversity respectively. Journals are taken as form of teaching method in which students are given a chance to voice out their feelings about culture, ethnic and racial difference though they may be in conflict with contemporary social work values or may not be politely correct and the best part is that students are not penalized for such conflicts during their exams.

Students are given assignments in groups after the class session to write a journal entry in which they can voice out their feelings related to course outline as well as their group dynamics and readings. Students are often required to present their journal entries in form of paper at the end of the course. This kind of practice enhances teaching methods as well as provides learning activities to the students.

No evaluation of the assessment method is provided (*Marotta et al., 2000*) though others have suggested that students may be expected to present the extract of the journals as an assessment (*Harris, 1997; Razack, 1999*).

### Portfolio

Portfolios is another medium of assessment which may require group portfolio or an individual portfolio to document students' developing knowledge and competence over the subject matter (*Marotta et al., 2000*) and community organizing (*Gutierrez & Alvarez, 2000*). These kinds of assessments are designed to judge student's strengths, opportunities, obstacles and challenges in the production of the handout which is shared with the whole class. This is an impressive form of assignment showing the how different learning levels are required to study cultural competence (*Gutierrez & Alvarez, 2000*). Obviously, not all the students come with an experience of developing a portfolio therefore they require some guidelines which is another method of learning rather than just another assignment for students (*Taylor et al., 1999*). This medium is not that easy as it may seem. Low reliability and commitment level has been noticed amongst various students which is somewhat problematic (*Black, 1993, in Risler, 1999*) which is mainly due to the unclear guidelines for the students who have no experience in developing their portfolios (*Edwards & Kinsey, 1999*).

### Presentation

The talent to present one's point of view or an argument to experts (*Butler & Coleman, 1997*) or discuss ideas in seminar or forum (*Crisp, 1999*) is another form of assessment of social work students. They are often required to present orally rather than producing a written document which includes field trips, power point presentation and community simulations (*Gutierrez & Alvarez, 2000*).

### Proposal

Writing proposals is another medium of assessment for research methods (Crisp, 1999; Walsh, 1998) and social work practice units (*Hollister & McGee, 2000; Moxley & Thrasher, 1996*). This form of assessment actually enables social work students to demonstrate their range of skills and theoretical knowledge in writings which they may have to undertake after the completion of their graduation. A constructive feedback can help to increase students' understanding and ability to plan and write grant applications in future (*Moxley & Thrasher, 1996*).

### Reports of undertaken

Social work students are required to conduct research and practice simultaneously with their field work and write a report on it. However an exception has been made for those students to write an alternative report where it was found impossible to carry out research with in their agency (Walsh, 1998). Writing a report on their own learning experiences enables the students to explore issues of evaluation from both point of views as a researcher and researched (*Petracchi & Patchner, 2001*).

### Self-assessment

Self assessment is another strategic mean of enhancing the learning procedure of social work students as well as their critical thinking (Baldwin, 2000; Burgess et al., 1999; Gutierrez & Alvarez, 2000). This process actually focuses on students' capacities to assess their own work and to make judgements about their learning. This process further creates a balance of power between students and faculty, lifelong learning and enables students to take responsibility for evaluating their own learning (Burgess et al., 1999). Self-assessments engage students completing structured instruments (Gutierrez & Alvarez, 2000), developing their own self-assessment exercises such as reflective diaries or learning logs (Burgess et al., 1999)

Students are often given blank videotapes and interview guidelines and are instructed to discuss their opinions about a certain subject such as racism or oppression at the beginning of a course. These tapes are showed again at the end of their semester and students are required to write down their change in thoughts and submit these as self-assessment exercises. Self assessment is mostly used as a learning tool rather than an examining device. Crisp et. al. (2002) conducted research on three sites in the United Kingdom, and discovered self assessment as an excellent tool for evaluation.

It is necessary for evaluators to be trained properly and at the same time it is also very important the number of self assessment assignment should be to minimum to the extent that it may not result in any

kind of tiring experience for the students (Burgess et al., 1999). Moreover it is imperative that all the students engaged in self assessment should be co-operated fully as they may not be able to provide justice to the procedure fully (Baldwin, 2000; Waldman et al., 1999).

### Standardised instruments

In order to enhance the critical thinking skills, series of standardised instruments are to be administrative to all social work students at the beginning and end of the each course. However these instruments may very due to the traditional form of assessment and may not be in full support to few students because of their gender and social and cultural background (Plath et al., 1999). So far most of the assessments methods were concerning the development and learning of social work students however it is suggested that at the beginning and end of each course self-efficacy measure of the educator is imperative to test the teaching impact on the class. It is more likely that students with high self efficacy may carry out research after graduation therefore it is necessary that use of brief nine item instruments are introduced which measures research efficacy.

### Discussion and Conclusions

Hence, it is observed that methods of assessing social work students are much similar to any other humanities subject such as English or Sociology covering the almost same assessment methods identified as examinations, essays, project work, portfolio, oral assessment, work and skill based learning, self or peer assessment. Yet it is difficult to claim that this effort sheds light on all the methods of assessment currently being used for social work students. This raises a number of questions as well that may be social work mentors are least interested in publishing the all the methods of assessment being used then their other aspects of work, preferring to only publish those they believe to be innovative. It may also me possible that institutions rules make it impossible for them to implement or bring about new ideas or rules yet they have sufficient freedom around the ways they teach in their classrooms (Burgess et al., 1999). There lies



also a possibility that teachers or mentors are not that interested how students are being assessed rather they believe in developing optimal teaching (Cree & Davidson, 2000).

It is unfortunate that few researchers have worked on evaluation of assessment techniques (Desai, 2000; Hollister & McGee, 2000; Marotta *et al.*, 2000). Instead of just determining the evaluation of learning of skills, research must also be conducted on the effectiveness of assessment techniques to determine which student has learnt more than the other (Visvesvaran, 2000). Although assessments are evaluated by students as well (Crisp, 1999; Montalvo, 1999), it is rare for the evaluation to elicit learning objectives and their achievement. Hollister & McGee (2000) say that even though students are unwilling or unable to evaluate the effectiveness of assessments in terms of learning ability, this method is useful because it goes beyond simply evaluating teaching methods. It is therefore reasonable to say that much work needs to be done in this regard.

Furthermore, it must be understood that although assessments can be made as difficult as the assessor wants, they must be normalized to the level of study being undertaken, and the skill of students (Burgess *et al.*, 1999). Also, human error on the side of the evaluator must also be kept in mind when making assessments, in order to make the process more realistic. Many researchers have based their study on small classes, of less than 30 students (Butler & Coleman, 1997; Gutierrez & Alvarez, 2000; Marotta *et al.*, 2000). This is also not always the case, and must be kept in mind when basing assessment techniques on those of other educators.

It need also be kept in mind that certain students may have special needs (such as hearing or visual impairment), and these needs must be kept in mind while designing and implementing assessments. Perhaps the result needs to be re-evaluated for special needs students, even though the test designed for them is the same as for others.

As social sciences education is widespread in Pakistan, special attention must be given to proper assessment techniques. Whichever methods are chosen for testing, the level of students, the nature of knowledge imparted and other factors must be kept in mind. If this is done, the assessment method will no longer remain a testing tool, but will add to the knowledge gained by the student as well.

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