

Failing to fail students in the caring professions: Is the assessment process failing the professions?

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Summary: This article represents a personal view of the phenomenon of professionals 'failing to fail' students of questionable competence. It is mainly drawn from the author's experience first as a practice teacher, then as a lecturer and manager of a social work qualifying programme and recently as tutor of a programme preparing social workers and others to become practice teachers and assessors. The article first examines aspects of the process of practice assessment and then argues that the turnover amongst those given this responsibility means that the expertise appropriate to undertaking such a complex task is difficult to accumulate. It then offers some remedies that focus more on organisational responses than simply on the individual professionals who take on this essential responsibility.

Much of the recent concern about social work practice teaching and assessing has focussed on the question of quantity. Getting enough practice learning opportunities is a perennial problem in itself- but this article addresses an issue of quality, namely ensuring that both pass and fail decisions are made with confidence.

As the author's background is social work in England, the article will use social work terminology and refer to social work and other documents from the English context, but he hopes that readers from other professions and countries will find the debate useful.

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Introduction

In the UK, social work follows a model of professional learning where academic study is combined with periods of practice learning and the award of a professionally accredited higher education qualification effectively facilitates admission to the profession. (A contrasting example is the legal profession where universities offer academic degrees and the profession controls the processes leading to professional competence.) There is an increasingly overt emphasis on the value of practice learning as the key to raising the status of the social work profession. An example of this comes from Stephen Ladyman, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Community talking about the new social work degree introduced in 2003:

The quantity and quality of practice learning opportunities available to students will be critical in achieving a better trained workforce.' (Ladyman, 2004)

One of the initiatives to achieve this critical outcome was the establishment of the Practice Learning Taskforce, whose Annual Report 2004/5 predicted 'an increase in demand for practice learning of between 39-118%' (cited in Doel, 2006, p.7). Inevitably this is leading to the involvement of many new people in practice learning to meet this increase in quantity. This article, however, addresses an issue of quality important to the overall objective of enhancing social work's professional status.

It is not difficult to hear anecdotal evidence from human service professionals of students not deemed competent in practice still gaining professional qualifications. A detailed study undertaken on behalf of the Nursing and Midwifery Council (Duffy, 2003) produced a useful analysis of this phenomenon, much of which, I believe, could be replicated by a study of social work practice learning. Duffy cites Watson and Harris (1999) reporting that 46% of nurse mentors agreed with the suggestion that some students passed placements despite unsatisfactory performance.

One of the issues that may strike the reader of Duffy's report is the number and complexity of the factors which lead to situations of failing to fail. She did achieve a broad categorisation of reasons as follows (2003, p.47)

- *Leaving it too late* covers a number of process issues
- *Personal consequences* mainly refers to negative impact on the student
- *Facing personal challenges* refers to the negative impact on the mentor
- *Experience and confidence* relates to the uncertainty about standards more common among inexperienced mentors.

A similar picture is reported by Furness and Gilligan (2004) in respect of assessments of social work students. Yet these failures to fail are being admitted to by experienced, competent professionals who spend their working lives making decisions affecting the health and welfare of many thousands of people. In comparison, it is rare to find academics declaring, for example, 'that failing a student was a difficult thing to do and that personal, emotional as well as practical issues influenced the outcome of their judgements' (Duffy, 2003, p.5).

I would suggest that an additional dimension in the failing to fail phenomenon, certainly for social work, is the question of resources. In their article drawing on 'our own direct experience and on discussions between over 70 practice teachers, tutors and placement co-ordinators' Furness and Gilligan (2004. p. 465) point to the current context of inadequate resources and insufficient recognition for the task of teaching and assessing social work students. The resource argument is often debated but progress is rare and inadequate. Employers find themselves in a vicious circle of a shortfall of social workers to do the social work task (see, for example, Parker & Whitfield, 2006), making it constantly difficult to release them to teach and assess the practice of the growing number of students recruited to courses to address that same shortfall.

As each social work student must have experience in at least two practice settings, the need for an increased quantity of practice learning opportunities has led to the involvement of many other professionals who also need opportunities to understand the social work role for which students are preparing. It is notable that the minimum criteria to assess a social work student do not stipulate any training (GSCC, 2002a), and, although it is usual to offer training, it varies from two days upwards. It is also significant that the GSCC (2002a, p.19) requires

that those responsible for the *final* [my emphasis] assessment that a student

is qualified to practice include experienced social workers and professional educators.

On the basis of these requirements, students can progress a considerable way through their 200 days of practice learning without being assessed by a qualified and experienced social worker.

The present article is modest in its aspirations and does not make unrealistic claims for a large switch of resources to practice teaching. Some of what is said is based on my perceptions rather than researched evidence, for as Duffy (2003, p.5) says, 'the area of failing students ... has received very little attention'. However it is hoped that the article may prompt worthwhile local debates on the practice assessment processes prevailing on social work and similar courses and may result in research in social work education of a similar nature to Duffy's.

For the conference talk which preceded the article I was invited to blame either practice or the universities for the 'failure to fail'. I considered this suggestion unproductive, but it triggered a comparison of aspects of practice and academic assessment which might prove helpful as many practice assessors will not have direct experience of academic assessment and vice versa. As I believe a fuller mutual appreciation of the issues might generate some solutions, the comparison is reproduced here. The intention is to promote co-operation, not to compete for who faces the greater challenge, and to focus the perceptions of practitioners and academics alike on the nature of the task of practice assessment compared to academic assessment in an organisational context. A shared perception may enable both groups to work more pro-actively to enhance both the quantity and effectiveness of resources devoted to practice assessment and minimise obstacles to reaching the right assessment decision. The analysis inevitably generalises about both practice and academic processes, and while I recognise there will be differing practices in some contexts, I believe the generalities merit consideration.

The assessment process

Seven aspects of the assessment process are considered:

- The focus of assessment
- The methods of assessment
- Moderation of assessment
- Re-assessment following failure
- Assessment regulations
- Relationships with the assessed
- The personnel involved

The focus of assessment

<i>Academic focus</i>	<i>Practice focus</i>
‘The measure of knowledge, understanding and skills.’ (QAA, 2006, para.12)	‘The measure of knowledge, skills and <i>behaviour</i> .’ (Carpenter, 2004)
Single subject modules as building blocks.	Many or all standards in each practice learning opportunity.

The first point of comparison is the focus of assessment. The first key difference is that in practice there is a need to assess behaviour, rarely a focus of academic assessment. Note that Carpenter differentiates between skills and behaviour. I would interpret behaviour as both the ethical dimension of a student’s practice and the aggregation of skills into methods of working: how they are doing the job. The second key difference is that this behaviour is expressed in terms of 21 units clustered in six key roles. (TOPSS, 2002) plus a Code of Practice (GSCC, 2002b) to which social work students should adhere once registered as students with the GSCC (General Social Care Council). Assessment in a social work placement is against a significant number, if not all 21, of these. Given that approved behaviour among human service professionals is inherently varied, deciding when a student’s behaviour is so unacceptable or short of competence to be classed as failing rather than a learning need involves a complex judgement. In comparison a

lecturer is usually focussing on a limited number of learning outcomes from a defined component of the academic curriculum (i.e a module) as demonstrated in one or more delineated assessment tasks (QAA, 2006, para.13).

The methods of assessment

<i>Academic focus</i>	<i>Practice focus</i>
Standardised learning opportunities	Learning opportunities individualised and interpreted
Tasks often indicative rather than exhaustive.	Tasks potentially very wide (wider than reflected in portfolios)
Standardised assessment tasks.	Standardised requirements open to interpretation.
Student authored material	Combination of material from student and others

To develop the last point further, the next comparison focuses on the impact of the individuality and complexity of the methods of assessment in the practice setting. The key roles and Code of Practice are inevitably written in such a way that both the learning opportunities and the assessment which follows need interpreting in each separate specific practice context. The range of activities undertaken by the student is potentially very wide (much more so than requires evidencing in the typical practice assessment portfolio) and the material which is required for the typical portfolio is a combination of material created by the student and material from others – the practice assessor, her colleagues, people from other professions and service users. In comparison, an academic module usually offers standardised learning opportunities (lectures, seminars, guided study etc), standardised assessment tasks which are indicative of learning achieved and almost all material assessed is student authored.

Moderation of assessment: Checking the evidence

<i>Academic focus</i>	<i>Practice focus</i>
Assessment material about knowledge, understanding (and some skills) is often fixed and open to review	Assessment material about skills and behaviour is mainly based on transitory events. Only the records of these events are open to review.

Considerable emphasis is placed on the quality assurance of academic assessment achieved by both internal and external moderation. Internal and external moderators can see the original or a copy of a student's written material along with the first marker's comments to ensure adherence to standards. Much of the most valuable evidence of behaviour and performance in practice is transitory, and once observed, can only be recorded in the account of one or more of the parties involved. Permanent, first-hand evidence such as video- and audio-recording remains unpopular with assessors, and even if popularised, could only record what many assessors regard as 'set piece' practice. Much valuable evidence of both competent and incompetent practice is seen and absorbed, but may only be patchily recalled if needed, and challenged for this reason by a student fighting to establish their competence. Therefore it is not easy for moderation processes to verify original evidence and be sure of the standards used by practice assessors to interpret what they see.

Re-assessment following failure

<i>Academic focus</i>	<i>Practice focus</i>
Re-assessment usually involves the resubmission of the original assessment tasks or something similar, or re-attendance at the next delivery of the module, either option having negligible resource implications	Re-assessment of practice (beyond remedying portfolio deficits, which is rarely grounds for failure) usually involves extending a placement or locating an extra one with significant resource implications

In the event of student failure in an academic module, the resource

implications for the course and the university are usually minimal – perhaps a little extra tutorial time, but the resource implications for practice failure are potentially considerable in the context of the chronic scarcity of placements repeatedly cited around the country. In fact it is not unknown for university regulations to be much more restrictive about ‘re-sit’ opportunities for practice as opposed to academic modules (for example at one university local to the author, final year academic modules can be reassessed or studied again as of right, but for the final placement this right does not exist and further assessment opportunities can only be agreed by the Programme Assessment Board under exceptional circumstances).

Assessment regulations: ‘The rules of engagement’

<i>Academic focus</i>	<i>Practice focus</i>
Academic regulations are complex, but familiarity comes with time to HEI staff.	Learning a particular HEI’s regulations in detail is not a priority task.
Interpretations of regulations are transmitted through the informal network.	Interpretation of HEI regulations is more difficult to communicate

Many practice assessors accept students from more than one university or other Higher Education Institution (HEI), or the period between accepting students is such that if they had committed to memory some of the regulations, they may have forgotten them next time around. Most university courses will supply a handbook either with the regulations or a guide to them, but in the midst of the other concerns of a practice assessor, especially one with a struggling student, they may be slow to turn to the procedures. In addition, most practice assessors, unless they have sustained involvement with the university will not have been party to any prior discussion of the interpretation of those regulations. In contrast, over time, academics acquire increased understanding of the university regulations they use most, and their interpretation, and can anticipate responses to students in difficulties (just as practitioners become familiar with law and procedure). Duffy (2003, p.28) reported that ‘not following procedure is a major factor as to why some students are passing practice placements without having demonstrated sufficient competence’.

Relationships with the assessed

<i>Academic focus</i>	<i>Practice focus</i>
Academic assessors are likely to have little or no personal relationship with the student. Assessable work may be anonymised	Practice assessors have a close personal relationship with the student, have personally managed the student's learning and accountability

Personal relationships between students and academic lecturers are of variable intensity depending on a number of factors such as how many modules lecturer and student are jointly engaged in, whether the lecturer is personal tutor to a particular student, and how much a particular student engages with a particular lecturer. It is possible that a lecturer marking a student's work cannot even recall a face to put to a name, or anonymisation of work masks the identity of even a lecturer's personal tutees. In contrast a practice assessor usually takes the major responsibility for organising the learning opportunities which precede student practice assessment, is likely to have come to know a great deal about the student as a person and provided emotional as well as practical support through the challenges of learning to practise social work. Confronting a student with a fail recommendation after such an experience can be a daunting prospect.

The personnel involved

<i>Academic focus</i>	<i>Practice focus</i>
Comparatively constant staff group	Constantly changing personnel
Teach students in groups	Most take one student at a time
Usually in same or connected locations	Scattered locations limited networking.
Primary role is education	Primary role is Practice

It is commonly recognised that the turnover in practice assessors is considerable. People move to other jobs where taking students is not

feasible, or simply do not continue offering placements for a number of reasons (see, for example, Furness and Gilligan, 2004, p.467; Kearney, 2003, p.4). The most common model of practice assessing is to have one student at a time, and perhaps not have another for a year at least. Practice assessors are scattered across a range of organisations in social work and social care. The primary role of most practice assessors is social work or care work and not practice education. These factors militate against the accumulation of expertise and confidence in the roles of teaching and assessment, and it is in the difficult area of marginal and failing students that expertise and confidence is most needed. In contrast, lecturers are in the business of education – of teaching and assessing, of passing and failing. Newcomers receive induction and support and are assimilated into the academic culture. Social work teaching teams are often comparatively small and often located in the same building, accelerating the assimilation of the newcomer. Expertise and confidence in the key educational tasks grows at the rate one expects of anyone in their primary occupational role.

Two possible remedies

Arising from the above analysis, I would like to offer two possible remedies, the first focussing on practice learning providers and the second on HEIs' strategy for practice assessment. The GSCC states that '(t)he degree in social work prepares students for employment as professionally qualified social workers' and consequently the universities are required both to award the degree and to 'secure, approve, allocate and audit appropriate practice learning opportunities'(GSCC, 2002a). For this reason, HEIs should concern themselves with both remedies.

Promoting and developing a strong community of practice.

The last aspect of the analysis (the personnel involved) highlighted the fragmentation of the practice assessing community. Wenger's (1998) concept of 'communities of practice' offers a useful vehicle for analysing the situation and offering one pragmatic remedy. He presents a social theory of learning that focuses on learning as social participation, and

suggests we all belong to several socially participating groups, which is what he calls communities of practice. (Practice here effectively means 'activity' rather than, say, social work practice or educational practice.) Practice, he argues, defines a community through three dimensions: mutual engagement, a joint enterprise and a shared repertoire (Wenger, 1998, p.152). These dimensions are summarised in the figure below. It is in our communities of practice that a new professional, for example, a social worker or nurse extends, reinforces and refines the learning gained when qualifying. 'When we are with a community of practice of which we are a full member we are in familiar territory' (p.152). Wenger suggests that 'the boundaries of our communities manifest as a lack of competence' (p.153).

Dimensions of a community of practice, after Wenger (1998)

Mutual engagement

In a community of practice we learn:

- How to engage, as practice teachers/assessors with other people.
 - How to interact with others and work together.
 - What part we can play within this community.
 - What identity we gain through being part of this community.
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Joint enterprise

- Shared perspectives generate certain interpretations, actions and responses.
 - This sense of joint enterprise can lead us to value certain experiences, and make certain choices.
 - A shared identity tends to generate shared perspectives.
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Shared repertoire

- Sustained engagement in an activity facilitates the ability to interpret and use a wider repertoire.
 - The repertoire is built from the history of actions, the language and the concepts we absorb and contribute to.
 - The repertoire becomes more personalised through experience
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If we need social workers to feel competent in their assessments of students and overcome the problems identified by Duffy (2003) and summarised earlier, we need to enable them to be sufficiently and consistently engaged in learning and assessment issues to form part

of a community of practice. This will consolidate their learning and also enable them to contribute to their colleagues' development in this area of activity. Wenger presents the 'community of practice' as a naturally occurring social phenomenon, but I would suggest that its benefits are such that we might consider strategies to help foster their development.

Few organisations have developed retention strategies for practice teachers (Lindsay & Walton, 2000), and often staff take what expertise they have gained into parallel roles of staff supervision and management or some move into academia (for example, Kearney, 2003; Lindsay & Tompsett, 1998). While this may benefit social work generally, it hinders the development of high levels of expertise in practice learning. Doel (2006) reports characteristics of English local authorities demonstrating success in practice learning and it is easy to see how some of these characteristics would foster 'communities of practice': They have champions of practice learning; they embed the function in job roles; they provide meaningful incentives and a programme of training and support; they have strong partnerships with HEI's (who of course have a parallel academic community of practice). Parker and Whitfield (2006) encourage others to follow this successful strategy.

Some organisations that provide large numbers of good quality student placements, such as those surveyed by Doel (op cit.) create combined posts, perhaps half practitioner, half practice teacher and in others, full-time practice teacher posts exist. Such postholders can provide a centre to Wenger's 'community', but we need to keep other staff involved frequently enough to give to and take from the 'community'. This means organisations, developing strategies to keep practitioners who start taking students involved over a longer period of time. It helps further if the larger organisations can help smaller ones in the locality by including them in their development or foster a similar community-building strategy. The HEIs too can negotiate a contributory role (a factor already identified in successful local authorities).

A critical review by universities of their management of practice assessment

The second remedy to consider relates to the experience of practitioners who recommend that a student fails a practice module. Many practitioners perceive that a recommendation to fail a student will trigger a reaction much more demanding of them than the reaction to a lecturer failing an assignment for an academic module. They anticipate extra demands on their time (which may already have been stretched by protecting the service users' and agency's interests in the context of a student struggling with competence), and scrutiny of the quality of the learning opportunities they provided. Duffy (2003) reported experiences of this nature. In contrast, a modest number of fails in an academic module assignment is seen as routine and rarely triggers any scrutiny beyond standard moderation processes. In addition, practice assessors are often unsure of the university's response, which often comes initially via the student's personal tutor. The personal tutor in fact may see themselves as having a variety of agendas, including maximising the university pass rate and advocating on behalf of the student. While tutors would wish to see themselves as allied with practice assessors in safeguarding professional standards, they may not be perceived as helping practice assessors with the technically and emotionally demanding task of seeing through a fail recommendation. Undoubtedly there will be variation between universities in how far they have developed practice assessment strategies which take account of the way practice assessment processes differ from academic assessment, but I would invite all universities to ask themselves some questions about their strategy on practice assessment:

- Do we attach the same level of importance to the assessment of practice as to academic assessment?
- Do we ensure that we apply the same level of quality assurance to practice assessment as we do to academic assessment?
- Do we ensure that practice assessors have full and timely information about factors affecting a student's likely performance, e.g. needs arising from a disability or concerns raised by a previous practice assessor?
- Do we have regulations and procedures that make it more difficult for re-assessment in practice compared to academic re-assessment?

- Do we communicate our regulations and procedures on failing students as effectively as possible so that practitioners can rapidly understand what is entailed?
- Do we ensure that a practice assessor working with a struggling student has access to experienced consultancy acquainted with the particular university's processes from someone who is not also expected to advocate for the student?
- Do we have a strategy for advocating that a practice assessor working with a struggling student is given extra time to meet the demands of concluding that experience in as positive a way as possible for all concerned?
- Do we recognise the impact on a practice assessor of questioning the quality of a placement after already approving its use by placing a student there?

Conclusion

At the beginning of this article I argued that the issue, failing to fail, was important to the quality of enhancing professional status. It is also important at a much more local and personal level: how incompetent professionals impact on their organisations, on their close working colleagues, and most importantly on the public, the users of their services. Duffy's very illuminating research rightly attracted some interest from the professional and general press (see NMC, 2004; BBC, 2004; Guardian Unlimited, 2004). Sadly the emphasis the press chose was to say to nurses 'must try harder'. The press personalised a difficulty which, I argue, should be analysed systemically. The professions need to validate the importance of the task they entrust to those who teach and assess the next generation of practitioners and build expertise. The universities need to be proactive in supporting that strategy so that they have confidence in the practice assessment recommendations they receive. They need too, to ensure that the process for handling student failure in practice recognises the challenges of the task and that there is a reliable strategy to support practice assessors to achieve the right outcome for the profession. I hope that the issues addressed will stimulate debate and act as a trigger for further research on the topic.

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