

Assessing students' personal and professional development using portfolios and interviews

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Background and Purpose Medical schools are placing more emphasis on students' personal and professional development (PPD) and are seeking ways of assessing student progress towards meeting outcome goals in relation to professionalism. The Faculty of Medicine at the University of Sydney sought an assessment method that would demonstrate the value of reflection in attaining PPD, provide feedback and encourage students to take responsibility for setting and achieving high standards of performance.

Methods The instruments used to assess Year 1 students in PPD are a portfolio and interview. This assessment format encourages students to explore ideas and values that are important to them and relevant to the PPD theme. A confidential interview, based on the PPD goals, is held with a faculty member who has read the student's portfolio.

Results In 1997/98, 96% of students agreed that they had engaged in useful reflection on their approach to the course and 91% agreed that the experience was worthwhile. A further 76% of students agreed that they

could see opportunities to modify their approach in some ways as result of this exercise.

Conclusion Sustained PPD is essential in equipping doctors for the varied stresses of careers in medicine. Despite, or perhaps because of, the latitude in the Year 1 assessment, both students and faculty members found the process of value. This form of assessment acknowledges that the most valid assessment formats cannot always be made reliable and that in some parts of the curriculum it is more important to demonstrate trust in students' own motivation to become competent and mindful practitioners. The fact that the portfolio and interview are the only summative assessments in the first year emphasises the importance that the Faculty places on PPD.

Keywords *professional competence; educational measurement; education, medical/*standards; interviews/methods; Australia.

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Introduction

The Medical Programme at the University of Sydney is a 4-year graduate entry programme. Students obtain early clinical experience in a programme characterised by strong horizontal and vertical integration, a focus on developing skills in clinical reasoning and assessments that emphasise feedback and self-evaluation.

Four themes extend throughout the 4 years of the programme. These are labelled Basic and Clinical Sciences, Patient and Doctor, Community and Doctor, and Personal and Professional Development (PPD).

The specific goals of the PPD theme are to produce medical graduates with:

- commitment to compassionate, ethical professional behaviour;
- the ability to work co-operatively as a member of a team, accepting and providing leadership as appropriate;
- recognition of the inevitability of decision making in circumstances of uncertainty and the capacity to make rational and sensitive decisions based on the best available evidence;
- the ability to recognise their own personal physical and emotional needs and responses to stress, and openness to assistance in time of need;
- ongoing commitment to the advancement of learning within a community of medical scholars, and
- skills in the recording, organisation and management of information, including the use of appropriate information technology.

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Key learning points

The capacity to understand and monitor one's own personal and professional development is central to mindful practice.

A PPD curriculum addresses complex areas and assessment poses challenges in constructing instruments that are both valid and reliable.

At the University of Sydney, we trialled an assessment with high face validity in preference to an assessment with high reliability.

Students respond to opportunities to explore and express their own personal and professional concerns in an atmosphere of confidentiality and trust.

The portfolio benefits participating faculty by promoting a deeper understanding of students' PPD.

Graduate entry students commence studies in medicine with a range of first degrees, but approximately half have a degree in biomedical sciences. This gives them a substantial early advantage over students who enter with a non-biomedical degree such as in arts or law. We want to ensure that there is adequate time for all students to acquire knowledge and understanding of key biomedical concepts prior to the first assessments of biomedical knowledge, and so these assessments are delayed until the end of Year 2. In Year 1, assessments of knowledge and reasoning in the basic and clinical sciences are all formative, providing students with feedback on their progress. However, there is no reason to delay an assessment of students' PPD, and many reasons for introducing it as early as possible.

Because assessment drives learning,^{1,2} we wanted to identify a form of PPD assessment that would encourage student-centred learning as an active process, through which students would develop deep approaches to learning³ and take responsibility for their own progress as they move toward becoming competent and reflective practitioners.⁴ The assessment of students' PPD poses special challenges,⁵⁻⁷ especially if it is to provide intrinsic rewards, rather than relying on extrinsic rewards such as grading and ranking.

We selected a simple portfolio format and tried to avoid imposing 'busy work' or a logbook format that was too convergent and restrictive. We wanted to allow individual students to select and describe the experiences and ideas that were most important to them and that increased their personal insight.

Although portfolios are being used more frequently in undergraduate^{8,9} and postgraduate education,^{10,11} the members of the PPD Theme Committee were uncertain of how students and faculty would react to this form of assessment so early in the course. We agreed that the assessment task should focus on encouraging students to explore aspects of PPD that would foster mindful practice¹² and we recognised the difficulties in developing criteria for grading such diverse documents, or even in defining and describing a 'pass mark' in advance. Nevertheless, we agreed that the goal of fostering students' professionalism was of sufficient importance to justify this type of assessment, with or without highly reliable methods. The assessment is non-graded.

Method

In Year 1 we implement only one summative assessment. Students are asked to prepare a portfolio of approximately 20 pages, based on their approach to satisfying the goals of the PPD theme. Students are encouraged to include any special evidence of progress, such as tutor feedback forms or work undertaken in special study modules, but these extra documents are not required.

We do not ask students to keep a diary or journal unless they wish to do so; rather we ask them to be selective and to describe their development in relation to the goals of the PPD theme. Most students write about their early clinical experiences, about the experience of collaboration and group work, about adapting to a problem-based learning curriculum, and about facing ethical dilemmas. Some students include literary and art works (both their own and others). We provide a non-prescriptive list of prompts, including:

- steps taken to identify and address individual learning needs;
- advantages and disadvantages of working in small groups;
- balancing the demands of study with other commitments;
- reflections on critical incidents;
- notes on ethical dilemmas and evidence of a systematic approach to resolving them;
- descriptions of options (special study modules) undertaken or planned;
- notes on readings in the humanities, social sciences or elsewhere, and
- results of any formative assessments or feedback on performance.

We ask students to engage thoughtfully in reflection and self-evaluation and to discuss these processes in a

confidential interview. During the first few weeks of Year 2, we hold a briefing session, outlining the requirements for the portfolio and interview and encouraging students to ask any questions.

We are aware of differences in students' willingness and capacity for self-disclosure and depth of thought, but such differences are not considered relevant at this stage. The two assessment criteria are whether the student has:

- 1 produced a portfolio that demonstrates a genuine attempt to engage in reflection and self-evaluation, and
- 2 discussed the contents of the portfolio in relation to the aims of the PPD theme.

Students may select a particular faculty member to read their submission and conduct the interview, or they may ask for an interviewer to be allocated at random. Interviewers specify the maximum number of interviews that they can offer (usually around four or five spread over a 2-week period) and receive the portfolios 2 weeks in advance.

Interviewers attend a 2-hour training session that outlines the aims of the PPD theme and the portfolio interviews, provides the list of prompt questions and deals with any questions. Interviewers are not acting as mentors, so a common question is how to assist students who reveal personal problems such as a physical or psychological disorder. (In these circumstances interviewers are encouraged to consult one of the two Year 1 subdeans who provide pastoral support, but only with the student's permission). The main role of the interviewers is to assess the student's ability to demonstrate insight into their own performance as it relates to the programme goals contained in the PPD theme. Having made this assessment, interviewers provide formative feedback and encourage students to identify any plans for action in the light of the topics canvassed. Student and interviewer record the main points that have been covered on a report form, which is submitted to the Student Services Office as evidence that the assessment has been completed. The return rate for the reports has been 100%, as this assessment is compulsory.

After completing their last interview, the interviewers provide brief written comments on their overall impressions of the assessment process on an open response feedback sheet.

Evaluation

In 1997 and 1998 interviewers were asked to give each student a one-page feedback questionnaire to return

anonymously. The questionnaire contained statements contributed by members of the Faculty's PPD Theme Committee; each statement reflected either an aim of the assessment process ('I have gained further insight into my approach to learning') or a Faculty concern ('I find this form of assessment too woolly and undirected'). Students were asked to rate each statement on a 5-point Likert scale.

Results

When the assessments began in 1997 we scheduled 30 minutes per interview, but interviewers reported that this time was insufficient for a deep discussion in a supportive and encouraging atmosphere. The time allocation was therefore increased to 40 minutes from the following year. The whole process often takes about an hour, but this is because many of the interviewers elect to take more than the scheduled 40 minutes.

In 1997 133 Year 1 students participated in the assessment and in 1998 157 Year 1 students took part, giving a total of 290 students. A total of 195 students (67%) returned the anonymous feedback form. There were no significant differences in responses from the two cohorts.

Combining the 'agree' and 'strongly agree' responses (Table 1), 178 students (91%) agreed that the experience had been worthwhile, while four students (2%) disagreed. There was 96% agreement with the statement: 'I engaged in useful reflection about my approach to the course'. Only 7.5% of students agreed with the statement: 'I find this form of assessment too woolly and undirected' and 73% responded that it had stimulated their awareness of their decision processes. In all, 82% of students found that the interview provided a useful outlet for personal feelings and 76% agreed that they could see opportunities to modify their approach in some ways as result of this exercise. A total of 57% stated that the experience had prompted them to consider their styles of coping with stress.

All 31 of the 'foundation' faculty interviewers reported that they had found the experience of reviewing the portfolios and interviewing the students to be a positive one. Despite the latitude in the assessment process, interviewers were able to satisfy themselves that students had met the criteria, namely to produce a portfolio that demonstrated a genuine attempt to engage in reflection and self-evaluation and to discuss the contents of the portfolio in relation to the aims of the PPD theme. No student has failed the assessment.

Despite the time commitment (an average of five portfolios each requiring reading time and an average of 1 hour per completed interview and report), the

Table 1 Student feedback on assessment by portfolio and interview, 1997 and 1998 (*n* = 195) (percentages are in brackets)

	SA	A	Un	D	SD
Overall, this was a worthwhile experience	84 (43)	94 (48)	13 (7)	3 (1.5)	1 (0.5)
I engaged in useful reflection about my approach to the course	91 (47)	96 (49)	7 (3.5)	1 (0.5)	0 (0)
I have gained further insight into my approach to learning	50 (26)	115 (59)	18 (9)	11 (5.5)	1 (0.5)
Through this process I have a clearer understanding of some of my values	30 (15)	111 (57)	34 (17.5)	19 (10)	1 (0.5)
This exercise has contributed to my development in considering ethical issues	30 (15)	87 (44.5)	54 (28)	23 (12)	1 (0.5)
The process should result in changes to my group participation	9 (4.5)	65 (33.5)	63 (32.5)	57 (29)	1 (0.5)
This exercise has contributed to my awareness of the need to support my peers	21 (11)	112 (57.5)	43 (22)	18 (9)	1 (0.5)
This exercise has stimulated awareness of my decision processes	37 (19)	105 (54)	40 (20.5)	12 (6)	1 (0.5)
I can see opportunities to modify my approach in some ways as result of this exercise	36 (18.5)	112 (57.5)	39 (20)	8 (4)	0 (0)
The exercise provided a useful outlet for personal feelings	58 (30)	102 (52)	28 (14.5)	4 (2)	3 (1.5)
As result I shall actively consider my styles of coping with stress	31 (16)	80 (41)	49 (25)	34 (17.5)	1 (0.5)
The interview gave me scope to discuss issues of central importance to me	56 (28)	108 (55.5)	19 (10)	11 (6)	1 (0.5)
The interview provided helpful feedback about aspects of my progress	44 (22.5)	103 (53)	39 (20)	9 (4.5)	0 (0)
I experienced the interview as encouraging and supportive	118 (60.5)	70 (36)	5 (2.5)	0 (0)	2 (1)
I would prefer a conventional written examination	5 (2.5)	6 (3)	29 (15)	80 (41)	75 (38.5)
I find this form of assessment too woolly and undirected	3 (1.5)	11 (6)	36 (18.5)	94 (48)	51 (26)

SA = strongly agree, A = agree, Un = undecided, D = disagree, SD = strongly disagree.

number of volunteers grows each year, with almost 50 interviewers now taking part. Typical faculty feedback comments include: 'This was a special privilege', '(I gained) useful insights into key issues for students', 'Highlighted opportunities for students to initiate change' and 'All faculty should be encouraged to do this'.

Discussion

The relatively low response rate to the feedback questionnaire (67%) may be attributable to our reliance on the interviewers to remember to hand out a feedback form to each student, and the fact that non-responders were not followed up. A bias toward more favourable reports from the students who did respond is likely to be small, as students do not hesitate to provide negative feedback in other situations and the portfolios required a considerable effort. Students who found it a waste of time were likely to have said so, but there were frequent positive references to the portfolios following the assessment.

Most of the student responses confirmed expectations that the portfolio would help them to reflect on their approach to the course, gain insight into their own learning and develop a clearer understanding of some of

their values. However, only 38% of students reported that the process could result in changes to group participation, a result that may be explicable on the basis that group participation may not have been a widespread concern.

The assessment is labelled 'summative', in the sense that the students must satisfy this course requirement. However, it would be more accurate to call the assessment 'required, formative', as the students must participate in the process, with the primary aim of receiving feedback. Some students present portfolios that most faculty members would have difficulty in matching. The efforts of other students are much more modest, but the fundamental challenge for interviewers is to satisfy themselves that the student is making a genuine attempt to reflect on their own behaviours, beliefs and values in the light of the PPD theme.

The Faculty's aim in creating this assessment was to communicate the Faculty ethos of student-centred learning. The PPD theme goals are also the aims of the Faculty, namely to foster compassionate, ethical professional behaviour, teamwork, rational decision making, self-awareness, commitment to colleagues and appropriate professional skills. In encouraging a reflective approach, we aim to remind students that in time responsibility for their clinical performance will

rest with them. While similar to a mentoring scheme in some respects, the PPD assessment is distinguished by the fact that it relates directly to our educational aims and is actually a requirement for the satisfactory completion of Year 1.

Despite the time commitment, Faculty interviewers find the opportunity for a deep, reflective discussion a worthwhile use of their time. There are no extrinsic motivators for faculty participation, but their willingness to participate may be a response to the knowledge that they have been specifically chosen as a trusted person for a confidential interview.

Although the process places considerable onus on the interviewers to decide whether or not the students have made a genuine attempt to engage in self-reflection in the portfolio and interview, we have not encountered a situation in which an interviewer feels unable to make this judgement, and none has expressed doubt that their students have done so. This may be because the students are keen to perform well in their first assessment in medicine and also because they are required to engage in a face to face conversation with an interviewer, often one of their own choice.

Interviewers do recognise and comment on differences in the maturity and breadth of focus among students, but there have been only a handful of reports of students who appear to be somewhat cautious or defensive. Kekes¹² outlines unreflective, prereflective and reflective goodness as three stages in the development of moral wisdom, which, he argues, is the most important of the virtues. Because the emphasis in PPD is on 'development', these stages must be recognised and accepted as starting points for further personal and professional growth that should occur at later stages in the programme. Encouraging and supportive feedback from the interviewer is part of the process of enhancing trust and encouraging further development.

Apart from increasing the time allocated to interviews, the assessment process has been maintained in its original format over the past 5 years. There have been frequent suggestions, which usually take the form: 'Perhaps the students could be asked to include X in their portfolios'. If all of these suggestions had been adopted, the portfolios would now much larger, much more structured and much more directive. More significantly, they would almost certainly have lost their commitment to student-centredness.

The portfolios themselves are creative, reflective, insightful and chastening. Some student portfolios contain accounts of considerable student hardship and obstacles overcome. There are frequent references to positive and negative role modelling, especially in

clinical settings. Students often explore the links between their new experiences in Year 1 and their ultimate goals in studying medicine. They describe encounters with patients from which both parties have clearly gained benefit. In these encounters students contribute to patient care, even though they cannot yet offer the benefit of medical expertise.

Some students who commenced with scepticism expressed surprise at the portfolio's impact on their ability to reflect on experience, develop new ways of thinking and consider changes in their approach to the course. Examples from the students' writing provide a rich source of teaching material for future students and these are used to demonstrate important PPD issues with the authors' permission. The portfolio and interview challenge students to reflect on their personal and their professional development, a process that has overturned any ideas that this is a soft option.

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