ENGAGING STUDENTS IN THE DESIGN OF EXAM ASSESSMENT METHODS

IMPLICATIONS FOR LEARNING AND PROFESSIONAL APPLICATION

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Abstract: This report discusses and evaluates the engagement of students in the design and implementation of new exam assessment methods at a course on "Field Methods" for military linguists at the Royal Danish Defence College. Arguing that assessment methods can be employed to improve student learning, the report focuses on the guiding principles of productive assessment and on the practical implementation of such principles. As this report shows, the collaboration with students on the revision of and introduction of new assessment methods may be a time consuming, at times bewildering process, yet also a rewarding process that enhance student motivation, and thus student learning.

Key words: Practice-oriented learning, student motivation, assessment methods, exam forms.

Contents

1. Introduction

This report discusses the linkages between assessment methods and student learning. The report takes its point of departure in the course "Field Methods" [Feltmetode] that I taught three times between 2014 and 2016 at the Institute for Languages and Culture (ICL) at the Royal Danish Defence College (RDDC). The central purpose of this course was to qualify the students to gather, analyse and disseminate qualitative data – a methodological qualification enabling them to advise military commanders in tactical decision-making during their future military careers. Based on student evaluations of the courses in 2014 and 2015, and in order to investigate how student learning could be enhanced, I decided to revise the assessment methods during the 2016 course. A specific initiative in this regard was my decision to revise the final exam form, moving from individual oral exams structured around the presentation of a written synopsis report followed by summative grading to a project-based group exam structured around formative feedback. In this report I focus on the process of designing and implementing this new exam form and the aligned assessment methods in collaboration with the students, and I discuss what implications this had for student learning and professional application.

In addressing the linkages between assessment methods and student learning, the report is inspired by a fundamental pedagogical question: What motivates students to learn? Exploring this question is essential when planning a course, as the students' motivation both "generates, directs, and sustains what they learn" (Ambrose et al. 2010:6). To explore this, I conducted a focus group discussion with six students prior to the course, which focused on the following themes: Educational backgrounds / existing knowledge, expectations for the course, learning goals, and professional application. This focus group discussion resulted in two significant findings, which inspired my decision to revise the final exam form:

1) A large number of students simply aim at getting through the course, as they do not see the relevance of a "university-like" course on qualitative methods, and thus find it more important to invest their time in their language courses.

2) In order to stimulate motivation, the course should be practice-oriented and made relevant to their future military careers.

These findings suggested that I could expect the students to balance between "surface" and "strategic" approaches to learning (cf. Biggs & Tang 2011: – a balancing that would depend on my ability to stimulate motivation. In this report I focus on one out of several factors and methods that can motivate students to move beyond surface approaches to learning: assessment methods.

The reflections and findings of this report are of relevance to teachers engaged in the evaluation and revision of assessment methods. In particular, the report is of relevance to teachers at the ICL when reviewing the assessment of cadets and when seeking to develop and implement career-oriented exam forms. As this report shows, the revision of and introduction of new assessment methods may be a time consuming, at times bewildering, process, yet also a rewarding process that enhance student motivation, and thus student learning.

2. Course description, learning outcomes and activities

The course "Field Methods" is a mandatory course at the Officer Linguist Programme at ICL – a two-year programme in which selected cadets are trained as military linguist and as cultural advisors. Following the successful completion of the programme, the cadets are deployed to international missions for a period between four and six months. Cadets selected for the programme have mixed educational backgrounds; whereas some hold bachelor and master degrees (mainly in political and social sciences) others have just completed their high school (or similar education). While the course is aimed at bachelor-level, the variety of backgrounds demands close attention to how both cadets with and without university backgrounds can meaningfully engage with and learn from the course content, teaching/learning activities, and the intended learning outcomes (ILOs).[1]

The ILOs of "Field Methods" (see Appendix 1) refer to declarative knowledge as well as to functioning knowledge (cf. Biggs & Tang 2011:101). By the end of the course the student should, for instance, be able to:

- *Identify* analytical perspectives.

- *Reflect* on how the methodological framework has shaped the quality of data collected.

At a more abstract level relating to future-directed, professional application of competences, the course is furthermore intended to enable the students to:

- Engage in a military collaboration and assume responsibility for guidance on methodological procedures during data collection.

- Identify own learning needs in relation to methodological approaches to data collection, and in relation to the particular operational possibilities and limitations in the mission area.

The teaching/learning activities (TLAs) addressing the above ILOs consist of a combination of student presentations, reflection exercises, case studies, and short lectures, here with a particular focus on activities that stimulate reflexivity and transformative learning through practice-oriented group assignments. During the course I taught in 2016, such practice-oriented group assignments were most significantly structured around a two-week study trip during which the cadets engaged in collaborative data collection on a self-selected topic of military relevance. As the cadets were trained in Russian and Arabic languages, the study trips took place in Minsk and Cairo.

These study trips provided a fertile possibility for the students to engage in data collection and methodological reflections in an environment characterized by political unrest, insecurity,

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[1] A discussion of how I addressed this during the field method course is, however, beyond the scope of this report.

distrust and surveillance, and hence an environment resembling the operational environments into which the students would deploy after completing their education. As such, the study trips enabled the students to engage in learning activities directly applicable to a professional setting – *and*, at the same time, closely aligned to the ILOs.

Constructive alignment, however, not only demands attention towards how TLAs direct student's learning towards the ILOs, but also attention towards how assessment methods can most productively be aligned to the ILOs and TLAs. Below I discuss in further details such alignment, focusing on the linkages between assessment methods and student learning.

3. Assessment methods and student learning

Assessment is central to student learning (cf. Brown & Rice 2013:74) – it is a tool which can be employed directly to promote and improve effective learning (Sambell, McDowell & Montgomery 2013:1). During the last decade, the recognition of the significance of assessment methods has resulted in a move away from a limited focus on assessment criteria for the final exams towards a focus on how assessment methods can be employed to activate and inspire student to learn also *during* the course (Andersen & Cozart 2014:3). At the same time, however, students are preoccupied with exam results, as these results can potentially inform their future professional careers. As a consequence, "exams inevitably structure and shape the work of students" (Ibid:1).

A central question I have been engaged with when planning the 2016 course on "Field Methods" is how assessment methods targeting the final exam can most productively promote student learning throughout the course, and potentially beyond the course. Furthermore, I have been preoccupied with how I could develop methods balancing summative and formative assessment. While exams are most commonly dominated by summative assessment, and in particular by grading, I wanted to reduce this dominance by employing also formative assessment to foster deep or strategic learning rather than surface learning.

Engaging with these questions I took my point of departure in the "Ten Principles of Good Assessment" developed by David Nicol (2007), and in particular in five of these principles and related questions. These principles state that good assessment should:

1) Help clarify what good performance is (goals, criteria, standards).

   To what extent do students in your course have opportunity to engage actively with goals, criteria and standards, before, during and after an assessment task?

2) Encourage 'time and effort' on challenging tasks.

   To what extent do your assessment tasks encourage regular study in and out of class and deep rather than surface learning?

3) Encourage positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem.

To what extent do your assessments processes activate your students' motivation to learn and by successful?

4) Give learners choice in assessment – content and processes.

To what extent do students have choice in topics, methods, criteria, weighting and/or timing of learning and assessment tasks in your course?

5) Help teachers adapt learning to student needs.

To what extent do your assessment process help inform and shape your teaching?

In combination, these principles served as useful guidelines for the development of assessment methods, as they direct attention towards how assessment methods inform the interplay between student motivation, student learning and teaching practices.

4. Designing and implementing new assessment methods

My decision to design and implement new assessment methods during the final exam was, as noted above, informed by my focus group with students prior to the course. During this discussion, the students stated that they experienced the "traditional" synopsis exam to be "a waste of time", and hence advised me to consider implementing a new exam form. This exam form, they argued, should focus less on students' abilities to engage with theoretical concepts, as these concepts (emerging mainly from anthropological theory) could not be directly applied in a military context. Moreover, the exam should to a greater extent relate to and engage with the knowledge and capabilities they were obtaining during other courses at the Officer Linguist Programme.

Though it is not common practice to involve the students in the choice of assessment methods for the final exam at the ICL, I decided to skip the "traditional" synopsis exam on the basis of the focus group discussion. I did so because I believe it is important to consider student's perspectives on assessment when seeking to enhance student learning. In a context where students openly express their lack of motivation for taking a course, it is particular important to consider how they can become actively involved and gain a sense of ownership of their own learning. A dialogue on assessment methods can be a vital tool in this regard (see also Sambell, Dowell & Montgomery 2013:17).

The Officer Linguist Programme is not bound by ministerial orders on examinations. Consequently, I could have decided to completely skip the exam. However, considering the fact

that students at the ICL are usually extremely occupied with exam results, because these results may inform their future military career paths, I envisioned that skipping the exam would further de-motivate the students to actively engage in the course. Therefore, I decided to design a new exam form. The most significant guiding principle structuring this design was that the exam should reflect professional practice. Moreover, apart from designing an exam form aimed at preparing the students for their future careers, I intended to choose an exam form that could relate to the other courses the students were taking.

Military officers, including language officers, most commonly work in teams composed of different capabilities, performing complementary functions. Against this background I decided to implement a group exam during which students with diverse educational backgrounds could complement each other. This exam form, I found, was also more closely aligned with the ILOs than the individual exams, in particular with the ILO focusing on the ability to engage in military collaboration. In order to address the students' request for an exam focusing less on theoretical concepts and more on military applicability, I simultaneously engaged in a re-evaluation of the role of the external examiner.

During the courses I taught in 2014 and in 2015 I had invited external examiners from the University of Copenhagen with backgrounds in anthropology. These examiners had little knowledge of the military profession, and thus focused their assessment on the extent to which the students were able to demonstrate capabilities addressed in the ILOs relating more narrowly to anthropological/sociological methods and methodology. In order to supplement such assessment with an assessment targeting the ILOs relating to military practice and applicability, I decided to set up a panel of external examiners composed of one anthropologist and two military officers. The anthropologist I invited to engage in this panel was selected due to her strong methodological skills and her long-term experience in qualitative data collection in conflict-affected areas, but also due to her recent research on Danish war veterans, which provided her with a solid insight into the military profession. In selecting the military examiners, I decided to invite two army officers; an intelligence officer (G2) and one CIMIC officer (G9)[2]. I chose this combination for two key purposes. Firstly, the students were taking a course on military intelligence collection during the same semester as the field methods course – a course focused on methodology and data collection, and thus closely related to the field methods course. By selecting the G2 officer I could address the student's request to relate my course to other courses at the Officer Linguist Programme, thus potentially stimulating a stronger sense of a coherent education. Secondly, I chose the combination of a G2 and G9 officers as the students are likely to work closely with these functions during their professional careers. By selecting these officers for the panel, I thus had the possibility to expose the students to their future professional colleagues (and vice versa). Because these officer could also turn out to become the students' future employers, I assumed it would motivate the students to actively engage in the exam.

In the first lesson of the field methods course I presented the background and purpose of the new exam form to the students, together with a short briefing on the composition of the

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[2] Civil-Military Co-Operation (CIMIC).

assessment panel. During this lesson I explained that I wanted them to engage in the design of assessment methods and criteria for their final exam. By way of engaging in this task, I told the students, they would not only be able to influence *what* and *how* they wanted to learn – the course content and TLAs – but also sharpen their understanding of the learning goals.

With point of departure in the ILOs I gave the students the task to develop a limited number of criteria informing the exam assessment. Following discussions on the linkages between assessment methods and learning, the students outlined seven assessment criteria for the final exam (see Appendix 2). To ensure the assessment panel found the criteria useful I subsequently evaluated the criteria with the external examiners. As such, the assessment criteria were not given from the outset of the course, but gradually developed through a collaborative process with the students and the assessment panel.

The final version of the assessment criteria was handed out to the students just before their study trip, during which they would be engaged in the data collection forming the basis for the final exams. At this point it was also decided – together with the students – that the final exam should be structured around oral presentations, discussions with the assessment panel and feedback, proceeding as follows:

- Group presentation (15 minutes)

- Questions from and discussion with assessment panel (15 minutes)

- Assessment (5 minutes)

- Feedback from assessment panel (10 minutes)

- Peer feedback (5 minutes)

Before the exam, the groups should hand-in a short paper (of maximum five pages) informing the presentation. The purpose of this paper was to offer the assessment panel a background understanding / context of the project carried out. The paper should, however, not be included in the final assessment.

5. Evaluations and reflections

To what extent did the implementation of a new exam form and of new assessment methods enhance student learning during the course? How did it inform and shape my own teaching practices and experiences? What were the benefits of turning the development of assessment methods into a collaborative process – and what were the pitfalls?

At the end of the course a written anonymous evaluation was carried out by the students (see Appendix 3), which was subsequently followed-up with a lesson during which I discussed the evaluation with the students, as well as offered my feedback and reflections on my own teaching practice. Unfortunately, the written evaluation was conducted in a pre-designed electronic

format that did not explicitly address assessment methods. Nevertheless, some students did comment on their experiences of the exam and with the assessment methods. These comments focused on the following issues:

- Being involved in the design of assessment criteria create a sense of active participation and of ownership.

- The linkage between the course on field methods and the course on military intelligence collection is productive and relevant as it generates an experience of being better prepared for future studies and for future work.

- The implementation of a new exam form produces uncertainty of what is expected from the students.

- The process of designing assessment criteria and preparing for a new exam form is (too) time consuming.

As evident from these comments, my decision to engage students in the design and implementation of a new exam form and in new assessment methods had intended as well as unintended effects. In terms of the intended effects, the decision to engage the students *did* stimulate motivation, as it generated a sense of influence and ownership. Another significant factor that stimulated motivation was my attempt to link the field methods course to the course on military intelligence collection. By doing so, the students experienced coherence and relatedness between their courses, and most significantly, they experienced that the course prepared them for future career paths because it was explicitly linked to the military profession. In terms of the unintended effects, several students experienced to be uncertain of what was expected from them during the final exam – an experience that fundamentally differed from my purpose of involving the students in order to sharpen their understanding of the learning goals. Moreover, the students pointed out that they found the processes of being engaged in the design of assessment criteria too time consuming – not least when taking into consideration that the time devoted to discussions on assessment could have been productively employed to, for instance, practice-oriented exercises.

From further discussions with the students it turned out that they were also surprised about the "seriousness" of the exam (see also Appendix 3). I believe that such surprise may be linked to the fact that the exam was not graded, but simply marked as pass/fail. When grades are not at stake, the students may not expect the same degree of seriousness and formality usually associated with exams. That being said, some of the students also pointed out that the mismatch between their expectations and experiences of the exam was caused by a specific assessment criterion: that of military relevance (Appendix 2, number 5). During the exam, the army officers naturally focused their questions and assessment around this criterion. While I had prepared the students to explain *why* and *how* their data collection project was of military relevance, I had not devoted sufficient time to make the students understand what military relevance could imply in the context of the field methods course. As a consequence, several groups addressed the military relevance by referring to the *context* of the data collection, rather than to the *methodology*. Simultaneously, the external examiners had their own – and diverse – interpretations of the criteria. During the exam this triggered a number of questions from the assessment panel that

the students were largely unprepared to answer. In retrospect, the uncertainty this generated among the students could have been avoided if I had devoted more time to address the specific criterion. To begin with, the criteria was obviously too vague, as it was interpreted in diverse ways. Moreover, I should have devoted more time to discuss the criterion in further details with the students *and* with the assessment panel.

At a more general level, I believe that students' mixed experiences with the exam assessment was a consequence of my attempt to make the students relate two distinct disciplines (anthropology and military intelligence), theoretically as well as practically. This requires that the students have a rather solid understanding of and practical experience in both disciplines – a requirement that was undoubtedly too ambitious when taking into account the short length of the course (twenty lessons). It was, however, exactly this relatedness that inspired and motivated the students to actively engage in learning during the course.

The important question is whether the *kind* of learning the students engaged in here was aligned with the intended learning outcomes, and to what extent it supported my attention of seeking to motivate the students to move beyond surface approaches to learning. While these questions are difficult to provide a valid answer to on the basis of a short course, it was my experience that the majority of the students gradually adopted a more transformative approach to learning during the course. While I recognise that "students learn what they think they will be tested on" (Biggs & Tang 2011:197), I experienced that this gradual adoption was a result not only of the collaborate decision to move from an emphasis on summative grading towards formative feedback during the final exam, but also of my teaching practice during the course. Being aware that feedback and assessment during some of the courses the students had taken at ICL were focused on correcting errors, I put a lot of effort into creating a learning atmosphere allowing for "mistakes". In fact, I encouraged the ability to move beyond clear-cut answers focused on "facts". By, for instance, employing concrete practical examples from my own fieldwork experiences I sought to demonstrate the significance of focusing on disjunctures and on the messiness that characterise lived realities (not least in conflict zones) when seeking to gather, analyse and disseminate qualitative data. Against the background of the focus group I conducted prior to the course, I did not expect that this would be an easy exercise. Yet, I found that the majority of students were eager to engage in teaching/learning activities that stimulated reflexivity rather than tangible answers. This kind of learning, I argue is productive not only in the context of anthropological methodology but also in the context of military practice.

In retrospect, the teaching/learning activities could have been more closely aligned with the assessment method of the final exam. Especially so if this method had been outlined from the outset of the course. The collaborative process of designing the assessment criteria was – as the students rightly noted in their evaluation – a time consuming process, resulting in uncertainties about what could be expected from the final exam. These uncertainties also influenced my teaching practice, as it was first towards the end of the course that the final assessment criteria had been adopted. Yet, I believe, it was exactly the processes of mutual collaboration between the students and I that encouraged the kind of transformative learning that was aligned with the intended learning outcomes.

6. Assessment methods: recommendations

Assessment methods have implications for student learning. They inform what and how students learn, and at such it is highly significant that the assessment methods are aligned with teaching/learning activities, and with the intended learning outcomes. While this sounds rather obvious and simple, my experiences with the course on field methods exemplifies that creating such alignment is no straightforward process – especially not when engaging the students in the design of assessment methods for the final exam form. Nevertheless, the evaluation of the students' and my own experiences with the course suggests that this process of mutual collaboration around assessment methods *did* enhance student learning. More specifically, it enhanced a particular kind of learning that I aspired for when planning the course: transformative learning. It did so for several reasons, but most importantly because it stimulated motivation to learn. Among the students this motivation was triggered by the fact that they actively engaged in making the course applicable to professional practice, and because they experienced a sense of ownership of their own learning in this process. For me as a teacher, it has not only been a personal rewarding experience to be engaged in this process – it has also been professionally rewarding, inspiring my own motivation to teach. And to learn.

Below I outline a number of recommendations of relevance to teachers, particularly at the ICL, who are preoccupied with the linkages between assessment methods and student learning.

Recommendations:

- Explore what motivates students to learn, and consider how teaching/learning activities and assessment methods can stimulate this motivation.

- Engage students in the design and implementation of assessment methods in order to inspire motivation and ownership, and to enhance student learning.

- Ensure the students understand *why* they are involved in the design of assessment methods, and *how* the methods are aligned to teaching practices and to intended learning outcomes.

- Encourage exam forms and assessment methods that relate to "real-world" situations and to professional practice.

- Allocate time for review and evaluation of assessment methods in collaboration with the students, both prior to, during and after the course.

- Involve the external examiners in the design of assessment methods.

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8. Appendix 1: Course description

1.1 ECTS
Antal ECTS-point: 5

1.2 Formål
Formålet med kulturfaget Feltmetode er, at den studerende får indsigt i metodiske tilgange til indsamling og bearbejdelse af data i missionsområder. De metodiske tilgange vil være fokuserede omkring deltagerobservation og kvalitative interviewteknikker. Den studerende skal derudover – med henblik på vejledning af militært personel – udvikle evnen til at bearbejde, analysere og formidle den indhentede information.

1.3 Læringsmål
Viden
Den studerende
- tilegner sig viden om antropologiske og sociologiske metoder til indsamling af kvalitative data
- tilegner sig viden om metoder til analyse af kvalitative data
- udvikler sin evne til at forholde sig kritisk til forskellige kilder til informationsindhentning, herunder egen og andres positionering.

Færdigheder
Den studerende skal kunne
- udforme relevante metodiske guidelines
- udforme en interviewguide, udføre et interview og analysere materialet
- reflektere over, hvilken betydning valget af metode har for karakteren af de indsamlede data

- reflektere over etiske problemstillinger
- identificere analytiske perspektiver i en given metodisk fremgangsmåde
- formidle analyse og resultat
- formidle betydningen af de valgte metoder i relation til de data, der indhentes og analyseres (såvel til fagfæller som til folk uden forudgående kendskab til emnet).

Kompetencer
De studerende skal kunne
- indgå i et militærfagligt samarbejde og påtage sig ansvar for vejledning om metodiske procedurer i dataindsamling (eksempelvis i forhold til et CIMIC-virke)
- identificere egne læringsbehov i forhold til metodiske tilgange til informationsindhentning, samt i forhold til de givne operative muligheder og begrænsninger i regionen.

1.4 Indhold
I undervisningen indgår følgende overordnede temaer:
- Etnografiske metoder i det militære arbejde
- Kvalitative metoder til dataindsamling
- Positionering og adgang
- Feltnoter, databehandling og analyse
- Etiske overvejelser

1.5 Undervisnings- og studiemetoder
Undervisningen tilrettelægges i en vekselvirkning mellem plenum, elevoplæg, refleksion, øvelser og casestudier. Den studerendes rolle spænder således fra aktivt lyttende, over deltagende, til direkte styrende. Underviseren fungerer både som formidler og som vejleder.

Ved at arbejde med øvelser i relation til de forskellige metoder trænes de studerende i at foretage selvstændige interviewforløb, samt i at bearbejde og analysere disse. Evnen til at arbejde metodisk og analytisk opøves yderligere gennem hjemmeopgaver. Endelig styrker problembaserede opgaver (cases) de studerendes færdigheder i selvstændigt at indhente og bearbejde information.

Refleksionen over metoder og opgaver undervejs i forløbet skal udvikle den studerendes evne til at koble fagets indhold til virket som sprogofficer. Dette foregår, hvis muligt, i samspil med sprogofficerer, der tidligere har været udsendt, og som forestår relevante case-opgaver.

Faget kræver betydelig forberedelse. Til hver undervisningstime skal de studerende regne med at bruge i gennemsnit to timer til læsning af faglitteratur. Desuden skal de i løbet af kurset udarbejde skriftlige hjemmeopgaver samt et mundtligt oplæg.

9. Appendix 2: Assessment criteria

1) Diskutere hvilken betydning metodevalg har for karakteren af indsamlede data.

2) Diskutere hvilken betydning positionering (egne + informanters positioner) har for karakteren af indsamlede data.

3) Diskutere etiske overvejelser og problemstillinger

4) Identificere analytiske perspektiver

5) Identificere perspektiver af militærfaglig relevans.

6) Diskutere forholdet mellem antropologiske og militære tilgange til dataindsamling, analyse og formidling.

7) Målrette formidling et antropologisk og militært bedømmelsespanel.

10. Appendix 3: Course evaluation (attached file)