

APPLIED EPISTEMOLOGY FOR COMMUNITY NURSES: EVALUATING THE IMPACT OF THE PATCHWORK TEXT

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SUMMARY

In this article we describe how and why a version of the Patchwork Text assessment format was developed for a module called 'Perspectives on Research in Professional Practice'. This was a module where the teaching and assessment processes were working well but, it was, felt, a more reflective, synthetic, cumulative and open-ended assessment would lead to better learning. We then present comparative material to show how the new format was evaluated by students and how the new format affected the intellectual performance of students. We conclude with a discussion of how far introducing the Patchwork Text met our aims in doing so and what we as tutors learned from the experience.

INTRODUCTION – THE COURSE

The module is one of three compulsory theoretical modules taught at the beginning of a post qualifying degree programme for community specialist nurses. Students thus include health visitors, district nurses, community psychiatric nurses, school nurses, general practice nurses and community learning disabilities nurses. The programme seeks to provide already experienced nurses with the specialist skills required when working within the community.

The main aim of the module is to provide students with a theoretical understanding of the different types of knowledge that might inform their practice. The specific learning outcomes which students are required to meet and evidence in their assignment are officially listed as follows:

1. Develop a critical understanding of the nature of clinical theories and models and their status in contributing to current debates concerning professional knowledge.
2. Develop a critical approach to the knowledge base of health professionals and its related disciplines through the examination of theoretical problems underlying the nature and structure of knowledge.
3. Critically analyse the role of the practitioner, researcher and service user in the development of professional knowledge.

4. Critically examine the differing theoretical underpinnings of qualitative and quantitative research.

The module is based on ten weekly three-hour sessions focusing on topics such as: different conceptions of knowledge and research, comparing qualitative and quantitative methodologies, integrating research in the development of professional practice, action research, research validity and research ethics.

In previous years, before the introduction of the Patchwork Text, students had been required to write a 4,000 word essay submitted on the last day of the module. The guidance notes for the assignment had been as follows:

“This assignment will involve writing about your understanding of the concepts presented during the module and reflected upon in your diary. You should select between two and four of the concepts and refine and develop your material for the assignment. Your chosen topics *must* evidence that you are familiar with quantitative and qualitative methodologies. You may wish to use headings to discuss the different topics, which you will need to illustrate by reference to one or more work scenarios. Alternatively, you may wish to integrate the material into a general discussion about how the different concepts have informed your practice, but this is by no means intended as a requirement.”

The next section describes how the tutor's sense of dissatisfaction with this assignment led to the development of a Patchwork Text format.

DEVELOPING THE PATCHWORK TEXT ASSIGNMENT

Lesley, who has taught the ‘Perspectives on Research’ module since 1997, had become concerned that her teaching strategies were becoming increasingly didactic. She was committed to a collaborative and constructionist approach to learning (Askew and Carnell 1998; Kasl et al 1993), but as a response to both her own and students’ anxieties about the assignment, she found herself giving more formal lectures. This meant students had less time to explore and debate their own experiences within inter- professional learning groups. Also, although students were urged to keep a reflective diary, few students wrote weekly entries, despite good intentions, perhaps because this did not form part of the summative assessment.

Both these factors led her to believe that she was beginning to ‘coach’ rather than facilitate a process of autonomous learning.

These concerns were reflected in students’ written work, where she had a sense that most scripts were similar in content and style of writing, and that the independence of thought, creativity and reflexivity so central to their professional development was not being harnessed. In short, the assignments seemed to reflect what Marton et al (1984) refer to as ‘surface’ rather than a ‘deep’ approach to learning tasks. With these concerns in mind, Lesley decided to work on developing a patchwork text assignment the following year, teaching the module with Richard, with two parallel groups of students.

Evaluation Prior to Introducing the Patchwork Text

We began our curriculum development work by analysing the University’s routine module evaluation forms for the last cohort of 50 pre-patchwork students. 43 students (86%) completed this form and all these students either agreed or very strongly agreed that the learning outcomes and teaching and learning strategies for the module were appropriate. Other community specialist tutors also viewed the module as successful and integral to the degree programme. We therefore decided to leave unchanged the learning outcomes and were indeed heartened by the strength of the positive evaluations, as the data suggested that Lesley’s original anxieties were not reflected in students’ or colleagues’ evaluations. This was helpful to our research, because if the module was already in some sense ‘working well’, there would be less danger that the specific introduction of a new assessment format might be positively evaluated merely as part of a general ‘halo’ effect, and thereby distort our findings and conclusions.

As the University’s evaluation form gave us little information about how students prepared for writing a 4,000 word essay or indeed how they experienced the assessment process, they were also asked to complete the following questionnaire immediately after handing in their assignment:-

1. Please outline your thoughts and feelings (positive, negative and ‘general’) about the assignment for this module.
2. How did you set about preparing yourself to write the assignment?

3. How far do you feel that writing this assignment has helped you to bring together the various ideas presented in the module?
4. How far has writing this assignment helped you to develop your own personal response to the module topics?
5. Any other comments on the assignment process (e.g. Was the timing right? Was it appropriate; Was it too easy / too difficult; too open-ended/ too constraining?).

In addition to the questionnaire two focus groups were held where students were also asked about their experiences of the pre-patchwork text assignment.

43 students (86%) completed this questionnaire and these together with the transcripts of the focus groups were analysed in terms of positive and critical attitudes about the assignment (i. e. the final essay). We were also interested in the way students had set about writing the essay and whether the experience was a collaborative and insightful one. On the whole, as we now expected, most students expressed positive attitudes towards the assignment, saying that although the module was difficult the assignment was nevertheless interesting, enjoyable and challenging, and 32 students (64%) felt that writing the essay had led to a deeper understanding of the module content:

However alongside these positive comments, students were also articulating more critical experiences, and their concerns provided useful insights into the limitations of the existing assessment format and helped us in clarifying what it was we were trying to achieve by introducing the Patchwork text. For example, some students complained about lack of time to complete the assignment, about an initial sense of being overwhelmed and daunted by the prospect of the assignment, and about feeling constrained to leave out some of the topics (especially those presented later) in their work, so that there were aspects of the course and learning outcomes which they still felt they didn't understand as well as they ought:-

'It is a shame that the way the course is designed meant that the assignment has to be written before the taught element is complete. I was tempted to use 'action research' but felt that as this was not covered until the end I would be disadvantaged time wise by doing so.'

'I was unable to bring in all the ideas and reflective thoughts following lectures and unable to be creative and bring in the various ideas that I would liked to have followed through.'

'There wasn't time to consolidate the knowledge gained in the weekly sessions.... I would liked to have been writing my assignment in line with the taught sessions but this wasn't possible.'

'Writing a 4,000 word essay is an enormous pressure- the pressure and the expectation (perceived) is that there must be a correct way to answer the assignment question. This reduces options for self learning and development of own ideas.'

Students' responses to the question concerning how they set about preparing themselves for the assignment suggested that the process was a rather individual and instrumental one, involving reading relevant articles and handouts but little in the way of what Barnett (1998, p77) refers to as 'critical self reflection'. Only 5 students (12%) mentioned exchanging ideas with their peers or work colleagues and there was a sense in which the linking of theory to practice was an academic exercise rather than an illuminating process in which new meanings and understandings were being developed:-

'I found the most difficult part was relating theory to practice. I spent most of my time trying to understand the concepts and then tried to fit my practice scenarios into the concepts. More time was needed to discuss our different practice experiences.'

The focus group discussions illustrated perhaps even more clearly how for some students writing the assignment had become a kind of 'academic game', where independence of thought was being sacrificed to the perceived need (often fostered by tutors) that the most important thing was assembling a plethora of references: -

'I felt like I've got to stop this sentence, because I've got to find a referenceyou interrupt your train of thought, and you can't say it all because you haven't got the theory that you need to put in there.'

Aims for the Patchwork Text Project

The conclusion of our analysis of the above material seemed to confirm our original suspicion that the essay assignment format had a number of drawbacks. It seemed that students' anxieties about the subject matter meant that trying to represent the views of

different writers (including those of the lecturers!) left little scope for reflexivity. Additionally, students often responded to the constraints of having to present a time-consuming essay at the end of the module by beginning the essay before the module had finished and by adopting a rather selective and instrumental approach to the module content. Arising from these interpretations of students' experiences, then, we formulated the following statement of what we hoped to achieve by introducing the Patchwork Text: -

We want to encourage a form of writing which :-

- 1) Is more 'reflective', i.e., which presents a more personal interpretation of students' understanding of the topics, of their own development, of their own learning process.*
- 2) Places more emphasis on creating a 'synthesis' of their learning.*
- 3) Places more emphasis on the relationship between the concepts, rather than exploring each one separately.*
- 4) Includes all the topics presented in the course and addresses all of the learning outcomes.*
- 5) Presents ideas more tentatively, with a greater sense of questioning and exploring issues.*
- 6) Displays more individual variety of approach and theme.*
- 7) Starts out from students' own experience and uses theory to question and explore their experience, rather than simply using theories to categorise their experience.*
- 8) Draws on a variety of writing styles.*

We also hope that the patchwork text process will enable us to identify and support 'invisible weak' students, i.e. those who respond to uncertainty by adopting a low profile, so that their lack of understanding only emerges at a late stage in the course.

THE PATCHWORK TEXT: ACTIVITIES, LEARNING OUTCOMES AND GUIDANCE NOTES FOR STUDENTS

As described in the previous section, our aims in introducing the patchwork text were to address the shortfalls of the essay as identified by student evaluations. We were also concerned that the teaching and learning process should provide students with the opportunity to discuss their pieces of writing in small learning groups (see Winter et. al., 1999, Chapter 3). The Patchwork Text format had originally been developed for a 'Reflective Writing' module in which students know in advance that they are signing up for a relatively

'open' experience and will be expected to share their writing. However, this is not the case for the 'Perspectives on Research' students, whose expectations concerning the assessment process and methods of learning we predicted as being fairly conventional. We therefore reproduce below the notes we gave students to prepare them for this quite different assessment. Also included in the notes is the list of activities for the Patchwork Text, cross-referenced with the list of learning outcomes (see page 1, above) that the patches were seeking to assess.

Guidance Notes for Students

Your assignment will be assembled gradually during the progress of the module through a series of written tasks, which you will share with each other in small groups. There are several reasons for this:-

- *to avoid the last minute rush of having to write the whole assignment at the end of the teaching, when time is short;*
- *to enable you to use a variety of different ways of writing, and thus to increase your opportunity to demonstrate your own particular abilities;*
- *to enable you to give each other early constructive feedback as to how clearly you have presented your ideas and how they might perhaps be developed;*
- *to enable you to write about all aspects of the module content (instead of having to select just a few aspects for a specific essay topic).*

Before you submit your assignment, you will be asked to write a final piece, to be added to what you have written already. This is designed to give you the opportunity to revisit (edit and revise) the ideas you have presented in your earlier pieces and to discuss what you have gained from the work as a whole. (This is the only task that will need to be completed after the end of the teaching.)

The sequence of writing tasks which will make up the final assignment is as follows: -

1. *Reflect on what you learned from the group exercise in week one (Learning outcomes 2 and 4)*
2. *Write a personal response to the ideas on research in the article by Anne Oakley (To be discussed in week two) (Learning outcomes 2 and 4)*

3. *Describe and reflect on your experience of the practical exercise on different forms of interviewing in week four (Learning outcomes 2 and 4)*
4. *Discuss how far the article by Pat Benner (to be presented in week seven) throws light on your own professional experience (Learning outcomes 1 and 2)*
5. *Write about an example of your own professional practice from the point of view of one of your own clients / service users, imagining their experience of your work with her / him (based on the work in week eight) (Learning Outcome 3)*
6. *Write an explanatory 'defence' of an action research proposal for a local research ethics committee based on the work in week 9 (Learning outcome 3)*
7. *(Final synthesis) A retrospective summary of and commentary on your previous writing, indicating what you have learned which seems to you to be important for your own professional understanding (All learning outcomes)*

NOTE 1 In your final assignment you may include any five from the first six pieces of writing outlined above.

NOTE 2 If for some reason you are unable to attend one of the sessions which forms the basis for one of the writing tasks you may either: -

- i) liaise with the tutor or your co-students to gain the information you need in order to complete the task, or*
- ii) read one of the pieces from the collection of articles provided for the module and write a personal response to the ideas it presents.*

Time will be available within the teaching sessions for you to discuss in small groups the writing you have done in response to each of the writing tasks. So you will therefore need to make four or five copies to bring along to the session.

The word-limit for the whole assignment is 4000 words. There are no specific word-limits for the individual pieces of writing, but you should aim to make sure that there is a balance between them. And you will need to leave at least 500 words for the final task (no. 7 above).

So when you first do your writing for the first 6 tasks you should bear in mind that in the final version it will need to be somewhere between 500 and 1000 words.

THE STUDENTS' WORK

The impression we derived from reading the students' work was its variety and a much greater willingness to give an independent, personal interpretation of their reading. For example, one student included the following incisive critique of the work of Pat Benner on the 'intuitive' dimension of nursing expertise:

It appears unwise to rely on a process that cannot be articulated or tested as a basis for practice. It could also be the case that intuition is counter to the principle of accountability, in that it is difficult to account for one's actions if you cannot explain them. It is also dangerous to rely on something as ephemeral as intuition. It is human nature to forget or discount instances when mistakes or wrong decisions have been made whilst remembering when things have gone well. Consequently there is a risk of developing a distorted picture of the successes associated with intuitive decisions.

It was also pleasing to see how students were able to embody theoretical insights in forms of writing that had a practical or an imaginative focus (the action research proposal and the client perspective). Many of the action research proposals managed to marshal a wide range of arguments very economically, and their clarity seemed to be aided by the writers' commitment to what they were arguing for. Perhaps one of the most satisfying pieces of work was the following response to Task 5, which presents so cleverly, in a fictionalised format, the issues of cultural hierarchy surrounding professional knowledge and how they can (but might not) be circumvented:

'MEETING MY NEW CARE CO-ORDINATOR'

by Melanie Chase

I've just met my new care co-ordinator today. Not the ideal circumstances - in a review meeting with two doctors, my GP and Bev from the Day Hospital. It was all very formal. We shook hands but I didn't say what I wanted to say so to her because I was too nervous. I wanted to say that I didn't want my last Care Co-ordinator to go, that I didn't like the letter that she had sent me saying that she was 'taking over', and that I am worried that

when she knows my 'history' she won't like me. Anyway we smiled at each other and said Hello. She's got a nice smile.

It was embarrassing in the review with everybody talking about me with my new Care Co-ordinator before I had had the chance to talk to her myself. She didn't say much, but seemed to know what was going on. I bet she's read all my notes. I felt like I was just an onlooker and it wasn't me they were talking about but someone else. I caught her eye two or three times and she smiled. Perhaps she'll be all right.

She looks like the sort of person who hasn't any troubles in her life, probably lives in a nice house with a good bloke and children at college or something. I hope that I'll be able to talk to her. I won't know where to start.

I'm going to miss my chats with my old Care Co-ordinator. You just get used to one and begin to feel OK with them and then they go. Is it worth it? In the end you don't know who to trust.

I wish my old Care Co-ordinator had been in the review today. I've stopped taking my tablets again and I know that I could have talked to her about it and she would have understood and helped me to sort it out with the doctor. I don't think I'll be able to tell this new one. She looked a bit too pally with the doctors. She won't understand. It's not really getting off on the right foot, is it? She would probably be cross with me for causing problems already. No, I definitely won't tell her.

We did have a few words after the review, in the corridor, which was a bit awkward as there were other staff wandering around. I hate corridor chats. She wanted to arrange a time to come round and visit. I was a bit flustered and couldn't remember what other things I was doing next week. Anyway, her diary was full of other people's names and we had to fit it in a slot that she had on Tuesday. Then she walked me to the door, like I didn't know where I was going - like I haven't been going there for years! Or perhaps she didn't trust me, thought I might nick something! When I got home my calendar said 'shopping with mum' on Tuesday, so I'll have to speak to mum and rearrange that now. She won't like that. I'm a bit pissed off about it as well.

I'll have to tidy up a bit before Tuesday, make the place look respectable and get some tea bags in I suppose. She looks like a tea drinker.

My old Care Co-ordinator used to treat me to coffee and a bun at Tesco's.

THE STUDENT RESPONSE: THE 'CRITICAL LETTER' EVALUATION

Our original plan had been to give the students who had undertaken the Patchwork Text assignment the same questionnaire as we had given the previous cohort (see above). Eventually we did so (see later discussion), but during the course of the module an opportunity arose to utilise what we thought would be a more rigorous form of evaluation. By the latter half of the module, although we had a general sense that students felt very positively towards the Patchwork Text format, a number of them had expressed various reservations and anxieties. One way of checking how far these concerns were widely shared seemed to be to write a 'spoof letter' expressing the students' reservations and anxieties in an 'appealing' way and to ask the students to write a 'reply', as part of the end-of-module evaluation process. (The idea arose from discussion of one of the set tasks, i.e. asking the students to write about their practice from the point of view of one of their own clients.) The reason why this seemed to be a more rigorous test of the students' perceptions of the new assignment format than the conventional evaluation form we originally designed, (which students were also asked to complete at the end of the module) is that the letter was consciously drafted in a way that would make it easy for other students to agree with the negative comments that some of them had articulated. It thus allows for the possibility that a student group might generally express pleasure at the novelty of the approach, with its ostensible concern for their stress levels and individuality, but that this would *not* necessarily mean that they actually thought the Patchwork Text format was clearly preferable to other formats. In other words, it seemed to be a way of counteracting the 'Hawthorne effect', i.e. the 'halo' created by the high level of morale in the group due to a variety of factors which might not be essentially related to the specific effect of the Patchwork Text innovation.

The Letter

Dear Andrew,

Thanks for your letter. What a coincidence that your history module at Leeds is being done using this Patchwork Text idea as well! I wonder how you are finding it.

I must say, I am a bit sceptical, although I can see what they are trying to do.

Most of us were really pleased to begin with, especially at the idea that we wouldn't have to do a great long assignment in a rush at the end, and especially on research, which everyone finds a difficult topic anyway. So, having started off feeling really worried about this module, it looked at first as though it would be a lot better.

But the problem is, we're not sure how we ought to be writing up the tasks. I mean we learned how to write in an academic way on the Diploma programme, and now, suddenly we are supposed to write in a more personal, chatty sort of way, so that we don't really know how it is supposed to be. The tutor keeps trying to be all sort of reassuring, but actually it's quite stressful just not knowing! Mind you, some of the bits of writing are quite fun – like pretending to write from some-one else's point of view.

And then there's the group sharing of the writing. Actually the people in my group are very good. We all seem to do it differently, and we give each other quite a lot of advice. So it does feel as though you are getting some sort of support and feed-back. But are we on the right lines? And what would happen if you were in a group where someone was really aggressive. Or really assertive even though they were completely wrong? That aspect seems like a bit of a lottery. Although most people do seem to be fairly happy with their groups. Perhaps we are all lucky this year!

Another thing is the writing tasks. Some of them are a bit vague. Like: 'Write a response to the article by XYZ'. What the hell is 'a response'? I mean, I thought, 'This is shit – it's badly written and full of jargon words – I hate it!' But I can't think that would do. I think they need to sharpen up the wording a bit so that (again) we know what we are supposed to do. And then there's that final ('retrospective, reflective') piece, which I gather your people have given you as well. I know it's only a few hundred words, but I really feel quite uncertain about how to do that. Fortunately we managed to persuade the tutors to lay on an extra tutorial. But even so....

To sum up, then. I suppose all assignments are worrying. And this has some nice features, but I don't know if I really feel less worried than I would if we had to do an old-fashioned essay. They are hell, but at least you know where you are! (Better the devil you know and all that...)

Anyway, hope you are OK. Perhaps you could write back some time and tell me if you have had the same sort of thoughts about your experience as I've had.

Analysis

Replies to the letter were written by 94% of students (after the final session, but before the results of the module assessment were known) – a total of 47. The replies were sorted using four headings (the wording to describe the headings was gradually refined during the sorting process). Numbers and percentages under each heading, together with illustrative quotations, are given below

1) Expressed enthusiasm for the Patchwork Text format but agreed with the criticisms in the letter: -

Number: 9 (19%).

'Yes, I've had all these thoughts and more. I was also in a good group but can see the danger of some dodgy group dynamics coming into play...Still, miles better than the other modules, even though I was looking forward to [the module on] research the least.'

(N.B. None of the responses actually referred to having had a bad group experience, although several said they had heard of difficulties in another group – a strange contradiction – perhaps the difficulties were all short-lived, so that no one felt they need to be included in a final evaluation. They could also have been suggested by the comments expressed in the letter.)

'I had to laugh when I read your letter: these are all the kinds of conversations my group have had with each other...[But] don't worry about the Patchwork Text! It is the best style of studying I have come across.'

2) Expressed enthusiasm for the Patchwork Text format and also rejected the criticisms in the letter (often saying that they were just initial apprehensions that turned out in the end to be unimportant):-

Number: 28 (60%).

'Yes, I too initially had my reservations around using the patchwork format, but what I have found is that it has removed some of the stresses of using the old format for

assignments... I also had concerns around how critical some members [of the group] could be, but found again the group developed coping strategies... The use of variations in writing styles I found to be of value in trying to gain different perspectives, which using the usual assignment format would probably have not been included within my work.'

'It was great to think I had something constructive to do over the first few weeks...Sharing with a group worked really well for us, as we all had different styles and learnt from each other.'

'Like you say, "old-fashioned formats" are more comfortable, but I, like many others, in the past have just churned out an essay containing information which I felt was required in order to pass, but now I feel I can write what I actually think and still pass.'

'The writings, daunting at first, become easier once you understand that your feelings / views are as important as anyone else's. Also you are using your personal knowledge (emotional, professional, and lay) and that this is all valued.'

'It's interesting to hear that you found the titles [of the writing tasks] a bit vague. I really enjoyed the freedom that I had to write as I wished, and found it a very positive experience.'

3) Agreed with the criticisms in the letter, and expressed rather limited enthusiasm for the Patchwork Text format:-

Number 9 (19%).

'Well, you hit the nail on the head! Too right, it was unclear what to put in the weekly tasks, but as time went on I settled into it.'

'It was all such an unknown entity, and no-one really knows how good or to what benefit it will all be until those final marks are received... The stress is certainly there to begin with, but it then recedes a little...The Patchwork Text certainly helps you maintain the pace of the work, as you are sharing your work and ideas, and obtaining feedback from other members in your group.'

'Because this module was so different I didn't really pick it up until quite late, after time had been wasted. I did enjoy some tasks more than others, because it made the module really interesting, instead of the usual boring stuff.'

'Most of us were initially pleased that we would not be sweating over a typewriter at the last minute, but we shared mixed feelings as the module progressed. I personally found the task of evolving from writing academically to writing more personally very difficult... One positive aspect, I agree was the groups we were in. I was so lucky – our group was great.'

4) Agreed with the implication in the letter that the Patchwork Text format is not preferable to other formats:-

Number: 1 (2%).

'I found it difficult to write a piece of writing each week instead of an assignment at the end, as I am one of those people that work better under pressure and deadlines. I became confused as to the style I was meant to be writing and following reading others' pieces of work tried to copy them if I felt my particular style was wrong, i.e. too academic, too personal, etc.'

Summary of the 'Critical Letter Evaluation'

When the students were invited to agree with a persuasively phrased critical view of the unfamiliar Patchwork Text assignment, we were encouraged to find that no fewer than 79% of them chose to reject the invitation and, instead, to articulate an enthusiastic endorsement of the advantages of the new format. In general, it seemed to be agreed by an overwhelming majority that the letter correctly expressed what had been *initial* worries, but that these worries had quite quickly been surmounted through experience of the process of the work. For a further 21% of the students the Patchwork Text assignment seemed to have been a mixed experience: their responses were not, overall, negative or critical, but they did note difficulties as well as benefits (see heading 3 above). Only one student out of 47 clearly suggested that she / he would have preferred a conventional assignment.

**COMPARING INTELLECTUAL ACHIEVEMENT ACROSS THE TWO
ASSIGNMENT FORMATS (ESSAY AND PATCHWORK TEXT)**

The purpose of this analysis was to find out whether we can draw conclusions as to whether the Patchwork Text assessment format had been more effective than the previous Essay format in fostering educationally desirable intellectual qualities. This is a slightly different issue than whether we had achieved the aims we had initially formulated (which is addressed in a later section). Although those aims are, we feel, educationally sound and significant, we also wanted to find out how we would answer potentially sceptical colleagues, who might want to know whether the Patchwork Text allows students to demonstrate equally well the intellectual qualities characteristic of the essay form itself, i.e. those that are already recognised and agreed within the academic community. In other words, would we be able to answer critics 'on their own ground', so to speak?

Our method was as follows.

First, we read through the work of the previous cohort of students undertaking this module, who had written an essay-type final assignment and had been awarded a fairly high grade, i.e. an A or a B (approximately 30% of the total cohort). From this material we created descriptive statements of the intellectual qualities we generally hope students will demonstrate. Each statement that we finally agreed upon was illustrated by a quotation from one of the essays.

Second, a 'marking scheme' was devised in relation to the statements:

0 = quality not demonstrated

1 = quality demonstrated, but only in a rather minimal fashion

2 = quality demonstrated in an 'impressive' way.

(These judgements were made within our experience of the 'Honours Degree Level'; i.e. what we thought one might reasonably expect from these students on this course. Assessing the qualities as either 'minimal' or 'impressive' led to some difficult decisions, but in the end this created better agreement between us than when we attempted to add intermediate categories.)

Third, a sample of four assignments was analysed separately by both RW and LS to check that we were able to agree a similar interpretation of the assignments in relation to the statements concerning intellectual qualities. This resulted in the reduction in the number of statements and a refinement of their wording.

Finally, we compared the assignments of the two cohorts of students (those who wrote a final essay-type assignment and those who produced a Patchwork Text) in two ways, To begin with, we compared the average score of the assignments in the two cohorts. In the end we agreed on seven intellectual qualities, so the maximum score for any assignment, if it demonstrated all seven qualities in an impressive way, was 14. Assignments were thus, in a sense given a mark out of 14. Then we compared the 'profile' of average scores for the different qualities in the two cohorts, in order to see whether the two assignment formats seemed to have encouraged a different 'balance' of intellectual qualities. Here, the maximum average score for each quality is 2, indicating that *all* scripts had demonstrated this quality in an 'impressive' way. Half of each cohort of assignments was analysed by RW and half by LS, as a further check on the reliability of the method, in that conclusions are only presented when they were reached independently with respect to the two halves of the total sample. (However, the statistics in the table below refer to the two halves combined.)

Seven Desirable Intellectual Qualities (derived from Essay-type assignments)

- 1) Explains concepts / theories clearly and fully, and elaborates their significance (EXP)
- 2) Presents clearly the complexities and dilemmas inherent in situations and ideas (COMP)
- 3) Illustrates arguments with clear and relevant reference to a wide range of literature (LIT)
- 4) Uses theoretical concepts to develop critical awareness of professional experience (THP)
- 5) Effectively compares different perspectives in order to bring out their significant points of similarity and contrast (COCO)
- 6) Presents clear critical arguments or questions in relation to a particular theory / perspective (CRIT)
- 7) Presents theoretical arguments / professional experiences in ways which demonstrate independent thinking (IND)

Results

Table 1: Comparison of average scores for assignments in relation to all seven qualities:

(Each assignment was assessed in relation to the seven qualities above. If an assignment demonstrated a quality in an impressive way it would gain a score of 2 (see above). So the maximum score for an assignment was 14 (7 X 2).

Type of Assessment	Average (maximum 14)
Patchwork cohort scores N=50	10.08
Essay cohort score N=50	8.58

Table 1 thus suggests that on average the Patchwork Text assignments seemed to score higher than the Essay assignments according to criteria that were originally derived from the intellectually desirable qualities demonstrated in the best work within the Essay format – clearly an encouraging result,

Table 2: Comparison of average scores (maximum 2) of each quality separately. (The total score under each quality was divided by the number of assignments in the cohort. The maximum of 2 would have scored if *all* assignments in the cohort had demonstrated the quality in an impressive way.)

Type of assessment	EXP	COMP	LIT	THP	COCO	CRIT	IND
Patchwork Cohort N=50	1.6	1.36	1.28	1.34	1.14	1.62	1.74
Essay Cohort N=50	1.64	1.06	1.34	1.16	1.2	0.98	1.2

Table 2 seems to suggest that the Patchwork Text assignment format was rather more successful than the Essay format in encouraging students to:

- Present clearly the complexities and dilemmas inherent in situations and idea (COMP)
- Present clear critical arguments or questions in relation to a particular theory / perspective (CRIT)
- Demonstrate independent thinking (IND)

Table 2 also suggests that the students using the Patchwork Text format did not seem to perform worse than the students writing a final essay according to any of the other intellectual qualities identified as desirable.

Clearly, the interpretation of data such as this is always open to question, and we would only wish to claim that this comparison would offer no support to (and might indeed begin to refute) those who might wish to argue that the Patchwork Text may be popular with students, but that it does not really test the intellectual qualities associated with the writing of a successful essay.

Table 3: Comparison of the distribution of scores in relation to the seven intellectual qualities. (The maximum score is 14 - see table 1 above)

	0-5	6-10	11-14
Patchwork Cohort N=50	8% (4)	48% (24)	44% (22)
Essay Cohort N=50	24% (12)	42% (21)	34% (17)

Explanation: Table 3 shows the percentage of students in the two cohorts who obtained a given score in relation to the seven qualities used to assess the intellectual quality of their work. The results are given in three bands, i.e. scores of 0-5 (poor), 6-10 (satisfactory), 11-14 (good). The Table shows that the main difference between the two cohorts is in the lowest range of scores, i.e. that in comparison with the essay assignment the Patchwork Text format seems be more effective in helping students to avoid a poor result. This is an encouraging finding in the light of our intention that the Patchwork text assignment should be a form of assessment that is 'inclusive' as well as intellectually demanding, and would thus contribute to expanding access to higher education qualifications.

DID INTRODUCING THE PATCHWORK TEXT ACHIEVE WHAT WE HOPED?

On Page 6 above, we outlined what we aimed to achieve by introducing the Patchwork Text assignment. In this final section we re-visit those aims to evaluate how far they have been achieved. (The material in this section draws in part on the replies by the patchwork text student cohort to the same questions as the pre-patchwork text cohort, listed on pp. 2- 3 above.)

Our initial reaction on reading and marking the Patchwork Text assignments was one of enjoyment and surprise at their variety and independent thinking. Students were certainly displaying *'more individual variety of approach and theme'* (Aim 6), were *'more reflective'* (Aim 1) and more *'explorative and self-questioning'* (Aim 7). This was encouraging, both in addressing Lesley's initial concerns about 'coaching' students and in suggesting that the students had moved away from the mere regurgitation of other people's theories so evident in the essays. This was also reflected in the student's comments:

'I enjoyed writing the different patches and felt for the first time my own personal learning and experiences were relevant.'

'It is difficult, and a little unnerving to be encouraged to write in the first person. However, I believe my personal response is far more enquiring and questioning than I believed possible.'

'This method at first seemed too easy, however in some ways it is more difficult than more traditional academic assessments as it involves challenging your own beliefs and attitudes.'

Students comments (confirmed by our judgements of their work) also suggested that their assignments drew on *'a variety of writing styles'* (Aim 8):

'Each patch met its objective in enabling me to use a different writing style. It also improved my writing skills which has helped me with other modules.'

Our comparative analysis suggested that the Patchwork Text format enabled students to discuss the complexities and dilemmas inherent in situations and ideas, to present clear critical arguments or questions in relation to a particular theory / perspective and to demonstrate independent thinking. This led us to believe one further aim was achieved, namely that of *'presenting ideas more tentatively, with a greater sense of questioning and exploring issues'* (Aim 5):-

'I have developed into a more complex and critical thinker. I have learnt more about different forms of knowledge (albeit limited) and have more questions (but not answers) to consider in relation to my practice.'

We also hoped that the process of teaching and learning would enable students to ‘*start from their own experiences and use theory to question and explore their experience, rather than simply using theories to categorise their experience*’ (Aim 6). And indeed, students commented positively on the value we placed on their previous learning and professional experiences and like Boud (1988, p 23) saw this as important in developing more independent thinking. Such independence was evidenced in their writing and also in group discussions where students engaged in rich explorations of professional situations.

One of the most challenging and creative task of the Patchwork Text is the final piece of writing, where students are asked to write a reflexive commentary illustrating their own sense of the coherence and significance of the module concepts. This is, of course, the task that is designed to create a ‘*synthesis of students’ learning* (Aim 2) and to provide an opportunity for students to examine ‘*the relationship between the concepts, rather than exploring each separately*’ (Aim 3).

By this stage in their writing we found most students were more confident and engaged writers. However, they were also under considerable pressure to complete two other assignments (for other modules) and this, together with the demanding nature of the writing, led to quite disappointing results. Students often summarised rather than explored their ‘personal journey of learning’, and for some students this was their most rushed and least engaged piece of writing. We have responded by making our expectations for this task clearer, by adding a focus on the key concepts of the module. Thus, our guideline for Task 7 now reads:

(Final synthesis) A retrospective summary :-looking back on your various pieces of writing how would you personally sum up the relationship between research, knowledge and practice in your professional experiences.

(This should be compared with the original version which appears on p. 6, above.) We will also allocate more time for this piece of writing so students can benefit from reading and reflecting on each other’s work.

In our earlier evaluation of the traditional essay we pointed out that students often complained about feeling constrained to leave out some of the topics, especially those presented later, so that there were aspects of the course which they still felt they didn't fully understand (see pp. 3-4 above). Thus, in designing the tasks for the Patchwork Text we

wanted to ensure that students wrote about all the topics covered and met all the learning outcomes (Aim 4).

This aim was not difficult to achieve, for it merely necessitates what Biggs (1999) would call 'aligning' learning objectives, teaching methods and the assessment. However, what students valued most positively was an assessment structure enabling them to write about, and reflect upon, each area of their learning; an aim not achieved by the previous (essay) assignment:-

'Due to the individual style of this module I have written what I thought about each of the topics covered. This is so different from other modules where you find you just write about two or three topics'.

What is rather more difficult to achieve is an assessment format that integrates (rather than merely 'aligns') teaching methods with autonomous and self critical learning. It will be recalled that one of Lesley's dilemmas was the disjunction between her commitment to promoting autonomous learning and her feeling that she needed to 'coach' students to pass the traditional essay. Her experience of the Patchwork Text format was quite different in that she found herself less likely to resort to coaching, partly because (somewhat paradoxically, given the central role of the Patchwork Text writing tasks) students appeared less assignment-focused and more engaged with the learning process. This change might be explained, at least partly, by the way sharing writings provides students with the 'space' to develop their own learning about different writing styles and professional experiences and thus deflects attention away from the anxieties associated with the single summative assignment. The role of the tutor here becomes, centrally, providing a structured and safe but not constraining environment, in which students can explore, reflect upon, and revise their own learning.

Critics may, of course, interpret such structuring as exerting even greater (if more subtle) control, providing students with even less autonomy over the pacing and content of their written work. Our reply to such criticism is that writing (and learning from that writing) is an exacting discipline and if, as Brown et. al. (1996, pp142-3) suggests, assignments are to become an integral part of the learning process then very careful structuring and pacing of the learning environment is needed.

There are also two important points to be made concerning the issue of improving access to higher education. First, we found that more than half the assignments exhibited different levels of competence across the various tasks, i.e. they did some sections better than others. (We are differentiating this group from those whose work was roughly at the same level

throughout and from a relatively small number whose work showed 'progress' towards a higher level of work in the later pieces of writing, compared to the earlier pieces.) It was also clear that work of most of the students who achieved a high mark overall was *consistently* of a high standard, whereas it was the rather weaker students whose work tended to exhibit a difference in level. In other words, the ability of the weaker students to manifest their understanding in written work seemed to depend on the *type* of written work they were asked to undertake. This seems to be evidence that the *variety of types of writing* in the Patchwork format does indeed help to weaker students to do justice to their grasp of the issues, as we had originally hoped.

Second, there is the issue of the 'invisible weak' student, who (we hoped) would be more easily identified and supported early in the module as a result of the Patchwork Text process. Previous experience suggested that such students often respond to the demands of academic work by keeping a low profile, starting assignments late and missing tutorials. The Patchwork Text format, in contrast, makes such strategies difficult to adopt. For example, given that all students are engaged in some writing by the second week of the module, 'task avoidance' is not an option. Indeed, in our experience, it was extremely rare for students not to complete their task on time and, barring sickness, the attendance rate was 100%. All students attended tutorials and there were fewer requests than in previous years for 'assignment recipes'. It was as if the process of sharing writing with peers engendered a sense of reciprocity, which was morally binding for all students. The context for such reciprocity, i.e. small learning groups, also allows the 'invisible weak' student to become more visible. It is a place where students can express anxieties, gain support and try to make sense of what may appear as 'alien' concepts and theories:

'Initially I was apprehensive and felt I didn't have the skills of the 'academics' in the group. But by the next week I felt at ease and enjoyed the group work immensely. I found I was able to develop my writing with their support and understand difficult concepts'.

Perhaps the most telling indication that we had addressed the problem of the 'invisible weak student' was that there were no unexpected failures: unlike in previous years, all students passed the assignment.

CONCLUSION

Applied epistemology is not really community nurses' favourite topic. They often start the 'Perspectives on Research in Professional Practice' module expecting it to be 'difficult', 'academic', 'boring' or even 'dismal'. Nevertheless, students usually overcome these initial attitudes and even before the introduction of the Patchwork Text format the module was seen as one that was 'working well.' Starting from this already positive threshold, we are encouraged by the further positive impact of the Patchwork Text assignment format on students' level of engagement and enjoyment of the learning process in this module. This positive evaluation has three dimensions, as indicated below, which summarise the material we have presented in this article.

Firstly, our comparative analysis suggests that the Patchwork Text assignment format was more successful than the Essay format in encouraging students to present the complexities and dilemmas inherent in situations and ideas, to present critical arguments or questions and to demonstrate independent thinking.

Secondly, the Patchwork Text encouraged these intellectually demanding qualities without alienating 'weaker students', so that when comparing the intellectual quality of the assignments only four Patchwork Text students compared to twelve in the Essay cohort fell into the lowest range of scores. From these results we tentatively suggest that the Patchwork Text may be both a more rigorous and yet also a more 'inclusive' form of assessment than the traditional Essay.

Thirdly, when students were invited to agree with a persuasively phrased critical view of the Patchwork Text assignment, nearly 80% of them chose to reject the invitation and, instead, to articulate an enthusiastic endorsement of the advantages of the new format. What students liked most about the new format was the pacing of the assignment, the opportunity to digest and reflect upon new learning and finally to receive feedback from their peers about their written work. These are all features which Gibbs (1999, pp43-7) and Rust (2002, pp 153-4) identify as central to how students learn 'best'.

Of course not all students responded with equal enthusiasm to the Patchwork Text format, and providing a 'safe and constructive' environment for collaborative learning requires constant revision. And we fully recognise that the sort of comparative data we have provided here can never be more than suggestive. Nevertheless, inspired by the overwhelmingly enthusiastic response of our students, we feel confident that the change to

the Patchwork Text assignment has enabled us to take a substantial step forward in integrating the assessment process with responsive teaching and with autonomous and self-critical learning.

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