

Inclusive Assessment & Standards: Case Study

Case Study Title: Enquiry Based Learning and Assessment: *Authentic, Universal and Accessible*

Organisation: Dundalk Institute of Technology

Background: My name is Anita, and I am a midwife lecturer and programme director in the Section of Midwifery at Dundalk Institute of Technology (DkIT). The Section of Midwifery in DkIT facilitates two full-time Level 8 midwifery programmes and four part-time (professional development) programmes. In recent years, the growth in diversity among midwifery students, has required a re-imagining of how learning can be enhanced for all learners. This heightened need to accommodate diversity within professional programmes, is also reflected in the recent 'Guidance on the Provision of Reasonable Accommodations on Practice-based Placements in Professionally Accredited Programmes' (Waters and Rath, 2022). As diversity in learning needs grows, the barriers that learners may face in entering and remaining within the midwifery profession, are gaining increasing acknowledgement and affirmative action. Within this enlightened landscape, midwifery education has needed to adapt and accommodate diverse learning and assessment modalities, on multiple fronts, i.e. within the classroom, within lab/simulation, and within clinical settings. Each of these areas is vital to student success, however, a pervasive challenge within professional education programmes, like midwifery, is integrating theory (know that), to practice (know how) (Huston et al., 2018; Saifan et al., 2021). Midwifery students with additional learning needs, may experience more profound challenges on this front (Waters and Rath, 2022). Revising curriculum design and delivery, to ensure that all students can optimise demonstration of their integration of theory to practice, through inclusive assessment, is a key intention of midwifery education.

Aims: Integrating theory to practice, while at the same time, accommodating increasing diversity in learner needs, and fostering assessment authenticity and inclusivity, might appear a challenging ask for educators. However, Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles, provide a coherent framework to scaffold inclusive learning and assessment, within professional education programmes (CAST, 2024). In its simplest form, UDL is a mechanism that offers more choice to learners. Choice in how students engage with their learning (engagement), choice in how students use learning resources (representation), and choice in how students demonstrate their learning (action/expression). Each of these principles empowers learners to work with their strengths, and behoves educators to facilitate more inclusive approaches to learning and assessment. One such UDL educational approach, that has potential to optimise theory/practice integration, and foster assessment authenticity, literacy and inclusivity, is Enquiry Based Learning. Enquiry Based Learning (EBL), utilises real world scenarios, and harnesses peer teaching, to enable students to critically consider how their learning can be applied to practice. In doing so, students also critically consider how *they* can best demonstrate their learning, ensuring that assessment is

student centred, authentic, valid, and inclusive (Byrne et al., 2018). Both *product* (what is learned) and *process* (how learning occurs) are assessed. To illustrate, working in small groups, students are given a 'real world' case/scenario. Together, they must discover how to best approach the case, and how knowledge/skills gained from learning about the case, can be demonstrated. Students are graded on the knowledge/skills demonstrated (*product*), and also, on how they worked together (*process*), ensuring that marking is individualised and transparent. EBL embraces all of the UDL principles, most especially, multiple means of action/expression (inclusive assessment). Recognising that group work, and group assessment, may challenge some students, Sturgess (2020) developed principles of good practice for supporting students to work with their peers, these principles underpin all EBL group work and assessment. By using real world scenarios and demonstrating / assessing learning in a simulated space, opportunities to link theory and practice are optimised for students, and assessment becomes manageable, meaningful and comprehensible.

Implementation: Enquiry Based Learning has been a feature of Midwifery Education in DkIT since 2009, and two doctoral studies have been undertaken to examine the impacts / validity of this approach among undergraduate and postgraduate learners. In more recent times, the drive towards UDL and valuing diversity in learning and assessment, have reinforced the relevance and applicability of EBL as an inclusive learning, teaching and assessment approach. Currently, EBL features in years 1,2 and 3 of the undergraduate midwifery programme, and in all semesters of the postgraduate midwifery programme. Since its introduction, formal and informal student feedback have contributed to agile, iterative adjustments to the approach, that continue to respond to, and enhance the student learning and assessment experiences.

Assessment appraises both *product* and *process*. Multiple modes of *product* demonstration (action/expression), are available to students, and these are all constructively aligned to module / programme learning outcomes, ensuring validity and rigor. *Process* assessment takes the form of peer and self-assessment, enabling assessment of, for, and as, learning. These assessment strategies are student centred, authentic, robust and inclusive. They also enhance assessment literacy, and facilitate constructive and contemporaneous student feedback. Constructive and contemporaneous feedback must be included as a core feature of inclusive assessment (Tai *et al.*, 2023).

Outcomes: Fifteen years of EBL implementation has resulted in significant learning for all involved. Students have valued the approach on multiple fronts, i.e. enhanced engagement, authentic learning and assessment, transferable skills, critical thinking and overall enjoyment. Faculty facilitators have also offered their considered opinions on the approach. Substantive outcomes based on both doctoral studies and formative feedback, reveal that EBL assessments accommodate individualised learning pace, enhance meaningfulness of knowledge and skills, and, with contemporaneous feedback, facilitate constructivist, individualised, learning opportunities:

“EBL is basically what you’re going to be doing when you’re out on the wards”

“The feedback makes the information stick in your brain more”

“It was suitable and very good as we were constantly learning and different types of assessment was used”

Whilst EBL assessment embraces the principles of UDL inclusivity, the approach is not without challenge. The requirement for equitable group effort in assessment can present difficulties, and students can sometimes feel frustrated by inequity (Chang, and Brickman, 2018). To minimise this, EBL needs to be well planned, structured and supported. Various mechanisms and supports can be put in place to enhance student learning and assessment through EBL. These include, but are not limited to, managing expectations prior to assessment, student agreement on effort / attendance / demonstration of learning, contemporaneous individual and group feedback, good facilitator/facilitation skills, provision of assessment rubrics, peer and self-assessment, and pastoral support.

EBL continues to be supported and promoted within the Section of Midwifery, and Department of Nursing, Midwifery and Early Years, in DkIT. With the increasing drive towards enhanced inclusivity in assessment, EBL presents a viable option for inclusive assessment at scale.

Reflections: EBL is not the panacea for inclusive assessment. However, the approach offers students the opportunity for increased choice, enhanced diversity, transparency, fidelity, and constructive, contemporaneous feedback, which are defining attributes of assessment inclusivity (Tai *et al.*, 2023). Embedded within UDL principles, the evidence base underpinning EBL is extensive and expansive. What works well, is the authenticity of assessment, and real world application of knowledge and skills through multiple means of action and expression, coupled with constructive and contemporaneous feedback. Students engage with their learning and assessment because they see relevance and worth in demonstrating what they have learned (Sharma *et al.*, 2023). Each EBL assessment builds upon previous assessments through constructive feedback and considered design, ensuring that learning is scaffolded, and new knowledge and skills are compounded. Fidelity and transparency are ensured through provision of clear guidance, constructive alignment to learning outcomes, discussion of assessment rubrics and involvement of peer and self-assessment processes. Nonetheless, EBL learning and assessment methods are not without challenge. As previously mentioned, there may be a level of discomfort in becoming accustomed to this alternative educational modality. Both students and faculty can experience initial dissonance with the approach, and the need for prior planning and preparation for all involved, should not be underestimated. To ensure that EBL learning and assessment work well, all stakeholders need to be fully aware of, and familiar with:

- how EBL is facilitated
- how EBL is assessed
- what are the roles of facilitator and learner
- how peer and self-assessment confer individualised grading, optimising equity of effort and transparency of marking, and finally,
- the absolute need for contemporaneous and constructive feedback.

EBL and UDL are dynamic processes. They are always open to, and welcome opportunities for change and enhancement. This need for agility and revision can be unsettling, and there is a clear requirement for all to have 'trust in the process'. Championing inclusive learning, teaching, assessment and feedback takes effort, and no small degree of faith in its underlying principles. We make a path by travelling, and inclusivity in assessment is a path worth taking.

References

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