

Education for mental health case study

Vivas

Dr Ann Kirkman

University of Derby



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Context

In our Education for Mental Health co-creation panel research, we found that students liked and often flourished in different types of assessment. Overall, our research discovered that there was not one form of assessment preferred by all students. Viva assessments have been found to be an effective assessment method for students. A viva is an oral exam, during which examiners pose questions based on the student's work (1). This assessment format has been shown to be effective at developing a deeper approach to learning and students were found to have a greater motivation to learn the topic area (2).

In this case study, the Learning Journey module was assessed by a viva, the subject of the viva was 'The student and their experiences of learning throughout the programme'

The viva

The module focused on Theories of Learning and involved self-reflection of their teaching. The viva concentrated on students' understanding of their own learning journey in the context of the programme. There wasn't any requirement for the students to have produced any written work prior to the viva.

During the viva, students were asked four questions for which they had previously prepared and discussed in class sessions. Three questions were created by the module team and the fourth question was co-created with the students using the assessment criteria. This was to ensure questions would support the students to achieve the learning outcomes of the module. Additionally, the students had some agency in their assessment. Groups often came up with more than one question and the academic team allowed them to choose which question they would take individually.

Students were invited into the 10-minute viva where two academics led the assessment. Each student gave a short presentation (using props if they so wished) followed by answering the four questions. Research by Fulton and Schweitzer in 2011 (3) found that giving students choice or flexibility over their assessment enhanced their learning experience and module performance. The academic team observed that students chose a variety of ways to communicate their learning journey.

Pedagogy approach

This model was founded on critical pedagogy - students were able to bring their authentic selves to the room and seek out theoretical positions which aligned with their experience (4).

The students were prepared for this type of assessment through scaffolded oral assessment at each stage of the student journey. This module allowed them to reflect on what they had learned, how they understood their learning through a theoretical lens and what it meant for them as future practitioners in education. The assessment also supported a critical evaluation of the structural issues of education, how success and failure are defined and framed and how that plays out in an individual's self-concept.

Outcomes of the module

Key module information	
Typical intake	35 students
Format	Face to Face
Level of study	Level 6
Assessment	10-minute viva with four questions
Assessment feedback	Feedback verbally in the viva and written feedback after the viva
Teaching staff	Lecturers
Duration/frequency	12 weeks (Weekly)

Challenges

- + Before the viva, many students were anxious and felt challenged by the thought of an oral exam. The students were supported throughout the module, with one-to-one meetings, given the questions in advance of the viva and given time to practise presenting within the seminars. These measures helped the students feel less anxious about the viva assessment. Additionally, one of the questions was co-constructed by the students in the classroom before the viva. The students were also allowed to bring notes into the viva. However, the students were free to choose how they presented their learning journey, for example, props, diagrams, PowerPoint, verbally etc.
- + Several students found it difficult to reflect positively about themselves and their teaching before the viva, however, the reflective element of the viva allowed them to learn to do so. Pence and Macgillivray (5) found that students using reflection contributed to their professional and personal growth.

Advice for other academics

- + Prepare students before the viva. Scaffold their learning by having similar types of activities early in their degree, such as presentations. Scaffolding their learning will help students to communicate their ideas effectively at an individual level.
 - + Let students co-create at least one of their questions before they undertake the viva. This will help them understand the marking criteria of the module and the viva.
 - + Be clear and prepare the students as to how the viva is going to run and what the criteria for the viva are.
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Contact us

General enquiries

+44 (0) 3300 416201

enquiries@advance-he.ac.uk

www.advance-he.ac.uk

Media enquiries

+44 (0) 1904 717500

communications@advance-he.ac.uk

www.advance-he.ac.uk/contact-us

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