Love over fear: an experience of assessment

At Ashridge we have always felt that our mission with assessment should be to try to ‘overcome fear by developing love’. Although assessments need to be rigorous, equitable tests of the achievement of a particular competence, we also want our assessments to be important learning opportunities. The latter means that our assessments need to provide safety and security so that candidates feel they can be vulnerable and experiment, while at the same time remaining rigorous and open-ended.

Some of our qualifications are passed by less than two-thirds of the candidates at first attempt, although we always offer students the opportunity to retake a ‘licence to practise’ and aim to be more successful next time.

This article illustrates our experimentation of marrying rigour with authenticity, allowing the love of learning to overcome the burning desire to succeed. In October 2018, Robin Shohet was asked to moderate the final accreditation for our supervision postgraduate diploma at Ashridge/Hult Business School. He wrote up his experiences, sent them to his co-moderator David Birch, who added his own impressions and they in turn sent them to the director of studies, Erik de Haan, and finally the candidates themselves.

Here, we each give our highly personal perspective on this unique experiment, trying to convey our experience of the day and to inquire into what might have contributed to its success.

Robin Shohet (external moderator)

My purpose in writing this short piece was to challenge conventional ways of assessing, which I believe are unconsciously designed to keep those assessing in a position of power under the guise of maintaining standards. What this teaches students is how to ‘second guess’ the examiners, to divine their ‘currency’ and give them what they want in order to pass; a legacy from our school examination system, which there is no need to perpetuate.

As an external moderator for the Ashridge supervision postgraduate diploma, I was asked to read written work by the five students and grade them, along with three other tutors, before the live practice assessment day. On the day in question, I, along with one other staff member from the course, met with the five applicants. Each was to make a 20-minute recording of a supervision session in another room, which was live streamed to us, the two assessors and four other students. All seven of us remained for the entire day, watching and giving feedback.

After checking with the other moderator, we agreed that I would introduce the day by telling the candidates that they had all passed. There immediately followed a catharsis of laughter and relief. I noticed that I felt a little uneasy – as if the words had not really landed, so I fed that back to the candidates and added that there were no tricks but the mind can tell us things...
I believe the assessment for qualification is very much like the preparation for a wedding: a full and consummate union with a new profession, culminating in a sense of obligation and a freedom to act, as well as other festivities and love-making.

In a wider sense, we want to help reduce the abuse of power in the helping professions by growing the ability to 'contain' fear, anxiety and self-doubt. We have not always been so successful as on this particular day. Often, we oscillate in the swirling turmoil between Scylla and Charybdis (the mythical sea monsters in Homer's Odyssey where, if you manage to avoid one, you will have to confront the other):

- On the one hand, the pure drive and rigid nature of the assessments, as exemplified by many of our professional associations, where one uploads robust feedback and most personal work, only to receive a dismissive half-page of impersonal feedback, or worse, where assessment is carried out in secret and one only hears from one's supervisor that one is 'unfortunately not ready yet' without receiving much grudging and customarily, judgment.

- On the other hand, the Rogersian idea of asking all candidates to give themselves the final mark: Rogers asks us in this provocative and- I- am- too way with all-up down teaching, with examinations and assessment, and even with 'degrees' as externally driven standards.

Our accreditors are usually anxious to pass all candidates, and we would dread the moment when we would find evidence that more learning was required in order to meet the standards. At that point we would still draw on our love for the participant and the profession to speak our truth fearlessly and mitigate the shock of the unwelcome news. However, in the field of love, even too much is often not enough, as in Mozart's opera 'The Marriage of Figaro'. Figaro famously ponders during the intrigues leading up to his wedding, his own celebration of personal love.

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Karen Griffin

I experienced the accreditation day as being full of support and love. The decision to announce that, providing we didn’t do anything extremely wrong, on the basis of our written submissions we had all already passed, was liberating. The work of today was therefore going to be about ‘the mark’ and giving and receiving constructive feedback. I felt a sense of relief and excitement. The metaphorical distance between the assessors and ourselves seemed to close and in that moment it felt like all of us were, in essence, ‘one team’.

The day was an absolute pleasure. While my positive feedback was based on the whole live supervision session, I felt that wherever it landed, it would be OK. As I write, I recall that despite this, I was still ‘holding’ back a little, trying to be the ‘professional’ supervisor, which led me adopting certain ‘formal’ behaviours, which I don’t actually do. I was still slightly apprehensive before my accreditation day, I felt disturbingly tense. But after Robin conscientiously explained their rationale, I was able to believe it and feel relieved, happy and a bit suspicious all at once. My previous experiences rang distant warning bells. Before my first live supervision session, I felt that wherever it landed, it would be OK. As I write, I recall that despite this, I was still holding back. My previous experiences rang distant warning bells.

The way in which the college responded was so robust and open, in ways I hadn’t anticipated. The whole day seemed to close and in that moment it felt like all of us were, in essence, ‘one team’. Arne Hemkes

As assessors, we are aware we need to hold the power entrusted to us in this role with the utmost care and humility. We need to be firm and containing, but we also need to be open to scrutiny, such as through an Appeals and Complaints process. Such a process was in place here through standard QAA practices: the Ashridge Postgraduate Diploma in Organisational Supervision is a higher education degree.

As Robin writes, this is the report of one successful experiment benefiting from the high performance that all these five candidates had shown at earlier modules of the programme. Our nagging question remains, what if that performance had been more equivocal, what if we did question in advance the maturity or competence of even one of these candidates for becoming qualified supervisors? We have always made sure that as part of the supervision accreditation we also assessed the accreditors, but of course this had been a less fateful assessment than that of the candidates themselves.

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We believe our next experiment, perhaps with a group where we are not so sure if all are ready to become qualified supervisors, could be to try to make the assessment a truly collegiate day, and invite all candidates to contribute to the assessment of each colleague. This will be difficult for us to hold together and contain, and to help all present to take part in such challenging and responsible assessments, but it would certainly be worth the effort in our view.

David Birch

David Birch is a qualified team and executive coach, supervisor, psychotherapist and mediator with over 30 years’ international business experience helping individuals and teams make a difference to the world. His practice is founded on the understanding that change occurs within and through relationships. He is a faculty member on Ashridge’s acclaimed MSc in Executive Coaching and PG Diploma in Organisational Supervision programmes. His work was recognised with an EFMD gold award for Organisational Development in 2015.

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Professor Erik de Haan is leader of the Ashridge MSc in Executive Coaching and the PG Diploma in Organisational Supervision, and director of the Ashridge Centre for Coaching at Hult International Business School. He has written 12 books, most recently Critical Moments in Executive Coaching (Routledge, 2019), and almost 200 articles. He is also a psychodynamic psychotherapist and professor of organisation development and coaching at Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam.

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Robin Shohet is co-author of Supervision in the Helping Professions (Open University Press 4th edition 2012) and editor of Passionate Supervision: Supervision as Transformation and Supervision in the Helping Professions. He is currently editing a book, Love in the NHS: Stories of Caring, Kindness and Compassion, which will be published in 2020. He is committed to helping to reduce fear in the workplace and introducing a spiritual dimension to his work as a supervisor, trainer and consultant.

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Leen Lambrechts, Karen Griffin, Marjan Timmer, Arne Hemkes and Ineke Duit, who were candidates in the assessment, are qualified professionals in both coaching and supervision and conduct their independent consultancy businesses/practices in Belgium, UK and the Netherlands, respectively.

References


Counsellor-to-coach Tim Jones

and coach-to-counsellor Catherine Noel reflect on how the shadow shows up on their learning journey and consider how privilege and hierarchy impact their work.