



Grand designs for assessment: Fieldtrip consultancy

James Derounian

INFORMATION ABOUT THE CLASS, MODULE OR PROGRAMME

Discipline

The case study comes from the field of Community Development (CD), but could be applied to many practical and vocational subjects.

Context

The context for this assessment relates to a second year undergraduate extended fieldweek on the Isle of Lewis, in the Outer Hebrides (Scotland). Students, in groups of four, are required to prepare and present a consultancy report to representatives from the Western Isles Council and other stakeholders, at the end of the fieldweek, in Stornoway. This relates to the potential development of wind farms on the island.

The students are studying (as distance learners and campus-based students) at the University of Gloucestershire, in SW England.

Learners

There are fourteen level II undergraduate students taking part in this activity during April 2007. These are mainly distance learners, studying Diplomas in Local Policy part-time, who are scattered across England and Wales. Most are clerks to a local parish, town or community council.

RATIONALE IN TERMS OF EDUCATIONAL IDEAS

Underpinning theoretical principles

The principles underpinning the development and implementation of this assessment approach relate to 'active learning':

“Active learning focuses on inquiry in the field, studio, laboratory and classroom using real sites, community-related and employer-linked activities. More than simply 'learning by doing', our approach enables students to construct theoretical understanding through reflection on practical activities. It is particularly effective with the Department's diverse student body, including disabled students, mature students and distance learners.” <http://www.glos.ac.uk/ceal/> [accessed online 2 March 2007]

Pedagogical intent of the assessment

The pedagogic intent in relation to this group consultancy is several-fold:

First to encourage group working amongst geographically scattered students; so consultancy preparation prior to physically visiting Lewis is engendered through WebCT group endeavour; a residential school; video conference with W Isles staff and academics; plus independent study and Internet trawl.



Second, the consultancy constitutes a topical, 'real' focus for the students' study of Local Policy. It also draws on the study of European, national, regional and local policies, programmes and projects - which form part of the learning OUTCOMES FOR THE Local Policy and Community Development fields of study. Third, students can draw on their own local knowledge and understanding of wind power proposals to inform their review of these major windfarm proposals. Fourth, students are required and encouraged to undertake extensive independent study.

Drivers for the use of this assessment

A key driver for the use of this assessment is the fact that this is a 'live' issue, due for resolution during Spring 2007. So students' field visit, in April 2007 enables them to feed in to (Scottish Executive) final arbitration on the windfarm proposals, and facilitates exposure to debate as part of Scottish Parliament elections taking place in Spring 2007. It also grows from the author's external examiner networking with colleagues from the UHI (Millennium Institute) based in Stornoway. Thus enabling links and contributions from key players in the decision-making process - officers at the W Isles Council, key civil servants in the Scottish Executive, the windfarm developer etc. It also brings together Scots and English/Welsh students to share information and perspectives on this topical issue.

Furthermore the windfarm consultancy assignment lends a sharp focus and appropriate purpose to the field week. The consultancy format also fits with the role and function of many of the students as parish clerks - who are required to present committee reports, talk to agenda items and advise councillors on politically sensitive decisions.

HOW THE ASSESSMENT WAS PUT INTO PRACTICE

This is covered in preceding sections. But briefly, the assignment was introduced well (months) in advance of the official start date of the module. This has enabled students (and staff) to evolve their thinking and materials relevant to the windfarm (assignment) consultancy, and to secure significant resources - committee papers, agency/stakeholder submissions e.g. by securing stakeholder submissions of evidence via the 'Freedom of Information Act'. The assignment also enables students to make a constructive input to the island they are visiting and studying rather than the 'extractive' model of field trips whereby visits are made and information absorbed but little may be returned to the hosts.

Materials and methods used

As above. But in particular WebCT for networking; video conferencing with key players prior to the field visit; field and preparatory notes in the form a reflective log-book; project visits - for example to the prospective wind farm sites in the company of the developer (AMEC); and end-of-week group oral presentation to councillors and officers in Stornoway, Isle of Lewis.

OUTCOMES, ENABLERS AND BARRIERS

Outcomes include in-depth knowledge of Local Policy in connection with a case study (wind farm proposals on Lewis). There are also process outcomes in terms of negotiation, team working, contribution of complementary skills etc in pursuit of an effective group oral presentation. There are 'political' generic issues surrounding conservation versus economic development, pursuit of sustainability etc.

Enablers come primarily from the development and exploitation of pre-existing contacts (via established external examiner dealings). Barriers include those common to group assessment: that each group is only as fast and strong as its slowest member; allocation of



tasks; equity in who does what; and the challenge of producing a fluent and flowing group presentation.



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