

# Love over fear: an experience of assessment



Moderators, tutors and candidates of the final accreditation process of Ashridge/Hult Business School's supervision postgraduate diploma share their experiences of a new method of assessment that aims to 'reduce fear and develop love' and offers unique learning opportunities for students and tutors alike.

**Robin Shohet, David Birch and Erik de Haan** with **Ineke Duit, Karen Griffin, Arne Hemkes, Leen Lambrechts** and **Marjan Timmer**

**A**t 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 →



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like: 'This diploma can't mean anything if everyone passes' or 'I am better than X, so if they pass that means I have not been recognised,' or worst of all, 'He is just saying that; I don't really believe him.' This was particularly true of one student who had had bad experiences of assessment. I suggested she might be willing to forgive those previous experiences and move into a new possibility. She later shared this had a positive impact and enabled her to let go for the day.

I gave a rationale for this way of working. As part of the day involved students giving feedback to each other, there might be a fear of giving robust feedback in case it contributed to a failure. We arranged for students to give their feedback on a particular recording, and then the two moderators made the final decision. This new way of working meant that we could all be part of the experience, as there was no



final decision to make. The power balance, an unfortunate concomitant of most assessments, was altered, and we could get on with the task of learning together.

As well as reducing the fear of giving robust feedback and reducing fear generally, the impact of passing everyone from the beginning meant they could enjoy their sessions and therefore were more likely to do good work. They might be free to take risks, rather than play safe. These reasons seemed to us a good justification for this way of working, and are based on the tenets of appreciative inquiry<sup>1</sup>; that we are more likely to both find, and create, good practice if we actively look for it and encourage it.

It was relatively easy to put this into practice as it came at the end of the course and even though I had not met the students, I had read enough of their written work, which included very frank self assessments, to guess they were good enough to get through. To use a football analogy, the course and the tutors had done all the midfield work and I was there to pop the ball into the net at the end. Would I have been able to play with such ease if I had been a main tutor from the beginning and there had been a candidate whose work I did not think was good enough? There are many questions such as these, but what I am suggesting is for us to find ways of making assessment as 'fear free' and creative as possible. This is an ongoing inquiry.

#### David Birch (co-moderator and tutor)

As the 'main tutor' from Ashridge, I felt a rush of anxiety when Robin suggested that we tell the candidates that they'd all passed at the start of the accreditation. The more cautious and compliant part of me was concerned that we'd be subverting our carefully designed assessment process by making decisions before we'd had a chance to review the candidates' performances on the day.

Although I knew the candidates through my teaching and tutorial work with them, my role thus far had been almost entirely developmental rather than evaluative. Despite my habitual ambivalence about

the evaluative role, it seemed that we might be losing something important if we were to automatically pass them all. What value would we be adding to the process? Might the candidates feel short-changed when they learned that they no longer needed to prove themselves under exam conditions? Might their qualification feel of lesser value as a result? What if we ended up having serious misgivings about a candidate's fitness to practise?

Robin's response was to remind me of how I ride my motorbike, which to me means taking risks while staying alive to the present moment, alert and aware of everything that's going on around me. He appealed to that more playful part of me that loves to improvise and experiment. As I reflected on the likely (as opposed to imagined) risks, I realised that this was something I wanted to try. These were senior, seasoned practitioners whose competence I trusted. If we allowed ourselves to 'break the rules', rules that were largely self-imposed in any case, we would be opening ourselves to new learning and growth.

My experience of the accreditation day was unlike any previous assessment process that I have been part of. I was indeed more alert and alive in my body, rather than busy in my head, as would have been the case had I been judging and evaluating. I felt more relaxed and attuned to the candidates and to Robin. Although this was our first time as co-accreditors, it felt natural and easy working with one another. We were able to be ourselves, mostly aligned but able to accommodate our differences when we were not. This became a defining quality of the day. Freed from our roles as evaluators, we were able to relate to the candidates as peers, collaboratively inquiring into the dynamics and sensitivities of the supervisory relationship. I did not detect any of the suppressed competitiveness that so often characterises these kinds of processes, or the awkwardness of an imposed power differential between accreditor and accretee. Instead, we were able to create a safe-enough space where people took risks, were vulnerable and held one another to account in a spirit of respect and goodwill. To borrow a phrase from the world of improvisation, we had truly 'made one another happen.'<sup>2</sup>



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#### Erik de Haan (director of studies)

At Ashridge we have always felt that our assessment process should be based on us trying to 'overcome fear by developing love'. Our accreditors are usually anxious to pass a candidate, and we would dread the moment where 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.

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 oscillated 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)<sup>3</sup>:

- On the one hand, the punitive and rigid nature of the assessments, as exemplified by many of our professional associations, where one 'uploads' one's best 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 grounds for this ominous judgment at all.
- On the other hand, the Rogerian idea of asking all candidates to give themselves the final mark: Rogers asks us in this provocative article to do away with *all* top-down teaching, with examinations and assessment, and even with 'degrees' as externally driven testaments of learning (ie, driven by the repudiated 'external locus of evaluation'<sup>4</sup>). When we follow Rogers' attractive ideas, as I have done on many occasions, we end up celebrating all learning and achievement, and naturally everyone passes. However, a lingering doubt remains in each person's mind, as they have truly only been passed by themselves.

#### The candidates

##### Ineke Duit

The assessment was an incredibly rich learning experience, although we as students had almost completed the journey already by attending the workshops and submitting our required pieces of work. The only gate we had left to pass was the assessment. By acknowledging the work we had done at the beginning of the day, the assessors enabled a deepening of the process and the exchange of our experiences and viewpoints with a free mind. Of course, it wouldn't feel right if we were given a pass that was not well considered. But I assume, as Robin Shohet describes his deliberations, we had shown enough of our capacities already.

It was relational supervision in the real sense of the word.

##### Marjan Timmer

My initial response when Robin made clear we all started the day with a pass, was a moment of huge catharsis, as expressed by all in the group. Amazingly, how soon my doubting mind overruled that catharsis with disbelief, due to negative assessment experiences in the past. This was noticed and followed with an invitation to consider the past as indeed the past, and enter the day with a generous attitude of forgiveness. This was a helpful liberating perspective and meant that I was able to make that shift so I could really contribute to reflections and feedback conversations in the spirit of a deep joyful learning time and space with all involved: assessors, candidates and volunteers.

##### Leen Lambrechts

As I believe that the quality of my interventions as coach and supervisor depend on the quality of my presence, this approach allowed me to connect more deeply with myself. This was beneficial to both me and the client as we could enter a supervision dance together, without being triggered into survival behaviours caused by earlier traumatic examination experiences. I felt carried by the energy of the group, stimulated by the learnings of other candidates. I could access love and joy instead of being in competition with my 'perfect self'. →

**Karen Griffin**

I experienced the assessment 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 I was still slightly apprehensive before my 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 to me adopting certain 'formal' behaviours, which I don't actually do in 'real life' with my supervisees. I realise now, that if I attended another supervision accreditation day that was set up in the same way, I would take more risks.

**Arne Hemkes**

Based on earlier experiences, I am not comfortable in situations where I feel looked at and judged by an authority, especially when the situation is precious to me. For me it has to do with power and feeling dependent. Consequently, in the days preceding accreditation day, I felt disturbingly tense. So, when Robin told us at the start we had all passed and their intention was for the day to be a learning experience, I felt like a balloon suddenly losing all air. I felt relieved, happy and a bit suspicious all at once. My previous experiences rang distant warning bells. But after Robin conscientiously explained their rationale, I was able to believe it and to step into this new reality: a collective learning experience, which I sensed as warm, caring and stimulating.



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 benefitting 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.

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. ■

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**References**

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