John Cowan's assessment examples for Social Sciences

Example JC1 (also an example in Civil Engineering)

Establishing the viability and potential of formative peer-judgements

When: Undergraduate, first year

Purpose: To establish the making of formative peer-judgements as a feasible and worthwhile activity, through an early and successful experience of the process.

Outline: (NB: Used in conjunction with an early, demanding, open-ended assignment, with each individual student's submitted response being independent.)

1. Invite students to bring a completed draft to a "co-operative activity"; no draft, no admission!
2. Pass drafts to peers who (preferably) do not identify the writer;
3. Indicate in general terms how to identify scope for improvement, and what type of suggestion might be helpful to the writer. Show students by example how to generate constructive suggestions for improvement by the individual writer;
4. Return drafts with the peer's written suggestions;
5. Encourage original writers to consider suggestions thoughtfully;
6. Leave writers free to revise drafts as they wish, before submission for marking by the tutor.

Expected outcomes:

1. Writers will see scope and means for improvement in their own drafts, mainly through their (guided) commenting upon the work of peers.
2. The notion that evaluative judgements normally feature multiple headings will have been encountered.
3. The formative value of peer assessment will have been established
4. Over 90% return to subsequent *voluntary* activities of this type.

Comments:

1. It paves the way for pedagogically effective, and cost-effective use of formative peer-assessment throughout the programme.
2. The commonest comment (often made) comes as drafts are being passed back. "I don't need to see what suggestions are being offered to me. I have already seen how to make improvements in this effort of mine by looking at what others have done, and seeing how they can improve."
3. [The students learn] Active engagement, giving and receiving feedback, modelling and practice, working with peers, developing learning and judgement.
4. The activity is so general that, provided the assignment is open-ended (each student should have an individual response) it can be used without adaptation, in any discipline or level.
5. Emphasise, and model, that the only feedback to be offered is feedforward, with helpful suggestions which can be taken up by the writer, without brain surgery or much extra effort.

Example JC2 (also an example in Civil Engineering)

Specifying and using criteria for evaluative judgements

When: Usually undergraduate year 1, but have used in year 2, and in early stages of [part-time] postgraduate provision

Purpose: To introduce students to the need for objective formulation and use of criteria, in order to reach sound decisions, about anything, including own work and work of peers.

Outline:

1. Time this activity to occur late in the history of an early assignment which has entailed searching on the web for sources;
2. Schedule a workshop on "The making of evaluative judgements".
3. Form small groups and ask them to prepare to choose one of six optional prizes in a holiday competition. They will be asked to predict which option will be selected by one of their number, (perhaps Mr X?), according to *his* holiday preferences;
4. The group extracts from Mr X his priorities and his methodology for choosing;
5. The prizes are revealed. The group try to predict Mr X's choice without his assistance, while he decides, privately;
6. Methods and outcomes are compared, usually with light-hearted banter regarding the discrepancies or disagreements within groups;
7. The process is repeated, now with a car prize to be chosen by Ms Y;
8. The tutor facilitates a plenary discussion: "What have we learnt about identifying and using criteria to make a choice?"
9. Now all refer to the current course-related task which has involved finding and using citations by searching on the internet. Groups are charged to help members to devise criteria and methodology for judging the worth of two of their chosen citations. That judgement is to form part of the imminent assignment task.

Expected outcomes:

1. The expected outcome is a grasp of the main elements of the process of making evaluative judgements leading to a single decision when using multiple criteria. The tutor should highlight emerging points as the activity proceeds.

Comments:

1. The class time allocated to this activity will undoubtedly have been precious. If the activity has been well facilitated, it will transpire to have been used with good effect in an initially somewhat detached, enjoyable and effective activity. For this engagement with the basics tends to make an effective and enduring impact, and is often so recalled by the students.
2. The commonest comments are e-mail messages to the effect that the student wishes to make changes to their submission for the forthcoming assignment, as they see where it can be improved. "Is that OK?" Of course it is OK, as any student can improve any draft before submission. Also forthcoming in the long term are feedback messages to the effect that they have started judging their draft work formatively, according to the same rationale.
3. Active engagement, modelling and practice, working with peers, developing learning and judgement – and to some extent students contributing to formulating and applying criteria for formative self-assessment of work in progress.
4. Although the example described is the *simplest* variant, as the parallel with choosing sources is straightforward, I have most commonly used this with a forthcoming open ended assignment, for whose evaluation the class should try to formulate criteria before dispersing.
5. Make it fun, but never lose sight of the real priority in the facilitation of the event. Pinpoint general lessons, as these emerge from student comments. Perhaps keep a flipchart sheet or screen display which the facilitator updates with "Words of class wisdom."

Example JC4 (Also an example in Civil Engineering)

Self-assessment facilitated by evaluative peer-comments

When: Undergraduate (first and third years) and postgraduate

Purpose: To benchmark standards in self- and peer judgements, through the facilitative influence of peer-evaluation of higher level abilities.

This can best occur in a setting featuring personal development planning, or creative effort (design, problem-solving, or group work), and the claiming of consequent developments. For in such cases it is often only the students themselves who have access to primary data (such as their creativity or contributions to the group), which they may tend to rate without objectivity.

Outline:

1. Ask each student to identify three commendable examples of their *use* of relevant capabilities during the module or group work. Then ask them to amplify these choices with supportive descriptions of the context and data, and a brief explanation of why they regard their chosen examples as commendable;
2. Peers (preferably arranged by the students) make and report their own formative evaluations of the sets of examples tabled by another student, based only on the writer's descriptions, implicit criteria, and supportive data;
3. Peers only then have access to the writer's self-evaluations, and offer their comments thereon;
4. It is left to student claimants to reflect freely upon their peer's comments, with a view to their revision of claims for development to date, and possibly their planning and subsequent evaluation of their further development.

Expected outcomes:

1. Generally the outcome is reassurance for some, or a challenge to be more self-satisfied for others, or a challenge to be more demanding for yet others.
2. Benchmarking of standards is difficult to confirm, but volunteered student feedback suggests that it can occur, with rich impact, for at least some.

Comments:

1. Marks were not so much allocated for the task (self-assessing), as for the outcome (the self-assessment).
2. It is a valuable step on the journey to self-reliant and objective self-managed lifelong learning.
3. Initial reactions indicate apprehension about the level of demand, and hence even rejection of the validity of the task. Provided these affective needs receive attention, students quickly develop confidence and objectivity, and will soon simply talk about the activity as if it is the natural way to tackle the assessment of generic abilities.
4. Active engagement, giving and receiving feedback, working with peers, developing judgement.
5. It is possible (and probably desirable) on a second encounter with this format to get students to define their ability level at the beginning of the appropriate module, and then base their assessment claims on *development* from that starting point.
6. Students may not be clear what is expected of them. I find it useful to avoid telling them what they should do, but rather to provide an example, perhaps fabricated, from another discipline area of a claim which they can nonetheless understand, and ask them "Please do that, for your own case".
7. It is declaring the programmes commitment to generic abilities of value, to self-judgement, and to the powerful socio-constructivist impact of engagement with peers.

Example JC5

Self-assessing to provided criteria

When: Undergraduate, penultimate year

Purpose: Wholehearted and iterative engagement with the making of evaluative judgements, with a particular emphasis on applying objective criteria.

Outline

1. The evaluative part of the activity centres on the concept of a 'Sound Standard', taken to be mid-way between 'Excellent' (usually rated in the UK at 70%) and 'Minimal Pass' (usually rated at 40%);
2. Tutors declare perhaps 5 or 6 headings under which the students' work may be judged;
3. Tutors define *in objective terms and without value words,* the features under each heading which would justify a Sound Standard mark of 55%. [Rather than calling for 'an *adequate* coverage in the literature review,' they state how many sources, of what currency, and from what standard of journal, would be expected].
4. Tutors offer two edited or fabricated examples of student work, one somewhat above and one somewhat below the Sound Standard. The students should be able to comprehend these;
5. Tutors facilitate group discussion and judging of the examples against the specification of Sound Standard. Discussion should begin by identifying points which are stronger or weaker *in the students' judgement* than the tutors' Sound Standard description. Students should then individually modify or change the specifications at this stage, using terms which they themselves understand, and to which they can subscribe;
6. Students are encouraged to declare, define and use any other headings which they consider personally valuable and relevant;
7. Students should declare their decomposed self-judgement of their work when they submit it. In this they should identify aspects of it which they consider to be above or below the Sound Standard description; hence they qualitatively judge their work;
8. Tutors (or small groups) audit the self-judgements, noting and reporting any failures to follow the stipulated procedure (which, of course, invalidates the self-judgement).

Expected outcomes:

1. The structure and framework enable objective decisions about the quality of a student's work. Fewer disagreements or appeals ensue. Instead, there may be a few *objectively reasoned* differences of judgement discussed between student and auditing assessors.

Comments:

2. It concentrates attention on the objective formulation of judgements to keenly considered criteria and standards.
3. "Why don't the other lecturers make it clear what they want, in this way?" Comments which are *not* made in these circumstances are "But I was very happy with this one" (as if we were in the entertainment industry; and "I had a gut feeling that this was a good one" (from someone who, when asked how they told a gut feeling from indigestion became rather angry).
4. I would like to add here that, of all the examples for freshening assessment which I have suggested in workshops in various UK institutions, this is the one which has occasioned more messages 3-6 months later to tell me "I used this with my students. We all really liked it."
5. [Students learn] Active engagement, giving and receiving feedback, Developing learning and judgement, students at least partly able to design assessment.
6. [Possible developments]: class formulation of the basic list of Sound Standard Descriptors.
7. [Note the] Use of everyday language in descriptors. Absence of value words which can mean all things to all people. Discussion centred on exemplars.
8. See *Enhancing student learning through effective formative feedback,* Juwah *et al* eds, Higher Education Academy, 2004.

9. http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/ourwork/teachingandlearning/assessment/alldisplay?type=resources&newid=resource_database/id353_effective_formative_feedback_juwah_etal&site=york (accessed 10/02/10)

Example JC7 (also an example in Civil Engineering)

Clarifying and creating criteria

When: Undergraduate, early first year mainly, or later if a type of task is entirely new

Purpose: Greater appreciation of dealing with multiple criteria.

Outline:

1. Advise the class in general terms of the next assignment task;
2. Ask groups to make 'shopping lists' of questions they would like to ask of helpful advisors, regarding what should feature in a well-rated assignment;
3. Form cross-groups. Allocate each to a different advisor from whom to seek advice. The advisor may be a second year student, a final year student, an employer, a graduate, or another lecturer;
4. When students return from cross-groups, they should pool and reconcile their findings. Then arrange for the class to snowball a general list of criteria and weightings.
5. Marking tutors should seek clarification, if they need to do it, so that they can mark accordingly, to the class's criteria.

Expected outcomes:

1. Expect the criteria which emerge to be much as would have been chosen by the marking tutors. But probably some will have used somewhat different wording. However, the fact that evaluation often entails multiple criteria, the combination of which it is difficult to arrange in assessment, will have been usefully highlighted.
2. Students will have gained a real understanding of the criteria – to which they will be committed, as their own creation.

Comments:

1. The task was facilitative of students' preparation for assessment. The item in question was being assessed, though.
2. It encourages students to think about desired outcomes in terms of standards and criteria.
3. "I'm as lot clearer now" Stop/Start/Continue feedback, and focus groups, strongly commend this activity for its usefulness, in communicating criteria in understandable terms – although seldom is the word "criteria" used by students in this connection. They talk more colloquially, about what is expected of them.
4. [Students learn] Active engagement, investigative activity.
5. Insist, firmly but politely, that there is no mention or discussion of the particular, imminent task.

Example JC9 (also an example in Civil Engineering)

Evaluatively identifying needs for early remedial tuition

When: Usually the first year of a course, undergraduate or postgraduate, especially in the latter case with international students.

Purpose: To identify and assist those whose grasp of the process of objective self-assessment offers significant scope for improvement, as a means to self-improvement?

Outline:

1. Centre this activity on any current demand for submitted work;
2. Require students to provide their own self-assessment of their submission. They should declare a mark or grade, and set out a brief explanation of how they reached it, mentioning what they see as the strengths and weaknesses of which they have taken account in their judgement;
3. Charge personal development tutors to sincerely and credibly (and briefly!) endorse those judgements with whose marking they can identify; they should arrange to discuss with those students (usually only a few) whose self-judging gives cause for concern – either through inability to self-appraise, or because of the identified weaknesses.

Expected outcomes:

1. Usually this unearths (as well as weaknesses requiring tutorial attention) some important misunderstandings in the understanding of the evaluative process or in applying criteria, or mistaken attitudes. These can generally be rectified, or at least receive attention.

Comments:

1. No marks for the task. Marks were awarded for the activity with which this task was associated.
2. [Tutors assist] by benchmarking standards for self-appraisal, and by encouraging declaration of weaknesses.
3. A mixture of reactions. Some students dislike attention being given to their weaknesses. Others welcome action which leads to remedial tuition. To a great extent, the success or failure of this activity depends on the extent to which the approach of the tutor is, or is not, supportive.
4. Students learn] Investigative activities, giving feedback, developing judgement.
5. The activity should be supportive, confidential, non-judgemental, and effective. Big demands, but when it is possible, the outcomes for the threatened students can be marked.

Example JC10 (also an example in Civil Engineering and Business)

Complete evaluation of a programme experience

When: Used in undergraduate year 1 (whole year), years 2 and 3 (one module), and postgraduate

Purpose: Providing and using a complete experience of the making of an evaluative judgement, which involves distinguishing between formative and summative evaluation.

Outline:

1. In the opening weeks of the programme, students should each compile a private 'Prior', in which they set out their hopes for the learning experience;
2. At the end of the programme, each student (not necessarily in accordance with the re-visited Prior) should specify the criteria by which they now evaluate their learning experience;
3. Students then apply their criteria to formulate a summative evaluation and judgement based on ingathered data; and a formative evaluation which identifies need, scope, suggestions and methods for feasible improvement.
4. Students should be involved in assembling and analysing the data, and formulating the occlusions to be drawn from it.

Expected outcome:

1. Comparative appreciation of and involvement in the processes of formative and summative evaluation *per se*, without its being directly related to the students' own work.

Comments:

1. It entails, in an activity which is ostensibly programme evaluation, a meaningful engagement with both formative and summative evaluative judgements.
2. Positive reactions, provided they were told that attention would be given to the evaluative judgements, and action taken for the benefit of the next cohort – and were shown, speedily, that this was happening.
3. [Students learn] Active engagement, giving and receiving feedback, working with peers, authentic and investigative activities, developing ability for making judgements, almost design of assessment (of a programme).
4. I find it more meaningful for all concerned to run an activity like this at roughly the half way stage in a programme, to identify improvements which can and should (and will) be made for the benefit of the current cohort.
5. Active engagement on the part of the students; genuine valuing of the outcome by staff.