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Assessing interpersonal understandings

A candidate's ability to understand interpersonal situations and to reason about human feelings and interactions has become an increasingly important consideration in the medical selection process. There is a growing recognition that medical practitioners require more than academic skills to be good at their jobs; they also need to be good communicators and readers of people.

'Interpersonal' multiple-choice questions are designed to assess a candidate's ability to understand and infer the thoughts, feelings, behaviour, motivations, and/or intentions of the people depicted in text-based scenarios, dialogues and passages. Such multiple-choice questions are currently being used across Australia as part of a battery of instruments to differentiate between large numbers of academically qualified candidates applying for limited places in university medical courses.

At ACER, interpersonal questions are developed according to a 'construct of empathy', where empathy is regarded as a cognitive ability requiring reasoning about interpersonal situations. As such, interpersonal questions do not aim to test candidates' knowledge of social conventions or their opinions about human behaviour. Rather they aim to test how much candidates understand about what is happening inside, and between, the people depicted in given scenarios.

There are two main types of stimulus texts used in the creation of interpersonal questions:

1. *intra-personal* – inward-focused, 1st person accounts of individual feelings and experiences; and
2. *interpersonal* – situations, scenarios or vignettes involving two or more characters, usually dialogue-based.

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The major requirement of all interpersonal stimulus texts is that they are authentic in the sense that they reflect real life. They must also contain some kind of emotional conflict. Whether this conflict originates from a misunderstanding or tension between people, or from some private suffering, struggle or excitement expressed by an individual, without agitation of some kind – and variation within the expression of that agitation – there would be little scope for asking questions which test an understanding of human emotion and motivation.

The best interpersonal texts are those which open themselves to misinterpretation – not from any linguistic ambiguity, but from complexities arising from expressed human feelings and behaviours that might be counter-intuitive or contradictory, subtle or understated, implied or suggested, unexpected or exaggerated, or even misunderstood by the characters themselves. Ideally, interpersonal stimulus texts are 'emotionally complex' as opposed to 'verbally confusing'. Where correct interpretations (keys) are specified, they must be demonstrably true from evidence within the text. Conversely, incorrect answers (distracters) – though still plausible in the sense of their intelligibility and relatedness – must be misreadings of the given situation and defensibly wrong.

When we ask interpersonal questions we are, at some level, testing knowledge and experience of shared human actions and emotions. We are asking candidates to look inward at their own experiences for confirmation that their interpretations of a particular situation are correct. We are asking them to place themselves into others' shoes; to imagine others' minds; to seek an understanding of others' feelings through the interpretative medium of their own feelings. The measurable part occurs once we ask candidates to take this empathetic knowledge and reason with it in situations separate to their own lives and opinions.

This article is based on a conference presentation delivered by ACER Research Fellow David Norris at the 3rd International Conference on Education and New Learning Technologies, held in Barcelona in July. The conference paper, titled 'Assessing interpersonal understandings with multiple choice questions', was co-authored by ACER Research Fellows David Norris and Brad Jackel.

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Resourcing change in small schools

Principals of small schools wishing to resource positive change must rethink existing resources and harness new opportunities for the school and the school community, the authors of a research paper suggest.

The *Australian Journal of Education* this year published a paper written by ACER Senior Research Fellow Dr Michelle Anderson and Monash University Associate Dean Professor Simone White, titled 'Resourcing change in small schools', in which the authors analyse the challenge that school leaders face in creating the conditions for learning in small schools. The paper draws on Australian and international research and uses a case study to examine how small-school leaders can successfully resource change.

Anderson and White contend that principals of small schools can be well positioned to resource change to improve learning outcomes by developing new community relationships with groups, drawing from the skill set of diverse experts and volunteers, and by seeking and securing funds to support key educational projects.

"Being a principal in the 21st century entails new responsibilities amid rapidly changing policy conditions and contexts for learning," Anderson and White write.

These responsibilities include managing and monitoring curriculum development, assessment and reporting, staff selection and performance management, financial management, mission building and managing reform, managing professional learning, school accountability, and community relations and marketing.

School leaders are also faced with needing to engage more actively with the complexity of schools within their communities as, increasingly, education interacts with other social challenges, including mental health and well-being, obesity, economic disadvantage, and access to products and services.

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The Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians contains an expectation that partnerships be formed to help forge connections between young people and the communities in which they learn, live and work. These partnerships can be among schools and/or with groups external to the school, such as parents, businesses and community organisations.

“Partnerships in education, both in Australia and elsewhere, continue to be a prominent policy feature, directing the conversation towards preferred ways of working to deal with key challenges for schools and their leadership,” Anderson and White write.

The Principal of the school used as a case study in this paper confirmed the importance of partnerships in education. He recognised that teaching and learning could not succeed without countering disadvantage, which in turn required the development of relationships with other organisations.

Anderson and White highlight the importance of small-school leaders developing school-community relationships in order to deal with key localised needs.

“These relationships can include businesses, philanthropic and not-for-profit sectors,” they write.

‘Resourcing change in small schools’, by Michelle Anderson and Simone White, appeared in the Australian Journal of Education, Vol. 55, No. 1, 2011. To subscribe to AJE please visit

<http://www.acer.edu.au/press/aje/subscriptions>

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ACER Update

ACER Award for Student Journalism 2011

The Australian Council for Educational Research is offering an award for excellence in an article relating to education. Students who are currently enrolled in an Australian accredited course leading to at least a diploma level qualification are invited to enter. Small cash prizes totaling \$600 will be awarded to the place getters (\$300 for first place, \$200 for second place and \$100 for third place). Entries close Friday 28 October 2010.

Seminar to share new ideas on resourcing educational change

Next week the ACER Institute in conjunction with Tenderbridge will host a seminar presented by University of Winchester Professor of Learning Bill Lucas, on the topic *New Thinking about Intelligence and Learning: New ideas for resourcing new thinking in schools*. A former school leader and best-selling author, Lucas has helped to create five organisations: Learning through Landscapes, Campaign for Learning, The Talent Foundation, The Centre for Real-World Learning and, most recently, the English Project. During his seminar, Lucas will share his experiences of turning good ideas into resources - money, time and talents. He will discuss well-tested practical ideas drawn from across the world designed to put educational visions into practice and will suggest how educators might access funds to do this. For more information on this seminar or to register your interest please visit <http://www.acerinstitute.edu.au/>

ACER Student Engagement & Experience Conference

ACER has teamed up with Criterion Conferences to present a two-day conference, *Measuring and Improving Student Engagement and Experience: Increasing the quality of teaching & learning to encourage retention in higher education*. Recent developments such as the advent of TEQSA and the Government's participation and attainment targets have brought the intersection between teaching, learning and student engagement to the fore.

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With presentations from over a dozen experts from a range of higher education institutions and research organisations, this conference will address:

- The impact of the wider reform agenda on projects aimed at improving student engagement
- Debate of the effectiveness of measures and standards of higher education teaching and learning
- Issues with monitoring and strengthening quality student transitions across diverse access pathways
- Institutional strategies to support student cohorts most at risk of high attrition.

Pre- and post-conference workshops will explore how to use data on students' learning to improve education and on engaging postgraduate coursework students.

The conference runs from 21-24 November at Melbourne's Novotel on Collins. Discounted early bird registrations are available until 21 October. Further information about the conference is available from <http://www.improvingstudentengagement.com>.

CEET Annual Conference

ACER Research Director Dr Phillip McKenzie, ACER Principal Research Fellow Dr Sheldon Rothman and ACER Senior Research Fellow Justin Brown will present on the topic 'The Changing Destinations of Low SES School Leavers – the Contribution of VET in Schools' at the 15th annual conference of the Monash University Centre for the Economics of Education and Training (CEET), on Friday 28 October 2011 at Ascot House in Ascot Vale, Melbourne. The theme of the conference is *The contribution of Vocational Education and Training (VET) to a more inclusive Australia*.

Further information about the conference is available from

<http://www.edu.monash.edu/centres/ceet/conferences/2011.html>

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