Assessment  helping learners and assessing competence

What?

- keep track of what learners can do, and what they know
- assess competence
- give feedback and record the outcomes
- plan further development
- plan the next assessment
- review the assessment process.

Why?

There are two main reasons for assessing learners on work-based learning:

- to help with their learning
- to check whether they are competent and have the necessary knowledge and understanding.

Assessing learning is called formative, or continuous, assessment. Assessing competence or achievement is called summative assessment.

Formative assessment is where a learner’s attainment is assessed against what they knew or could do previously. It brings an assessor and learner together in a process of continual reflection and review of learning. By making accurate judgements and giving clear feedback, assessors help learners take the next steps in their learning. Done well, it helps to raise learners’ motivation and self-esteem.

*Strengthening the practice of formative assessment produce[s] significant, and often substantial, learning gains.*

Black, P and William, D (1998) Inside the Black Box

Summative assessment provides evidence of what a learner has achieved at the end of a specific period of learning. It marks the important stages in a learner’s development and can be formally recorded in various ways:

- record of achievement
- test or examination scores
- unit of a qualification
- whole qualification.

Key facts

In all the inspections carried out by the ALI in 2001-2002:

- the assessment process was praised as a strength in 20% of providers
- 70% of providers were criticised for their poor assessment practice and 60% for poor internal verification
- assessment was a weakness or in need of further attention in over half of the providers inspected.

“Strengthening the practice of formative assessment produce[s] significant, and often substantial, learning gains.”

Key points

- Take a careful look at the forms of assessment and recording used.
- Make sure assessment is used to check learning, inform learners about how they are performing and help them develop further.

How?

Keep track of what learners can do, and what they know

If initial assessment is done well, you’ll know the starting point for every learner – see the factsheet entitled ‘Initial assessment’ for ideas. Once learners have started on the programme, and are actively learning, one of the tasks of assessors is to keep track of how their skills and knowledge develop.

It helps to recognise that there are degrees of competence. Simply ‘can do’ is not enough. A fully trained hairdresser or engineer is going to be better at their job than someone who has only been partly trained, or who hasn’t had enough time to build up confidence in their job. A learner who is fully competent has developed a lot of skills and knowledge and knows how to apply them to the job.

Assessors might be able to keep track of learners’ progress just through assessing competence at work and asking questions. But there are other ways as well, such as:

- assignments or projects – often used to check progress in key skills
- end-of phase tests
- progress towards technical certificates.

Assess competence

Assessments should be planned and assessors should check that their learner is able to carry out the assessment as planned. Sometimes the arrangements may need to be changed, e.g. if the organisation is short-staffed and the supervisor needs the learner for something else that day.

Then, assessors should check that the learner knows exactly what the assessor is looking for and how their skills and knowledge will be assessed.

When a learner’s competence is being assessed, the assessment must be made on the basis of evidence that is:

- valid
- reliable
- authentic
- sufficient.

The main assessment methods are:

- Observation – watching someone carrying out a task at work or in a realistic work environment.
- Products – looking at work products or the outcomes of projects and assignments to see whether they meet the required standards.
- Professional discussion – asking a learner to tell you about an aspect of their work, and making a judgement based on the description they provide of what they have done.
Give feedback and record the outcomes

Giving feedback is an essential part of assessment. Good feedback:

- gives learners a clear sense of what they have achieved and what still remains to be done
- encourages learners to reflect on their own progress
- confirms that they are on the right track, or helps to put them right
- makes specific suggestions for improvement.

An important skill in assessing competence is not to give learners too much help. When giving feedback, it's helpful if assessors imagine that they are putting up 'scaffolding' for learners – helping them but not completing the solutions. Assessors need to give learners the chance to think and work things through for themselves.

There's a factsheet on this topic entitled 'Feedback'.

Assessors should record:

- the basis on which the assessment was made – i.e. the evidence
- their judgement on the learner's skills and knowledge.

It's important that assessors record the assessment fully, detailing what they saw or heard that allowed them to assess the learner effectively. Assessors should always refer to all sources of evidence and where they can be found, including non-paper evidence such as a video or audio recording of a professional conversation.

It can be a good idea for learners to have their own assessment log books, which they complete after each assessment.

Plan further development

It's impossible to separate assessment entirely from learning. Learners need these things to develop their skills and knowledge further:

- A suitable working environment – i.e. one in which they will be learning as well as working, and where assessors are welcomed.
- Assessors who are up to date with the occupational area.
- Work supervisors who are aware of the learner’s learning goals and objectives, and willing to help them get ready to be assessed.
- Resources such as assignments, practice sheets and so on that back up learning and provide a basis for assessment.
- Plenty of opportunities to learn and practise before they are assessed.

Assessors may discover that a learner needs more help. Any stage of assessment can identify support needs, which might include things like additional literacy support, help in developing IT skills, or opportunities to practise job skills in a non-threatening working environment.

An action plan is needed, which says what the learner will do before the next assessment. The action plan may outline the skills the learner needs to work on and any training or other support they will be getting.
Plan the next assessment

Assessors should have an assessment plan for each of their learners. It doesn’t matter what form the plan is in, but it should cover these four basic points:

- What will be assessed – make it clear to learners what’s expected by linking the assessment to the appropriate part of the NVQ.
- How it will be assessed – by observation, assignment, supplementary questions etc.
- When it will be assessed – so that the learner knows how much time they have to prepare.
- Where it will be assessed – at work, in the training centre or college.

Assessment plans are specific to each learner. Assessors should negotiate each plan carefully with the learner so that it’s all perfectly clear. It’s good practice to give a copy of the plan to the work supervisor as well as the learner, so that supervisors are informed and involved in the assessment process.

Make sure that assessment plans for each learner include plenty of opportunities to:

- Record detailed observations in the workplace
- Use a wide range of evidence, including evidence that occurs naturally at work.

Review the assessment process

This is done at two levels:

- For individual learners – to check that they are meeting the targets set in their individual learning plan, and that any problems are identified and dealt with in time.
- For the process as a whole – to ensure that assessments are fair, consistent and in keeping with accepted standards.

Assessors should meet regularly to discuss the progress of individual learners, identify any problems or challenges they are facing and agree what to do about them.

Reviewing assessment practice as a whole is part of the quality assurance process known as internal verification. It involves sampling assessments, both through observation of assessors and looking at written documentation, in order to decide whether they meet accepted standards.

Standardisation meetings give assessors the chance to share best practice or resolve particular problems together. As the name suggests, the aim is to ensure that the standards applied in assessments are consistent and compliant with national guidelines.

Where and when?

Assessment can be done pretty much anywhere – in the workplace, at a training centre or college. Formative, or continuous assessment, doesn’t have to be planned, though it may be. It can happen any time, any place – whenever there’s a chance to observe learners and talk to them about their work and learning.

Summative assessments should normally be planned in advance, so that learners have time to practise and gain confidence in whatever they are being assessed on.

But it’s also sensible to take advantage of opportunities when they arise, especially with learners who are used to being assessed. For example, it might be a good use of time to carry out an assessment during a workplace review visit, if the job the learner is doing is relevant and they feel comfortable about being assessed. Where this happens, the assessor should make it clear that the review stage of the meeting is over and that an assessment is about to take place.
Case studies and examples

Improving assessment practice

One employer trains modern apprentices in hospitality and catering, retailing and customer service. A recent inspection by the Adult Learning Inspectorate highlighted poor assessment practice and weak internal verification.

The company’s learning development manager gave her reaction:

“I think we’re a classic case. Our staff have very sound knowledge of their industries and most gained their assessors’ awards several years ago. We’ve actually become a bit complacent about the assessor’s role.

I welcomed the inspectors’ comments as they endorsed some points I recently made to staff. We need to improve our understanding of the different assessment processes and the value of giving good feedback to the candidates.

It’s my job to research recent practice in assessment and gain a better understanding of how I can advise staff on improving assessment practice. We’ve already planned regular standardisation meetings for the assessment and verification teams. I know that staff don’t have to re-qualify for the new A1 and V1 awards, but I intend to give all staff the chance to improve their skills and work to the new standards.”

Extract from the company’s development plan:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Actions</th>
<th>Expected outcomes</th>
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<tr>
<td>Learning development manager to research, plan and deliver staff training on assessment processes and power of effective feedback.</td>
<td>All training and assessment team able to carry out more effective assessment and feedback.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Learning development manager to implement standardisation meetings with immediate effect.</td>
<td>Shared working practice, increased staff confidence, more effective internal verification.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Learning and development manager to contact NTO for guidance on new standards and training events and plan staff training accordingly.</td>
<td>Improved assessment practice.</td>
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Keeping track of assessment

A national provider, dealing with large numbers of learners across a variety of occupational areas, has developed an effective database tracking system to record and monitor the progress of learners in a systematic and accessible way.

Assessors can look at individual learner records to identify which modules have already been assessed and which are still outstanding. This makes it easy to see what progress learners are making and how far they have to go to complete their NVQ or Modern Apprenticeship.

As a part of its internal verification process, individual portfolios are selected and checked by the verifiers on an ongoing basis. As well as keeping a separate record of which parts of the portfolios have been verified, the provider marks each piece of work that has been verified with a rubber stamp, recording who verified it and when.
One of the internal verifiers comments:

“This simple innovation has proved extremely useful in the verification process as a whole. In effect, it creates an easy-to-check audit trail for both internal and external verifiers.

Previously we kept a record of what had been verified, but we didn’t mark it on the actual portfolios. Now the stamp makes it easy to see which bits of which portfolios have been previously verified, when this was done, and by whom. It’s a great way of keeping track of where we are.”

Resources

- Assessment Matters journal and network. www.trilobitedesign.net/assessment

Stay in touch

- www.qca.org.uk
- www.edexcel.org.uk
- www.city-and-guilds.co.uk
- www.ocr.org.uk
- www.lccieb.com

Checklist

- Which methods do you use to keep track of what learners can do, and what they know?
- How often do you do this with individual learners?
- Which methods do you use to assess competence?
- How do you assess learners’ underpinning skills and knowledge?
- In what forms do you give feedback to learners, and when?
- In what forms do you record the outcomes of assessment?
- Do your learners keep their own assessment log?
- Does each of your learners have their own assessment plan?
- Do you provide enough opportunities for learners to develop their skills and knowledge before the next assessment?
- Do you meet regularly with other assessors to talk about assessment and exchange ideas?
- Do you have regular standardisation meetings to improve the standard and consistency of assessment?