

Engaging VET Practitioners Forums

Professional judgement and assessment

What are the factors driving, facilitating and impeding new practices in VET teaching, learning and assessment in a Training Package environment? An assessment perspective.

A think piece to stimulate discussion at the Reframing the Future Forums, August 2005

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This paper is presented as part of the Reframing the Future Forums – 2005 Engaging VET Practitioners. It aims to raise issues and encourage discussion and debate amongst the participants.

Background

Professional judgement in competency based assessment is intrinsically linked with the notion of professionalism and professional practice.

Enhancing the Capability of VET Professionals Project: Final Report (ANTA 2004a) notes that the 'exercise of professional judgement' is considered a key characteristic of professionalism (Senate Employment, Education and Training Committee 1998 as cited in ANTA 2004a) with professional practice said to include:

expert knowledge of the field, a deep understanding of underlying principles, accumulated experience in the practice of the profession, a familiarity with recent advances in the professional knowledge base, and mastery of the best available techniques and tools. (Masters 2003, p. 46 as cited in ANTA 2004a)

I think that this definition is important in terms of the expertise of the assessor, and will refer back to this at the end of the paper.

Professional Judgement in Competency Based Assessment

With the implementation of Training Packages and the focus on assessments conducted on and off the job, the processes, methods selected and judgements made have become increasingly important. In recent times the emphasis from ANTA has been on the notion of 'consistency' of assessment and the integrity of the qualifications.

Competency based assessment is often defined as collecting evidence and then making a judgement as to whether competence has been achieved. However, Bailey (1994) emphasises that 'assessment of competency is not simple'. Gillis and Bateman (1999) expand this definition of competency based assessment to include:

- clearly defining the purpose,
- identifying and documenting the evidence required to demonstrate competency,
- using appropriate evidence gathering methods,
- interpreting the evidence against the competency standards, and
- making a judgement (Gillis & Bateman 1999).

Included in this model is record keeping procedures and the reporting of outcomes of the assessment.

This model requires a range of decisions which must be made by the assessor in the development of assessment tools and undertaking assessments. Gillis and Griffith (2005 unpublished) argue that content and context specific assessments are an issue of validity. Down & Hager (1999) note that 'sound judgements take into account the particular circumstances in which they are made. That is they

are contextually sensitive'. Hence assessors should be cognisant of the target group, the purpose of the assessment and the context of the assessment so as to be able to develop valid assessment tools and make sound interpretations and judgements.

Much of the literature around professional judgement of skilled professionals refers to 'tacit knowledge', and 'gut feeling', however this is an elusive notion and we often try to verbalise or describe it, albeit unsuccessfully. The literature suggests however, that there is a strong relationship between 'knowing' or knowledge and that of judgement.

Drivers of innovation

So what are the drivers of innovation in assessment? There is very little literature here to assist in this discussion.

Moving On....., the Final Report of the High Level Review of Training Packages (Schofield and MacDonald 2004) considers that Training Package implementation has enabled trainers and assessors a level of innovation and flexibility in designing training and assessment. In this instance, the Training Package specifies the knowledge and skills required as well as the context of the workplace; it does not specify how teachers/trainers will design the learning program and resources, nor provide restrictive information pertaining to assessment. CURVE and University of Ballarat (2003, p. 9) in their scoping study confirm that

...VET practitioners are delivering in a range of contexts, using broad ranging strategies and various tools and technology to meet the needs of diverse learners. It has also found clear evidence that a considerable amount of effective and innovative teaching and learning is taking place.

They noted that the examples of quality pedagogical practice can be characterised as having three distinct, interlinking features. These are:

- A learner centred approach – with a focus on the needs and learning styles of learners with the teacher or trainer as facilitator.
- Work place relevance – with a focus on teachers and trainers with good industry links who are knowledgeable about work practices and able to contextualise learning experiences regardless of the context of learning.
- Flexibility and innovation in translating Training Packages into learning experiences – with a particular focus on customised and integrated learning and assessment strategies.

Impediments to innovation

As previously mentioned, the High Level Review (Schofield and MacDonald 2004) considered that Training Package implementation has at best enabled trainers and assessors a level of innovation and flexibility in designing training and assessment. However, at worst the feedback indicated that Training Packages have led to confusion, poor practice and atomisation of assessment, with the frequent use of checklists against performance criteria. The High Level Review team however consider that it isn't Training Packages per se that lead to the atomisation of assessment but that it is a result of poor competency standard design and poor assessment design and practice.

The implementation of Training Packages has occurred during the period of the introduction of the AQTF. Although important in terms of quality assurance of the system, the High Level Review (ANTA 2004b) considers that the AQTF is not a sufficient means of ensuring good quality teaching, learning and assessment. The *AQTF Standards for RTOs*, Standards 8 'RTO Assessments' and 9.2 'Validation of assessment strategies' relate specifically to the quality and integrity of assessment. However, one of the major criticisms of the framework is that it is process and input driven and not outcomes focused and hence may not have a critical impact on the quality of assessment and on professional judgement.

In addition, it may be that this framework and its 'compliance' approach in essence hinders rather than hampers innovation and quality assessments. Furthermore, the audit model adopted by relevant Registering/Course Accrediting Bodies may in fact mean that assessors are responding in assessment design and tool development with a compliance approach rather than an innovative and context specific manner. The audit methodology and the concerns of assessors attached to determinations of non-compliance may in fact lead to what Clayton et al (2004) consider a key factor that impacts on the confidence of assessors in making assessment judgements.

It is important to note that the research conducted by Clayton et al (2004) was undertaken in the late 1990s through to 2000 and hence prior to the introduction of the AQTF. In their research, Clayton et al (2004, p. 8) defined 'confidence' as 'a sense of trust in the quality of the information provided to learners, the validity of the assessment tools, and the reliability and fairness of assessment procedures' and considered that the key factors that impact on the confidence of assessors in making assessment judgements include the skill and experience of assessors as well as the clarity of competency standards.

Common across the literature (Clayton et al 2004, Docking 1997, Jones 1999) is that there is a relationship between the level of expertise and tacit knowledge and that of making sound judgements. The findings of Clayton et al (2004) indicate a deficit of assessor expertise possibly resulting from what they say is poor initial assessor training, lack of on-going support and professional development and neglecting assessor vocational skills and knowledge. I suggest that this lack of vocational skills may also encompass the lack of sensitivity and knowledge of current workplace practices alluded to as being important in sound assessment judgements.

Schofield and MacDonald (2004) suggest that Training Package transitional issues may result from the lack of support materials. To this I say, caution. Purchased resources (including assessment tools) are not context specific and hence, without adaptation by the assessor cognisant of the target group and the context of learning and assessment, validity can be questioned.

Strategies to enhance professional judgement and innovation

What bothers me about the above discussion is that Training Packages and the AQTF can be seen as both drivers and inhibitors. It may be that it is the attitudinal characteristics and expertise of the assessors that impact on the notion of innovation and creativity rather than Training Packages and the AQTF per se.

The High Level Review (ANTA 2004) considers that to improve quality assessments what is needed is a capacity building approach that 'emphasises quality, creativity, professional judgement and growth rather than simply compliance' (p. 5).

The *AQTF Standards for RTOs* provides guidance to assessors by focusing on the key underpinning principles of assessment and rules of evidence (Standard 8.1). In addition, it provides some guidance of a key quality assurance and continuous improvement strategy – 'validation' (Standard 9.2). Support resources, such as the Training Package Assessment Materials Project (2001 ANTA/DETYA), have provided assessors with readily accessible information pertaining to assessment.

Clayton et al (2004) note that the literature overwhelmingly suggests that strengthening quality assurance processes of the RTO is a critical strategy for improving assessment. This notion is also reinforced by Schofield and MacDonald (2004).

The literature also notes that there are a number of key quality assurance strategies that can be employed to enhance the professional judgement of assessors. CURVE and the University of Ballarat (2003) in their scoping project note that the feedback from practitioners included the following:

Opportunities for sharing knowledge and building skills were seen as critical to the process and informants referred to networks, mentoring, professional development and action learning as ways that this could occur both formally and informally.

Four strategies are:

1. *Professional development*

Providing avenues for professional development is a key factor mentioned in *Enhancing the Capability of VET Professionals Project: Final Report* (ANTA 2004a). Professional development activities are varied including communities of practice, mentoring and networks, and the latest information pertaining to pedagogy and knowledge of and sensitivity to the workplace context.

2. *Validation/Moderation/Verification or is it just coming to a common understanding?*

Within the AQTF, validation involves reviewing, comparing and evaluating assessment processes, tools and evidence contributing to judgements made by a range of assessors against the same standards. There are various approaches to moderation but the most commonly cited in competency based assessment is that of consensus moderation (Foyster 1995). Consensus moderation provides an avenue for professional development and for shared understanding of benchmarks. Other moderation forms may include: visitation, peer/group and expert. Regardless of when it occurs in the assessment cycle the aim of verification is to come to some form of common understanding.

3. *Exemplars*

The development and use of exemplar assessment tools is often cited as strategy to provide sample assessment tools or evidence which are agreed to be good examples. Again these provide assessors with further understandings regarding assessment requirements.

4. *Integration with teaching and learning.*

What we must never forget is that assessment in a training environment is about a judgment of a learners' knowledge and skills and ultimately the extent of their learning. Assessment, as you know, can be diagnostic, formative and summative. Assessment in its broadest sense needs to be part of the teaching and learning program/plan and should be integrated to provide critical information and feedback to the trainers and the learners.

Conclusion

I would like to refer back to definition of professional practice and remind the participants that it includes:

expert knowledge of the field, a deep understanding of underlying principles, accumulated experience in the practice of the profession, a familiarity with recent advances in the professional knowledge base, and mastery of the best available techniques and tools

I also believe that it includes participation in extensive professional dialogue, critical self-reflection and the capacity to critique own and other peers' practices. It also includes a set of professional standards to not only direct practice but also to drive professionalism (ANTA 2004a).

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