Assessor judgements and everyday worker performance

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The subjective nature of assessment focuses attention on the prior perceptions that workplace assessors can bring to formal assessment activities, regarding the competence of workers. This paper draws on a study into workplace learning and assessment practices and the construction of worker identities, which was conducted at three food production companies in North East Victoria. The paper proposes that, rather than concentrating principally on planned, formal assessment activities to determine the competence of workers, workplaces could develop an alternative approach and support assessors to utilize (and make publicly justifiable), the prior perceptions they have regarding workers' skills and abilities on-the-job and include these in the overall assessment.

An alternative approach to workplace assessment

When introduced, Training Package delivery focused on regulatory and compliance mechanisms to ensure implementation (ANTA 2004). Current policy proposes that Training Packages are now sufficiently embedded in vocational education and training (VET) provision to enable '… some flexibility in the application of standard rules … to test different approaches …' (ANTA 2004:6). In light of these changing attitudes, this paper draws on evidence from a study into workplace learning and assessment and proposes that prior perceptions about workers' daily work practices, which workplace assessors bring to the assessment experience, should be made part of the total assessment, rather than having assessors rely principally on formal assessment activities to determine worker competence. In many workplaces, assessors often know the workers they assess very well, as they engage in working relationships with one another and may also develop social friendships. Having said this, a vital, yet contentious component of workplace assessment relates to the judgement(s) made by the assessor of the worker's performance (Hager *et al.* 1994; Wolf 1995b; Jones 1999). As these judgements are critical in deciding if an assessee is competent, recognition needs to be given to the subjective nature of an assessor's judgements, which must, nonetheless, be publicly justifiable. Of pivotal importance is the need for a supportive structure to assist assessors to make informed judgements. This paper explores these issues and proposes a model in which the prior perceptions held by assessors, about the skills and abilities of workers, can form a basis for valid assessment.

The judgemental nature of assessment

On the whole, assessors do not decide the assessment criteria, but are responsible for interpreting criteria; and, assumptions are made that assessors have the ability to judge assessee performances consistently (McDonald *et al.* 1995). However, as different performances can

reflect the same standards, competence cannot be observed directly, but it can be inferred from performance (Hager *et al.* 1994; McDonald *et al.* 1995). Workplaces vary enormously and, for this reason, any assessment process is complex and judgemental, as:

> … one person's playing of a piano piece, one person's operations plan, is by definition not exactly the same as another's, and cannot be fitted mechanistically to either a written list of criteria, or to an example (Wolf 1994:35).

Wolf rightly claims that documents do not create the standards, but that they clarify and articulate them to assessors. Accordingly, it is the '… prior knowledge and implicit understanding of what competence in their own context means', that allows assessors to make professional judgements regarding the competence of an assessee (1994:34). Similarly, Mulcahy (1999:99) draws attention to the tacit knowledge that experienced practitioners bring to the assessment experience and that assessment of competencies is translated by assessors, in '… the presence of experience'. Results of two studies, which look at the reliability of assessments in vocational contexts, highlight the variable judgements made by assessors on when a learner is judged to be competent (Wolf 1995a). Some assessors demand perfect performance, whilst others are satisfied with barely adequate performance and doubt is then shed on the notion that clear written standards can ensure acceptable practice on their own. Wolf claims that the assessors' behaviour shows a tendency to '… ignore written instructions in favour of their own standards and judgements' (1995a:98). Therefore, it can be concluded that, whilst informed judgements can be made by individual assessors, it is not possible to ensure consistent judgements between assessors, unless practices such as assessment moderation are introduced (discussed later), to assist in developing consistency in assessor judgement.

Thus far, it has been established that assessment hinges on judgements being made and it is the assessor who is responsible for

deciding if an assessee has attained competency. As Wolf so astutely observes, '[t]he assessment does not take part in a vacuum, but within a social context' (1995b:133); and, this can create a particularly tenuous position for some workplace assessors, as they seek to balance working, social and (possible) personal relationships with the assessee, whilst endeavouring to maintain a professional and impartial approach to the assessment process. This discussion is illustrative of the way in which the 'cultural cohesion' of a workplace can count *against* fair judgements, as judgements can be too subjective. Having said this, an integrated, holistic and judgemental model of assessment accepts that judgement is central to assessment in a competency-based system; so '… the point is to take steps to ensure that such informed judgement is both valid and reliable' (Hager *et al.* 1994:9). Hager *et al.* acknowledge that an informed and experienced assessor weighs up the quantity and quality of evidence provided, in order to ascertain its consistency and, from this process, delivers a competent/not yet competent judgement for the assessee.

So far in this discussion, it is evident there are aspects of deciding competency that necessarily require assessors to apply a level of judgement (Raggatt & Hevey 1994; Beckett 1996; Jones 1999). As it is almost impossible to eradicate the subjectivity humans carry into the assessment process, Tovey (1997) proposes that the goal should be to reduce the degree of opinions and feelings felt by assessors. However, it is important to recognize that judgements are inevitably discretionary, are '… made in the flux of practice …' and that assessors are required to discriminate between evidence for the competent performance of assessees (Beckett 1996:135). Assessors do bring their own experiences to the assessment process – they compensate, explain away, make allowances – and their own concepts and interpretations play a very active role (Wolf 1995b). The process of assessing is judgemental and necessarily has to be '… *because the actual performance which one observes – directly, or in the form of artefacts – is intrinsically variable…*' (original in italics)

(Wolf 1995b:70). Consequently, whilst judgements are unavoidably contextual, they will eventually become public knowledge and must be rigorously justified.

How skilled, then, are assessors at undertaking assessment of workers and how might they judge that an assessee is competent? In answer to this question, the training and assessment system assumes trainers/assessors have experience which is relevant and up-to-date and, subsequently, whose judgement and expertise is valued (Gibb 1993). Nonetheless, not all assessors have specific industry experience and training and this then casts doubt on their capacity to make informed decisions about the competency of a worker's performance. Judgements made by workplace assessors have a large component of tacit knowledge and this requires high levels of vocational expertise on the part of assessors, as well as '… expertise in making educational judgements' (Jones 1999:154). Assessment judgements are particularly vulnerable to the contextual significance of both personal relationships and also to the awareness of consequences for the assessor and the assessee (Docking 1990; Griffin 1997). These personal significances of the assessment process can influence the attitudes and responses of the assessor. It can be difficult for an assessor to separate assessment outcomes and demonstrated performance from what they know, or believe they know, about the backgrounds of those they are assessing and this can markedly affect outcomes for participants (Gillis *et al.* 1997; Cumming 1998). For this reason, it is important for organizations to assist in the development of assessors' judgement, which recognizes ' … that " this is the right thing to do"…' (Beckett 1996:138). Again, this highlights the need to provide assessors with relevant training and supportive practice in assessment, to assist them in making informed judgements about assessees' competence, which can be, nonetheless, publicly justified.

Whilst studies show that interpersonal characteristics and physical features of the assessee influence assessor judgement

(Gillis *et al.* 1997), these features and characteristics do not lend themselves to public justification. Furthermore, workplace assessors also develop perceptions about the abilities (or inabilities) of workers to perform tasks because they often observe them at work, on-the-job, on a daily basis. Significantly, the effect of the language used by an assessor when giving feedback to the assessee about their product (or performance) can be problematic, if the assessor fails to make absolutely clear the distinction between the product (or performance) and in judging the assessee as a person (Boud 1995). The result of competent/not yet competent, may be interpreted by the assessee as a direct reflection of the assessor's personal feelings towards them, rather than as an indication of the assessee's competence at the task (Boud 1995).

It is evident that there are a great many complex judgements made by the assessor and that key judgements have '… far more to do with whether someone has actually performed up to the *assessor's* standards…' (italics in original), rather than with the individual performance criteria (Wolf 1995b:67). This observation highlights the contentious nature of the public justification of judgement, which supports a decision concerning the competence of an assessee. An alternative is to attempt to provide complete clarity in the competency standards, but this has been described as the '… never-ending spiral of specification' (Wolf 1995b:55), where the '… performance criteria become narrower and narrower and increasingly divorced from the real world of practice' (Hager *et al.* 1994:86). The issue of assessor judgement requires an understanding of the need to balance the specification of competent performance, with the recognition that informed judgement can be a valid and reliable component of assessing in the workplace. Likewise, the capability of assessors is of particular significance, as their skills in interpreting and implementing assessment guidelines must be balanced with meeting the requirements of the organization (including time and cost) and the needs of the assessees.

Capability of assessors

Variability of standards in assessment can occur across organizations and industries on a local or national basis (Brennan & Smith 2002) and the capability (or lack of ability) of assessors may be a contributing factor to this variability. Whilst the Certificate IV in Assessment and Workplace Training (CAWT) (ANTA 1999) was designed to provide a minimum qualification for workplace trainers and assessors, it '... was frequently delivered with scant regard for quality' and failed to provide the skills needed to work with Training Packages (Brennan & Smith 2002:10). As a consequence, an exhaustive review of the CAWT has led to the endorsement of the new CAWT Training Package.

Individual workplaces may assume that staff with expertise in their chosen field, will also be able to assess with expertise when they have undergone assessor training. However, experience as an assessor takes time, support and practice (Docking 1997) and these fundamental aspects of developing competent assessors can be overlooked. Whilst workplace assessors need to have considerable expertise in their industrial field, they also require a sound knowledge of assessment techniques, so they are competent and confident to make informed assessment judgements (Jones 1999). Novice assessors, with little assessing experience, '... will typically know and be strict in applying the limited rules they have been trained in ...', but will experience difficulties when they are required to adapt rules '... for more complicated situations requiring the use of experience, intuition and specialised technical knowledge of assessment' (Gillis *et al.* 1997:2.18). The best assessors are those with assessor qualifications, coupled with specific industry experience and/or training (Dickson & Bloch 1999). However, lack of ongoing assessor training causes workplaces to lose faith, when assessors cannot demonstrate industry-specific skills and knowledge (Dickson & Bloch 1999). Similarly, Bateman (1998) experienced problems

with those assessors who held the required qualifications, but who did not possess the necessary communication and interpersonal skills to assess effectively, or to collect information on which to make judgements.

Problems associated with workplace assessors can relate to their being increasingly busy with their own work and having less time to engage effectively with the assessee (Dhillon & Moreland 1996). Additionally, the level of assessor involvement can be influenced by the degree of willingness they have towards being involved, the type and amount of training they are given in assessment procedures and the fairness and reliability of the actual assessment tools they use (Maclaren & Marshall 1998). Consequently, recognition of initial suitability of candidates who undertake assessor training, underpins the importance of identifying staff development needs in assessment processes, techniques and standards (Mabry 1992) and in targetting those people who show a genuine interest in becoming assessors. Anecdotal evidence suggests that some organizations focus on particular individuals to become trainers/ assessors, without considering the implications of the suitability of such choices. This can be a product of the 'cultural cohesion' that exists in specific workplaces, which emphasizes the importance of valuing 'mateship'. An innovative response to the issue of assessor capability recommends the introduction of validation/moderation processes, through forming networks of assessors (either intra- or inter-organizational), to share ideas and interpretations (Wolf 1993; Booth *et al.* 2002). This can assist assessors to develop common understandings about assessment that carry over into practice. By providing a network of peer support, it is possible to improve the capability of assessors, the quality of subsequent assessments and consistency in assessor judgement (Booth *et al.* 2002). Hence, the value of publicly justifiable validation/moderation practices, to assist the judgements of workplace assessors, becomes evident.

In summary, assessor judgements are central to competency-based assessment; yet, assessor training, on its own, does not ensure valid and reliable assessments. Judgements vary between assessors and in different contexts, as assessors exercise their understanding of what competence in their own context means. These informed judgements, whilst discretionary, must also be publicly justifiable. The capability of assessors is influenced by the technical knowledge of the assessor, coupled with the thoroughness of assessor training and the assessing experience of individuals. Establishing networks of assessors, to share ideas and interpretations, is seen as a way of developing common understandings among assessors that carry over into practice. Assessors require training and supportive practice in assessment in order to become skillful at making judgements; and, trained and technically skilled assessors, who are guided and supported to develop assessing experience, are most likely to make valid and reliable judgements.

A study into workplace learning and assessment practices

An ethnographic study into workplace learning and assessment practices was recently completed at three Food Processing companies in regional Victoria – a dairy company, an edible oilseed processor and the catering division of a healthcare firm (pseudonyms were used in the study).   Nine production workers, four females and five males, were the principal respondents and each worker was undertaking formal training and assessment in either the Certificate in Food Processing, the Certificate in Dairy Processing, or the Certificate in Hospitality (Catering Operations), at Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) levels 1, 2 and/or 3. Each worker was interviewed on three separate occasions and was also observed at their work and assessors and colleagues of the workers were also interviewed. The fieldwork was conducted over a nine-month period.

Determining the competence of workers

Empirical evidence from the study reveals that these workers demonstrate their skills, knowledge and understanding most readily, through their actions, in the performance of their daily work (Timma 2004). Additionally, the study discloses that workers and assessors are aware of the prior perceptions assessors bring to the assessment experience, as workers are often observed daily on-the-job performing the tasks in which they will be formally assessed (Timma 2004). This paper proposes that these daily activities and practices should be overtly recognized and included as part of the overall assessment, to determine worker competence.

Louise, who maintains the quality and environmental systems at Emerald Food Co., is also an assessor and explains her relationship with the workers:

> I think it would be a lot easier to assess someone you didn't know! I find it is very hard to keep your mind on assessing at the time you are assessing. I suppose because I have that prior knowledge, I know people can do particular jobs before I am assessing them. It is harder to keep your focus sometimes. But, on the other hand, because you have seen them doing it outside the assessment time, I guess it makes it easier to re-word the questions and that with confidence, knowing that all you are really doing is getting the answer out of them that you know they have got (Interview [assessors] June 2001).

Louise raises pertinent issues regarding prior knowledge and assessment practices. Observing workers performing tasks competently on a daily basis means that she takes this knowledge to the assessment experience and this knowledge then influences the way in which she conducts the assessment. Patricia, a tester and packager of powdered milk products at Harvestime Produce, discusses how she is assessed:

> You tell the assessor (you are ready to be assessed) and you
> get it all organized. You do it after work. Make a time, usually
> it is only fifteen minutes or so (to complete the assessment).
> Well, they are always watching what you are doing and they've
> got a checklist and they have to check that, so they ask you
> questions to make sure that you know what you are doing at
> the same time and why you are doing it ... Because you are
> working (together) sometimes they see you do it every day ...
> (Interview 1 [production workers] April 2001).

Patricia reveals that, as the assessors are also co-workers, they
regularly see her perform her daily work on-the-job and she is aware
that this prior knowledge assists them to determine whether she is
competent. Jim, a drier operator at Harvestime Produce, discusses
how senior operators (who are often also assessors) observe him on-
the-job:

> ... a senior operator just checks to see if you are doing what
> you have been trained to do correctly and making sure you
> know what kind of job you are up to. What kind of stuff you
> have to do and whether or not you are doing it properly and
> whether or not you still need training in some areas. Usually,
> a senior operator checks you straight after a mistake and they
> pick up on it, then they come out just to check to see what you
> are doing and how you did it. Whether or not you have to be
> retrained to a certain task. (It happened to me) not too long
> back (Interview 2 [production workers] September 2001).

Jim emotively describes how the senior operator observes him
working on-the-job and, from this informal assessment, can then
determine any further training requirements. Gemma, one of Jim's
co-workers at Harvestime Produce, is a processing organizer and also
assesses workers on-the-job. In contrast to Jim's experiences, Gemma
discusses the practical difficulties of formally assessing workers'
ability to handle problems and irregularities during production and
finds:

> ... when we want to assess them on troublesome areas, on things that often go wrong, trying to *get* things to go wrong, so we can assess them on how they would handle the situation. Because they can tell you how to handle the situation but until you actually see how they react in the real situation it can be quite different ... (Interview [assessor] June 2001).

Gemma's response indicates her need to visibly observe workers dealing with authentic problems during production, so that she can ascertain if they can work competently under pressure. Yet, there is a tendency at Harvestime Produce to perceive 'assessment' as a formal, planned activity; and, assessing workers dealing with 'real life' production irregularities is difficult to achieve in such a rigid assessment environment.

The data extracts from this study illustrate the interconnectedness of the judgements made by on-site assessors, concerning a worker's competence, coupled with the prior perceptions that these assessors hold, through their everyday interactions with and observations of, workers on-the-job. Tensions exist between assessors knowing workers as colleagues and observing them work daily on-the-job, whilst also attempting to assess within formal workplace boundaries. The assessment of skills in the current competency-based framework includes an element of worker attitude (a subjective notion), which means that the process of assessor judgement must be even more transparent to the assessee. To follow is a proposed model which recommends the utilization of prior perceptions that workplace assessors carry into the assessment experience and which are also publicly justifiable.

Utilizing prior perceptions in workplace assessment: a model

This assessment model builds on formal assessor training and practice and proposes:

- The development of assessment tools which include ongoing observations and discussions of workers' skills, abilities, attitudes and understanding, in the everyday performance of the job; and,
- Moderation practices to assist in developing consistency in the decisions made by assessors in determining worker competence. These practices must be publicly justifiable.

It must be stated that this model relates to in-house (and not visiting) assessors and could require workplaces to alter existing attitudes to assessment, particularly in relation to factors of time and cost (see, for example, Hager *et al.* 1994; Toop, Gibb & Worsnop 1994; Wolf 1995b; Dickson & Bloch 1999), due to the refinement of existing assessment tools. However, in the long-term, increased costs should be offset when assessment becomes embedded in the everyday activities and interactions of the workplace.

Enabling an alternative approach to assessment

- Central to this model is the modification of existing assessment tools, to incorporate the everyday, informal interactions, observations and discussions that occur between workers and in-house assessors. Input from work colleagues could also contribute to the overall assessment.
- Assessments should be conducted over time, on multiple occasions, that is, daily/weekly/monthly (or whatever is deemed suitable) to enable assessors to confidently determine the competence of workers, from everyday observations and discussions.
- Rather than a 'tick box' approach to competencies, assessors would provide written (or spoken) comments about the assessees' work and assessees would complete a self-assessment, to enable a more holistic picture of competency to unfold.
- Workplaces must provide sufficient time and resources, to enable modifications to and reformatting of, assessment tools

and recording mechanisms. Organizations need to factor this development time into their planning and the real work time of on-site assessment developers (often also the assessors). This can include specific time set aside when production is quiet or cleaning is taking place, when there is downtime, or when annual/seasonal maintenance is occurring.

- Workers must be informed that assessors will be informally assessing them on-the-job and building up a profile of their competency, over time. Additionally, workers should be encouraged to consult with in-house assessors regarding their assessment, when interacting daily as colleagues. This can assist in consolidating assessment as part of everyday work practices, rather than as a separate entity and can also minimize costs associated with formal, pre-arranged assessment activities.
- Trialling of this new approach is necessary to identify strengths and/or any problems that may arise, as well as allowing assessors and assessees to provide feedback and to become familiar with the new way of assessing.
- The recording of informal assessment activities must be expediently and accurately completed and may require changes to attitudes/practices, as workplace assessors must also meet their own daily work requirements.
- Training and ongoing support in the new assessment practices must be provided to assist assessors to make informed judgements. Whilst this incurs additional costs to the workplace, it is anticipated that improved assessor skills will make a real contribution, in the long-term, to increasing overall workplace productivity.
- Formal moderation practices between assessors should be introduced and nurtured, so that assessors share their ideas and interpretations with one another and can develop common understandings about assessment judgements, that carry over into practice (Wolf 1993; Booth *et al.* 2002).

Conclusion

This paper presents evidence from a study into workplace learning and assessment that reveals workplace assessors are often also colleagues of the workers they assess. The prior perceptions these assessors hold about the workers' skills and abilities, accompany them to formal assessment activities. A model has been developed, which advocates the inclusion of these everyday interactions as part of the total assessment and which must be publicly justifiable. Assessors require training and supportive practice to become skilled at making informed judgements and establishing assessor networks is a way of developing common understandings that carry over into assessment practice.

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