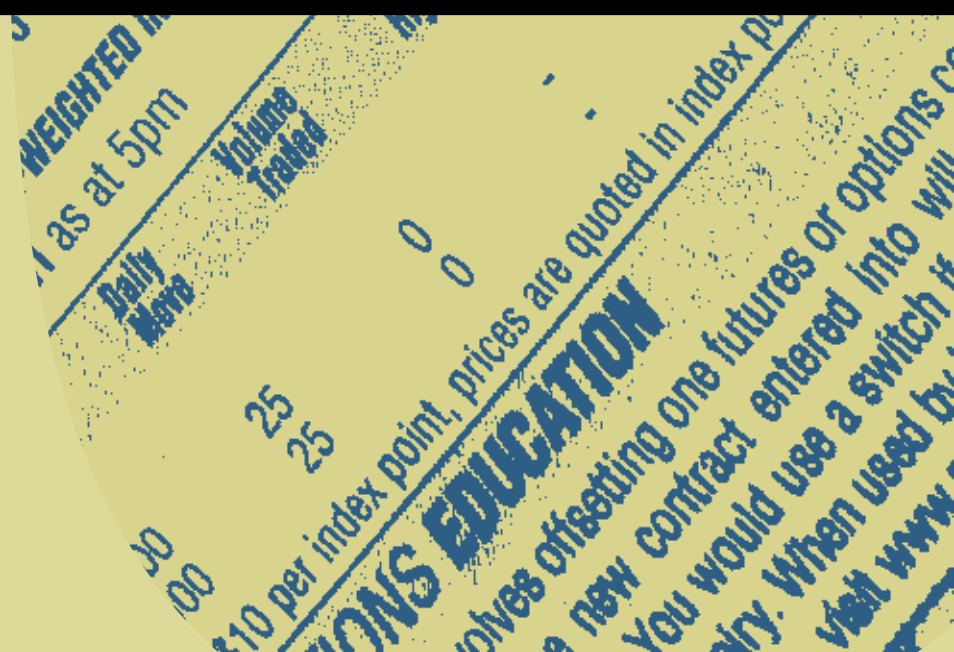




Assessment for Foundation Learning

The importance of purposeful assessment in
adult literacy, numeracy and language courses



Research conducted by
New Zealand Council for
Educational Research

Assessment is carried out by foundation learning (adult literacy, numeracy and language) education providers in different ways and for different purposes. For some, the assessment is a starting point and part of enrolment. For others, the assessment is a way of measuring successful completion of a course, while others use the assessment as a reference point for the tutor and learning plans are based on ongoing assessment.

This research study was carried out in 2005 to establish an understanding of how New Zealand adult literacy, numeracy, and language tutors view and carry out assessment.

Local practice was compared with national and international findings about effective assessment practice.

To ensure teaching is effective, it's important to ensure that the provider, tutor and learner are all getting the most out of the assessment process and have a shared understanding of the purpose. Research repeatedly points to purposeful assessment as being a crucial factor in helping learners reach their goals.

The researchers would like to thank the providers, tutors and learners who took part in this study. The information they provided will help tutors and programme designers as they consider the effectiveness of their assessment practices.

For detailed information on the research study, see the full report, available from www.minedu.govt.nz

THE VALUE OF ASSESSMENT

Good assessment processes can inform effective programme design and encourage learners to pursue further study.

- Accurate assessment of a person's needs assists the learner in making rapid progress and the tutor to tailor the learning to the needs of the student.
- Learners will benefit if they are placed in learning programmes that closely meet their particular needs.
- Effective assessment processes can assist providers to design a range of programmes that address specific learner needs.

ASSESSMENT EXPLAINED

Although the ultimate purpose is to benefit the learner, there are generally three reasons why providers conduct assessment:

- to report on learning progress
- to improve teaching and learning
- to promote lifelong learning

While promoting lifelong learning is the over-arching goal of all assessment and reporting on learning progress is the most common, good assessment should address all three assessment goals.

Providers address their assessment needs by conducting various forms of assessment. These are commonly grouped into diagnostic, formative or summative assessment. While formative assessment may do more to encourage lifelong learning, all three forms of assessment are equally valid and each has its purpose. Here is a general explanation of these three forms of assessment.

Initial /diagnostic assessment

Initial assessment is usually carried out at the beginning of a programme to identify learners' strengths and weaknesses but can also take place at any stage, even before the programme has begun. The assessment may be a specific check on a particular skill, understanding, or aptitude, or it may be a broad indicator of general areas that need attention. Diagnostic assessment is usually performed in order

to place a learner in the most appropriate course or programme for their level of skill or to identify a learner's needs and strengths throughout a programme.

Initial and diagnostic assessments are sometimes also used to determine suitability for admission to a particular programme or to allow learners to be credited with all or part of a course or qualification.

Formative assessment

Formative assessment is characterised by ongoing feedback from the tutor for the duration of a course or programme. It is often called "assessment for learning" because it is intended to provide feedback on progress to both the learner and the tutor. The feedback is used to plan the next learning steps for the learner.

Formative assessment can include some or all of these elements:

- the learning intentions are clearly set out at the planning stage of each lesson and shared with the learners
- learners are supported to carry out self-evaluations against these learning intentions
- learners receive feedback from the tutor which is either formal (such as written tests) or informal (such as oral responses) and specifically related to their progress in meeting the planned learning outcomes; and
- learners are supported to set their own next learning goals.

Summative assessment

This term is used to describe any assessment that identifies and summarises achievement at a particular time. Such assessment may measure achievement for credit—for example for the award of a certificate, or to report results for all or part of a course or programme such as the completion of unit standards. Summative assessment may take place on one occasion at the end of a course, or be continual—for example, internal assessment throughout the course that is used to build a Record of Learning.

GOOD ASSESSMENT

For the purpose of this study, six broad principles of good assessment practice in foundation learning settings were drawn up based on research evidence and discussions with experts in the field. The table below lists the six principles and provides a set of characteristics for each.

Good assessment ...	Characteristics
1 has transparent goals and clarity of purpose.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The programme purpose and assessment criteria are clearly understood by all. • Learners' prior learning and current competencies are recognised. • The assessment is designed to improve learner performance. • Learners are shown that diagnostic assessment is a constructive exercise.
2 aims to improve learning and pays attention to the needs and interests of the learner and to the process of learning.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assessment is based on the needs of the learner and an understanding of how people learn. • The assessment helps learners understand what they still need to learn. • Assessment is performed throughout the duration of the programme. • Assessment helps learners to self-assess, encouraging them to reflect on their learning. • Constructive, honest, feedback is provided, allowing learners to be aware of their progress and identify next learning steps with their tutors. • Learners can identify options for progression. • Feedback from assessment allows tutors and developers to improve their own practice.
3 is valid, reliable, ethical, fair, and manageable.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The full range of achievements of all learners is recognised and the methods used take account of the diversity of learners. • Assessors use appropriate tools and sources of evidence providing tutors and learners with the evidence needed to make quality interpretations. • A variety of assessment measures are used to sufficiently prove that performance criteria have been met and to ensure that no learners are disadvantaged. • Good internal systems ensure that consistent judgements are made about learners' performance.
4 is authentic.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A contextualised approach is taken where assessment is a vital part of teaching. • Assessment places an emphasis on both the generic competencies of literacy, numeracy or language as well as the specific competencies of the workplace, community, and everyday life situations.
5 is credible to all relevant stakeholders.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The programme is developed from a consensus building process that, where appropriate, assures portability of credentials. The associated assessment measures learning in the programme. • A systematic approach is taken to accountability and programme improvement based on meeting learners' needs and programme goals. • The results of assessment are documented and learners receive recognition for their achievements within the programme. • The tutor and provider participate in ongoing quality assurance processes, such as moderation systems. • The assessment provides useful information to report credibly on performance.
6 is undertaken by experienced tutors backed by ongoing professional development.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assessment results are used to inform and improve programme design and teaching methods. • Tutors are experienced in the use and interpretation of the assessment tools and can use the information to promote learning. • Tutors share their teaching and assessment practices and undertake regular professional development.

ASSESSMENT IN NEW ZEALAND

The six principles of good assessment in teaching adult foundation learning were used to determine the effectiveness of current assessment practices in New Zealand.

The researchers were conscious of the wide range of different contexts in which foundation learning is taught in New Zealand and tried to encompass the full diversity of this provision in their study. Twelve providers representing private training establishments, polytechnics, adult and community providers, workplace training and universities took part in the study. Full details of participants are listed in the full report – see www.minedu.govt.nz

Initial/diagnostic assessment

All the providers participating in the study put considerable effort into initial or diagnostic assessment. While there was some variation in the strategies used, the researchers found all providers took great care to ensure that the purpose of the assessment was made clear to the learner.

Use of initial or diagnostic assessment

Assessment tools and approaches		Factors guiding use of assessment		Use made of assessment information	
Use of meaningful contexts	***	Tutors' personal professional knowledge	***	Fine-tune learning plans	***
Formal tools used	**	Emotional wellbeing of learners	***	Construct individual learning plans	***
Informal methods	**	Sharing ownership of assessment with learner	**	Determine programme eligibility	*
Self-assessment	**	Only "expert" tutors conduct assessments	*	Access appropriate learning support	*
Group assessment	*				

* occasionally used, ** sometimes used, *** often used



Working together to construct individual learning plans meant that the learners were given a clear sense of assessment purposes (Principle 1 – transparent assessment goals and clarity of purpose) and a wide range of both formal and informal approaches and tools was used for this process (Principle 3 – valid, reliable, ethical, fair and manageable assessment).

Principle 2 (assessment is tuned to learners’ needs and interests and the learning process) was also very much in evidence. Taking care of learners’ emotional needs as their learning needs were assessed were key considerations for most providers. Most frequently mentioned was the importance of not further damaging learners’ self-confidence. In workplace settings tutors recognised the importance of keeping learning needs confidential, whilst also reporting on overall progress to the workplace management, usually by aggregating data from all the programme participants. Acting in culturally appropriate ways was important in some programmes.

Principle 4 (assessment is authentic) was strongly in evidence at the initial stage—many providers mentioned the use of authentic contexts in which they carried out initial assessments.

Authenticity of context for assessing learners was interpreted in different ways by the providers. For example some programmes assessed literacy skills by asking learners to write and read out something about themselves. As well as assessing these skills, this exercise also allowed the tutor to find out more about the learner as an individual.

Initial assessment tasks in workplace programmes often required the learner to carry out activities that could be a normal part of their job. In these cases the tutors who design the initial assessments need a thorough working knowledge of the demands of the specific workplace, in addition to skills in diagnosing literacy and numeracy needs. One programme assessed learners as they worked on specifically devised group tasks. Occasionally learners were partially assessed in a heritage language so that they could more fairly demonstrate prior knowledge.

One concern was that in some programmes only the most experienced tutors carried out this initial assessment, and interpretation of the results in many cases was dependent on the tutor’s professional knowledge. Unless there is good communication, there is the risk that the assessment process might not appear transparent to others, including the learners themselves. Finding ways to share assessment expertise more widely with other tutors is the challenge here (Principle 6 – Assessment is performed by experienced staff backed by ongoing professional development).



Formative assessment

When formative assessment was used, a greater emphasis on improving learning was evident.

Use of formative assessment

Assessment tools and approaches		Factors guiding use of assessment		Use made of assessment information	
Tutor observation and feedback	***	Learning to learn—drawing learners deeper into learning decisions			***
Use of meaningful contexts	***	Tutors' personal professional knowledge	***	Adapting tasks/next learning steps	***
Monitoring in relation to learning plan	**	Emotional wellbeing of learners	**	Tracking progress	***
Self and peer-assessment	**	Sharing ownership of assessment with learner	*	Programme accountability	*
Group assessment	*	Moderation of assessment judgements between tutors	*	Preparation for formal summative assessments	*
Individual meeting with tutor	*	Peer support in another language	*	Access appropriate learning support	*
Staff discussion of individual learners	*				

* occasionally used, ** sometimes used, *** often used

A common theme was for assessment to be ongoing through continual observations that tutors made and recorded against the initial learning plan. Learning logs could form a “running record” with an emphasis on its use for “learning to learn”. In some work-based settings some monitoring occurred as learners used their new skills while carrying out their routine work. This type of assessment obviously has strong validity (Principle 3 – valid, reliable, ethical, fair and manageable assessment). Despite this, tutors in some programmes were less specific about ways they identified, and shaped evolving learning goals as their programmes unfolded, or how they used these new insights to shape next learning steps (Principles 1 and 2 – transparent assessment goals and clarity of purpose tuned to learners’ needs and interests and the learning process).

In formative assessment, the nature of what counted as a “meaningful context” shifted (Principle 4 – assessment is authentic). Compared to initial or diagnostic settings where the context was likely to be something of direct interest to the learner, in formative assessments the meaningful context often

amounted to practice summative assessment. There is a danger here that “next learning steps” could be restricted to practising the assessment over again.

Few measures for strengthening tutors’ shared understandings of assessments were reported (Principle 6 – assessment performed by experienced, trained tutors). Similarly, knowing the next learning steps often seemed to be dependent on individual tutors’ own professional knowledge. Such assessment is likely to be reactive—the tutor recognises a learning need and gives feedback. Without transparent assessment criteria and being able to anticipate what might be found, it is not as easy to plan next steps, or to share ownership of formative assessment decisions with learners.

Summative assessment

There was much more similarity between the different providers for this type of assessment than for either diagnostic or formative practice. In part this is because so many of them used the National Qualifications Framework and especially the National Certificate of Employment Skills to assess learning that could count towards formal qualifications.

Use of summative assessment

Assessment tools and approaches		Factors guiding use of assessment		Use made of assessment information	
Assessments structured in prescribed ways for formal qualifications	***	NQF compliance	***	Learner certification	***
Written learner learning profile	**	Tutors' personal professional knowledge	**	Programme accountability	***
Portfolio of learner work	*	Other published standards	*	Learner promotion	*

* occasionally used, ** sometimes used, *** often used



In most programmes Principle 3 (valid, reliable, ethical, fair and manageable assessment) – especially in relation to fairness and reliability and Principle 5 (assessment is credible to all stakeholders) become especially important because this is the “high stakes” part of the assessment process.

Research on lifelong learning makes it clear that learners need to be involved in making summative judgements about their learning, not just in making decisions about their progress during the learning. However, it was not clear how involved learners were in making judgements about how well they had met the performance criteria for the standards and tasks of the National Qualifications Framework and the National Certificate of Employment Skills.

There can be a tension between using the motivating power of summative assessment for qualifications and meeting the most important needs of learners with high literacy, numeracy, or language needs. Because a work-based learner needs to be signed up for at least 20 credits to get Industry Training Organisation funding the development of much needed basic skills may take second place to working to pass the unit standards relevant to the workplace.



The two polytechnic learning support courses in the study did not use summative assessment because learners were assessed in their formal course work. Several literacy providers did not use formal summative assessment either and no qualifications were at stake as the major focus was on addressing and meeting the evolving needs of the learners in the contexts of their daily lives.

It is worth noting that the low-stakes summative assessments were likely to meet more aspects of the six principles than were the high-stakes assessments.

IN CONCLUSION

For learners to make real gains in literacy, numeracy or language, research evidence shows that purposeful assessment is crucial. Good assessment practices can help shape effective programmes and teaching methods, plan future learning, encourage further learning and measure programme effectiveness. Such practices put the learner at the heart of the assessment process.

This research study found that some tutors were very experienced in designing and using purpose-developed assessment tools. Wider sharing of this experience amongst tutors and managers in foundation learning programmes would help to build assessment capability and help to ensure that initial, formative and summative assessments are used to best advantage.

The researchers hope that this research study will encourage discussion by providers about improving their assessment practices.



Published by:

Tertiary Education Learning Outcomes Policy

Ministry of Education

www.minedu.govt.nz

Contact us at: learning.forliving@minedu.govt.nz

Design and production

FitzBeck Creative

© Crown copyright

All rights reserved

All enquiries should be made to the publisher

July 2006

ISBN 0-478-13523-8