RECENTLY WE HAD TO GO TO
restaurants and hotels to
interview supervisors and
chefs to learn what
competencies they wanted their
trainees and apprentice cooks to have.
It was for a research project which
involved the assessment of cooks.
Their requirements can be
summarised as consistently high-
performance of various cooking
related skills over time; performance
of tasks within strict timelines; high
levels of interpersonal skills with
customers and/or fellow workers; and
punctuality, hard work, initiative.
The problem this list presents to
trainers in TAFE and private provider
colleges is that although these things
can be observed and judged as part of
workplace assessment, none of them
sits comfortably in the off-job
environment of a training college. It
is time we acknowledged the
substantial differences between
workplaces and training colleges and
considered just what this means for
the assessment of competence.
Training colleges do not tend to
cater for consistent practice of skills
over time. One consequence of the
modular approach to training is that
once a module outcome has been
checked off by an assessor it, too
often, is not revisited. This is in spite
of the strong evidence that practice
and reinforcement are important in the
acquisition of any ability.
Workplaces on the other hand are
big on practice. Some cooks practice
the skill of cooking steaks every day
of their working lives and might be
cooking twenty steaks at the one
time—some rare, some medium and
some well done. The training college
has a problem assessing this sort of
performance and it obviously cannot
do it on a daily basis—who would
pay for all those steaks?
In the workplace, trainees face two
time requirements. They are expected
to arrive at work on time, but more
importantly they are expected to carry
out their tasks within certain time
frames. Our cook doing the steaks
might be preparing them perfectly but
they also need to be presented to the
customer within an acceptable time.
In the training college the trainees
who fail to meet the timeline might
not be deemed competent, but at least
they don't get the sack. There are
pressures, like keeping one's job, that
only come with being in the real
world.
Ability to solve problems is
almost always mentioned as a most
desirable skill for trainees to possess
and we know people face tough
problems at work. But what is more
important, many of these workplace
problems do not lend themselves to
single solutions, but rather to a range
of alternative responses—some more
appropriate than others, but not
simply right or wrong.
Most of the training material I've
seen on problem solving seems to be
directed towards finding single
solutions and fails to acknowledge the
reality of workplace problems where
we have to seek solutions that are, at
best, rough compromises!
Mirroring workplace conditions to
assess real problem-solving skills
creates substantial difficulties for the
training college.

Some industries value inter-
personal skills more highly than
others. Not surprisingly our work in
the hospitality industry has
emphasised the importance of dealing
with customers. In fact, nowadays,
there are few occupations that do not
see the importance of skills related to
team work and getting along with
others. While there is no doubt that
the training colleges stress the
importance of interpersonal skills they
can usually only assess them in an
artificial environment.
There is, I would suggest, a
substantial difference between using
a role play to assess a trainee's ability
to deal with a drunk customer who is
threatening physical violence in a
college and the real thing in a
workplace.
I once interviewed a TAFE
teacher, a trainer of metal industry
apprentices, who boasted to me that
no apprentice of his ever failed. On
being pressed, he explained how he
spent extra time in training some of
his apprentices and helping with
aspects of their practical work even
to the extent of doing some of their
work for them to get them up to pass
standard.
There is no doubt that this man
was a dedicated teacher. But he saw
the standard set by industry as the
enemy and he joined forces with his
apprentices to defeat it by any means
at his disposal.
Contrast this approach with the
relative lack of assistance given to
trainees in most workplaces and the
rigid application of standards to
performance.
Having made that contrast, it also
needs to be stressed that the standards
applied in the workplace vary
between individual places. Returning
to our cookery work once again, we
found that the level of rigour varies
greatly across the industry. For
example, the silver service restaurants
and the major hotels demand much
higher standards than many of the
smaller operators. What is more, these
differences apply across trainees
taking the same level of certificate.
Assessing workplace competence is not a job for training colleges.

Peter Thomson says

In our project we have been developing record books which require the trainees to write a few simple sentences about their work. Employers at the top end of the market are quite happy with this approach, but at the bottom end we are told there is a problem because some trainees cannot write!

Some workplaces set higher standards than others.

There are a couple of consequences of these differences in standards between workplaces that need to be considered. Firstly, it will almost inevitably lead to a league table approach to qualifications. Qualifications from some employers will be more highly valued than others because it will become known that different levels of rigour have been applied. Secondly, it puts the training provider college in a no-win situation. If trainees from establishments representing the top and bottom of the league table are coming to the college for some of their training how should the college assess them? The lowest common denominator approach will not satisfy either end of the market.

Here is a major dilemma for us. In demanding workplace assessment as a major component of our competency-based assessment procedures we must be prepared to concede that national comparability is no longer possible.

Some workplaces set higher standards than others. Some are noisy, crowded and dirty places making assessment itself problematic. Some workplaces have outdated equipment, others have the newest equipment perhaps found nowhere else in the country.

These factors make assessing to national standards very difficult. Just think about all the trouble we go to in order to standardise examination conditions in Year 12 so that potential disadvantages are minimised and we can achieve validity and reliability. We cannot get national validity and reliability under workplace conditions which we know will vary enormously from employer to employer.

However, at the level of the individual workplace, validity and reliability are possible. We can tailor our assessments to meet the needs of the individuals and make valid and reliable measures of the performance of trainees in their own workplace. Which, of course, is what most employers want.

These problems are not going to go away and addressing them is certainly worth further thought.

Peter Thomson is deputy director of NCVER

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