Professional Conversation as an Assessment Tool for Recognition of Current Competence

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Abstract

Recognition of current competence is an area that does not easily lend itself to the traditional assessment tools such as observation and questioning particularly when assessing integrated, high-level work performance. As a response to these difficulties, Dr Chris Devereux from the UK developed a technique called professional conversation, initially for use in the customer service sector. There has been growing use of and credibility for the technique in New Zealand and South Africa and is now used as a useful method for assessing current competence in the professional and managerial sectors.

The paper distinguishes between recognition of prior learning and current competence, describes the process of professional conversation, addresses issues of validity and sufficiency, and describes the systems and processes that have been implemented to ensure the quality of assessment.

1. Introduction

In 1998, Dr Chris Devereux from the United Kingdom and Liz Bowen-Ciewley of New Zealand were both working in the field of assessing workplace learning against competency standards and met to discuss their conceptual frameworks and methodologies.

Independently they had reached similar conclusions that traditional methods of workplace assessment such as observation and questioning had proved to be limited when assessing integrated, high-level work performance. They concluded that there was a need for an additional methodology to assess such integrated knowledge and skills that had often been obtained by a mixture of informal and formal learning and for which recognition of current competence was an appropriate form of assessment.

Devereux had developed an assessment methodology called professional conversation for use in the assessment, initially, of customer service skills that he
described in his handbook *Rigour Without Rigidity*\(^1\). This approach has been adapted by Bowen-Clewley and used in New Zealand and South Africa for the assessment of management competence, both in contextualised situations (asset management) and in broad based management (meat processing, teaching and mining). It has also been trialled in the assessment of Early Childhood Teaching competencies.

Assessment using professional conversation has been subject to moderation in New Zealand, the UK and South Africa and is being reviewed as part of a PHD dissertation. Findings suggest that it is a valid, sufficient and rigorous process that has equal credibility with more traditional approaches. This is of particular concern where safety of systems, structures and people can be compromised by incompetent performance.

2. Assessment
There is considerable debate over how to define competence in general terms. Gonczi\(^2\) defines it as *the collection of attributes needed for intelligent performance in specific situations*, while Beaumont (1996)\(^3\) suggests it is *the ability to apply knowledge, understanding and skills and performing to the standards required in employment. This includes problem solving and meeting changing demands.*

However, most agree with Worsnop (1993)\(^4\) who suggests that the concept of competence should encompass four elements:

- The requirement to perform individual tasks (repeatedly to a set standard)
- The requirement to manage a number of different tasks within a job
- The requirement to respond to irregularities and breakdowns in routine
- The requirement to deal with the responsibilities and expectations of the work environment, including working with others

Capper (1996)\(^5\) suggests that another element should be added:

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\(^1\) Devereux, C (1997) *Rigour Without Rigidity* WA Consultants
\(^2\) Quoted by Gonczi’s colleague Flowers at a seminar in New Zealand
\(^3\) Beaumont G (1995) Review of 100 NVQs and SVQs
\(^4\) Worsnop, P (1993) *Competency Based Training: How to do it - for Trainers*
• The requirement to handle continuous learning in a constantly changing work environment

Capper's (1996) research into best practice in workplace assessment\(^6\) also indicates that assessment of competence should:

• combine work, training and assessment
• make the maximum use of performance events which produce valid evidence across a number of elements
• make maximum use of naturally occurring and readily available evidence in the work or learning setting
• allow for the clear presentation and cross-referencing of evidence
• ensure that candidates take an active role in planning and collecting evidence

Bowen-Clewley and Devereux (1999)\(^7\) added to these suggesting that:

• actual performance is the only determinant of competence
• it has become apparent from practice that evidence of on-going, whole task performance is a much better determinant of competence than isolated examples of performance of individual task components. It is also more cost effective in workplaces where stopping production for assessment purposes is often inefficient and costly. Thus the collection of evidence/formative assessment model is the only feasible model for assessment in the workplace
• the focus of assessment should be on the learner rather than the assessor and on whole task performance judged against holistic assessment criteria/judgement statements which generate reflective thought on personal practice
• unit standards and evidence guides must be written in a way that is accessible to the learners as well as the assessors. They need to be in plain English and be specific about what is required. As the concept of competency based training and assessment is to provide clear criteria for the

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\(^6\) ibid

\(^7\) Bowen-Clewley, L and Devereux, C (1999) *South Meets North: Love At First Sight: Exploring workplace assessment methodologies that examine whether the marriage, and relationships with in-laws, will survive.* IAEA Conference, Slovenia
performance required, the standards and evidence guides should not become barriers to understanding.

Given the above, it has become apparent that competence can only be demonstrated by performance in a specific context. Assessing parts of a role in isolation from one another may give some evidence towards that judgement, but the most satisfactory evidence of competence comes from on-going actual performance. Moreover, whilst performance may demonstrate knowledge and understanding, evidence of knowledge per se most often does not demonstrate understanding and application.

Wolf (1995)\textsuperscript{8}, Beaumont (1996)\textsuperscript{9}, and Eraut and Cole (1993)\textsuperscript{10} indicate that competence style assessments have a demonstrable validity in measuring occupational performance that academic and psychological tests lack. Wolf reviews the literature on academic measures and occupational performance and shows low correlations in research reviews between academic performance and occupational performance: \textit{The evidence on the link between academic measures and vocational performance is almost consistently damning}. Wolf also suggests that \textit{assessment should be as close as possible to the outcomes one is interested in}. This is a message repeated again and again in the authentic assessment and performance assessment literature.

The above discussion has particular significance in assessing current competence where it is very difficult to maintain any semblance of meaning or relevance in atomised pieces of evidence, particularly when assessing high-level integrated performance that has largely been learned on the job, often in an apprenticeship based model.\textsuperscript{11} Moreover issues of validity and sufficiency also need to be considered in determining appropriate evidence at this level.

\textsuperscript{8} Wolf A (1995) Competency Based Assessment Buckingham: Open University Press
\textsuperscript{9} ibid.
\textsuperscript{11} The term apprenticeship applies to a broad based description of learning that offers on job mentoring and coaching with some supported formal training
Significantly, the notion of validity has undergone a significant rethink in recent years. Initially regarded as the extent to which a test measures what it is intended to measure, validity has been reconceptualised through the work of Messick, Fredrickson and Collins, Cronbach, and Linn, among others. The extended concept of validity has become called consequential validity, concerned as it is with the consequences of assessment and its interpretation.

The change is reviewed by Gipps (1994). In describing Messick's concept, she notes that *Validity ... relates to the evidence available to support test interpretation and potential consequences of test use.*

Moreover, the concept of validity has been extended beyond the design of assessment tasks to the design of competency standards, assessment systems and moderation procedures. The definition of validity is now often given as "fitness for purpose" and at a symposium on competency based assessment in the workplace at the University of Cambridge in the UK in 1999, the group went so far as to define some key requirements which reflect this. They noted, for example that standards design *should be adapted to particular and changing workplace circumstances 'fitness for purpose', rather than being used as an all-purpose template.* Oates (1999) explores these issues in reviewing approaches to analysing and describing competence.

One other shift regarding validity is worth noting. While validity has always been acknowledged as more important than reliability (conventionally, the second criterion of test quality), it is only recently that the acknowledgement has been acted on. In other words, comparability does not supersede validity in importance. When using a collection of evidence model, where evidence becomes variable according to the work circumstances of the candidate, this reinterpretation has considerable significance.

The related issue of sufficiency is linked to two underlying aspects: the purpose for which the result will be used, and the confidence with which the assessor makes

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judgements. Purpose underlies all validity judgements. Wolf\textsuperscript{14} comments that the
competence movement in the United States, the UK and Australia has always paid
attention to the importance of broad conceptions of what 'competence' involves -
insisting that 'competence is a wide concept, embracing transfer, planning, personal
effectiveness and not merely narrow skills.

In considering high level performance in professional contexts this broadly based
perception of purpose has implications for selecting assessment methodologies,
particularly where assessment is of applied and integrated understandings, skills and
personal attributes.

3. The Recognition of Prior Learning/Recognition of Current Competence
debate
The terms Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) and Recognition of Current
Competence (RCC) are often used interchangeably. This leads to considerable
confusion over policy development and related assessment methodologies. The
following distinctions may alleviate this confusion.

3.1 Recognition of Prior Learning is an equivalency or credit transfer process. In
general the methodology is a benchmarking operation where comparability of
previous qualifications and/or experience is established and credited towards a
full or part current qualification. It is unusual for unit standards or qualifications
to be awarded, but equivalency is documented. The candidate is rarely asked to
provide evidence of current performance. An example is where the Design and
Construction Industry Training Organisation uses RPL as the method for
establishing transition between traditional and National Qualifications
Framework (NQF) based qualifications. This is a paper-based exercise where
the candidate is required to provide evidence of qualifications and experience
and a credit transfer/equivalency is established and documented to enable the
candidate to proceed in the NQF qualification environment.

\textsuperscript{14} Wolf A (1995) \textit{Competency Based Assessment} Buckingham: Open University Press
3.2 Recognition of Current Competence is a formal assessment of a candidate’s performance in relation to specified unit standards or learning outcomes. Candidates are usually required to produce evidence of workplace performance as well as documentation and attestation. Where there are gaps, candidates are offered bridging procedures to fill these. Actual unit standards and/or qualifications are awarded.

However assessment of current competence usually encompasses integrated performance and the process must be characterised by best practice elements. Devereux\textsuperscript{15} suggests, amongst others, the following key features of RCC assessment processes are:

• outcomes (results) are crucial, but often the way things are done is the outcome - thus, processes followed or utilised can be considered as assessment evidence
• assessment is holistic - not the ticking off of dozens of items on a checklist but lumping activities together
• candidates and assessors are equal partners in the evidence collection and consideration processes
• the assessment partners are required to think critically at all times
• assessment is a short process.

Moreover, whilst all assessment involves a systematic consideration of evidence, it does not, however, need to be generated by activities designed by the assessor. Indirect evidence may be as valid as direct evidence sources.

With RCC, it can be assumed that the candidate is already competent with respect to the outcomes being assessed - that the assessment process is one of confirming or verifying competence. With the existence of clear descriptions of the performance evidence expected as proof of competent performance, there is an expectation that the candidate has undertaken a process of self-assessment. The result of such action is a willingness of the candidate to present themselves and/or evidence for formal assessment.

\textsuperscript{15} Devereux, C.M. (1997) Rigour without Rigidity, W A Consultants
It is usual, therefore, for the RCC model to focus on actual performance in the workplace and to require a collection of evidence approach to assessment. However the variable nature of the evidence in this model has created some challenges particularly in specifying evidence requirements. Whilst an evidence guide\textsuperscript{16} is often supplied to support this approach and provides clear judgement requirements for both the candidate and the assessor, the assessment process puts the onus on the candidate to identify relevant evidence\textsuperscript{17}. In these circumstances professional conversation offers a methodology whereby purpose of the assessment and the interpretation of the results in a workplace context are integral to the actual assessment process.

### 4. What is professional conversation?

Professional conversation is an assessment method that has its origin in two social science methodologies – discourse analysis and behavioural interviewing. It also draws from theorists such as Dewey and Foucault.

Dewey's significance for informal educators lies in a number of areas. First, his belief that education must engage with and enlarge experience has continued to be a significant strand in informal education practice. Second, and linked to this, Dewey's exploration of thinking and reflection - and the associated role of educators - has continued to be an inspiration. We can see it at work, for example, in the models developed by writers such as David Boud and Donald Schön. Third, his concern with interaction and environments for learning provide a continuing framework for practice. Last, his passion for democracy, for educating so that all may share in a common life, provides a strong rationale for practice in the associational settings in which informal educators work.

The role of discourse has been defined by Foucault (1981)\textsuperscript{18} as a way of organising the word in terms of meaningful categories, classifications and bringing a method of control into social understanding. Furthermore, recent research methodologies have

\textsuperscript{16} These are variously referred to as assessment guides, evidence guides, and assessment schedules

\textsuperscript{17} An evidence guide used in professional conversation is attached as Appendix 1

included narrative as a basis for collecting valid data (Runyan 1984)\(^9\). Narrative, or the telling of personal stories in the context of specific situations is described by Runyan (1984) as *useful, if not indispensable for indicating how people thought and felt, what they did and said, what situations they were in, the subjective meaning of events, how their words and actions were interpreted by others and the processes which they interacted with their worlds over time*. This suggests that focussed discussion and contextualised discourse can be a valid and sufficient way of gathering evidence of competence, particularly when supported by documentation and validation.

Indeed, professional conversation is a very powerful form of assessment that allows a candidate to demonstrate their understanding and give examples of their skills and attitudes. It is, essentially, an exchange between two equals, led by the candidate and supported by other types of evidence that have been collected by the candidate.

The basis of the conversation centres round:

- What the candidate wants to say about their experience in their current and previous work roles
- How these experiences meet some or all of the assessment requirements for the unit standard/s and/or qualifications
- Empowering and enabling the candidate to get more ideas about the way they do things in order to improve their performance.

The use of professional conversation in assessment of current competence provides a controlled and rigorous process that affords applicants the facility of thorough discussion and explanation during which they can relate all relevant experience. Assessors also have the opportunity to discuss the evidence provided by the applicant until a full understanding is reached.

This can be particularly significant in areas of cross-cultural understanding where contextual issues may arise. Moreover, the self-determining concepts inherent in the professional conversation process are consistent with sound culturally sensitive

practice. Benton (1995)\textsuperscript{20} states, *Our diverse experiences, histories and cultural perspectives are a valuable source of new insights and new knowledge to which every New Zealander can contribute. To make the most of cultural diversity, we start with self-knowledge...Our cultural differences become not just a forum for tolerance but a source of strength and wisdom.*

This approach reflects the work by Argyris\textsuperscript{21} who explores the distinctions between adaptive and generative learning in his model of single and double loop learning (Fig. 1 below) and posits the benefits of self-reflection in enhancing learning. He suggests that where the consequences of actions are used only to adapt actions and behaviours, there is less learning than where the consequences are used to explore, and potentially refine thoughts, feelings and beliefs.

**Figure 1 Single and double loop learning**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Governing variable</th>
<th>Action strategy</th>
<th>Consequences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thoughts</td>
<td>Actions</td>
<td>Results</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feelings</td>
<td>Behaviours</td>
<td>Behaviours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beliefs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Professional conversation offers an assessment methodology that specifically integrates generative learning into its process through the use of guided self assessment.


4.1 Features of professional conversation\textsuperscript{22}.

Candidates:

- prefer talking about their work that writing about it
- are nervous and unsure at the beginning
- spend considerable time thinking and planning about what they want to say and show to their assessor
- usually take over the assessment process themselves by the end
- cross reference the conversation and supporting evidence to a number of unit standards
- change some of their work practices as a consequence of the conversation

Assessor\textsuperscript{23} and Candidate

- recognise that both may be a bit nervous at the outset
- recognise that both are equals in the process
- have a knowledge of the field being assessed
- define an agenda of what the candidate wants to discuss and which standards are being assessed
- have an assumption that the discussion will bring out aspects not defined in the original agenda
- will explore why the candidate acted and thought in a particular way
- see the experience as an opportunity to each have an enriched understanding of the field
- will identify what still needs to be tackled

Assessor only

- starts with the assumption that the candidate is competent
- has the ability to get an candidate to bring up further examples to illustrate a point
- can keep quiet
- can link a number of points and relate them to the standards

\textsuperscript{22} Devereux, C.M. (1997) \textit{Rigour without Rigidity}, W A Consultants

\textsuperscript{23} Full training and assessment is undertaken before assessors are registered to use this assessment approach.
4.2 Process for Professional Conversation

Prior To Assessment
Candidates collect evidence before the formal assessment. To do this they will:

- Select appropriate unit standards/qualifications
- Undertake the guided self assessment process provided by the assessment schedules/evidence guides
- Identify case studies/work situations that candidates can discuss with the assessor to demonstrate their competence for all or part of the unit standard.
- Put together evidence that supports their case studies/work examples and demonstrates that they have met the requirements of the unit standard/s. This may include samples of work, general references, performance appraisals and any other materials that candidates believe substantiate their competence.

During Assessment
Formal assessment takes place on a specified day and is undertaken by a trained and registered assessor. It is normally between an hour and two hours for a group of standards or up to a day for a full qualification. It takes the form of a taped professional conversation where candidates discuss cases/work situations that demonstrate their competence. Candidates support their conversation with the evidence they have already collected. This must include documentary evidence and validations from authorised personnel. The conversation is the most important part of this process, as candidates need to discuss not just what they do, but why and how they do it.

Candidates will know their results by the end of their assessment when the assessor will give candidates feedback. This will include identification and documentation of the following:

- Outcomes/unit standards/qualifications for which sufficient evidence has been provided
- Gaps for which further evidence needs to be provided before the award of unit standards/qualifications. The evidence to be collected is agreed by candidate and assessor
Areas where training is required before further assessment should take place

Quality management of assessment processes and decisions
In New Zealand all NQF assessment is subject to formal moderation procedures. In some sectors this includes pre-assessment of assessment tools and activities and post-assessment sampling of assessment decisions. Other sectors only require the latter. Assessment by professional conversation has been subject to assessment processes and both the technique and the outcomes approved through three sector groups' moderation systems.

5. Where is professional conversation being used?

- In the United Kingdom, professional conversation is an accepted assessment method, particularly in the customer service and management sectors
- In South Africa, one of the world's largest mining companies is using this method for the assessment of all its managers. In the last three years over 200 people have been assessed against New Zealand management unit standards using professional conversation and 50 people trained to use professional conversation as workplace assessors. There is also considerable interest in the approach from other professional groups such as engineers who are also exploring it as a possible methodology for professional registration
- In New Zealand, a number of industries are using professional conversation as part of their evidence collection methods. These include:
  - assessment processes within the meat processing industry and the design and construction consultants industry training organisation
  - professional groups such as ALGENZ offering professional conversation as a process for the recognition of current competence for their new national qualifications
  - a trial by Whitireia Polytechnic and Assessment Solutions Ltd of the process for RCC in the Early Childhood sector
  - Richmond Ltd (a meat processing company) using the process for assessing all their senior managers
• Ministry of Social Development using professional conversation to assess leadership competencies
• a number of other companies and government departments exploring professional conversation as a tool for assessing management and policy development and analysis competencies

6. Conclusion

Professional conversation is becoming an accepted assessment methodology for the recognition of current competence both in New Zealand and overseas. It overcomes the difficulties of traditional assessment approaches to assessing high-level integrated performance, particularly in the professional sectors. It has the added advantages of self-reflection by the candidate and the identification of training needs to assist with the development of targeted training/bridging programmes. Whilst people using the methodology need to be trained and skilled, this is true of all assessment procedures.

Rowan Karstel of Ingwe Coal Corporation, South Africa sums up the process as follows24:

The process was very interesting. I've already done two Masters degrees but this method made me think about what I do in my job and how I do it. It gave me a chance to reflect on my own performance in a structured way and the professional conversation provided the opportunity to look at alternative ways of doing things and challenged some of my practices. I actually learned from the assessment process.

24 Part of a taped conversation for the review process undertaken for PHD research by Annemarie Rademeyer
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Appendix 1 Sample Evidence Guide

UNIT STANDARD 1987 (version 3)

CREATE AND MAINTAIN POSITIVE WORKPLACE RELATIONSHIPS

LEVEL: 5    CREDIT: 5

Requirements
The evidence listed below must be provided to support a professional conversation with the assessor where the candidate discusses case studies or specific work examples that demonstrate competence in this unit standard. Validation of the evidence by an authorised person must also be available.

Judgement Statement
• Evidence presented is in accordance with organisational policies and procedures.
• All activities comply with the ethical codes of relevant professional or industry bodies and any relevant legislative and/or regulatory requirements.
• The knowledge base is demonstrated through the case studies and work samples provided
• The number of examples required by the unit standard and specified in the self-assessment checklist below are provided.
• Documentation, professional conversation and validation by an authorised person (where requested) together confirm claim for credit for this unit standard

Cross Referencing
The evidence that you have prepared for this unit standard and incorporated into your professional conversation may be cross-referenced to the following unit standards

8495        Develop self to improve performance
8493        Lead individuals and teams
17498       Lead a team or group to complete tasks with some complexity within set timeframes

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8483  Contribute to the development of public sector service delivery objectives and systems
14945 Demonstrate knowledge and understanding of ethics in the New Zealand public sector
7452  Plan, organise and allocate work to achieve objectives
11075 Manage implementation of organisational strategies, policies, and plans
9741  Explain and apply principles and practices for the management of improvement and change
8496  Create a safe and supportive work environment
9676  Facilitate a group and/or team to recommend solutions to problems

To be assigned Manage professionally, ethically and responsibly

Knowledge Base to be demonstrated through Conversation
• Methods of enhancing working relationships within an organisation
• Conflict management strategies
• Relevant Employment and Consumer legislation including EEO provisions
• Impact of own leadership style on individual and team performance

Application of Knowledge in the Workplace
Prior to the professional conversation you should go through the checklist below and self-review:
• whether you believe that you meet the requirements listed
• evidence you can present to demonstrate your performance in this area

Self-assessment checklist
NB You may bring this checklist with you to the assessment and use it to guide the professional conversation

To gain credit for this unit standard you must be able to

Yes  No  Evidence I can present or obtain from others

Elements 1 & 2
Devise and apply strategies to establish productive working relationships with colleagues.
These strategies should:

- involve workplace colleagues in the development of goals and objectives.
- incorporate opportunities for colleagues to discuss work related matters and personal issues.
- encourage individuals to be innovative, tolerant and give due recognition for ideas and views offered.
- require that feedback and advice is offered to colleagues in a positive manner and undertakings to colleagues are met.
- ensure that colleagues are informed about changes in policy and work place operations that may affect them.
- provide for concerns over quality of work to be raised directly and discussed with the people concerned.
- take account of varied ethnic needs and Equal Employment Opportunities.
- ensure that immediate manager/s is consulted and/or kept informed of activities, progress and results of work group and information presented is clear, accurate and timely.

Elements 1, 2 & 3
Develop workgroup plans which ensure that EEO and equity objectives are achieved

Element 3
Identify and minimise personal conflict in the workplace by

- ensuring staff are informed of expected standards of work and behaviour and evaluation/appraisal provisions and
• regularly giving staff the opportunity to discuss work matters
• dealing with potential and actual conflicts promptly and in accordance with legal and organisational requirements
• referring conflict situations appropriately
• maintaining records of conflicts and outcomes in accordance with organisational requirements

Elements 4 & 5
Supervise employment conditions and workplace operations to ensure that:
• employment conditions and workplace operations meet the requirements of all legislative requirements, employment relations, labour relations, industrial relations, and specific employment agreements.
• policies are in place to identify and remedy personal grievances.
• policies are in place to implement discipline procedures.
• workplace supervision requirements take account of the maintenance of agreed employment conditions.
• ethical considerations for workplace activities are identified in relation to organisational policy
• equal employment responsibilities for workplace activities are adhered to