How to get your Assessment Tools Cooking with G.A.S!

With Marc Ratcliffe

When provided with the brief for this article, I was asked to discuss how to 'develop assessment tools that even an auditor would be proud of'. Now, it is great that an auditor loves your work, but ultimately the true test of an successful assessment tool is whether it is a good fit for the benchmark standards, the candidate/s and the workplace the competency is to be applied. Moreover, just because it looks good and ticks all the auditor's boxes, this doesn't necessarily make it right for all occasions.

According to the TAE10 Training Package v2.0 (p101) "There is no set format or process for the design, production or development of assessment tools", however there are key things that successful ones share. This article therefore seeks to identify some of the best practice features that support the development robust assessment tools.

Essentially, there are six steps in the assessment design process:

Step 1: Familiarise yourself with benchmark standards

Step 2: Identify evidence requirements

Step 3: Select appropriate assessment methods

Step 4: Develop assessment tool/s

Step 5: Collect Evidence

Step 6: Trial and refine tools

Traditional assessment was focused on the testing part, rather than the learning part. In this way we were trying to catch the student failing, rather than capturing them in moments of success. However, these days we concentrate much more on verifying success (competence) than confirming failure and as such, it is critical that we develop evidence-gathering tools that help us to best support a candidate’s claim for competence.

Like all professionals, assessors need to understand the capacity of the tools they use, and be able to adapt them to meet the particular requirements of the task and expectations of that task in a workplace setting. Rather than simply regurgitating the old mantra of ‘we have always done it this way’, they should be continuously striving to enhance the tools to meet the changing needs of their unique settings.

STEP 1: Familiarise yourself with the benchmark standards

Before determining whether someone is competent, you will first need to identify the set of criteria or benchmark standards to compare their performance against. In the VET sector, this usually stems from national competency standards found in Units of Competency. However, it could also include assessment criteria found in accredited courses or other performance requirements from organisation-specific, non-accredited courses.

STEP 2: Identify evidence requirements

Within a Unit of Competency, the evidence requirements can be found in the Evidence Guide. This should be read in combination with other components of the Unit with intended industry outcomes in mind. i.e. *What would a competent worker look like in the workplace?* Visualising competence therefore becomes central to the unpacking of a Unit of Competency. Kind of like a jigsaw puzzle, were one piece is not enough to see the full picture, we need to see how all the pieces fit together to determine a true picture of competency.

STEP 3: Select appropriate assessment methods

An assessment method is the broad description of how the evidence will be gathered and can be divided into the following four categories:

1. Observation of Actual Performance
2. Answers to Questions or Problems
3. Production of Items/Portfolios
4. Observation of Performance in a Simulation

Depending on the evidence requirements outlined in the standard, some methods will be more appropriate than others. For instance, if knowledge is the outcome, the assessor is more likely to use some form of questioning, whereas evidence of skills would be more commonly captured through observation (either real or simulated). Finally, if a combination of knowledge and skill were necessary, a production of an item may be the best alternative.

STEP 4: Develop assessment tool/s

Assessment tools are the actual materials used to gather evidence via the chosen assessment method. Furthermore, they are comprised of two parts; the instrument (the specific activity or questions we use to assess competence) and the procedures (the instructions given to the candidate and the assessor about how the assessment is to be conducted and recorded).

Assessment tools generally make provision for the following practical requirements:

- Name of assessment tool
- Unit /cluster title
- Version control
- Candidate's name
- Assessor's name
- Date of assessment
- Result - competence achieved/outcomes of the assessment
- Candidate feedback
- Candidate signature/date
- Assessor signature/date
- Instructions to candidate and assessor
- Resource requirements of the assessment.

Each assessment tool must have clear instructions on how it is to be used, how judgements of competence will be made and what reasonable adjustments are allowed to address issues of access and equity. Further to this, marking guides (or similar) should be created to support assessors in determining the ideal responses/performances expected from candidates and any variations that are appropriate. Guidance around the amount evidence that should be collected or how often it should be collected could be included in this guide.

STEP 5: Collect Evidence

Most Training Packages will recommend the workplace as a preferred setting. However, when one is not available or appropriate, a practice setting which strongly resembles that of real-world setting is desirable. Other considerations when collecting evidence may include the size of the participant group, their physical location and access to equipment or facilities. Further to this, the timing of your evidence-gathering activities must take into account enterprise needs, and also the needs of your candidates.

STEP 6: Trial and refine tools

The final step in the process is the continuous improvement element of trialling and refining the tools. You may think you have the world's greatest and most appropriate evidence-gathering technique, but you don't really know until you have tested it with real people. To ensure that your assessment resources are consistent with the requirements of the Training Package and that they maintain their currency, sufficiency and effectiveness, it is important that your tools are reviewed by other assessors and trialled prior to use with people representative of your target audience. Casting the net wide to include all the key stakeholders (colleagues, candidates, and industry representatives) should confirm that the tools facilitate the effective collection of evidence, are relevant for the needs of employers and that the level of difficulty is appropriate to the qualification.

The final words…

So how does it all fit together? The relationship between the 6 steps in the process may look something like the table below: (*Taken from the SFL10 Unit of Competency SFLDEC201A Assemble floristry products)*

Benchmark	The Standards against which a candidate is assessed. e.g. *Assemble hand tied flower and plant materials.*
Evidence Requirements	The information that when matched to the benchmarks, show that a candidate is competent. e.g. *Ability to construct multiple and diverse fundamental floristry products.*
Assessment Methods	Techniques used to gather different types of evidence. e.g. *Observation of Actual Performance, Production of Items*
Assessment Tools	The instruments and instructions for gathering and interpreting evidence. e.g. *Observation checklist and review of portfolios of evidence and third-party workplace reports of on-the-job performance by the candidate.*
Evidence Produced	The information on which the assessment judgement is made. e.g. *Demonstration of multiple hand tied flower arrangements*
Trialling and Refining	Checking fitness for purpose and seeking improvement options. e.g. *Trialling your tools before they are used formally with candidates could enable more user- friendliness in the format and clarity in the instructions.*

So what is the G.A.S. all about? Put simply, **G**athering appropriate evidence **A**ssures **S**uccess! If you continue to follow the six simple steps of assessment tool design, then your assessment practice will be more effective, you will gather better evidence, there will be more consistent outcomes for the workplace application and you will be cooking with gas as an assessor!

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