ASSESSMENT TYPES

Introduction

Assessment serves several purposes for learners: it allows them to identify what they want and need to learn, what they are good at and where they are having difficulties. It lets them see what they are learning, and helps them to document growth. Assessment also helps adults understand their own capabilities as they engage in tasks and projects, read and write for enjoyment, and involve themselves in the challenges of daily life. Assessment can document the knowledge and strategies that learners bring to a communicative task or a literacy event and provide evidence of the skills gained along the way. Besides providing a record of attainment and accomplishments, assessment help learners gain a better sense of which strategies work for them under what circumstances and why. Given the complex lives that many adult learners lead, assessments can also provide important insights into the barriers that impede success to learning so that necessary support and assistance can be offered.

By now it is axiomatic that no one assessment will be able to capture all that adult learners have learned and can do. Given the multi–dimensional nature of language and literacy, different types of assessments must be used in order to capture the changes that occur as adults handle ever more complex forms of communication (written and spoken), interact more fully with others in the community, and express their thoughts and opinions more effectively. Assessments are also needed to capture progress and challenges as adults learn to work as part of a team, negotiate systems and embark on a process of life long learning.

Below, we presents an array of assessment types that are able to capture both qualitative and quantitative changes in key areas of learning: language acquisition, literacy development, numeracy, problem solving and learning how to learn.

Assessments Types

1. Task–based demonstrations that provide evidence of performance.

2. Logs and inventories that serve as documentation of language and literacy use.

3. Self–assessment, conferencing and reflections to gauge perceptions and shed light on dispositions.

4. Global proficiency assessments and competency tests that document skills attainment.

5. Tests and quizzes to show progress in the acquisition of sub–skills.

6. Learner portfolios to showcase and evaluate the work that was done.

Principles for Selecting Assessments

It is our hope that as developers select assessments, they will take the following considerations into account:

- The assessments selected should be linked to learner backgrounds and interests and should be matched to the appropriate tasks and course activities.

- A combination of assessments should be chosen: some focusing on skills, others on strategies, still others on the acquisition of knowledge. Included should be "integrated assessments" that focus on the application of several skills that reflect tasks faced by learners in their daily lives.

- Learners should have a strong say not only in deciding which tasks to work on, but also in the kinds of assessments they want to select. Opportunities for self–assessment, conferencing and reflections need to be an integral part of each course.

- All assessments should be part of a larger framework that combines information on learner characteristics and backgrounds; learning plans; tracking data on activities and tasks; the learner portfolio; test scores, and accomplishments.

1. Task–Based Demonstrations

Task–based demonstrations allow learners to showcase what they can do and how well they can respond to challenges that involve literacy, communication, calculations, and/or problem solving. Demonstrations are often exhibits of skills, such as being able to write an effective letter of inquiry. Correctly explaining a given plumbing problem to the landlord, or calculating what kind of car is the best deal given a set of resources. But they can also be demonstrations of processes: learners might discuss (orally or in writing), how they would go about finding a bilingual doctor for their child, what to do when the police stops you or how best to go about composing a resume. Skills and strategies may be assessed separately or in an integrated fashion. Integrated tasks allow for performance on complex tasks such as selecting a nutritious meal from a given menu for a given price and explaining the selection to a child who wants ice cream or convincing an employer by all means necessary to give you a chance at a job that you are only marginally qualified for.

Tasks may be addressed individually or in groups and evaluations typically involve a set of criteria along with indicators of various levels of success, also known as benchmarks. These indicators may range from "novice to expert", from "beginning to advanced" or from "low to high".

Task–based demonstrations have a great deal of validity in adult education since they are a direct measure of performance (unlike multiple choice tests, for example), and represent challenges similar to those faced by adult learners in their daily lives.

Oral Communication Tasks

Task–based demonstrations of oral proficiency may include interviews and conversations with learners (the BEST test has an oral interview section) or a role play in which communicative events that are acted out (in person or on video). Group tasks might involve giving a presentation on a team project, or giving a short speech (prepared or spontaneous) on a topic of special interest. Comprehension tasks might include listening to an announcement and reporting which items the store is putting on sale, listening to recorded messages (movies, train schedules, airport announcements) or following instructions on a video–taped tasks.

Assessments of metacognitive skills might be discussing what was easy to say and what was hard; what else the learner could have said and didn't and the strategies used to get a point across and make sense of what was heard.

Writing, Reading, and Numeracy Tasks

Writing skills are easier to demonstrate than reading skills, largely because writing is observable. Functional writing assessments can be developed that ask learners to create a set of simple instructions, to write a note for a child

who cannot come to school, to leave a message for a co–worker, or to fill out an application. More expressive writing tasks may involve capturing memories to be shared, creating a story or song lyrics, or writing one's autobiography. In multi–media environments, the task might include selecting clip art, graphics or video and audio clips to illustrate what has been written.

Creating authentic reading task is a challenge since comprehension occurs "behind the eyes". The new technologies allow for new ways of demonstrating comprehension that do not rely on pencil and paper tests, using a multiple choice format. Learners might draw a model, paint a picture that represents a description, follow a set of instructions by selecting and combining machine parts from a computer file. Similarly, video clips can be selected to illustrate comprehension of a story or a dialog. Math tasks offer similar possibilities. Learner might demonstrate their knowledge of math concepts by choosing items from several on–line catalogues to match a given dollar amount, or by determining the savings to be obtained by taking advantage of internet sales and electronic coupons.

Integrated Tasks

Integrated task involve a combination of various skills in order to reflect the authentic challenges that learners face in their daily lives. Learners may be asked to write an opinion in response to a news story, or through letters, email or phone calls share they have heard on radio or television.

Tasks that have a strong problem solving component often involve team work, such as creating a video of the neighborhood and sharing it on the internet, compiling stories collected from learners living in different parts of the world who have experienced natural disasters, or creating a logo and a title for a group project, such as a poster or a play. Group projects are typically assessed by looking at the final product and a group rating is assigned, along with the contributions that individuals have made, both in terms of engagement and participation in the overall process and the skills that were put in.

2. Documentation of Language and Literacy

Documenting the extent to which learners have engaged in language, literacy, and problem solving and chronicling how they went about doing so, is a powerful way to track learner progress over time. Logs and inventories can show how language and literacy progress qualitatively, as learners increasingly read and write more or attempt more difficult materials. In the area of communication, documentation can show whom adult learners talk to and about what and how they fail to talk with (although they would like to) because they feel embarrassed or intimidated. For immigrants, communication webs can show where the native language is used and for what purposes and where, why and with whom immigrants use English or would like to. Such documentation can show to what extent adults use translators and literacy brokers and to what degree those who rely on them see such arrangements as useful and beneficial. Used at regular intervals, assessments such as "socio–grams" and "communication webs" can demonstrate both less reliance on others (and thus increased independence) and more reliance on others as a sign of a newfound readiness to collaborate and act as a resource to others.

Oral Communication

Logs and charts are often used to document where immigrant learners speak English and where the native language is used. They also serve to list the language functions that come into play, as learners try to get a point across. (Examples include giving explanations; making requests; apologizing; or complaining). Scales can be attached to report how much was understood or how competent the learner felt talking with certain people, such as the police, a landlord, or a child's teacher. Communication breakdowns can be recorded and analyzed, along with the strategies used to repair the situation.

Viewing and listening logs can help track which radio or television programs the person listens to and which movies are watched in English.

Reading, Writing and Numeracy

Logs and inventories can help track the magazines and newspaper articles that a learner consults on regular basis and the books that are read. For low level learners, logs can keep track of literacy materials that learners are able to access, long before a multiple choice reading test is able to pick up any changes. These materials might include bills, official letters, forms and flyers that were once put aside as too difficult and are now considered. Math logs can help track calculations done as part of "school work" as well as those done to solve number problems related to money, space or time. Whether such calculations were done alone or with others, on paper or in one's head can be tracked as well.

Scales and check lists can be attached to these logs to show what a learner found interesting or worthwhile, along with what was confusing and what

brought joy. In addition, learning logs can be used to document the skills attained in a unit, as well as the knowledge gained through a theme.

Integrated Skills

Instances of problem solving and decision–making (individually or as a group) can be tracked also and the steps taken documented. Comments on which strategies worked and why and which didn't can serve as a basis for future problem solving. Problems to be logged and analyzed may include learning challenges that were addressed, work problems that were confronted, and sticky situations that were faced as part of daily life. Can–do lists that allow learners to state what they are able to do with language, literacy and math serve as documentation of skills acquisition and evidence of change over time.

3. Self–Assessments, Conferencing and Reflections

Self–assessments, conferencing and reflections put adult learners in charge of their own learning process. They can provide a record of skills, strategies and knowledge and form the basis for goal setting and planning. In addition, they provide insights into the strategies that facilitate communication, learning, and problem solving and make learners aware of the barriers that make success difficult. These types of assessments can help learners understand that language and literacy development are not linear processes that contain sub–skills to be mastered and combined, but complex phenomena that require engagement and develop in fits and spurts. What is learned today may not stay learned, particularly if applied to new contexts, and what looked like sure mastery of a skill on one day may slip away as real life constraints of stress, time and difficult people intervene.

Self Assessments

Self assessments allow adult learners to discover what they know and don't know and identify what they want to learn. They enable learners to try out tasks and discover what is easy for them and what is difficult. With some encouragement, learners can assess what they can and cannot do well, given certain tasks, challenges, and constraints. It is sometimes difficult for learners without much formal education to assess their academic skills up front. It is often much easier to for them to assess their skills in context that is through involvement with certain tasks (creating a story book for a child) or participation in communicative events (answering questions in a mock INS interview). These self–assessments can take the form of open–ended responses to questions or checklists plus rating scales (such as "can–do lists" that indicate how competent learners consider themselves). Learning logs allow adults to keep track of the tasks they have attempted, and help them to document the skills they have gained and thus provide a chronicle of progress over time.

Self–assessments that focus on qualitative aspects may document changes in literacy behaviors (more time spent reading; reading different kinds of texts; first attempts to communicate with English speaking neighbors). Such assessments can also identify new strategies (trying different ways to speak up at a team meeting, learning short cuts on the computer; playing books on tape to increase listening comprehension).

Reflections

Reflections allow adults to think about themselves as learners and discover what helps them learn and what gets in the way. They can chronicle patterns of communicating and engagement with literacy. "Worry Journals" allow learners to explore their fears. Spaces for notes can be added to lessons and

units or separate journals (shared or individual) can be set up to capture reflection pieces.

Conferencing

Conferencing with peers, a coach, or a teacher allows adult learners to share insights about their skills and their learning with others. In the process, it helps them gain a better understanding of their own strengths and limitations.

How does conferencing work? A coach, teacher or peer may open up a dialogue about experiences that shed light on skill development, perceptions, learning styles or dispositions. These dialogues can take place face to face, over the phone or on–line. Peer conferencing follows a similar model. Learners showcase and share a piece of work or discuss communication challenges they have met or positive experiences they have had. All involved may comment on the work or the experience, providing encouragement, highlighting what they see as strengths and/or or making suggestions for changes. One great advantage of conferencing, especially for learners with negative experiences with schooling and little confidence in their own abilities, is the opportunity it provides to gain and provide support to others who share similar life circumstances.

4. Global Proficiency Assessments and Competency Tests

Proficiency assessments serve to place learners at certain levels of competence, based on their performance on language and literacy tasks. While some of these tasks may be authentic (having to take a dictation in a citizenship test), many others are not. They are nevertheless worthwhile as broad indicators of what a person can do.

Reading Proficiency Assessments

As a rule, reading tests either assess sub–skills (see tests and quizzes below), comprehension (both literal and inference), or the reading process (i.e. how readers make sense of the information that appears on a page). While some of these assessments are rely on multiple choice items, others assess performance and/or processes more directly.

"Cloze tests" and "miscue analysis" are broad assessments of reading comprehension that rely on emergent readers filling in missing words in a text (cloze) or reading a passage aloud (miscue). Given the way the mind processes information, only learners who understand most of what they read are able to fill in the empty slots correctly or read words that make sense. These tests are relatively easy to design and to administer.

Language Proficiency Assessments

Dictations and retellings constitute global language assessments that provide a general sense of how well a person can handle English as a Second Language. Dictations require that learners interpret language that they hear well enough to remember what was said and to write it down accurately. Retellings work on a similar principle but are more elaborate. Learners are asked to listen to a story and then retell what they have heard, keeping key points intact. If the story is recorded on video or audio, learners might listen several times before beginning their retellings. Both dictations and retellings provide an assessment of how well a person can combine language, listening and reading and writing tasks.

Life Skills Competency Tests

Life skills test constitute assessments of an overall ability to deal with a set of tasks. Learners may be asked to listen to a message and take notes, or to figure the interest to be paid on a credit card bill or to fill out an application. For the most part, life skills test focus on functional literacy, with a strong emphasis on reading and writing.

5. Tests and Quizzes on Sub–skills

Tests and quizzes often provide a quick and easy way to tell what information has been obtained. what broad skill level a person may be functioning on, what vocabulary has been learned and what sub–skills have been acquired. They can appear in the form of games or puzzles and can be easily be part of a contest through which the person competes against himself, another learner, the computer or the clock. Comprehension tests such as cloze tests and oral readings allow for determination of reading difficulties using a fairly structured approach.

Background Knowledge

Tests and quizzes in various forms allow learners to check what they know, what they don't know, and what they have learned about a certain subject or topic. Most common options include fill–in–the blanks, sentence completion, open answers, and multiple choice.

Technical Language and Literacy Skills

Tests and quizzes often serve to test the technical language skills (sometimes called sub–skills) that learners need to master if they are to become fully proficient. Grammar and spelling tests fall into this category, as do quizzes on writing conventions (capitalization, spelling, paragraphing; emails and chat rooms) and tests on selecting appropriate formats and styles (formal and informal letters; gentle inquiries vs. threatening notes).

For beginning learners, quick and easy quizzes on reading sub–skills may be appropriate. These may be quizzes that test for phonemic awareness (recognizing patterns in sound/symbol relationship), or word attack skills (e.g., starting with the sounds of the first and last letters of a word).

Vocabulary quizzes that match words to pictures, words or definitions are considered sub–tests as well, as are basic reading comprehension tests that ask learners to indicate "yes" or "no" to a question or to identify the right answer from a list of choices.

6. Portfolios

Evidence of both success and struggles obtained from assessments can easily be combined as part of a learner portfolio that contains work samples that tell the story of the learner's effort and accomplishments. Accompanied by guidelines of for selection of work (by the learner and by others), criteria for judging the merit of a piece, and learner's comments, self–ratings, and reflections, such a portfolio will paint a rich picture that documents success along the various dimensions of literacy and serves to guide future learning efforts.