FINEST COMPLIANCE
Consultancy & Training

Revising your Assessment Tools to Better Satisfy Standard 1.8…

By Carolyn Claridge

Contents

Context: ASQA's Focus…

ASQA has confirmed during briefing sessions as well as through recent audit behaviour, their focus on scrutinising the assessment practices of RTOs and in particular, their adherence to the Principles of Assessment and Rules of Evidence as mandated in Standard 1.8 of the *NVR Standards for RTOs 2015.*

The implications for RTOs being found non-compliant in their assessment tools and practices can be major for initial or re-registration purposes, as well as for ensuring an RTO's graduates are competent when assessed; and therefore deserving of their awarded qualifications.

Purpose of this Handout

Regardless of ASQA's scrutiny, the continual improvement we can gather from revising our assessment tools to promote consistency in application and benchmarking questioning, observation, and workplace support of competence is undeniable. The type of assessment tool which can be applied within the workplace itself is invaluable to industry, with the goal of applying reliable assessment practice without interfering greatly in the production, construction, or other workplace process.

At the end of the day, RTOs must make their own judgements as to whether they follow the principles outlined in this information, enough to be confident they cover the Rules of Evidence and Principles of Assessment adequately within their own student groups and assessment systems – a key question here to ask is if the tools can be applied systemically across their operations.

What are the Requirements with Verbal Questioning?

The *Standards* mandate that assessment must be sufficient and authentic (refer to the Rules of Evidence), i.e. the quality and quantity of underpinning knowledge answers used to evidence a judgement must clearly be the student's own work (therefore, the need for verbatim answers to be captured on the assessment tool rather than answers 'interpreted' or re-worded by the assessor when written down).

The *Standards* also mandate that assessment must be of a reasonable amount to evidence a valid judgement (not just a tick and flick, unless there is only one possible answer).

When we use verbal questioning as a mode of assessment, it is suggested the assessor records the answers given verbatim (not just tick that it was answered, or circle generalised 'wording' which are not reflective of what a student would actually say). This also supports the principle of 'reliability of assessment' and the rule of 'authenticity of evidence'.

The recording of answers verbatim when oral questioning is used as an assessment instrument, it is also listed as an audit evidence requirement under some State Government funded training policies.

How can we do this in Verbal Questioning?

General rule of thumb: Written assessment = short question & long answer required
Verbal assessment = long question & short answer required

Wording questions to attract closed answers wherever possible, to limit the words/options supplied by the student, is suggested. Focussing on students at an AQF level II or III (quite often the level of apprenticeships and traineeships where assessment is commonplace within the workplace itself), a mix of multi-choice, True/False, Yes/No, one-word answers or 'give me two things that…' is a good place to start.

Using the same approach as problem solving with the 5-Whys[1]… start with a question, and revise it until it can be answered with just one word or a short phrase.

Instructions need to include making sure the assessor gives the student enough time to respond to each question. This may need to include thinking time before he or she answers; assessors are reminded not to interpret a pause as a "No comment" in the first instance.

Do we need to include instructions relating to the safety of asking questions whilst we are watching the demonstration of skill on-the-job? Food for thought - Questions trigger a mental reflex known as "instinctive elaboration." When a question is posed, it takes over the brain's thought process; when your brain is thinking about the answer to a question, it can't apparently contemplate anything else.

Multiple Choice Questions

Multiple-choice questions have the risk of exposing students to misinformation (i.e. with the wrong answers) that can influence their subsequent thinking about the subject matter and also provide an unprepared student the opportunity to 'guess' the right answer.

Below are some hints when developing multiple-choice questions at the AQF II and III levels.

- Only use plausible multiple-choice options/distractors – joke answers are too obvious and deter from the integrity of the questioning. The alternative answers should be plausible and attractive to those who don't know the correct answer,

[1] *5-Whys is a technique used to explore the cause-and-effect relationships underlying a particular problem. The primary goal of the technique is to determine the root cause of a problem by repeating the question "Why?"*

- Do not use multiple choice answers if each answer is more than 3 – 4 words long as the student will not remember all of the options to be able to give a reliable answer (remember, these questions are being asked verbally, not written down),

> In a multiple-choice question, when is the longest answer the correct answer?
>
> a. Rarely
> b. Sometimes
> c. It's almost always the correct answer, and it's often stuffed with new information that should have gone in the main part of the course but we forgot so now we're putting it in the quiz because we can't possibly leave out the tiniest detail
> d. Occasionally

- Ensure that the alternative answers are independent of each other (mutually exclusive),
- Keep option lengths similar - don't mix long sentence answers in with one-word answers; too much for the mind to sort through when trying to determine a correct answer,
- Statistics say…correct answers are usually the second or third option presented (do we want to be a statistic?),
- Avoid "none of the above" answer as an option – you will never know if a student knows the correct answer, as this only measures their ability to detect wrong answers,
- Avoid "all of the above" answer as an option – students can answer this on the basis of partial information as they only need to recognise two of the answers above as correct in order to get this right. Similarly, if a student sees just one incorrect answer, they know that "all of the above" is also incorrect. They are not encouraged to fully contemplate the answers but rather to go for the easier option,

> When is "All of the above" the correct answer?
>
> a. With alarming regularity
> b. When we try to cover too much in one question
> c. When we use a question to teach instead of assess
> d. All of the above

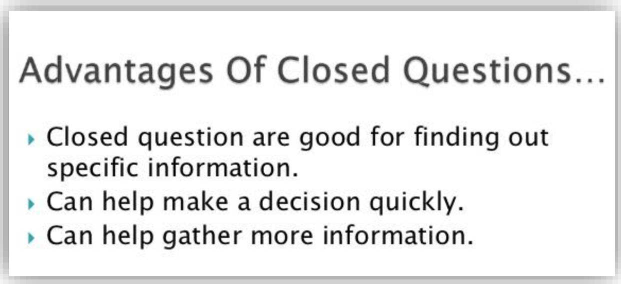
- Don't use a multiple-choice question as the easy way out if other question types are more appropriate – limiting alternatives and problem solving an answer is a much more reliable determination of knowledge,
- The question should be meaningful without having to read out all the options first, and
- Wherever possible, state the question in positive terms. Negative terms can often confuse students, especially those with low English skills; e.g. Instead of "Which one of the following is not a piece of PPE to wear on plant?", you may ask "All the following is appropriate PPE to wear on plant EXCEPT for which of the following?",

> When is it NOT a good idea to avoid negative questions?
>
> a. Never
> b. Sometimes
> c. Always
> d. What?

In addition to the idea of limiting (or eliminating) negatively stated questions – decades of research have found that the more the brain contemplates a behaviour, the more likely it is that we will engage in it… and we don't wish to subconsciously encourage unhygienic, unsafe, or irrational behaviour in our students at work.

Open and Closed Answer Questions

People are naturally nervous before every assessment; whether verbal or written – but nerves are definitely stronger during the oral exam because it is like some kind of performance test. A student must stand face to face with their examiner, whose comments or behaviour may increase the level of their stress and subsequently influence their answers. Some students can read English a lot more fluently than listening to it spoken, and for these students, we need to provide them with the opportunity of answering these questions through written method (after removing any answers from the assessment tool).



Whilst as assessors, we may be involved in verbal questioning up to 20 times in the one day, we must remind ourselves that our students aren't.

Our behaviour (including body language and voice) needs to portray calm so the student can think, give the opportunity for them to clarify, and the confidence that their answer will not 'inconvenience' us if incorrect.

It provides an opportunity for us to coach if necessary, to seek clarification from them on their level of knowledge.

Below are some hints when developing closed and open-ended questions at the AQF II and III levels:

- Try to pose one concept in a question at a time – this avoids confusion but also complements the closed questioning technique and enhances the receiving of just the one required answer (hopefully the correct answer),
- If there can be more than one right answer to a question, include it in a list, as this lowers discrimination between students (Principle of Fairness of Assessment),
- There are some answers which we cannot avoid being 'open' (i.e. the student must give us an answer rather than choose one presented to them) – these should be limited to answers relating to their specific work area which cannot be generalised across our clients. Mixing these up with other question types also allows the student to think about the answer rather than supplying rote or guessing from a selection (also promotes integrity of questioning); e.g.

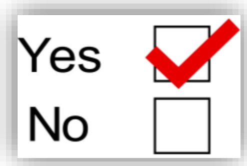
List a control point in your area? *(K8, K9)*	*Assessor note hazard stated – verbatim - and tick if correct:* ____________________ ____________________

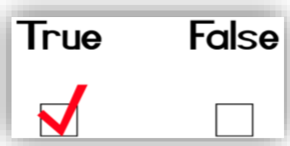
- Having a list (or a 'bank') of answers available to tick saves assessors time and energy involved in writing answers down verbatim,
- Avoid extremes wherever possible; be careful with words like never, only, none, every, and always,

- Use direct questioning whenever possible, rather than incomplete statements. e.g. instead of the incomplete sentence of 'During breaks you store your PPE in ______________________', use a direct question, such as 'During breaks, where do you store your PPE?',
- Human nature leans towards 'yes' answers, so give this thought when phrasing questions.

True/False and Yes/No Questions

These questions allow us to move through the assessment at a reasonable pace, but they are often considered one of the most unreliable forms of assessment, due to the 50/50 chance of getting them right (or wrong), and encouraging students to guess rather than think of the answer.





Often, true/false tests contain more true answers than false answers; so the students may have more than a 50% chance of being right by answering "true" to every question – hence we need to mix up the question types.

Every part of a true sentence must be "true" – If any one part of the sentence is false, the whole sentence is false despite many other true statements.

Questioning at the Appropriate AQF Level

At AQF level II we don't need the student to supply a definition off the top of their head, but they need to know what something is and what it is for.

- For example, instead of asking 'What is HACCP?', we could ask 'The main purpose of a HACCP system is to control what in the food production process?'.

At this level we are asking the student to identify, select, describe, and predict. We are asking them to demonstrate basic operational knowledge – not theoretical concepts. We don't need them to analyse, compare, design, prioritise, or discuss as much as we need them to recall, list and name.

- For example, sample knowledge questions include: Describe the purpose of……?
  What would happen if……?
  List the three components of……?

Compliance

- Map the questions against the unit criteria, including the skills (S) and knowledge (K) – insert extra questions where there are gaps, or a criteria is not sufficiently covered. Note this mapping on the document itself next to each question,
- To promote consistency of use, interpretation and benchmarking with these tools, wherever possible, supply instructions to the assessor;
  - Example 1: *Student may answer any one of the following:*
  - Example 2: *Note any additional consequences named by the student in spaces provided:*
  - Example 3: *Assessor note hazard stated – verbatim – and tick if correct:*

What are the Requirements with Practical Skills Observation?

> "Assessment evidence for practical skills observation must include a record of the skills the assessor observed the student demonstrating relevant to the unit of competency to substantiate the judgement of competence. The use of checklists with pre-populated lists of observable behaviours relevant to the unit is acceptable if the assessor has included details of the activity observed and an indication of the behaviours demonstrated by the student by writing notes and circling the relevant variables from the pre-populated lists."

[Department of Employment, Small Business and Training (Qld) *Pre-Qualified Supplier Audit Evidence Requirements (User Choice).* 26 March 2018. p17]

An observation checklist enables the assessor to observe in a focussed way, to take structured notes that can be referred to when making the assessment decision, to provide informed feedback to candidates, and to enhance the objectivity of the assessment decision.

How can we Record what we Observe During a Demonstration?

The observation tool must give a clear indication of the observable things to look for and how to record those observations. It also must include information on what was observed and under what circumstances specifically.

- Is a Yes/No tick option appropriate?
- Is there a need for a comments column, or is there a need for further training of your assessors so they are using the column to write structured notes?

A simple list of ticks and crosses on a checklist without any other information isn't helpful and would generally be questioned by auditors. The observation criteria must provide sufficient clarity for assessment judgements to be consistent across a range of assessors and points in time.

Below are some hints when developing observation criteria at the AQF II and III levels:

- Revising the criteria is easier to do after revising the verbal questioning section as there is a lot of duplication,
- Map the observations against the unit criteria including the skills and knowledge – insert extra observations where there are gaps. Note this mapping on the document itself next to each observation,
- Observations need to be broken down into what the assessor is expected to 'see'. For example, 'Does the student lift according to correct manual handling techniques?' is too generic. This should be broken down even further to 'Does the student bend their knees when lifting heavy or low objects?',
- It may help to create a list of the characteristics and specific activities you need to 'see' the student perform in the first instance, and then base a checklist on this. For instance, what are you looking for if you need to see a student 'follow WHS requirements'? What examples of communications are you looking for if you need to see them 'communicate effectively'? ,

- Try to list one skill or activity in an observation at a time. For example, observing that a student 'uses a ladder correctly' can be broken down into several observations:
  - Student checks area is safe and clear before setting ladder up.
  - Student inspects ladder for defects prior to use.
  - Student checks the base of the ladder cannot slip.
  - Student uses hands while climbing the ladder.
  - Etc.

Workplace Supervisor's (Third Party) Reporting

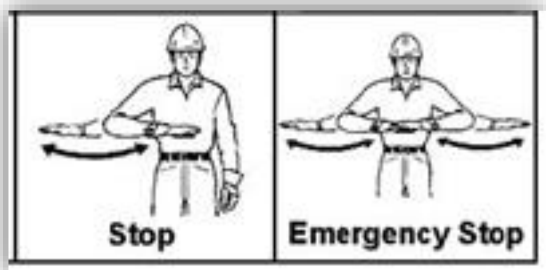
These reports are useless if they are not meaningful. Simple tick and flicks and absent-minded signatures done on the fly are not what we are calling quality supportive (supplementary) evidence.

- This must be written within the language and context of a non-vocational education person.

  For example, one of the criteria in the *BSBCMM101 Apply basic communication skills* unit states that the student must 'use appropriate verbal and non-verbal skills to seek and convey information in face-to-face situations'. In the third-party report template, you may currently ask the referee 'Does the student use appropriate verbal and non-verbal communication skills?' to cover this criteria.

  Could there be a better way to ask this? Are communication requirements similar across the worksites where you assess and if so, can you re-word this to better suit reality within the workplace?

  Such an example could be 'Does the student use appropriate hand signals for 'Stop' and 'Emergency Stop'?',



- It may assist if the third-party reports are revised/trialled in collaboration with an actual workplace supervisor (i.e. a non-assessor),
- Ensure your instructions to the person providing your workplace report are clear to follow. Is the person completing the report actually in a position to make a valid comment on the student's performance? Other guidance may include information relating to when, how, how often , and over what period of time their observations of the student's workplace performance is to be collected – have they been the student's supervisor long enough to be able to provide a reliable report? ,
- ASQA's website has some great information on what to look for when requesting that workplace reports be provided as supporting evidence of competence. Access this information at: https://www.asqa.gov.au/news-publications/publications/fact-sheets/using-other-parties-collect-assessment-evidence