

Case study 2 — Professional Discussion

Professional discussion is being used more and more regularly in assessment for SQA qualifications. This case study looks at two different approaches to its use, and reviews the experiences of assessors and candidates.

We are grateful to Ellen Lancaster of Cardonald College and David Morgan and Michelle Taylor of ENTO Direct for their help in developing this case study.

Cardonald College

Introduction

Cardonald College has developed extensive experience of professional discussion as part of the assessment for the level 3 SVQ in Health and Social Care, the level 3 SVQ in Childcare Learning and Development, and the Advanced Care and Management Practice Award (ACAMPA).

Ellen Lancaster, Section Leader of the SVQ in Health and Social Care and Childcare and Education, says that professional discussion is: ‘An essential tool for assessment. It allows the assessor and candidate to consider a particular set of circumstances and to discuss why and how something is done, and to fill in gaps in existing performance and knowledge evidence. It can be used formatively and summatively, and using it enhances the assessment process for both candidates and assessors.’

Ellen says that candidates are happy to use professional discussion as it supports their learning, helping them to identify what they know and can do, and where they require further development and practice. Assessors like it as they feel that it helps to integrate the assessment of individual Units and supports the evidence supplied in the portfolio.

There are a number of principles that underpin the college’s use of professional discussion. These are that professional discussion:

- ◆ can only be used if the evidence requirements allow it, and if the candidate is happy to participate
- ◆ is not a replacement for practical assessment — the candidate must still undertake and achieve all the practical activities defined in the Units
- ◆ needs to be recorded — the recording can be in electronic form or in note form

Professional discussion in use

Ellen says that she and her colleagues use professional discussion as a method of assessment in a range of different circumstances. For example:

- ◆ to assess knowledge and explore behaviours and values
- ◆ as an alternative to the reflective account
- ◆ to help deal with sensitivities

Assessing knowledge

The college often uses professional discussion in place of questioning, and to follow up on the written reflective account. The added value of a professional discussion, over and above questioning, is that it allows time for the candidate to give evidence of behaviours and values that are important in the health and social care environment, but which might not always be easy to identify in written answers or in a short oral question and answer session. It is the college's experience that a professional discussion allows time for the discussion to develop naturally, and for characteristics such as integrity and honesty to be more clearly demonstrated by the candidate.

While professional discussion is never used as a replacement for assessment in practical activities, the college does use it to explore underlying issues such as how the candidates went about tackling a particular task, what they learned from the activity, and why they followed a particular course of action. This helps to integrate assessment.

Ellen says that professional discussion is also used with dyslexic candidates. For instance, one of her colleagues recently used professional discussion to assess the knowledge of a dyslexic candidate in a level 3 SVQ. The discussion allowed the candidate not only to show her knowledge of the subject area, but also to explain how she had put that knowledge into practice in some situations. This combining of knowledge evidence with evidence of practical ability, already recorded in the portfolio, was felt by both assessor and candidate to strengthen the assessment process.

The discussion was recorded electronically, and neither the assessor nor the candidate found this inhibiting — indeed they almost forgot the recorder was there. The internal verifier was present at the discussion, and this helped to confirm the authenticity of the evidence supplied.

As an alternative to the reflective account

The first-person reflective account is a detailed description of a candidate's practice in real work activities and situations. It provides evidence of a candidate's knowledge — showing why something was done, how it was done, the values and principles that underpinned the activity, and what the candidate experienced in undertaking the activity.

Recently a candidate on a level 4 SVQ, who was more used to formal report-writing at work, found the style of the reflective account difficult to capture. He felt that trying to write in the way required was beginning to interfere with what he wanted to say. The candidate and the assessor therefore agreed to provide the evidence for the reflective account by means of a professional discussion.

The discussion gave the candidate the opportunity to bring out and discuss all the aspects required for the reflective account. Again, the discussion was recorded on tape, and the college was interested to discover that the candidate had afterwards used the tape to help him to develop his approach to writing reflective accounts in future.

To help to deal with sensitivities

In areas such as health and social care, there might be occasions where candidates prefer to discuss sensitive issues rather than put them down in a written account. These might be to do with confidential matters, or where practices have fallen short of a care user's expectations (arising, for example, from lack of funds or other resources). The professional discussion allows these sensitive, yet important, points to be addressed and for useful learning points to emerge.

In all cases where Ellen and her colleagues use professional discussion, the assessors check beforehand that its use is acceptable in terms of the Assessment Strategies and the Evidence Requirements for the qualification concerned. Ellen suggests that, if assessors are in any doubt as to whether professional discussion is permitted, they should contact SQA to seek the advice of the External Verifier for the qualification.

It is the college's practice to arrange for candidates who have been assessed through professional discussion to be available to meet the External Verifier if required.

Arranging the professional discussion

As with any assessment, candidates have to know when the professional discussion is to take place, how long it will last, and what will happen afterwards. This means that the discussion needs to be planned for and agreed with the candidate, and time needs to be properly set aside for it. It is the college's experience that at least an hour should be set aside for the professional discussion. The assessor develops an agenda for the discussion (based on the Units or Outcomes to be assessed) and this is cross-referenced to the relevant parts of the Units concerned. The assessor gives the agenda to the candidate and the internal verifier in advance of the assessment.

Documentation for professional discussion

The agenda forms the basis of the professional discussion record form which the college has developed for facilitating professional discussions. The assessor will

use this form to record points that need to be noted in the course of the professional discussion.

At the end of the discussion, when the assessment is discussed and feedback is given, the assessor and candidate both sign the recording form. It then forms part of the assessment record for the candidate, and is available when it is required for verification.

The college aims to keep the portfolio short, and professional discussion can help with this since it encourages assessors to integrate assessment and show the linkages between different aspects of learning. In addition, when the professional discussion takes place in the workplace, the candidates can use workplace records and other documents relating to their activities as evidence to support the discussion. This means that they do not have to make copies of such material for their portfolios and, again, this helps to reduce the bulk of the portfolio.

Recording discussions

The college records all professional discussions — sometimes electronically, sometimes by the assessor taking notes. When the discussion is electronically recorded, the college assessors also keep a note of the discussion to identify where certain points that may need to be referred to in feedback and/or drawn to the attention of Verifiers, appear in the recording. This ‘tagging’ of the electronic recording helps to authenticate the evidence.

When the discussion is not recorded electronically, the assessor makes careful notes of the points covered — what was said, what omitted — and how the discussion was undertaken. This is not a verbatim record, but it is more detailed than the notes made during an electronic recording as it is used for giving feedback to candidates and for verification.

ENTO Direct

Introduction

ENTO Direct, an Awards UK centre¹, uses professional discussion to help to assess a wide range of vocational qualifications including NVQs in Learning and Development, and the Assessor and Verifier Awards. As Quality Manager, Michelle Taylor, says: ‘Professional discussion can be used across many sectors. Assessors who want to use it should think about whether it’s effective to do so for the candidate and effective for the course. If the answer to both of these questions is yes then they can start to prepare and plan for using it.’

Preparation and planning will involve the assessors in:

¹ Awards UK is a wholly owned subsidiary of Edexcel and SQA.

- ◆ getting to know all the Units
- ◆ confirming (with the External Verifier if necessary) that professional discussion is an appropriate assessment for the Outcomes or Units being assessed
- ◆ deciding what is to be assessed by professional discussion
- ◆ agreeing how relevant topics within or across Units can be brought together
- ◆ agreeing the kind of evidence that is expected from the candidate
- ◆ identifying when individual candidates will be ready for assessment (to make the most of the professional discussion when it takes place)
- ◆ thinking about practicalities, such as where the professional discussion will take place, and how the assessor and candidate will access evidence

ENTO Direct's experience is that taking time to prepare and plan allows the assessors to make the most of assessment opportunities and ensure that the professional discussion is all the more effective and efficient.

The assessors agree a generic plan or template, which defines what the candidates are expected to cover in the course of the discussion. This also helps to confirm that the assessment is valid and reliable, and that the purpose of the discussion will be met.

The assessors then personalise the plan for their individual candidates and give them a copy. This helps the candidates to prepare for the assessment as it acts as a reminder of:

- ◆ what they will be expected to cover in the discussion
- ◆ the physical evidence that they will need to access

The professional discussion in action

During the professional discussion, the assessor is likely to:

- ◆ ask specific questions covering knowledge
- ◆ want to see physical evidence (for example product evidence of practical activities) and ask the candidate to talk the assessor through particular aspects of it
- ◆ discuss contingencies and/or complex tasks with the candidate

It is Michelle's experience that professional discussions rarely take less than 45 minutes, and sometimes they last longer. There is good reason, then, to make sure that the candidate is really ready before embarking on the professional discussion. And there might also be a need to factor time for breaks into longer discussions. Just like Cardonald College, ENTO Direct aims to reduce the paper chase element of evidence gathering. There is no requirement for candidates to hold copies of specific documents in their portfolios. For example, in the Learning and

Development Awards, assessor-candidates might need to refer to their centre's Handbook, but instead of keeping it in the portfolio, all they need to do is produce a copy at the discussion.

When physical evidence that is held in central files needs to be seen, the candidate has to be able to access it and explain its relevance to the assessor. In the past, information about physical evidence might have been sought in a written candidate statement. Now, however, this can be given in the course of the professional discussion, which helps to reduce the burden on candidates. The discussion ends with the assessor reviewing what has been seen and discussed. The assessor then gives the assessment decision and provides feedback on the candidate's performance. Both assessor and candidate discuss plans for any further assessment.

Using professional discussion with evidence gatherers

ENTO Direct also uses professional discussion with those who act as evidence gatherers in the workplace. Michelle says she finds that holding a discussion with a witness is often more efficient and effective than seeking a written statement — witness statements are burdensome on individuals and can sometimes be less detailed than what is required. The discussion, by contrast, can cover a wide range of specific activities. It is guided by the assessor, who knows what evidence is required and can ask questions directly related to that evidence.

ENTO Direct's assessors plan, as part of their assessment duties, to meet witnesses. As preparation for the meeting they tell the witness what evidence they would like to view and discuss. In the workplace it is likely that witnesses will be able to supply extensive holistic evidence from real work records. Again, this gives the assessor a more integrated picture of the candidate's competence.

Recording discussions

ENTO Direct uses electronic recording. After the assessment, the records are uploaded into a central file and linked to the candidate's record. The internal verifier and External Verifier can access the recordings for verification purposes. The template also provides a tape counter column to help assessors note and locate particular aspects of the discussion. This is useful for:

- ◆ the assessor, so that he or she can review the evidence
- ◆ the internal verifier, so that he or she can sample the evidence of the different assessors
- ◆ the External Verifier
- ◆ assessors and internal verifiers working together on standardising exercises

The SQA perspective: making professional discussion effective

Benefits

Both centres told us that a significant benefit of professional discussion is that it allows candidates to integrate their assessment evidence. Since the evidence is based on real work activities in the workplace, fragmenting the assessment into single tasks is less likely to happen.

A further benefit of professional discussion is that it might help to reduce the need for a bulging paper portfolio. The assessment needs, of course, to be supported by evidence. However, that evidence does not need to be in the candidate's portfolio: it can be kept where it is always kept — in the workplace — and the candidates and assessors can refer to it there in the course of discussions.

Limitations

Two factors that might limit the potential success of professional discussion might be the need to develop assessors' skills in interviewing, and the fact that preparing and planning for professional discussion are perceived as being time-consuming. Both our case study centres said that, as with any assessment activity:

- ◆ the more skilled the assessor, the easier an assessment is to implement
- ◆ preparation is essential and cannot be skimmed on

In summary

Based on the experiences of the two centres in the case study, we suggest that centres intending to use professional discussion as a method of assessment will want to prepare for doing so by:

- ◆ reviewing resource requirements carefully — including preparation time, and access to suitable accommodation and equipment
- ◆ providing training for assessors in interviewing and listening techniques
- ◆ making sure that assessors keep using interviewing and listening skills
- ◆ providing guidance for assessors on developing assessment material for professional discussion
- ◆ providing training for assessors and internal verifiers in using any technology
- ◆ undertaking standardisation exercises

They will also want to analyse and take steps to manage the risks of introducing professional discussion. However, it needs to be said that centres have to deal with all of these issues in one way or another, whatever method of assessment they decide to offer to candidates.

As David Morgan, Managing Director of ENTO Direct, says: ‘Professional discussion is well worth persevering with. It should not be made into something complex or mysterious; it is part of any competent assessor’s toolbox, and should be used when it is appropriate to do so.’