A City & Guilds Group Collaboration

City & Guilds
Professional Discussion

Continuous Professional Development Series
Assessment Pack

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1. Overview of the professional discussion

Professional discussion is a planned, in-depth, two-way exploratory conversation between the Assessor/Trainer and learner. It is an effective way of assessing the learner's understanding and knowledge and how they embed this in their practice. It is efficient in terms of time and as a useful holistic assessment method. The professional discussion can help a learner who finds written evidence difficult to produce. It can also be used as an assessment method to confirm authenticity, where this is in doubt, to enable the learner to demonstrate their underlying knowledge or to address significant and related gaps in the learners' product evidence. **It is not a question and answer session.**

"The process of asking prepared questions around an assessor-led agenda, with the learner answering rather than leading, is doomed to failure" Research from Black & William 1998 and QCA and ALI (2004)

Professional Discussion

It Is NOT just a chat, NOT a group activity and Is NOT a terrifying ordeal for the learner.

The key aspect in professional discussion is the 'discussion'. Questioning may be used to gain depth, but discussion should be led by **structured by the Assessor/Trainer** but **led** the learner.

2. How professional discussion can contribute to the assessment process

It is important that the Assessor/Trainer realise that when professional discussions are used as an assessment method, the entire assessment process is needed:

Plan	The Assessor/Trainer will produce an assessment plan that outlines the focus of the professional discussion i.e. which learning outcomes/assessment criteria will be covered; date/time; who will be present; supplementary evidence to be presented and discussed
Assess	The Assessor/Trainer will complete the professional discussion with the learner, record what is said and make an assessment decision based on the outcomes of the discussion
Feedback	The Assessor/Trainer will communicate the assessment decision to the learner, and any future action needed
Record	The Assessor/Trainer will record the assessment outcome on the required assessment records.

Professional discussions can help the Assessor/Trainer to:

- explore and assess the learner's in-depth understanding of a subject/topic
- assess practice that cannot be directly observed
- assess aspects of work practice that are difficult to observe, are rare occurrences, or take place in restricted or confidential settings
- assess a discrete set of learning outcomes/assessment criteria using a two-way conversation
- access additional information to supplement and support other assessment methods, for example a portfolio or project report, assignment etc.
- enable the learner to explore and elaborate on areas which may not otherwise be easy to demonstrate
- to follow up on any Expert Witness testimonies (EWT) provide by the learners Manager and/or workplace supervisor.

3. Advantages of this assessment method

If conducted well, the Professional Discussion can evidence behaviour developments and is particularly good at generating evidence for problem solving, and other higher order thinking skills, as illustrated below. This is because it offers the learner a unique opportunity to tell a natural 'story' including the why and the how, and also the impact and outcomes of their work.

Appraise argue assess attach choose compare conclude contrast defend describe discriminate estimate evaluate explain judge justify interpret relate predict rate select summarise support value

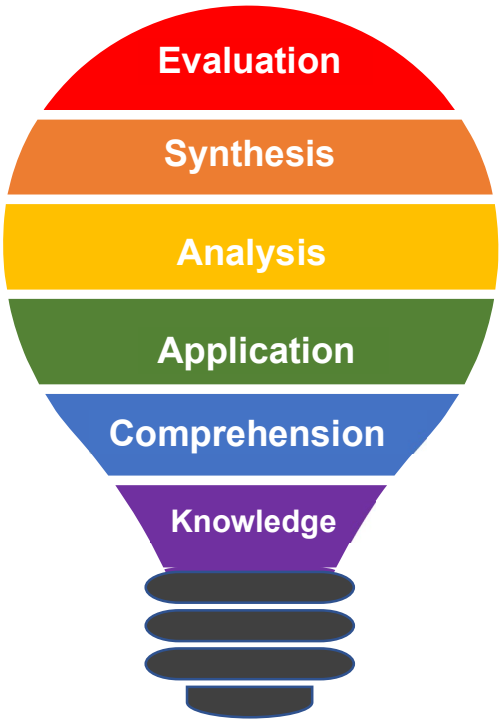
Arrange assemble categorise collect combine comply compose construct create design develop devise explain formulate generate plan prepare rearrange reconstruct relate reorganise revise rewrite set-up summarise

Analyse appraise breakdown calculate categorise compare contrast criticise diagram differentiate discriminate distinguish examine experiment identify illustrate infer model outline point out question

Apply change choose compute demonstrate discover dramatise employ illustrate interpret manipulate modify operate practice predict prepare produce relate schedule show sketch solve use write

Classify convert defend describe discuss distinguish estimate explain express extend generalised identify give example(s) indicate infer locate predict select paraphrase recognise rewrite review translate summarise

Arrange define describe duplicate identify label list match memorise name order outline recognise relate recall repeat reproduce select state



When it is conducted and recorded appropriately, a professional discussion is a highly flexible form of assessment

- it can be used to supplement another component of assessment, for example, building on an observation, following a project report or a presentation
- it can be wide-ranging in scope and cover a large part of the role and the occupational standard.
- it can draw upon other supporting evidence such as a portfolio or a project report and can effectively determine the authenticity of that supporting evidence
- it can effectively assess those skills and behaviours that require probing questions to explore the reasons for the learner's ideas or actions
- it can be recorded to aid moderation and internal/external quality assurance
- it can be conducted online/remotely, providing appropriate controls are in place
- oral questions/discussions can be less daunting and are more accessible for some learners
- it is an effective way of collecting qualitative data e.g. reflection and experiences.

Where used holistically with other forms of assessment, such as a practical observation or EWT, the professional discussion enables additional evidence to be collected and cross referenced to multiple and diverse assessment criteria in order to validate the learner's overall grade or performance. This process of using multiple assessment methods in this way is referred to as triangulation and is consider best practice.

4. Validity, reliability and robustness

The Assessor/Trainer will need to be skilled in the kind of prompts and questions they ask in professional discussions. They will also need to be able to help the learner overcome their nerves/anxiety and be able to conduct the discussion in a way that is consistent across all learners they assess for a particular qualification. One way of helping is for the Assessor/Trainer to discuss beforehand with their learners what is going to happen and give the learner a structure of what they are going to be covering. Also, the Assessor/Trainer can carry out ''dry runs' with learners which are not recorded, so that the learner knows what to expect in terms of process and outcomes.

Things to think about: *how many 'bites of the cherry' will you give the learner to answer the questions adequately? What prompts will you use to draw out higher-level answers to allow learners to demonstrate higher-level grade responses?*

The Assessor/Trainer will need to avoid bias. Learners will need to be assessed fairly and consistently, irrespective (for example) of whether the learner is confident or nervous, or whether a learner is eloquent or where English is their second language.

The evidence collected and recording procedures need to be robust as there will be times where a learner or employer challenges the grading decision, assessment outcome or assessor judgement and often qualitative methods like a professional discussion can be the first area that is challenged.

Grading and assessment decisions will need to stand up to scrutiny and be underpinned with a reliable evidence.

5. Preparing for the professional discussion

The learner and Assessor/Trainer should plan for a professional discussion. Once they have planned the session, the Assessor/Trainer should then structure what is going to be covered and prepare 'thoughtful' prompts or questions, using the right kind of language – one the learner understands. It is important that the learner understands that the professional discussion is an assessment and that they may need to do it again if it does not meet the agreed requirements.

A professional discussion assessment plan will need to include:

- the date, time, location and who needs to be present
- preparation the learner needs to complete before the professional discussion
- the format that the professional discussion will take (include if this will be based around real life or situational scenarios and provide guidance on the content of those) – always check the assessment strategy for what is permitted
- whether it will be used in conjunction with any other assessment component or graded/assessed separately
- a rationale which describes the purpose of the questioning activity (this could include the assessment of specific learning outcomes/assessment criteria, clarifying underpinning knowledge, to fill significant and related gaps or to further prove knowledge and competency)

- any supporting information/evidence that can inform the professional discussion, for example, will the learner need to prepare any evidence to bring to the professional discussion?
- how long it will last; this should reflect the number of learning outcomes/assessment criteria that are to the assessed and be mindful of what is realistic
- confirmation of whether it is an assessed activity and whether there will be an assessment decision taken
- reference to the learner's right of appeal against the assessment decision if relevant

See Appendix 1 for an exemplar Professional discussion planning form

Assessor/Trainer

The Assessor/Trainer must be skilled in putting the learner at ease and be able to adapt their own behaviour and demonstrate sensitivity – using non-verbal as well as verbal cues. It will help the learner if the Assessor/Trainer prepares a structure for the professional discussion – based around what is being explored and/or the learning outcomes/assessment criteria being assessed – and it will help to keep the learner focussed on what needs to be covered.

Also – importantly – the Assessor/Trainer must remember to LISTEN rather than talk and to use pauses and silence effectively. It is important to give the learner time to reflect and think before speaking and to ask probing questions and open body language that encourage the learner to extend and enrich their responses: "that's interesting, tell me more about….", "I see, and?". Remember that silence is golden.

"Silence is the element in which great things fashion themselves together"

(Thomas Carlyle, 1831)

Professional discussion should make effective use of questioning methods e.g. using open questions, prompting and using specific questions but it is meant to be a conversational session and **NOT,** as mentioned previously, a question and answer session. To work effectively, it needs to be time managed – 30 minutes of 'quality' discussion is much better than over an hour of the learner struggling for words and 'urmming'…… It should be a short but rich discussion.

Prompts and questions posed should be asked to lift or extend thinking, moving the learner from narrow to broader aspects of their knowledge. It is helpful to ask the learner easier questions first, to put them at ease before progressing on to more complex questions. Extension prompts and questions can then be used once the learner is more relaxed and talking freely.

During the discussion, where learners stray from the learning outcomes/assessment criteria or other areas being discussed or assessed, the Assessor/Trainer can refer to the structure and bring the discussion back on track by using prompts such as:

- OK so going back to where we were looking at AC3.1, what would you do if?
- Great. Thinking more now about the area of xxx, tell me?
- Tell me more about …? **or** Explain a bit more around?
- Focussing on AC2.3, tell me what happened when?
- Describe what you did when …?
- Explain why you think this happened?
- Thinking about ……., can you evaluate what went wrong/well and what you learned from it?
- You've outlined …….., now explain what you think you could have done differently?
- When you performed this activity, explain to me how you planned for it and what you did?

6. Keeping records

Creating an audit trail by recording the professional discussion helps the Assessor/Trainer, the learner, the Internal Quality Assurer (IQA) and the External Quality Assurer (EQA) , to 'make sense' of the learner's evidence. It formalises the professional discussion. The discussion can be recorded in a number of different ways – handwritten notes on a suitably drafted document, but typically a video or audio recording works best. Whatever method of recording is used it MUST be referenced to the unit and learning outcomes/assessment criteria that are being assessed and claimed.

If handwritten notes are taken by the Assessor/Trainer, it is good practice for the Assessor/Trainer to try to record the learner's words or phraseology so that it is clear that the learner has given the responses. Also – the learner and Assessor/Trainer need to sign and date the notes to authenticate and confirm them as a true record of the discussion.

Notes of what was said in the professional discussion must be saved and available to others so that for example, IQAs and EQAs can sample them at a later date. In the notes, the Assessor/Trainer must record the learner and Assessor/trainer name, the date the professional discussion took place, the location, a brief summary of what was assessed and that the learner's right to appeal against the assessment decision was discussed. Notes should also contain the assessment feedback to the learner and a statement of what the assessment decision was. So, for example at the end of a professional discussion, the Assessor/Trainer might ask the learner what they thought went well and what they thought could be improved and then give their decision. They would then note down something like 'The Assessor/Trainer confirms that, your professional discussion has met the requirements of AC3.1.' Both Assessor/Trainer and learner would then sign and date the notes as a true record of what was said.

Digital recording – making best use of technology available

Digital recording on Smart phones, online Instant Messaging and other digital platforms can be used to capture the professional discussion. All recordings must be saved and available to others so that for example, IQAs and EQAs can sample them at a later date. It is essential therefore that the recordings include all of the information that would have been included in a written record or the 'notes' referred to above, e.g. stating the learner and Assessor/Trainer name, the date the discussion took place, the location, a brief summary of what is being assessed and the learner's right to appeal against the assessment decision, the assessment feedback to the learner and a statement of what the assessment decision is. Similarly, at the end of a professional discussion, the Assessor/Trainer might ask the learner what they thought went well and what they thought could be improved and then state clearly ' I agree, your professional discussion has met the requirements of AC3.1.'

In digital recordings, it is important that the learning outcomes/assessment criteria are explicitly related to what is said as part of the recording – and this can be done by the Assessor/Trainer during the recording e.g. they may say 'right, now moving on to AC2.2 tell me about…..'. Also, the Assessor/Trainer needs to keep a rough guide to the time in the recording when the criteria was addressed, via the discussion, e.g. 1m 55 secs, AC3.1, 2m 43 secs AC5.4 and AC5.5, etc. The recording can then be included as part of the learner evidence as long as the assessment criteria is annotated to indicate where they have been addressed/met.

Finally, under no circumstances should the content of any professional discussion compromise the confidentiality of any individual. Data protection legislation and confidentiality policies must be adhered to at all times and it would be expected that the Assessor/Trainer would have explained this to the learner at the start of the assessment process. Where recording technologies are used, data protection/GDPR must be adhered to at all times.

Some guidance on giving assessment feedback:

- Before giving feedback, ask the learner what they thought went well and what they think could be improved in their responses
- Ensure the feedback is focussed on specifics about how the learner met the learning outcomes/assessment criteria
- Give clear confirmation of the assessment decision(s)
- Agree an action plan with the learner for anything that needs to be repeated, any remaining work or what needs to be improved
- Ensure that a copy of the recording and/or the written feedback is available in the learner's portfolio and in the centre records, signed and dated by both Assessor/trainer and learner.

Other factors to consider include the following:

- Time and resources – professional discussions require careful preparation by the Assessor/trainer and some additional equipment may be needed and maintained
- Assessor/trainer ability and confidence - the Assessor/Trainer must be skilled in prompting learners and in asking open, probing questions, in listening to obtain the required information and to identify the need for further follow-up questions – not all Assessor/Trainers excel in these areas.

7. Some guidance for the Internal Quality Assurer

Check list for IQA when sampling records of professional discussions:

- A professional discussion is not a series of questions and answers
- It should flow like a focussed, technical conversation
- It should not sound like it is being read from a script
- The learner should speak fluently about the requirements that they are covering
- The Assessor/Trainer should be prompting, guiding and contributing, but not leading the learner
- The Assessor/Trainer should generally be speaking less than the learner
- There should be a clear assessment decision, which can be quality assured
- The recording should be accurately recorded on the feedback sheet against the learning outcome/assessment criteria/areas of work being assessed
- The recording should state the learner and Assessor/Trainer name, the date the discussion took place, the location, a brief summary of what was being assessed and the learner's right to appeal against the assessment decision.

8. When is professional discussion not a suitable assessment method?

This assessment method may be less suitable when:

- assessing skills and some behaviours in practical occupations which would be better assessed directly through workplace observation/practical assessment or use of EWT
- where professional discussion is not a regular activity within an occupational role

- where professional discussion is not a permitted assessment activity within a qualification or part of formative or summative assessment requirement within an apprenticeship.

It is recognised that during exceptional circumstances, professional discussion may be the only option to gather relevant evidence from a learner. Use of professional discussions at these times will either be directed by the Awarding Organisation/Body or Regulatory Authority, therefore, it is essential that the Assessor/Trainer or their employer should discuss their use with the IQA before working with the learner.

9. Risks of this assessment method

The professional discussion is likely to produce limited evidence if too many questions are used, if questions are poorly designed or closed (eliciting a yes/no response), or where repetition occurs, and scope is less well defined. It is important to avoid the discussion being a mechanical list of questions, rather than an opportunity to **discuss** and explore an area of interest.

A professional discussion can generate a large quantity of qualitative evidence that might be difficult to grade/judge, validate and compare, particularly if used as a method of assessment across a peer group activity when a number of learners are involved at the same time. The skill of the Assessor/Trainer here is the recording and use of evidence provided by **each** learner, which may vary depending on their role in the group activity, or by virtue of their overall contributions throughout the professional discussion.

The risk can be significantly reduced when the professional discussion is recorded using audio or video platforms. This is because this allows for rigorous scrutiny of the evidence, including the Assessor/Trainer's use of tone and prompt/question types, as well as the learner's verbatim responses and dialogue - this level of detail is clear in video and audio recordings, but often lost by choosing to record the discussion solely in written form.

10. Professional discussion template

City & Guilds have provided an exemplar template to help the Assessor/Trainer with the process of undertaking a professional discussion.

Appendix 1 Professional discussion planning form

Professional discussion planning form					
Qualification title					
Learner name					
Assessor/Trainer name					
Date	DD/MM/YY	**Time**	HH:MM	**Proposed duration**	HH:MM

Learning Outcome(s)	Assessment criteria	What is to be covered in the discussion	Time reference (if recorded)
		Please continue on a separate sheet if required	

Assessor signature		**Date**	DD/MM/YY
Learner signature		**Date**	DD/MM/YY
Internal Quality Assurer Signature		**Date**	DD/MM/YY

Appendix 2 Professional discussion form

Professional discussion form			
Qualification title		**Qualification number**	
Learner name		**City & Guilds Number**	

Record of discussion (key points only if recorded)	**Time reference (if recorded)**
Please continue on a separate sheet if required	

Units covered within this discussion	**Outcomes covered in units**

Assessor/learner declaration:

I confirm that I have assessed all of the work produced and have ensured that the work is that of the named learner. I have ensured that during the learning process the evidence is authentic, sufficient, valid and current to the standards required.

Assessor name		**Date**	DD/MM/YY
Assessor signature			
Learner signature			

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