

## **A Fresh Look at Initial and Diagnostic Assessment in Community Education Provision**

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### **Abstract**

This article outlines findings from a collaborative project with two partner organisations that focused on the initial and diagnostic assessment practice used by an Adult and Community Learning provider in the north-east of England. The findings highlight the need for change with regard to how initial assessment is conducted, and, as a result of this, we make suggestions as to how providers can ensure assessment is appropriate. The researchers found that the assessment tool used for diagnostic purposes is less important than the process of assessment. This action research explored learners' experience of assessment and makes recommendations for further changes to the assessment process.

### **Key words**

Initial and Diagnostic Assessment; Adult and Community Learning; Mindset; Induction Processes.

## **Introduction**

The project was conducted by a Community Interest Company (CIC) established in 2010, alongside support and input from two other partners, both within the Post-16 sector. The company's main base is within South Tyneside with satellite provision in other areas of the north-east of England.

The company was originally established to work with vulnerable young people and adults in the community. Many of our learners have multiple barriers to overcome in their lives and are at a low level starting point academically when they engage with the company. Many have not been able to sustain education within a college or other Post-16 provisions, and therefore benefit from a different environment in which they can engage. Costs of failing young people are significant – not just for the young person and their family, but also in terms of the wider cost for society (Gutherson et al, 2011). The company was established to support vulnerable members of society to overcome barriers and re-engage in education, with a strong focus on re-engaging young people aged 16 to 19. Our learners are mainly those classified as at risk and who previously have not had their needs addressed in their previous education provision (Edgar-Smith & Palmer, 2015). The company works from the philosophy that each and every individual has great capacity to learn when exposed to effective and relevant learning strategies (Green, 1999).

Learners include:

- those with involvement in Youth Justice
- those in care or leaving care
- previous non-school attenders
- young parents
- those not in education, employment or training (NEET).

Within all our work, we focus on the emotional needs of learners with the belief that how learners feel is a huge part of the learning process and a person's readiness to learn. Previous research (MetLife, 2004; Rose & Gallop, 2002) supports this belief, stating that for many decades, student emotions were seen as barriers to learning and often ignored or discouraged. Sliwka and Yee (2015), when focusing on withdrawal from mainstream education and a lack of social engagement, concluded that

student emotions are significant indicators of the effectiveness of learning. The learners in this research indicated that, in their previous education, they felt stupid, could not make friends, felt disliked by staff and peers, were misunderstood, and that they did not fit in at school. This was often despite moving schools to give them a fresh start. They saw some of the school protocols as pointless and did not feel listened to or encouraged to have a voice. These feelings were largely attached to their experience in secondary education and many indicated that primary education felt very different and more comfortable. Some felt overwhelmed by just the size of the school and number of other learners, and they felt that anyone who was seen as different was picked out. For some, who had originally progressed to college, the feelings had stayed with them in college.

Our previous experience with learners mirrored this and so we developed an Emotional Resilience programme to support learners, in addition to many other elements of support, including a full-time Pastoral Manager. As a small educational provider, it is much easier for us than for many large organisations to keep our groups to small numbers; we mix adults with young learners and the number of learners per year is much smaller than a school environment. We provide one-to-one support on a weekly basis and work closely with all other professionals involved in learners' lives, for example the Leaving Care Service and Social Services. As one learner told us recently: "*I feel happy here. What I really like is that people like me actually come here*" (young learner, 2018). We can hear the learner's sense of belonging in this voice, and a consequence of this is an improvement in attendance.

As an educational provider, our ethos is based on the theory of student-centred approaches, as discussed by Gatongi (2007), when focusing on behaviour management. Bernstein (1975) defines such an approach as '*...taking a highly structured and responsive approach to each child's learning, in order that all are able to progress, achieve and participate*' (p. 22). The provision offered is designed for people whose needs are not being met in mainstream education for a variety of reasons and so are not succeeding in that learning environment (Gutherson et al, 2011), hence our emphasis on building a learning environment which aims to meet learners' needs in a better fashion. There is not one standard delivery model and programmes are diverse and individualised with a strong focus on the holistic needs of each individual learner.

Prior to beginning the research, it had also become apparent that, due to the nature of the learners we deal with, teaching strategies needed to support and encourage a change in learners' mindsets. This aspect became increasingly important throughout the research, particularly when exploring learners' previous experiences of assessment.

Dweck's research (Yeager & Dweck, 2012; Dweck, 2012) has shown the positive effects of growth mindset interventions on students' achievements at all ages. Although mindset theory identifies two mindsets – fixed mindset and growth mindset – it is not to say that the two are not malleable. As part of our student-centred approach, elements of mindset theory and behaviourism are also embedded, with the intention of changing learner attitudes towards education whilst re-engaging and motivating learners. Learners with a closed mindset are likely to feel as though a classroom is a place where they are judged, and less likely to engage in activity that involves risks or making mistakes (Yeager & Dweck, 2012).

Studies, including those of Boaler (2013) and Blackwell et al (2007), focusing on the concept of mindset theory found that interventions impacted on learners through a significant increase in their value and enjoyment of education. Although changing a learner's mindset appears from research to have numerous benefits, changing mindsets takes a significant amount of time and, as outlined by Dweck (2012), even when changed, their old beliefs are not removed completely and replaced with different ones. Instead, new beliefs gradually become stronger and begin to influence the way a learner thinks, feels, and acts. Therefore, as a company, we aim to promote a change in mindset over a sustained period of time, and embed strategies to do so within all teaching. However, changes in mindset can also be promoted during the assessment process. This has led to a review of our initial and diagnostic assessment process.

### **The research project**

We were asked to be involved with the project by the local Adult Education department. Limited funding was provided for supply cover by The Education & Training Foundation. The project focus was initial and diagnostic assessment. It had emerged from conversations with providers

commissioned by the fund holder and managers within the organisation that a significant change was needed regarding the way learners are initially assessed. We had already concluded that the current methods could be inaccurate and demotivating for learners.

It was important that we worked closely with the representative from Adult Education to understand the challenges faced by other local providers, particularly with regards to re-engaging potential learners and ensuring they did not face the same challenges and barriers to education they had previously experienced.

### **Development of the Initial and Diagnostic Assessment project**

Initially, discussions focused on the range of diagnostic tools available for Mathematics and English, and whether we could discover the best tool for initial assessment. From our perspective, we felt the process of assessment was as important as the tool used and it was something that we had not given sufficient consideration to previously. Whilst it was possible to see the impact of assessment/initial assessment on learners and their future learning, we were not clear about how the learners felt about the process of initial assessment.

The use of the term 'diagnostic' when discussing assessments might bring to mind a medical examination and we needed to know the reality of learners' perceptions and feelings about this process. It was also highlighted that learners often did not understand the need for diagnostic assessment and did not see the value of it or understand how staff would use the assessment results. Additionally, it was agreed that the process of completing an initial assessment when enrolling on a new programme undermined Dweck's (2012) concept of a growth mindset, which we wanted to nurture. The theory only assessed current knowledge, promoting attitudes of fixed mindset, rather than focusing on skills developed and distance travelled to promote a growth mindset and instilling attitudes that, with practice and effort, would enhance skills and knowledge.

Our two partners in the project felt initial and diagnostic assessment and mindset was an interesting and perhaps lesser known area of research and we agreed that our starting point would be to carry out research with both young learners and adults. The local Adult Education department does not have direct contact with learners but, as a fund holder, was in a position to inform and influence

provider regulations and specific requirements regarding the outcomes of Functional Skills initial and diagnostic assessments. Their involvement was paramount in taking outcomes from the research forward to a wider audience.

Dweck (2012) comments on assessment in terms of changing mindset, concluding that the feedback that students are given and the manner in which feedback is delivered can profoundly impact on students' perceptions of their own ability. We carefully considered this in terms of formative and summative feedback, and staff engaged in training around Dweck's work. We had already implemented a system whereby learners completed a mindset questionnaire and the key outcomes were added to learner profiles. However, we had not considered the impact of mindset sufficiently for initial and diagnostic assessments which we were aware was a crucial stage in terms of learner retention and motivation. We had failed to consider the initial assessment stage as a crucial stage in the learner journey.

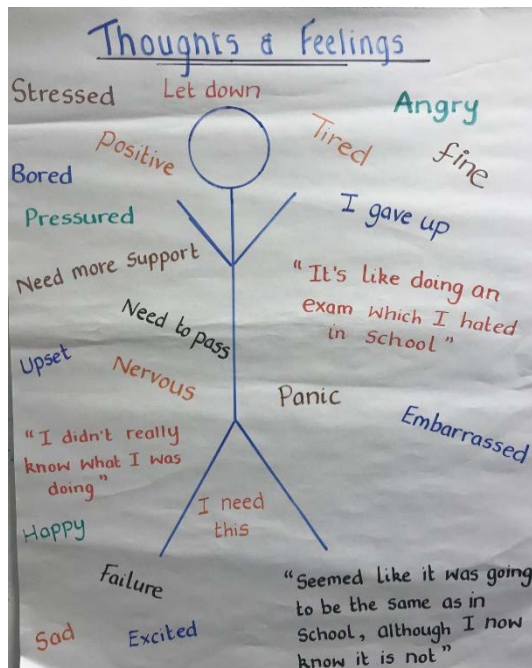
Harlen (2005) discusses how often teachers focus on the content of tests, training students to answer specific questions and adopting transmission styles of teaching rather than focusing on the learning process. The same theory can be applied to assessment, suggesting that rather than focusing on the outcome of initial assessments, good practice would be for educators to instead focus on the process of initial assessment. The same research also concludes that to decrease the detrimental effects of assessment, it would be beneficial to use a more collaborative approach whereby judgements about students' attainments are made based on their regular interactions during teaching and learning. The importance of considering a learner's emotions and perceptions of assessment is emphasised within The Education and Training Foundation Guidelines (2018), which recommend: '*Assess for self-belief and motivation, ensure that assessment and regular reviews address learners' self-belief and motivation...*' (p. 14). A review of literature focusing on re-imagining assessment and tracking in Maths and English completed by The Education & Training Foundation (2016) states that commencing a learning programme with a test may create anxiety for learners as, for many learners, such assessments may reinforce memories of earlier negative experiences of education (Edwards, 2013).

## **Beginning our research with learners**

When working with our learners, we used a technique called Draw & Write to elicit learners' perceptions and feelings. The method was originally developed during the 1980s and was mainly used for studies of children's health. Variations of the technique have since been used in research with adults as it is thought to produce rich and unique visual data, encouraging participants taking part in research to express what is not easily put into words (Weber & Mitchell, 1995).

The method was devised to elicit children's views without framing questions which might influence them. It involves asking participants to draw a picture in relation to a topic or scenario given and, where they were able, to write words that came into their thinking around the drawing. Community First North East had developed the technique to make it applicable to adults but kept the key feature of eliciting answers that were not tutor-led or where learners might perceive there was a right or wrong answer.

We presented learners with a stick figure representing a learner and asked them how the figure might feel about being assessed when they first came to us. Learners were asked to recall their experience of initial and diagnostic assessments for Functional Skills and write down anything that came to mind when they described this, including how they felt. A total of 64 learners were involved in the project. Groups involved in the research were each of mixed ability, ranging from Entry Level to Level 2 Functional Skills. Group sizes were limited to between six and eight. One nominated tutor led the research process with every group to ensure consistency of approach, and there were 12 team members involved overall with the project. The learners chosen were selected at random as we wanted to involve a selection from all groups of learners. The data was gathered over a five-day period and the outcomes from each group were combined.



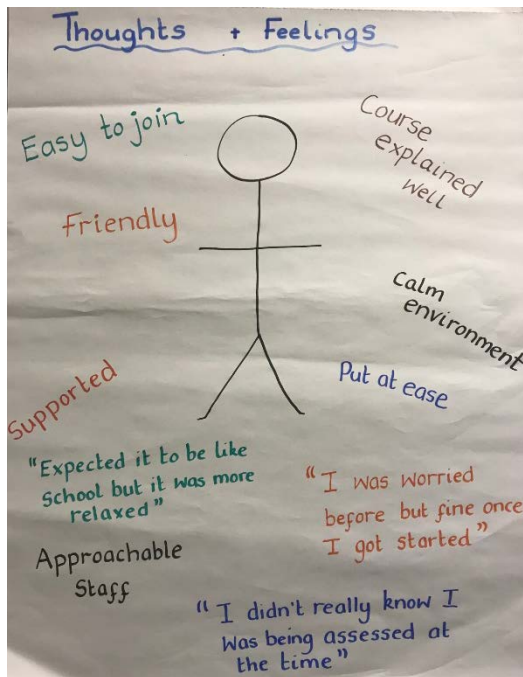
*Findings from cohort 1*

Overall, 82% of learners felt the assessment and induction processes they had previously experienced were negative and their feelings had an impact on their initial engagement in learning. Examples of comments included "What's the point? I can't do it anyway" and "I just felt stupid". This was despite always taking care to inform learners of the purpose of the assessments and trying to put learners at ease. The outcomes led us to question how and when we should carry out assessments in order for the process of initial assessments to have a more positive impact on the learning experience and still be of value to the learners and teachers. Within our organisation, we concluded that the current assessment process did not match our ethos, did not reflect the emphasis we gave to the emotional needs of our learners, and was not a student-centred approach.

As a result of this initial research phase, we decided to incorporate a minimum two-week induction period for learners during which decisions regarding learners' starting points, and therefore the more appropriate programme of study for them, could be made. This process used initial and diagnostic assessments which placed emphasis on the process of completion, and combined tutor observations, discussion with learners, and learners' mindsets.



We introduced this change with a small group of learners who started their programme with us later in the 2017/18 academic year. This group was asked to complete their thoughts and feelings around a stick person of someone who had joined their programme and was reflecting back over the last four weeks.



Findings from cohort 2

### Changes to our initial assessment practices

With this new group, the term 'assessment' was avoided. We explained to learners that over a period of time, as they settled in, we would be discussing their learning with them and – through teaching activities during the first weeks – we would get to know them, make sure they were on the right course, and set work for them at the right level. Tutors carried out a range of activities with learners that enabled them to make a full initial assessment. Examples included:

- how fluently learners could share their knowledge through group debates
- how easily learners could put their learning into practice through written tasks, such as '10 facts to help others get to know me'
- creating posters to advertise their current course to any new learners
- proposing one thing that we, as an education provider, could do over the term to raise money for chosen charities and break down what the income and expenditure might be.

The use of such practical activities allowed learners to demonstrate their group skills, problem-solving and decision-making skills, and creative thinking. Self, peer, and tutor observations were collated. At the same time, we aimed to develop activities that were engaging, fun, and built group cohesion. From these we were able to assess the confidence levels and support needs of learners.

The Pastoral Manager contacted other professionals who were involved in a learner's current life (such as social workers, Leaving Care staff, the Youth Justice service, domestic violence support workers, family nurses, midwives, health visitors and Connexions staff) and there was full sharing of relevant information. Through this more relaxed yet comprehensive approach, we gathered the information necessary to make an initial assessment and ensure that learners were quickly guided on to appropriate programmes such as GCSE or Functional Skills.

However, for Functional Skills assessments, our fund holders require an official diagnostic assessment. Therefore, we continued to carry out formal diagnostic assessments but learners were not told it was an assessment and they assumed it was part of their everyday classroom exercises. We debated the ethical issues surrounding this and agreed that, because any assessments carried out were for internal use by tutors only, the process would not impact on the learners' rights and wellbeing. Learners were told that this process would help tutors identify any areas they particularly needed to focus on, but we also discussed with learners which aspects they felt they needed to refresh and what were key areas for further development. They were therefore very much part of the overall assessment process.

### **The learners' experience**

Feedback from our new learners suggested (again using the stick figure strategy) that they did not fully realise they were being assessed and their reflective thoughts and feelings were much more positive. Their responses included "*calm*", "*at ease*", and "*more relaxed than my previous experiences*". Some learners asked "*When did we do the assessments?*" For these learners, the initial assessment had been successful as it had appeared either supportive or invisible; it had not been a traumatic or negative experience.

### **The teachers' experience**

Teachers engaged with the new approach and found it more beneficial for teacher and learner relationships as the more incremental process enabled a fuller appreciation of the learners' skills and abilities. Staff now had a more detailed overall picture of a learner which helped them to better understand how to support them. Because staff were also setting the initial assessments (but not describing them as such) they also had greater confidence in their judgements. Staff expressed concerns about the potential delay in completing initial course paperwork, which had to be submitted by a deadline set by fund holders, by adapting new ways of working. They highlighted the fact that, regardless of outcomes from the initial assessment, conditions of funding did not allow total flexibility, for example, learners who must take a GCSE as part of the condition of funding. Initial assessment, however, can show learners are actually working at a much lower level than GCSE, possibly because of previous schooling.

Delays in processing assessment paperwork could also mean a delay in paying any bursaries to young learners because assessment paperwork cannot be submitted at the very beginning of their course. The obstacles, in terms of paperwork and funding issues, remain and we will see in the next academic year how we manage to balance this whilst ensuring we provide a better experience for learners.

In summary, the movement from formalised diagnostic assessment proved beneficial to learners, but staff identified practical financial implications which could compromise the more student-centred experience.

### **Sharing our learning to influence wider change**

As a result of our initial research and findings, the Adult Education department encouraged us to link with another provider to explore how to improve our initial assessment. We participated in a prioritisation activity to generate discussion and share practice between staff. Outcomes showed the top priority for groups of tutors was to safeguard learner confidence and independence, which,

according to our research with learners, current methods clearly did not. The exercise also gathered views from staff indicating that staff preferred initial assessment to be:

- learner-centred
- accepted by learners
- linked to vocational subjects and learner interests with practical activities included
- not like a test.

We invited staff to imagine an ideal initial and diagnostic process and what it should encompass. A summary from this activity showed staff across the Community Education provision needed initial assessments to provide information on the following:

- educational background
- personal background/personal living circumstances
- support and additional needs
- contact details
- goals (ideal goals and realistic goals)
- evidence of prior achievement
- previous experience
- identification of strengths.

This research also indicated that staff needed to refer back to the assessment process to assist learners in monitoring their progress towards goals. Initial assessments needed to be a longer process which gathered a breadth of information. Staff stated the need to use initial assessments to help learners set personal targets, both performance-based and learning-based. Previous research emphasises the need for a more formative approach and there is a need to make assessment part of the learning process (Hargreaves, 2005).

*'The teacher's job is not to transmit knowledge, nor to facilitate learning. It is to engineer effective learning environments for the students. The key features of [an] effective learning environment are that they create student engagement and allow, teachers, learners and their peers to ensure that learning is proceeding in the intended direction.'*

*The only way we can do this is through assessment. That is why assessment, is indeed, the bridge between teaching and learning.”*

(William, 2011: p. 50)

The involvement of staff from another provider was an important aspect of the project for us as we wanted outcomes to impact on all courses and all learners.

### **Principles guiding our future practice**

This initial research provided a platform to make further changes and also gave us confidence in the approach that we were taking. In future years, we shall try to incorporate the following principles:

- avoid the term ‘assessment’
- assessments should not be carried out at the initial meeting with a learner but should be implemented at an appropriate time as part of an holistic and formative initial review process
- work with learners to determine their emotional readiness to engage in an assessment and allow up to four weeks for the assessment process
- record contributions from other professionals involved in a learner’s life to ensure consistency of approach
- choose a diagnostic assessment tool that is fit for the purpose of identifying strengths and areas of development.

The initial review process needs to help learners and teachers make more meaningful use of the outcomes of diagnostics across all subjects.

### **Conclusion**

As a result of this research into developing a more inclusive initial review process, we will extend our profiles to include details of learners’ mindsets, group skill abilities, emotional, and social needs, together with outcomes of Functional Skills assessments alongside the level they were working towards. This will enable the company to continue to embed the emotional resilience curriculum within teaching through a more in-depth understanding of learners’ social and emotional needs whilst also

developing learners' growth mindsets. This links with findings by Stigler and Hiebert (1999) who discuss how education systems should be based upon the idea that learning is a process determined by effort, rather than fixed notions of ability. From our experience on this project, we can endorse The Education & Training Foundation's recommendation that:

*'Initial Review should replace Initial Assessment: we believe that determining and validating a learner's prior achievement, current capability and appropriate learning pathway choices is essentially a review process rather than an assessment. We suggest that this terminology is also more learner-friendly and more in keeping with an extended period of evaluation'.*

(Education & Training Foundation, 2016: p. 21)

We have realised that how assessments are conducted is more important (to learners and teachers) than the specific assessment tool. We need to monitor how staff can effectively use the diagnostic encounters to motivate learners to achieve and take ownership of their goal-setting, and to work with our Adult Education fund holder to see how administrative paperwork can be adapted to provide effective formative learning opportunities, as well as diagnostic information.

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