

What's Your Assessment Strategy?

If you don't have one, now's the time to create it. **BY CONNI BILLÉ**



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Testing, assessment, and evaluation are three terms often used interchangeably. However, understanding their differences is crucial to ensure an assessment strategy that makes sense for your business objectives. Here, a look at the definitions of the three terms and their implications for professional practice.

TEST

A test of knowledge, skill, or ability is a measurement activity, and is only meaningful in relation to the purpose and context in which it is used. It may be part of a “formative” process that assesses progress toward an objective (“How are you doing on your parallel parking?”) or a “summative” process that measures the whole (“Did you pass your driver’s license test?”).

Before beginning a testing program, you should be clear about what impact the test results will have on individuals, as well as the organization. It is essential to understand what is being tested (e.g., recall of the regulations and skill in parallel parking), as well as the purpose of the test (e.g., whether to assist a novice car driver, or to certify a professional trucker).

Implications for professional practice: Do we provide different types of tests for different domains of learning? Do we have a clear objective for each test? Does each test item have a purpose? Do we use subject matter experts (SMEs) to develop or approve test items?

ASSESSMENT

By nature, assessments are formative, capturing progress toward a goal. With this in mind, individual assessment results are intended for the learner, the instructor, and the instructional designer. This allows the learner and instructor to mold their respective efforts based on individual need. Slow down? Not a problem. That technique not working for you? Let's try it **this** way. The instructional designer uses the feedback to improve the overall course and curriculum.

Implications for professional practice: Do we provide for formative testing in our course design? Are we assessing in relation to a goal the learner understands?

EVALUATION

Evaluation is the summative, buck-stops-here measure. An evaluation confirms whether or not a goal has been attained, and when you pass (or fail), it “counts.” Tests should not be used to evaluate performance until they have been piloted, and passing scores have been set after reviewing results. Determining the standard for “passing” involves judgment, data, and statistics. There is always an element of judgment in evaluation—the “expert” who sets the standard for passing should be qualified to do so, and should use established and defensible criteria.

Implications for professional practice: Do we

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validate our tests with experts? Do we “test the test” with a pilot to make sure poor performers can't fake their way through it or that the good performers are not failing?

To sum up, back to Driver's Ed: To get a license, an applicant typically must run the following gauntlet: Receive periodic progress *assessments* (from Mom or Dad). Pass a *test* on knowledge of driving regulations, followed by one that demonstrates driving skill and applied knowledge of the regulations. Finally, the *evaluation*: An authorized examiner evaluates the applicant's performance and determines whether it passes or fails, based on established criteria. **■**