

Project READ Literacy Network

Waterloo-Wellington



Taking the First Step

An LBS Referral Assessment

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Summary

Project READ Literacy Network has been conducting referral assessments in Waterloo Region and Wellington County since 1994/95 when their *Literacy Skills Assessment Project* toolkit and assessment process was developed. In 1999, the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities funded Project READ to revise its original document, in order to align it with the five levels of the LBS Learning Outcomes Matrix.

Taking the First Step: An LBS Referral Assessment contains some of the original assessment activities, as well as new activities designed not only to reflect the LBS matrix, but also to provide literacy practitioners with a wider variety of assessment activities that meet the needs of adult learners. We've also added sections that explain how the activities are linked to the matrix, how they can be used in an assessment, the conditions recommended for their use, and a section on how the assessment activities can be modified to closer meet the needs of learners and practitioners.

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History of the literacy skills assessment project

In 1994, the Literacy Community Planning Process Committee identified common assessment as a priority for field development in Waterloo Region. At that time, Project READ Literacy Network was receiving an increasing number of requests from the public for program referrals. In addition, the LCPP Committee believed that providing a referral assessment service would be an effective way of meeting the literacy needs of clients at the newly created jobLink Ontario Resource Centres in both Cambridge and Kitchener. As a result, Project READ applied for and received funding to conduct the Literacy Skills Assessment Project.

The project's objectives were

- to develop a common assessment process and "toolkit" based on input from area literacy practitioners;
- to conduct sensitive and confidential placement assessments;
- to refer learners to appropriate literacy programs;
- to write assessment reports which would help the learner and practitioner plan for learning;
- and
- to participate in the jobLink Ontario Resource Centre, as co-located staff, providing service to jobLink clients, and educating jobLink staff about the unique characteristics of the literacy assessment.

The Final Report, which contained a description of the assessment process and copies of the assessment instruments was published and distributed throughout Ontario; and other locations in Canada. Practitioners used the report to conduct both placement and initial assessments, as well as some ongoing assessments.

Purchasers of the original report were surveyed to determine how the assessment process and toolkit were currently being used. Practitioners in LBS agencies report using the Literacy Skills Assessment as both an initial and ongoing assessment tool. They have had to make some modifications to the original assessment process, focusing more upon goal setting, identifying skill gaps and development of the training plan. In addition, some practitioners have identified levels for the assessment samples by linking them to specific success markers in the learning outcome matrix.

The Project READ assessor continued to conduct referral assessments between 1995 and 1999. In 1997, the assessor modified the "toolkit" in order to link the assessment instruments to the five levels of the learning outcomes matrix. She also added a checklist that compared the learner's performance against the original three levels of the foundation draft of the learning outcomes matrix introduced by the Ministry of Education and Training in 1996.

In 1999, the Ontario Literacy Coalition commissioned an environmental scan of current and planned assessment activities in LBS agencies. A number of assessment tools, including the Project READ Literacy Skills Assessment, were subsequently reviewed and evaluated to "identify which assessment instruments and approaches meet the MET Learning Outcomes criteria for effective assessments and which instruments are most closely related to the Learning Outcomes Matrix for Literacy and Basic Skills..."¹, The review organized the tools evaluated into two categories. Category 1 materials were those that were the most comprehensive, and contained processes and instruments that could be used or easily adapted for the purpose of assessment training. Project READ's Literacy Skills Assessment was one of these tools.

Based in part on the report's recommendations, the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities funded six projects that were highlighted. The revised assessment tools are intended to be a part of the Ministry's initiative to build upon a common understanding of assessment (including the LBS Learning Outcomes), and to implement common assessment², which is the second phase of RALS. The Ministry intends to provide orientation and training for the "family" of assessment tools keyed to the five LBS Learning Outcomes Levels in the winter of 2000.

Current project objectives

The LBS Referral Assessment Project was undertaken to achieve the following objectives.

1. To update and revise the process, documentation and tools or demonstrations to meet the LBS Learning Outcomes approach.
2. To publish an updated report and assessment package to the literacy field.
3. To conduct referral/placement assessment for clients of Ontario Works as well as clients, former clients or potential clients of Human Resources Development Canada.

The purpose of a referral assessment is to ensure that the learner is routed to an appropriate group, class or program

The theoretical basis for *Taking the First Step*

1. Defining the difference between referral and initial assessments

The purpose of a referral assessment is to ensure that the learner is routed to an appropriate group, class or program. The focus of the assessment is on identifying the learner's current skill levels, and matching them against the entry-level requirements for the group, class, or in the case of this assessment, LBS program. The outcome of the referral assessment would be placement of a learner in an appropriate program or class, and a referral report that describes the learner's performance during the assessment.

¹ Graham, Neil. *Review and Evaluation of the Assessment Tools and Instruments Currently Being Used by Practitioners*. Ontario Literacy Coalition, September, 1998. pg. 7

² MTCU understands common assessment to refer to the use of compatible assessment tools and approaches across the literacy field, not to the development of a single (common) assessment tool.

The purpose of the initial assessment, on the other hand, is to develop a learning plan, based on the learner's long and short-term goals. The same kinds of information are important (i.e. the long and short-term goals, the background information and entry skill levels), but the focus is on developing the steps required to achieve the goals, and the gaps that exist between the learner's current skills and the skills required by the goals.

Typically, the initial assessment takes longer to complete, and involves research on the requirements of the goal, and a task analysis for the goal, which highlights the specific communications, numeracy and self-management/ self-directions skills embedded in the tasks³. Skill gap analysis, instructional planning and selection of appropriate demonstration activities for ongoing and exit assessment would naturally flow from this type of study. The outcome of an initial assessment would be the a training plan for the learner.

For example, a learner's goal may be to enter the Social Work Diploma program at a community college, and eventually find work in a group home. For a learner with reading skills at level one or two, this is definitely a long-term goal. Depending on the services available, the learner may or may not be able to directly enter the academic upgrading <+ program at the community college. In a referral assessment, the assessor would compare the learner's current skill levels to the entry requirements for available programs. These two factors will have more influence over the referral than will the fact that the learner will eventually need to enter a college program.

The referral assessment enhances, but does not duplicate or replace the initial assessment

Once the learner is enrolled in an appropriate LBS program, he/she and the program coordinator/instructor will develop a training plan which will lead to enrollment in the Social Work Diploma program at the college, if this is deemed to be a realistic goal. Training plan development will be based on information collected during the initial assessment, informed by information in the referral report.

The referral assessment enhances, but does not duplicate or replace the initial assessment. It can help inform the initial assessment process by

- providing background information about the learner and speed up the intake process within the LBS agency;
- describing the learner's performance on assessment activities in detail, pinpointing areas that might require more in-depth investigation; and
- suggesting an appropriate skill level for demonstration activities used to establish a baseline measure in the initial assessment.

2. Holistic vs. analytic assessment

In a learning outcome environment, learners work on developing skills, knowledge and behaviours embedded in the tasks associated with achievement of their long-term goals.⁴

³ For a more complete description of this type of initial assessment, see *Goal-Directed Assessment: An Initial Assessment Process*. Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities. May, 1997.

⁴ *Working with Learning Outcomes: Validation Draft*. Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities. July, 1998

The specific needs of the learner are determined by identifying the gap between the learner's entry level skills and the requirements of the goal. Discrete skills are generally assessed holistically, within the context of authentic task performance.

For example, Maria (a level 3 writer) wants to get a job working in retail sales. She has the knowledge and skills required, but she feels her chances at securing employment are being hampered because she lacks good job search skills. Maria needs to produce an effective resume and learn how to write persuasive cover letters. Using a learning outcome approach, Maria would be asked to write a cover letter to a business for which she would like to work. Her instructor would assess her overall performance, and determine what aspects of letter writing (purpose for writing, style, organization and mechanics) she needs to improve. Following an instructional period, Maria would write other cover letters to demonstrate the progress she has made, and she might be considered successful when she writes an effective cover letter and submits it to a potential employer.

While authentic assessment can be used to identify proficiency with discrete skills, its strength lies in its ability to provide a more holistic view of learner achievement. The holistic approach to assessment works best when used to evaluate the overall quality of performance, as well as to examine higher order skills.⁵

An analytic approach, on the other hand, provides diagnostic information about discrete skills, which is useful when placing a learner in an appropriate program (the primary aim of the literacy skills assessment) and when planning an instructional program (the next step in the process).⁶

Both holistic and analytic approaches can be used with authentic demonstration activities, while tests for discrete skills lend themselves most readily to an analytic approach. However, at the lowest literacy level, learners are less capable of demonstrating the level of integration required by authentic tasks. For this reason, tests for discrete skills should be made available for use in assessment of the lowest level of performance. As the learner becomes more proficient, a more holistic approach can be utilized.

...at the lowest literacy level, learners are less capable of Demonstrating the Level of integration Required by most Authentic tasks

In addition, time plays a role in the selection of assessment approach, particularly in writing. A holistic assessment instrument, like the Ontario Literacy Coalition's Common Writing Assessment recommends giving the learner one hour and fifteen minutes to complete the writing task. In a referral assessment interview, the total time available is limited to approximately an hour. A learner might require the majority of that time to produce a writing sample of sufficient length to assess holistically, leaving little time for discussions of goals, preferences, learning styles and other skill areas. In many instances, particularly at the lower levels of performance, it is possible to gauge a learner's current skill level just as effectively and accurately using tests for more discrete skills, while including an abbreviated writing sample to estimate the learner's proficiency with writing

⁵ Ontario Literacy Coalition, Day One Assessment Training. Summer, 1999.

⁶ Ibid.

Literacy is an interactive process, involving a number of components: decoding/encoding, knowledge of language, syntactical and semantic cueing systems and comprehension skills.⁷ The proficient reader/writer uses these skills interchangeably, depending on the need at the moment.

According to the Whole Language model, reading development is a gradual integration of three cueing mechanisms (semantic⁸, syntactic⁹ and graphophonic¹⁰).¹¹ Reading is viewed as a process of predicting target words based on semantics and syntactical information, followed by confirmation of the word within the context of the passage or sentence. The reader also uses knowledge and experience with the subject to predict the unfamiliar words. Although phonics plays a lesser role, Goodman's model of whole language states that beginning literacy learners need to learn the graphophonic cueing system in order to draw on oral competence and match familiar sound sequences to less familiar letter symbols. As the reader becomes more proficient, phonics takes on a secondary role, serving as a back-up strategy for semantic, syntactic and pragmatic strategies.¹²

In a basic skills approach, skilled readers process all the words they encounter in connected text, and typically, all the letters in those words. Instantaneous whole word recognition is viewed as a product of accurate and fluent decoding and sufficient practice with reading to make a large number of words instantly recognizable. Contextual meaning is a strategy that aids in comprehension of connected text, as are semantic and syntactic cueing systems.

Regardless of the approach used, literacy learning, in the primary stages, involves learning to use a variety of cueing mechanisms effectively. Developing an instructional approach relies on the assessor's ability to identify areas of learner strength and weakness in a variety of reading strategies.¹³ Tests for discrete skills can pinpoint these areas quickly, and help to determine the learner's proficiency with them.

Finally, and most importantly, good practice suggests that assessments should focus on the learner's strengths, not weaknesses. This perspective affords the adult learner a measure of dignity and builds on the learner's sense of self-esteem. The LBS Learning Outcomes Matrix identifies a range of skills at level one that culminates with the learner's ability to "... read a short text.." and "... write a complete sentence"¹⁴

...good practice suggests that assessments should focus on the learner's strengths not weaknesses.

7 O'Malley, J. Michael and Pierce, Lorraine Valdez. *Authentic Assessment for English Language Learners: Practical Approaches for Teachers*. Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1996.

8 Semantics: a linguistic term referring to word meaning in language.

9 Syntactic: a linguistic term referring to grammar system of a language. Syntax is the way words are strung together.

10 Graphophonic: a term referring to the letter/sound relationship. Letters and letter clusters represent phonemes, or sounds of the spoken language.

11 Ibid.

12 Goodman, K.S. *Behind the Eye: What happens in reading*. In H. Singer & R.B. Ruddell (Eds.). *Theoretical models and processes of reading*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association. Pp. 470-496. 1976.

13 Adams, M. J. *Beginning to Read: Thinking and learning about print*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press. 1990.

14 *Working with Learning Outcomes: Validation Draft*. Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities. July, 1998. Pp. 44 and 52.

If a learner is unable to accomplish these tasks during the assessment (in other words, if the learner is performing lower than the expectations for success at level one), the assessor should have instruments that allow the learner to demonstrate the discrete skills that he/she does possess. In this way, the learner can experience some measure of success, as well as provide some evidence of past learning to the assessor.

For a referral assessment, which will be administered within a relatively short time span, a number of reading, writing and numeracy activities that lend themselves to both holistic and analytic approaches should be used. In addition, a number of tests for discrete skills that focus on the most fundamental aspects of development should be available for use with learners performing at the lowest literacy level.

The tests for discrete skills need not be used in any particular order. Some practitioners prefer to use the tests in a step-wise fashion, starting with the most basic discrete skills and working up toward more integrated tasks. Other practitioners use the discrete skill activities to "backfill" or pinpoint specific problems. Integrated activities are found in Section 1 of the reading and writing activities for all 5 levels. The tests for discrete skills are found in Section 2 of Level 1 reading and writing activities for the sake of consistency only.

3. Assessment vs. evaluation: description vs. Judgment

Assessment has been defined as the "systematic approach for collecting information on student learning or performance, usually based on various sources of evidence."¹⁵ During an assessment, the learner performs tasks that require him/her to apply his/her skills. The assessor observes the learner using a variety of methods and instruments. Based on these observations, the assessor is able to describe the learner's performance in detail.

Evaluation involves the "interpretation of assessment data regarding the quality, value, or worth of some response, product or performance. (They are usually based on multiple sources of information.

Evaluation, on the other hand, involves the "interpretation of assessment data regarding the quality, value, or worth of some response, product or performance. Evaluations are usually based on multiple sources of information."¹⁶ A learner's performance is evaluated when one wishes to determine the learner's proficiency with a certain skill or the relative success the learner has achieved at a given level, or with a specific task. In other words, assessment tells us what the learner can do, while evaluation tells us how well the learner can do it.

Some evaluation of a learner's performance is necessary in a referral assessment. The assessor will need to make judgments about the learner's ability to succeed in a given program, or at a given level. For instance, "Jim" is trying to decide between the LBS program offered at the community college, versus one that is offered in a community-based setting. In this case, the assessor will need to determine if Jim has the necessary self-management/self-direction skills to work independently, and meets the entry requirements for the college program. The assessor will

15 O'Malley, J. Michael and Pierce, Lorraine Valdez. *Authentic Assessment for English Language Learners: Practical Approaches for Teachers*. Addison-Wesley Publishing Company. 1996.

16 Ibid. Pg. 238.

need to make judgments about Jim's proficiency with these skills as well as identifying his LBS level, at least tentatively, to decide which program is most suitable.

However, the definitions cited suggest that both assessment and evaluation should take place over a period of time, and be based on a number of demonstrations or performances. By its nature, the referral assessment is a "one-shot deal". The learner is placed in a somewhat artificial setting, and asked to perform "cold". There is no advanced preparation for the demonstration, and it is based on previously acquired knowledge, rather than on a body of learning that has been learned prior to completing the task. The learner is asked to perform in a relatively short period of time, which may or may not be adequate to demonstrate the range or level of development of his/her skills and knowledge. The assessment process needs to take all this, as well as the learner's level of anxiety, into account. It would be unfair and inaccurate to make judgments on this basis.

Furthermore, decisions about which skills need to be improved and to what level as well as the instructional method and content are more properly decided between the learner and the literacy practitioner, within the program to which the learner has been referred. By describing the learner's performance during the referral assessment, the assessor can provide valuable information that will help inform those decisions.

The assessment can

- **confirm the learner's eligibility for the program or class/group**
- **provide background information normally collected during an initial assessment**
- **pinpoint areas of clear strength or weakness**
- **indicate areas that the practitioner may wish to investigate further**
- **help the practitioner determine an appropriate level for demonstration activities used in an initial assessment;**
- **inform the development of a training plan and/or instructional materials**

Purpose of assessment

When examining the original document and the way it was being used by practitioners, it became apparent that we would need to revisit the purpose of the assessment instrument and determine how we intended to use it before we could continue with the revision process.

- What kind of assessment do we intend to conduct?
- What kinds of information do we intend to collect?
- What will we do with the results of the assessment?

Project READ's assessment is intended to be a snapshot of the learner at a given moment in time. **It should not be considered conclusive evidence of a learner's full range of abilities**, since the assessment is conducted during a brief initial interview. The results are used to determine which of the available programs best suit their needs: goals, current skills, and learning preferences. Copies of the referral reports are forwarded to the appropriate LBS agency, the learner and to the referring agency (e.g. Ontario Works caseworkers, and HRDC or employment counselors).

Literacy practitioners most frequently use the assessment reports to

- confirm the learner's eligibility for the program;
- collect relevant background information; and
- guide the development of their own initial assessments and demonstration activities.

Based on the needs of learners and practitioners, then, the literacy skills assessment should achieve the following objectives. '

- *To list the learner's stated long and short-term goals:'*
- *To report on the learner's educational and employment history.*
- *To describe the learner's current reading, writing and/or numeracy skills,*
- *To refer a potential learner to an. appropriate LBS, credit or post secondary program.,*
- *To identify, for the purpose of tracking, the learner's level of performance, or the level of complexity of the task(s) completed*
- *To report to "outside agencies" (e.g. HRDC employment counselors or. Social Services. Department caseworkers) the learner's need in 'the area of basic and educational skills*

Target audiences

Assessment Process and Activities:

The primary audience for the assessment process and activities is the potential adult learner, who is seeking an appropriate LBS agency or program, or wanting to know if their educational skills are adequate for retraining, credit courses or post secondary education. With modification, the process and activities can also be used with learners who are already enrolled in an LBS program, or who are seeking admission.

For these learners and potential learners, the instrument must

- be at an appropriate level;
- have instructions that are easily understood (both verbal and written); and
- be sensitive to the adult learners, with relevant and real life activities.

Practitioners conducting referral or placement assessments are also considered to be an audience. For them, the instrument needs to be;

- easy to follow, with clear, concise instructions;
- possible to conduct the assessment within a reasonable amount of time;
- easy to modify; and
- valid to the LBS Learning Outcomes Matrix.

Assessment reports

The results of a referral assessment are written in a report that describes the learner's performance during the assessment. A copy of the report is sent to

- the learner;
- the frontline literacy practitioner at the LBS program to which the learner is referred; and
- other interested parties. These might include caseworkers, employment counselors and other "outside" agency staff, who have referred one of their clients for assessment.

Because the report will be read and used by people with a range of expertise and understanding of the LBS Learning Outcomes Matrix, it should be written in a common, non-exclusive language. The report writer should also be sensitive to the fact that learners will have access to the information contained in the report. Information should focus on the learner's strengths, and areas for improvement should be noted carefully.

Researching the changes to be made

In order to create an assessment instrument that responded to the needs of the literacy field, we used a variety of different methods.

- Compared the original document to the goal-directed assessment approach.
- Compared the original assessment process to current "best practice" in assessment and development of demonstration activities.
- Reviewed the recommendations made by the Ontario Literacy Coalition in their Review and Evaluation of the Assessment Tools and Instruments Currently Being Used by Practitioners.
- Surveyed practitioners from Waterloo Region and Wellington County who regularly receive referrals from the Project READ Assessor.
- Surveyed purchasers of the original document from outside of Waterloo Region and Wellington County.
- Discussed possible revisions with representatives of the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities.

Comparison with Goal-Directed Assessment

The original literacy skills assessment document closely mirrors the goal-directed assessment approach recommended for use by MTCU, with a few minor exceptions. The most notable of these lie in the area of goal setting and the outcome of the assessment processes:

a training plan in the case of the goal-directed assessment, and a referral report, in the case of the literacy skills assessment.

In the goal-directed assessment, the focus is on the development and articulation of long and short-term goals, and on researching and defining the requirements for the goal(s). Goal information is critical in a goal-directed assessment, since the development of assessment activities is based on the learner's stated goals. With this information, the assessor develops a training plan with the learner. The training plan contains a specific action plan, delineating the specific requirements of the goal, the means to achieve them and the method of assessing progress.

The LBS Referral Assessment, on the other hand, views the learner's goals as means of matching the learner to an appropriate learning program, and in selecting appropriate assessment activities. The assessment process ends at the point where the goal-directed assessment takes over. In other words, the LBS Referral Assessment process gathers preliminary information that suggests an appropriate program. The literacy practitioner, along with the learner, would then conduct a goal-directed assessment in order to develop a training plan.

The LBS Referral Assessment process does not seek to duplicate the important work of the LBS coordinator / instructor, but to enhance it.

The LBS Referral Assessment process does not seek to duplicate the important work of the LBS coordinator/instructor, but to enhance it. The information collected will inform the goal directed assessment by providing information about the learner's background, as well as suggesting an appropriate LBS level for initial assessment activities. In this way, the coordinator/instructor can modify demonstration activities to a level that is comfortable for the learner and provides an accurate baseline measure for skills¹⁷

Based on the comparison of these two assessment approaches, we suggested the following modifications.

- The LBS Referral Assessment should reflect the goal-directed approach as much as possible, but be shortened, so that it can be completed in one meeting of approximately 60 to 90 minutes.
- Researching and articulating goal requirements should remain in the domain of the coordinator/instructor, and not be part of the LBS Referral Assessment.

Review of the original document and recommendations made by the OLC

In review the original process and assessment activities, we used the process suggested by the Ontario Literacy Coalition in Day One Assessment Training. The process suggests that when reviewing an assessment tool the following aspects should be considered.

- Quality of the tool.
- Purpose for the assessment.
- Hi/low stakes of the assessment.
- The kind of information we need to collect with the instrument.
- At what point in the learning cycle the assessment takes place.
- Available time and resources.
- The program philosophy.

We considered the original literacy skills assessment process and toolkit from the perspective of both the immediate use (as a referral instrument) and its possible uses in the broader literacy field. Based on our own review, we made the following observations.

- For the purpose of validation, each assessment activity needs to be linked to the LBS Learning Outcomes Matrix: by level, and if possible, by skill set.
- The assessment activities need to be more relevant for the adult learner.
- The purpose of the assessment needs to be clarified, and we need to develop a method for practitioners to modify the assessment activities to make them useful in a number of different contexts.
- Assessment activities need to be brief enough to allow their use in an interview of approximately 60 to 90 minutes, but thorough enough to provide an adequate sample. When an instrument is too complex to be completed in this time frame, we need to be able to modify it, selecting only those portions of the activity which are relevant to the learner.
- The assessment process needs to include a section on how to use the instrument, and how to assess the learner's performance. This will help to make the assessment results more transparent.

¹⁷ Day Two Assessment Training offered by the Ontario Literacy Coalition in October 1999, suggests that once the requirements for the goal have been identified and selected, the demonstration activity should be developed on the basis of the learner's current skill level

- The assessment results need to be articulated in a way that will make them accessible not only to learners and literacy practitioners, but also to "outsiders": people who will receive the report, but do not necessarily have a background in literacy. The language of the assessment instrument and referral reports should be easy to understand.

The Ontario Literacy Coalition's review and evaluation of the literacy skills assessment resulted in these suggestions.

- "Review each assessment tool and identify the skill set or sets and the level or levels at which it functions through the identification of success markers it requires to do it.
- Add one or more specific assessment tools that ask learners to 'write for different purposes', particularly for learners at higher levels.
- The checklist stapled in at the end needs to be checked against the outcomes, levels, skill sets, and would need to be assessed against the outcomes, skills sets and success markers in the new matrix.¹⁸

Survey Results

Practitioners in Waterloo-Wellington (the recipients of referral reports) and purchasers of the original document from across the province were surveyed to collect their ideas for revisions. The response to the survey was limited, largely due to the fact that the survey was distributed during the summer, when many practitioners were on vacation. However some positive suggestions were made.

- Link existing assessment tools to the 5 levels of the LBS Learning Outcomes Matrix.
- Use more materials that are relevant to the adult learner.
- Use more learner self-assessment.
- Modify the checklist to agree with the 5-level matrix.
- Condense the assessment process to make it a more effective guide and make it more likely to be read and used.

Discussion with MTCU representatives

The Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities has announced plans to support the literacy field through resources and training in common assessment, phase two in the implementation of the Recognition of Adult Learning Strategy. The strategy design includes

- orientation on assessment (completed by the OLC in October, 1999);
- an MTCU paper on assessment;
- the introduction of a family of 6 assessment tools keyed to the 5 LBS Learning Outcome Levels; and
- MTCU training on common assessment, including the use of the revised assessment tools.

¹⁸ Graham, Neil. *Review and Evaluation of the Assessment Tools and Instruments Currently Being Used by Practitioners*. Ontario Literacy Coalition. September, 1998. pg. 7

The Project READ LBS Referral Assessment is one of the "family of 6 assessment tools. During discussions with the Assessment Tool Working Group, a Ministry representative suggested that the "family" of assessment tools be made up of the six tools being revised to the 5 LBS levels, and that all the tools consist of the following characteristics.

- Have a common look and feel in formatting and presentation.
- Have comparable instructions on how to use each instrument.
- Have identifiable niches to be identified, in terms of
 - stages of use
 - the types of learners served
 - use with particular outcomes
 - possible strengths in particular delivery sector(s)
 - other relevant factors
 - meet the needs of most LBS learners

The purpose of this family of assessment instruments is to provide a range of resources for literacy practitioners which use a common language of assessment, and which are compatible with one another. Members of the working group were asked to consider and identify the particular niche for their respective instruments.

With these findings in mind, we decided to make the following revisions to the original process and toolkit.

Process	Assessment Activities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Condense the assessment process to make it a more effective guide and make it more likely to be read and used • Define the purpose for the assessment, and adjust the process accordingly • Include new sections on how to assess using the instruments and how to modify existing assessment activities • Allow for both a holistic and analytic approach to assessment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Link existing assessment tools to the 5 levels of the LBS Learning Outcome matrix • Use more materials that are relevant to the adult learner • Add one or more specific assessment tools that ask learners to „write for different purposes”, particularly for learners at higher levels. • Add a variety of assessment items that are less academic in nature

How the assessment instrument was developed

LBS Learning Outcomes Matrix vs. Level Descriptions

First we compared the Learning Outcomes Matrix to the Level Descriptions developed by the Ontario Literacy Coalition. The level descriptions are valid to the matrix, but divide the composite skills of reading and writing into "features" or primary traits.¹⁹ The features are further segmented into specific performance indicators, which are roughly equivalent to the

19 At the time of writing, the OLC's numeracy, speaking/listening and self-management/self-direction level descriptions were not available.

success and transition markers in the matrix. Based on this comparison, we made the following observations.

- The level descriptions eliminate a great deal of the duplication found in the matrix.
- The progression of skill development across the 5 levels is clearer in the level descriptions²⁰
- The level descriptions offer a simplified language.
- The supplementary materials distributed with the level descriptions during OLC's Day One training offer insights on how to develop assessment activities and assess learner performance.
- The level descriptions lend themselves to both an analytic and holistic approach to assessment.

Based on these observations, we decided that the level descriptions would likely be the easiest to use, since training in their use has already taken place, so practitioners are familiar with them and have reacted favorably towards them. We recognized that since there were no level descriptions for speaking/listening and numeracy that they would have to be dealt with differently, but we felt that using the reading and writing descriptions was still advisable.

Steps in developing the reading assessment activities

1. Using the level descriptions, we selected the performance indicators most likely to be demonstrated in a referral/placement assessment and listed them in chart form for each level in reading.
2. Using the *Suggested Criteria for Selecting Reading Passages and Guidance in Asking Reading Questions* from the OLC's Assessment Training documents, we determined the method of assessment to be used with the assessment activities. For each level, we listed the types of observations that the assessor would make while the learner is reading, as well as the general kinds of questions that the assessor might ask.
3. Using the *Suggested Criteria for Selecting Reading Passages and Guidance in Asking Reading Questions* we selected the criteria to be used in the selection of reading activities. We considered the criteria for both prose and document samples, and noted the differences where applicable.
4. Developed the conditions under which the learner would be asked to perform the reading task.
5. Selected the reading samples based on the criteria we had selected. In some cases, these were available either in resources found in the community or in existing learning materials. We also included some of the documents from the original literacy skills assessment where we felt they were appropriate, or where there were few samples available for a given level.
6. Reading samples were compared against the criteria developed by the OLC for Day One Assessment Training²¹ (entitled *Features of the Text* in the LBS Referral Assessment). Each reading sample was then assigned an overall LBS level.

20 A chart illustrating the progression of skills across levels is provided in Appendix 2: Assessor's Notes and Assessment Scales

21 From *Suggested Criteria for Selecting Reading Passages and Guidance in Asking Reading Questions*. 1999. Assessment Training Documents, Ontario Literacy Coalition.

7. Questions for the reading samples were developed on the basis of the guides to assessment, entitled *How to Assess Reading at Level ?* Next, the questions were linked to the LBS Learning Outcomes Matrix, to establish the validity of the reading sample and associated questions. Linking the questions directly to the matrix as well as to the Level Descriptions will benefit practitioners who track learner progress against the matrix for reporting purposes.

Skill sets were used, rather than success markers, because often one question is covered by a number of success markers. The questions are linked to the skill sets at the level that has been identified for the reading sample.

8. In order to provide learners performing at the lowest literacy level to demonstrate some success, assessment items that examine discrete success markers were developed.

Steps in developing writing assessment activities

1. Using the level descriptions, we selected the performance indicators most likely to be demonstrated in a referral/placement assessment and listed them in chart form for each level in reading and writing. For the writing assessment, we used only the features ***Organization, Style (Vocabulary, Voice and Sentence Variety) and Mechanics***. The feature ***Purpose For Writing*** was used to select writing topics.
2. The conditions for the activity were developed using the feature ***Purpose for Writing, Suggestions for Writing Prompts***²² and taking into consideration the context of the referral/placement assessment.
3. ***How to Design a Writing Task at Level?*** was also developed using these resources.
4. Once the assessment criteria and conditions for the activity were designed, writing prompts were selected. In addition to isolated writing prompts, questions from the reading assessment were selected, on the basis of their applicability to the task of writing. Reading assessment questions were considered to be an efficient means of assessing writing in a limited amount of time.

A word of caution about using reading questions as a writing assessment tool... When learners are asked to answer reading questions as a means of assessing their writing skills, they have a tendency to focus on the writing function, rather than on answering the question. If the learner is focusing on writing, the answer to the reading question may not be completed as thoroughly as when reading alone is being assessed, and vice versa.

Furthermore, since writing skills frequently lag behind reading skills, a reading sample at level 3, for example, will not likely result in a writing sample at that level.

²² From *Writing Samples with Rationales and Suggestions for Writing Prompts*. 1999. Assessment Training documents, Ontario Literacy Coalition.

5. Where applicable, documents were either selected or developed to allow learners to demonstrate their skills in this area.
6. For the lowest level, opportunities to demonstrate discrete skills were included, to allow learners to show their strengths, even though they might not be successful at level one writing.

Steps in developing the speaking/listening demonstration

Learners participating in a referral assessment are demonstrating their ability to take part in an informal, one-to-one interview with an unfamiliar person. For this reason, an actual demonstration activity was considered to be the most appropriate means for assessment speaking and listening skills.

1. A task analysis was conducted, to determine the types of speaking and listening a learner would be expected to do. Since level descriptions had not yet been developed by the Ontario Literacy Coalition, these skills were listed, and compared to the speaking/listening skill sets and success/transition markers of the LBS learning outcomes matrix.
2. Individual skills were categorized into "primary traits" which reflected the one-to-one interview. .
3. A level of expectation was set for the activity.
4. A rubric was developed to reflect a continuum of skills across 4 levels of performance.
5. Specific questions were selected from the list of questions used for the assessment process to be specifically assessed in the context of a one-to-one interview and linked to the various aspects of the interview process.

Steps in developing numeracy assessment activities

1. Since the numeracy level descriptions are not yet available from the Ontario Literacy Coalition (a work in progress), we used skill sets and success markers instead. We began with the premise that there were too many discrete skills across too many skill sets to cover adequately in a limited amount of time. We asked ourselves what general skills a learner could adequately demonstrate within a limited time period. We also looked at
 - a number of assessments conducted over the past 2 years to see what learners most frequently had difficulty with; and
 - learner self-reports about retention of numeracy skills over time. Learners frequently report that they have retained few numeracy skills from formal education. Regardless of how well they performed in school, learners often state that they would feel more confident about math if they had an opportunity to review "the basics".

Overall, learners were most comfortable discussing their current skills and skill gaps in the areas of

- Reading and writing numbers
- Counting
- Addition and subtraction
- Multiplying and dividing
- Fractions, decimals, ratios and per cents
- Linear Measurement
- Measurement of time
- Measurement of temperature

These skill sets also lent themselves most readily to real life applications and were most likely to be skills that people consciously use in their daily lives.

2. Success markers were selected from each of the first three levels. The decision to assess only levels 1 to 3 was made because
 - learners most frequently begin to have difficulty (and were less familiar) with skills and concepts beyond level three in the skill sets which were selected for the assessment activities, particularly in Fractions, Decimals, Ratios and Per cents.
 - if communication skills are also assessed, there is limited time to conduct a more thorough assessment.
3. Success markers were grouped according to level. Transition markers were grouped with the success markers at the lower level. For example, level 2/3 transition markers were considered to be part of level 2, rather than 3.
4. There was some difference of opinion among reference group members with regard to the use of assessment activities testing discrete skills versus more activities that took a more holistic approach. Some respondents felt that both learners and instructors would be more comfortable with the traditional activities, which tested discrete skills. In addition, these respondents stated that, "it is hard to interpret integrated skills according to the skill sets etc., in such a short time when a student is nervous, less confident and easily discouraged". On the other hand, other respondents suggested that having a mix of integrated and discrete activities allowed the assessor some flexibility in selecting the items that most closely reflected the learner's current abilities. For this reason, both types of assessment items were included.
5. Assessment items were selected according to the ease with which the learner could demonstrate the embedded skill. Some mathematical concepts were easier to assess by asking the learner to self-evaluate.²² Other success markers, such as the ability to write numerals and apply place value can be observed within the context of the assessment activities, whether they are discrete or more integrated. For example, learners demonstrate their ability to write numbers when they write the answer to an addition question. They demonstrate their understanding of place value when they multiply a three-digit number by a two-digit number and arrive at the correct response.

²² See Appendix 4: Forms and Checklists for a checklist that can be used. The math checklist is similar to the ones developed for reading and writing, but asks the learners to evaluate their ability to deal discrete numeracy skills in both a theoretical and applied way.

6. Assessment activities were developed that represented a range of skill within a level.
7. Integrated activities were designed to reflect what a learner might be reasonably expected to do at each level. For example, when designing the inventory sheet activity in level 2, the learner is only asked to multiply a three-digit number by a one-digit number, as stated in the transition marker between level 2 and 3 in the skill set Multiply and Divide.

How to modify the assessment activities

How to use the assessment process and activities in other forms of assessment

1. **Identify the purpose of the demonstration:** An assessment can take place at many different points in the learning process:
 - placement: the literacy skills assessment activities are designed to be used at placement. If you are using them for this purpose, you can use them “as is”.
 - initial assessment: following goal setting, the initial assessment is used to establish the student's strengths and needs, and to collect a baseline sample for demonstrating progress. The initial assessment helps to develop a training plan and learning materials.
 - ongoing assessment: to confirm progress during the learning cycle. The results of ongoing assessment inform lesson planning decisions and allow the learner and instructor to re-evaluate the goal and its timeline, or to build skill integration in preparation for a final demonstration.
 - exit assessment (summative): at the end of a learning cycle. The exit or summative assessment allows the learner to prove that he/she can perform a selected activity to an acceptable level. The summative assessment can be used when the learner has accomplished a task embedded in a goal, when the learner is ready to move on to the next LBS level, or when the learner is ready to exit the program.

Identifying the purpose for the demonstration will help you to decide if the assessment activity is appropriate.

- Does it relate to the learner's goal?
 - Will it help to establish a baseline?
 - Is it a composite task for goal achievement?
 - Will it show progress in essential skills over time?
 - Will it demonstrate progress?
2. **Consider the learner's goal path:** Does the assessment activity relate to that path? Many of the activities in the literacy skills assessment package relate to either the self-improvement or educational goal paths, although many contain information related to employment. You should be cautious when considering whether or not to use the activity.
 - Does the assessment activity consist of a task or tasks that are embedded in the goal the learner is trying to achieve?
 - Does the assessment activity contain the same embedded skills as required by the goal?

3. **Consider the topic, scope and overall level of the activity:** The assessment activity should reflect the learner's interests, needs and abilities at this point in time.
- Is the assessment activity *authentic*? Does it reflect the actual kinds of activities that the learner might be expected to perform in goal achievement?
 - Is it an appropriate level for the learner? Is it too difficult? Not challenging enough?
 - Does the activity cover the domains, outcomes, skill sets/features and success markers/performance indicators that the learner has been working on?
4. **Identify key components from the matrix or level descriptions that need to be demonstrated:** Compare the skill sets embedded in the assessment activities to those that the learner has been working on.
- Will the learner need to learn any new skills before attempting the activity, or learn to integrate any of the current skills that he/she has been working on?
5. **Consider how to judge success:** The results of the assessment activities contained in the LBS Referral Assessment are intended to be used as a descriptive tools. In order to modify them to perform as evaluative tools, it will be necessary to decide what successful performance will look like, what approach will be used to evaluate and what criteria will be used to judge performance.
- Will you use a holistic or analytic approach to evaluation?
 - What are the performance standards suggested by the activity itself, or the expectations for performance of that activity in a real-life situation?
 - How many times, and to what degree of proficiency will the learner need to demonstrate success in the task's embedded skills?
 - What kind of scoring mechanism will be used? Evaluative continuum? Scoring rubric? Marking scheme?
 - Is there a clear connection between the learner's goal, the success markers you are evaluating, the expectations for the activity and the expectations of the scoring mechanism?

Once you have considered these issues, you can develop a scoring mechanism for the assessment activity.

6. **Does the activity need to be modified in any other way?**
- Will the details of the assessment activity need to be modified to agree with the learner's culture, geographical location, etc.?
 - Will you have to change the questions used in the assessment activity to reflect the success markers/performance indicators that the learner needs to demonstrate?
 - Will you have to increase or decrease the level of complexity of the task to reflect the learner's current skill level?
 - Can the learner complete the activity in the time allotted?
7. **Are the instructions for the learner clear? Do you need to write instructions for a volunteer tutor/instructor?**
- Will you have to add any conditions or instructions to the activity? Will the assessment instrument be administered by a volunteer tutor? Will the learner need any special considerations for the learner? (i.e. extra time to complete the task, use of resource materials, barriers that the learner might encounter due to a disability?)

How to change assessment activities to meet specific needs

These assessment activities have been selected or written to address the needs and interests of adult learners. They focus predominantly on employment issues, and daily activities that are common for a number of goal paths. We recognize that not all activities will be relevant for all

learners, and that from time to time activities may need to be modified to reflect current events and program philosophies and instructional approaches.

To modify or replace assessment activities, follow the process described in the *How the assessment instrument was developed* section of this report. Be sure that you compare the assessment activity that you have selected or developed against the *Features of the text* to see if it is at an appropriate level, and that you develop questions or writing prompts that are suggested in the *How to Assess* sections of the assessment scales.

Evaluation of the assessment process and activities

At the beginning of the project, an advisory committee was formed, consisting of practitioners from all three delivery sectors. Practitioners from Waterloo Region and Wellington County were chosen because they will be the agencies to which referrals from Project READ will be made. Other practitioners (from across sectors and regions within the province) were also chosen to participate.

Initially, the committee members from Waterloo Region and Wellington County were asked to respond to a survey focusing on how the original assessment toolkit and report were used. The survey asked for suggestions about how the toolkit, and the referral reports which are generated from the referral assessment could be modified to meet practitioner's needs, and align them with the LBS matrix.

Once the assessment activities were developed, copies were sent to the advisory committee for review and recommendations. Two levels each of reading and writing, the speaking/listening demonstration and one level of numeracy were randomly selected for each committee member. We felt that asking them to review the whole document was too much to expect from already overworked practitioners.

Committee members received a survey, which asked them general questions about

- the purpose of the assessment instrument;
- the theoretical underpinnings upon which the instrument was based;
- the suitability of the assessment activities for adult learners;
- the validity of the assessment activities and the conditions under which they are intended to be administered; and
- their flexibility for use in other forms of assessment.

In addition, committee members were asked to review each individual assessment activity, to

- ensure that the links to the matrix and level descriptions were accurate;
- that the level contained a variety of activities that are representative of the level; and
- that the questions asked actually assessed the skills they were supposed to.

The committee's responses were reviewed, and appropriate changes were made.

The assessment activities developed for this project have been given an LBS level in accordance with information contained in the LBS Learning Outcomes Matrix and the OLC Level Descriptions. We have endeavored to validate the levels based on input from the Advisory Committee members. As a result, the

assigned levels have been somewhat validated, but they still need to be used more extensively by many more practitioners before we can say with any certainty that they are valid and reliable instruments. **They should not be considered anchor papers at this point in time.**

The validation of assessment samples requires broad-based agreement by practitioners and a process for coming to this type of agreement. We anticipate that Phase Two of the revision project will look at various models for generating the common understanding that this kind of work requires.

The assessment activities have also been used with learners in Waterloo Region since their development. A random sampling of learners were asked about their assessment activities.

Questions revolved around

- the learner's opinion of the tools used to assess their current skills;
- their level of comfort with the assessment process; and
- whether they felt they had increased their awareness of their own abilities as the result of the referral assessment.

Most learners reported a positive experience both with the assessment process and the activities they had been asked to complete. When concerns were raised, the assessment activity was changed to reflect them.

The literacy field is embarking on a period of growth and learning in the area of assessment

Conclusions

Based on the initial responses from Advisory Committee members, Project READ's LBS Referral Assessment appears to be an instrument of some value to the literacy community. We have made every effort to provide assessment activities that addressed the needs of adults who are considering upgrading their literacy and basic skills, continuing with their secondary or post-secondary education or employment training. Taking the First Step allows learners an Opportunity to demonstrate their current communications and numeracy skills in a non-threatening and affirming environment.

We also believe that our assessment activities are flexible enough be used in a variety of assessment situations, to gather information about any combination of literacy and numeracy skills. Together, learners and practitioners can and should mould the assessment process and activities to meet their own individual needs.

The literacy field is embarking on a period of growth and learning in the area of assessment. Over the next few years, LBS agencies and principal provincial stakeholders will be working towards a province-wide understanding and acceptance of assessment results. The Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities will support initiatives that orient practitioners to assessment concepts, introduce a range of assessment instruments for use in various assessment situations and train practitioners to conduct effective assessments. During this transitional phase, assessment practice throughout the province is expected to become more sophisticated, and practitioners will develop a deeper understanding of common assessment. As these changes occur, we expect that the Project READ LBS Referral Assessment will change and grow along with our understandings.

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