

## **Assessment Strategies in the Recognition of Prior Learning: The Practitioner's Perspective**

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Assessment tools and strategies form the basis of most formal educational settings, and learners are often overly preoccupied with the forms of assessment upon which their work will be judged in order to attain their goal. Assessment is seen as a necessary evil to get the grade, and sometimes negates integral theoretical and practical components that are a vital portion of the learning process. Assessment theory espouses that when assessment is practiced and provided in a regular and a responsive manner, it forms the backbone of support to a learner in facilitating a learning process.

In the field of prior learning assessment (PLA), the notion of assessment takes on a slightly different nuance. In a PLA program, the implementation of assessment of learning, knowledge or competency is not the final step before the end result of a grade, nor is it stitched through the journey of learning to provide support to the learner. In the recognition of prior learning (RPL), assessment is the starting point. As RPL practitioners, we start our interaction with candidates by discussing the strategies of assessment that will be used to draw out and formally recognize their existing experiential knowledge or competencies. The relationship between candidate and evaluator is distinctly different from that of student and teacher in that there is a more collaborative effort to design a process of formal recognition that meets the criteria of the institution and the needs of the candidate. According to Stenlund (2010), if claimants know exactly what criteria will be used when assessing a performance, their performance will improve because they know the goals to attain (p. 793).

This article is a collection of experiences from multiple RPL practitioners who implement assessment strategies and who have developed a variety of assessment tools in order to best meet the needs and requirements of their candidates. These practitioners are from colleges in the province of Quebec and are advisors to candidates, or subject matter experts who conduct evaluations or teach in the program of study where a diploma is sought. In their combined years of practice, the contributors to this article have considered the questions related to an assessment strategy as it relates to specific demographics, such as skilled immigrants who encounter barriers to the workforce due to a lack of a Canadian diploma, or workers in a field, such as early childhood education where the government institutes legislative changes to the required number of licensed educators in a day care, or those seeking to transition from one field to another. In all cases, the overriding theme is the necessity to align assessment strategies to the principles of andragogy and to assist candidates in their navigation of this subsection of adult education in the Quebec education system.

In Quebec, prior learning assessment and the recognition of prior learning are referred to as the recognition of acquired competencies (RAC). The process, which was initiated by the Provincial Ministry of Education, includes structures and guiding principles, basic evaluation tools for some programs of study within the college sector, and limited financial support for some aspects of the evaluation process. The Quebec government

continued its demonstration of a commitment to the RAC dossier with the creation in 2013 of four Centres of Expertise for the Recognition of Acquired Competencies (CERAC) that house educational consultants, trainers and subject matter experts to support the 48 public colleges that offer RAC services. Of particular note is that the Quebec education system from kindergarten to college is organized around instruction and assessment that is competency-based. This educational context requires that in the process of recognition of acquired competencies, assessments are also competency-based. A competency is defined as the ability to act effectively by mobilizing a range of resources (Government of Quebec, 2001, p. 4). In order to assess the mastery of a competency, the evaluator assesses different elements which, taken together, form a competency. Therefore, each competency element is evaluated separately and each element must be attained for the competency to be awarded. Once all competencies have been met, a diploma is awarded.

The contributors to this article are current practitioners in the field of recognition of acquired competencies.

Andy Brown is the advisor for the Transport and Logistics program at Champlain Regional College in Saint-Lambert, Quebec. In terms of the implementation of assessment tools, Brown is interested in the question of who is included and who is excluded as a result of a particular assessment strategy. Brown's assessment philosophy is to ensure a means of assessment so that anyone who can possibly be a viable RAC candidate is included. His section addresses the main challenges and proposed solutions to this situation.

Laura Malbogot is the advisor for the Special Care Counselling program at Champlain Regional College in Saint-Lambert, Quebec. This program of study is particularly complex to evaluate due to the number of competencies that need to be addressed. Malbogot addresses the question of how we judge reliability and validity regarding particular assessment strategies.

Tetyana Tsomko is the subject matter expert for the Early Childhood Education program and a recognition of acquired competencies advisor at Champlain Regional College in Saint-Lambert, Quebec. Tsomko brings a unique experience in the recognition of prior learning from all perspectives (from a candidate to a career as an advisor). She is also a trainer of evaluators and brings great insight to the questions of who the evaluators are and how they impact candidates' accomplishments.

Leah Moss is an advisor for the Centre of Expertise in Recognition of Acquired Competencies at Champlain College in Saint-Lambert, Quebec. Part of the mandate of this consultative service is to encourage the study of the field of RAC in Quebec. Moss's contribution to this article is to discuss the theoretical framework of assessment and how all questions from the contributors relate to one aspect: the success of the candidate.

## **Transportation and Logistics: Navigating One's Way to a Diploma Through the Recognition of Acquired Competencies**

### **Andy Brown**

The goal of the RAC process is to recognize the wealth of prior knowledge that candidates bring to the evaluation process and align their experiential knowledge with the competencies of programs of study. RAC candidates in the program of Transportation and Logistics have diverse educational, life and professional experiences that they bring to this process. As a practitioner, I am faced with the significant question of how to capture these myriad experiences in a way that is accessible to as many potential candidates as possible. The answer is not simple and involves an intertwining of numerous factors that can facilitate candidate evaluatory success. In this section, an exploration of these factors will be presented and explored.

An initial consideration is: Will the RAC process work for the potential candidate? The RAC process is not for

all and requires candidates who have extensive prior knowledge of the competencies of the program of study. As well, it demands that candidates are intrinsically motivated and proficient, autonomous learners. An effective assessment strategy is one area where we can increase the likelihood that candidates will succeed with the RAC process.

### **Admissions/Validation**

We always start by asking the candidate: Is RAC right for you? The first stage is to ensure that candidates have the required experiential learning to make the RAC process a viable option for them before they are admitted. This is a lengthy process to ensure that candidates understand the RAC process, its demands and required commitment levels, and to admit candidates who have a good chance of succeeding with the RAC process. During the admissions interview, an analysis and evaluation of whether the candidates' experiential learning aligns with the competencies of the program is done. This interview also allows the advisor to discuss the RAC process in more detail, and explain the assessment procedures and support structures available to the candidate.

The aim is to ensure that the candidate has the prior knowledge to make the RAC process viable, and that the time and energy candidates will impart will be beneficial in contributing to their personal objectives: the focus is not to be exclusionary, but to increase the probability of candidate success toward their personal goals.

### **Assessment Tools**

The assessment tools in this program of study were designed by marrying the professional expertise of subject matter experts with the educational expertise of RAC advisors (pedagogical advisors). The purpose of the Transportation and Logistics program is to provide a vocational diploma that will enable RAC candidates to enter the workforce. With this purpose in mind, there are clear principles that guide the development of assessment tools. First, the assessment tools must as closely as practically possible mirror the application of knowledge and skills found in the North American workplace. The first principle relies heavily on the expertise of subject matter experts who, through their extensive professional experiences, identify workplace best practices that exhibit the elements of competencies.

Second, the assessment tools must align with the competency elements and performance criteria dictated by the program of study. The second principle is guided by the use of Bloom's Taxonomy, which allows the knowledge types and cognitive dimensions to be identified for each competency element. This exploration of the knowledge and cognitive dimensions and workplace best practices allows advisors and subject matter experts to co-design assessment tools that are professionally relevant and developmental, and that align to the knowledge types and cognitive dimensions of the competency elements. It is worth noting that each competency element is evaluated separately and each element must be attained for the competency to be awarded.

Third, when applicable, an assessment should offer the candidate and evaluator a variety of assessment tools from which to choose for each competency. This has led to the development of numerous assessment tasks for each competency. Assessment tools could be assignments, reports, case studies, presentations, role-plays, demonstrations and interviews. In addition, paper and pencil, invigilated exams are also used. These contain some short answer questions to assess declarative and conceptual knowledge, but mainly involve the application of conceptual knowledge in the replication of workplace-based tasks. To this end, many authentic materials from the transport and logistics milieu are used in these assessment tools, and candidates often have access to offline and/or online computer tools that are commonly used in the workplace.

Fourth, the assessment tools should allow, when possible, different options for candidate demonstration of

proficiency with the competency elements. In the RAC process, this is referred to as *conditions of recognition*. The premise is to allow candidates multiple options to demonstrate their prior knowledge. The first condition for recognition is always recognition of a pertinent qualification already attained. Examples of this would be previous certificates or formal learning. Other conditions can then be generated. These might take the form of a portfolio or samples of work, an interview, an assignment or an examination-based evaluation tool. It is also possible to combine these options. For example, for presentation skills, the only valid way to assess a candidate's proficiency is to see them present. However, this could be done in person, via web-conferencing software, or a video artifact could be evaluated. The only dictum for conditions of recognition is that, however presented, a candidate's knowledge/skills are aligned with applicable workplace practices and the competency element in terms of knowledge type and cognitive dimension.

The first and second principles of assessment tool design contribute to the validity of the tool, and the third and fourth principles contribute to the accessibility of the assessment: allowing candidate multiple intelligences and multiple experiences to be harnessed to facilitate competency attainment.

Assessment tools are a key component in the RAC process, however subject matter experts are the pedagogical frontline of the RAC process. Without committed and caring subject matter experts, the process would be greatly inhibited. For many subject matter experts, who due to their professional expertise have limited pedagogical training, the RAC process can be daunting. Therefore, it is important that pedagogical advisors work closely with subject matter experts to ensure that they understand, buy into and commit to the process. This buy-in is facilitated by the co-designing of assessment tools and training resources and the subsequent ownership of these resources. It has been the author's experience that with guidance and support, the professionals who are recruited as subject matter experts quickly adapt to this new educational context, and with time become adept and autonomous RAC practitioners. Once adapted to the process, the subject matter experts then work in partnership with the candidates to help them prepare for their assessments. Subject matter experts provide detailed developmental feedback on assignments and also competency evaluations through the use of a digital grade sheet that is emailed to candidates. In particular, they give recommendations for further study if a competency element is not attained. If needed, they can give more training one-to-one or in small groups and are accessible via email, phone or online communication tools such as Skype.

The nature of the competency-based RAC evaluation process shifts the focus from an overall grade in the competency to the candidate being professionally proficient in all elements of the competency. This shift in focus from grade-orientation to proficiency-orientation can be seen as candidates go through the RAC process and prepare to enter the workforce or build their careers. Andragogically speaking, they are focused on the immediate application of their knowledge in the workplace.

Assessment tools are one piece of a much larger puzzle relevant to the success of a RAC candidate. The process is one that we see in a holistic manner: from candidates' immediate needs and their level of motivation, to the appropriate assessment tools and training and support of all stakeholders involved in the process.

Once a candidate is accepted into the RAC service, every effort is made to make these services accessible, flexible and adaptable to cater to the diversity of the candidate body. Assessment tools need to be contextually relevant, aligned with competencies, and be varied in both type and recognition conditions. Training materials, offered through our program's website, need to be comprehensive and accessible to allow for autonomous study. Moreover, the whole RAC team has to understand, buy into and commit to the RAC process. It is the author's belief that the responsive and adaptive intertwining of the factors presented here facilitate candidate success.

## **Transparency of strategies to the validity of assessment tools**

Andy Brown's description identified issues related to the significant question of how to capture the numerous experiences of an individual in a way that makes the process of recognition of acquired competencies as accessible to as many potential candidates as possible. A core element in Brown's strategy as a practitioner is to establish transparency to the candidate related to the assessment process at every stage. Further, the RAC assessment tools are directly linked to the competencies of the mainstream program and therefore strongly linked to the academic rigor of the program. According to Travers and Evans (2011), prior learning assessment programs need to find ways to demonstrate how they are effective and academically rigorous. "By using similar types of evaluative structures, the effectiveness of the programs can be equated to other program evaluation processes" (p. 153). The link to core competencies of the mainstream academic program is significant for the candidate in knowing the RAC process, and is one that is in parallel to that of the mainstream academic program and just as valid for their diploma and entry to the marketplace. It is also significant for the subject matter expert who is usually from industry to recognize the main stream academic degree as a valid entry point to the job market. Assessor and assessee mutually agree on the ideas behind the RPL model and what is to be assessed in the process should improve the possibility of assessing that which is actually supposed to be assessed (Sandberg & Andersson, 2011, p. 776). Although it may seem to some that a competency-based system of education may make the assessment strategy straight forward, it is in fact quite complex. One of the challenges is to maintain the academic rigor of a program of study while maintaining the philosophical orientation that individuals should not have to redo what they have already learned in another environment. In practical terms, this requires that the RAC pedagogical advisor finds appropriate clusters of competencies that can be evaluated at one time and in a program of study that covers a wide range of competency elements, and recruits and trains an appropriate number of content specialists.

## **Special Care Counseling and the Particular Challenge of Reliable and Valid Assessments**

### **Laura Malbogot**

Special care counselors are trained to work with individuals who can have a range of diverse special needs across the life span, including individuals who have physical and neurological disabilities, intellectual disabilities, language and learning disabilities, drug and mental health issues, those who have experienced violence and exclusion, loss of autonomy in older adults, and maladjustment in youth. In order to highlight the complexity and diversity of working in this field, it should be noted that a special care counselor's work environment might include working with either a child, adolescent, adult or older adult who has physical or neurological disabilities and in a multitude of different organizations, such as schools, schools for clients with specific needs, group homes, community centers, shelters and nursing homes. While it is more common that special care counselors gain expertise working with one or two client groups and within one age group, they are trained to work with individuals with any of the above mentioned special needs.

There are specific challenges inherent in the assessment strategies in the RAC Special Care Counselling program in comparison to other programs of study such as the diverse client groups that make up this field of work. Candidates who want to complete a diploma in special care counseling must become familiar with the basic characteristics of each client group across the life span. As well, there are 26 competencies in the Special Care Counselling program compared to the more common 13 to 15 competencies in other programs of study. In addition, the subject matter experts who work as experts in their field must also represent the different client groups in order to ensure that candidates are assessed by experts effectively. (Thus, for example, it is rare that a subject matter expert would be an expert in both youth and maladjustment and in physical and neurological disabilities.) This means that in the assessment of special care counseling competencies, a group of subject matter experts with different specialty areas are required to cover the different client groups and, at the same time, to be in a position to evaluate RAC candidates. This situation presents

particular challenges when it comes to assessing candidates fairly and consistently, making sure to apply the same rigorous standards irrespective of which subject matter expert evaluates a candidate's work.

In order to ensure quality in the assessment strategy for certain competency assessments, there are multiple assessors, requiring collaboration among and between the different subject matter experts and a rigorous system in place to ensure that there is consistency in the evaluation process. In order to thoroughly understand what is involved in this process, two concrete examples follow.

In special care counselling, the competencies have been grouped in clusters, both to facilitate learning the different but related content areas, and for assessment purposes. This has been organized in order for candidates to access their previous knowledge and experience, and link all the different areas of special care counselling content more easily. Specifically, in special care counselling, there are six clusters that are grouped together according to the different areas of knowledge and skills required. Two examples are included to highlight the challenges inherent in having multiple assessors involved in the evaluation process.

There are five competencies and four separate evaluations that make up the cluster titled "Relationship Building with Client and Work Team Members." The competencies are listed below:

- to communicate with clients and members of a work team
- to act as a facilitator for groups of clients or work teams
- to establish a helping relationship
- to associate approaches, objectives and techniques with specific adjustment problems
- to interact with clients from cultural and ethnic communities different from one's own.

Candidates must submit several written reports and are also required, in one evaluation, to facilitate a simulation of a work team involved in a decision-making process where they successively play the role of participant and facilitator. The subject matter expert must evaluate the written work and "observe" the simulation activity. This begs the question, "What is observation?"

The dictionary defines "observation" (1997) as "an act or instance of noticing or perceiving" or "... of viewing or noting a fact or occurrence for some scientific or other special purpose." The behaviors being observed or the skills must be clearly defined; for example, knowing exactly what is meant by "effective communication skill," or noting whether a behavior is being demonstrated, such as body language.

Candidates know precisely what criteria are included in the evaluation:

- the use of appropriate verbal and nonverbal language
- the display of attitudes and behaviors conducive to participation and cooperation among group members
- the use of facilitation techniques that promote participation and are suitable to the climate of the meeting.

The nature of evaluating a simulation activity requires that any special care counseling subject matter expert responsible for conducting the simulation activity would evaluate candidates similarly. Will the assessment results for this candidate be similar if he or she is evaluated at some other time or if the candidate is evaluated by different subject matter experts? This is the question that guides subject matter experts' evaluation process. In order to ensure consistency and reliability in the assessment of simulation activities, several important steps must take place. First, the RAC advisor must be cognizant of the challenges involved in subject matter experts attributing subjective judgments and perceptions when it comes to what constitutes an acceptable simulation in comparison to one of excellence. The RAC advisor must initiate and facilitate open and



critical dialogue among the subject matter experts to ensure they are in agreement and in accordance with the Ministry of Education guidelines on which behaviors and skills constitute competent or acceptable demonstration of the skill. The RAC advisor may, for some evaluations, necessitate that two subject matter experts are present during the simulation activity in order to ensure reliability.

Observing simulation activities requires that a clear and concise set of behaviors, attitudes and skills are expected, and, further, expected to a similar degree. There is too much opportunity for individualistic interpretation of what constitutes an acceptable demonstration of facilitator skills, attitudes and behaviors conducive to leading a group decision-making process. The RAC advisor must ensure that the subject matter expert knows what he or she is looking for as “observable” stated behaviors, skills and attitudes, and that there is agreement among the team with regard to whether a candidate is not meeting, is meeting or is exceeding standards of the specific skill or behavior being evaluated.

For the simulation activity in one cluster of competencies, the subject matter expert has several categories to observe, and following the simulation activity, will meet with the candidate in order to provide feedback and engage the candidate in a self-evaluation. The following checklist of skills and behaviors acts as a rubric in the evaluation, and represents both what the candidate has been presented as criteria prior to the simulation activity and what the subject matter expert refers to during the observation to engage in a feedback session with the candidate after the simulation activity.

**1. Presentation of Self**

- attending skills
- posture indicating interest and engagement
- voice: tone, articulation, projection and volume
- establish rapport with team members (greeting).

**2. Vocabulary/Language**

- appropriate to participants involved in the meeting
- uses appropriate language, professional terms and terminology.

**3. Verbal Skills**

- introduces the decision-making situation
- responds appropriately to participants in the meeting
- integrates paraphrase when appropriate during the meeting
- maintains appropriate pace
- includes encouraging statements.

**4. Non-Verbal Skills**

- eye contact is maintained during the meeting
- minimal encouragers are used to maintain engagement.

**5. Engagement Skills**

- facilitates links about among participants in regard to the decision-making discussion
- encourages interaction among participants
- calls on participants by name
- manages air time among participants to equalize engagement and participation.

**6. Communication Skills**

- demonstrates active listening
- utilizes open and closed questions
- paraphrasing, summarizing, perception checks
- reflects feelings accurately and appropriately during the meeting
- reflects meaning

- sets clear limits
- encourages “I” statements
- facilitates turn taking.

## 7. Closure Skills

- synthesizes key points
- summarizes key points
- uses effective closing statements
- checks if anyone has questions before ending the meeting (if appropriate).

## 8. Problem Solving Steps

- utilizes problem-solving steps during the meeting to arrive at a general consensus among participants.

The metrics used in the assessment of the competency are: developing, competent or accomplished. The process of discussion ensures greater consistency between subject matter experts in the evaluation of candidates.

A second example of an evaluation is derived from another cluster of competencies, where candidates must demonstrate basic understanding of the different client groups across the life span. Candidates are expected to learn the basic characteristics of each client group and be able to design, implement and evaluate an intervention plan for any client group. During one specific evaluation in this cluster, candidates are given two client profiles (case studies) where they must develop an intervention plan for clients other than those they are familiar with from work experience. Typically, there is one subject matter expert responsible for invigilating this three-hour evaluation.

A challenging area in the assessment strategy is that a subject matter expert with a specific area of expertise must also be able to accurately evaluate the work of a candidate outside his or her own area of specialty. In the development of our assessment strategy, this demanded some creative problem-solving on the part of the RAC advisor. Subsequent to trying several strategies, what emerged as the most effective system to safeguard fair and consistent evaluation for the candidates while having a system that was efficient in time and cost, was to create an answer key for each client profile that could be an element in the assessment of the candidate’s competencies. Several steps were involved in this process:

- First, each subject matter expert developed approximately two to three different client profiles from their area of expertise.
- Then each client profile had to be compared for consistency in the format presentation, complexity and clarity of the client profile, detailed client information provided and directions provided to the candidate with regard to the intervention plan.
- Subsequent to this, each subject matter expert was responsible for designing an answer key of potential intervention plans that could be evaluated by any subject matter expert as either: developing, competent or accomplished. This template assisted in more fairly evaluating candidates’ intervention plans.
- Several team meetings were needed to discuss the answer keys and ensure understanding before there was sufficient confidence in the answer keys provided.

What has evolved is a system where subject matter experts are now positioned to confidently evaluate the work that candidates submit, irrespective of whether it is in the subject matter expert’s own area of expertise or not. Team meetings in RAC special care counseling are held on a regular basis in order to provide a necessary check and balance for fair and reliable candidate assessment.

## Dialogue is the key

Laura Malbogat’s discussion has focused on the need to ensure reliable and fair results in a complex system



of assessment involving multiple stakeholders and competency elements. A key aspect of Malbogat's assessment strategy is the assembly of a team of subject matter experts who work by dialogue and consensus in order to maintain reliability and quality assurance in the assessments of RAC candidates. In this sense, this team implements the tenets of Jürgen Habermas' theory of communicative action both in their work with the candidate and in their own sessions of discussion to assess a candidate's dossier. Here, Habermas' TCA (theory of communicative action) contributes by focusing on communication and providing the underlying conditions for how individuals can reach mutual understanding in a process signified by communicative reality. This should be a main concern, since prior learning cannot be assessed if the individual is not able to put his or her learning into an understandable context for assessment, e.g., into words (Sandberg & Andersson, 2011, p.768). Since the recognition of prior learning is a collaborative effort between candidate and assessor, it is essential that a protocol of communication is established to ensure all parties are aware of their active role in contributing to a dialogue of understanding. As was evident in the first section of this paper, Malbogat's protocol with candidates also involves transparency in the metrics of how the elements of a competency will be assessed. According to Maxwell's (2010) understanding of Arter and McTighe's discussion of "scoring rubrics": "Rubrics can offer a place where descriptors of competency can be written in a way that articulates the actions and concrete behaviors needed to demonstrate both the knowledge developed and the application of that knowledge, as well as being a place of feedback" (p. 11). With an assessment strategy that is based in a philosophy of transparency to the candidate, the metrics and even the rubrics of how elements of competencies are assessed allow a RAC candidate to better prepare for their assessment and find resources to supplement areas where gaps in knowledge exist.

## **Who are the Evaluators in the Recognition of Acquired Competencies?**

### **Tetyana Tsomko**

Retention and graduation rates are accountability schemes used to measure indirectly educational outcomes both in regular educational settings and in the recognition of acquired competencies. Grades awarded by subject matter experts during the assessment of a competency are direct outcomes of how well RAC candidates demonstrate their competencies. Direct and indirect measures of success depend on candidates' intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, availability, work and life conditions, and educational and professional backgrounds. Not solely though. An equal contributor to candidates' successes is the RAC team: advisors, tutors, evaluators or subject matter experts, and support staff. Their support or its absence plays a crucial role in candidates' accomplishments.

Although much has been said and written in regard to RAC pedagogical advisors' roles and their professional and personal qualifications (MELS, 2006), evaluators have so far gained far less attention. Hoffmann, Travers, Evans and Treadwell (2009) determined that evaluator professional development is one of five critical factors impacting program structures. These researchers, who studied 34 prior learning assessment programs across the United States and Canada, also mentioned the importance of institutional philosophy statements and policies supporting PLA practices, institutional support, PLA program parameters on accreditations, and program evaluation processes.

The environment of continuous growth of RAC services in terms of the number of programs, candidates and evaluations is conducive to continuous improvement in the quality assurance of the assessment tools we use and services we provide. In 2014, the RAC team at Champlain College invested time into inquiring about what we "want more of" from new evaluators offering our services. The appreciative hiring process showed outstanding results at Centralia College in Washington, DC (Henry, 2005). We decided to modify it and implement it at Champlain College.

The first step was clarifying what the college administration and the RAC office (the RAC manager, six RAC advisors, and support staff) “wanted more of” by inquiring into the qualities we appreciated in members of our college community. We created the following list of RAC values within our RAC team of the Continuing Education Department at Champlain College:

- validity, rigor, efficiency, professionalism
- lifelong learning
- team spirit, collaboration
- continuous improvement, innovation
- internal freedom of expression, initiative
- adaptability, customized and personable approach
- career-oriented approach
- belief in individuals’ success
- diversity.

The second step in the appreciative hiring process was to update the job description for evaluators. In an effort to make it objective and realistic, we decided to gather data on evaluators’ skills, attitudes, professional qualifications and responsibilities. If we had only collected this information from evaluators, the data could have been incomplete due to the fact that different evaluators sometimes perform different tasks depending on the program of study and competencies that they evaluate. If we had only gathered information from our RAC manager and advisors, the data could have similarly been distorted. The optimal solution was a collaborative one. Our RAC advisors contributed to defining evaluators’ job functions, hard and soft skills that evaluators use regularly at work, and also questions to be asked to a potential evaluator during the hiring interview. Then, an online questionnaire was sent to evaluators in seven programs of study offered through RAC at our college. Twenty-six evaluators (out of a survey sample of 44) completed this informal survey and engaged in our collaborative approach.

Our RAC team wanted more of the following knowledge and hard skills:

- proficiency in English and French<sup>1</sup>
- degrees and certifications in an appropriate field of specialization
- domain knowledge and working experience
- functional technical knowledge
- experience in adult learning and evaluation.

An expectation was that each evaluator should possess the majority of the earlier-mentioned hard skills. However, as one participant noted:

*“In a true team, although some skills will be held by many, it is not necessary for every member to be equally qualified in each hard skill; their skills complement each other. Different competencies require different levels of hard skills.”*

The next task in the questionnaire asked evaluators to prioritize five (in the list of 17) most important soft skills that they used to do their job effectively. The highest scores (21 out of 26) went to communication skills (including active listening skills) and organizational skills (15 out of 26). Motivational skills and flexibility scored 14, while interpersonal skills, ability to treat others fairly without judgment, and patience received 13 votes.

Joosten-ten Brinke, Sluijsmans and Jochems (2009) conducted a similar survey at the Open University of the Netherlands. Nine tutors and evaluators were asked to rank the importance of, and self-assess, their skills in the assessment of prior learning. The computer science participants prioritized domain knowledge and skills.

Their self-assessments showed high scores in domain knowledge and skills, judgmental skills and motivation on decisions. The educational science participants rated the judgmental skills highest. The highest score in their self-assessments were observational and judgmental skills.

The “job functions” component of the Champlain College survey appeared to produce the most diverse and rich data. The list of evaluators’ tasks was long ranging from personal consultation and coaching to recruiting potential RAC candidates. We summarized all the tasks and included only the following in the job description:

- accompany RAC candidates through the recognition process
- keep resources up-to-date
- provide feedback to candidates through the evaluation process
- inform pedagogical advisors on candidates’ progress, struggles or needs
- facilitate seminars and work sessions
- evaluate competencies using different methods of evaluation
- follow the Ministerial guidelines as to how to conduct the recognition process.

The last section of the survey provided us, and the human resources manager, with questions for the hiring interview related to hard and soft skills. We analyzed these questions from the appreciative inquiry perspective, adapted the language so that it was more positive, and divided the questions into two groups. The first group contained discovery questions on the potential evaluators’ past experience. These types of questions invite “deep, multi-faceted stories, rather than brief, perfunctory answers” (Henry, 2005, p. 2). For example, the question “Take a minute and think about your most significant professional achievement. What skills do you possess that made this achievement possible?” inquired into a person’s professionalism. The questions “What do you value deeply? How are these values reflected in your work?” investigated the value system of an interviewee. A question about team spirit and collaboration was: “Share an example of the best team you’ve worked with and what was it about that team that you admired the most?”

The second group of interview questions referred to the future position of an evaluator. These types of questions give an opportunity for the hiring committee to see the real person beyond the curriculum vitae and make it easier to conclude who will be a good fit for the position. Examples of questions about person-job fit included: “If you were to create your own ideal position within RAC, what would the job description be?” and “What would your typical day be like?” Some questions on adaptability were: “You have four candidates with different learning preferences. How would you adapt the content of partial training so that every candidate understands it?” and “Identify a very common essential competency from your area of expertise and name some different ways a candidate could demonstrate this competency.” Lastly, questions about lifelong learning included: “What did you learn last year and how did you learn it?” and “What is your strategy to keep up-to-date in your field of specialty?”

In order to reveal a fuller picture of the whole person, the hiring interview consisted of three categories: domain knowledge and professional skills, soft skills, and personal fit with the college culture and RAC value system. As Simon Sinek (2009) explained: “If you hire people just because they can do a job, they’ll work for your money, but if you hire people who believe what you believe, they’ll work for you with blood and sweat and tears” (7:54).

Evaluators who we hired this way acknowledged the humanity and the inclusiveness of the tone during the hiring interview:

*“What was nice about the questions is that I felt they were not a trap. That’s the way to do it. It felt like a real discussion, which I think is the best way to make the candidates be themselves.”*

Another comment was:

*“Overall, I liked how the interview went because it focused a lot on the interpersonal and soft skills. I found it to be a human-oriented interview.”*

One of evaluators who was hired indicated that the hiring interview:

*“... was really straightforward and well planned.”*

Hiring the right people on the RAC team and allocating them the responsibilities that enable them to use their strengths are important tasks. Training comes next. The RAC advisor and newly hired evaluators create a set of goals and performance measures. The quality of RAC services depends on the clear direction, good training and support provided to evaluators by the RAC advisors.

## **Conclusion**

This article is a reflection of the shared experiences of prior learning assessment practitioners who have identified areas of best practice in their assessment strategies. The core tenet that runs throughout is that no one part is the key to an effective assessment strategy.

According to the authors, an effective assessment strategy in the recognition of acquired competencies is a holistic process that takes into account not only the tools of assessment in regard to metrics and rubrics but also the philosophical orientation that guides an office’s hiring process, training and support of evaluators, and continuous feedback and support to the candidate. According to Travers and Evans (2011), “[p]rior learning assessment programs need to find methods to use to assess their policies, practices and outcomes in ways that align to other academic programming and the institutional processes. The more others within an institution can understand the program and its integrity, the greater the program will be accepted and accessed across the institution” (p. 154). The RAC practitioners at Champlain College have determined standard rubrics for evaluations in each program of study, as well have written policies and procedures that are guided by the college’s established policies on student assessment and evaluation. Most importantly, is a sense of transparency between all stakeholders that, according to the authors, is fundamental in the acceptance and support of the process of recognition of acquired competencies.

## **Note**

<sup>1</sup> The official language of the Province of Quebec is French, and therefore proficiency in the language is an essential competency to master related to job market placement.

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