A BRIEF HISTORY OF COMPETENCY-BASED LEARNING IN THE UNITED STATES

By

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ABSTRACT

The environment of online business education has blossomed in the last decade in the United States, as well as in the rest of the world. Many different approaches have been used to provide students with a more convenient, still very high quality education that can help them to acquire the knowledge and to develop the necessary competencies to achieve success in their careers.

Competency-based education has emerged recently as an alternative, targeting a specific audience of learners, that have developed skills prior to getting a formal education in those areas. By being able to assess those competencies, competency-based programs can recognize the "learning-by-doing" that students have formerly been exposed to, therefore accelerating the completion of degrees and guaranteeing that students can bridge the gap between the knowledge acquired and the actions employers expect to have, when hiring the graduates.

Competency-based education, however, is not new to the United States or the educational system; it has been used for years in corporate training as well as trade schools. With that in mind, this review of literature will examine the history of competency education and the current trends in best practices.

Keywords: Diversity in Business Education, Competency Development, Online Education.

INTRODUCTION

Business Higher Education in USA

The climate of Higher Education in general, and of Business education in particular, has undergone major changes in the United States in the past decade, mostly attributed to the economic downturn and slow recovery and, the Department of Education is helping students by opening the doors to new and innovative educational programs, to meet the needs of the current and future job market.

"The economic downturn places our education and economy at crossroads. At the same moment, that state legislatures are dramatically slashing education budgets, it is imperative that we cultivate tomorrow's highly skilled, innovative, knowledge-based workforce to remain internationally competitive" (McCarthy, 2010, p.252).

Once, a college education was the best possibility to swiftly move into the workforce and create a career. Today, thousands of college graduates cannot obtain employment and thousands more with a combination of college credits and workforce skills are unemployed or underemployed in the United States.

Meanwhile, the government is holding billions in student loans for students seeking suitable employment. The current presidential administration is looking for new and innovative ways to provide students with workforce-ready skills while not overburdening them with excessive, unaffordable college loans.

Competency-based education is expected to broaden the access to higher education by assessing students' workforce-ready skills combined with lower tuition costs, flexibility, and shorter time to graduation (Sullivan & Downey, 2015). This approach aligns directly with the Presidential Administration's goals to create a more accessible and lower cost higher education for students.

The Department of Education Experimental Sites Program

announced, in 2013 in a Dean Colleague Letter, that competency-based education will be explored as one of the several opportunities to help meet the administration's vision. Several universities and colleges will now be able to grant students, college credit through outcome-based assessments.

Competency-based education is not new to the United States or the educational system; it has been used for years in corporate training as well as trade schools. With that in mind, this review of literature will examine the history of competency education and the current trends in best practices.

1. A Brief History

Competency-based education is broadly defined as a type of education in which students earn credits for demonstrating knowledge through assessments instead of traditional seat time (clock hours). Although there is currently no consensus on an absolute definition for competency-based education, a variety of frameworks are currently being used in the current higher-education landscape.

Coit Butler (1978) started an argument about competencies and education when he observed, "There is a universal lack of agreement among educators as to what constitutes competence and how to describe it" (p.7). Short (1984), on the other hand, during his studies stated that the term "competency" was being misused as a "descriptive concept rather than a normative concept and its referent a thing or an activity rather than a quality or state of being" (p.203).

Despite the lack of a clear definition, there is abundance of information on competency-based education in several different fields and industries; however, each industry defines competencies differently, assesses competencies differently, and attributes learning to those competencies and assessments differently.

Throughout history, medical colleges have used competencies to determine medical skills; Lurie (2012) describes the difference between knowing and competency as:

"Knowing' not as a final destination, but rather as a first

step on the long journey towards 'doing.' The various higher-order 'doing' skills (e.g. professionalism, cultural competence, clinical reasoning, etc.) have come to be known as 'competencies'" (Lurie, 2012, p.50).

Historically, this perception of competency applies across industries: "knowing" matters less than "doing".

"Competence and competencies are job-related, being a description of an action, behavior or outcome that a person should demonstrate in their performance" (McMullan, et al., 2003, p.285).

Education and training programs committed to competency-based assessment ask, if institutions or corporations write a series of competency statements to define, what skills are needed for a specific job, industry, or college and then effectively assess, if the individual can demonstrate the skill.

2. The Pennsylvania Libraries

Pennsylvania Libraries' "Developing Competency-Based Assessment for Library Professionals" (2015) states that a

"...clear, evidenced-based approach to learning outcomes assessment for professional graduate programs has not been previously well-defined in the literature... The literature showed a noticeable tension between the types of instruments used for a true, effective measurement of student learning" (Harhai & Krueger, 2015, p.15).

The article discusses several ways that industries as well as higher education institutions have assessed students using a variety of instruments such as practical experience, multiple-choice testing, and indirect measurements (such as self-assessment surveys).

Harhai & Krueger (2015) noted that, higher education is using more direct measurements such as test and practical experience demonstrations, while other industries provide an opportunity for the student to have a higher level of self-awareness. However, they noted, this only indicates that some learning has occurred, not that the individual can demonstrate a learned skill. "Direct measures demonstrate actual learning while indirect self-assessment surveys indicate a student's learning experiences" (p.16). Harhai & Krueger (2015) ask whether

direct and indirect assessments can be used in higher education as the only assessment option, or whether the combination of the two methods can also successfully be used in a program.

3. The Georgia Southern University

A research study conducted by Orly Calderon (2013) entitled, "Direct and indirect measures of learning outcomes in MSW Program: What do we actually measure?" examined a traditional social work educational program. Calderon stated that,

"…evidence also exists to suggest that indirect measures of learning are not good predictors of actual learning as measured by mastery of content and skills" (Calderon, 2013).

However, Calderon wanted to test both direct and indirect learning in the social work program at Georgia Southern University. At the conclusion of his study, he found there may be a two-factor solution. This "may be a more appropriate approach to assessment of learning outcomes than either a continuum approach or a direct measurement approach alone" (p.417). He also found that, direct measures can effectively measure knowledge and skill attainment while indirect assessments are better suited for the students' learning experience in higher education.

4. The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

After the launch of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Flex Option, the librarians provided some reflection on the program, information literacy, and information literacy in a competency-based program. The design of the program is self-paced, the goal is to assess students of their knowledge and skills no matter where they learned the material through authentic assessments. The librarians built information literacy as a skill, set into each of the four programs offered and assessed them at several different stages to identify achievement. In order to aid students without prior research skills, the librarians embedded, during the development phase of the program, several tutorials to help students demonstrate these types of skills as part of their assessments. Woodward (2015) notes that, by adding a partnership between the development team

and the librarians during the development phase, information literacy built into the competencies and objectives of the program added value to the student's competency-based program.

5. Competency-based Education in Three Pilots Program

The Rand Corporation research report (Steele et al., 2014) is part of a research series of pilot programs through the Bill and Melinda Gates foundation. One of the pilots focused on competency based education. The authors designed their program based on the following features: first that the learning happens wherever they are in their educational experience. Students are evaluated based on demonstration, and student have a choice about their learning. Participating schools noticed higher reports of engagement and positive experiences in the competency program because of the flexible packing and academic choice, the program afforded the students. The researchers concluded that, the most important pieces of the program were supportive instruction, skillful teacher engagement, and student direction.

6. Evolution of Competency Education

The need in higher education for flexible learning schedules, and lower-cost tuition has forced an evolution of competency-based programs as a mainstream option. It is no longer just an assessment of academic skills for the college of university, but is now a student-centered approach. The challenge is to assess students based on what they currently know, support students' learning with interactive curriculum, and ultimately filling knowledge gaps (Lacey & Murray, 2015).

Assessments are the key method of evaluation for all competency programs. Everything the student can demonstrate is collected through a 'high-stakes' assessment. The assessment is graded to determine whether the student is competent or if there is a need for supportive curriculum.

With so many different colleges and universities venturing into the pedagogy of competency-based education, it is important to understand that assessment methods can differ from one discipline to another in higher education.

Assessment requirements for accreditation in a nursing program, for instance, are very different from those in an Information Technology program.

Assessment requirements drive assessment development and ultimately the curriculum develop methodology. Unlike traditional assessment and curriculum development methods, competency development methods connect each skill to a particular aspect of the workforce environment.

For example, competency-based assessment will rarely ask students to memorize a theory, and then recount the theory in their own words though a research paper, because assessments in competency seek to go beyond textbook-based knowledge. Instead, competency-based assessments ask the student to demonstrate performance of the task in a business situation. Although some institutions would say they already do this in their traditional courses, student still have to follow the weekly curriculum requirements of (for example) reading 22 hours of material, interacting with other students and faculty by discussing questions, topics, etc. Students also practice through incremental required assignments worth a percentage of their total grade. Some curriculum methods first allow the student to learn the theory through material, practice the theory and then apply the theory based on what they have learned in the classroom.

Competency, however, asks the student to apply the skill based on their experience in the workforce and, should the student have a gap in knowledge, then provides the supportive curriculum. Competency assessments and curriculum design rise to the next step of learner engagement, because students engage where they need to in the curriculum and are not required to study the material they can already demonstrate. The assessments ensure that the student then can demonstrate the skills.

Conclusion

Competency Education is a fast-growing aspect of Higher Education. The structure is fairly unknown and it's an uncharted adventure for most institutions (Ordonez, 2014). Several colleges and universities have accepted the challenge of creating competency-based programs and are exploring the many opportunities and challenges that the programs have to offer. Frameworks have been recently proposed to provide ways to measure the quality of this emerging learning approach (Krause, Dias & Chedler, 2015). As a new educational modality, competency-based education is constantly challenged, and different scholars try to unveil what is behind this approach (Oyugi, 2015).

While the Department of Education and learning institutions alike are concerned about affordable access to education, the academic community is also concerned with the rush to cheaper versions of education, possibly negating academic rigor and integrity of their programs. Competency education, however, is not a cookie cutter, easy-testing-and-cheaper version of education. A true competency program in higher education exhibits the same qualities as traditional higher education, including academic rigor and integration (Clerkin & Simon, 2014). In Competency-based Programs, the assessments presented to students often have to exceed the caliber and academic rigor of the traditional final exam. The students are not being assessed on what have learned, known or read, but what they can do in a real-world job situation. They are not applying academic theory from a text; they are applying life experience in an exam. Their life experience is not based on one professor's tenure and experience: rather, they are based on the collective experience of industry leaders as well as their collective expectations of an employee on day one. Competency Education offers graduates the opportunity to show and define the achievements of what they can do, as well as what they have learned.

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