3-24-2014

Memo To ACE Fellows

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Recommended Citation

March 24, 2014

Dear ACE Fellows:

We enjoyed meeting with you on Monday (March 17th) and *b-r-i-e-f-l-y* beginning to explore the world of competence-based learning/education. In follow-up, we're writing to offer a few responses to frequently (or possibly) asked questions. In so doing, and in the spirit of "one-stop-shopping," we're incorporating within this document the content from our handout from March 17---while adding to it.

As we can be of further help, please let us know.

Sincerely,

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Frequently and/or Possibly Asked Questions RE: *Competence-Based Learning*

(1) First, some context. What is DePaul's *School for New Learning (SNL)*?

Established in 1972, DePaul's School for New Learning (one of the university's 11 schools and colleges) exists to serve the educational needs of working adults. SNL is recognized as a leader in the field of adult education and is dedicated to providing individualized, student-centered education in a collaborative learning environment. Its academic programs are outcomes-based and tailored to the learning needs of the individual student. These programs enable students to focus their learning while also integrating their work and life experiences with the values and traditions of the liberal arts. Working closely with faculty members as well as expert practitioners, students are assisted in both developing and demonstrating targeted areas of professional competence and honing their skills in the areas of communication, self-direction, reflection, critical-thinking, and creative problem-solving----skills deemed essential for maximizing personal and professional effectiveness in a world of dynamic change.

(2) What is *competence*?

The concept or notion of "competence" has a long and established history (e.g., in architecture, in music, in theatre, in journalism, in social work, in engineering, in medicine, in law, etc.). In brief:

a. It involves the ability to perform reliably to a criterion-referenced standard;
b. It results in (i.e., is a cause of, not synonym of) effective performance. As such, people are not competent/incompetent; their performance is.
c. It occurs within a specific context (situated cognition) emanating from the notion that what we know is inseparable from how we know it; and,
d. It focuses on bridging the artificial gulf between ideas and actions so that students learn ideas-for-action. Consequently, the aim of learning is the latter—often referred to as "outcomes-based."

(3) Why (or how to) build an *undergraduate program via competence*?

The SNL model for competence-based **undergraduate** study (the Bachelor of Arts in Individualized Focus Area/BAIFA) was launched in 1972. This model incorporates the following:

a. A set of 50 competencies established by the faculty that encompass three broad areas: (1) general education; (2) the student's individual area of focus; and (3) a series of electives;

b. Courses, proficiency exams, and portfolio development focused on achieving and demonstrating competence;

c. Courses designed by faculty to enable students to demonstrate one or more of the 50 competencies; and,

d. Course activities and assignments including criteria, specifications, and rubrics to enable students to build and demonstrate competence.

Here's an example:

(i)   Competence: Can assess the social and personal value of civic engagement for achieving change.

(ii) Course Title: *The Fight for Human Rights: One Woman's Crusade*

(iii) Criteria: By the end of the course, student should be able to:
        -Explain the impact an engaged citizen can make to improve the effectiveness of a society.
        -Articulate a strategy for personal civic engagement.
        -Engage in an activity that positively contributes to the civic life of a community.

(iv) Learning Activities:
        -Read and discuss texts by Helen Prejean, including books, essays, letters, opinion pieces, petitions, and interviews .
        -Meet with Helen Prejean, discuss activism with her and review her archives.
        -Read about writing persuasively for different audiences.
        -Choose a human rights issue of interest and conduct guided research regarding such.

(v)   Learning Products/Demonstrations:
        -For a human rights issue about which they have a concern, they write:
        -Letter to the editor
        -Letter to government official
        -OpEd for a web news site
        -Short paper explaining and assessing chosen strategy.

(vi) Assessment Rubric:
The following rubric is used by the instructor to assess student work against competence. All work is expected to conform to college-level standards of mechanics and presentation.

A designates work of high quality.
An A paper (27-30 pts) develops an argument cogently and creatively across the length of an essay; reflects thorough understanding of and engagement with pertinent texts (audiovisual and/or print) and the issues at hand; draws insightful connections and/or generates thoughtful questions concerning the topic and the specified materials; cites sources consistently in appropriate citation style; is virtually free of grammar lapses.

B designates work of good quality.
A B paper (24-26 pts) develops an argument effectively across the length of an essay; reflects adequate understanding of and engagement with pertinent texts (audiovisual and/or print) and the issues at hand; draws clear connections and/or generates apt questions concerning the topic and the specified materials cites sources consistently in appropriate citation style; is mostly free of grammar lapses.

C designates work which minimally meets requirements set forward in assignment.
A C paper (21-23 pts) develops some ideas but does so in a superficial or simplistic manner; reflects limited understanding of or engagement with pertinent texts (audiovisual or print) and the issues at hand; draws connections, some of which are unclear, and/or raises questions, some which are inapt, concerning the topic and the specified materials; cites sources inconsistently and/or occasionally uses appropriate citation style; contains several grammar lapses.

D designates work of poor quality which does not meet minimum requirements set forth in the assignment. A D paper (18-20 pts) shows little development of ideas; reflects little or no understanding of pertinent texts (audiovisual and/or print) and the issues at hand; does not draw clear connections or raise coherent questions concerning the topic and the specified materials; does not cite sources appropriately; contains numerous grammar lapses.

(4) Why (or how to) build a *graduate program via competence*?

The SNL model for competence-based **graduate** study (the Master of Arts Program in Applied Professional Studies/MAAPS) was launched in 1984. Through this individualized model, each individual graduate student identifies and proposes competencies aligned to his/her area of study and, once approved, develops them and demonstrates them for assessment. At a high-level, the steps are as follows:

a. Graduate student proposes an "**idea in context**" that he/she wishes to explore via graduate-level learning. We call this his/her GRADUATE FOCUS AREA.

b. Graduate Student, Faculty Mentor and Professional Advisor (practicing professional in the area of the "idea in context") align the Focus Area to an inquiry rubric including the following *portals of entry*:   -*its main theories, concepts and ideas*
   -*it methods of research*
   -*its specialize skills*
   -*its communication modes*
   -*its organizational/interpersonal dynamics*
   -*its challenges from larger contexts*
   -*its ethical issues*
   -*its use of reflection in/on practice*

c. Through each *portal of entry*, the Graduate Student builds, proposes and, upon approval, executes a three component plan:
   ▶Competence: What would I like to claim regarding my ability (and have the University support!) given this portal---in relation to my Focus Area? [e.g., *"I can describe and analyze X…and explain/demonstrate its application to professional practice in my Focus Area."*]
   ▶Learning Activities: Through what specific strategies or processes will I accomplish the competence outcome (above)? –What do I propose to do and how to develop my ability with respect to "a"? [e.g., independent study, work project, graduate course, etc.]
   ▶Learning Product(s): What specific form of evidence will I submit for assessment in demonstration of the competence outcome (above)? [e.g., --depends on nature of competence statement above.]

d.   Assessment of Learning Products involves three steps:
   (i) Assessment by Graduate Student (self-assessment)—using pre-established criteria (congruence to approved plan; fulfillment of standards of professional practice in area of "idea in context;" integration of theory and practice; analysis; and presentation).
   (ii) Assessment by a Professional Advisor (or other practicing professional in area of "idea in context") –using pre-established criteria; and,
   (iii) Assessment by Faculty Mentor—using pre-established criteria.

(5) What are some major *advantages* to competence-based learning/education?

Drawing upon SNL's over 40 years of experience within competence-based learning/education, we have found this approach to offer the following *advantages*:

a. It translates the concept of performance into terms that people can understand;

b. It aligns with evidence-based/results-oriented perspectives pertaining to performance in the workplace;

c. It incorporates relevance insofar as students are able to explore the notion that knowledge is productive when it fits a context and solves a problem;
d. It creates and capitalizes on opportunities for self-awareness and responsibility for one's own learning; and,
e. It allows for acceleration of progression if student has prior knowledge or learns at different pace than others. This can result in increased affordability and flexibility.

(6) What are some key *challenges* to competence-based learning/education?

Drawing upon SNL's over 40 years of experience within competence-based learning/education, we have found this approach to offer the following **challenges**:
a. It may be less relevant and/or readily embraced in domains where the tradition is to "know and understand" rather than apply;
b. It requires some reorientation of faculty who are traditionally-trained and academic-discipline biased insofar as it reprioritizes "content" from being an "end in itself" to being a "means to an end (competence)";
c. It requires analysis and determination of competencies as well as rubrics for reliable assessment;
d. It challenges assumptions wherein culture privileges certain paths to knowledge over others;
e. It stretches the flexibility/agility of enterprise systems that may otherwise be resistant to multiple models, e.g., translating between/among competencies, courses, credit hours, contact hours, tuition, fees, etc.;
f. It may not be best suited for traditional students or less than motivated students; and,
g. It may suffer from early and ill-formed impressions (based on sound-bite marketing/recruiting efforts suggestion "easy") which have caused excessive skepticism.

(7) Is competence-based learning/education *scalable*?

The simple answer to this complex question is: "it all depends." Indeed, in today's world, there are numerous models of competence-based education—some, more scalable than others. It will require different approaches to scalability beyond class size. Key considerations include:
a. Actual and sought size of program (e.g., SNL's competence-based undergraduate program is considerably larger than its competence-based graduate program. The design varies accordingly. Further, the school's financial model relies on a broad use of practicing professionals for assessment.).
b. Match of program & support service design to students sought and admitted (e.g., How motivated and self-directed are the students? How much support is needed?).
c. Degree of flexibility (moving parts) and personalization. (e.g., How responsive will the program be to individual differences?).
d. The extent to which the program can use technology to reinforce in-person learning and support formative assessment.

(8) What are a few *key trends* impacting competence-based learning/education?

1. -pressures to reduce the time it takes to complete a degree
2. -pressures to address the financial aid crisis
3. -pressures to enhance the employability of graduates
4. -reemergence of career and technical education
5. -rethinking of the Carnegie unit
6. -acceptance of models that enable the earning of credit for what one already knows
7. -impact of online learning where students progress at their own pace
8. -emergence of MOOCs
9. -shifting of grant resources in favor of new models of education (including competence-based learning/education)

10.   -application of financial aid to competence-based learning/education

(9) What are a few *key resources* for exploring competence-based… further?

▶Websites: http://www.cael.org/Research-and-Publications
                     http://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org/NILOAResources.html
                     http://www.luminafoundation.org
                     http://www.newamerica.org/
                     http://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/higher-ed-beta-/creating-competent-students

▶Books:

Burke, J. (1989). *Competency based education and training.* Bristol, PA: The Falmer Press.

Curry, L., Wergin, J.F., & Associates. (1993). *Educating professionals: Responding to new expectations for competence and accountability*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Driscoll, A., & Wood, S. (2007*). Developing outcomes-based assessment for learning-centered education*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing.

Gilbert, T.F. (2007). *Human competence: engineering worthy performanc*e. San Francisco: Pfeiffer.

Lucia, A.D., & Lepsinger, R. (1999). *The art and science of competency models: Pinpointing critical success factors in organizations*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass/Pfeiffer.

Spencer, L.M., & Spencer, S.M. (1993). *Competence at work: Models for superior performance*. New York: John Wiley.

Vorhees, R. (2001). *Measuring what matters: Competency-based learning models in education: New directions for institutional research, number 110*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Wolf, A. (1995). *Competence-based assessment*. Bristol, PA: Open University Press.

Zwell, M. (2000). *Creating a culture of competence*. New York: John Wiley.

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