

Chapter 2

Building Competence: A Historical Perspective of Competency-Based Education

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ABSTRACT

A flurry of new instructional approaches has recently emerged in post-secondary education; one approach receiving the most attention is competency-based education (CBE). While many think CBE is relatively new, its roots are deeply seeded in decades-old pedagogical philosophies. The frequency with which CBE is now appearing in conversations about higher education instruction and reform gives the false impression that most practitioners actually know what CBE is, or how it contrasts with other instructional approaches. In fact, the modern dilemma faced by many in higher education is that few institutional leaders have a comprehensive understanding of what CBE is, how it differs from other instructional approaches, the historical significance behind it, and how it might be used to effect pedagogical change and instructional innovation. This chapter explores the historical basis of CBE, its benefits and detriments, and its operational elements.

INTRODUCTION

Because of the newfound popularity of competency-based education (CBE) and recent legislative requirements for accountability in higher education, institutions of higher education all over the nation are implementing CBE initiatives that place significant emphasis on the demonstration of learning instead of on the completion of classroom hours. CBE models of instruction also place control of the learning process with the learner, allowing learners to progress at their own pace, accelerating or, in turn, slowing down where they so choose. This approach represents a shift away from what are considered traditional instructor-centered models of instruction to more student-centered models. With this transition institutional

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leaders are wrestling with understanding CBE, its characteristics and philosophical underpinnings, and the value of it as compared against the traditional institutional model. In an effort to bring some clarity to CBE, this chapter will respond to the following:

1. What are the historical and theoretical foundations of competency-based education?
2. How is competency-based education different from other pedagogical approaches, and what are its essential and distinguishing characteristics?
3. What is the comparative value associated with implementing competency-based education delivery models?

BACKGROUND

Colleges and universities provide the last formal learning experience many young adults receive. This experience is often very traditional in practice, utilizing an instructor-led, lecture-memorize method, in which instructors stand at the front of the room and lecture while students are expected to internalize what is said. This ancient model is instructor-centered, meaning all instructional activities (i.e., schedule, content delivery, assessments, etc.) are driven by and revolve around the instructor's preferences, and it does not well match students for today's world of work. As companies seek to employ dynamic thinkers who are flexible and collaborative, universities are now challenged to pursue different pedagogies that engage and involve students, rather than ask them to passively receive new information. "They (colleges and universities) know that employers are looking for young men and women able to analyze issues, think critically, solve problems, communicate effectively, and take leadership" (Justice, Rice, Roy, Hudspeth, & Jenkins, 2009, p. 841). It is no longer a matter of imparting knowledge; it is a matter of creating instructional experiences that give learners the opportunity to develop 21st century skills and the capacity to think, process, and collaborate.

In response, over the past three years, there has been a dramatic shift in higher education practices. Colleges and universities are implementing programs that emphasize demonstration of skills and knowledge acquired through work or life experience or through prior learning activities. These programs are generally referred to as competency-based education, as well as standards-based education, outcomes-based education, inquiry-based education, and problem-based learning. While there are similarities among these terms, there are also differences that require elaboration for their distinctions to be understood.

Competency-Based Education

Modern competency-based education (CBE) was first described in an article by R. W. White (1959) as a concept for performance motivation. The term later gained greater recognition in David McClelland's 1973 paper, "Testing for Competence Rather than for 'Intelligence'". This particular approach is often used for teaching knowledge and skills that are considered concrete, meaning measurable and observable. In turn, each unit of instruction is detailed and well defined in specifying what exactly the learner is to learn. Taken together, the individual units work as building blocks that comprise a larger learning goal or outcome. In CBE programs, instructional units are often designed to teach a small number (e.g., one to three) of competencies at a time. Students must demonstrate mastery of all competencies within the unit to satisfactorily complete it and move on to the next.

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