

Chapter 11

Learning, Adults, and Competency-Based Education

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ABSTRACT

Because competency-based education (CBE) programs ask students to demonstrate what they know and can do and because CBE students often work at their own pace, competence-based learners need to be able to articulate and to manage their own learning. Drawing upon our research and experience developing, teaching in and consulting to competency-based programs for adults in domestic and international higher education contexts as well as workplace and community settings, the authors demonstrate the necessity and give examples of how to teach CBE students to be competence-based learners.

INTRODUCTION

Much of the conversation in higher education around developing competency-based education (CBE) programs has focused on how to define and how to assess competence. Both are crucial for delivering quality competency-based education. In addition, there is a third, equally vital, component of any CBE program: learning.

Learning is an essential aim of higher education (Chickering & Claxton, 1981), whether the architecture is course-based, competency-based or some combination of the two. No educational system worth its salt leaves learning to chance; and there is no reason for the competency-based enterprise to do so. Yet, amid all of the recent press on competency-based education and its “academic programs, practices, and policies,” competency-based learning and the “learners and their experience in learning environments” is often overlooked (Everhart, Sandeen, Seymour & Yoshino, 2014, p. 4). For example,

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over the last year, “competency-based learning” appeared in 50 fewer articles than “competency-based education” in *Inside Higher Education* and *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.

Considering adult learners in particular, for whom CBE holds much promise, this chapter explores and gives examples of how to develop two kinds of learning that are necessary for student success in CBE programs: learning how to articulate learning and learning how to learn for competence development. The chapter then presents four characteristics of learning experiences and environments that support competency-based learning (CBL). It concludes by drawing upon an example from the authors’ international work to show the broad applicability of CBE with CBL.

BACKGROUND

In the rush to develop CBE programs in higher education, it is not surprising that learning can take a backseat, particularly for those programs targeting adult students. It is easy to assume that adults already know how to learn – that they just need opportunities to validate the learning they have already gained in their lives and to be pointed toward resources that they can use to pursue new learning independently. Adults do come to CBE programs with a significant amount of learning. However, they can struggle to transfer that learning, while what they have learned about how school works often does not serve them well in competence-based programs (Navarre Cleary, 2013). Forty plus years of serving adult learners has made it clear to the authors that the potential for substantive *new learning* and for degree completion is compromised without focused attention on guiding CBE students to extract learning from experience and assume agency as learners.¹

An emphasis on learning in the design, development and delivery of CBE programs is particularly important for adult and other students for whom school is one of many major responsibilities. As Erisman and Steele (2015) most recently noted, the 30 to 35 million students with some college but no degree in the United States need more, not less support, for learning. To achieve goals like Lumina’s Goal 2025 to increase the number of Americans with a college degree or similar credential to 60%, competency-based programs need to provide learning environments that work for those who have already been educationally underserved: “*21st century students*: adult learners without a college degree coming back to college, low income students, students of color and first generation students” (Lumina, n.d.). Competency-based programs that assume learning, rather than elevate it, run the risk of increasing the educational attainment gap, a point Lewis et al. (2014) made for K-12 students, but which is just as true for those in higher education.

In many ways, CBE is ideally suited to adult learners. It recognizes learning gained in a variety of ways and offers the flexible delivery and pacing options that adults often need. CBE is also well matched to adult learners, who have been repeatedly characterized as learners who are highly motivated, ready to learn, rich in life experience, and who want clearly stated and relevant educational outcomes, value learning to do rather than just to know, and desire to be self-directing (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007; Knowles, Holton, & Swanson 2012; Taylor, Marienau, & Fiddler 2000,). Yet, many of these apparent advantages of CBE can be double-edged swords. The flexibility of competency-based programs can mean that the needs of work, friends and family always seem more pressing than those of school. While adult students tend to be more highly motivated than their younger counterparts, they also return to school more anxious about their ability to succeed and are less likely to persist (Navarre

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