Chapter 10

A Return to Doing:
How Authentic Assessment Changes Higher Education

Karen M. Mattison
Capella University, USA

Stacy L. Sculthorp
Capella University, USA

Heather Schroeder
Capella University, USA

Jaclyn Zacharias
Capella University, USA

ABSTRACT

Elements that define competency-based education are provided, and followed by a history and evolution of this educational philosophy that has become increasingly attractive and necessary to both institutions and learners. Authentic assessment is introduced as the heart of competency-based education and as the instrumental element that differentiates competency-based education from traditional approaches. Examples of authentic assessment are provided from field-specific domains. Drivers from industry, government, and learners are described and linked with the progression of authentic assessment. The design and evaluation of authentic assessment is explored with a thorough explanation of the ways in which properties of reliability and validity are established. The chapter concludes with a forecast for the change that authentic assessment will bring in competency-based education.

INTRODUCTION

A post-secondary credential—a college degree—has long been the ticket to favorable employment. The college degree is a widely accepted symbol for appropriate field knowledge and a readiness to apply specialized knowledge productively and with purpose on the job. For many years, that degree meant ready-to-work. Recently, the federal government, employers, and higher education learners and graduates themselves are crying foul: the system of education-to-employment is becoming unsteady. Each of these groups is complaining that graduates do not have the skills demanded by today's workplace, and, that despite excellent credentials, that they are not ready to work at expected levels. There is clear demand for change in higher education to address these urgent needs. One needed change is a return to

doing: a shift in focus from knowledge gained with the implied possibility of application to knowledge actively applied and measured in realistic situations. Governments, employers, and learners want to know what employee-graduates can do on the job and in the world. This change is contained in an education model called competency-based education. Competency-based education, or CBE—that is, focusing on employer-identified competencies by teaching to and assessing whether learners have mastered those competencies— is beginning to address this need for change. At the heart of success for this model is the nature of the assessment: the way in which learning can be evaluated, quantified, and reported. Authentic assessment, which this chapter examines in detail, is the assessment strategy that allows CBE to collect and produce quality evidence that what is learned transfers to the work world. It is a means of instilling confidence among learners and employers alike that the bearer of a college degree is ready and able to do what the workplace requires.

BACKGROUND

In June 2015, The Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions (C-RAC) put forth the following definition of CBE:

In general, competency-based education (CBE) is an outcomes-based approach to earning a college degree or other credential. Competencies are statements of what students can do as a result of their learning at an institution of higher education. While competencies can include knowledge or understanding, they primarily emphasize what students can do with their knowledge. Students progress through degree or credential programs by demonstrating competencies specified at the course and/or program level. The curriculum is structured around these specified competencies, and satisfactory academic progress is expressed as the attainment or mastery of the identified competencies. Because competencies are often anchored to external expectations, such as those of employers, to pass a competency students must generally perform at a level considered to be very good or excellent.

C-RAC is explicit about CBE as outcomes-based, stating that the focus of CBE is on what learners can do rather than on knowledge they gain. In addition, however, there are three additional factors that lead to successful CBE.

First, to be successful the CBE's curriculum must be professionally aligned to link theory to practice. It must include measurable knowledge, skills, and abilities; something that may appear obvious, but cannot be emphasized enough. The development of a CBE curriculum must be deliberate to ensure a clear and meaningful connection—often called alignment—between current field requirements, academic activities that support learning, and the assessments that measure the learning. As this chapter will discuss, the most efficient and sound way to create a professionally aligned curriculum is by employing the assessment-first philosophy.

The second factor of successful CBE is that the teaching faculty for such programs must be experienced leaders who possess both practical field experience as well as a deep understanding of that field's foundations and theory. The involvement of faculty who meet these criteria is crucial: these individuals are in a position to understand both what is needed in the industry and a CBE program's accreditation standards. Faculty are not only responsible for evaluating learner competence, but also for providing

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