Competency-Based Learning and the Future of Nigerian Colleges of Education: A Recipe Vocational and Technical Aptitude

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Abstract - The importance of competency based learning cannot be ignored, considering the role it plays for effective learning and development of skills necessary for successful performance in a job. This paper attempts to review some conceptual issues on competency base learning, such as competency assessment and stages of its implementation. The paper further explained the applicability of the competency based learning in Nigerias colleges. The paper concludes by offering some recommendations, such as provision of legislative frame work for competency based learning to have the legal backing it deserves and equally to redefined institutional frame work in order to accommodate the system

KEYWORDS: Learning, Competency, and Vocational and Technical aptitude

INTRODUCTION

Colleges of education do not only provide platform for bridging the gap between university and pre-university levels but also serves a formidable purpose of capacity building with mush of same manifesting in technical component of learning itself. Recently, the terms competency-based learning or competency-based education (and related synonyms) have become more widely used by (1) online schools or companies selling online learning programs, and (2) colleges and universities, particularly those offering online degree programs. It should be noted that "competency-based learning," as it is typically designed and implemented in selected public schools, can differ significantly from the forms of "competency-based learning" being offered and promoted by online schools and postsecondary-degree programs. According to Spencer, in Cherniss and Goleman, eds (2001) at the collegiate level, for example, competency-based learning may entail prospective adult students receiving academic for knowledge and skills they acquired in their former careers an approach that can tuition costs and accelerate their progress toward earning a degree. **It** should also be noted that many online schools and educational programs, at the both the selected and higher-education levels, have also become the object of criticism and debate. Many for-profit virtual schools and online degree programs, for example, have been accused of offering low-quality educational experiences to students, exploiting students or public programs, and using the popularity of concepts such as "competency-based education" to promote programs dubious educational value. When investigating or reporting on competency-based education, it is important to determine precisely how the terms are being used in a specific context (Spencer & Spencer,1993; Wood & Payne, 1998).

Competency-based learning or Competency Based Education and Training is an approach to teaching and learning more often used in learning concrete skills than abstract learning. It differs from other non-related approaches in that the unit of learning is extremely fine grained. Rather than a course or a module every individual skill/learning outcome, known as a competency, is one single unit. Learners work on one competency at a time, which is likely a small component of a larger learning goal. The student is evaluated on the individual competency, and only once they have mastered it do they move on to others. After that, higher or more complex competencies are learned to a degree of mastery and isolated from other topics. Another common component of Competency-based learning is the ability to skip learning modules entirely if the learner can demonstrate they already have mastery. That can be done either through prior learning assessment or formative testing (Barttam, 2005).

For example, people learning to drive manual transmission might first have to demonstrate their mastery of "rules of the road", safety, defensive driving, parallel parking etc. Then they may focus on two independent competencies: "using the clutch, brake with right foot" and "shifting up and down through the gears". Once the learners have demonstrated they are comfortable with those two skills the next, overarching skill might be "finding first: from full stop to a slow roll" followed by "sudden stops", "shifting up" and "down shifting". Because this is kinetic learning the instructor likely would demonstrate the individual skill a few times then the student would perform guided practice followed by independent practice until they can demonstrate their mastery.

Competency-based learning is learner-focused and works naturally with independent study and with the instructor in the role of facilitator. Learners often find different individual skills more difficult than others. This learning method allows a student to learn those individual skills they find challenging at their own pace, practising and refining

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as much as they like. Then, they can move rapidly through other skills to which they are more adept (Spencer, 2004; Draganidis & Mentzas, 2006).

Most other learning methods use summative testing; competency-based learning requires mastery of every individual learning outcome making it very well suited to learning credentials in which safety is an issue. With summative testing a student who has 80% in an evaluation may have an 80% mastery of all learning outcomes or may have no mastery whatsoever of 20% of the learning outcomes. Further this student may be permitted to move on to higher learning and still be missing some abilities that are crucial to that higher learning. For example a student who knows most traffic laws and has mostly mastered controlling a vehicle FED LOW COST,T/WADA GUSAU. FED LOW COST,T/WADA GUSAU could be treated equally to a student who has a very high mastery of vehicle control but no understanding of traffic laws, but only one of those students should be permitted to drive (Spencer,2004).

What it means to have mastered a competency depends on the learning domain (subject matter). In. subject matter that could affect safety, it would be usual to expect complete learning that can be repeated every time. In abstract learning, such as algebra, the learner may only have to demonstrate that they identify an appropriate formula, for example, 4 of 5 times since when using that skill in the next competency, resolving a formula, will usually allow opportunity the learner to discover and correct their mistakes (Draganidis, & Mentzas, 2006).

It is important to understand that this Learning methodology is common in many kinetic and/or skills based learning, but is also sometime applied to abstract and/or academic learning for students who find themselves out-of-step with their grade, course or program of study. Increasingly educational institutions are evaluating ways to include competency-based learning methodologies in many different types of programs in order to make learning success a constant while student pace can vary (Horton, 2000; Cheng &. Dainty, 2005).

Competency based learning is an educational technique that can be applied in many fields and learning environments. **It** is an area of pedagogical research and is not adequately understood in one, single learning domain, such as that which follows in this paper.

The rest of this paper focuses one application of competency-based learning in corporate environments and is heavily weighted to a Human Resources perspective (Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005).

Once organizations have used a competency dictionary to define the competency requirements for groups, areas, or the whole organization, it becomes possible to develop learning strategies targeted to close major gaps in organizational competencies and to focus learning plans on the business goals and strategic direction for the organization (Dubois and Rothwell, 2000).

BEST PRACTICES

Competency profiles assist in effective learning and development by identifying the behaviours, knowledge, skills and abilities that are necessary for successful performance in a job. Employees can assess their competencies against those required for their own job, or for another job in which they are interested, and then take steps to acquire or improve any necessary competencies (Rausch, Sherman, & Washbush, 2002).

Competencies support learning by:

- Focusing learning on the critical competencies needed for success in the job and organization
- Providing standards for measuring employee performance and capabilities

Providing the framework for identifying learning options/curriculum/programs to meet employee and organizational needs (Dubois & Rothwell, 2004). Supporting effective forecasting of organizational, as well as project-related learning requirements (Kochanski, and Ruse, 1996).

Providing standards for determining how well learning has occurred, both at the individual and organizational level (McEvoy et.al 2005).

THE RECIPE

The entrenchment and consolidation of competency-based learning practices is built on a common benchmark that is expected to be applied regardless of environment or institutional framework being operated. In the Nigerian colleges of education, the adoption of these practices is a luxury that cannot be compromised. This is because of its centrality in especially the process of value addition and service improvement.

Some of the common benchmark competency-based practices in learning and development are:

- Assessments against competencies - Once the competencies have been defined for particular job / roles, it becomes possible for employees and others to assess the employee's competencies against those required for current or future roles within the organization. This assessment can occur in the following ways:

Self-assessment - Typically, the behavioural indicators for the competencies and proficiency levels needed within the target role / job are used as the standard for assessing the performance of tt-e employee using a common rating scale (e.g., five- point scales from Never to Always) for assessing each indicator. The results are compiled and a report is provided that includes the results for all competencies, highlighting both employee strengths as well as competencies requiring improvement. This information can then be used to support the development of an individual learning plan (Homer, 2001).

Multi-source / 360 - Multi-source or 360 feedback is similar to the self-assessment process except there is more than one evaluator. The process includes at a minimum the employee and their supervisor, and can include others with whom the employee interacts within the workplace (e.g., peers, team members, clients both within and outside the organization, reporting employees; etc.). Once again, a report is prepared on the feedback results to allow the employee, supervisor and / or 'others (e.g., coach / mentor; learning advisor; etc.) Catano, Darr, & Campbell, (2007) to

target learning and development efforts to the particular employee's needs (Sanchez, &. Levine, 2009).

IMPLEMENTATION STAGES

According to Lucia & Lepsinger, (1999). The following implementation stages are suggested for mid to large organizations implementing competencies in Learning and Development on a corporate-wide basis.

Stage 1

•Determine policy for integrating competencies III Learning and Development (Bartram, 2005).

•Design individual learning tools and processes (Learning Plan Form; associated instructions/ tools) and/ or acquire tools to support individual Learning Planning (e.g., i-Skill Suite Assessment and Learning Plan modules).

•Build or acquire a catalogue of learning resources organized by competencies in the Dictionary and classify organization specific programs and tools in the catalogue. Advertise and make the catalogue widely available to employees and managers (e.g., post the catalogue on an intranet site; acquire and implement web-based software to support employee).

• Develop or acquire self-assessment and multi-source surveys and reporting processes as competency profiles become available for job groups (e.g. i-Skill Suite Assessment and Learning Plan modules). Post self-assessment tools on the organization's intranet website, and introduce supervisor and multi-source assessments as employees become familiar and comfortable with the competencies and the assessment process.

•Develop and introduce training/communications related to competencies and their use in the learning and development process in the organization (Gene, 1976).

Stage 2

•Conduct a needs assessment / analysis and design / develop tools and reporting processes to support aggregate analysis and reporting of organizational strengths and gaps in competencies (Catano, Darr, & Campbell, 2007).

•Assess how curriculum / learning program design and development could be improved with the introduction of competency-based management. Implement changes, as required (Shippmann, et.al. 2000).

•Review current processes contacting evaluations of learning programs with the organization and integrate competencies, as required, to determine: the extent to which workplace behaviour and outcomes have changed in the desired direction; as well as the return on investment for the learning / training provided (Schmidt & Hunter, 1998).

Based on the foregoing stages, the Nigerian college of education system will prove not only capable of adopting the new way but also appear effective in especially managing the process of transition so well that deviation from the mean will stand minimized.

SCHOOLS WITH THIS SYSTEM: IS IT POSSIBLE FOR NIGERIAN COLLEGE OF EDUCATION SYSTEM?

It has become increasingly pertinent that value addition in all service sectors remains an important objective based on which the performance of organizations is measured .this is particularly fundamental noting how attraction and retention of patronage constitutes the pivot UPOl1 which competition is approached with a view to consolidating positive signature through corporate identity. As a universal practice (albeit with limited application), a number of institutions have begari to reformulate goals and capabilities towards working by interfacing competency learning with the old ways of doing things. In the Western part of the world for example, Adams county school district 50 and Chugach. School districts are a part of the Competency-based learning project but have their own name called Re-Inventing schools coalition (RISC). They have replaced grade levels with 10 learning levels that students work through at their own pace (Shandler, 2000). Western Governors University (WGU), has used this model of learning since it was chartered in 1996 by 19 governors in the Western United States. Other institutions are also offering competency-based approaches to postsecondary degrees. Capella University's FlexPath bachelor's and M.B.A. program was the second direct assessment degree to be given the go-ahead by the Department of Education. Southern New Hampshire University developed a competency-based pathway to an associate's degree through College for America, launched in 2013. Additionally, the University of Wisconsin Extension's Flex Option provides a competency-based approach to learning a bachelor's degree. The question remains why not Nigerian colleges of education? Albeit we face institutional and infrastructure related problems, with strong will, we can bridge the gap between where we are and where we ought to be. In Africa, all we need is a little push and the magic will happen.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

It is however worth noting that the world is fast changing in this era of globalization. By this, certain practices must be redefined to enable the Nigerian college of education sector respond to the call of globalization. In the transition, the need for any system to observe certain protocols (stages) and benchmarks is very clear.

In order for the college of education sector to respond adequately corresponding legislative frameworks must be exhausted to give competency-based learning the legal backing it deserves. In much the same way, the totality of the institutional framework must be redefmed to accommodate the new way.

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