

Bases of Competence: A Framework for Facilitating Reflective Learner-Centered Educational Environments

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Abstract

As the business world becomes more complex, the role of professional higher education in the development of “reflective practitioners” becomes more cogent. In this article, the authors argue for the Bases of Competence model, which articulates base competencies required of today’s higher education professional graduates, as a tool in learner-centered, self-reflective pedagogy and self-assessment. The purpose of this article is to describe the Bases of Competence model and to demonstrate its use in two learner-centered, self-reflective course-level initiatives.

Keywords

competence-based education, competencies, learner-centered learning

Introduction

Business environments are changing and to adapt, organizations are becoming more employee empowered rather than organization dominated. The

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implication for employees is a move from guaranteed lifelong employment to self-managed lifelong employability (Thijssen, Van der Heijden, & Rocco, 2008). Lifelong employability implies having knowledge, the skills to apply that knowledge in a multidisciplinary, team-oriented, dynamic environment, and engaging in lifelong learning. Competency-based performance models (Knowles, 1975) have helped practitioners and educators understand the need for and process of identifying skills for effective performance, in this case performance measured as lifelong employability. The mandate for lifelong employability calls on a different mindset, one that embraces reflection and self-learning. Our mission as educators is to effectively prepare students as lifelong learners to ensure that their transition to those work environments is smooth and seamless.

Traditionally, the acquisition of knowledge and the development of competencies has been separated in our stove-piped pedagogical design of business school curriculum. We offer courses in hard sciences, such as finance and marketing, which emphasize learning the theories, concepts, and models relevant to those topics, whereas the soft sciences, such as management and communication, focus on learning about and developing skills and competencies. There is growing evidence, which one could argue has become overwhelming over the last decade, that “knowing” is not enough—being able to apply that knowledge to analysis, decision making, and problem solving within a team-based, complex environment is key to success. This perspective is confirmed in repetitive reports from organizations such as the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (Top of the Class Report), Canadian Council for Learning (Canadian Learning Index), the Business–Higher Education Forum (2003), the Business Roundtable (2005), and the National Research Council (2006).

The role of professional higher education in the development of students who are “reflective practitioners” (Sluijsmans, Dochy, & Moerkerke, 1998) is clear (Falchikov & Boud, 1989; Kwan & Leung, 1996; Schon, 1987). Reflection and self-assessment are skills that can be learned (Longhurst & Norton, 1997; Sluijsmans et al., 1998; Sobral, 1997). Self-assessment built into the curriculum can help students to develop into reflective lifelong learners (Sluijsmans et al., 1998). In addition, self-assessment can guide educational institutions toward a learner-centered learning environment (Sluijsmans et al., 1998). Learner-centered learning environments co-opt the student into the learning process, encouraging active participation in their own development, and discouraging “passive, reproductive forms of learning” (Sluijsmans et al., 1998, p. 315).

In general, the objective of learner-centered learning environments is to develop competent, lifelong learners who reflect continuously on their

behavior and learning process (Moerkerke, 1996). Specifically, learner-centered learning environments provide multiple benefits: They

- (1) foster students' feelings of ownership for students' own learning,
- (2) motivate students and encourage their active involvement in learning,
- (3) make assessment a shared activity rather than a lone one (i.e., more objective),
- (4) promote a genuine interchange of ideas,
- (5) lead to more directed and effective learning,
- (6) encourage students to become more autonomous in learning,
- (7) signal to students that their experiences are valued and their judgments are respected,
- (8) develop transferable personal skills,
- (9) produce a community of learning in which students feel that they have influence and involvement,
- (10) reduce the teacher's workload (Rushton, Ramsey, & Rada, 1993),
- and (11) make students think more deeply, see how others tackle problems, pick up points and learn to criticize constructively. (Sluijsmans et al., 1998, p. 314)

Keith (1996) found that for learner-centered learning to be effective, students must put significant and meaningful energy into a self-assessment assignment. This promotes the sense of responsibility for self-learning and for skills development (Keith, 1996).

Self-reflection is not only a concern for students. Educational institutions are increasingly being mandated by accrediting agencies and other stakeholders to engage in assessment of learning outcomes. Effective assessment models are those that provide feedback to students about their own development as well as to institutions about the effectiveness of the educational environment in facilitating learning outcomes.

As Sluijsmans et al. (1998) point out, one of the most difficult and crucial aspects of self-assessment is to determine the criteria for assessment. Whereas many studies have developed typologies of necessary skills, we base our models on the Bases of Competence, the outcome of the *Making the Match* research program (Evers, Rush, & Berdrow, 1998). This is a general skills model and a framework for learner-centered skills development.

Considerable work has been done in the area of competencies, both in terms of identifying competencies important for success in the workplace as well as assessing an individual's performance of those competencies. The purpose of this article is to continue these discussions by offering two pedagogical designs that guide students in learning what competencies are important to their success while also offering opportunities for them to assess and develop their personal competencies within the context of any content-based course.

The foundation of our work is the Bases of Competence model, which we introduce and describe briefly, providing insights into competency development acquired from our originating research. Then we discuss self and program level assessment. Finally we present two pedagogical designs of learner-centered, self-reflective course-level initiatives.

Competency Model

The “Bases of Competence” is a model of the general skills used by higher education graduates in corporate employment. Changes in the workplace have focused attention on the skills needed by employees. This model is unique in that it concentrates on generalist skills needed by higher education graduates as a base supporting their specialist knowledge and skills. Our belief is that this model transcends the corporate world and is equally applicable to the public and not-for-profit sectors. We have found through ongoing case research and review of other studies that these skills are echoed throughout the workplace and by employers of many types.

Although we advocate this principle of competency-based education for general education, our main application is to business schools and the competencies required to be an effective manager (Boyatzis, Stubbs, & Taylor, 2002). We do so to address the overwhelming evidence that a gap exists between the higher education preparation of graduates (supply) and the workplace challenges faced by employees (demand; Cohen, 2003; Doria, Rozanski, & Cohen, 2004). We neither advocate for the “job market” to drive curriculum, nor do we advocate for “job training.” But we do advocate for recognition of the prerequisites for effective employability. The specific skills emphasized may vary, but the model proposed is generic and the principle of competency-based education is universally applicable.

The development of the bases of competence was part of a long-term research project entitled *Making the Match Between University Graduates and Corporate Employers* (Evers & Rush, 1996). This project analyzed skill competencies of university students and graduates working in organizations in Canada. Phase 1, which was commissioned by the Corporate–Higher Education Forum, examined the adequacy of university education for corporate employment. Phase 2 was conducted to investigate the skill development process from the early years of university to the 10-year point in individuals’ careers within Canadian corporations.

A survey methodology was used collecting data from 816 Students at 5 Ontario universities, 794 university graduates working in 20 organizations, and the managers of graduates. The longitudinal design allowed for data to be

collected across 3 years from respondents as they moved through five cohorts: Early University, Pre-Graduation, Job Entry, Job Change, and Stabilized Career.

A set of 18 skills form the heart of the questionnaires completed by students, graduates, and managers. The final model comprised 17 skills; technical skills were not included as our focus was on the general day-to-day work of college graduates. The skills were factor analyzed and four distinct combinations emerged: *Managing Self*, *Communicating*, *Managing People and Tasks*, and *Mobilizing Innovation and Change*. We found the 17 skills and 4 factors (see Table 1) to be consistent with the evolving literature on skills, and, we believe, they capture the current base competencies necessary to work in today's organizations. A more detailed presentation of the bases of competence is in Evers and Rush (1996) and Evers et al. (1998).

Bases of Competence Self-Assessment Instrument

The 4 base competences and 17 skills are assessed through a self-report instrument. A shortened version was developed from the original items that were used to develop the bases of competence. The question of whether to use self-reports or to structure peer assessment was debated. Given the application of the instrument in the context of a learner-centered learning environment engagement of the student in self-reflection was a core objective. In addition, a review of expert opinion determined that self-assessment would not skew the results, particularly because the results were used for self development rather than to evaluate performance.

Comparison of self and peer assessments of grading show little if any difference in performance metrics (Stefani, 1994; Malcolmson & Shaw, 2005). When looking at performance assessment, Stefani (1994) found that "use of the student marks in place of tutor marks would result in a similar ordering of individual performance with only the slightest tendency toward undermarking, particularly with high achievers, but no corresponding overmarking with low achievers." This refutes the claims of Falchikov and Boud (1989) that good students tend to underrate themselves whereas weaker students tend to overrate themselves. Dochy, Segers, and Sluijsmans's (1999) review of self-assessment studies concluded that

research reports positive findings concerning the use of self-assessment in educational practice . . . Self-assessment, used in most cases to promote the learning of skills and abilities, leads to more reflection on one's own work, a higher standard of outcomes, responsibility for one's own learning and increasing understanding of problem-solving. (p. 337)

Table 1. Making the Match Base Competencies and Skill Sets^a

Managing self: Constantly developing practices and internalizing routines for maximizing one's ability to deal with the uncertainty of an ever-changing environment

- Learning
- Personal organization/time management
- Personal strengths
- Problem solving/analytic

Communicating: Interacting effectively with a variety of individuals and groups to facilitate the gathering, integrating, and conveying of information in many forms (e.g., verbal, written)

- Interpersonal
- Listening
- Oral communication
- Written communication

Managing people and tasks: Accomplishing the tasks at hand by planning, organizing, coordinating, and controlling both resources and people

- Coordinating
- Decision making
- Leadership/influence
- Managing conflict
- Planning and organizing

Mobilizing innovation and change: Conceptualizing as well as setting in motion ways of initiating and managing change that involve significant departures from the current mode

- Ability to conceptualize
- Creativity/innovation/change
- Risk taking
- Visioning

SOURCE: Evers, Rush, and Berdrow, 1998.

a. Developed and refined as part of the "Making the Match" research project.

Because self-reflection is our objective, self-assessment of the bases of competence within the context of faculty guidance and feedback is appropriate.

Competency-Based Education and Assessment

The bases of competence skills model provides a common language for educators and employers and a framework for assessing the supply and demand gap between graduate abilities and employment needs. Competency-based education programs can be designed at three levels—institution, program, and course. At an institutional level, the mission can articulate and model

both knowledge and foundational competency development. For example, Alverno College in Milwaukee, Wisconsin has an acclaimed curriculum enabling students to cultivate integrative and expansive capabilities across a lifetime. At a program level, departments or disciplines can choose to enhance competency development within particular levels of the curriculum. For example, Babson College has developed an External Assessment Program for their undergraduate business students (Weintraub, Hunt, Brown, Bosse, & Schiffman, 1998). Bentley College uses a service learning program, the “Bentley Immigration Assistance Program,” to foster competence development in undergraduate students (Evers et al., 1998). Faculty may wish to have students do their portfolios electronically, for example, Carnegie’s KEEP (Knowledge, Exchange, Exhibit, and Presentation) Toolkit could be used to store and display all of the portfolio material. The KEEP Toolkit was developed by The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching’s Knowledge Media Lab. For a longer discussion of each, see Berdrow and Evers (in press).

For the purposes of this article, we focus on individual courses, where competency development opportunities are integrated with topical content and teaching methods for particular courses. Two particular models of course-level initiatives are presented here. These are both designed to incorporate self-directed learning (Boyatzis, 1994; Boyatzis, Cowen, & Kolb, 1995; Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2002). “Self-directed learning is self-directed change in which you are aware of the change and understand the process of change” (Boyatzis, 2004, p. 11). We argue that self-directed learning is a key factor for lifelong employability.

The first model is a competency-based course design, and the second model is a capstone course. In both these models, the hierarchical development is compressed to a one-course time period with emphasis placed on self assessment. The students focus on skills most in need of development at that point in time, while understanding that the reality of hierarchical skill development.

Although both examples are at a course level, the first is presented in much more detail due to the complexity of the course development and assessment. As educators, it is at the course level that we have the most control and can most directly influence our students. “As a faculty member, you can undertake few activities that will have greater impact on your students than active involvement in the design of a curriculum or a course you teach” (Diamond, 1998). We feel that the responsibility for an individual’s employability rests with that individual. Educators can provide the foundation for employability and employers can provide training and resources to enhance

employability, but ultimately the responsibility rests with the individual. The leadership must be shown by educators and employers to create a learning culture that transcends educational institutions and the workplace.

Model 1: Competency-Based Course Design

The skill development component of competency-based course design is based on three principles: awareness as a first step to skill development, skill development as an individual learner-centered process, and self-reflection on skill development experiences. Students not only need the knowledge of what the skills are and how to recognize them, but they also need to reflect on their level of competence and to take individual responsibility for increasing that level. These principles provide two requirements for self-directed learning: opportunities for, and safe settings in which, to experiment and practice (Boyatzis, 2004).

The competency-based course design is based on a matrix structure that overlays a competency development component onto a topical course content. The intent of the matrix course design is to introduce students to competency development while delivering the specifics of a management topic such as psychology or organizational behavior. The share of resources and rewards (class time and grades) allocated to competency development is proportionately smaller than that allocated to course content as is appropriate given the secondary nature of this learning objective.

The competency component follows the suggestions of Bigelow (1996) that a hybrid approach to teaching skills is most effective. A hybrid approach integrates both a conceptual and a descriptive approach. The conceptual approach traditionally focuses on external knowledge about skills and assumes that understanding results from studying the concepts. A descriptive (experiential) approach focuses on the learner and assumes that practice leads to understanding and knowledge. The hybrid approach has three components: conceptual, descriptive, and a connecting component. The competency-based course design model provides the conceptual understanding of the skills, the descriptive practice of using those skills through different types of assignments and activities, and connects the two through the student portfolio.

Students are provided a handbook of specific steps to take in completing the skill portfolio requirement of the course. At the beginning of the semester, students are given background information about the skills to develop their awareness. We first describe a skills portfolio and then discuss the particular steps in this requirement.

Portfolio development. One method of enabling people to demonstrate their employability is with a “skills portfolio.” Just as artists display their work in a portfolio, students can prepare portfolios of their technical and generic skills. Portfolios are typically notebooks, divided into skill areas. Students put materials into the different sections that demonstrate their abilities.

One of the problems that a lot of college students have as they approach graduation and the daunting task of finding a job is that they do not know what skills they possess. They have a transcript that shows what courses they have taken and their grades. They know what extracurricular activities they have engaged in, but they cannot translate this information into a list of skills of value to employers. Portfolios help students identify their skills.

At the end of the course, students are required to hand in a synopsis of their competency portfolio, which includes self-assessments, a write-up of the occasions that proved particularly helpful in developing their chosen skill or that highlighted their need to improve, and a statement of their ongoing goals for competency development.

The portfolio for the Competency-Based Course Design includes

- self-assessment of 17 skills (Learning, Personal Organization/Time Management, Personal Strengths, Problem Solving/Analytic, Interpersonal, Listening, Oral Communication, Written Communication, Coordinating, Decision Making, Leadership/Influence, Managing Conflict, Planning and Organizing, Ability to Conceptualize, Creativity/Innovation/Change, Risk Taking, Visioning);
- four specific goals, determined by the student; one for a weaker skill in each of the four base competencies (Managing Self, Communicating, Managing People and Tasks, Mobilizing Innovation and Change);
- developmental progress: written reflections on whether or not goals were achieved, the difficulties encountered, evidence of success or difficulties; in particular, reflections on situations that highlighted the need for that skill or that proved particularly challenging in applying the skill; and
- future goal statement.

The self-assessment instrument is shown in Table 2 and guidelines for the development of the portfolio are given in Table 3. Other sections may be included such as those incorporated into our second model, the Capstone Course.

Table 2. Self-Assessment Instrument

⇒Rate your skills; put a ✓ in the column that best represents your present skill level for each of the skills . . .

| Competencies and Skills | Very High | High | Average | Low | Very Low |
|---|-----------|------|---------|-----|----------|
| <p>Managing self:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Learning</i>: involves the ability to gain knowledge from every-day experiences and formal education experiences • <i>Personal organization/time management</i>: involves managing several tasks at once, being able to set priorities and to allocate time efficiently in order to meet deadlines • <i>Personal strengths</i>: comprises maintaining a high energy level; motivating oneself to function at optimal levels of performance; functioning in stressful situations; maintaining a positive attitude; working independently, and responding appropriately to constructive criticism • <i>Problem solving/analytic</i>: consists of identifying, prioritizing, and solving problems; individually or in groups. Includes the ability to ask the right questions, sort out the many facets of a problem, and contribute ideas as well as answers regarding the problem <p>Communicating:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Interpersonal</i>: involves working well with others, understanding their needs, and being sympathetic with them • <i>Listening</i>: involves being attentive when others are speaking, and responding effectively to others' comments during a conversation | | | | | |

(continued)

Table 2. (continued)

| Competencies and Skills | Very High | High | Average | Low | Very Low |
|---|-----------|------|---------|-----|----------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Oral communication</i>: involves the ability to present information verbally to others, either one-to-one or in groups • <i>Written communication</i>: involves the effective writing of formal reports and business correspondence, as well as informal notes and memos | | | | | |
| <p>Managing people and tasks:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Coordinating</i>: involves being able to coordinate the work of others and encourage positive group relationships • <i>Decision making</i>: involves making timely decisions on the basis of a thorough assessment of the short- and long-term effects of decisions, recognizing the political and ethical implications, and being able to identify those who will be affected by the decisions made • <i>Leadership/influence</i>: involves the ability to give direction and guidance to others and to delegate work tasks to others in a manner which proves to be effective, and motivates others to do their best • <i>Managing conflict</i>: involves the ability to identify sources of conflict between oneself and others, or among other people, and to take steps to overcome disharmony • <i>Planning and organizing</i>: involves being able to determine the tasks to be carried out toward meeting objectives, perhaps assigning some of the tasks to others, monitoring the progress made against the plan, and revising a plan to include new information | | | | | |

(continued)

Table 2. (continued)

| Competencies and Skills | Very High | High | Average | Low | Very Low |
|--|-----------|------|---------|-----|----------|
| Mobilizing innovation and change: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Ability to conceptualize</i>: involves the ability to combine relevant information from a number of sources, to integrate information into more general contexts, and to apply information to new or broader contexts • <i>Creativity/innovation/change</i>: involves the ability to adapt to situations for change, at times initiating change and providing “novel” solutions to problems • <i>Risk taking</i>: involves taking reasonable risks by recognizing alternative or different ways of meeting objectives, while at the same time recognizing the potential negative outcomes and monitoring the progress toward the set objectives • <i>Visioning</i>: involves the ability to conceptualize the future of the organization or group and provide innovative paths for the organization or group to follow | | | | | |

Although the portfolio is graded, the purpose is motivational rather than evaluative. If a grade is not assigned, students unfortunately would not engage in the exercise. Student’s currency in a course is grades. Unless they are graduate students with work-life experience, they take their cues about what is important from the distribution of rewards, in this case, grades. Therefore, if a portion of the grade—a precious commodity for the instructor and the student—is assigned to the portfolio, the message is “this is important.” The grade is based on effort and completeness, not progress in skill development. In this model, progress in skill development is self-assessed against the students’ own measure of acceptability, usually compared with peer performance and instructor demands. It could also be

Table 3. Guidelines for Competency-Based Course Portfolio

A portfolio is a collection of materials which shows progression in a particular area. An artist compiles a portfolio to show his or her artistic capabilities and developments. A model compiles a portfolio to show his or her talents in different settings. A professor compiles a portfolio to record his or her development of teaching materials and skills

Your portfolio should contain a collection of reflections or materials describing your understanding and development of the four base competencies. Typically a portfolio is a notebook or file divided into sections for each competency. It could contain reflective journals, notes about exercises, assignments, extracurricular or school events, or recognition from others. The purpose is to organize and present your skill improvement efforts and outcomes

The portfolio must include the following sections: (grades will be reduced for missing sections)

- *Self assessment:* a copy of the self-rating sheet completed at the beginning of the term
- *Four specific goals:* As we complete each module, you will be asked to set one goal for yourself to work on over the next 2 to 3 weeks. The goal should relate to your weakest skill within the competency discussed. The goal needs to be a clear statement of what you will strive to accomplish, how to hope to accomplish it, over what time period you will work on the goal and how you will measure your success
- *Developmental progress:* For each of the goals you set, you will write a reflection on whether or not you achieved the goal, the difficulties you may have had in doing so and what evidence you have that you were successful or not. In particular, reflect on situations that highlighted the need for that skill or that proved particularly challenging in applying the skill
- *Future goal statement:* Reflect on your progress through the term specific to competency development and discuss your plans for continuing your competency improvement in the future

assessed against standards if faculty developed specific rubrics for each skill. These rubrics would indicate performance at *exceeds expectations*, *acceptable*, and *unacceptable* levels. However, the model proposed here strives to create awareness and instill developmental practices rather than measure specific outcomes.

Self-rated measures. As part of the competence requirement, students are asked to complete a self-assessment questionnaire at the beginning of the semester. Students assess their confidence in each of the 17 skills that make up the 4 base competencies. These student competency ratings provide a diagnostic evaluation for students so that they can improve on the ones where they are weaker.

Goal setting. For each of the four base competencies, with consideration to their self-ratings, students develop goals to work on for a brief period of time during the semester. The goals relate to one or two of the specific skills that the student found particularly troublesome. Throughout the given time period, students work on their goals, recording their experiences and reflecting on their success at the end of that time period. The purpose is not to become proficient in each competency by the end of the course, rather to experience the process of identifying, recognizing, practicing, and reflecting on each.

The choice of particular skills to focus on individualizes the effort, so that students are not forced into focusing on skills they are already proficient in, particularly because course time devoted to this activity is limited. For example, a particular challenge for freshmen is *personal organization/time management*. A goal for improvement may be to have assignments completed before the due date so there is time for review and editing. The action plan may be to obtain a personal planner and schedule in assignment work times that correspond with deadlines. Students could track the times at which assignments are started and completed relative to due dates, and compare these efforts with grades achieved to determine if their efforts are paying off.

Reflection and extension. At the end of the course, once all goals have been worked on, students are asked to reflect on their experiences and the potential impact on their employability. The reflections are written retrospectively based on their thoughts about how much effort they did (or should have) put into the project and what they felt they got out of their efforts. Invariably, students will begin this section with statements about their initial skepticism about the merits of the project, which then evolve into insights of how important this work was to their self-understanding.

In addition, they consider how they might continue working on the competencies in the future. This discussion is an action plan for future development work based on their self assessment and goals.

Opportunity and practice. The course is structured such that students are called on to engage all of the competencies at some time or other, either in preparation for the class or during in-class activities. As well, on various occasions throughout the course, discussions and assignment questions focus on process issues that relate to the various skills. During the semester, students are expected to keep track of situations that created awareness of the need for the skill or allowed them to practice the skill.

Four competency modules are presented during the course to provide students with greater understanding of each. These are finite time periods to work on each skill and make natural progressions to the next competency. The module design consists of four double-class sessions, one for each

competency. The modules are tied to topics within the course so the overlay of knowledge acquisition with competency development is maintained, but the modules focus on creating awareness and experiencing the competency within the context of a specific course topic. Table 4 draws the connection between instructional methods and competencies. Note that specific skills can be added as rows to determine how they will be accomplished.

Practical considerations. The modules should accommodate the hierarchical nature of the competencies. The research has shown that *Managing Self* and *Communicating* are prerequisites for developing competence in *Managing People and Tasks* and *Mobilizing Innovation and Change*. This hierarchy describes the way in which individuals learn the competencies. Their competence in the first two will influence their competence in the second two. Therefore, the modules should be ordered to accommodate that hierarchical development. The caveat, as previously mentioned, is that the practice and development time is compressed. The intent is for students to understand the competencies, recognize the hierarchical nature, and then choose specific skills to focus on given their self assessment at the time. The program and institution level design should identify specific courses that address particular skills and ensure the hierarchical development is achieved.

This competency-based course overlay example can be applied to any general education or degree program course throughout the four years of undergraduate education. The second example of competency-based course design, the Capstone Course, applies to the final year of higher education to facilitate the students' preparation for the workplace.

Model 2: Capstone Course

"Senior year experience," (Gardner & Van der Veer, 1998), "transition from school to work," and "capstone" courses and programs are gaining popularity as a means of assisting college graduates with their entry into professional programs, graduate education, and, especially, the workplace. A variety of applications are evolving, with some oriented to students' entire undergraduate program and others as specific courses offered in the last year of undergraduate programs. Some are very specific to academic programs, such as psychology, whereas others are more general, dealing with issues that affect all graduating students. Dr. John N. Gardner and his colleagues provide a "syllabus of a senior capstone transition course" for psychology students at the University of South Carolina in Gardner and Van der Veer (1998, pp. 303-311).

The goals of transition from school to work courses include increasing students' awareness of their options on graduation, discussing the realities of

Table 4. Connecting Instructional Methods to Competencies

| Competency | Course Work | | | |
|---|-------------|---------------|---------------------|----------|
| | Group Work | Participation | Written Assignments | Projects |
| <i>Managing self</i> | * | * | * | * |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning • Personal organization/ time management • Personal strengths • Problem solving/ analytic | | | | |
| <i>Communicating</i> | * | * | * | * |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interpersonal • Listening • Oral • Written | | | | |
| <i>Managing people and tasks</i> | * | | * | * |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coordinating • Decision making • Leadership/influence • Managing conflict • Planning and organizing | | | | |
| <i>Mobilizing innovation and change</i> | * | | | * |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ability to conceptualize • Creativity/innovation/ change • Risk taking • Visioning | | | | |
| <i>Specific skills</i> | | | * | * |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Computing expertise in word processing • Spreadsheets • Statistical packages • Foreign languages • Etc. | | | | |

the workplace, and providing students with an opportunity and framework for self-reflection and assessment of their own skills. One example provided here is called Transition from School to Work offered to fourth year

undergraduates at the University of Guelph. The course provides an example of managing the transition into the workforce in higher education programs.

Transitions students discuss the changes taking place in organizations and work, and the general skills needed by university graduates in the workplace. The ongoing changes in organizations—flatter structures, less management, team approaches, employee empowerment—have changed the way work is accomplished and, in turn, have created a need for a combination of generalist and specialist skills in advanced level jobs. Transition issues, such as the change from the role of “student” to “employee” or “entrepreneur,” are also studied.

Guest speakers are invited to the class to discuss their personal transitions from school to work. Students are very interested in the way others have made the transition and are now working in exciting jobs related to the social sciences. Guest speakers also cover specialized topics such as job interviewing from a human resource manager’s perspective. Student services experts are invited to the class to discuss practical topics such as resume and cover letter preparation.

Skills portfolio. There are two major assignments in the course: “skills portfolios” and “action projects.” Creating a skills portfolio is at the heart of the course—the content is listed in Table 5. As described in the first model, Skills Portfolios are an excellent way to reflect on education and work experience and prepare for job searching, job interviews, and career development.

The skills portfolios contain a personal mission statement, an intellectual autobiography, résumés in alternative formats, example cover letters, record of job interviewing experience, and a presentation (with support material) of the development of skills in each of the four “Bases of Competence:” *Managing Self, Communicating, Managing People and Tasks, and Mobilizing Innovation and Change* (Evers et al., 1998). The personal mission statement style that we use is a one-sentence version described by Jones in her book, *The Path: Creating Your Mission Statement for Work and for Life* (1996). A methodology for creating a personal mission statement is carefully explained in this book. The intellectual autobiography is a three- to five-page overview of the students’ intellectual development thus far. Basically, it consists of the students’ stories about schooling, volunteer work, paid work, travel, and other experiences. Writing this autobiography helps students get started on the self-reflection necessary to undertaking the skill sections. Students are asked not to put any confidential information in the autobiography.

The self-reflection on the base competencies and the skills within each base is the most difficult aspect of the development of the portfolio. Although

Table 5. Guidelines for Transition From School to Work Course Portfolio

Purpose: The intent of the Skills Portfolio is to serve as a framework for self-assessment, career planning, and preparation for job interviews. It will be a record of your skill development to date. I hope that you like the format and find the portfolio useful enough that you will want to continue to use it and update the contents periodically

Format: Within the parameters specified below, you may set up the portfolio in whatever way seems best for your purposes. Required ingredients:

- Résumé
- Mock cover letters
- Record of mock and real job interviews: include key points that you want to remember from mock and real (optional) interviews
- Personal mission statement: a single statement that captures your work and life goals (see *The Path: Creating Your Mission Statement for Work and for Life* by Laurie Beth Jones, 1996)
- Intellectual autobiography: in two or three pages describe your intellectual development so far. This will serve as “your story” and as an introduction to the skills development sections of the portfolio
- Making the Match Base Competencies and Skill Sets Self-Assessment sheet: Note in your story and/or interviews to the skill sections how you may try to further develop specific bases or skills
- Evidence of skills development: this is the bulk of the portfolio. Organize using the four Bases of Competence developed in the “Making the Match” research project (Managing Self, Communication, Managing People and Tasks, and Mobilizing Innovation and Change). Within each of the Bases, use the specific skills to help determine the material for that section. The evidence can consist of papers; presentations; discussion of work and volunteer experiences; discussion of courses (credit and noncredit); booklets, handouts and other material you have prepared; your homepage; and any other relevant material
- In addition to this material, you are encouraged to add information on specific skills such as computing expertise in word processing, spreadsheets, statistical packages, Web page development, fluency in languages, and other skills pertinent to your career

Evaluation: Your skill portfolios will be reviewed and evaluated on content, completeness, innovativeness, and format. You will *not* be graded on the basis of your skill competencies. You are *not* going to be penalized or compared with other students in terms of your level of skill development. We will be looking at how well you present the content of the portfolio. We will prepare a separate sheet to provide you with feedback so that we do not have to write directly on material in your portfolio

bafling to some students at the start of the course, by the end many students note that the exercise was both eye-opening and worthwhile. A number of students comment that the competency component of the portfolio provided

them with relevant information about themselves that they could continue to reflect on and use in the future.

Feedback from alumni who have taken the Transition from School to Work course at the University of Guelph has been very positive. Alumni comment that the portfolio is useful in job interviewing and career development. Graduates comment on how they have continued to update and use their skills portfolios. Another important outcome of the process of developing a skills portfolio is that it builds students' self-confidence. They learn that a university education does help students develop and refine skills valued by employers.

Action project. Students also conduct research on a topic of interest to them. They are asked to select a topic that relates to what they intend to do when they graduate. The topics can be almost any issue or problem that is researchable and has an "action" element. Teams are encouraged as long as the topic relates to two, three, or four students (teams of two are the most common). For example, two female students who were in the criminal justice stream within sociology and about to apply to become police officers, looked at gender issues in Ontario police forces. Another team of students who want to be social workers investigated the availability of services for children with special needs and developed a Web site with links to many resources.

The action projects give students an opportunity to apply their knowledge and skills to a "real-world" problem, similar to a senior year or capstone project. By including the project within a transition course or program, students are able to relate the work to the self-reflection process under way for the skills portfolio.

There are many ways to offer competency-based transition to work programs and courses. The key aspects include (a) self-reflection of knowledge and skills that relate to desired careers, (b) development of a skills portfolio, and (c) application of the knowledge and skills to problems and issues relevant to the discipline.

Conclusion

Our business environment is changing and within it the realities of employment. As educators it is our responsibility to prepare our students for those realities. If they are to become employable and independent individuals who contribute to society and their own personal development, they need the requisite skills. We pack our syllabi with topical course content, but that is no longer enough. Students need to be able to apply personal skills, as well as knowledge, to be successful employees in the changing environment of business, whether they are the product of a liberal arts or professional degree program. This article presented a framework and practical model for

ensuring our students are not short-changed in their education. The two models highlighted in this article depict competency-based course design and can be easily adopted by instructors of any subject matter.

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