thinkpoint

What institutional changes would promote competency-based education models?

By John Lane

Introduction

Performance assessments, the formative assessment process, and student-centered classrooms all contribute to the success of competency-based education (CBE) models

of classroom instruction. But classrooms function within institutions. So what institutionalized practices will have to be overturned for the principles of competency-based education to become reality in classrooms?

Institutions and Institutionalization

The terms institutions and institutionalization are used in a variety of different ways, and differences in usage make their meanings elusive. Institutions have been defined as "established, traditional, habitual, legitimate ways a society carries out its business" (Charon, 2002, p. 110). They are tasked with solving important problems a society faces. Schools are institutions charged with ensuring that all students are ready for citizenship and economic productivity.

As in any institution, school professionals over time establish *what* they will do and what the key features of schooling will be. Most notably, schools set expectations for *what* students will learn. They also establish *how* educational activities will be structured. Traditionally, students have been grouped in batches of age-alike peers and placed into corresponding grades. Finally, schools determine *who* will be involved in what students will learn and how they will learn it. Schools are filled with many different roles (e.g., principals, teachers, students, parents) and each has a different part to play. Once the what, how, and who are well established and each person sticks to his or her role, the what, how, and who that frame common activities have become *institutionalized*.

In sum, then, institutions are groups of people who come together to solve important problems, and they negotiate common and predictable ways of doing things. These common and predictable ways structure the what, the how, and the who of institutional activity and, in turn, become well known as the status quo.

Institutionalized practices and the principles of competency-based education

Any institutional change will necessarily alter the *what*, the *how*, and the *who* that control common activities. However, because institutions and their institutionalized practices (i.e., the what, how, and who) are well established, institutional change can be frustratingly slow. For example, public schools have faced constant and harsh criticism for over 100 years and yet have been slow to change. Most schools (i.e., educational institutions) operate in familiar and traditional ways despite the fact that critics are skeptical that the what, how, and who of the institution align with a set of best practices that would allow the institution to address societal challenges more effectively.

Table 1. Comparison of CBE Principles and Common Institutionalized Practices

Principles of Competency Based Education (Glowa & Goodell, 2016)	Common Features of American Schooling Institutions
Learning is personalized.	All students are presented with the same content and expected to learn it in the same way.
Learning is competency-based.	Student progress in school is divorced from their mastery of academic content.
Learning happens anytime, anywhere.	Only learning that occurs in classrooms has institutional value.
Students take ownership of their learning.	Teachers control classroom interaction. Teachers extend distilled knowledge to students.

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Principles of competency-based education conflict with the institutionalized practices of most schools. There is much more to the challenge of reimagining schools, then, than promoting change strictly at the individual classroom level. Institutional change is needed.

Glowa and Goodell (2016) further contend that institutional change that leads to alignment with CBE principles would lead to a variety of benefits including decreased drop-out rates, increased college acceptances, increased student achievement in math and reading, improved student engagement, better student behavior, and enhanced student agency.

A closer consideration of Glowa and Goodell's four principles suggests a greater concentration on the how and the who than on the what of schooling. In other words, institutionalized practices that must change to align institutional practices to the principles of CBE concern *how* activities are structured and *who* is responsible for conducting each of the activities.

How school activities are structured matters

The first principle, personalized learning, primarily involves how learning activities are structured. Glowa and Goodell (2016) explain that:

> Personalized learning recognizes that students engage in different ways and in different places. Students benefit from individually paced, targeted learning tasks that formatively assess existing skills and knowledge and that address the student's needs and interests. (p.4).

Historically, schools have focused on batch processing of students and standardized treatment (Callahan, 1964; Tyack, 1974). Traditional institutionalized practices in schools assume that all students arrive with similar needs and interests and that they learn in similar ways.

Glowa and Goodell's second principle is that learning is competency-based and that students only "move ahead when they have demonstrated mastery of content" (p. 4). Again, this principle stands in stark contrast to common institutionalized practice in which students are "socially promoted" regardless of their academic accomplishments.

The third principle states that "learning happens anytime, anywhere" (p. 4) when, traditionally, only the learning done in the classroom during seat time has had much value.

The fourth and final principle is perhaps the most important and consequently, this Learning Point addresses this principle at length. In Glowa and Goodell's and the Nellie Mae Education Foundation's vision of CBE, students must take "ownership" of their learning. This means that learning will be student-centered and oriented toward mastery of rigorous academic content and based on student backgrounds and funds of knowledge. Students will take full advantage of opportunities to demonstrate their understanding through what they say, make, or demonstrate. They also make sense of and respond to feedback from self, peers, and the teacher. Furthermore, they will assess their peer's work against common standards for mastery. Finally, teachers will continue to craft educative activities for students based on their evolving understanding at the same time students are acting on feedback to maximize their learning.

In conclusion, the principles of competency-based education conflict with the institutionalized practices of most schools. There is much more to the challenge of reimagining schools, then, than promoting change strictly at the individual classroom level. Institution-al change is needed.

Who is responsible for institutional change?

While we should not underestimate the power of one teacher to institute the competency-based education principles in their classroom, broad institutional changes will require a concerted effort. Institutionalized roles (i.e., "the who") must change dramatically and this will involve students, teachers, school leaders, and parents. Because it is likely that the push for competency-based

education—if it is to come at all—will come from school leaders and teachers, their commitment is prerequisite.

School leaders may be among the first CBE enthusiasts. School leaders can help establish the conditions required for competency-based education to be a success. They can help set the vision for competency-based education and share this vision with teachers, students, and parents. They can explain that institutional activities will feature personalized learning, promotion based on mastery, and flexible learning environments. School leaders can also set expectations for the student-centered classroom and the use of the formative assessment process and couple these expectations with robust opportunities for teachers to learn, collaborate, try and fail, and try again. Furthermore, school leaders might communicate to parents and students new expectations and principle-aligned practices and anticipate the resistance that might emerge as institutionalized practices are upset.

Teachers can commit to their own growth and development while at the same time working with and learning from colleagues. As teachers engage in institutional change efforts, they will need a collective commitment to work with colleagues and other stakeholders to address challenges as they come up.

Parents can be staunch upholders of the status quo, but also they can be powerful agents for institutional change. Parents are accustomed to advocating for their children in an institutional system that they understand. They are likely to be concerned as these arrangements are altered. They may feel disconnected from what is happening in their children's school and may be uncertain about how best to offer their support. In moments of frustration, parents, too, will benefit from reflecting on the difficulty of deep institutional change. In these moments, they can talk with their children about how both the student and parent roles are changing and why this can sometimes be difficult. Parents can also be patient with school leaders and teachers as they enact practices that are unfamiliar and potentially confusing.

Students may play the most important role of all. Perhaps most students will be enthused about their new more active role that requires them to demonstrate mastery before moving on. Inevitably, however, some portion of students will find this new role challenging. At times, all students will likely want to retreat to a more passive role because learning is difficult, exhausting, and sometimes frustrating. Students can capitalize on these apparently negative feelings by asking themselves what this new institutional role is asking of them and why the new demands are eliciting these feelings. Students can also reflect on moments of intellectual insight and accomplishment that are also associated with a more active role, and keep in mind that rigorous learning will sometimes encompass a wide range of feelings and experiences.

Change can be daunting because the institutional status quo is so well established and so infrequently questioned. However, institutional change is possible and will be necessary for the principles of competency-based education to be realized.

may feel less effective at first and their efforts may draw them into direct conflict with others, especially students and parents. Teachers will likely benefit from knowing in advance that the principles of CBE are promising, but the road ahead will be a challenging one. Substantive institutional change is difficult, and teachers

Conclusion

Institutional change can be daunting because the institutional status quo is so well established and so infrequently questioned. However, institutional change is possible and will be necessary for the principles of competency-based education to be realized. Deep institutional change will demand that students, teachers, educational leaders, and parents negotiate new roles at the same time they are changing how the foundational activities of schooling are carried out.

This ThinkPoint seeks to generate greater understanding of the challenges ahead and provoke initial thoughts to help people take the first step.

Reflection Points

1. **How, if at all, did this ThinkPoint influence your thinking about the status quo? What does the Think Point suggest makes the status quo so difficult to change?**

2. **Consider the "Common Features of American Schooling" presented in Table 1. In your experiences are the common features institutionalized in the schools you have worked in? Would you add any institutionalized common features to the Table? If so, what would these features be?**

3. **This ThinkPoint suggests that institutionalized practices in education are currently geared more toward efficiency than effectiveness. If educators attempt to enact CBE practices (thus increasing effectiveness), what challenges might emerge (especially those related to efficiency)? How might educators plan for and approach these challenges?**

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Resources for further learning

Moving toward mastery: Growing, developing and sustaining educators for competency-based education, by Katherine Casey. (Competency Works 2018).
www.michiganassessmentconsortium.org/wp-content/uploads/CBE-Moving-Toward-Mastery.pdf

Deeper competency-based learning: Making equitable, student-centered, sustainable shifts, by Karin Hess, Rose Colby, Daniel Joseph (Corwin 2020)
us.corwin.com/books/competency-based-270688

The Michigan Assessment Consortium offers a curated collection of assessment resources that can support a competency-based education model. Explore and share!
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