RETRACTED: The importance of competency development in higher education: Letting go of rote learning

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Introduction

The world has changed a lot in the past few decades, and it continues to change. Technology development has accelerated, and this is also true of social changes and changes related to specific jobs (Pfeiffer, 2021). The job of the future might not exist yet, and old industries are shifting quickly (Halberstadt et al., 2019). This new landscape has led to a ripple of changes across educational institutions as well, because traditional paradigms no longer meet the demands and expectations of this new reality (Kjellgren and Richter, 2021). The traditional approach has been slowly replaced by a focus on competencies, and there are good reasons to push forward for a competency-based approach (Ibarra-Sáiz et al., 2020). The terms competence and competency are often used interchangeably, and we will be employing competency in the sense of having specific abilities, a product of learning and a foundation for action (Chan et al., 2013; Shevyakova et al., 2021). The article discussed the importance of focusing on competency development in lieu of knowledge-based learning in higher business education.

Discussion

The role of competence-based education

The current job market does not offer opportunities on the basis of a degree alone. Rather, there is an increased search for people who can do things, who can respond to problems and offer solutions (Wallo et al., 2020). In short, there is a search for people who can "take action" rather than those who have knowledge (Velasco et al., 2014). Employers look for people who have skills like communication, teamwork, and beyond, as well as those who can develop new skills as required, who can learn new competencies and put them in practice (Konrad et al., 2019). This suggests that employers seek graduates who have not just knowledge but the combination of skills, knowledge, and ability to put their expertise in practice that can be defined by the word competence or competency. However, it is not just that this is something requested or required by employers. It becomes necessary because the world demands it as well.

If before, people could get a job, get promoted within the same company and then retire from the same place, today, that is a lot less common. Between the ages of 18 and 24, people change jobs 5.7 times on average, and, while that number decreases with age, it still remains higher than 1. Fifty-three percentage of adults will use half of their education or less in their jobs, and many more will shift careers, sometimes once, sometimes more than once (ApolloTechnical, 2022). This means that people will often rely not on the specific knowledge they acquired from university but more general abilities, as well as the capacity to acquire new skills as required. This is why competencies are especially important. There are several competencies that become particularly significant in the modern world. Competence means that you have the ability to do something well. You are capable of performing a task or job effectively (Zhiping, 2020).

Competence can include the knowledge and skills needed to solve a quadratic equation. Or, it can comprise the much larger and more diverse clusters of skills, or competencies, needed to lead a multinational corporation. The concept of competence is creeping into our lives, pervading our thinking about developing people of all ages—from new babes to weathered professionals. We find it in modern human resources departments in our workplace, and in innovating schools experimenting with competence-based education. Is defined as the capacity to respond to individual, or societal, demands in order to perform an activity or complete a given task.

They are developed through acting and interacting in both formal and informal educational or professional contexts, and require going beyond the mere reproduction of acquired knowledge. At its highest level, this conceptualization of competence implies to choose and adapt from within the acquired processes those ones necessary to solve an unknown complex task or problem. The ability to action something successfully or efficiently. Also synonymously referred to as "skills".

One that has received a lot of attention, both positive and negative, is intercultural competence (Gregersen-Hermans, 2017). This refers to the ability to understand and respect other cultures and operate successfully within diverse teams (McGill et al., 2020). The competency can serve the individual within a variety of fields and contexts and becomes essential for working in a globalized world. Universities and schools are becoming aware of this and consider intercultural competencies a part of their program. But at the same time, in many educational contexts, the term becomes a catch-all concept or is given insufficient attention (Gregersen-Hermans, 2017). While competencies are becoming more popular, they are not always integrated fully into the curriculum, given enough attention, or differentiated from more traditional approaches in a meaningful way.

This shows that countries and institutions have been slower or faster in adopting this model. While there is some consensus in the literature on the benefits of a competency-based model over other forms of education and the requirements for new approaches, this has not always been enough to spur institutions into action, which means that even institutions that state they use competencies have sometimes held back, something that can negatively affect the employability of their students.

The role of higher education

Higher education is expected to provide professional attributes more in line with competence models, albeit not all schools have adapted to it and have been quick to modernize their approaches. But what is the alternative? Traditional approaches often focus more on rote learning. This is especially true of some spaces. For example, a paper focused on Pakistan context mentions rote learning as the leading approach on all levels of education from elementary to higher education and how it is something that keeps students from acquiring 21st century skills. Rote learning is focused on memorization rather than deep learning. It also does not consider practical applications or skills as much, rather centering on reproducing knowledge close to the text (Ahmed and Ahmed, 2017).

The problems of rote learning have been described in the literature (Ahmed and Ahmed, 2017). While it is useful for simpler skills, it does not offer a deeper understanding of the subject and it does not create opportunities to apply the knowledge beyond the basics. The modern world demands greater and more flexible skills that can be used in practice. Rote does not allow for flexibility because the knowledge is expressed and memorized as is, on a superficial level, which often means the person can reproduce what they know but not modify it or use it creatively.

There are many different models that describe competencies and that outline the specific competencies that universities should focus on (Fuchs, 2021). Some common ones include self-confidence, problem solving, communication, critical thinking, flexibility, innovation, creativity, application of knowledge, and more, as well as career management and job-specific competencies that might vary from school to school. A competency-based model does not neglect specific knowledge, such as human anatomy for doctors or programming languages for IT specialists (Sáez-López et al., 2021).

The competence-based model works to ensure that students emerge with the main basic skills that can be adapted for practice right away and that also can be modified depending on what they require later in life. Instead of offering specialized knowledge or, rather, only specialized knowledge, the objective is to also bring generalizable skills that students will be able to use later on.

But if the competence model offers so many benefits, why has it not been yet adopted everywhere? Why are there systems that continue to focus on rote learning or other traditional

TABLE 1   A comparison of characteristics between rote learning vs. competency-based learning [adopted from Crosslin (2016)].

Characteristics of rote learning	Characteristics of competency-based learning
Passive learning: mere memorization of facts	Active and immersive learning
Short-term recall	Long-term understanding
Retention of knowledge	Transfer of knowledge (using existing knowledge to solve new problems)
Faster, quicker way to remember information	A gradual process leading to a more comprehensive understanding of concepts
Difficult to focus, mental exhaustion	Engaging and fun
Little to no development of cognitive skills such as logical-thinking, analyzing, reasoning, or problem-solving	Opportunity to fine-tune cognitive skills

approaches that center knowledge? Change is not easy and requires a significant overhaul of existing practices. This takes time and investment, as well as significant effort, which might not always be possible for all institutions. Traditional programs remain in place, and many educators have been working with these throughout their lives.

The modern world changes quickly and demands far more advanced skills from people pursuing higher education. They need to solve problems in novel ways, create skills and promote innovation. It is not enough to reproduce what they know, but people have to adapt it to new situations. Due to changes in technology and other advancements, the world shifts constantly. One example that illustrates the use of general competencies was the recent pandemic. It meant major changes to people's lifestyles and jobs, the need to adapt quickly and work independently from home. Managers and employees had to use their competencies to fit with their new situation and continue to thrive even as the world around them massively changed.

Moreover, rote learning is deeply embedded in the basis of the educational theory of instructivism. The ideology of that theory maintains a stance that knowledge should be transferred directly into the mind of the learner from the instructor (Crosslin, 2016). An opposing viewpoint is the educational theory of constructivism, which supports competency development over mere memorization techniques

(as summarized for comparison in Table 1). Competency-based learning begins by identifying specific competencies or skills and enables learners to develop mastery of each competency or skill at their own pace (Crosslin, 2016).

Conclusion

Competencies prepare people to face the world, whether they end up working in something directly related to their education or changing careers because there is a high probability that they will change careers at some point in their professional life. Competencies cover more general skills and develop the person for the modern world with all its high demands and requirements. While it cannot be said that a competence-based model will be the future of all education, it is a better option at the moment. It strives to develop general skills and responds to the demands of an increasingly fast-paced and changing world, so it better serves students and higher learning institutions. It might also better help society, offering more people the chance to develop skills like communication, critical thinking, and beyond that can be applied beyond a single workplace. They can help people make a change in their relationships, communities, and their projects as well.

Author contributions

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

Conflict of interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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