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Competency based education can promote development of a positive self concept in students.

Competency based education: catalyst for reform

by Howard D. Hill



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For nearly a decade, competency based teacher education (CBTE) has been widely discussed among those whose major commitment is the preparation of teachers.¹ Its strongest supporters view it as an agent for educational reform and as a vehicle for bringing more humanistic attitudes to evaluation of student performance. Detractors of competency based education attack it as being anti-intellectual and costly, as well as providing the means for dehumanizing education.²

This paper presents a rationale in support of the competency based approach as a method for improving teacher training and educational programs.

Before examining some underlying assumptions of competency based education, a definition is in order. According to McCleary, the term "competency based education" is used with such abandon that there is danger of its usefulness being destroyed. Unfortunately, the term has as many meanings as there are people presenting themselves as "experts" in the field.³ Hamilton provides the following definition of CBTE:

... this approach can be defined as one which specifies objectives in explicit form and holds prospective teachers accountable for meeting them. Teacher competencies and measures for evaluating them are specified and made known in advance of instruction.⁴

This same method is then utilized by "competency" trained teachers in working with students and is generally referred to as competency based education (CBE). The above definition is congruent with that proposed by many writers in the field and will provide a point of focus for this paper.

Many of the criticisms waged against the competency based approach are not really justified. For example, some studies comparing the traditional vs. the competency based approach in working with academically disadvantaged students have yielded results strongly supportive of CBE in specific areas of student achievement.⁵ Far from dehumanizing education, a competency based

approach can promote development of a positive self-concept in students—assuming that the teacher has been well educated in the approach and holds values consistent with it. After all, CBE shuns the norm-referenced system of grading which places a premium upon “discriminating” between students. What can be more dehumanizing than having one’s work translated into a point on a curve?

A totally different set of assumptions seems to underlie the evaluative method used in CBE—that of criterion-referenced grading. Here, it is more important to ascertain an individual’s status with respect to a pre-established criterion. (Not empirically based, they say?) Thus, one student’s scores are not compared with other students’ scores. A teacher may insist that 90 per cent is the criterion for passing a unit exam, so that all students must make that score before going to the next material. This message from the teacher could possibly help to eradicate negative self-concepts on the part of some students, such as “I’m just a C student,” “I never do well on tests,” etc. The expectation of the teacher in this example is that all students are *capable* of a 90 per cent score. (It is a well-established principle that people tend to perform the way they are expected to perform by others.) If a large number of students fail to meet the criterion, the teacher needs to take a serious look at the objectives and method of instruction.⁶

Also, traditional approaches have held time constant, sometimes resulting in great variability in student achievement. In CBE time may vary, but attempts are made to hold achievement constant. After all, is it really valid to say that the student who scores 90 per cent on an exam the first time knows the material better than the one who scores 90 per cent after two attempts?

Another characteristic of CBE is the accountability system utilized in assuring that the student achieved the stated competencies.⁷ The teacher is held accountable for specifying *objectives* and *criteria*; the student is held accountable for *meeting* them. This system aims toward clear communication between teacher and student, hopefully removing some of the ambiguities students have traditionally encountered in trying to “figure out” what teachers expected of them. In traditional educational programs the criterion for a “good” instructor is how much he/she knows about the subject and how well it is presented. In CBE, the criterion for a “good” instructor is the extent to which he/she is effective and efficient in helping students acquire the competencies they are seeking.⁸

An additional advantage to CBE is that it is one of the few curricular frameworks where there is a built-in potential for self-correction through feedback.⁹ A combination of product and process evaluation can be used to assess a CBE program’s effectiveness.

In summary, benefits of competency based education include:

- The students know what is expected of them.
- The specificity of objectives can lead to improved evaluation procedures.
- Learning activities can be self-paced and individualized, leading to increased student independence.
- The teacher can more easily become a true *facilitator* of learning.
- The individual student competes with himself rather than other students.

Competency based education, if given a chance, may provide the most viable agent for reform of our educational system that has been proposed to date.

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