Defining higher education: How community college faculty and staff understand competency-based education (CBE)

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Introduction

The purpose of this study is to frame employee understandings of a competency-based education (CBE) program in the Kentucky Community and Technical College System (KCTCS) in the past and present discourses of American higher education reform. The program, Learn on Demand (LOD), started as an initiative from the central office of KCTCS as a way to reach those populations who needed greater flexibility than traditional semester-based online courses provided.

As institutions start to explore and develop competency-based education programs, the faculty and administrators at those institutions are necessarily impacted through the intersection of pre-existing organizational and subgroup culture, societal beliefs about the definition and purpose of education, and how innovations may shape the experiences of individuals. Competency-based education has arisen in response to the problem defined by the national reform discourses of accountability and affordability. In this study, I utilize discourse analysis to understand the realities of innovation for individuals in higher education.

But what is Competency-Based Education?

Proponents will admit that there is no single definition of competency-based education, but in general, it refers to those programs of study that give credit to students based on their evidence of subject mastery rather than having a set number of credit hours determined by weekly student participation in a course ("seat time"). Competency-based programs use a mix of prior learning credit (e.g. written portfolios of work experiences, or credit by exam) and self-paced coursework to grant students credentials upon demonstration of competencies rather than time in the classroom.

These programs are intended to benefit working non-traditional students who have knowledge and skills from prior work experiences, but they also enable self-motivated students to accelerate their time to degree, thereby increasing affordability and efficiency. Competency-based education clarifies what a credentialed student will be able to do and makes assessment more transparent and relevant to those outside of higher education.

Case Study: KCTCS & Learn on Demand

Courses in this program are regular KCTCS courses that have been modularized and are evaluated through a Quality Assurance process every three years after initial development. Each course is split into three to five modules, each of which students must pass – either through a credit for prior knowledge pre-test or by working at their own pace through the assignments – before moving on to the next, demonstrating competency before encountering new material. Courses are taught by "facilitators" who communicate with students daily, and students are assisted by Success Coaches. Six of the sixteen colleges in KCTCS are known as "charter colleges," those who were involved in the development and profit-sharing of the program since its beginning (between 2007 and 2009), but other colleges within the system have also developed courses. Those colleges that are not involved tend to see themselves in competition with LOD for traditional online student enrollment. Centralization of the Quality Assurance process exists within a system of loosely coupled autonomous colleges.

Administrators in KCTCS have been active members of the national competency-based education community, as evidenced by system President Jay Box's position on the steering committee of the Competency-Based Education Network (C-BEN). Box was previously the system chancellor, and LOD is often referred to as his "baby" by many in the system. His new role as president has cemented LOD's future.

Methodology

This project is a local case study for my dissertation research on the discourse in competency-based education and how it relates to education policy issues. In addition to these interviews, I am analyzing four years of news articles and white papers on competency-based education to reveal the national discourse.

In the national piece of my dissertation, I am using a critical form of discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2003; Gee, 2014) to examine conversations about competency-based education in the context of current and historical education reform discourse, in order to reveal how certain discourses dominate public and political discussions about the future of higher education. While political stump speeches and inflammatory new articles may not directly impact higher education, the response of administrators at individual institutions to these discourses and ideas are significant for their employees and students.

For this case study, eleven semi-structured interviews (Glesne, 2011) have been conducted with student success coaches, faculty, and staff who are directly involved with the Learn on Demand program across seven different colleges. The interview questions have been written with the intention of revealing how KCTCS faculty and administrators understand the role of Learn on Demand in relation to the overall mission of the college and their assumptions of what higher education should be. The four guiding interview questions are:

1. Tell me about your involvement with Learn on Demand.
2. How would you describe a typical LOD course?
3. How does LOD relate to KCTCS's overall mission?
4. What have you heard others say about LOD?

My intention is to understand how faculty and administrators have "made sense" of the program in light of the organizational culture of KCTCS (Birnbaum, 1988). I analyzed the interview transcriptions for emergent themes, with the national context in mind.

Central Theme: Idea vs. Implementation

Great Ideas…	With Problems in Implementation
Students can work and complete a course at their own pace	Facilitators monitor all course shells created for each section and grade different assignments at multiple points in the semester. Also, students who misjudge the amount of time needed end up not being able to finish by the end of semester deadline
Standardization of course content allows for quality assurance and the leveraging of resources across the system	Faculty no longer have full control over their courses, academic freedom is restricted as instructional design teams determine the curriculum and assessments instead
Courses do not follow traditional academic terms, allowing students to enroll anytime during the year	Financial aid regulations do not allow for courses to cross terms, resulting in programs being ineligible or being forced to put restrictions on enrollment
Flexibility in delivery models allow students to pick what works for them	Older programs must compete with new courses for student enrollment and tuition dollars
Students gain credit when they demonstrate competency in course content and skills	While competencies can be easily defined by skills in technical programs, creating competencies and assessments in academic subjects is likely impossible to do objectively

Discussion

I started my research with the intention of not wanting the project to turn into an evaluation of Learn on Demand, and thus I was careful to word my questions towards the issues surrounding competency-based education rather than focusing on what has happened within KCTCS in particular. However, it quickly became evident that the discourse could not be separated. The technical issues in the implementation of the program were tied up in system politics and thus both aspects influenced how faculty and staff perceived it.

The broad theme of "idea vs. implementation" became clear through analysis of the interview transcripts. In the context of my research question, this is the issue of what "on the ground" barriers confront and challenge the discourse of innovation and reform in higher education. Those individuals who I talked to were all directly involved with Learn on Demand and each saw the potential that the program had, even as they were conscious of its weaknesses. Administrators that were making decisions about the program were removed from the front line and were not likely to understand the labor required by faulty mechanics and the politics of loading resources into a program that a minority of colleges supported and invested in. What is lost between an idea of how CBE should be defined and how the program should be defined and the actual implementation is a theme repeated throughout the country as various types of higher education institutions join the bandwagon.

How institutions define competency-based education is also a recurrent theme nationally as well as in my interviews. While technical programs have traditionally thought of competencies as demonstrable skills (competency as a noun), Learn on Demand – at least originally – defined competency as the completion of a module before advancement (competency as an adjective). What is agreed upon is the match between competency-based education and the access and workforce missions of the community college. However, the relevance of this new model for community colleges does beg the question of why it also exists with non-open access four-year institutions. These other colleges appear to be moving into the community college market niche.

Next Steps & Implications for Practice

These interviews will provide content for a close-ended survey that will be distributed to all faculty and staff within the system, including those who do not have direct personal experience with Learn on Demand and those who work at a colleges that have not been involved in program development. These colleges, however, will have students that are taking LOD classes. This survey is meant to triangulate the interview findings on the discourse and perceptions of Learn on Demand within the system.

The findings of this project have the potential to offer important implications regarding the implementation of competency-based education at other community colleges and higher education systems. Programs like Learn on Demand address some of the key missions of the community college: access (via flexible delivery modes), affordability, and workforce development. The discourses that have been heard most often regarding competency-based education are those that have been reported in the media and in publications by advocates. This study provides a new perspective on innovative change within an institutional context with a multitude of voices.

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