

Making competent judgments of competence

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What does *competence* mean in ordinary language? How is it distinguished from other words?

In the English language, the term '*competence*' differs only slightly in spelling from '*competency*', but an important distinction can be made between them. This is useful in distinguishing slightly different concepts, and distinct approaches to measuring them.

'*A competency*' is often taken to mean an identifiable skill or practice. In some education and training contexts, 'competence' is then often taken to consist of a large number of discrete competencies which could be tested independently, perhaps by objective means. So in that way of thinking, measuring competence is undertaken by measuring all the competencies separately; the collection of these is, by definition of competence.

The *approach I have been involved with is different*. It takes the common notion of 'competence' and seeks to find responsible ways to make judgments about a student's level of competence directly and holistically, rather than by building it up from 'components'.

Why this view? Because the whole (*competence*) is *more than the sum of the parts (competencies)*. This view implies that judgments of competence can properly take place only within complex situations, and not componentially. This is necessary when there is something more than the separate competencies. The 'something more' includes any 'extra' abilities, of whatever kind, that have not been identified as competencies, and maybe cannot be identified at all – ever. It also includes the ability to 'read' a particular complex situation, not exactly like any seen before, and *know how to use the various competencies productively, confidently, safely and wisely*.

With this interpretation of competence, sound judgments of competence require qualitative appraisals of *how well a person can 'get it all together' in a given situation*. Judgments need to be integrative and holistic, and arriving at consistent judgments requires that the judges be calibrated. Hence the title of my presentation: *Making competent judgments of competence*.

Competence in a particular field involves being able to:

1. *Accept responsibility* for a particular situated *problem or challenge that has not been seen before*;

2. Perceive the problem as a whole (in what Dreyfus & Dreyfus call 'holistic similarity recognition'); **noticing certain aspects** that are worth noticing (and for those, assessing their likelihood of being important in developing a response), **not noticing** those aspects highly unlikely to have relevance to a solution, but keeping options open in both categories;
3. Classify the problem, at least provisionally so as to **locate it within a known schema** for solution;
4. Start on the **development of a way** to address the problem;
5. Select from and then **orchestrate a body of knowledge and a set of techniques**, skills or other actions (at least some of which may be small-scale competencies practiced to a high degree of proficiency or automaticity);
6. Treat **incoming data or information as tentative** or in need of confirmation until authenticity and relevance are established;
7. Engage in **sophisticated contingency management** by monitoring and controlling the quality, effectiveness or other key properties of the emerging solution (including any problems that arise due to their own actions) and appraising risk;
8. Appraise, progressively **clarify, and project themselves into**, the likely nature of **the best end point** that is achievable in the circumstances and under the constraints; and, in the case where the endpoint will not be known for some time, have developed some alternative courses of action should some adverse situation develop; and finally,
9. **Combine and switch** the order of these as and whenever appropriate. They are **not fixed, linear steps**.

The competent person makes **multi-criterion judgments that are consistently appropriate and situationally sensitive**. The person possesses a refined sensitivity to contextual cues, taken in on the run, and including those of their own creation; and know what to access and draw from their personal repertoires of potential moves in order to monitor improve their work or performance.

“What is the nature of the confidence which allows a surgeon to operate, never entirely sure what he will find when he gets in there, but clear that he cannot close up until he has sorted it out? What is the expertise which distinguishes a premier division footballer from the amateur who plays in the park, and whose idea of tactics is simply to chase the ball wherever it is? How does the skilled counsellor form just the right question, in just the right tone, at just the right time, to enable a client to see her situation differently? How is the counsellor able to take informed risks? How is that different from the well-meaning novice who is likely to miss the opportunity or unwittingly nudge her in an unproductive direction? And how...? The list is endless.”

Atherton, J. S. (2008). Doceo; Original papers [On-line] UK.
<http://www.doceo.co.uk/original/index.htm> Accessed: 9 April 2009

The range of situations that will be faced by future researchers, discipline specialists and professionals is potentially infinite; preparing people for that is what we are engaged in, and that is a key characteristic of *higher* education.

You say: "You must be describing the best surgeon in the country!" No. Competence can be expressed at all levels of life, from early childhood up. The elements of the changes are the *sophistication of the problems and the amount of knowledge and skill* needed to tackle them.

What are the levels appropriate specifically to Higher Education? Good question, let's deal with that. Let us accept that the competent person makes multi-criterion judgments that are consistently appropriate and situationally sensitive. How might we bring that about? How might we measure it?

Here are some areas where it is needed:

The types of assessment tasks of special interest are those that require students to produce complex works or perform complex actions, and where judgments of their competence are made according to:

- The *quality of the responses* (or *products*, or outputs, or performances); or
- The *quality or integrity of the processes* involved in producing the Responses; or
- Whether solutions to problems are *full, partial or flawed*.

Typically, if we are to appraise or judge competence in students in different disciplines, fields and professions, we need to require student to respond to *divergent or open tasks* for which there is no single correct or best answer, result or solution.

Response formats include (but are not limited to) *term papers; essays; written assignments; field and project reports; solutions to scientific or technological problems; seminar presentations; studio and design productions; specialised artefacts; clinical consultations; creative works; client interviews; and other professional procedures and performances.*

Returning to the nine typical aspects of competent action listed above, it should be clear that many of these are involved in producing the above types of responses.

How might we 'model' the competence?

Decomposing competence into manageable (or even atomised) components in order to facilitate judgments may have some interim value in certain contexts, but the act of decomposition can obscure how a competent person practitioner would work the various bits in together to form a coherent whole. Measuring them separately is not the same as measuring competence. The whole is more than the sum of the parts. The logic of this phenomenon is obvious: *if you break something into pieces, whatever originally held it together has to be either retrieved or satisfactorily substituted if the sense of the whole is to be restored.*

Summary: How might we model it? By reference to real cases of competence, as inferred from the nature of what is produced, or the sophistication of the action. How might we assess it?

By ***designing assessment tasks*** that are clearly specified and outline the higher-order outcomes required. That includes specifying a particular product type (such as a critique or a design) if appropriate.

By holding students to the specifications, which means not awarding credit at passing level or higher for works that are not compliant with the specifications.

By training, and importantly, ***calibrating assessors***.

How can we assist students to develop competence?

- By teaching them how to ***deliver on typical task specifications*** of the sophistication required.
- By creating opportunities for them ***gain serious evaluative experience*** of the same kind that is required to judge the competence they are trying to develop. As the dramatist Shenstone wrote in 1768: 'Every good poet includes a critic; the reverse will not hold'.