A brief introduction to competency-based education

What is competency-based education? An overview

Competency-based education (CBE) is an approach to designing academic programmes with a focus on competencies – knowledge, skills and abilities. CBE is similar to mastery learning.

The crux of CBE is that learners arrive to the learning setting with existing competencies, and learning is designed to build upon this foundation to support the mastery of a new set of competencies. In CBE programmes, it is common to ask students from all ages and backgrounds to complete prior learning assessments (which may include written exams or portfolio assessments) to better understand their existing knowledge and experience and to place them in appropriate educational settings. If the student cannot demonstrate proficiency, the teacher then establishes learning activities to support the student to achieve it. The student works with the teacher to set expectations for the activities and establish a learning plan.

CBE is based on the principle of personalised learning. The instructional programme of CBE should be grounded in specific competencies, and organised to accommodate each student’s learning style and needs. The teacher should also provide regular feedback to the student on his or her progress throughout the course. CBE focuses on the outcome (the student’s ability to demonstrate competencies) rather than the learning process. Overall, CBE seeks to reduce inequities in student outcomes by personalising the learning to meet them where they are with the competencies they have upon arrival in the classroom or course.

How effective is competency-based education?

One study reported that students who experienced CBE reforms experienced higher proficiency rates on state accountability tests compared to those in traditional academic settings. However, there is an overall lack of strong research and subsequent evidence to support CBE as superior to other forms of education and training in terms of output. This is partly because it is particularly difficult to define “competence”: a competent student has abilities that are more than the sum of the competencies demonstrated in their prior learning assessment. A student must demonstrate mastery of certain criteria, which are defined by faculty and subject matter experts to measure competence, which may vary between courses and programmes.

When/ how should competency-based education be used in the classroom?

While CBE has its origins in higher education and vocational training, CBE can be applied for students from different backgrounds and ages, including early childhood education. When determining whether content or a method of teaching is “developmentally appropriate,” teachers make a judgment about a student’s competencies, and assess whether the student reached a stage in development wherein he or she has the competency to complete the task. For example, if a teacher is teaching a student how to write, the teacher must be aware of the student’s development related to fine motor skills: is the student able to hold a pencil, and draw?

CBE programmes and courses at all levels of education should reflect robust competencies, and support learners at all learning paces. In addition, rather than traditional exams, students should be evaluated through a system of assessments designed with particular attention to whether the student has demonstrated mastery of the competencies throughout the course.
References


