

Competency Based Education

Russell Bush

Today we have Russell Bush, Information Technology faculty in the Department of Business and Information Technology. Last year, Russ presented on Competency-Based Education at the Reflective Scholars Poster Fair. What got you interested in Competency-Based Education?

Sure, since my experience or my roots were in K-12 education and the fact that I'm still connected with that. There's a big movement to move towards a competency based education system, especially in the state of Iowa. There's been some legislation passed with movement that way. Also, the fact that the federal government. There's been some pilots towards a competency based education model, and so that piqued my interest when I saw that it was happening here in Iowa. Also [with] the movement happening nationally, I should take a look or look deeper at what it is. Is it different than what we're already doing or how is it different? That's what got me interested in it.

Why should we be concerned about competency-based education at Kirkwood Community College?

I don't know if this is a concern, but I think especially that I teach in a career and tech area, it's the skill—it's the demonstration or evidence of skill that shows to me the competency that really piqued me interest because that's really what I want to know when a student leaves my class. Have they maintained? Are they proficient? Have they mastered a certain skill set? So when they walk out the door, they're going to be ready for that job. Or when they're there, the diploma that we're giving, or the degree that shows that they're qualified to do this. And one of the things with competency based education that might be different is that it's not based on seat time. That you can earn if you can show that you are competent. Even with these competencies, they can be met in different ways than taking a class. Prior education, other types of demonstrations, test outs, things like that. That's one thing you want to take a look at. If the states and other institutions are interested, I think maybe we would be interested too.

I think that goes along with my job and Wilson's job as instructional design you want to have evidence when you design your course, especially when it comes to assessment. The assessment is the evidence.

And I think the assessment is the key really when it comes down to the end. It's creating those—we call them competencies or outcomes, which I think is the language we're using here at Kirkwood with some of the professional development I had. It's the evidence that you collect at the end or the formative and summative evidence you have to be able to assess that, the collection of evidence. How valid is that assessment that you created. How good is it? The goal is always to keep improving and striving to get better to measure, so you have clear learning targets and assessments. That's the challenge of teaching too.

Yes, in my background in English language teaching, it seems that some fields develop their own competencies. So you can take it from the professional organization. It's already set, so you just have to elaborate on what they established.

Yes, that's interesting because we too in the IT industry have a lot of different companies. We have a Cisco Networking Academy here that maps directly towards Cisco certification.

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It's definitely an industry standard. We use a lot of their curriculum. It's a very good curriculum, well designed because it's a worldwide community. So have some excellent assessments, but sometimes they might not measure exactly what we want to measure. That drives a lot of the ways we assess too. In the career technical field, we are impacted by external things too.

How can faculty prepare themselves for integrating competency-based education in their classrooms?

I think all the current work we're currently doing with assessment day with the common assessments is really what—I think we're on the right--from my perspective—again I don't claim to be any expert on competency-based education. I just have an interest in it—is that moving towards that will kind of lend itself to that. Keeping our eye on the movement nationally too because the game changer is the fact that if this continues to be because it won't be a Carnegie unit anymore. I think I'm saying that correctly. Seat time! We can grant financial aid based on if they earned these competencies. That may change some methods of delivery, maybe more blended learning or credit for prior learning or systemically, not just for the classroom teacher, but as a system. How do we do that? How do we handle that if it comes to fruition? Will we see more growth in this area? Those are things we don't know yet because there's just some universities and some two-year universities in Wisconsin that have piloted some of these. That's yet to be determined. I think it's being aware of looking forward.

I was also thinking that assessment is a good first step and a basic understanding of instructional design. There I go plugging my background.

No, it is. Your curriculum is a living curriculum. Being a designer is taking a textbook and turning it into curriculum, making it living, breathing curriculum that students can interact with now as opposed to 20 years ago. We have many different tools that we can use to make it more engaging and that's the challenge. I guess I'd say the art and science of teaching has changed a little bit because some of the tools we have. Coming from having experiencing all different kinds of learning, there are some traditional things that are still valuable and there are some new things that are just as valuable too.

I think one way to engage learners is through the flipped learning model as well.

Flipped learning definitely. That's where I started using some of those things in my courses to create some flipped learning. Although what I'm finding after some retrospection is that I want to make sure that I pick and choose my flipped learning things because if where things change. If I'm teaching about an operating system where things update, that may be outdated in a year, and then I'm redoing again, so trying to use time wisely. That's a challenge of faculty to create flipped learning because you don't want to be recreating the wheel. You want to create quality things. We want to keep learning and progressing. Work smarter not harder.

What I tell students in my class is that in every industry you're going to see a rapid pace of change. If you understand the concepts underneath it, then you can apply those concepts later on. So even though you may not be working on the latest and greatest, you can still, if you learned how to learn, you can still move forward and adapt.