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ABSTRACT

Competency based teacher performance and competency based teacher education represent an attempt to marry scientific methodology with instruction. This is not the first time that such a union has been attempted--programed learning and behavioral objective centered learning were both designed to minimize the error factor contributed by individual teachers. The teacher error factor is an acknowledgment of the fact that teachers vary in their abilities to effectively provide education. Programed learning removed the teacher as the sole source of information and insured that all students, using identical materials, were exposed to identical opportunities. Behavioral objectives were intended to redirect the often whimsical priorities of teachers. Competency based education is a direct outgrowth of behavioral objectives. The competency approach is more extreme than the behavioral approach because it not only attempts to reduce the influence of the teacher error factor, but it tries to supplant individual teacher intuitions with an objective model of learning. However, complete objective models of learning upon which to base the competencies do not exist. Teachers, therefore, must fall back upon their intuitions to designate a model from which to draw competencies, a situation that parallels the problem competency based teacher performance was intended to resolve. (MM)

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Has There Been Incompetence In The Specification
Of Teacher Competencies?

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What is competency based teacher performance and what is its rationale? Competency based teacher performance, and its higher education corollary of competency based teacher education, is an attempt to marry scientific methodology with instruction. This is not the first time that such a union has been attempted. Programmed learning and behavioral objective centered learning were both designed to minimize the error factor contributed by individual teachers.

By the teacher error factor, we mean only to acknowledge that teachers vary in their abilities to effectively provide education. The abilities of some portion of this teacher population (possibly a significant portion) fluctuates below an acceptable level of effective instruction. Programmed learning and behavioral objectives offered an opportunity for student learning that was relatively free of individual teacher eccentricity. Programmed learning removed the teacher as the sole source of information and insured that all students, using the identical material, were being exposed to the identical opportunities. Behavioral objectives were intended to redirect the often whimsical priorities of teachers.

Competency based teacher performance is a direct outgrowth from behavioral objectives. Learning, and consequently teaching, is not a nebulous operation the success of which depends on disparate instructor viewpoints. If students are to achieve proficiency in a particular academic discipline, they must master the subskills, or competencies, which are the conditions for that proficiency. In literature, a behavioral objective might be that students learn to paraphrase Shakespearean plays. This behavioral objective would be intended to liberate students from the tyranny of autocratic teachers who might have otherwise insisted that these students, for example, memorize minutia which had no functional ap-

lications. A competency based approach to literature would differ from a behavioral objective approach in its degree of precision. Competency based education presumes that there are a finite number of specifiable skills the sum of which equals an ability to appreciate literature.

Those skills might be that students be able to recognize story lines in Shakespearean plays, distinguish major plots from subplots, describe characters, point out stylistic peculiarities, analyze the more famous passages, and quote certain speeches. The competency approach is more extreme than the behavioral approach because it not only attempts to reduce the influence of the teacher error factor but tries to supplant individual teacher intuitions with an objective model of learning.

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However, before we can specify the essential competencies for a particular type of learning, we will have to assume that a complete model of learning exists. For example, I can specify learning competencies for an automotive mechanic. There are a finite number of parts to a car and these may interact under a limited number of circumstances. An automobile repair manual will contain models of engines. These are accurate models because they enable a mechanic to identify automotive dysfunction and to recommend remediation with complete accuracy. It may happen that a particular mechanic lacks the expertise to properly diagnose a problem with a car, but this is the fault of the diagnostician. The model accounts for all the determinant functions of the machine and we can specify a set of competencies based on the components in the model. (For example, competencies could be that an individual know how to adjust the air and fuel mixture in a carburetor, set the engine timing, measure valve clearance, etc.)

In education, there is not a model comparably accurate to the automobile engine model. In reading education, for instance, there is no model which can reliably diagnose the cause of reading disability and ascribe predictably effective remediation on the basis of that diagnosis. There are multiple reading models which specify essential competencies such as letter recognition, spelling, phonic decoding, sight recognition of vocabulary, and literal oral recitation. However, unlike the auto model, which predicts that the sum of the functions it represents equals performance, the sum of any set of presently specified reading competencies does not add up to functional reading. That is, having taught a problem reader to recognize letters, spell, phoneticize, ... we cannot predict that the student will be able to read with a degree of success that approximates his ability to use oral language (and this functional level of ability would seem to be the minimal goal for reading education.) Not only in reading, but in literature and in all learning areas which are emphasized in education, complete models -- models which predictably allow diagnosis, remediation, and the attainment of minimal functional levels -- do not exist.

If educational competencies are not being extracted from completed models, where did the competencies originate? The competencies were stipulated by teachers, professors, administrators, commercial publishers, and parents. But, aren't these the groups who have been establishing educational priorities all along? In what way is competency based teacher performance an innovation?

We might reply that the act of specifying competencies is itself the innovation. It forces teachers to think systematically about learning tasks and the practical extensions of those tasks. But effective

educators have always approached learning from this vantage and it is precisely because of this vantage that they have been successful. Obviously, then, the specification of competencies must be designed to improve the performance of ineffective teachers.

Does the requirement that ineffective teachers specify learning competencies improve those teachers? If there were a complete model of learning which they could consult, such exercises would probably be advantageous. However, there is no such model; and there are little more than tentative and highly speculative models available, models which do not agree on even initial premises. A teacher, trying to specify learning competencies, can elect from reputable objective models which describe learning as the result of extra-individual factors, equally reputable subjective models which explain behavior solely on the basis of personal determinants, or a myriad of popular eclectic models. The only real guide to an appropriate competency model is a teacher's own intuition. But, it was the appeal to intuition by individual teachers which originally created the teacher error factor, the problem which competency based teacher performance was intended to eliminate.

Recategorizing and reorganizing performance can, when the revamping proceeds from ingenious insights, lead to scientific advancement. Without such insights, reorganization and recategorization result only in aimless exertion. Since we lack the accurate models from which to draw such insights, and since individual intuitions are variable and unreliable, the unscientific specification of competencies will inevitably result in education's exertion rather than learning's advancement.