

Connecting and Continuing the Learning: The Promise and Possibilities of Competency-Based Education: A Conversation with Charla Long

Nan Travers and Alan Mandell, SUNY Empire State College, New York, USA

What follows is an edited version of an interview with Charla Long, J.D., executive director of the Competency-Based Education Network (C-BEN)¹ with headquarters in Franklin, Tennessee. C-BEN is committed to “growing demand, building capacity, and removing barriers” for competency-based education. Before beginning her work at C-BEN, Charla Long served as the founding dean of the College of Professional Studies at Lipscomb University in Nashville, Tennessee. The interview took place on March 2, 2020. Much appreciation to Charla Long for her time and ideas, and for her willingness to work with us in editing this conversation.

Alan Mandell (A.M.): Welcome, Charla. As a way to begin, can you give us some insight into the Competency-Based Education Network and its mission?

Charla Long (C.L.): C-BEN is a network of accredited colleges and universities, state higher education systems, and service providers that are working together to address a number of shared challenges to designing, developing, and scaling high-quality competency-based education (CBE) programs. C-BEN has about 140 member institutions from around the United States and abroad. The field of CBE continues to grow, and though the pre-COVID growth was somewhat slower than we anticipated, there has been significant interest in the last few months. We are working to grow demand for CBE programs, help organizations and businesses understand what CBE is and why recruiting or hiring a CBE grad is important, as well as educate individual consumers on why they might consider a CBE program. C-BEN is building CBE capacity within institutions, state systems, and service providers in order to do this important work more effectively. And finally, we are striving to remove barriers that may be inhibiting CBE growth.

Nan Travers (N.T.): What kinds of barriers and inhibitors are you referring to?

C.L.: AIR’s [American Institutes for Research] National Survey of Postsecondary CBE² provides a list of actual and perceived barriers. For example, federal financial aid regulations are often perceived as barriers but in most course and credit hour programs these aren’t significant barriers. If an institution wanted to create a direct assessment CBE program, then financial aid would become a more significant issue. We want to support institutions in overcoming these struggles and, in doing that, also strengthen the quality of their overall CBE work. For some institutions, they want to know if CBE programming meets best practice standards. We have been reviewing CBE programs against the Quality Framework for Competency-Based Education Programs,³ as institutions are asking us to look at their programs and tell them whether they meet the quality framework that we’ve established. In this way, we’re operating as a “quality assurance organization.” For others, they need help in getting started. Through our consulting and technical assistance work, we lead institutions and state systems in the design and redesign of CBE offerings. From single programs to systemwide state strategies, we are helping to shape the overarching vision that guides coordinated CBE development — all the way through to individual competency course design. We know that one of the greatest inhibitors to organizations pursuing CBE is the lack of subject matter expertise on campuses, so it is necessary to supplement existing

expertise and build additional competence on all things CBE within organizations. Finally, I want to add that through our annual conference, CBExchange,⁴ which is open to all higher education institutions and training providers, we release new resources based on what those in the field have told us would be helpful in the design or scale-up of programs.

A.M.: For those who might not be as familiar with the world of competency-based education, could you briefly describe the theory and its practices?

C.L.: CBE is focused on actual student learning and the application of that learning, rather than the time you spend in class or on materials. In a CBE model, a learner's progress is measured by the individual's demonstration of "competence." Through a system of rigorous assessment, the learner shows that they've mastered the required knowledge, skills, abilities, and intellectual behaviors that one would expect from the holder of a particular credential. In practice, credentials have been backwardly designed, meaning that the institution answers the question: What does that person need to know and be able to do if they are the bearer of that credential? It doesn't matter if the credential is a micro-credential or a doctoral program — the question remains the same. Once the institution has determined what the person must know and be able to do, the institution can answer other questions like: How am I going to assess them on that material and how am I going to teach to this level of performance?

N.T.: Why do you think competency-based education is important in terms of our thinking, not just about our current situation but about the future needs of education?

C.L.: I can answer that question through multiple lenses, but I'd like to start with the learner lens. With a competency-based approach to education, we adopt a more positive dialogue with learners about the competencies they already have. We start by talking with the learner about what they know and can do. Everybody brings something to the table, and so our ability to look at a learner and acknowledge the competencies they already possess builds the learner up. Contrast that with other approaches such as: "I see you have never taken any college classes" or "Wow, the best grade you ever earned was a C" or "You have *zippo* to work with." Looking at a learner through a competency lens is far more empowering to learners who are not well served in today's model. I was recently working with faculty from a community college and helping them write their competency statements when I pointed out the importance of beginning with "I can. ..." This approach helps learners articulate what they know and can do and the dispositions they can demonstrate to potential or current employers. This helps students see the immediate applicability of their learning to their personal and professional lives. How empowering is that? That's one big learner benefit of CBE.

A.M.: Yes, this can really be powerful for the learner and the bigger picture of higher education, as well.

C.L.: Higher education needs to be able to connect what we do to issues and problems beyond the academic setting. We have labor shortages in America; we have a lot of people who have the wrong skills for the jobs that are available in today's economy. We are an increasingly digital economy, and yet we have people poorly equipped for it. I think higher education plays a role in helping to solve the workforce challenges that exist in America, and one way we can do this is to use a language that resonates with business and industry. The language of competencies can serve as the basis for forming connections between workforce needs (i.e., hiring, training and development, succession planning) and academic programming (e.g., degree programs, micro-credentials, continuing education offerings). It is important that those in higher education use the language used by those in industry. Not only does this make the academy more approachable, but it can allow us to bring expertise and insight to some of the toughest workforce and employment challenges that exist in America today.

N.T.: All of this continues to touch on the validation of learning and skills.

C.L.: Yes, higher education institutions should be validators of learning. A tremendous amount of training and education is happening in our military, in community and civic organizations, and our workplaces. The academy isn't the only sector to "deliver" knowledge. But higher education institutions play an important role in validating what learning experiences rise to the college credit level. CBE has the potential to help institutions really think about this responsibility as validators because programs must transparently articulate what a successful demonstration of competence looks like!

A.M.: I want to return for a moment to that great technical term (!), "zippo," that you used a few minutes ago and what amounts to CBE as an empowering orientation to students and workers. Acknowledging someone knows something becomes part of our role in higher education. It's such a student/person-centered orientation.

C.L.: Absolutely. I want to say that this is a place in which PLA (prior learning assessment) and CBE have a lot of similarities. In a CBE program I previously built, students started with an assessment center designed to objectively assess a learner's knowledge, skills, abilities, and intellectual behaviors based on 15 workforce essential competencies most desired by employers. We used the student's performance as the basis for a personalized learning journey — a CBE learning journey. This approach allowed us to recognize preexisting competencies and identify gaps in needed areas. It was, in essence, a PLA start to the competency-based program. Other schools might use a pretest before they start a competency to determine what part of the competency a student already knows and can do, and where missing components need to be taught. Most adult learners — at least those I have known — have a lot of skills and abilities but may not have the knowledge that undergirds *why* they do what they do; or they have a really well-trained *gut*, but they don't have the knowledge piece that backs up that gut. So, when the gut fails them and they try something and it doesn't work, they sometimes don't have an ability to figure out another tool they could use because they lack the knowledge behind their skill sets. If a higher education institution can acknowledge what the person knows and can do, then couple it with a personalized pathway to develop the needed competencies, it will be helpful to learners seeking personal and professional development.

For example, I have taught conflict management courses in the past, and students may know that there are two or three methods for solving conflict, but they may have never heard of the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument.⁵ They may not know there are five methods for handling conflict or what situation merits which approach. So I can teach them these theoretical frameworks that undergird what they already know and do. I never want to dismiss what a student already brings to the table but I want to really pull from what I see as the interplay between PLA and CBE. Some synergies between the two would be great for institutions to leverage.

A.M.: Yes, the "synergy" of helping somebody recognize what they already know *and* complementing that with new learning; for example, becoming aware of a different language, a different way of approaching something that does not negate what they have but actually can supplement it to make it that much fuller and richer.

C.L.: Finding the best way to complement is the key. Institutions seeking to leverage PLA in CBE designs need to be mindful of PLA policies and structures and accommodate for this in the CBE program design. For example, it's common for a learner to have some of the course content but not the entire course. C-BEN works with institutions to think about how to modularize content so that students can bypass or complete more quickly that content where there is prior learning while unlocking new content or the portion of the course that a student doesn't have. By acknowledging what the learner already knows and can do, learners can accelerate

their journey. When PLA is paired with competency-based models, institutions can help the student fill in the gaps so that, in the end, the student will have the knowledge, skills, abilities, and intellectual behaviors she/he needs for that credential — but the learning journey starts with where the student is right now. So, of course, each student’s journey would be somewhat different based on what that student brings to the table. Not all institutions leverage PLA in their CBE programs, and some are actually prohibited by regulations from doing so, but those that use PLA are able to acknowledge the competencies learners are able to demonstrate and can customize the learning journey with modularized content to support that individual learner.

N.T.: I wonder if we could return to the question of the attraction to and power of this CBE model, this overall approach to higher education today. There is so much that is going on with CBE right now. Why do you think this is taking place?

C.L.: Part of the answer has to do with philanthropic investment. Organizations like the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Lumina Foundation have made tremendous investments in this space. And institutional champions like Paul LeBlanc, president of Southern New Hampshire University, raised the visibility of the movement. These organizations and individuals really helped this movement gain attention and traction. There are a host of technologies to support CBE today that did not exist even five years ago. These advancements have allowed schools to innovate beyond the traditional delivery model and deliver a more personalized learning journey. Next, the workplace itself has evolved, as well. Human resources practices are continuing to embrace the use of competencies in their hiring, training, development, and succession planning processes. The conditions are ripe for us to link work-based definitions of competencies to those in higher education. It is the right time for us to use workforce competency needs to influence program content composition. Finally, I’d say we see growth in the field because early pioneers have shared their learnings and best practices. There was the ‘70s generation that certainly included your work at SUNY Empire, Nan, and Charter Oak State College, Thomas Edison State University, Excelsior College, and Alverno College; then a second generation comprised basically of one pioneer, Western Governors University. I would say we’re in the third generation of CBE today.

N.T.: One of the things that we have been experiencing when evaluating workplace learning is a shift in the training model at a lot of organizations. Either because of their size, finances, or immediate needs, organizations moved from offering much more formalized training that required going to a training center or classroom, to a greater focus on learning and a coaching model with learning on the job. And, too, we’re finding that companies are developing their performance evaluations from much more of a competency-based perspective — even if they don’t name it that way — because that’s how they can figure out if employees are ready to move on or have done their job. I wonder if this is how you see it. I just think this way of thinking is more alive in the culture than most people realize. They just don’t know how to frame it.

C.L.: Yes, I believe that’s true. I often hear people say at meetings that employers don’t know what competencies are. This frustrates me because I do not buy that! Employers know and can talk in competency terms. From job postings, job descriptions, performance reviews, and training and development offerings, employers use competencies. Where I think higher education can help employers is in the area of assessment. Remember the earlier conversation about higher education as a validator? Why aren’t we partnering with employers to validate on-the-job learning and describe it in a way that would make sense to both higher education and industry? Again, I believe employers understand this model and have “competencies” as the language in their organization even if it’s not labeled as such.

A.M.: Can you give us some particularly imaginative examples of ways in which the competency-based education framework has been used in different institutions?

C.L.: I mentioned earlier the assessment center we set up at my previous institution, Lipscomb University. There, learners were assessed on 15 core workforce essential competencies. These competencies aligned to what a Fortune 100 employer in the area was looking for in their employees. So, we began running our assessment centers as part of a performance development and succession planning project with their organization's leaders. We went into their work environment and assessed their midlevel managers on these competencies. Many of these managers were people who had worked their way up in the organization and had no postsecondary degree. We prepared reports not just for the employee, but for the employer, based on how they performed in our assessment center. We met with employees to share their assessment results. These results were beneficial to the employer, but they also helped these employees in terms of college credit and the ability to leverage the assessment in the completion of a credential at our institution. Through this employer partnership, we were able to create development plans for employees, not in a punitive way, but in a way that could help them develop new competencies that would be needed for the next managerial level. This employer project leveraged both PLA and CBE to benefit all the stakeholders: the university, the employer, and the employee-learner.

We also worked with a large regional bank to make our competency development courses available to small business loan clients. The bank had found that many of their small business clients would default on loans because they didn't have the business skill sets to succeed. So, we designed competency-based classes for the bank that they offered to their small business loan holders. When people took these competency-based courses, they had the option to transcript the course for college credit, but more importantly, it allowed the small business owners to develop skill sets that they did not have. In the end, the bank had more competent loan holders who were leading thriving small businesses.

There are many employer-based projects like these taking place at institutions around the country. We could, for example, talk about how CBE has been used in Texas; in particular, Carlos Rivers [operations research analyst] has done a great job at Texas A&M University-Commerce collecting data on how much more quickly and at a lower cost a student there can complete a high-quality CBE credential.⁶ They're having significant results. Another key example is Brandman University's work with Guild Education [a company that partners with employers to arrange education benefits and tuition reimbursement to employees] to offer programs to The Walt Disney Company⁷ and Walmart.⁸ You may want to take a look at C-BEN's Employer Engagement Toolkit,⁹ which was written by our institutional members to help others seeking to build dynamic partnerships with businesses. Part of what we're trying to do is to surface — across the whole field — what is happening. There are many institutional cases and research studies such as these that exist. We all need to become more aware of them.

N.T.: We wonder if we could now turn to the policy dimension. How do we start to reframe our policies regarding the inclusion of CBE as a valuable approach to learning?

C.L.: As I mentioned earlier, one policy that comes to mind right away is federal financial aid. Federal financial aid only pays for new learning and I totally get that, but helping students pay the fees that institutions charge to administer a PLA evaluation or transcript a PLA evaluation for course credit could save a single learner thousands of dollars in tuition. Often, students can't pay these fees out of pocket so they just enroll in a class and pay tuition so that they can have aid to pay the bill. Isn't that shortsighted? Can't we find a solution to this problem so we can save federal aid?

Competency-based programs need a new way to administer financial aid that's not tied to the course or credit-hour structure. C-BEN has long advocated the U.S. Congress for a CBE demonstration project so we can test and demonstrate a new financial aid model based on competencies. This demonstration would put guardrails in place so institutions can innovate around a

new financial aid model.

On a state level, there are many policy barriers to CBE's full implementation. As one example, think about the number of licensure programs that require a certain number of clock hours in order to earn or renew one's license. Just because someone has completed or sat through 16 hours of continuing education coursework does not mean the individual is more competent than when they started the course. It just means they sat there for 16 hours. We need to change the way states think about licensure. In the same way, the number of years on a job does not determine competence either.

A.M.: It really does seem as if the very legitimacy of competency-based education — and PLA, as well — rests on the issue of academic quality. If the distinction between years on the job and knowledge/skills gained isn't addressed, I think all of the work we are trying to do is really undercut in significant ways.

C.L.: Academic quality is at the core of C-BEN's mission. It's the reason we released the Quality Framework for Competency-Based Education Programs³ at the time that we did. When we initially started drafting this work in 2015, we decided that we wouldn't attempt a quality framework until about 2020 so that institutions could have about five years to experiment with different models of competency-based education. As you know, there are many different approaches out there; there's no one prescribed approach, so don't believe it if somebody tells you that their institution has the one right way to do CBE! Many models are providing data to illustrate their efficacy. We thought this five-year space would let people experiment and prove what models really worked. But there was a significant risk that poorly designed programs might harm learners. Academic leaders wanted to know what a well-designed program should look like, so we assembled quality experts and our institutional members to accelerate the creation of a quality framework. We released the "Quality Framework for Competency-Based Education Programs" document in September 2017. Today, institutions use this framework as they build programs and C-BEN assesses these programs as part of a quality assurance program. Now, people know of the framework and realize a quality program will, for example, include our Eight Elements of Quality.³

N.T.: As I think you know, I've actually analyzed the framework, and it could be used for *any* program whether it is competency-based or not. In fact, I shared it with our deans here at SUNY Empire State College as a way to look at the quality of our programs. I always tell people that three elements are critical to any PLA program: quality, integrity, and equity. The quality elements are such an important thread to help people understand that what we are doing is not going out somewhere in left field! The process and its outcomes have standards that, in many cases, so-called traditional education lacks. Have you found that institutions are using the quality framework even beyond their CBE programs? Could it be that the CBE program is taking the lead in showing what quality is about?

C.L.: I'll be honest and say that a lot of times when I do quality assurance or design workshops, people say that all of their programs, including traditional offerings, already meet these principles and standards — that they already have these quality standards in place. I often push back because if we were being honest with one another, most faculty and administrators will admit that they do not know for sure that somebody has developed every one of the competencies or even learning outcomes that are in an academic program. Do we believe that an assessment created by a teacher on her commute to work the same day the assessment is administered is explicitly tied to the competencies and performance indicators specified in the program's competency map? Do we honestly believe there is no variation in the competencies of learners based on the course instructor? In the institutions where I've worked, there is a lot of variability in the academic process. CBE strives to remove this variation in outcomes and keep learning expectations constant. I think this requires us to hold ourselves to a set of standards that are

actually higher than what we do now. This is why CBE programs can be a quality model for the rest of the institution.

A.M.: This really shows how what I think of as a “movement” — whether focused on PLA or CBE — is really about changing the basic ways we think about *learning*, whether the learning occurs within a classroom or at a workplace or in a community center. It's one of the reasons that it's quite a radical thing.

C.L.: It's not just the learning. It's also about making sure the assessment of the learning is at the right cognitive and behavioral levels and that the learning journey has resulted in the student being able to demonstrate the required competency in an authentic, performance-based manner. Though CBE programs are typically agnostic about the source of the learning, we want to make sure the learner can, in fact, demonstrate the required competencies at the appropriate level.

A.M.: Both of you have been so much more fully involved in competency-based education than I have, but I am so struck by the similarities that have come up in this discussion between PLA and CBE. It seems that any person who is arguing for the significance — for the power and validity of prior experiential learning — would be using almost the same words! So, I want to go back not only to the similarities but to some of the differences between thinking about competency-based education and PLA. Are they important for us to recognize?

C.L.: Yes, it's absolutely important not to confuse or conflate the two. They share a great deal in common, including often opposition from the same audience. PLA and CBE recognize that learning can occur in a wide range of places: military, work-based, community organizations, home, and school. CBE provides the curricular pathway for a learner to go from where they are today to possessing the competencies needed for a particular credential. CBE programs believe all learners can master relevant content if the learning journey is built well. In a recent workshop I facilitated, a tenured faculty member with 32 years of teaching experience told me that he doesn't believe he can teach all of his students to achieve competence. He thinks some students are destined never to succeed. CBE program leaders believe everybody has the ability to achieve the same set of competencies. We, as faculty, may need to change how we teach and how we develop our learners. We may have to hone our teaching competencies and keep digging deeper into our skill sets. We may need to create new tools to better meet a learner's different learning style. We just can't teach the same way for every learner. We must become more responsive to the individual needs of our learners and find the resources to move them to competence. This is directly linked to Nan's focus on “equity.” The CBE movement has done a pretty good job of saying that CBE is about the backward design of a well-crafted learning journey that moves all learners to a successful demonstration of the competencies they need. PLA doesn't involve the curriculum needed to move the person beyond what they already know and can demonstrate. So, I think there are ways the two work together — there's real synergy here. Competency-based education programs carefully craft how they can take students from where they are today to where they need to be if they want to earn a particular credential. That's the distinguishing difference between the two.

N.T.: I want to interject one little thing that we mentioned before but is so important. It's another shared understanding between CBE and PLA. Both worlds share the belief that the source of the learning, of the skills, does not matter. The goal is to help people gain the credentials they need so that they can be successful.

C.L.: It's the credential — and this is crucial — it's the *high-quality* credential. So while I absolutely think that we're seeing signs of CBE becoming more widely accepted, when government entities and philanthropic organizations say something like “our aim is that by a certain date, x% of adults should have a credential,” it's a little risky for all of us — a place of real

vulnerability — because if we are not careful about the “quality” of the credential, we may harm learners and strengthen the opposition’s case against PLA and CBE. The achievement of attainment goals should not come at the expense of quality in these credentials. Certainly, this is something everyone should support, especially those fond of PLA and CBE.

N.T.: Funders who definitely have a direction in which they want to see things go also face enormous pressures in terms of preparing the workforce and looking more closely at the role of higher education. We really need to find ways to capture people’s learning and help to build on that learning which can bring about workforce solutions. And yet, to move forward, we are dependent on the funding. There are interesting tensions here and I wonder how they will play out.

C.L.: As I see it, C-BEN’s goal is getting to a place where the “competency” is the currency of learning, as competencies undergird all learning regardless of the context (e.g., military, work-based, institutional). I’m optimistic that’s going to happen sooner rather than later; and I know we need to get there as a Nation. If the leaders in competency-based education will continue to transparently share the results they are achieving, I’m also optimistic that our legislators and our regulators will take the necessary steps to enable this innovation. We need to be clear about our needs and where we could use the assistance of Congress, the president, employers, and philanthropic organizations to make this happen. Part of C-BEN’s role is to help academic institutions learn how to talk about what they do in the context of the development of competencies. Individual learners need to be able to know what competencies they have and when they need to “skill up” in an area. And employers need to recognize that they can count on a growing set of institutions to help them think creatively about the development of these competencies in their people or potential candidates.

N.T.: The rise of PLA has been phenomenal over the last couple of years and as I listen to you, it is clear that the same can be said about competency-based thinking. I think there is a real potential to bring these two conversations together, and thus really help institutions as they grow their PLA programs to be able to take that work further to the competency side. I’m afraid that if we don’t have that joint conversation, too many institutions will stop at PLA and define it in a very limited way. That will help students a little bit, but not at the level we need right now.

Notes

- 1 <https://www.cbenetwork.org/>.
- 2 <https://www.air.org/project/national-survey-postsecondary-competency-based-education>.
- 3 The “Quality Framework for Competency-Based Education Programs” document can be found at <https://www.cbenetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Quality-Framework-for-Competency-Based-Education-Programs-Updated.pdf>. The Eight Elements of Quality are: 1) Demonstrated Institutional Commitment to and Capacity for CBE Innovation; 2) Clear, Measurable, Meaningful and Integrated Competencies; 3) Coherent Program and Curriculum Design; 4) Credential-Level Assessment Strategy with Robust Implementation; 5) Intentionally Designed and Engaged Learner Experience; 6) Collaborative Engagement with External Partners; 7) Transparency of Student Learning; 8) Evidence-Driven Continuous Improvement.
- 4 <https://virtualedition.cbexchange.org/>.
- 5 <https://kilmanndiagnostics.com/overview-thomas-kilmann-conflict-mode-instrument-tki/>.
- 6 <http://sites.austincc.edu/cbec/best-practices/carlos-rivers/>.
- 7 <https://www.brandman.edu/news-and-events/news/brandman-tapped-for-disney-education-benefits>.
- 8 <https://www.brandman.edu/news-and-events/news/walmart-chooses-brandman-college-credit-program>.
- 9 https://www.cbenetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/CBEx-19-019-Best-Practices-Toolkit_DIGITAL-3.pdf.