Competency-Based Education: Flexibility and a Built-in Prior Learning Assessment Method: A Conversation with Franz Feierbach and Leslie Seiferle

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Franz Feierbach, associate dean for operations and academic readiness at the School of Applied Technology and Technical Specialities has been with Salt Lake Community College (SLCC), Salt Lake City, Utah, USA, for 17 years in different roles. He has been instrumental in implementing a recent series of competency-based (CBE) education training programs. Leslie Seiferle, professor in Career and Technical Education at Salt Lake Community College, has been teaching for 27 years in the Culinary Arts area of the School of Applied Technology and Technical Specialties. We wish to thank Franz and Leslie for taking the time to join us and for their efforts in editing the transcription of this recorded interview, which took place on May 15, 2020.

Nan Travers (N.T.): Good morning. Can you help us understand the mission of the Salt Lake Community College School of Applied Technology and Technical Specialties?

Franz Freierbach (F.F.): The School of Applied Technology was created in 2009 as a merger between two sister institutions that were serving the same populations in the same county here in Salt Lake County. We were both state institutions, and so the legislature created a new law that merged these two institutions: Salt Lake Community College's Skill Center, which was its adult education noncredit side of the workforce training; and the Salt Lake portion of the Utah College of Applied Technology. This law defined what we would do, what we had to do, and how we had to do it.

The statute read, in part, that the new institution to be administered by Salt Lake Community College was to: "provide non-credit career and technical education for both secondary and adult students, with an emphasis primarily on open-entry, open-exit programs" (Salt Lake Community College – School of Applied Technology – Career and Technical Education – Supervision and Administration – Institutional Mission, 2020, para. 4a). That's how the Utah State Legislature defined it — "open-entry, open-exit." They went on further to define what "open" and "exit" mean: "a method of instructional delivery that allows for flexible scheduling in response to individual student needs or requirements and demonstrated competency when knowledge and skills have been mastered; students have the flexibility to begin or end study at any time, progress through course material at their own pace, and demonstrate competency when knowledge and skills have been mastered; and if competency is demonstrated in a program of study, a credential, certificate, or diploma may be awarded" (Career and Technical Education Amendments, 2009, lines 275-282).

All that wording is essentially competency-based education. The statute didn't call it as such, but that's what it is!

Alan Mandell (A.M.): What is the school's focus? Who are your students?

F.F.: There is another thing that is mentioned in the law, and it's that we're supposed to serve economically disadvantaged, educationally disadvantaged, or at-risk students, and this means

that we were to seek articulation with SLCC's traditional or credit-side programs and the state system of higher education beyond SLCC. We were also to offer adult basic education — basic reading and math skills necessary for success in those programs. And then there was another key aspect: low costs to adult students through legislative appropriations, and free tuition for high school students. Taken together, that is why the School of Applied Technology, later consolidated with the School of Technical Specialities, is what it is today: the School of Applied Technology and Technical Specialties (SATTS). It's not something we chose to do; it's something that has been legislated. It's in the law.

As it turns out, the average age of the student population for our program is 34, whereas the average age for Salt Lake Community College as a whole is 24. We have had students who were as old as 60, and we have a few high school students who take advantage of our programs.

Leslie Seiferle (L.S.): You can see why CBE being implemented in the SAT [School of Applied Technology] was a logical fit. In essence, it was already occurring even though it was not explicitly called competency-based education!

F.F.: And they basically do the same at the other institution, the Utah College of Applied Technology, renamed in 2017 to the Utah System of Technical Colleges. A certain level of uniformity between the two entities was written into law. Thus, what we do here in Salt Lake County is supposed to be the same as what they are doing in their service area regions.

N.T.: How did you begin approaching competency-based education, and how has that evolved into what you do today?

L.S.: Maybe I'll share something about myself as an example; that may be the best answer. My transfer to SAT began right at the start of our [Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training (TAACCCT)] grant, and it's been the highlight of my 27 years at the institution. When someone asks me about my employment, I've told them that the best four or five years have been these last four or five years.

A.M.: And Leslie, why is that?

L.S.: Just to put it bluntly, it's because of our focus on CBE.

A.M.: Do you think that you can be more responsive to your students when working in that model?

L.S.: Here's an example: Through no fault of their own, some students were just not able to follow the course schedule. They've missed a lab or have missed multiple days, and you come to understand that they are missing those days because they are now responsible for children, or have a court day, or have other adult demands on their time.

What I figured out how to do, and technology supports this, was to allow a student the opportunity to make up everything that was done in the lab on the days that she missed class. Yes, points were still against her or she was marked down for attendance, but she made up every single "competency" she missed on those days where she was not in class. And since our new model wasn't time-based, she did the work outside of class on her own in an autonomous way, which is what this adult learner was capable of. She passed the lab with maybe a B-plus or even an A-minus when she would have otherwise failed the course.

I was enthusiastically waving my arms as I described what had happened with this student, after which the dean said something like: "Well, what you just described is competency-based education." I said that it was more like surviving — the survival of students in labs who would have

failed otherwise because they missed class.

Imagine having a conversation with a chef (the student's employer) who is telling you that the student has been involved in some work-related event and that's why they've missed class. In the CBE model in which we now work, it's that chef who is now checking off the student and verifying assessments and verifying competency. That's a huge pivot.

N.T.: Are all the programs competency-based at this point?

F.F.: Through the School of Applied Technology and Technical Specialties, we have all but the adult basic education programs. ESL [English as a second language] is still cohort-based. We have only two new programs — one in construction labor, the other in brick masonry — that are cohort-based. And we have one program left to convert, our welding program. Other than those, there are now close to 30 programs that follow the CBE model.

L.S.: Monumental, just monumental.

A.M.: If I'm understanding this correctly, your programs are offering more flexible opportunities for people to learn in the present. That is, you are asking: Why focus on seat time if you have identified a set of competencies and somebody can show that he or she has attained those competencies outside of a formal classroom setting? If that is indeed the case, I wonder how many of your students come into your programs able to demonstrate the competencies they've *already* attained. Is there a process of systematic evaluation/assessment of what they come in with, for example, in the culinary area or some of the other applied areas?

F.F.: Our courses are, for the most part, built in a way where they're broken down into modules. You have a program consisting of a number of sequential courses and each course is broken down into a number of modules of varying length. Ideally, we want those modules to be no longer than a week's worth of work so we can more easily track progress. If students already have prior knowledge of what's being covered in that module, what this does for them is that they don't need to spend the 20 hours they are supposed to spend on that module to complete it. For example, if they can complete the module in two hours, they can go straight to the assessment. In practice, that's what we can do when we recognize that a student has some prior skills or knowledge that he or she is bringing in: go straight to that assessment! That's our form of built-in prior learning assessment. We allow for that acceleration. And it could be also that somebody needs more time, so that's fine, too.

N.T.: Leslie, I remember a story you told a couple of years ago about a student who was working a job cutting beef tips and he had a whole lot of them to do, and you uniquely approached documentation of his learning. Can you tell us about how you have learned to document learning from different sources?

L.S.: In describing this today, I'll need to update the story because talking about experiences before the kind of technology we have now changes the outcome. Smartphones are now everywhere, and at work, also. In the story that you mentioned, that student's chef or sous chef can use his or her smartphone to upload a media clip of a 60-second display showing the student fabricating a bird. [Fabrication means that you are cutting or pulling apart or breaking down seams.] If there's a specific competency you know or a task that they're showing such as, for example, removing the oyster [a very small piece of meat on the backbone, that has to come off with the thigh] in less than 60 seconds, the student can demonstrate that skill. With these phones, you can assess while they're at work, so they don't have to come to the campus at all. They don't have to spend any time viewing any media material that you provided.

A.M.: I'm wondering about the relationship between so-called "old" and "new" learning. Do you

see any differences at all in terms of the quality of learning — its nature and depth — between those who are learning new and those who are bringing in skills, understandings, and insights they've gained from the workforce?

L.S.: That's a really good question because that was in our annual report where we described the value of one of the courses that we offer at the end of the program. It's in the K-Work course [KWKR 0515 – Job-seeking Skills], where the student is preparing for and securing a position. Students in that course already have positions, and some have had *many* positions, and they just *jet* through that course. But they were the ones to comment frequently on prospective employers valuing the experience of making mistakes. And now it occurs to me where students who come in and know something — I don't know if the right word is nuance — but to pick up on the nuance of someone knowing something would include making a mistake on the job. When they're taught something new, yes, they get all the warnings in the classroom, all those safety lessons and lectures on what could happen, but still, it's nowhere near as nuanced. They know it because they have made a mistake, and maybe they were fortunate that they did it wrong at work when a customer was there who valued their learning. We've had some employers say that about formal education. It is always going to be a challenge to have error built in.

F.F.: But you know, I will say that in many of our programs, the vast majority of students are going through the full learning process, and they're not accelerating in a very dramatic way. They may be very good at one particular skill where they can just go very quickly, but it's broken down into little bits where you may do some component very quickly, but you will spend time on others because they're sufficiently different from what you've done, or maybe you want to review and make sure that you don't make mistakes. I don't know why, but we've found that many of our students are not accelerating as much as we had expected. I think that varies depending on the program area.

A.M.: Do you think it because of the students who come into the program, or because people's competencies or skill levels are different than what you might have expected they would have been?

F.F.: It's probably a combination of factors because we have students who are changing or doing a midlife career change. They're going to something that they've never done before because whatever they did before no longer exists, or they were laid off after the financial crisis and who knows what's going to happen now. So they are in that mode of wanting to try something completely different that will result in a job that will sustain them for the next phase of their life. So sometimes it's new for them. For example, sometimes we're seeing a lot of housewives who want to reenter the workforce after raising their children. There are many factors.

N.T.: One thing that I'm finding very fascinating is the importance of the relationship with industry, not only in terms of identifying the competencies but also in being a partner in capturing those competencies. Could you talk about how that partnership is happening in some of your programs?

F.F.: We do have advisory committees for all our programs, and I must admit, some are better than others. Some are a lot more engaged and basically they review our curriculum; they tell us what is current and what they want us to be focused on. One of the challenges we have with our school is that things are always changing. Programs are changing, requirements are changing, and then sometimes we are discontinuing programs that are no longer relevant. So there is that interaction with industry and they are providing us feedback. Sometimes they tell us that this is something you should do, so we spend a lot of time developing a program, and then find out that students aren't interested in going to that program! That's happened with a few of our programs where we haven't seen the enrollment materialize. Maybe those areas are too new and students aren't seeing that there's an outcome for those program areas in terms of job

prospects.

A.M.: If you were to advise an institution that was intrigued with your example and wanted to move in this direction, what might you say to them? What questions might someone ask when creating a competency-based program?

L.S.: Authentic assessments and their corresponding rubrics are key components of CBE, which is anchored by the belief that progress toward a credential should be determined by what learners know and are able to do. Technology has already evolved to where a student could upload a media clip and, as they progress through a project, narrate what they were doing. These kinds of examples have been stopgaps when disassembling, reassembling, and operating equipment, learning how to set up and correctly pass food items through a standard breading station, or correctly utilizing a knife to uniformly cut vegetables of a particular size for an appetizer, soup, or entree. While students submit these assignments asynchronously [through the Canvas learning management system in Google Drive], we have found that prompts, oral interventions, and step-by-step formative assessment work surprisingly well in asynchronous online meeting rooms, just as they did in person. Also, technology to support a competency-based student is paramount to their training.

F.F: Additionally, you need to have support from the leadership. They have to buy into the model from the very top because it trickles down, and then we need to have this buy-in because we'll have to work with different systems, some of which are not always easy or compatible with other areas. I'd say that once you can secure the support, make sure you have the systems to do what you want to do. And then I'd say, start small. Start with a pilot and test it out because you're more than likely to have to change a few things along the way, and once you have something that works well, you can think about scaling.

A.M.: Some students wonder whether the amount of time it's going to take them to document their learning in a prior learning assessment portfolio model is greater than just taking an entirely new course. From a student's point of view, is using the CBE model to their advantage?

L.S.: Yes, CBE is geared toward going faster or finishing sooner and can be important to one student; but then, not infrequently, another student will want to go more slowly, preferring the flexibility of this model because of other commitments outside the class and who has been penalized in a time-based model. As we've developed programs, I think we might have overestimated the number of students that we thought would be interested in this alternative model.

But, Alan, you just referred to how a student said that figuring out how to do an experiential learning portfolio is difficult. I'd say that the task of sitting down and getting 40-plus years into a transcript is daunting. CBE is a significant alternative.

References

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