Mapping Competencies: An Interview with Sally Johnstone

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Sally M. Johnstone is vice president for academic advancement at Western Governors University (WGU) based in Salt Lake City, Utah. Prior to joining WGU in October 2011, she was the provost and vice president for academic affairs at Winona State University in Winona, Minn. She also spent over 15 years at the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE). Her experiences include work on policy issues for higher education institutions and system organizations, inter-institutional collaborations, quality assurance issues, and development and evaluation. For more than a decade, she has worked with UNESCO on educa-tion and open educational resources. Johnstone serves on the editorial boards for Change *magazine and the* Journal of Open Learning, *and is the author of many writings on communication technologies and learning. We spoke with Sally Johnstone on 22 January 2013. What follows is an edited version of that discussion.*

Alan Mandell: Can you help us better understand WGU's competency-based model?

Sally Johnstone: One of the things to keep in mind is that the entire framework for WGU is based around a curriculum that is defined by both internally and externally valid competencies. So, we explicitly define the competencies for any degree program using panels that include both academic and external experts. Graduates have the skills or knowledge that would be expected in their area of study as they move into the workforce or graduate education. At the heart of the institution from the start was the founding governors' concern that their states should have a well-educated workforce. Our curriculum – no surprise here – is in areas where the state needs an educated workforce: business, IT, teacher education and health professions. With that in mind, we create everything we do around those initial competencies. They are then further broken down into both learn-ing objectives and statements that are defined by "a student will be able to do x, y or z." Assessments are de-veloped that are then mapped back to those competencies. For students, this whole framework is very clear-cut: to progress through courses or an area of study, here are the things you will need to know and be able to demonstrate. All our assessments, whether performance-based or objective tests, relate right back to the com-petencies.

A.M.: So, these assessment tools can be used to evaluate *any kind* of learning.

S.J.: Yes. The source of learning has no effect on the integrity of our degree programs because the curriculum is created in a way that is not centric to learning resources. Or, put another way: learning resources are critical-ly important, but they are not the starting point for the definition of the curriculum. It flips the model on its head.

Nan Travers: How have you designed the assessments to be able to capture a student's learning?

S.J.: It depends on the area of study. Obviously, in an area like nursing or teacher education, in addition to what you'd think of as course work and being able to successfully do the assignments and activities within that course area, students also have to do supervised clinical activities or teaching. For example, students work in a

classroom with a master teacher who evaluates their performance. The demonstration teaching looks like everything everybody else does. In other areas, the assessments differ. IT students may have to show they can program and manage a database, but they'll do it in a controlled setting so that it's proctored and there is integrity associated with the assessment itself. There is a whole basket of different kinds of assessments. But the critical point around this is that the assessments are never tied to specific learning resources; they are tied to the competencies and learning objectives associated with an area of study down to the course level. This means that the assessments of those competencies have to be well mapped and highly structured and, of course, secure.

A.M.: I understand that, from this point of view, the core is not the resources nor the origin of a student's knowledge or skills, but the fulfillment of the competencies. People could be entering this process with a whole range of experiences gained from myriad activities.

S.J.: And those are our students! The average age of a student at WGU is 37 with work experience and most of them have had some college. For example, if they have an A.A. degree, they can transfer it in. They receive credit for general education from the courses they have already completed. However, they do have to be able to write well and analyze complex information. Even transferring in course work, we'll find out if they can't do those things and they'll have to master them.

A.M.: And does your model apply to "general education" areas, as well?

S.J.: We talk about using the framework for areas of general education that are basically in line with the work described by the Degree Qualifications Profile [developed through the Lumina Foundation] and LEAP [Liberal Education and America's Promise, an advocacy group that is part of The Association of American Colleges and Universities], upon which many institutions base their general education. So, there is nothing terribly unique about what we are doing except the way students progress through the CBE curriculum. One part of every institution's curriculum is the student's ability to think critically. This is not learned in just one class, but it can be measured if the assessments are keyed to specific rubrics or learning objectives that demand that students demonstrate they can analyze complex information, think critically about it and express themselves in a way that allows a third party to say: oh yes, you know or you can do this!

N.T.: I wonder about so-called "emergent knowledge": knowledge that students may have gained that doesn't fit into rubrics or preconceived definitions that we might have in place. I'm thinking about the kind of learning that some students can bring to us that opens up more horizons than any one institution could ever provide. Do you ever have that kind of holistic learning with WGU students? Can the attention to structuring miss some of this emergent learning? Can there be mapping with flexibility?

S.J.: I think there is a bigger issue within the questions that you've asked. And part of that issue is this: When you think about the role of an institution, or the role of a degree that is awarded by any institution, it becomes important that the degree itself has integrity. That means that you will never be able to capture everything a student knows because, quite frankly, you do not need to do so. If a student is coming to us and trying to get a baccalaureate degree in database management, I really don't care that she is an expert in 1950s rock 'n' roll. It's a lovely thing, but it's not relevant to the validity of the institution's degree. What is relevant for the institution in awarding that degree is to be able to ensure that we know what it means to earn a degree in database management. Being able to define what that really means is critically important for the institution and for the student.

A.M.: Obviously, there is a clear link here to the question of "prior learning."

S.J.: Yes. In the case above, our student may have been a database manager for the last eight years, but has never earned a degree. Maybe she has some college, but the key is that this person really knows databases. So, when she enrolls with us, she completes a pre-assessment activity and, working with the individual faculty member with whom she will stay in very close contact (her "student mentor"), she will receive the guidance to determine how she is going to spend her time. She can probably look at the curriculum and say: "I can breeze through this introductory course on database management; I bet I can do that in a week. I just need to review the highlights and I can sit for the assessment. But I don't know as much about 'security issues' and that will take me some real time to dig into the materials I need to know in that area." So, what our model allows for, without degrading the integrity of the degree itself in any way, which is an institutional responsibility, is a student to come in and apply the knowledge that he or she has gained *wherever they got it,* and demonstrate that knowledge by quickly moving through the assessments with quick reviews of the things that they do know and focusing their time on areas they need to learn. For us, prior learning is just incorporated into the model.

A.M.: Are you saying that within this model, the distinction between "prior" and "current" learning is completely irrelevant?

S.J.: I would put it this way: The source of the learning resources is an irrelevant variable in our model. Now, the learning resources *are* very important because no one comes and knows everything. But *where* those resources come from or *how* the student acquired that knowledge is not critical for us.

N.T.: So, in the world that we're in, a world of more and more resources, your sense is that such "openness" becomes unproblematic for a place like WGU, as long as a student is seeking a degree that you are offering.

S.J.: Of course, the student is going to come to us because they are seeking a degree in one of our areas. The point is that the growth of open educational resources and its broad ramifications, as well as the refinement of what the publishers are beginning to do, is of great benefit to a place like WGU. It's wonderful. I also have spent time at very traditional institutions, and it doesn't work as well there. It's very tough for an institution that has built its curriculum around specific courses that cover specific kinds of materials and are delivered in certain kinds of ways, to then say: "Oh, we can just take this or that knowledge or accept the value of any good learning source, and it really doesn't matter." But it *does* matter because that's the framework of the curriculum upon which that entire institution depends. I really believe that the WGU model is the future. It offers ways in which institutions will actually be able to have a meaningful role in the emerging world of open and shared information that is happening all around us.