Competency Frameworks: Bridging Education and Practice

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Version  Final PDF / published version


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THE CONCEPT of competence and its usefulness for conceptualizing and defining professional practice, guiding the design and evaluation of educational programs and assessing student learning outcomes, has gained interest and acceptance by educators in a wide range of professional programs and countries. However, within Canadian social work education, the acceptance of competence-based models has been limited at best. As educators and researchers committed to education for professional social work practice, we have been perplexed by the stance of colleagues who have rejected and resisted competency models. This commentary reviews our understanding of the contributions of competence to the mission of social work education—to prepare effective social workers who can contribute to the betterment of Canadian society.

As Lee Shulman, education scholar and former President of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching has stated, professional programs are responsible for educating future practitioners in their profession’s fundamental ways of thinking, performing, and acting with integrity (Shulman, 2005). The challenge then is to conceptualize and define those fundamental components in a way that can guide curriculum design, determine a means for evaluating that students have mastered what we aim to teach, and ensure that they are ready to engage in ethical, capable, and safe practice.

In Canada we have not defined national standards or competencies for entry-level professionals. Rather, a patchwork of registration and certification requirements exists, largely based on the successful completion of an accredited social work university program (Collins, Coleman, & Miller, 2002). Hence schools have de facto served as the gatekeepers of
the profession; an ironic situation given Canadian educators' generally critical or at best ambivalent attitude toward competence and the practice of the profession.

So what is all the debate about? We suggest that a fundamental problem in the critique of the notion of competence in Canadian academic circles arises from a dated and limited understanding of the concept. A significant body of knowledge exists across professions and educational literature that considers the concept of competence. In general the concept refers to a set of knowledge, skills, and attitudes or values that are evident in the *behaviour* of professionals as they perform in the domains associated with their profession (Epstein & Hundert, 2002; Kane, 1992). The essence is that the work of professionals consists of complex cognitive, subjective, and behavioural components which can be deconstructed and expressed as specific competencies. The holistic nature of professionals' practice is always acknowledged as elements of competence are interrelated, integrated, and performed at an acceptable level (Kaslow et al., 2004).

Historically, competence models were developed from a behavioural and positivist perspective to identify core behaviours and skills needed in a wide range of occupations. In the United Kingdom and Australia, educators (including those in social work), were highly critical of an approach which analyzed professional practice in terms of work tasks; producing ever growing lists of discrete, concrete, behavioural skills (Hackett, 2001; Kelly & Horder, 2001). In this approach, social work practice was seen as mechanistic, devoid of context, and removed from advocacy and social change efforts. Many fundamental characteristics of professionalism were ignored: that practice is holistic and includes practitioners' cognitive processing of relevant knowledge based on their interactions with the unique situations they encountered; that reflection on one's own perceptions affects how problems are framed and decisions made (Eraut, 1994; Schon, 1983); and that emotional awareness of one's subjective reactions affects the viability of the working relationship and interventions (Ruch, 2007). After studying a range of professions in England, Cheetham and Chivers (2005) presented a model which includes not only performance of behaviours but also reflective, cognitive and reasoning processes or competencies.

In the past decade, most professions have recognized that competence models can provide a transparent blueprint of what students can expect to learn, what teachers will ensure is provided, what practitioners have a responsibility to master, and what consumers and policymakers can expect from a particular professional group. All participants in a professional community have a responsibility to communicate what services they provide and to do so in a language that is clear and accessible.

We certainly acknowledge the challenge in articulating competence models. On one hand, there is a need to balance the tendency to develop
increasingly narrowly conceived, lengthy and detailed inventories which become less relevant to a holistic view of practice, and on the other hand, to avoid expressing competencies which are so abstract, vague and nebulous that they are impossible to assess. Yet, rather than engage productively with this effort, Canadian social work educators have expended energy in divisive conflicts which have not advanced our mission and commitment to Canadians, especially the most vulnerable populations we serve.

Approximately 10 years ago, an extensive national study on social work resulted in a recommendation for the identification of national competencies for each degree or diploma level so as to better inform the public about what social workers do and to facilitate labour mobility across provinces (CS/Resors, 1998; Stephenson, Rondeau, Michaud, & Fiddler, 2001; Westhues, 2002). Critics of this recommendation feared it would enable state control over social work, arguing such a behavioural and reductionist approach would deskill the profession, undermine an emphasis on critical and reflective skills, and weaken the role played by the Canadian Association of Schools of Social Work’s accreditation standards and review procedures (Rossiter, 2002). Of interest in this argument is the lack of any proposed alternate ways of defining and assessing practice ability. The critique effectively silenced those in favour of developing competencies. In this context, the Canadian Council of Social Work Regulators took the initiative to lead a new attempt to develop a professional competence framework and did not partner with academics.

In Canada, several health and human service professions have successfully collaborated to develop complex, textured, holistic competence models. These models guide the design and goals of first-level and specialized education programs and continuing professional development activities; all for the purpose of the achievement and maintenance of competence. For example, under the leadership of The Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada, medicine has introduced the CANMEDS framework for “medical education, physician competence, and quality care, which are all predicated on meeting the needs of society” (Frank, 2005, p. v.). Similarly, a wide range of professions from teachers in elementary and secondary schools, to health professions such as dentistry, nursing, occupational therapy, and so on, have developed competency frameworks through national and provincial collaboration.

Similarly, social work educators in other countries have successfully developed competence models. In the United States, the educational policy and accreditation standards (referred to as EPAS, 2008) identifies 10 competencies and related illustrative practice behaviours expected of graduates of accredited educational programs (CSWE, 2008). In England, following extensive work by the social work reform board, a Professional Capabilities Framework has been proposed which will set out expectations of social workers at every point in their career. The frame-
work consists of nine capabilities which are similar to the competencies in the US model and will inform the design and implementation of education programs and continuing professional development (Social Work Reform Board, 2010).

Based on our research, we believe competency models can be created in Canada. In a multi-project program of research, we elicited the practice wisdom of field instructors and identified the implicit and explicit dimensions they draw upon when describing student performance at various levels along a continuum. The first set of studies involved field instructors in micro or direct practice settings and resulted in the articulation of a holistic model which included two inter-related levels of competence. One level is referred to as meta-competence and captures overarching qualities and abilities of a conceptual, interpersonal, and personal/professional nature. The second level refers to procedural competence or observable behavioural skills (Bogo et al., 2006). More recently the same method was used in a study of field instructors’ perceptions of student competence in macro practice in community, organization and policy field settings. The holistic model of competence was supported. When field instructors discussed students’ performance they did so in a manner wherein qualities and abilities at two different but interrelated levels were again identified, while the particular competencies differed on some dimensions from micro competencies (Regehr, Bogo, Donovan, Anstice, & Lim, in press). In both studies the link between the cognitive processes involved in conceptualizing practice and the performance aspect of choosing and enacting skillful behaviour was clearly evident. To break this link and solely identify behavioural skills renders competency models superficial. To focus exclusively however, on the cognitive and subjective processes of the practitioner ignores the essence of professional practice—how practitioners ultimately use what they know in the real world of practice with clients and communities.

REFERENCES


