'Flexible' Learning, Disciplinarity, and First-Year Writing: Critically Engaging Competency-Based Education

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Abstract

In this article, the authors describe both the disciplinary challenges and program benefits of designing curriculum for a competency-based first-year writing program. Through a review of current scholarship on competency-based education (CBE) and a description of the curricular design process, the authors demonstrate how they used disciplinary standards to address the challenges that come with designating competencies in a learning environment that is disconnected from a community of learners as well as from direct instruction. The authors ultimately argue that writing programs need to actively engage external demands for CBE in order to drive curricular development and maintain disciplinary standards.

In June 2012, Governor Scott Walker and University of Wisconsin System President Ray Cross announced the launch of the Flexible Degree Option—a program run by the University of Wisconsin Extension to meet goals for college completion set by the White House, the state, and foundations such as Lumina Foundation and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Publicity materials described the Flexible Option as a "unique, self-paced, competency-based model" that would allow students to earn college credit towards certain degrees for what they "learned in school, on the job, or on their own, as soon as they can prove that they know it" ("Governor Walker"). Built on models provided by existing online classes, prior learning assessment, independent study, and the competency-based approach of Western Governor's University, the Flexible Option was touted as an affordable and less time-restrictive means of earning college credit that politicians

and administrators hoped would allow more people to complete a degree. Our own institution, the University of Wisconsin Colleges, agreed to offer an entirely competency-based Associates in Arts and Sciences degree.[1] Our first-year writing program, including the composition course required for the degree, was central in executing this new approach to credentialing. Yet our central question was "Would we be able to design a competency-based curriculum for the Flexible Option while still upholding disciplinary standards and practices?"

Nationally, other writing programs are encountering similar external pressures to seek "innovative" ways of offering "credit by evaluation" as their institutions pursue flexible credentialing models in the interest of decoupling college credit from seat time, the credit hour, or even traditional courses (Schneider). A 2016 collaborative report from national organizations Eduventures and the American Council of Education found that a quarter of institutions surveyed have competency-based programs while over a third use competency-based courses (Garrett and Lurie). Historically, most WPAs have encountered alternative credentialing through models like Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, CLEP (College-Level Examination Program), or Prior Learning Assessment. All of these models involve colleges (sometimes through their faculty, sometimes through other measures) reviewing, developing, and authorizing a course-level model for awarding equivalent credit. For the purposes of writing studies, this is almost always a first- or second-semester writing class. However, for the Flexible Degree Option, we were asked to develop writing curriculum that differs from these models in some key ways.

The Flexible Option is offered by the college through a self-paced, modular, instructor-less, and entirely online format. (See Figures 1-4.) Each credit-bearing competency set—which is packaged as the equivalent of a campus-based course—is broken down into a variable number of competencies reflecting specific skills and knowledge students must demonstrate. Students must work through each competency set within a certain time frame by completing assessments accessed through an online course management system.[2] In lieu of instruction, students are invited to work through curated content incorporated into the CMS, either on their own or in consultation with their Academic Success Coach who provides mentoring and support but not instruction. The assessments the student produces are then evaluated by a course assessor with expertise in the field and who does not provide instruction. Thus, the ideal aim of the Flexible Option is to enroll self-directed learners ready to demonstrate learning they developed elsewhere for credit towards equivalent course requirements.[3]

Fig. 1: Flex Option Splash Page (http://bit.ly/2gmQ19x)	Fig. 2 Eng 102 Welcome and Overview (http://bit.ly/2fZW7HQ)
Fig. 3 Assessments Grading Feedback Rubric (http://bit.ly/2f4HQZG)	Fig. 4 Assessment 1 Self Assessment Essay (http://bit.ly/2g2AyrL)

Our focus here is on how this competency model presented programmatic challenges as well as valuable insights as we fought tirelessly to hold an external political initiative to our disciplinary standards for curriculum development. After all, we did not want to abandon our field's recognition that "the best assessment practice is undertaken in response to local goals, not external pressures" (CCCC Committee on Assessment). Even though CBE initiatives often come from such pressures, we insisted that the resulting curriculum for our program adhere to local needs and disciplinary standards. In doing so, we were actually able to strengthen our writing program by confronting this curricular challenge and ensuring that the Flexible Option would assess the same learning outcomes as the rest of our program.

In what follows, we first situate our program development in the context of current scholarship on competency-based education and parallel tensions in writing studies. Second, we share how, through the process of deriving assessable competencies from our program learning outcomes, we discovered that such work is not so different from the curriculum development writing programs already do and even suggest that CBE programs provide an opportunity to make program curricula more explicit not only for our students but for ourselves. We then describe the critical challenges of accounting for first-year writing competencies that depend on engagement with others, which in turn underscore the ongoing questions about

how to design writing competencies for students disconnected from a community of learners. Similarly, we address the vital distinction that must be made between assessment and instruction in CBE writing courses so that we do not devalue the important role instructors play in traditional forms of writing instruction. Finally, we emphasize that writing programs can and should actively engage external demands for CBE by drawing on the implicit competency-based thinking in the discipline and insisting on replicating best practices for learning to ensure that the disciplinary standards, rather than the political imperatives of outside stakeholders, drive the curriculum development.

Competency-Based Education and the Role of Writing Studies

Competency-based education is primarily touted as a convenient form of credentialing for students today who "are more likely to be older, working, attending part time, and learning outside of traditional credit-bearing classrooms than students in the past" (Laitenen). Moreover, by providing credentialing that focuses on what a student can do, rather than where or how they learned it, proponents claim that CBE encourages working adults to return to college by recognizing "knowledge and experiences that are worthy of academic recognition that's unavailable through traditional programs" (Schejbal).[4] Yet advocates' most pointed argument for CBE is that this model of credentialing more accurately assesses student learning rather than merely "measuring time spent trying" (Reed). Indeed, much of the conversation around CBE now cites Arum and Roksa's controversial *Academically Adrift* study asserting that undergraduates are earning degrees without actually learning. According to Paul LeBlanc, President of Southern New Hampshire University, which piloted College for America's CBE program, "CBE offers a fundamental change at the core of our higher education 'system': making learning non-negotiable and the claims for learning clear *while making time variable*" (emphasis original). The bolder contention is that CBE is better at measuring true learning than the traditional credit-hour, instructor-led course.

Unsurprisingly, such arguments are met with backlash, particularly from detractors who see CBE as fundamentally incompatible with traditional liberal education principles. Johan Neem, in his 2013 essay for AAC&U's *Liberal Education*, argues that CBE cannot replicate the core of a liberal education, which he defines as "putting students into contexts in which they are exposed to new ideas, asked to chew on them, and to talk or write about them." The narrative around CBE, and the rhetoric shaping the Flexible Option, is that "postsecondary education will fulfill its mis-

sion in service of the public good when academic study is understood as something that is intended to equip students with the competencies necessary to be individually competitive economic actors" (Adler-Kassner 448). Thus, competency-based programs ignore larger democratic missions like shaping well-informed, ethical citizenship by reducing higher education to a particular vision of job training, one that emphasizes the performance and assessment of measurable tasks. Indeed, most criticism focuses on what is perceived to be CBE's focus on discrete, measurable skills that are not usually associated with the more holistic and dispositional achievements a liberal education purports to develop.

For writing programs, the concerns around CBE are reflected in a broader tension that Kristine Johnson has highlighted between the ideal habits of mind that our discipline promotes as vital to a successful college education and the technocratic climate of current educational policy. As articulated in *The Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing*, students are more likely to be successful if they enter college with dispositions toward learning like curiosity, responsibility, and engagement. Yet, as Johnson notes, these dispositions are not easily assessed in direct relation to standards that resonate with outside stakeholders nor do they intuitively map onto the more granular assessment of competency-based programs like the Flexible Option. Such programs tend to emphasize artifacts that invoke isolated performances rather than complex dispositions developed over time. But as first-year writing programs—especially at open access institutions like ours—more often work to ensure students demonstrate such habits by the end of our courses rather than before they enroll, we are caught between holistic goals and assessable outcomes. As Johnson explains,

> The convergence of habits of mind and assessment seems to offer two unsatisfying options for fostering habits of mind: 1) position them as assessable outcomes to assure their significance, or 2) position them as unmeasurable and fundamentally antithetical to large-scale assessment. (534)

If we hold to the first position, we potentially undermine the goals and values of our writing programs. If we hold to the second position, we jeopardize those programs in a landscape of budget reductions and interventions like CBE.

When we were approached about the Flexible Degree Option, we shared these larger concerns about whether or not a competency-based approach could work for the curriculum offered by our institution and particularly our writing program. We were specifically concerned about how this approach could be used to capture the disciplinary wisdom and pedagogical

complexity of a first-year writing sequence. After all, as Linda Adler-Kassner notes, competency models tend to offer "a 'discipline-vacant' approach to writing" that seeks to "erase disciplinarity in the name of an economically motivated public good" (446, 447). For instance, the vocational model from Western Governor's University that we were given positioned assessments as generally isolated from one another and keyed to separate competencies. There wasn't a strong sense of how a deliberate, scaffolded, interconnected curriculum like ours could be translated into the structure of the Flexible Option. Thus, we did not have a blueprint for bridging this apparent incompatibility in either our design of measurable competencies or corresponding methods of assessment.

Nonetheless, we also acknowledged how the CBE model might productively serve our high-skilled students, many of whom are returning adults with substantial demands on their time as well as extensive (usually work-related) experience writing for a variety of purposes and audiences, which in turn had helped them develop competencies we sought to assess in our writing program. Moreover, as instructors at a two-year, non-residential, open-admission institution, we cannot readily embrace Neem's assumption about the necessity of the traditional college experience in order to develop well-rounded students, since many of our current students do not—and never will—replicate this ideal. Therefore, we saw this as an opportunity to continue making progress on streamlining, expanding, and improving our first-year writing program by taking advantage of the resources afforded to Flex Option development while ensuring that we didn't sacrifice our programmatic goals in the process.

The Familiar Work of Developing a Competency-Based Writing Curriculum

At the time we were asked to develop CBE curriculum for the Flex Option, our first-year writing program was already in the midst of a series of curricular revisions dating back to 2009. During that time, we experienced a significant increase in academically under-prepared students and in contingent instructional staff. To preserve the changes we had already made, we foregrounded the need to align the Flexible Option with the rest of our program revisions instead of focusing on merely adapting our program to the newest platform. This required articulating learning outcomes that would apply across the three different modes of learning now being offered (classroom, online, and CBE) as well as deriving competencies for each learning outcome that would also be assessable regardless of delivery method. Working through this process, we discovered the parallels between curric-

ular design for CBE and the implicit competency-based thinking already employed in many aspects of writing program development.

Our first step was to revise the learning outcomes of the three sequenced courses: a single, non-degree basic writing class (English 098) followed by a two-semester, degree-credit writing course sequence (English 101 and English 102). We wanted to preserve agreed-upon elements of rhetorical skill and content, such as those outlined in the WPA Outcomes Statement and *The Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing*. We also relied heavily on research into the learning needs of our own student population to ensure that we were delineating goals appropriate for our institution. We then worked backwards through the course sequence to identify benchmarks of progress that students had to meet, thereby scaling WPA Outcomes Statement recommendations to suit the level of proficiency reflected in each of our courses and using *The Framework for Success* to inspire some of the language and sensibility within those outcomes.

Our second step was to translate these outcomes into assessable competencies that would serve as benchmarks for the Flexible Option competency sets and guide the creation of appropriate assessments for all three writing courses regardless of credentialing format. As a result, there is no difference between the competencies that students are expected to demonstrate in our face-to-face courses, instructor-led online courses, and the Flexible Option because the same competencies are needed to achieve the program's shared learning outcomes. Preserving this curricular consistency across learning modes ensured that the CBE assessments would uphold our goals as a program and students in the Flex program would be required to demonstrate the same learning as our other students as they earn the same credit. For example, under the category of Critical Writing in English 102, we identified the following three learning outcomes:

- Write cohesive academic essays for a variety of rhetorical purposes supported by scholarly research,
- Distinguish an author's position and the writer's own position using evidence from a scholarly text, and
- Accurately paraphrase and summarize scholarly source material to use as support in a research-based text.

We then had to articulate competencies as tangible actions the students must demonstrate to achieve these learning outcomes. For Critical Writing, we articulated two competencies with multiple components required in order to address how these three learning outcomes were connected to one another in the development of student writing (see table 1). In doing so, we were able to highlight the complexity of developing critical writing compe-

tency at the end of our FYW program as well as suggest to our campus and online instructors the range of assessable learning activities that could be used to fully reflect the achievement of these outcomes. By drafting similar relationships between outcomes and competencies for each of the three composition courses, we could also scale the competencies to abilities we would expect from student writers at each level.

Table 1
Learning Outcomes and Competencies for Critical Writing in English 102

Learning Outcomes	Competencies
Write cohesive academic essays for a variety of rhetorical purposes supported by scholarly research	The writer produces texts that use scholarly research articles that: Organize content around a central claim so that each section of the text advances a key point in support of that claim
Distinguish an author's position and the writer's own position using evidence from a scholarly text	- Incorporate summary, paraphrasing, and quoting from sources to achieve the writer's rhetorical purpose - Use effective signal phrases to contextualize source material
Accurately paraphrase and summarize scholarly source material to use as support in a research-based text	- Provide explanation about the relevance of evidence to the main point(s) and subpoints of the text The writer produces a research-based argument that: - Situates the writer's position within the context of a scholarly conversation about a narrowly-focused issue - Addresses multiple valid positions - Articulates the differences and similarities between an author's position and the writer's own position

A challenge arose, however, when we had to map our work for the Flexible Option administrators who were following the Western Governor's model, which assumed a one-to-one correspondence among competencies, assessments, and grades.[5] When we presented our assessments to the Flexible Option program coordinator, we were asked how individual assessments were weighted and what the minimum level of proficiency was for each assessment versus the whole set of assessments. Such an expectation reinforced the often-criticized contention that CBE is necessarily granular because learning is characterized by the achievement of isolated competencies rather than an integrated, complex assessment. To counter this assumption, we asserted that writing competencies are necessarily interrelated and reflected in complex assessments. We were able to reference disciplinary standards for such complexity, particularly relying on the CCCC position statement on writing assessment that recommends assigning multiple pieces of writing "in more than one genre, on different occasions, for different audiences" as part of effective writing assessment (CCCC Committee on Assessment). Doing this let us address the tension identified by Johnson and retain the consistency of our writing program and the rigor of Writing Studies.

What emerged from the process of mapping our assessments to the competencies was a curriculum in which several competencies were reinforced across multiple assessments. For instance, we identified four common academic artifacts that would demonstrate the two competencies in Critical Writing and would reinforce these competencies across different rhetorical situations (see table 1). But for the first competency—to write texts that use scholarly research articles—we recognized that any number of texts could demonstrate this competency, particularly within a course like our English 102 that is focused on research-based writing. We also wanted students to demonstrate their competence in rhetorical adaptability within the contexts of the curriculum for that course. Although we could have designed a narrow exercise that only addressed competency in, for example, summarizing a scholarly article, doing so would not have reinforced our program goals of having students develop rhetorical adaptability in sustaining various arguments with textual evidence. Thus, we keyed this competency to several assessments that would make up the student's work for the Flexible Option English 102 competency set (see table 2).

Table 2
Corresponding Competencies and Assessments for Critical Writing Outcomes

Learning Outcomes	Competencies	Assessments
Write cohesive academic essays for a variety of rhetorical purposes supported by scholarly research Distinguish an author's position and the writer's own position using evidence from a scholarly text Accurately paraphrase and summarize scholarly source material to use as support in a research-based text	1. The writer produces texts that use scholarly research articles and that: • Organize content around a central claim so that each section of the text advances key point in support of that claim • Incorporate summary, paraphrasing, and quoting from sources to achieve the writer's rhetorical purpose • Use effective signal phrases to contextualize source material • Provide explanation about the relevance of evidence to the main point(s) and subpoints of the text 2. The writer produces a research-based argument that: • Situates the writer's position within the context of a scholarly conversation about a narrowly-focused issue • Addresses multiple valid positions • Articulate the differences and similarities between an author's position and the writer's own position	1. Self-Assessment Essay, Rhetorical Analysis, Research Review (Synthesis), Researched Argument Paper 2. Researched Argument Paper

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To push back against the expectation that a single grade could be applied to each assessment or weighted separately as isolated abilities, we returned to the language of our program learning outcomes and the competencies themselves to articulate the rubrics used to assess student performance. By remaining focused on program and course goals, these outcomes-based rubrics shifted attention from isolated activities to a breadth of ability that more closely reveals the growth of the student as a writer, growth that is measured by multiple pieces of writing across a variety of rhetorical situations and employing different procedural and reflective strategies. For the Flexible Option of English 102, we tailored the outcomes-based rubric to individual written texts submitted by students while still ensuring that each rubric addressed multiple, overlapping competencies and reflected program outcomes. For instance, for the competencies identified in table 1 and 2, we added a criterion to rubrics for all of the English 102 assessments to evaluate ability in critical, research-based writing (see table 3). We found that such language allowed for the breadth of rhetorical situations and generic conventions represented in each assessment while also including reflective writing that made it possible to assess both student performance and rhetorical knowledge of how writing works. Doing so allowed us to view each student's competency holistically, moving us closer to dispositional assessment while still evaluating measurable actions.

In the end, the competencies proved to be the necessary bridge between our program goals for each course and the kinds of measurable assessments outside stakeholders were seeking for the launch of the Flexible Option. Despite our initial skepticism, we embraced competency development as an effective method of backward design to guide the creation of an assessment sequence that would best embody the outcomes for each course.[6] After all, when instructors ask students to perform specific tasks or produce specific products and then assess these as artifacts of learning, the instructors are often using implicit competencies as the basis for assessment. Competency-based curriculum development forces writing programs to make these assumptions explicit and articulate them not only for students but also for instructors and administrators. One of the ways we see CBE as compatible with disciplinary standards, then, is because it requires a more explicit breakdown of what learning looks like as part of a student's rhetorical education, and it forces us to describe and measure such learning in ways that are meaningful to students, instructors, and administrators within a rigorous framework.

Table 3
Rubric for Assessing Competencies in Critical Writing

Advanced	Proficient	Competent	Developing
The writer: • Consistently produces insightful academic essays for a variety of rhetorical purposes supported by scholarly research • Effectively contextualizes the writer's position within multiple valid and scholarly positions about a narrowly-focused issue	The writer: • Consistently produces cohesive academic essays for a variety of rhetorical purposes supported by scholarly research • Accurately contextualizes the writer's position within multiple valid and scholarly positions about a narrowly-focused issue	The writer: • Produces cohesive academic essays for a variety of rhetorical purposes supported by scholarly research • Situates the writer's position within multiple valid and scholarly positions about a narrowly-focused issue	The writer: • Shows an emerging ability to produce academic essays for a variety of rhetorical purposes supported by research • Does not provide a context for the writer's position within multiple and positions about a focused issue

Preserving Dialogic Competencies without a Community of Learners

Although we achieved compatibility between our local goals and a competency-based writing curriculum, we encountered significant challenges in designing assessments for those competencies which required students to engage with others. For instance, the category of Critical Reading in English 102 includes a learning outcome that focuses on discussing texts with other readers. Competency is demonstrated by a student who

- Accurately and specifically discusses the text,
- Accurately summarizes peers' responses,
- Synthesizes different viewpoints, and
- Responds through concession, rebuttal, or qualification with the use of specific evidence from the text.

Another set of competencies in English 102 focuses on writing processes and asks students to "Demonstrate proficiency in working collaboratively to use appropriate resources for feedback, critically use reader feedback to shape revision, and provide effective feedback as a reader to other writers." In short, students need to engage with readers and peer writers to demonstrate competence in the writing process outcomes within our program.

Such competencies are traditionally demonstrated in environments where students engage directly with other readers and writers, which is essential to what we know about the social dimension of writing communities. For instance, as Kathleen Blake Yancey asserts in her *CCC* editorial, "Tracing Intersections," "peer review is at the heart of epistemological and scholarly practice" (554). Even though Yancey is specifically addressing the peer review process used by Writing Studies scholars, this claim speaks to the importance of writer-reader engagement to inspire invention, inform drafting, and refine revision to meet the needs of an audience and rhetorical purpose as part of an effective writing practice (see Heinert for a further discussion of how peer critique functions as a signature pedagogy of writing studies). Thus, while learning might be assessed individually, ability and understanding (what we assess when we assess competence) are frequently developed collaboratively, both in and out of the classroom. Yet one of the recurring concerns with CBE is the individualist assumption about how learning occurs and is subsequently assessed. Within the Flexible Option, we wondered how students could submit work that demonstrated their competence in areas that required engagement when they only had access to an asynchronous online environment without an instructor or classmates to serve as readers and fellow writers. Specifically, CBE students run the risk of diminishing the role of the reader as an addressed interlocutor in

the writing process, a concern addressed by Ede and Lunsford when they describe writing tasks that lack a reader (165). When we presented this concern to Flexible Option instructional designers, however, they were unable to help us develop a solution and even encouraged us to drop these competencies entirely.

Again, to preserve the integrity of our writing program and enforce disciplinary standards, we were not prepared to concede that these dialogic competencies could not be demonstrated by Flex Option students nor, more importantly, could not function as further development in their academic writing. We had to resolve the key experiential shortcomings of CBE that Neem and others ultimately rest their objections on: the lack of interaction among students or with an instructor and what this absence would communicate to Flexible Option students about writing as a social practice. To that end, we developed methods of assessment that would mirror as closely as possible the conditions experienced by students in our face-to-face and instructor-led online courses who have the opportunity to practice course objectives on an addressed audience.

To measure students' ability to "discuss a scholarly text in dialogue with other readers," we initially considered and rejected alternatives to the synchronous conversation of a learning community, such as requiring that students post to a public forum and document their interactions with other writers. But certain logistical limitations arose in trying to create a simulated dialogic environment. For example, it was difficult to find a forum for *scholarly* discussion; most of the lay online forums focus on news items, and the conversation that takes place in these spaces, while rich and complex in its own right, does not reflect a level of engagement with scholarly material that we would equate with college-level competence. Our solution, then, was to draw on our experience with asynchronous discussion from our instructor-led online courses by designing a two-part discussion activity in which the student was required to 1) post a public (in-course) reaction to an assigned scholarly article and 2) respond to a peer who had already posted to that same forum on that same reading.

To replicate the conditions of working with peer learners and to provide some context for these activities, we used discussion posts from students in our instructor-led online classes as example voices with which Flexible Option students would engage. (We obtained informed consent from the students before doing so.) While we anonymized the borrowed posts, we left them unedited so students would be working with responses and posts that represent the likely contribution of peers as if they were in a class together. In this way, the assessments would in many ways resemble the asynchronous exchange that happens for our online students with one

notable exception: the Flexible Option students would not receive replies to their own posts. Consequently, students' engagement with readers is altered significantly. After all, although we can assess what students are doing with their writing, we are not able to assess an actual discussion with an addressed audience who can respond. Such fluid interaction is probably best replicated in a synchronous learning environment or at least in an environment with asynchronous access to fellow learners, neither of which has been integrated into CBE models precisely because of their emphasis on independent learning.

Similarly, we wanted to preserve writer-reader feedback loops as part of the writing process to avoid the potential pitfall of dismissing the social nature of writing.[7] Fortunately, for the other dialogic competencies (using resources for feedback, using reader feedback for revision, and providing feedback to other writers), our solution was a bit more successful in meeting our program goals. Once again, we worked to eliminate the constraints of time and direct interaction by separating peer review into two distinct activities. In the first activity, students provide critical reader feedback on sample student essays which were also obtained from actual students in the instructor-led online versions of the equivalent courses. (Again, informed consent was obtained prior to using any student materials.) In the second activity, students submit their own formal essays for feedback from a professional tutoring service such as the UW Colleges Online Writing Lab or another campus-based writing center. Then, after considering that feedback on their writing, students are required to reflect on why and how they did or did not employ that feedback within the self-assessment portion of each assessment.[8] In doing so, students are expected to demonstrate that they are aware of readers as influential in their own decision making as writers.

Notably, requiring students to engage in reflection not only allowed us to gauge student competency in effective writing processes but also served to address another potential impasse between CBE and the goals of Writing Studies. Just as the discipline increasingly emphasizes the content of writing studies as much as the skills of writing,[9] CBE appears to be moving towards breaking down writing into discrete skills. Yet across our program, including within the Flexible Option curriculum, self-reflection and critical reading/writing about scholarly articles in writing studies serve as points of contact between these two areas, so ability is not severed from understanding.[10] For instance, we reinforced one area of our program learning outcomes (Rhetorical Knowledge: Writing) with a competency that explicitly stated: "The writer produces a text that accurately assesses the writer's own rhetorical choices and the effect of those choices for readers." While we require this across the different credentialing methods, the integration of such criti-

cal self-reflection within the competency-based curriculum serves to trace students' thinking about their writing while also capturing how accurately they can articulate some of the key concepts effective writers need to be successful—such as audience awareness or the value of revision in achieving a rhetorical purpose.[11] Ultimately, even though there is a lack of immediate dialogue with a peer, students are still able to demonstrate their ability to be critical readers for others as well as receive formative feedback from a real reader to show how they can both apply strategies and articulate their understanding of such strategies within the language of Writing Studies.

Defining Boundaries Between Assessment and Instruction in CBE

The most significant disciplinary challenge of developing competency-based courses for writing studies—and the thorniest logistical and intellectual problem we encountered in implementing our Flexible Option curriculum—is the role of feedback in learning. CBE models are predicated on the assumption that assessments are divorced from instruction, which is why such programs are touted as instructor-less even though students receive evaluations from expert assessors. In part, this is due to the influence of other disciplines where assessments are always summative and isolated from the learning process. Not surprisingly, the administrators and instructional designers of the Flexible Option failed to recognize how feedback serves a formative and instructional role in student writing development, providing a one-to-one dialogue between an instructor and student about how to improve the student's writing. We had to distinguish feedback from assessment in Writing Studies, specifically invoking the unique epistemological nature of process knowledge in writing development that is reflected in our field's foundational threshold concepts (see Adler Kassner and Wardle, 2015).[12]

More pragmatically, the co-authors had a vigorous discussion about how to handle the lack of instruction in the Flexible Option format and the corresponding distinction between instructor-led and instructor-less versions of our first-year writing courses. Specifically, because Flexible Option assessors are not compensated for the amount of time formative feedback takes, designing a course with traditional formative feedback on student writing was not a possibility.[13] Indeed, the premise behind many CBE models, in addition to offering convenience through flexible scheduling, is that CBE credits are more affordable to attain precisely because the program does not have to pay for the time and labor of an instructor. In traditionally-delivered writing courses, time and labor is largely devoted to providing

feedback on student writing. Therefore, our team conversation centered on the question: "If we are assessing competence, what kind of feedback is necessary?"

Ultimately we decided that summative feedback reflecting the proficiency of student learning demonstrated in an assessment was the only appropriate (and possible) feedback that balances the disciplinary value of offering feedback while protecting the labor demands on assessors.[14] Moreover, summative feedback aligns with a fundamental feature of CBE: that students are demonstrating and developing competence independently. In other words, students only receive feedback about the level of competence their work does (or does not) demonstrate through a rubric based on the competencies for that particular assessment. It is up to the students to use any summative evaluation to guide their work when either re-attempting the same assessment or moving on to other assessments within the competency set.[15]

Yet many students familiar with traditional writing courses still expect more guidance from instructors—even though the students have enrolled in a program deliberately devoid of instruction.[16] As a result, one consequence of developing a competency-based writing curriculum is the potential tendency of instructors to extend themselves within programs explicitly designed to sidestep instruction. As Gallagher argues,

> In light of the ensuing erosion of the tenure system and the concomitant rise of the use of contingent workers, we should be concerned about the ways in which CBE has contributed to, and today is accelerating, the casualization of academic labor (20).

It is a concern we share. A firm stance on the role and type of feedback offered through CBE protects the discipline, the instructors who are increasingly working off the tenure track, and students alike. Students who need instruction in a classroom setting to demonstrate the skills they have already mastered, or who do not have enough knowledge to complete the assessments through self-directed and self-paced learning, should not be enrolled in a CBE program. But the burden may be on writing programs and their administrators to make this assertion clear to those who eagerly embrace the CBE model without considering how a complex subject, such as writing, depends heavily on the relationship between students and instructors.

What CBE and Writing Studies Can Offer Each Other

Despite our struggles with developing assessments that address the full, nuanced breadth of competencies and disciplinary content knowledge that

we expect in our classrooms, as well as the ongoing challenges of negotiating the instructional role of feedback for students who opt out of receiving instruction, we ultimately found the intellectual work of designing our Flexible Option courses valuable to us as writing program developers. In particular, working through the CBE model helped us to recognize the competencies we assumed within our existing curriculum and the need to articulate and explicate them for both students and instructors. In doing so, we were able to create the kind of assessments that would best reflect the learning suited to our disciplinary, programmatic, and institutional missions as educators. Even as we gained a stronger understanding of what we are trying accomplish for ourselves, we could also declare to other stakeholders—including those administering the Flexible Degree Option—where our disciplinary investments were and which of these were non-negotiable.

The latter insight led us to a much more far-reaching conclusion: those with expertise in writing studies absolutely must be part of the development of competency-based versions of their own curricula. For us—and perhaps for other programs confronted with the call to develop CBE equivalents—the first critical hurdle is challenging our own initial assumptions that CBE models of credentialing cannot achieve the same learning outcomes and assessment standards that we use for instructor-led writing courses. We need to honestly yet critically explore how competency models might be able to accomplish what Neem describes as the purpose of liberal education: "to transform a person by offering him or her serious and diverse intellectual experiences." As CBE models gain traction among higher education decision-makers across various types of institutions, those in Writing Studies need to be part of the conversation about what CBE can and should do for student writers. Without local disciplinary experts involved, the ideals and goals that define our discipline and specific writing programs would be disregarded to fit the efficiencies of CBE rather than having disciplinary experts demand that CBE take up innovative ways to reflect and promote the complex learning our programs strive to instill. For faculty at the many institutions that adopt CBE programs, this opportunity might not be a given and instead must be fought for. As a field, we can—and must—shape the way that competency-based writing programs are discussed, designed, and implemented.

Here we have shared how we negotiated this perceived incompatibility by refocusing on the goals of our own program, mapping competencies across platforms and assessments, and striving to retain elements of writer-reader engagement within the constraints presented to us at our own institution. To spur further insights in the field, however, we offer the following

key questions based on our own experiences at the front lines of this new movement in higher education:

- How do we guide developers in designing a CBE writing curriculum that will not be taught?
- How can our disciplinary organizations best respond to these external imperatives to develop CBE programs?
- How do we protect instructors in programs that serve both traditional and CBE student populations?
- How can CBE be made to reflect the rapidly developing foundation of knowledge about how writing works and how students learn to write? and
- How can competency models like the Flexible Option create landscapes that become, in Neem's words, "contexts in which [students] are exposed to new ideas, asked to chew on them, and to talk or write about them"?

The only way to discover effective answers to such questions is for those of us in Writing Studies to critically engage with competency based education and advocate for the rhetorical and liberal education offered by our programs rather than allowing our disciplinary objectives to be co-opted by external, politicized mandates and agendas.

Notes

1. Unlike many community colleges covering technical or vocational education, our two-year institution provides the first two years of transfer-parallel credits aligned with the liberal arts general education curriculum of the state university system of which we are a part. Thus, students pursuing the Associates in Arts and Sciences (AAS) Degree through the Flexible Option might complete assessments across a range of disciplines, from history to women's studies to geography to first-year writing, during their prescribed periods.

2. At the time of this publication, Flexible Option students pay a flat rate to enroll in three-month subscription periods that can begin at the start of any calendar month and may be renewed once if needed to allow students more time to complete assessments.

3. Such a format has been challenging to students who fail to grasp their own responsibilities as independent learners who cannot rely on an instructor for direction. We speculate this is due to larger issues in how CBE is marketed to them as well as the ineffectiveness in assessing the alignment between prospective students' needs and how the program is structured. On the heels of increased scrutiny by the Department of Education, including a report from the Inspector General critical of competency-based programs, our administration reported on conversations

with the Higher Learning Commission, the accrediting body of our institution. Our provost tried to reassure shared governance bodies that

> the UW Colleges is in good standing with the Commission and is within federal rules and regulations regarding the U.S. Department of Education's expectations for "regular and substantive interaction" initiated by instructors between instructors and students in the UW Colleges UW Flexible Option program,

which does not dovetail with our experience as developers and assessors for Flexible Option (Lampe). The numbers also do not bear this out, though they have improved over the last two years. As of December 2015, 100 students had enrolled in our core-equivalent English 102 competency set but only 26 achieved a level of competence or above. In 2016, of the 108 students who had subscribed to English 101 or 102, 51 (or 48%) had mastered the competencies in the course. The fact remains that, despite the governor's and administrative insistence on the demand for this program, at this time, only a small subset of students are able to complete it independently without traditionally defined instruction.

4. The individual defining their own path to college credit based on what he or she already knows is a fundamental component of the Flexible Option marketing campaign, with slogans such as "Earn a University Wisconsin degree at your pace, on your schedule, using knowledge you already have" (University of Wisconsin System, "UW Flexible Option").

5. As defined by the Flexible Option program, assessments are "the tests, projects, and other activities used to measure . . . knowledge" (University of Wisconsin System, "FAQ").

6. See Wiggins and McTighe 1999 for more on backwards design.

7. See Roozen, in Adler-Kassner and Wardle, 2015. See also O'Neill et al. for an overview of key sources on feedback and its role in writing assessment.

8. Under the outcome category of Writing Processes for English 102, we articulated a competency that stated "The writer will produce multiple self-assessments that analyze and evaluate the student's writing processes and products with specific evidence from the student's own writing." So for each paper written, students must critically reflect and document their process.

9. See the Downs and Wardle "Writing about Writing" approach and the threshold concept model introduced by Meyer and Land in 2003 and recently developed more fully by Adler-Kassner and Wardle in *Naming What We Know: Threshold Concepts in Writing Studies*.

10. For example, the *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing*, Deborah Brandt's article "Sponsors of Literacy" and Sommers and Saltz's "The Novice as Expert" all serve as foundational texts Flex students read as part of completing assessments.

11. See Rose; Duffy and Downs, in Adler-Kassner and Wardle, 2015.

12. For example, threshold concepts such as "Writing Is an Activity and a Subject of Study" as well as "Learning to Write Effectively Requires Different Kinds of Practice, Time, and Effort" and "Writing Addresses, Invokes, and/or Creates Audiences," "Revision is Central to Developing Writing" and "Failure Can Be an Important Part of Writing Development" (Adler-Kassner and Wardle, v-vii).

13. Disciplinary experts who serve as assessors are not compensated the equivalent pay or status as an instructor of a semester-long campus or online course. Serving as a Flex Option instructor of record is not calculated into an instructor's course load but is instead an additional compensation over and above their current load based on enrollment. The rate for FYW since the Flexible Option's inception has been $300 per month for each instructor of record.

14. As stated earlier, any other guidance comes from reading through the curated content of the competency set, which includes the suggested readings and resources for students to examine on their own.

15. Flexible Option developers and administrators decided to allow students two attempts at proving competency on a particular assessment before the students would be encouraged to pursue instructor-led options instead. In English 101 and English 102, there are several assessments, each of which can be repeated once before completing the final portfolio assessment.

16. Assessors have also needed to be mentored away from traditional instructional practices to understand what competency-based education is and is not and adjust their assessment processes to those positions.

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