The mentor's dilemma: tips for assessing "soft" competencies in Competency-Based Theological Education (CBTE)

By Ruth McGillivray

Assessing a student's proficiency in New Testament Greek or Old Testament literature is relatively straightforward and well-understood, but how do you evaluate achievement of spiritual or emotional maturities? How do you reliably assess whether or not a student has "mastered" competencies like faith or humility? And how do you ensure consistency across multiple mentors performing those assessments? This article offers tips for CBTE program designers and mentors on how to improve reliability and consistency in assessing the "soft" competencies essential to success in ministry.

Editor's Note: *CBTE programs that are not credit/course-based require approval by the ATS Board of Commissioners as an educational experiment. Two ATS member schools have received such approval: Northwest Baptist Seminary and Grace Theological Seminary. CBTE programs that are credit/course-based do not require special approval, which would include programs offered by Sioux Falls Seminary. Read more about CBTE programs.*

Kyle is a theology professor at a seminary that has recently implemented a competency-based MDiv program. He has a decade of experience teaching traditional, semester-based courses at the post-secondary level, and another decade taking them. But his role in this new program is different. Instead of teaching courses in his specialty area to a new group of students each term, he's now the academic advisor on a cross-functional mentor team guiding one student through her whole degree. Not only does he also evaluate how well she

articulates understanding and critical thinking on theological concepts, but he also looks at how she applies them in her daily life and work. In addition, he's responsible to oversee her development in disciplines outside his specialty and assess whether or not she has mastered competencies like humility, faith, hope, and culture.

This presents a dilemma for Kyle, as well as for the ministry and practitioner mentors on his three-person team. Each has an individual sense of what it means to be humble or have hope, but how do they articulate what mastery of humility or hope looks like for assessment purposes? To complicate things further, Kyle oversees two other students in this new program and, in that capacity, is on three different mentor teams. Even if one team reaches consensus on what mastery looks like, he has to navigate the same waters with the other two teams. How does he assess his three students consistently if each team arrives at a different definition?

Kyle's dilemma is one of the reasons competency-based education (CBE) has been limited to skills-based, vocational programs for most of its 40+-year history. CBE programs award credit for demonstrated mastery of occupational competencies as opposed to time spent in a classroom.[1]

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1   Strategy Labs, 2017. Understanding Competency-Based Education Toolkit. Source: http://www.cbenetwork.org/sites/457/uploaded/files/CBEToolkit2017.pdf

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1

The criteria for assessment of mastery must be defined in terms that are observable, measurable, and evidence-based, which has historically been easier for occupations like automotive repair or nursing than it is for teaching or counselling.

Competency-based *theological* education (CBTE) draws on many CBE principles, but applies them in the ministry setting, where character traits, qualities, and dispositions of the heart (i.e., "soft" competencies) are as crucial to success as knowledge, skills, and abilities. CBTE MDiv programs include knowledge and skill-based competencies such as biblical languages, hermeneutics, and exegesis, but also rise to the challenge of assessing attitude-based competencies like faith, humility, and cultural diversity.[2]

The solution to consistent evaluation of spiritual and emotional maturities starts with careful program design. There will always be a degree of subjectivity in assessing soft competencies, but rigor in definition and mentor training can narrow the range.

CBTE program design tips to improve consistency in assessment

Once subject matter experts, practitioners, and ministry leaders have identified the core competencies required for success in the targeted ministry setting, CBTE program designers can apply a four-step approach to help mentors like Kyle improve consistency in assessing soft competencies.

1. Invest the time to write a description, performance standards, and indicators for each competency.

    - The competency *description* is a concise, high-level definition of the competency. It expresses the intent and scope of the competency within the context of the program. It is a necessary element but does not provide enough detail on its own for consistent assessment.

    - *Performance standards* provide more detail. They describe what mastery of the competency looks like in context; the observable components of performance that, when combined, fully represent mastery as defined in the description. They articulate what the learner is expected to know (cognitive domain), be (affective domain), and do (proficiency domain) with respect to that competency.

    - *Performance indicators* describe observable, measurable behaviors, outputs or circumstances that signal achievement of the performance standards. They quantify criteria a mentor can use to assess whether the learner has demonstrated achievement of the performance standard; they describe what evidence of competency achievement might look like in a learner.

While it is unrealistic to fully quantify intangibles like faith, humility, or love with a checklist, providing mentors with performance standards and indicators narrows the range of subjectivity in assessment, thereby increasing consistency among mentors and improving assessment reliability. The sum total of indicators will not add up to mastery, but evidence of their achievement forces mentors to articulate and defend the gap, resulting in clearer guidance for learners and higher quality assessment.

The table on the following page contains excerpts from the performance standards and indicators for the competencies of culture and humility, from Northwest Baptist Seminary's *Immerse* MDiv program for training intercultural workers. Note that there's not necessarily a one-to-one correlation between standards and indicators; one standard could have several indicators. Indicators may also articulate both the presence or absence of a particular behavior or trait.

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2

Competency	Performance Standard	Performance Indicator
Culture	The student is able to engage the insiders of an unfamiliar cultural context with perseverance, sensitivity, and skill and has the capability to help others adapt comfortably to settings that are foreign to them.	The student competently identifies, interprets, and strategizes for at least three cultural distinctives in their context of ministry and adapts their behavior accordingly, while helping at least three others adapt in a similar manner to a setting foreign to them.
Humility	The student imitates Jesus with an others-focused orientation to ministry that seeks the good of others, finds their own worth and identity in their relationship to God, and looks to other believers for accountability and guidance.	The student provides three examples of their sacrifice of personal goals and desires for the benefit of others, one example of confidence in God when facing failure, and at least three times communicates appreciation when assessed, challenged, and corrected.

2. Create assignments that connect to performance indicators and standards.

   - In CBTE programs, tasks or projects are assigned by mentors to help learners develop and demonstrate mastery. The performance indicators provide the framework for creating a repertoire of assignments that align directly to achievement of the performance standards and engage real people in an applied ministry setting. This provides the added benefit of transparency for the learner in how mastery is expected to be demonstrated, particularly for soft competencies. It also provides a framework around which mentors can customize assignments without losing sight of their intended purpose and outcome.

3. Train mentor/assessors how to use performance standards, indicators, and assignments.

   CBTE mentor/assessors are selected for their subject matter expertise and experience in the program field, but they also need training on how to use assignments, performance standards, and indicators to assess competency mastery.

   - *Assignments* are necessary to develop and demonstrate competency, but they are the means, not the end.

   - *Performance standards* are the knowledge, skills, and character traits a learner must demonstrate to be deemed competent. They are the "end." Their achievement must be observed, and evidence of it recorded.

   - *Performance indicators* are quantifiable markers a mentor/assessor can look for to signal achievement of a performance standard. They may be observed through completion of an assignment, dialogue with the learner, or development of the learner over time.

4. Conduct mentor/assessor moderation sessions.

   Moderation is the process of mentor/assessors sharing, working through, and agreeing on their understanding of expected levels of learner achievement and progress, based on the program curriculum.[3] Provide regular, ongoing opportunities for mentor/assessors to discuss and compare their interpretation of mastery and assessment decisions. This helps narrow the subjectivity gap and improves the consistency of decisions about learner progress and mastery across multiple mentor/assessors.

How this helps Kyle, his mentor teams, the students, and their schools

Providing Kyle and his mentor teams with performance standards and indicators for every competency equips

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3 New Zealand Government. Ministry of Education, 2018. Assessment Online. Source: http://assessment.tki.org.nz/Moderation

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3

them with school-endorsed standards for evaluating mastery. Even though it's impossible to fully quantify mastery of soft competencies like faith or humility, establishing a common base of minimum criteria reduces the gap open to interpretation. Training mentors and coordinating regular moderation sessions reduces it even further, resulting in increased consistency and more reliable results.

Applying this level of discipline in program design not only gives Kyle and his mentor teams confidence that

their assessments are consistent with required performance standards but also benefits students and seminary administration. It offers transparency for students in how the seminary measures achievement of mastery and establishes a standard to which schools can hold mentor teams accountable. It's more work up front, but the effort will yield more consistent outcomes, defensible assessments, and higher quality graduates.

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4