Taking Learning Professionals to Competent Professionals through Performance-Based Projects

by Seung Youn (Yonnie) Chyung and Donald Winiecki

Tales from the Field, a monthly column, consists of reports of evidence-based performance improvement practice and advice, presented by graduate students, alumni, and faculty of Boise State University’s Instructional and Performance Technology department.

The Field: Whom Would You Want?

When it comes to making a point about performance-orientation, there seems no better way than using Joe Harless’s (1989) humorous multiple-choice question: “If you’ve stopped breathing, whom do you want to show up?

Paramedic #1: I know how a resuscitator works.
Paramedic #2: I know how to work a resuscitator.
Paramedic #3: I have accomplished [successfully performed] resuscitation before” (pp. 36-37). Of course, you would want someone who has successfully done it before. You would trust that the person is a competent practitioner who can produce the desirable outcome. In some cases, it can make a life-or-death difference. With the same logic, organizations would want to employ competent practitioners too. However, no one is born with competent levels of job-related knowledge and skills. Unskilled or novice workers would have to learn to become competent. It’s often necessary for novice workers to seek higher education to become such competent professionals. Competent practitioners can continue to develop proficiency and ultimately become experts in the field (see Figure 1).

The Education: Focusing on Competence

Competency-based learning and performance strategies have been emphasized in training and performance improvement fields. Several professional organizations, such as the International Society for Performance Improvement (ISPI), the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD), and the International Board of Standards for Training and Performance Instruction (IBSTPI), have established standards or models for promoting competency-based performance in industry. The reason why competency-based strategies are critical becomes clear simply by reviewing the definition of the word, competency, which is a purposely combined set of knowledge, skills and attitudes that enables one to successfully complete specific job tasks, when measured by the standards used in the field (IBSTPI, 2008; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2002). That is, competent practitioners in the learning and performance improvement field are expected to exhibit their job-specific competencies. Therefore, the core of competency-based education is to ensure that learning professionals will be able to demonstrate their learned knowledge, skills and attitudes as evidence of possessing competencies. For this reason, competency-based instruction often focuses on ‘performance-based’ projects.
The Learning: Performance-Based Projects

That’s what readers of PerformanceXpress have seen in this ‘Tales from the Field’ column over the past few months. The articles presented in this column are written mostly by learning professionals, attending Boise State University, who have produced performance-based projects in their needs assessment, evaluation, instructional design, and foundations classes.

With the goal of aiding students in learning knowledge, skills, and attitudes that will enable them to demonstrate competency on the job and contribute to organizational performance improvement (PI), we pay attention to several things. First, we provide students with venues in which they will encounter not only foundational ‘textbook’ knowledge, but also factors involved in any PI projects employing systemic and systematic processes. These are factors like planning and budgeting, collaboration with clients and peers, written and verbal communication of technical topics, analytic and critical skills, among other things. Second, we provide students with opportunities to apply new knowledge and skills and timely and pointed feedback to enable them to reflect on ‘how they are doing it’ as PI practitioners. Finally, we encourage them to report their professional knowledge and accomplishments to their professional community of practice – to become members of the community that improves its own performance as it helps others to improve.

In the conduct of coursework, our students complete team-based projects where they take on authentic projects in their own workplaces. They learn and apply PI-related knowledge, skills, and attitudes interactively with their peers and based on constructive feedback from faculty. Throughout the semester, they undergo continuous spirals of learning new things, applying them, and then analyzing the effects of their work. Reporting their experiences back to the community of PI practitioners completes the picture. This allows one to become not only a competent practitioner who ‘has done it’ but also a practitioner who contributes to the field itself - this is the goal of our competency-based curriculum. We hope you enjoy our ‘Tales from the Field,’ but most of all, we hope you learn with us as we continue to build the field of performance improvement.

References


Author bios

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