

Reflections on the Online Learner Competencies

Ileana de la Teja, Ph.D
Laboratory of Cognitive Engineering and Learning Environments (LICEF)
Télé-université/UQAM, Montreal

Introduction

The point of view expressed in this text corresponds to a researcher interested in identifying the competencies of the online learning actors and fascinated by the complexity of the task. They are based on professional experience in the elaboration of lists of competencies and the use of a graphical modeling technique to integrate the competencies at curriculum, program or activity level and to make them match with appropriate resources to facilitate the online learning process. I would like to point out some difficulties surrounding the elaboration of online learner competencies and propose some hints to analyze them.

Context

As indicated by Jan in the introduction of this website, this panel was inspired, at least in part, by an ongoing project of the International Board of Standards for Training, Performance and Instruction (ibstpi), in relation with the online learner competencies.

It is in the venue of competencies that I formulated my questions for this panel. My expectation is to move forward the discussions on competencies that have been generated in the context of the Board as well as with colleagues at Téléuq, the distance education university where I do research on the competency-based approach applied to online learning. The questions I propose stem from issues under consideration by the "ibstpi online learner competencies team" (the OLC Team), suggesting that the online learner competencies are more challenging and difficult to "capture" than other sets of competencies previously elaborated by the Board, such as those for instructional designers, instructors, training managers and evaluators. Why is this so?

A preliminary explanation to this query can be found in certain opinions generated in discussions among OLC Team members and invited participants.

To elaborate a list of online learner competencies, it is important to distinguish the online learner from other types of learners (ex. Face-to-face learner) or the learner in general. This distinction seems unclear. (See Jan's reflections posted in this website)

- By focusing on the online learner as individual, competency frameworks lose sight of the contextual and situational nature of learning in online environments
- The competency framework provides a limited structure to articulate the basic criteria for online learners to be successful
- The end-users of the online learner competencies are difficult to depict, among others, due to the diversity of goals and interests they may have in online learning, their context of learning (ex. academic, corporate), type of learning (ex. formal, informal), level of expertise with technology, etc.

Please note that these opinions do not necessarily reflect the OLC Team's position but my personal interpretation of discussions by phone conversations, face-to-face

meetings, email messages and a Wiki exercise led by the OLC Team in the last two years.

It is from these assumptions that emerged my three questions for this panel:

- What makes a successful online learner?
- What is the role of online learners in a multi-actor environment?
- Are online learners getting what they want/need?

What makes a successful online learner?

This question encompasses two main concepts: success and online learner. With regards to success, for the purposes of this panel, and to be coherent with the premises stated earlier, this question focuses on the competencies required by the online learner to be successful in terms of the realization of his/her planned learning outcomes whether they are cognitive, affective, psychomotor, or meta-cognitive. To tackle the concept of "online learner", it is appropriate to distinguish between online learner and other types of learners, otherwise said: "Is there such a thing as an online learner"? (J. Visser, on this website).

Online learner or Just Learner?

A close look at the work done by ibstpi in the past four years may shed some light on this issue, especially during the creation of the list of instructors' competencies, when particular attention was brought to find out if the competencies for face-to-face instructors were different from those of the online instructors.

By modeling the competencies in a graph, according to the modeling technique developed at LICEF, it became clear that the domains in which the competencies had been organized were shared by both types of instructors: Professional foundations, Planning and preparation, Instructional methods and strategies, Assessment and Evaluation, and Management. Furthermore, the competencies under each domain could apply to both types of instructors. For example, "Demonstrate effective presentation skills", or "Demonstrate effective questioning skills" are competencies required for instructors in general, regardless of the type of tools used. However, the performance statements (PS) of each competency appeared to be different according to the applied instrument. This is the case of PS "*Follow up on questions from learners*", that instructors perform in a different way depending on the context and type of tool. For example, time managing will be different if the tool used for questioning is synchronous (chat) or asynchronous (forum, email, etc.). Also, the type of interaction during questioning may depend on the cardinality (one to one, one to many, many to one, many to many) as well as on the type of media (text, images, video, audio, manipulation).

This finding suggests that, at the highest level, the competencies are generic for all instructors, but that they differ when different technology settings mediate the activities. This is consistent with the Activity theory, which considers that "human experience is shaped by the tools and sign systems we use."

By applying this principle to the online learner one could come to the conclusion that a learner is a learner, but that when the online technology mediates the activity and

the object, the online learner requires a particular kind of competencies (cognitive, affective and psychomotor) to make his/her "mediation" successful.

Competencies or Hints?

It is interesting to see there are very few studies on online learner competencies, but many universities and organizations offer hints and tips on the Web to help the learner succeed in an online environment. For example, according to WorldWideLearn, "These are the traits that successful online students possess, to varying degrees: Self-Directed, Motivated, Comfortable with computers, Able to use email, internet browser, word processor, Like to read and write, Inquisitive, Disciplined, Independent, Able to stay on task". Although very important for online learners, these tips can also benefit face-to-face learners (see C. Rogoza). Even flow and engagement (see D. LaPointe) are not exclusive to a specific type of learning.

In my opinion, and from an operational point of view, to identify the competencies that are specific to online learners, it is essential to start by categorizing the competencies required in the learning process (for the learners in general) and then, to distinguish the impact that online tools have in the different tasks and activities. Only in that way it will be possible to identify the skills required to perform those tasks and activities. It is in the way of viewing learning that the qualities that make for a successful online learner will emerge.

What is the role of online learners in a multi-actor environment?

Tools are key to identify the specificity of the online learner competencies but they are not the center of the online learning process. In fact, it is not the tools but its use that is instrumental to online learners. "Tools are never used in a vacuum, but have been shaped by the social and cultural context where the use is taking place." (Bannon).

In the context of online learning, the use of tools is manifold because there are different actors that use the same tools in different ways and each actor has panoply of activities to perform. This entails a double analysis of competencies. The first analysis focuses on the way each actor uses the tools and allows the creation of the list of competencies per actor. The second considers how actors interrelate with each other and the use they do of tools for interacting. This type of analysis suggests a sort of "collective competencies" that need to be considered in a multi-actor dynamics where an actor cannot perform a specific competency if the other actors do not support him by performing their related competencies. Otherwise said, it would be very difficult to stipulate the competencies required by online learners to be successful, without considering their relation with the other actors and their competencies. This complex endeavor, that highlights the collective nature of online learning has been, to my knowledge, dimly explored by studies on competencies, and may benefit to be regarded from a modeling approach.

The scene becomes more intricate when one considers that each actor can play various roles during the online learning process. Playing different roles means using the tools in different ways because in a learning context, different actors can use the same tools for different purposes. Online learners for example, may use a learning-object repository to search information; for the instructional designer the interest could be to reference his/her work in order to reuse it later; the instructor may

analyze materials for further use, and the manager could use the repository to track the updating of materials.

From a learner-centered perspective, online learners are in charge of selecting learning strategies appropriate to their goals and preferences, finding their own resources, building up social interaction that will provide instructional scaffolding, and managing their own learning. The online learner, as an actor, is therefore asked to perform roles that usually were the exclusive realm of other actors in the learning process. The instructional designer was in charge to provide the pedagogical strategies and design the materials; the instructor was accountable of the knowledge and the strategies to deliver it, whereas the manager controlled and administered the operations.

The roles of online learners change during the learning process, which in turn modifies the required competencies for each of the actors, just like in a structure of variable geometry. Therefore, it is essential to consider the online learner competencies within a non-static learning context.

Are online learners getting what they want/need?

Several authors in this website have outlined the diversity of interests of online learners, as well as the numerous contexts in which the learning process can take place making it difficult to categorize the type of expectations that online learners may have. Moreover, expectations are not always clear or easy to express and it would be particularly challenging to find some of the competencies required to fulfill a certain goal.

It would be naive to think that competencies are THE solution for an online learner to be successful. Let's remember that one of the main functions of competencies is to give objective guidelines to recruit and assess personnel. To which extent developing certain skills such as self-assessment, autonomy and flexibility, represent the learner's innermost interests?

The reflections on the online learner competencies need to be extended into a society perspective, "since the concept of competence involves some reference to desired or required performance, the question may now be put of who desires or requires that performance." (Holmes)

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