Challenge Assignment 5: Authentic Assessment and Evidence for a Badge Ecosystem

Liberal Arts Competencies

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## Based on the badge system you described in the prior challenge, describe the learning and assessment frameworks that are needed.

## How can learners’ needs best be addressed?

Learners need a system that recognizes their competencies, however acquired, and provides evidence of those competencies to interested parties, such as prospective employers, advanced education programs, scholarship administrators, etc. Learners also find it helpful to have systems that enable them to organize and monitor progress toward their learning goals. A portable, transparent system is proposed that includes the following features:

* Provides a list of all anticipated outcomes in the liberal arts program
* Allows learners to indicate their own outcome priorities
* Allows learners to review their own status and remaining tasks to earn competencies
* Allows multiple “learning providers” and “assessors” of different types to recommend or grant credit or partial credit (e.g. for praxis) towards competencies
* Allows learners to select competencies earned and display them, along with supporting evidence, to the public or to selected persons
* Clearly identifies and describes competencies in universal language and provides examples of how each competency might be used in the world of work
* Assists in matching competencies with potential fields of work and/or with specific career opportunities

## Will traditional learning contexts and methodologies suffice, or can/should they be reworked? Are entirely new methodologies needed? Will new/different staff be required?

The competencies featured in the liberal arts ecosystem are applicable and demonstrable in a wide variety of contexts. While many of these competencies may be demonstrated in workplace situations such as cooperative education or internship placements, or may be described as part of a prior or external learning assessment process, project-based learning within assigned coursework can also provide an appropriate context in which to demonstrate these competencies.

Many of the most traditional forms of instruction and assessment are highly appropriate for providing opportunities to learn and demonstrate these competencies. Close reading, seminar and workshop discussions, reflective essays, and oral presentations are all contexts applicable to this ecosystem of competencies. Passive lecture is not recommended, as it offers no feedback to the learner and no means of assessment for the instructor, but Socratic or other dialectical formats of presentation and discussion are well suited to the pursuit of liberal arts competencies. Situated performance assessments such as laboratory demonstrations or simulations can also be appropriate; practical field work is ideal. Some commonly used “modern” (industrial era) means of assessment, however, such as multiple-choice based exams, are inappropriate as methods of assessing the rich competencies that comprise a liberal arts education.

Existing instructors in the liberal arts may benefit from some in-service learning opportunities to restore assessment skills undermined by the drive in recent years toward machine-scored tests. These professional development opportunities should emphasize careful observation and means of avoiding bias in assessment, such as blind marking, rubrics, and multiple evaluators. Additional staff may be needed to support supervision of cooperative education and internships and for the assessment of prior learning, though many liberal arts institutions already offer these program elements.

Because of the universal applicability of the liberal arts competencies, it is especially important that assessment opportunities are opened up to the wider community. Supervisors, coworkers, student peers, mentors, and community members served by students in paid or volunteer roles may all be in a position to recognize liberal arts competencies of various sorts. Identity management and a reputation system tied to public identities will be required to support such attestations of competence, as well as a mechanism for storing evidence associated with the attestation. For example, a community member might take a photo of a learner serving as a volunteer at a public function, and submit the photo and a short description as evidence to support a Civic Engagement competency. Another volunteer at the same function might submit a paragraph supporting a Teamwork competency. In particular, the more affective competencies defined in the liberal arts curriculum will require multiple instances of evidence, or *praxis*, to indicate that a level of competence has been achieved, and many of these instances may be best captured by the wider community.

While any member of the community (including the learner) might provide evidence of a baseline or milestone level of competence, final recognition of a capstone level of competence might be reserved for those who have, themselves, earned that capstone competence, or perhaps even all the capstone competences in the relevant framework category. That said, recognition of liberal arts competencies should become a regular civic responsibility, and taking action to record an observation of a competency should, in itself, earn the observer credit toward recognition of this valuable civic role. This activity might be explicitly recognized in one or more of the existing competencies, or an additional category might be added to those described in the AAC&U VALUE rubrics. Although assessment is a specialized skill, assessment of these competencies, specifically, should be a skill that is (or becomes) widely present in the community, just as these skills themselves should be widely present in the community.

## How do competencies map to the learning activities and assessments?

Many liberal arts institutions reference, at least in part, the AAC&U VALUE frameworks and rubrics. However, there is usually not close alignment between curriculum offerings and these rubrics.

There is not always a one-to-one correspondence between the competencies outlined in the VALUE rubric categories and dimensions and a cohesive learning opportunity structured as a course. Some competencies may develop over an extended period and across multiple contexts, for example. Others may be present as opportunities at multiple points in the liberal arts curriculum. This proposal recommends that each “course” listed in the liberal arts portion of a catalog have one or more competencies associated with it, in one of two defined relationships.

“Primary” competencies for a course will include competencies that are expected to be earned by all learners who complete that course. Opportunities will be presented for learners to present evidence of baseline and milestone levels of competence, as well as a capstone-level demonstration. As an example, a college level writing course may be expected to include coverage of most, if not all “Written Communication” competencies as “Primary.” It should be considered unusual for a student to receive a “passing” grade in a course without attaining all the Primary competencies.

“Secondary” competencies for a course will include competencies for which some opportunities will likely be present to explore or extend the learner’s abilities. While it is possible that a learner may earn a “capstone” level of a Secondary competency within a course, it is also possible that a learner may just begin to explore the competency in a “benchmark” level activity or may extend learning with a “milestone” level contribution. Progress in the competency is still recorded by the instructor, peers, etc. as appropriate. In most cases, a student achieving a “passing” grade in a course should advance at least one level (e.g. “benchmark” to “milestone 1”) in one or more Secondary competencies, if any are defined for the course.

Taken as a whole, the undergraduate liberal arts curriculum should provide complete coverage of all competencies as either Primary or Secondary competencies in one or more courses. To ensure that learners have opportunities to pursue all competencies, each competency should be identified in one of the following ways:

* A Primary competency in a required course (e.g. most undergraduate programs require a writing course, which contains several Written Communication competencies as Primary)
* A Primary competency in all options of a “General Education” requirement (e.g. if a “science” course is required, and is intended to provide opportunities to achieve an Inquiry and Analysis competency, all courses fulfilling the “science” requirement contain that Inquiry and Analysis competency as Primary)
* A Secondary competency in at least three required courses or course categories, where all courses meeting a category requirement contain the competency as Secondary.
* Additionally, a “Capstone” course for the liberal arts portion of the program and/or for the major field of study should also include a review of competencies met throughout the program, and learners should be encouraged to address any remaining unmet competencies in a Capstone project.

## What types of evidence and assessment are valued and/or required by employers?

Employers are typically most interested in evidence predictive of future performance within a role. The most compelling evidence will be of prior performance in a similar role. Employers are likely to seek examples of real-world work, completed projects, and evidence of ability to learn, work well with others, and accept feedback for improvement. These are the competencies outlined in the VALUE rubrics and proposed for this ecosystem.

Because employers are often reviewing large numbers of applicants, a system that allows the employer to quickly filter for specific, highly desirable attributes, i.e. competencies, will be most helpful. A secondary sorting or filtering mechanism allowing for more granular topical tags may also be helpful. Once a short list of candidates has been identified, the ability to examine the evidence supporting each competency may allow employers to gain a much clearer sense of the capabilities and strengths of each applicant.

## Do the methodologies support the validation frameworks the learning provider needs?

An important distinction to make is the difference between “course completion,” “grade,” and “evidence of competency.” A learner may be considered by the institution to have “completed” the course based on any of a number of criteria, including seat time or attendance, effort, completion of a minimum number of certain assigned activities, etc. (Cynics may also add “remittance of tuition” to this list.) Similarly, “grades” may be used to provide feedback to learners and to indicate a minimum “passing” effort, but may not be an assertion of the attainment of any specific competency. In particular, Western secular educational tradition argues against assigning grades on the basis of affective outcomes. Grades are generally reserved for a demonstration of cognitive outcomes, and typically a single demonstration is considered sufficient for assessment purposes. Grades are also frequently normed or scaled, and used to rank performances among students in a given cohort.

By contrast, competencies are predicated upon a theory of “mastery” learning. A competency is considered to have been attained by a learner when there is sufficient evidence to support this, regardless of where or when the competency was attained, how many other students in the same cohort have or have not attained the competency, or how much time or effort the learner has spent working to achieve the competency.

Competencies and outcomes, therefore, may be used in a complementary fashion to the existing structure of course completion and grades. Where existing learning providers may still find it helpful to track “course completion” for a variety of administrative purposes (e.g. the amount of staff resources expended in learning provision or the financial needs and eligibility of learners), and may assign grades for learner feedback and for ranking purposes where that is required by external parties, outcome completion or competency acquisition may be granted to acknowledge specific characteristics of learners, including affective outcomes, psychological wellness, praxis (engagement in an activity over an extended period, on a regular basis), etc. Pre-defined competencies may also be supplemented by tags or keywords providing additional information about the nature of the evidence provided to support the competency. For example, a competency in Ethical Issue Recognition might be tagged “body image” or “racial bias” indicating the type of issue described in the attached evidence. This additional level of detail will help future prospective employers who are looking for specific interests in addition to general liberal arts qualities.

It is likely that prospective employers will find these competencies more informative than completion or grades once the competency ecosystems become established. There may still, however, be stakeholders for whom completion and grades are of value.

## Write one or more “after badges” user stories depicting the value of the badge ecosystem for learner personas. What opportunities do badges provide for your personas? What challenges must be overcome in order to optimize the value of badges? Who do they share badges with? What goals do they have for using their badges?

Several user stories of this type have been provided in the previous challenge assignment. This story will integrate and expand on an anticipated “after badges” experience of Bernardo.

Bernardo enrolled for a semester at Community College X, completing coursework in writing, and college math (Quantitative Literacy), before dropping out due to lack of funds and entering the workforce. Since then, he has worked a wide range of jobs while traveling from place to place. Although many of his jobs have involved construction, he has also worked as a mechanic, and occasionally as a bus driver, a position that required him to complete a “defensive driving” course, for which he received a “Defensive Driver” badge. Bernardo’s driving instructor also nominated him for a “Civic Identity and Commitment” badge for his articulated sense of responsibility toward public safety.

Bernardo speaks English and Spanish fluently, and several other languages at a basic functional level, and sometimes finds himself translating between different workers or between workers and supervisors. His coworkers and supervisors have recognized this on various occasions by nominating him for badges in “Diversity of Communities and Cultures,” “Cultural Diversity,” “Intercultural Empathy,” and “Intercultural Verbal and Nonverbal Communication.” At a construction site for a city office, his translation skills were particularly helpful in defusing a potential dispute between supervisors and workers based on a misunderstanding around Latino holiday celebrations, and both sides nominated him for a badge in “Perspective Taking.” He was also nominated for a badge in “Civic Communication” by the city office managers, and a local newspaper awarded him a “Knowledge of Cultural Worldview Frameworks” for his statements in an interview about the dispute and its resolution. A local radio show featured him in a discussion about Latino culture and holidays, and several listeners were moved to nominate him for Oral Communication badges. Multiple participants in this event all nominated him for “Responds to Conflict” badges.

At one job, the employer needed some of the crew to become certified in CPR, so Bernardo volunteered. His CPR certification was recorded as an Open Badge, and, like many participants in the CPR program, he earned several Critical Thinking badges (“Explanation of Issues,” “Influence of Context and Assumptions,” and “Conclusions and Related Outcomes”).

Lately Bernardo has found himself mentoring some of the younger workers at the job sites, prompting them to nominate him for a badge for “Facilitates Contributions of Team Members,” and he has started volunteer work with teens at a gym franchise, earning badges from the managers at several gyms for “Civic Action and Reflection,” “Ethical Self-Awareness,” “Ethical Issue Recognition,” “Application of Ethical Perspectives/Concepts,” and “Evaluation of Different Ethical Perspectives/Concepts” for his work with at-risk teens in immigrant and refugee communities. These badges serve as references at new gyms when he changes locations.

At one gym, he became friends with a group of teens making music mashup videos as a hobby, and learned video editing skills in the process. The teens awarded him a badge in “Acquiring Competencies” for his new skills, and then another in “Taking Risks” for his first attempts at making bilingual rap videos for at-risk teens (even though his first videos made them laugh). His later videos were recognized with a “Solving Problems” badge from a youth intervention program, and then with an “Embracing Contradictions” badge for his clever use of the rap video format to speak against lifestyle issues often associated with rap music (violence, drug use, etc.) He continues to experiment with new video formats, and while not all of his creations have been as successful as his rap video series, YouTube reviewers have recognized his experiments with “milestone” level acknowledgements in “Innovative Thinking” in a recent competition for “public service announcement” format videos. He is thinking of returning to some of his teen colleagues for advice in new mashup formats, which may eventually earn him a badge in “Connecting, Synthesizing, Transforming.” Meanwhile, he has been working with Penny, a librarian in his current city of residence, learning about finding and legally using information resources for his mashup projects, earning a full range of Information Literacy badges through the library. At the library, he also met a group of GLBT teens, who nominated him for badges in “Intercultural Curiosity” and “Intercultural Openness” for his candid conversations with them about the issues important to them, including health risks, and for his help in their own first video creation projects.

Bernardo would like to settle somewhere and work as a youth counselor, whether at a school or at a community non-profit. He knows that he’ll need at least a four-year degree to be considered for such a position. Fortunately, he has a portfolio of badges backed by evidence to enable him to complete a degree quickly. On reviewing his application essay to College A, Grace immediately noted that he presented ample evidence for most of the “Foundations and Skills for Lifelong Learning” badges. She recommended that he start by enrolling in Introduction to Sociology with Feng, who awarded Secondary badges in “Analysis of Civic Knowledge” and “Civic Contexts/Structures” for Bernardo’s written work and verbal participation in the course, as well as Primary competencies in Global Learning that Bernardo hadn’t had an opportunity to pursue previously. Bernardo will also acquire Integrative Learning competencies as he expands into coursework related to his major, and will round out his Critical Thinking competencies, as well as adding Inquiry and Analysis competencies, by taking basic research courses. Bernardo will probably be renewing his acquaintance with Penny at the City Library as he works through his Reading competencies, and an internship with Jacob at *Reach Out!* will provide ample evidence for Problem Solving and the remaining Teamwork competencies. Within his first two terms of returning to college, Bernardo will have rounded out his Liberal Arts competencies and will be working his way through specific courses for his major and anticipated career.