Personal Reflection and Professional Competency Mode:

Notes on My Experience with Learning and Identifying Areas of Growth

Shannon Usher

College of Professional Studies, Northeastern University

EDU 6319: How People Learn

Dr. Elizabeth Mahler

May 14, 2023

Introduction and Paper Overview

Learning and developing skills and competencies is a lifelong experience. From job related tasks and procedures to participating in communities and even to hobbies like videogaming or cooking and baking, we engage in processes of learning–even if we aren't aware of it! This paper serves as a reflection of my own personal learning history and applies critical thinking and analysis to my professional goals and development. Then I will reflect on the process of engaging with the professional competency model. This paper will conclude with a synthesis of these topics and what I learned throughout this experience. After the reference section, a copy of my professional competency ratings is included.

Learning History

From a very young age, I have always enjoyed learning. I remember a time in kindergarten where I was over a neighbor's house with my mom. My friend's mother suggested that I could borrow her "Hooked on Phonics" books to practice reading. My mother handed them to me and I sat down while they had coffee. By the time we were ready to go, I handed the books backs and thanked her for letting me borrow them. She said that she meant I could borrow them to finish reading at home. When I told her I had already finished, she asked me to read aloud a section of the book because she didn't believe me. That was the first time I remember impressing an adult with my ability to quickly pick up and understand a new topic and also the first time that an adult wasn't convinced my work was my own.

I often got points marked off my homework and in class assignments, specifically in Math, because I wouldn't show my work on the page. This often confused me, particularly as a young student: if the lesson worked, surely I should be able to use this easily without needing a pencil and paper, so why was I marked down for that? When I got to high school, I quickly

learned that no matter how often I could prove that I did the work and knew how to properly use particular theorems, if I wanted the grade that I knew I deserved based on my understanding of the material, I had to do what the teacher asked even if I didn't need to.

From K-12, I was enrolled in private, Catholic schools on merit-based scholarships. I prided myself in my academic excellence while also excelling as a student and community leader. Still, my experiences as a learner taught me to be skeptical of the adults around me. It frustrated me that adults would create expectations of achievement, yet when I would meet those expectations, they didn't believe I did so on my own. I also recall often feeling stifled in the classroom by being taught a right and wrong way to solve a problem. One of the most fascinating things about language and mathematics is that there is more than one way to achieve the same outcome; however, that wasn't something that was encouraged in my youth until I attended a state university.

Because of this skepticism of my instructors, I found myself driving my own educational goals. While I had some extrinsic motivation in the form of merit-based scholarships, I was never concerned that my grades wouldn't be enough to keep them. Instead, I was motivated by my desire to win; I am a competitive person by nature which is reflected in my sportsmanship, in playing games, and in my academics. To me, it is not enough to do well: winning, or as close to winning as possible, has always been my goal.

I also have found that I excel in self-directed learning, particularly in asynchronous spaces. I learn better when I have the ability to take in and understand material at my own pace rather than at the pace of my classmates or instructors. I attribute this in part to how I process information. I am a visual learner but I am easily overstimulated by moving visuals. As a result, I

learn best from text and diagram-based materials, or power point presentations that do not include video elements.

Taking these observations as a whole, my professional development needs to be conducted in a self-paced manner with goals of my choosing that align with what my supervisor might be looking for. This is currently in practice: I have a professional development goal on my annual review that specifies that I need to take a specific number of courses–either from HRM, LinkedIn Learning, or through my degree program–but that the content, duration, modality, and frequency are completely up to my discretion.

Despite my opening statement of this paper–where learning can happen in almost any area–before this assignment, I hadn't considered how my ability to learn would affect my professional aspirations or impact any career changes or promotions. Of note, in our week four discussion I mentioned how I have been able to apply our course materials to understanding a real-world focus of my work. In diversity trainings for the College of Social Sciences and Humanities (CSSH) where I work, the entire college staff is collected (60-75 staff across departments and in the dean's office) and walked through the same training; however, not everyone learns the same way or has the same prior experience to assist in their learning. In group discussions, different levels of understanding are evident throughout the room. This situation is a great reminder that if I intend on returning to a managerial role or work with a larger team, I need to be mindful that everyone has a different perspective and history that they bring to the table with them.

Professional Landscape and Goals

Currently, I work as the Academic Administrator for the Department of Political Science (POLS) here at Northeastern. My role is a hybrid student facing and operational position. I

directly advise current POLS graduate students, which involves learning about their personal interests and understanding their individual situations to help them make choices that are the best fit for them. I also contribute to the development and maintenance of POLS program and curriculum, as well as general office functions for the department including website management and office space inventory.

Though I do have a direction I feel my career is going in, I do feel the need to touch on the idea of a "dream job." I have never subscribed to the idea that I should fantasize about work. I view my work as a means to an end; I work so I can pay my bills to live a lifestyle I enjoy and to continue to be healthy and happy. That being said, since work is an unavoidable facet of life, the work I do and look for in next steps must be fulfilling and meaningful in order to feel motivated to do that work in the first place. This is one of the reasons I enjoy working in higher education because I know that my work directly supports the leaders and educators of tomorrow.

Right now, I am comfortable in the role that I am in. I was promoted to this role in October, so I am not currently looking for a new position; however, I do now find myself at a crossroads. If I continue to work at a department level at Northeastern, I don't have much upward mobility. There is only one position that is above mine in CSSH and that role is not as student facing as my current role is. If I want to explore more operational work, there are more opportunities available and promotion is likely. Whatever my next step is, I will most likely need to choose between my love of interacting with students or my problem-solving operational skillset–or I find a role that does both, like my current role, but sacrifice some upward mobility.

No matter which direction I choose, higher education professionals have a consistent skillset across subfields. The implementation of these skills might be different from position to position; however, they largely point to a shared ideology that higher education professionals

must engage in empathy, critical thinking, active and effective communication, and emerging technologies. Each of these skills is also reflected in my professional development goals for my current position, and will continue to be important for any future positions in higher education.

Empathy allows higher education professionals to meet students and colleagues where they are to help them get to where they need to be. Empathetic thinking and social awareness help successful higher education professionals and leaders to focus on the wellbeing of all students and engage in work the supports some of the most marginalized groups by taking meaningful action in areas of diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (University of San Diego, 2017). Higher education professionals who engage in empathy and take time to understand the perspective of students can successfully judge when students might need an additional push to do something they feel nervous about or when students could use additional support than they have been receiving (Northeastern University, 2018).

Critical thinking is vital in any workplace environment; in the case of higher education, a lack of critical thinking can be extremely detrimental. Universities and colleges have a tendency to maintain the status quo; static policy and programming does not equitably serve students. Higher education professionals that engage in critical thinking by questioning and then improving institutional policies are in high demand as it keeps institutions up to date and relevant in an ever-changing cultural landscape (University of San Diego, 2017).

Strong communication skills are integral to higher education. In order to be effective team members and leaders, higher education professionals must be able to clearly articulate their thoughts and information in a variety of formats. A failure to do so can create misrepresentations and misunderstandings, and can damage relationships (Heflin, 2021). Effective communication also requires higher education professions to engage with audiences across viewpoints and

departments and can enable positive collaboration in a variety of areas (University of San Diego, 2017).

Technology is an emerging field that greatly affects the work of higher education. From data management, admissions processes, and classroom technologies, faculty and staff interface with a variety of platforms to accomplish most tasks. Maintaining a strong understanding of these services and a willingness to learn new systems makes higher education professionals reliable and resilient community members and valuable employees (Cooper, 2023).

All four of these skills are listed in multiple capacities in my current job description and in my professional development goals. Since I don't know my next move and I don't plan on leaving my current position for the foreseeable future, my own professional goals are tied to how I conduct myself in the workplace and with my colleagues. First, I will strive to create an empathic and compassionate workplace wherever I am. This is actually reflected in my LinkedIn description that I added after taking an HRM personal branding course: "Efficient and Innovative Idea Generator, and Cultivator of Compassionate and Professional Workplaces." Second, I will strive to ensure that my communications with colleagues and costumers are accurate, concise, thorough, but most importantly thoughtful in nature. Lastly, I want to maintain a strong understanding of emerging technologies in my field–and continue to develop in those tools I currently use. To ensure this, I would like to attend one seminar a month by a service provider on their technology or sit with a colleague to discuss how they use this tool.

Reflections on Professional Competency Model

When engaging in the exercise, I found it hard to critically assess my own skills. My inclination was to assume that I was fairly proficient in every area–and generally speaking, I am

fairly proficient in a number of areas but within each category of this assessment there was at least one area that stood out as a weakness or something I can improve on.

As far as general professional competencies are concerned, I am confident in my ability to engage I my work as a systems thinker. I am able to spot patterns and understand my place in a larger system; however, I struggle in areas of strategic awareness. Communication is a measurable goal for my position. Unfortunately, I have deep concerns and hesitations on working in groups and on team projects that stem from bad experiences as a youth that I can't seem to shake. I feel strong in my ability to develop creative solutions to problems and identify areas that might need improvement, but I do not feel confident in my own resilience. My cultural responsiveness is an area I am comfortable with. Unfortunately, I sometimes struggle with being able to balance multiple perspectives.

In areas related to program learning outcomes, I feel strong in my understanding of laws and policies related to higher education and I center social justice in my work. Where I find myself lacking is the ability to identify ways to support my own professional growth. In the areas I identified in addition my weakest area is technology, which is something I anticipated. I didn't include communication in that section since it was in the general competencies.

Most areas of weakness–strategic awareness, group projects, resilience–are tied to flexibility. I am not surprised by this observation; a therapist once told me that I tend to think in rigid ways and have a hard time transitioning from one activity to another without major disruption. As a result of this understanding and through the exercise of assessing my professional competencies and reflecting on my learning experience, I feel like my areas of weakness have actionable areas of growth. This experience has been fulfilling and I look forward to being able improve in my areas of weakness.
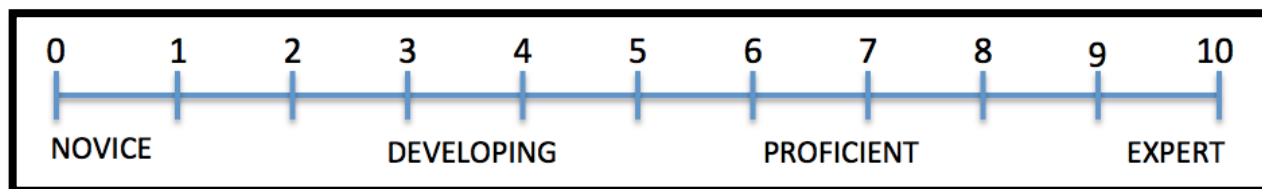
References

Cooper, M. G. (2023, April 25). *How professors' tech paranoia hinders higher ed*. The

Chronicle of Higher Education. https://www.chronicle.com/article/how-professors-tech-

paranoia-hinders-higher-ed?cid=gen_sign_in

Heflin, D. (2021, July 20). *Skill development needed for positions in higher education*. Graduate

Programs for Educators. https://www.graduateprogram.org/2021/07/skill-development-

needed-for-positions-in-higher-education/

Northeastern University. (2018, April 26). *Working in higher education: Careers, trends, &

must-have skills*. Northeastern University Graduate Programs.

https://graduate.northeastern.edu/resources/working-in-higher-education-careers-and-

trends/

University of San Diego. (2023, April 17). *5 skills you need to master for higher education

leadership*. School of Leadership and Education Science (SOLES).

https://solesstories.sandiego.edu/degree-of-difference/5-skills-you-need-to-master-for-

higher-education-leadership

Shannon Usher Professional Competency Model
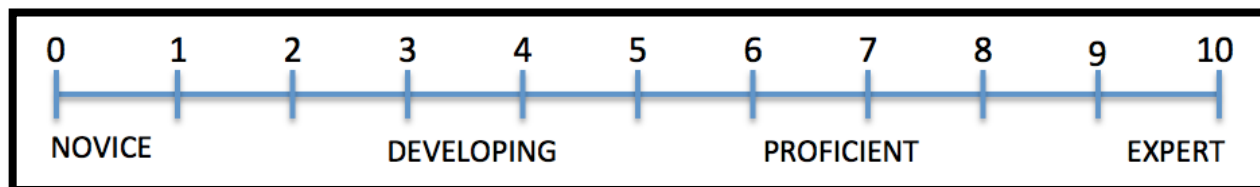
General Professional COMPETENCIES	Rating
A Systems Thinker	
Perceives self as an educator participating within a larger system of education	8
Demonstrates strategic awareness	5
Looks for patterns and makes connections	6
Sees how parts relate to the whole, including the implications of systems and organizational change	7
A Communicator	
Proficient as a writer and as a presenter	7
Capacity to work within groups to listen well, speak well, and co-author	3
Able to collaborate and communicate in a range of modalities (face-to-face and online)	5
Facile with technology, keeps current with emerging technologies and social media	7
A Creative Problem Solver	
Situational awareness and leadership in identifying and defining challenges	6
Thinks creatively to generate ideas and be open to alternatives	7
Develops and implements plans for addressing problems and effecting change	5
Is resilient in less-than-optimal circumstances	4
Culturally Responsive	
Perceives the professional self as functioning within a global context of education	5
Aware of the dynamics of race, class, gender, and the other cultural factors within community dynamics and intercultural communication	7
Interest in, and capacity to perceive, multiple perspectives	4
Self-aware of cultural perspective and privilege	6
Capacity to serve as an agent for social justice	6

Program PLOs*/Professional COMPETENCIES for the MEd in HEA	Rating
Examine law and policy regulations within a higher education context	7
Analyze, generate, and propose innovative solutions to contemporary issues in higher education, driven by data and applied theory	5
Integrate principles of social justice and inclusion for concrete actions in higher education	6
Articulate methods to continuously hone and upgrade professional skills in key higher education competencies	4
Effectively present ideas through multiple mediums for targeted audiences in higher education administration	6
Professional Skills Found During Research	
Empathy, meeting students and colleagues where they are	8
Critical thinking, engaging in thoughtful contemplation of new ideas	6
Technology, remaining up to date on technological advances	5

*usually found in the program's website within the Northeastern website or within your program's module in the GSE Master's Programs Resource Center.