

## **Review of Instructor Competencies: Standards for Face-to-Face, Online & Blended Settings**

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The revised third edition of *Instructor Competencies: Standards for Face-to-Face, Online & Blended Settings*, presents essential competencies that can be flexibly applied by instructors in any learning environment; it “is consistent with the notion of blended settings while being useful in face-to-face and online settings” (p. 6). As a distance instructor and a professor in a graduate instructional technology program, I have found the volume most useful and have recommended that others – especially faculty who teach others how to teach or design instruction – get a copy for their own professional reference library.

The volume is a rich resource for many audiences, not just online instructors; that is not surprising given the book’s origin. The International Board of Standards for Training, Performance and Instruction (ibstpi), a not-for-profit board “dedicated to increasing the capability of individuals and organizations in the training, instruction, learning, and performance improvement professions through the development of standards,” initiated and approved the standards (p. vii). Four ibstpi board members co-authored the report and the fifteen international-member board approved the competencies. Distance educators will be beneficiaries of their efforts, especially if the impact of the previous edition on face-to-face instructor certification is any indication of the impact of these competencies.

The book explicitly considers online learning environments in all aspects of instructor competencies. The authors assert that the competencies provide a foundation for “training programs aimed at the development of [online] instructor skills (vii).” The competencies state quality standards for what are usually the single most important influence in instructor-led instruction – the instructor; they explicate what instructor quality means in distance, blended, and face-to-face learning environments. Because none of the competencies are media-specific and examples for face-to-face and online environments accompany all of them, the competencies encourage flexible adaptation to any learning environment. Distance educators who follow

usability standards will find that the competencies complement standards for another influence in online learning, web design usability (see Koyani, Bailey & Nall, 2004 - Research-Based Web Design & Usability Guidelines).

Ubiquitous instructional technologies create opportunities for instructors but also demand additional instructor skills. Changes in technology that are propelling distance education into the forefront of most educational programs have shaped the current competencies. Rapidly changing instructional technology and societal expectations for education and training are altering the instructor competency domain. Only two of the current eighteen competencies did not change since the 1993 second edition; four incorporate minor changes; one-third have expanded concepts, and one-third are new. The six new competencies speak to instructor functions and learning outcomes; they enable an instructor to identify what she or he must do to support quality instruction -- from learning about technology -- to teaching legally, ethically, skillfully, and effectively with it. Paraphrased and followed by the competency number in parentheses, the following specific competencies promote professional conduct:

- updating and improving one's own knowledge (2),
- complying with legal and ethical standards (3),
- effectively facilitating learning (9),
- managing instruction with technology (18),
- promoting skill transfer (12), and
- promoting skill retention (13).

Therefore new competencies set a standard for instructors to practice professionally, to manage technology, to facilitate learning, and to assure learners remember and apply their skills and knowledge outside the learning environment.

All eighteen competencies are classified into one of five domains, a new feature in this edition. The first domain, professional foundations, includes four competency areas: communications, professional development, law and ethics, and credibility. The second, planning and preparation, has a competency in each area. Instructional methods and strategies, the third and largest domain, encompasses seven areas: motivating, presenting, facilitating, questioning, clarifying and correcting, skill retention and transfer. Assessment and evaluation, the fourth domain, has a competency in each area. Managing the environment and managing appropriate technology use are the two competency areas in the last domain.

Nine of the eighteen competencies in the current third edition directly address the instructor's responsibilities toward the student. They mandate that instructors interact with learners – that the instructors bear the responsibility (not the instruction or learners) for making the interaction happen. Student-oriented competencies require instructors to:

- communicate with learners (1);
- present information to them (8);
- facilitate learners in the learning process (9);
- question learners to direct learning processes (10);
- clarify learning processes and outcomes (11);
- provide feedback about performance (11);
- promote their skills and knowledge transfer (12) and retention (13); and
- motivate and engage learners (7).

While good design is essential, the competencies clearly place the responsibility for these functions with the instructor.

In Chapter 4, each competency overview grounds the competency in the literature of the domain and lists performance statements that support each competency. The performance statements expand upon the competency with specific instructor behaviors. For example, competency 11 requires that instructors provide clarification and feedback. To meet this competency, instructors should use a variety of clarification and feedback strategies; provide clear, timely, relevant, and specific feedback; provide opportunities for learners to request clarification; be open and fair when giving and receiving feedback; provide opportunities for learners to give feedback; and help learners in giving and receiving feedback.

The overview sections for each competency describe concise, feasible, and effective examples of online instructor activities and strategies. For example, Competency 7, stimulate and sustain learner motivation and engagement, has six supporting performance statements: (a) gain and maintain learner attention; (b) ensure that goals and objectives are clear; (c) foster a favorable attitude toward learning (d) establish relevance, (e) help learners set realistic expectations, and (f) provide opportunities for learners to participate and succeed. Suggested activities follow these statements, such as, “foster favorable attitudes towards online learning by highlighting the inherent opportunities of those settings,” and “provide strategies allowing online learners to know the limits and advantages of the technology and how to use it to attain their

objectives . . . they should help learners develop an accurate view of the effort required to succeed in an online and blended setting (p. 38-39).” Throughout the chapter online instructional methods are described for each competency. Other online instructor methods sampled from several competencies include: recognize learner contributions, address learners by name, send messages to non-participants, keep learners on track by addressing messages that deviate from the goal of the discussion, synthesize and summarize discussion threads, keep an online list of participants and information about them, and provide a virtual space for socializing. Therefore the book offers online instructors appropriate examples of how to instantiate the performance statements. Although the book is not a methods text for online learning, there are enough examples that most online instructors would find some that he or she had not considered.

The competency development model described in the second chapter assured that online instructors’ skills were essential to the process used to identify the competencies. Phase one began with a review of the literature and current practice which necessarily included online instruction. In phase two, a group of experts “began to identify the knowledge, skills, and attitudes for online teachers and tutors and also suggested that there was a great deal of similarity with competencies for instructors in face-to-face settings” (p. 18). This led to an instrument for collecting data from 1300 participants for the validation study. In most cases, each competency had a mean rating of 4.0 or above on a 5-point scale for both face-to-face and online settings. Furthermore most of the seven model assumptions assured instructor competencies would cover online learning, with assumptions that the competencies “apply to a wide range of settings and instructional approaches, . . . be meaningful and useful worldwide”, and be influenced by “factors such as instructional setting, organizational practice and local culture” (p. 19).

The chapter reporting the competency validation study details how the authors identified and confirmed the competencies through a well-designed, executed and reported study. The design chapter could serve as a model for validating competencies in other professional fields. The respondent profile indicates they were mostly experienced, technologically-savvy, and North American. Seventy-five percent of the respondents were working in the United States or Canada with the remainder from all over the world. Most respondents might be classified as instructional technology-use experts. About 40% had online experience and 40% had blended experience. Over 85% ranked their instructor expertise as high or very high and 75% ranked their technology expertise as high or very high. Respondents ranked twenty-one initial competencies on a 5-point

scale from least to most critical for the setting. Online instructors in the study ranked communicating effectively first. The second was updating and improving one's professional skills and knowledge; the third, prepare for instruction, followed by, use media and technology to enhance learning and performance. The lowest ranked of the eighteen final competencies among respondents with online experience was managing the learning environment. The report concludes by addressing a few telling discrepancies between face-to-face and online learning that reflect the role of technology in online learning environments as critical and not so important in face-to-face learning environments.

The appendices organize and summarize important information; the first three are particularly useful to online instructors. The first appendix lists competencies with their respective performance statements. The second is a code of ethics for instructors adopted by ibstpi. The third appendix provides "information about the professional associations, conferences, journals, digital repositories, electronic forums, and noteworthy books that may be of interest to instructors who work in face-to-face, online, or blended settings" (p. 107). The concluding appendix, a glossary of terms, contains mostly short definitions of familiar terms for experienced instructors (e.g., streaming, text messaging, server, scoring rubric, and so forth).

There is something in the volume for every distance educator whether the person is an administrator, instructor, professor of distance education, or training manager. The authors identify the immediate and primary audience as instructors and a potential audience among training managers, instructional designers, evaluators, personnel managers, and academics. The competencies can answer questions from training managers about what kind of professional development would be most useful for instructors; questions from designers about what kind of knowledge, skills, and attitudes must an instructor have for a particular content; questions from evaluators about how instructors should be evaluated; questions from personnel managers about what competencies should applicants for instructor positions possess; and questions from academics about what skills a teacher preparation and train-the-trainer programs should teach. The text describes a possible certification process based upon the competencies. In other words, a company, organization, or online program could use the outlined process and the competencies as the basis for initiating and planning a certification program. The model could also become the basis for a process to identify competencies in other fields.

The slender volume packs a lot into 87 pages in six chapters titled: An Introduction to Instructor Competencies, The ibstpi Competency Development Model, The ibstpi Instructor Competencies, Instructor Competencies: Discussion and Rationale, The Uses of the ibstpi Instructor Competencies, and Competency Validation Study. Four appendices, an author index and subject index supplement the text and definitely enhance the books value. Every instructor could benefit from reading and developing their competencies based on the ibstpi instructor competencies. Consider adding a copy to your own professional reference library or at the least for your organization's or institution's library as I did. No graduate program in instructional design or corporate training unit should be without it.

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