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## Individualized outcome evaluation. How to share responsibility to (im)prove competence and performance

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# HOCHSCHULE UND WEITERBILDUNG

**SCHWERPUNKTTHEMA:**

**ERFOLGSKONZEPT FERNSTUDIUM:  
BETREUUNG,  
INDIVIDUALISIERUNG,  
METHODENMIX UND VIRTUALITÄT**

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# Individualized outcome evaluation

## How to share responsibility to (im)prove competence and performance

ASTRID OHL-LOFF

### 1. The Problem: Supplier-driven evaluation deficiencies

Dealing with competencies, the question occurs how to support and prove outcome and performance of individual competencies. Furthermore, who is in charge of developing competencies and by that, developing performance?

Most teachers and trainers are familiar with so-called *Happy Sheets*: Short-term formative evaluation papers, regularly used at the end of a didactically adjusted learning process in a limited and protected learning environment. What do *Happy Sheets* measure? They measure the feeling that students have according to what they (might) have learnt. They look backwards. The standard model of learning evaluation, set up in Kirkpatrick's evaluation-pyramid (Kirkpatrick, 2006), states that the measurement of reaction is the lowest level of evaluation, answering the question: *How do you feel or think about what you could have learned?* Nevertheless it has been proven over several years that nearly 80% of all evaluations focus on this lowest level (*Reaction*), evaluated by these standard sheets. Figures swing slightly, depending on the year and the evaluation context, but over all it turns out that this is the most popular kind of evaluation (Krekel et al., 2001). The next level considers knowledge (*Learning*), proven e. g. by tests, aiming at knowledge and maybe written application. Only one-third of the evaluations dare to measure learning, partly owed to the business-training background where testing knowledge is not very common to avoid unfriendly reaction by higher-ranking persons. These basic levels are followed by changes in behavior and transfer to new and real tasks (*Behavior*). Top levels aim at impacts onto more abstract contexts like business objectives.

Developing competencies and transferring them in individual contexts - currently state-of-the-art in traditional and further education - is the focus hereafter: competencies are to be used in new and complex situations different from the lessons. Complex situations are framed by incomplete information, intransparency, polytelic objectives, and a dynamic

time component changing conditions apart from the learners influence (Dörner, 1986; Ohl-Loff, 2012). Under these conditions these situations the students or participants have to prove their ability to cope with new situations. They have to come to decisions and to bear consequences. According to international findings, this level is evaluated in a maximum of 10% of evaluations, usually even less (Krekel, 1999; Kirkpatrick, 2006; Euler, 2003).

Leading to further problems, a wide range of evaluation focuses on backward orientation. Even in more improved reaction-evaluation sheets, the most forward-looking question might be something like *Do you think what you learned would be transferable?* Founded on the qualitative analysis of 34 formative short-term evaluation sheets used in the education sector in Germany, findings show that question about targets and objectives from both sides, the suppliers' side as well as the recipients' side, are missing in 75% and are at least disguised in more than 80% (Ohl-Loff, 2012 (2)<sup>1</sup>).

As it becomes obvious that evaluation takes place but it does not measure what it should measure, the following hypotheses concerning supplier-driven evaluations are stated:

H1: Many formative evaluation sheets are insufficient due to their short-term approach. They measure the perception of the learning environment rather than its effects.

H2: A large share of evaluations hardly measure competencies.

H3: Formative evaluations are widely practiced as one-way questioning. They pose the question to students: „*What do you think about our work?*“

<sup>1</sup> Yet to be published. Full research report and results can be received from the author: ohl-loff@gmx.de.

## 2. Competing objectives

If it is not that short-term view onto perception of the learning situation, what counts? Regarding objectives, many further-education learners want to gain higher proficiency in doing what they do, or they want to prepare themselves to improve their career in further education. They need competencies for performance. The providers of education feel obliged to this approach, but also try to reach a large scale of learners. They need to meet standards for all and individual needs at the same time. Unfortunately, this seems to be a contradiction. The providing control level and the individual learning level compete in their demands. To assure matching of individual interests, individual transfer possibilities and the individual application context, performance, transfer and progress have to become visible - by evaluation. Therefore, the leading evaluation questions should be: Are the objectives reached? Objectives are first of all the objectives of students. They have to be in one line with the overall objectives of the study program. Development of competencies is an agreed objective of both sides and it has to be proven by their performance.

## 3. Competence-evaluation dilemma

Performance is closely dated to application situations which do not take place within an artificial learning environment like a classroom, no matter if it is a physical room or a web-based learning space. Objectives are beyond classroom learning, and beyond formative evaluations. According to Klieme (2004), competencies can be considered as dispositions enabling a person to deal with demanding tasks in different situations. A comprehensive definition of competencies, integrating several concepts and including non-cognitive individual prepositions, is given by Weibert (1999):

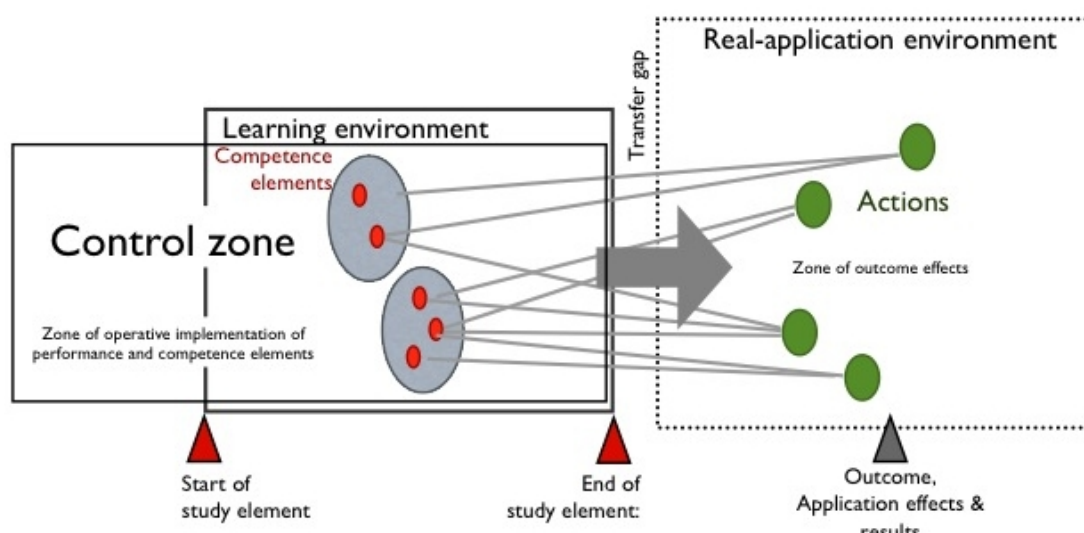
*Competence is a roughly specialized system of abilities, proficiencies, or individual dispositions to learn something successfully, to do something successfully, or to reach a specific goal. (p. 44)*

Following Erpenbeck (1997, 311) competencies cannot be measured directly, but be revealed from the realization of their dispositions. Frieling (2000) suggests that competencies are even developed while manifesting in performance. Performance in a classroom-situation or performance outside the classroom? In terms of evaluation: How could competence be proven and have an impact on the future development of the learning design at the same time?

A dilemma for evaluation comes up: The outcome manifests itself only outside the learning environment. Although classroom situations can show most signs of complexity as mentioned above, they lack the risk which is implicit in real application situations. Didactically reduced decisions do not have wide-ranging consequences as they would have when to be dealt with in real life. A transfer gap opens between the controlled learning environment and the application zone beyond as the following figure shows:

The control zone, a time-and-space zone of operative implementation of competence elements, defines and forms the learning environment. Competencies cannot be developed by reproductive learning - not even by learning in complex didactic case studies or projects. The dilemma results from a didactically reduced complexity in the learning environment. "We can also find examples of unrealistic and over-simplified problems in the sciences, languages and social studies" (Grabinger/Dunlap, 1995, 7).

Competencies are abilities to perform in real-life situations. They must leave the learning environment, seeded as small competence elements, or cores, to develop their applied outcome later on, in real-application environments. Those com-



**Abb.1:** The evaluation dilemma: Transfer gap between learning environment and real-application environment (Ohl-Loff, 2012).

petence-cores are meant to cause real outcome effects, having real results leading to real consequences. Despite methodic and didactic possibilities of giving complex tasks to the students, the crucial element is missing in artificial environments: The possibility of failure and being confronted with real consequences of decisions.

The problem is systemic - as long as the environment is not based on constructivist principles, competencies could hardly be developed, and measurement of outcomes remains non-effective as long as output is measured but performance is needed.

From an operative point of view, suppliers are confronted with a further problem: Dealing with the multiple-person environment full of individuals with individual needs. Control (personalized by those in charge of the learning design) needs a kind of double preparation. Planning has to cover the individual needs, in a way that also group needs and overall objectives are taken into account. At the borders of the learning environment, the next challenge comes up: Learners do not learn to fulfill the suppliers' needs. In short-term, they are aware that they have to pass some kind of examination to get the wanted degree. Long-Term, they learn to develop performance abilities to be used outside the learning environment.

Education suppliers hardly bear responsibility for the world outside: They never move into the real-life professional world of every single student - in fact, they cannot. How can they measure the outcome when they are not there? As a consequence, no evaluation takes place outside the immediate learning environment. In that one-way direction mentioned before it is only asked:

*Do you think what you learn will be helpful in your real-life problem?*

When receiving an optimistic answer, many evaluators do not look any further. The supplier takes responsibility until the border of the learning environment. As soon as this space is left, the learner has to take over responsibility on his own, hopefully equipped with everything he needs.

As far as the real-life environment is concerned, there is no standardized evaluation anymore but just performance success or failure. Even though that is hard-fact measurement, it does not fulfill the criteria for good evaluation. High-level evaluation enables both, the provider and the receiver, to improve, change, develop and innovate. As long as the learner has to bridge the transfer gap on his own, and see if he can sur-

vive in the unprotected area, evaluation and responsibility is shared in an insufficient way.

#### 4. Constructivist way out: Implications and consequences

Competencies base on highly individual learning and reflection processes. Their nature is about application and performing in real-life situations. Since learning environments cannot move into reality of all individual situations, a move into the other direction turns out to be an effective solution of the dilemma: A shifting of the real-life environments into the learning space. By moving the situation, also the time and space for evaluation is shifted, performance is shifted and the role of students and learning moderators are also preponed.

Being shifted, control zone and application zone overlap, putting emphasis and more responsibility into the learning zone. Consequently, learners and suppliers need to share responsibilities for the application of competencies, for performance and for the individual evaluation. Operatively, both have to come to mutual agreements. As soon as there is a certain knowledge background assured, they decide by which indicators the competence can be considered as given and become visible.

The consequences for the learning-environment design are tremendous. Following constructivist assumptions of learning (Grabiner/Dunlap, 1995, 9), learning mainly involves the

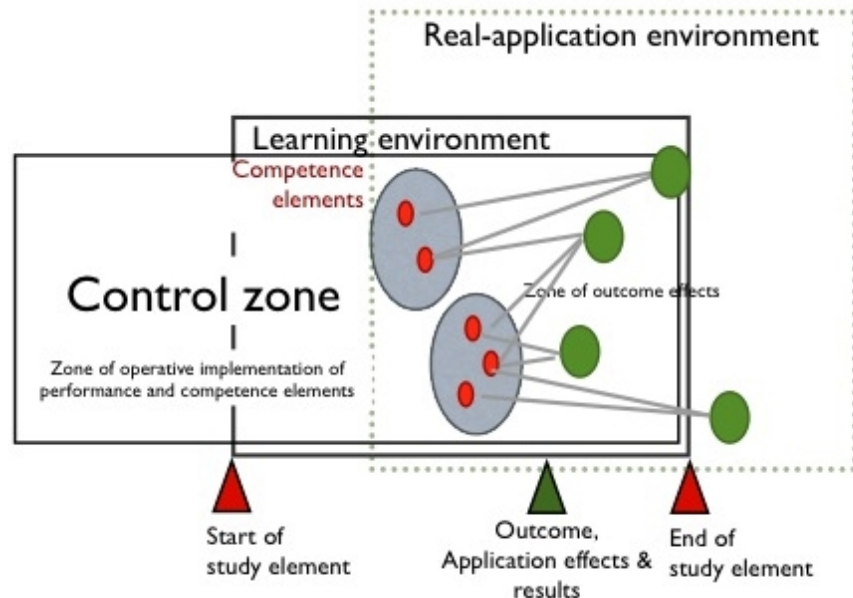


Abb.1: Closing the transfer gap by shifting the performance zone into the learning environment (Ohl-Loff, 2012).

processing of information and the constant creation and evolution of knowledge structures. Therefore, learning designs would have to focus on thinking, deciding and reasoning



processes: “Learners bring their own needs and experiences to a learning situation and are ready to act according to those needs. We must incorporate those needs and experiences into learning activities to help students take ownership and responsibility for their own learning. Skills and knowledge are best acquired within realistic contexts.” (p. 10).

A key element for successful shifting is metacognition. Metacognition, considered as knowledge, monitoring and control of one’s own learning (Baird, 1986; Bown and Palincsar, 1982) leads into processing, evaluating the processing, and deciding. Regarded in one line of assumptions concerning competencies and constructivist learning environments, it should be stated that the final objective of any competencies are decisions. Following this, didactical consequences have to be drawn on more than one level:

- Metacognition has to be emphasized and practiced within the learning design. Metacognition means knowledge, awareness and control.
- The outcomes of each study field have to be cleared in advance. Outcome indicators for a successful transfer and performance have to be agreed upon in shared responsibility.

## 5. Conclusions

Both challenges and advantages for students and education suppliers occur from that approach: Students define application situations. Within the learning environments, dealing with difficulties can be reflected in the protected area. Decision-making is improved by controlled and shared metacognition.

The education supplier can keep standards and support individual needs within the same process. Individualism does not compete with standards: There are standards for competencies (e. g. DQR Competence Matrix). Performance and competencies can be proved in different levels of fulfillment. Standards merge with individual needs. Both contribute to co-operative evaluation, according to the agreed outcome.

Competence-orientation in a constructivist learning environment, including individual application situations, solves many of the problems in the hypotheses mentioned at the beginning: Self-learning capacities are enhanced by metacognition and reflection in the protected area of the learning environment. This enables the learner to improve his own learning, his own metacognition and lifelong learning ability (H1). Learning for the real situation is possible instead of learning for didactically reduced tasks (H2). Evaluation asks “What are the objectives” first (H3).

The supplier gives over a part of the learning and evaluation control to the learner. The learners take control: they plan, act, measure and reflect the plans and actions in new and complex situations. This kind of evaluation puts focus not on happiness but on performance by new competencies. This makes the difference and brings both the learners and the learning design and education the study consequently forwards.

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