

Competency-Based Learning; the Apprenticeship Movement

One of the first things I remember from the very outset of my role as a trainer and assessor in Life Long Learning was the model of the four stages of human knowledge and understanding [attributed to Abraham Maslow], these being: (i) Unconscious Incompetence, (ii) Conscious Incompetence, (iii) Conscious Competence, and finally (iv) Unconscious Competence; or put more simply, things we don't know we can't do, things we know we can't do, things we know we can do and finally, things we don't know that we are doing.

The philosophical, insightful and beautifully concise breakdown of the human learning journey above appears to have been the inspiration behind Donald Rumsfeld's briefing at the US Department of Defense in 2002, in which he stated [...as] we know, there are known unknowns, there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns, that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns - the ones we don't know we don't know. This rather wordier version of human understanding has become known [or is that unknown?] as the Rumsfeld Matrix (Mikael Krogerus, 2011).

As the title of this article suggests, the thrust of this short piece is to raise awareness of apprenticeships within the educational milieu we operate within, but also to ask the question, what about the things we don't know [yet]?

At the moment young people go through an initial educational system which consists of a (mainly, if not wholly) linear - teacher centred [pedagogic] approach comprised of learning and subsequent assessment of that learning. Thereafter learners may move into a more practical environment, be it through College or University, but the approach appears to be much the same.

Where the 'Apprenticeship Movement' fits in to the current situation isn't completely clear, not because it is a competency based - learner centred [andragogic] style of learning, but maybe because learning [in and of itself] isn't currently considered to be a competency. Now, what if the art of learning was indeed a standalone skill that could be assessed alongside the actual subjects being taught; this would not only increase the learners understanding of learning and its manifold aspects, methods and iterations (valuable life skills are they not?), but also provide the impetus and readiness for the workplace and an individual's ongoing learning adventure.

Wouldn't it be an interesting and exciting concept to consider apprenticeships at a much earlier juncture in a young person's educational 'career', not as a gimmick, but as a real-world introduction to what will invariably be the chosen method of training, upskilling and ongoing learning into their future.

Apprenticeships are being embraced by all employment sectors and widely seen as an accessible way to educate and - of equal importance - to assess competence in practically any sphere of learning. I feel that the education sector is currently sitting at phase two of Maslow's competency scale, or in Mr Rumsfeld's words 'we know there are some things we do not know'.

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