

## **Competence Overload: Implementing the Bologna Programme in the Humanities**

Michelle Gadpaille, University of Maribor, Slovenia

### **Abstract**

The paper analyzes the disjunction between the competences required by the Bologna Programme and the traditionally generic outcomes of humanities education. After exploring the definition of competences and its discussion within the EU, the paper presents the results of a small study of final-year students of English at the Faculty of Arts, University of Maribor, recording student opinions about competence delivery. In line with expert definitions of what competences can accrue from humanities subjects, a lesson plan is presented that fulfils the ideal requirements of creativity, connectivity, co-creation, risk-taking, and personal engagement.

### **Keywords**

Bologna Programme; competences; Slovenian higher education; Faculty of Arts, Maribor; academic outcomes; creativity

### **Introduction**

In implementing the recent Bologna reforms, university professors in Slovenia encountered the demand that they specify the goals and outcomes of their courses. No longer could a literature course be just a pleasing list of novels, or a slim anthology of poetry; a course needed to be redefined by its aims, outcomes and, most of all, by the package of competences it promised to deliver to students. The requirement that course-specific competences be defined took many professors by surprise—certainly those who were not in the didactic sections of their respective subjects. Inevitably, some humanities teachers resented the pressure to name the competences, feeling that “competence” smacked too clearly of the vocational, of narrowly defined, low-level skills that one learned in a workshop or at a toolbench. Moreover, the Bologna competences came in different flavours: transferable, core and key being just three of the more salient varieties that one was called upon to master. As professors constructed their new course proposals, filling in the blanks on their Course Description forms, a distinct syndrome began to appear among humanities professors—a syndrome that I have called “competence overload.”

This paper addresses the dilemma of the humanities teacher, upholder of a liberal arts tradition, who seeks to plug her subject into the programmed certainties of the Bologna reforms. What do competences mean in a course on English literature, for instance? How can one quantify

the benefits that one intuitively feels are available for students in such courses? What do students think about the provision of competences? How well had we been preparing students for the outside world before the Bologna programme? Has the implementation of the Bologna reforms improved this performance? To address these questions, I collected opinions about the definition of competences—from the scholarly literature and the great EU publication machine. Additionally, I conducted a survey of final-year students from the pre-Bologna and Bologna programmes. The survey included both quantitative and open-ended questions. The theoretical and empirical results indicate the advantages accruing to those instructors who embrace competence definition as a means of making humanities subjects relevant to job-seeking students. Despite challenges in its definition and implementation, competence overload, it turns out, must be endured for the good of both the humanities and its students.

### **The Call for Competences**

Competences received wide publicity with the *Dublin Descriptors* of 2004, which brought the phrase “core competences” into mainstream European vocabulary (Kehm 2010: 42-43). Competences emerged to facilitate comparability of programs across Europe. However, by shifting the emphasis from teaching goals to learning outcomes, the Descriptors also made such outcomes “more explicit, subject to assessment and eligible for the acquisition of credits” (Kehm 2010: 43). Subsequently, the Tuning project reinforced the educational role of competences with a firm definition:

Competences represent a dynamic combination of knowledge, understanding, skills and abilities. Fostering competences is the object of educational programmes. Competences will be formed in various course units and assessed at different stages. Competences can be distinguished in subject specific and generic ones. Although Tuning acknowledges to the full the importance of building-up and developing subject specific knowledge and skills as the basis for university degree programmes, it has highlighted the fact that time and attention should also be devoted to the development of generic competences or transferable skills. (Tuning)

The call for a new approach to learning can be found clearly stated in the EU’s *Prague Declaration* of 2009, which speaks of “reinforcing the teaching mission of universities by

maintaining curricular reform and renewal by introducing new approaches to teaching, offering flexible learning paths adapted to the needs of diverse learners and ensuring that tomorrow's graduates . . . have the skills and competences needed to make them employable on rapidly changing job markets”(Prague Declaration). This mixture of idealism with functionality characterizes most of what is said and written about the Bologna Programme. Behind this irruption of competence-speak into the discourse of university planners, lies an unacknowledged debt to the world outside the ivory tower: competence development is undeniably rooted in organizational psychology and even in modern management theory (Illeris 2008: 135). The adoption of competence discourse in university planning signals a new pragmatism about the nature of upper-level learning, once the domain of pure research science, on the one hand, and belles lettres, on the other. University learning has changed its syntax: *to learn* is now a verb that governs both a direct and an indirect object: *learning what? And for what application?*

One researcher calls this the “technocratisation of competence” (Illeris 2008: 136), suggesting that such narrow competence definition serves the blame game: failure can be more easily assigned in a system with clear outcome expectations. Simultaneous with this technocratic definition, however, is the recognition of a concomitant need to ‘teach’ creativity, or at least to demand that graduating students have this ability. The European University Association, for example, in its 2007 report affirmed that “The complex questions of the future will not be solved “by the book”, but by creative, forward-looking individuals and groups who are not afraid to question established ideas and are able to cope with the insecurity and uncertainty that this entails” (European University Association Report 2007; quoted in McWilliam 2008: 634). Teaching for flexibility and creative competence has become *de rigueur* in implementation strategies for the Bologna Programme, even though this approach places Bologna in direct confrontation with traditional educational approaches, especially those in Central and Eastern Europe.

Among the supporters of this new, radical approach to learning is the European University Association, whose recent publication *Smart People for Smart Growth* (2011) highlights the need for creative, forward-looking individuals in the knowledge society of the emerging present. While acknowledging that a rapidly-changing business and social environment needs flexibility in its workforce, *Smart People* still places the emphasis on science, business and

technological research; the humanities occupy last place on its list of relevant research endeavors (*Smart People* 201: 1). It appears, therefore, that the writers of *Smart People* would not fully recognize educational value in the lesson that will be described below. It is against this background of assumed irrelevance that humanities teachers are trying to use the Bologna Programme as a platform for asserting currency in the global marketplace.<sup>1</sup>

### **Defining Competences**

By 2007, competences were firmly established in their many varieties: core, generic, subject-specific and transferable. Pedagogical scholarship began to reflect a preoccupation with defining the terms and establishing the methodology required to deliver them in the classroom. In 2009, for instance, the journal *Higher Education in Europe* published a study called, “Training Emotional and Social Competences in Higher Education: The Seminar Methodology.” The authors subdivide generic competences yet again into “instrumental, interpersonal and systemic competences” (Oberst et al 2009: 523). This study affirms the emerging difficulty of aligning the outcome-oriented descriptors with the existing teaching methods: “A traditional lecture-based course is not the most appropriate instrument for training these competences, because of its overemphasis on transmitting knowledge” (Oberst 2009: 531).

The most thorough anatomization of competences appeared in 2010, in a *European Journal of Education* article called “Competences for Learning to Learn and Active Citizenship: different currencies or two sides of the same coin? Here Bryony Hoskins and Ruth Deakin Crick of the UK devote four-and-a-half pages to defining the term and distinguishing the new competences from traditional “academic or skill-based outcome[s]” (Hoskins & Crick 2010: 121). Their particular contribution is to specify the multi-dimensional nature of competence: “competences are expressed in action . . . embedded in narratives and shaped by values” (Hoskins & Crick 2010: 122). Drawing on the DeSeCo study for the OECD, they support a multi-factorial definition of key competences. “They are transversal across social fields; they refer to a higher order of mental complexity which includes an active, reflective and responsible approach to life; and they are multi-dimensional, incorporating know-how, analytical, critical, creative and communication skills, as well as common sense” (Hoskins & Crick 2010: 123). This

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<sup>1</sup> See James Bradshaw’s article in the Canadian newspaper *The Globe and Mail* for evidence that universities in North America are also struggling to redefine the value of an undergraduate degree.

is a daunting list for any conscientious educator; nevertheless, its very complexity provides room for the kinds of skills normally fostered in the humanities classroom—as long as the subject is presented in a student-centered or task-based manner. Their definition affirms that real competence reaches across and beyond the classroom, and that, realistically, the educator's role is that of facilitator. Hoskins and Crick's competences cannot be taught, only fostered.

With this broad definition in mind, I set out to discover to what extent students in English classes at the Faculty of Arts, Maribor felt that their education was performing this multi-level task: providing key marketable skills while simultaneously catering to the holistic growth of the individual student.

### **Student Perceptions of Competence Delivery**

A convenience sample of final year students in the Pre-Bologna and Bologna programs in English Studies at the Maribor Faculty of Arts (22 students from each class) was administered a short questionnaire. The questionnaire included quantitative questions, as well as several open-ended questions. For the purposes of this paper, emphasis will be on a content analysis of the qualitative responses, although we will begin with one interesting item of quantitative data: responses to the question “What percentage of your study time here seems like “wasted time?” In the context of questioning about potential workplace skills being taught in their programme, this question was designed to elicit student perspectives on the overall relevance of their study programme. The percentages reported by each class revealed a considerable difference. 4<sup>th</sup>-year students in the pre-Bologna programme of English language and Literature were more disillusioned with the relevance of studies than were the Bologna Programme students.

In the old programme, before the arrival of competences, students are clearly skeptical about the amount of useful time in their study programme. Half the students in this programme think that 40% or more of their time is being wasted. Meanwhile, students in the competence-driven Bologna programme are more confident of the utility of their study time: a substantial percentage of this class feels that wasted time constitutes only 20% or less of their study programme. There are even two responses indicating no wasted time at all. We cannot be complacent about our competence delivery when almost a third of the class feels that 40% of their study time is wasted; however, there is some evidence here that the emphasis on outcome-

driven learning at the Bologna planning stage does result in a student perception that learning time is being more usefully spent.

Content analysis of the open-ended survey questions focused on identifying perceived learning outcomes in terms of holistic personal growth as well as in terms of practical, applicable skills. The analysis revealed interesting divergences in student perceptions between the two programmes.

For the Pre-Bologna students (who are in a Teacher-preparation programme), the main finding of the content analysis was their dissatisfaction with the amount of teaching practice and practice with speaking skills. Fully half these students complained about the lack of practical application for their studies and about the presence of too much linguistic and didactic theory in the programme.

Specific complaints among this group centered on the large size of seminar groups, which resulted in their having less class time in which to speak. About one-quarter mentioned the problem of class size, despite the lack of any specific prompt on the questionnaire (to clarify, in fourth year, a seminar group can hold as many as 56 students). One student traced this problem to the coming of the new Bologna Programme, in an odd but human twist of logic: “with the focus on Bologna program we got left behind and are treated inferior.” So, even in the pre-Bologna programme any deficiencies can handily be blamed on “Bologna,” which among the student body has become a byword for bureaucratic blundering. It is worth noting that the one standout area of critique (lack of speaking practice) falls precisely into the category of a work-related competence—one in which these pre-Bologna students feel under-prepared. As working teachers, they will be required to speak well and constantly during their future lessons, but development of their public speaking skills is neglected in favor of written tests and examinations.

Surprisingly, these pre-Bologna students were articulate about the holistic impact of their studies in their own lives. Almost everyone agreed that 4 years at the Faculty had changed them, and almost all of these reported positive developmental changes. Only two from the whole class reported no change or ambiguity about change. They also reported a range of perceived changes in themselves, from changes in their sense of identity to developments in their sense of values:

*I really think that my study. . . made me a better person.*

*During my study I found my . . . goal—being a teacher.*

*I started to doubt . . . my decision [to be] a teacher.*

The most commonly identified personal change was in the level of maturity, and several students also reported on the development of new ways of thinking:

*I started to think differently and I changed my way of life.*

*I learned to think more broadly about the world.*

Thus, although these students expressed a yearning for practical instruction, their answers elsewhere on the survey indicated that they had learned other lessons at least as valuable and that some could articulate these lessons clearly:

*It changed me completely . . . I've learnt that what you get back depends on what you've put into it.*

*How well you are prepared depends on yourself.*

*I became more aware of things happening around me.*

*I feel like I've learned a lot and I am hungry for more.*

*I am not afraid of new challenges.*

When we turn to the responses from the 3<sup>rd</sup>-year students in the new Bologna Programme (where the third is the final year), we find a slightly different picture. Although the quantitative measure of “wasted time” shows that the Bologna students feel more confident that they are being offered useful instruction, some comments from the open-ended part of the questionnaire reveal confusion. First, it is clear that the Bologna students were led to believe that their 3-year degree should have a practical employment payoff.

*I like the non-pedagogical programme . . . because it gives you a whole range of opportunities for work.*

*The Faculty is preparing us very well for the world outside.*

*I'm . . . getting the idea about how the real world works, and it's not always pretty.*

Set against this expectation of practical training for a non-specific job (since the three-year Bologna degree is not a teaching certification), is an undercurrent of complaint that the expectation is not being met:

*I think that the faculty could prepare us better. (multiple responses, very close in wording)*

*I still do not know what my employment will be.*

*I still didn't find my dream job—I mean, I cannot decide [sic] what should I do with my language knowledge. Perhaps professors could show us the right direction . . .*

Interestingly, several students cite the newly designed courses in writing and speaking as exceptions; these they find eminently useful—a victory for the syllabus designers in the Department and a vindication of creative lesson plans such as the one described below.

Nevertheless, there was a sense among the questionnaires that the very expectation of competence was creating cognitive dissonance for some students. “Competence” was being aligned with concrete lesson outcomes—not in skills, realizations or insights, but in terms of facts mastered. There was a call, for instance for “a more high school approach in the lessons,” one in which information would be provided by the professor and imbibed by the student. This resistance to the challenges of the creative, student-centered classroom can be partly explained by inappropriate high-school preparation and an overabundance of final exams, but it also reflects our failure to reconcile programme goals with lesson plans. Any student who wished to return to “a more high school approach” had undoubtedly experienced success with that approach and had been promised further success and a cut-and-dried outcome from the Bologna Programme.

Such comments imply that some students focus on the subject-specific competences and find the wider, generic competences largely intangible and thus un-graspable<sup>2</sup>. Some students would be more comfortable with a more limited set of competence goals, although researchers

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<sup>2</sup> A typical list of generic competences in the Bologna Programme would include the following: Ability to organize data and present in written and oral forms; skill with on-line databases and modern software; teamwork, negotiation and cooperation skills; ability to think critically and participate in debate.



affirm that it is the generic competences that are desired by the marketplace (*Smart People* 201; Livingston 2010: 58-59)<sup>3</sup>. If, therefore, we hold out the promise of “competence,” then we are under a particular responsibility, not just to deliver, but to be seen to deliver—particularly in the eyes of our own students.

The crucial revelation from the questionnaires probably lies in student response to the following question: *Which do you value more: the experience of being in class, or the degree and title you will receive at the end of your studies?* Almost 40% of the third-year Bologna class chose the title and the degree (compared to less than 30% of the fourth-year in the old programme (for whom the degree is a teacher certification!). If the younger generation of students see themselves as acquiring a credential rather than an education, then it is unsurprising that they should prefer simplified tasks and competence definitions.

Analysis of the survey results indicates that competences can be misapplied, misunderstood and mistrusted. As long as students see an “outcome” as a successfully memorized list of facts, or an academic exercise in blank-filling, professors in the humanities will struggle to establish the value of skills that are complex, interdisciplinary, transversal and transferable. This is despite the fact that careful competence definition is the key to the survival of the humanities in a commercialized age.<sup>4</sup>

### **Competence Delivery**

Although EU directives and much scholarship produced in Europe take a firm stand on the definition of competences, elsewhere, the difficulty of defining these is openly acknowledged. From Australia, for instance, McWilliam and Dawson establish the challenge of defining and measuring output, particularly in the area of creativity output (McWilliam 2008: 634). This coexists with recognition of the importance of “creative capital” in the new knowledge economy. How can a teacher be assured of producing competence in an area when it isn’t even clear what “competence” might mean?

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<sup>3</sup> I should add that not all the students shared this limited outlook. Some of the open-ended responses indicated student awareness of growth in the manner approved by Hoskins & Crick—i.e., towards new identity formations, multi-level personal growth and a complex sense of social responsibility (Hoskins & Crick 2010: 123).

<sup>4</sup> See my argument in “The Creativity Competence.”

The lesson described in the following section moves in the direction sanctioned by the EU's *Trends 2010* report: towards individual learning styles; pro-active learning; interdisciplinarity; outcome-based learning and formative assessment acknowledging prior learning and experience (*Trends 2010*: 31-32).

In evaluating the first-year lesson discussed below, I have chosen to apply McWilliam's analysis of principles essential in fostering creativity in the classroom. Since McWilliam and Dawson speak from a perceived position of creativity deficit in the Australian classroom, their analysis has considerable relevance to the situation in the new Slovenian Bologna classroom. Moreover, their principles are based on a sound basis of competence definition. Their list of vital principles for the creative classroom stresses the following pairs of ideal instructional paradigms for the delivery of competence: connectivity with diversity; co-invention/co-creation with separation; leadership with following; and enhancing constraints while removing inhibitors (McWilliam 2008: 639-640).

Note that these principles are all internally contradictory, even paradoxical and thus require an instructor confident of his/her ability to confront paradox, employ it and to support students as they struggle with the ambiguities of such multi-factorial activities.

### **A Student-centered Lesson Plan**

*Guided Writing in English*, a first-year course in the Bologna first-cycle programme, aims to improve student writing by giving students permission to write in their own voices as part of a larger project of self-discovery and becoming. As author Denise Claire Batchelor has acknowledged, "At the root of a conjunction between being a student and becoming oneself must lie the realization of an integrity of student voice, a fusion between personal and academic identities . . ." (p. 791). Creativity thus lies at the heart of the course's goal of achieving both expressive and critical language skills. The opening class, moreover, is designed to negotiate the paradoxes of McWilliam's principles for the creative classroom. The instructor, for instance, pursues almost contradictory aims in fostering individual voices while asking the class to explore shared assumptions and goals.

The lesson involves creating a prose poem following guided discussion of a model. Although literary concepts are mentioned, this is not primarily a literature class, nor particularly

academic. In fact, from the point of view of the top-down, information-delivery model of language/literature teaching, this class lacks quantifiable content. Like the rest of our Bologna pedagogy, this class is founded on the assumption that creativity is not opposed to more narrowly academic skills, but that these are “overlapping goals” (Beghetto 2009: 297).

The lesson is based on a piece of advertising copy promoting the Vancouver Winter Olympics in 2010. The 11-line advertisement was sponsored by the Hudson’s Bay company and highlights Canada’s northerly nature in a series of short, parallel statements that together make up a prose poem<sup>5</sup>. I call the exercise, “Olympic Imprint”.

Students were shown the advertisement, first in context, with the surrounding images, then as a verbal text only. Reading and discussion followed, with students initially considering simple matters of vocabulary and cultural specifics and then moving on to discuss connotations, imagery, message and voice. As readers of this text, what picture of Canada were they creating? How were they being positioned in relation to the ideology of Canadian-ness? Bridging as it does cultural studies, linguistics, prosody and creative writing, the lesson fulfills McWilliam’s first requirement of interdisciplinarity.

Next, students were given a schematic of the verbal text, with the anaphoric line openings intact but the Canadian references and images blanked out. What remained were lines such as the following:

We are a land of \_\_\_\_\_

We are a nation of \_\_\_\_\_

We are home to \_\_\_\_\_

This part of the exercise was headed “Who Are We?” In pairs, students were asked to co-create descriptors of their own nation/country/region/town by filling in the blanks with appropriate allusions, images and metaphors. Attention was drawn to the importance of rhythm, register and parallelism. Prosodic concepts crept in as the students worked together to fill in the blanks, which became spaces of possibility and promise. Before the end of the class, the pairs

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<sup>5</sup> The advertisement can be viewed online at <http://www.seetorontonow.com/Leisure-Trade/pdfs/BayDiscountCard-TourismToronto.pdf>. For copyright reasons, I have not reproduced the text here.

volunteered to share their best lines, to read whole poems, if they had finished, and generally to test their own voices while listening to those of their peers. Having been asked to speak collectively (as “we”), students had less difficulty speaking up, even in this large class (80-90 in the entering class). In this part of the exercise, connectivity and co-creation coexisted with diversity of perspective and separation into individual voices.

During this lesson, the classroom was quite chaotic: pair collaboration, inter-pair competition and consultation with the instructor are noisy, simultaneous activities. The student-centered classroom requires that the instructor sometimes cede control in this manner. The path to creativity lies only through risk-taking and loss of control (Hackbert 2011: 18). This loss is more apparent than real, however; as the European University Association affirms and Larry Livingston’s study confirms, interaction and collaboration are skills that students will require in most workplaces (Livingston 2010: 59). The creative agenda thus feeds into the invisible ‘technocratic’ demand of functional outcomes. Learning to work together creatively constitutes a marketable skill, according to current theories such as those cited above. Nevertheless, the exercise also supports students in identity-creation, self-reflection, and the critical, creative and communication skills prized by Hoskins and Crick.

Examples of student achievement within the frame of the Olympic Imprint lesson are available elsewhere (see Gadpaille “Creativity Competence”). The class creations reveal a diversity of voices and tones, and a multiplicity of perspectives on their own sense of identity and belonging. Regardless of which voice students found within themselves as an answer to the question “Who are we?”, this confrontation of multiple perspectives encourages self-awareness, broadens cultural tolerance and helps students towards a position where classroom learning becomes “internally persuasive” (Beghetto 2009: 312), allowing the creation of personal meaning. This kind of learning stays the course; it is more likely to persist past the study/work transition. By using the model, the lesson establishes the necessary constraint, while simultaneously giving permission for uninhibited self-and national critique, thus fulfilling McWilliam’s final paradoxical requirement of the creative classroom.

### **The Change Agenda and the Bologna Burden**

The author makes no claim for the unique excellence of this particular lesson but does wish to use the lesson as a catalyst for confronting the necessity of change in more than lesson

plans: the aims of the new Bologna Programme mandate change at the front of the classroom—even a change in our perception of where the “front” of any classroom resides--if anywhere. The EU’s *Trends 2010* publication does explicitly acknowledge this challenge:

Where other national policy changes are at work, the Bologna Process adds yet another layer to a sometimes heavy change agenda. These changes, including those inscribed in the Bologna Process, are deep and significant, often requiring changes in attitudes and values, and always requiring effective institutional leadership. They are time and resource consuming, especially on staff members. (*Trends 2010* 2010: 8)

This change agenda results in what *Trends 2010* calls the “Bologna burden” (p.8), and constitutes part of what I have chosen to call “competence overload.” On the positive side, *Trends* researchers reported the use of funding incentives for teaching innovations and the creation of courses for teachers. According to *Trends*, one university had launched a pilot project in 2005 to develop new teaching methods and infrastructure aimed at Bologna implementation, and had begun to fund new positions for faculty coordinators as well as pedagogical training for teachers. Such re-training of faculty and administrators remains unavailable in the Slovenian university sphere, where faculty members experience difficulty even gaining time for a sabbatical.

The researchers behind *Trends 2010* are aware that such constructive re-invention remains utopian in some parts of Europe; they identify a set of constraints on the implementation of some Bologna outcomes: heavy teaching workloads (which hamper creative teaching); promotion policies that favor research over teaching; examination regulations; the link between ECTS and teaching hours; the high average age of most teaching staff, and the expense of implementing new teaching methods such as blended learning (*Trends 2010* 2010: 48-49). Each of these constraints applies to the situation at the Faculty of Arts in Maribor, despite official recognition of the importance of systemic change in implementing Bologna demands<sup>6</sup>. With little institutional support or funding, teachers are placed on the front lines of the battle for competence as defined by the Bologna process and explicated by researchers such as Hoskins and Crick, but Faculty teachers are largely denied the weapons that would help to achieve these

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<sup>6</sup> See, for instance, the Dean’s “Preface” to the Faculty publication. *Odličnost Filozofske fakultete Universe v Mariboru*, pp. 4-8.

aims. Inevitably, the result is piecemeal implementation; teachers do the best they can at the micro-level of lesson planning, classroom management and assessment. Small successes such as the lesson described above come at the expense of hours of reading and preparation, enormous expenditure of personal energy during the class and lengthy editing and critique afterwards. The concomitant incompleteness of the engagement with outcome-based learning on the part of many professors is the probable cause of the mixed response of these surveyed students to the success of their programme: their experience has been that such lessons are the exception rather than the rule, that the 'right' answers are valued over their engagement in learning processes and creation of successful learning strategies. Finally, students come to the Bologna classroom anticipating a degree rather than an education and fully expecting the certificate to have greater utility than any skills or wisdom acquired. McWilliam and Dawson point to this kind of "assessment culture" (McWilliam 2008: 641) as one crucial element behind real classroom conditions. Where the external culture fails to reward competence, no curricular practice can revolutionize student perceptions of relevant outcomes. Changing culture is more difficult than changing the words on a piece of paper.

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