



Problematizing the Development, Labeling, and Naming of a Competency-Based Curriculum Design

ABSTRACT

In this article, I describe the Δ A-CBE, a model of competency-based curriculum design that aimed to create more equitable and inclusive higher education curricula. During the process of validating the Δ A-CBE, however, I unpacked the limits of the Δ A-CBE model and my positionality, expanding my understanding of what it means to do critical work. In this article, I describe and problematize the Δ A-CBE. Specifically, I share my learnings from the process and conclude that while the model has the potential to recreate teaching and learning systems and processes so that they are more rooted in the knowledges, skills, and attitudes (KSAs) of a holistic college community, the model does not (and cannot) achieve its original goals.

KEYWORDS

curriculum design, competency-based education, higher education, student affairs

INTRODUCTION

In this article, I describe and problematize a curriculum design model referred to as ~~Decolonizing~~¹ Approach to Competency-Based Curriculum Design (Δ A-CBE). I conceptualized the Δ A-CBE as a response to criticisms of Competency-Based Education (CBE) and higher education curriculum, namely that both CBE and higher education curriculum reinforce and replicate Western forms of knowledge and knowing (see Parson and Weise 2020). Higher education is an environment where curriculum, policy, practices, and procedures support dominating forms of knowledge and learning, which often silences and marginalizes individuals not traditionally represented in higher education contexts (Rosser 1999; Stein 2017).

To address criticisms of higher education and CBE, I designed the Δ A-CBE to incorporate Indigenous, Eastern, and Western knowledges² and to expand who was involved in the curriculum development and design process. The model expanded participation to include all those impacted by a degree program, such as past and current students, employers, those that program graduates would serve in hypothetical future roles, community members, and program faculty. During the Δ A-CBA creation process, I set the goal of building a framework for curriculum designers that would result in curriculum rooted in the diverse knowledges, skills, and attitudes (KSAs) of those the program will serve (e.g., students, communities served by the anticipated profession(s), employers), particularly Indigenous communities. As such, I labeled it “Decolonizing.” Yet, as I learned more about decolonization and reflected on the process of validating the Δ A-CBE by creating a higher education and student affairs (HESA) graduate degree program curriculum, I realized the limits of both the model and of our understanding of what it meant to do decolonizing work.

In this paper, I describe the model while also examining how and why the model is not and could not be termed decolonizing. In this article, I also problematize the idea of “decolonizing

curriculum” and reflect on whether any process that maintains higher education structures can truly be considered decolonizing. Specifically, I reflect on if and how the ÐA-CBE can inform curriculum development without continuing a long history of the Western colonization of knowledges, peoples, and economies. Additionally, I discuss if the ÐA-CBE can be said to help accomplish the social justice aim of creating more equitable higher education settings. To do that, I begin by problematizing the ÐA-CBE as a conceptual model for curriculum redesign. Second, I contextualize the model within Western approaches to research, knowledge, and curriculum design. Finally, I conclude by highlighting my learnings throughout the process of applying and problematizing the model. Throughout the manuscript, I highlight the tensions of validating the ÐA-CBE and how and where the model fails to be decolonizing.

POSITIONALITY

I am a faculty member and a white woman with multiple salient, privileged identities including class, race, age, and ability. As a faculty member, I am invested mentally, emotionally, and financially in higher education. I both benefit from and am bound up in the institution of higher education.

At present, I am also working to understand how power is implicated in the learning methods that are often presented as being the natural, normal, and intrinsic parts of becoming “educated.” I strive to think through ways to make visible the systems and structures that oppress persons with marginalized identities while not centering myself in that process. I do this by resisting the idea of “goodness” (Leonardo 2004; Marx and Pennington 2003; Matias, Viesca, Garrison-Wade, Tandon, and Galindo 2014) and by unpacking and problematizing my reasons to change higher education. Especially in the context of decolonization, I seek to resist what Mawhinney (1998) calls “moves to innocence,” which are various actions or steps settlers enact to take on innocence (as summarized by Tuck and Yang 2012). In summarizing Mawhinney (1998), Tuck and Yang (2012, 1) write “the metaphorization of decolonization makes possible a set of evasions, or ‘settler moves to innocence,’ that problematically attempt to reconcile settler guilt and complicity, and rescue settler futurity.” I considered the history and role of appropriation during this process, and I continue to trouble this work in the context of “interest in and appropriation of Indigenous knowledge” (Martin, Stewart, Watson, Silva, Teisina, Matapo, and Mika 2020, 319). With that intent, I problematize the ÐA-CBE, starting with a description of the model.

THE ÐA-CBE MODEL³

Competency-based education (CBE) traditionally approaches curriculum design by identifying professional competencies for a specific career field and applying the learning processes and procedures needed to develop competence. Because future employers of program graduates prioritize their needs by identifying their most desired competencies, CBE is touted as creating programs that better prepare students for post-graduation employment. Yet, in focusing on employer-described needs, competency-based frameworks often exacerbate the racialized, classed, and gendered nature of higher education, because competencies often only represent one dominating sociocultural and economic context (Harris, Snell, Talbot, and Harden 2010). For example, graduate level medical education⁴ fields ensure that eight core competency areas are met by graduates of medical school: interprofessional collaboration, patient care, medical knowledge, professionalism, interpersonal and communication skills, practice-based learning and improvement, systems-based practice, personal, and professional development (Physician Competency Medical Set; PCRS; as described in Englander, Cameron, Ballard, Dodge, Bull, and Aschenbrener 2013). A specific

body of knowledge that is founded within Western approaches to medical knowledge and care informs each of those areas. As such, those competencies both reinforce Western approaches to medical knowledge and care and limit or completely silence holistic approaches to healing and wellness, such as different Indigenous approaches, Traditional Chinese Medicine, or Ayurveda.

In the ÐA-CBE (Parson 2021), I sought to address the limitations of CBE by centering the perspectives, knowledges, and experiences of members of Indigenous and marginalized groups instead of only those historically involved in curriculum design (i.e., faculty and administrative leaders; see Koszalka, Russ-Eft, Reiser, Senior Canela, Grabowski, and Wallington 2013 for example)⁵. Often those in faculty and administrative positions are white, middle class, and identify as cisgender; in some fields and administrative position types, people holding these roles are still more likely to identify as cisgender men. In the ÐA-CBE, relevant partners⁶ are current students, program faculty, future employers, alumni, and members of the communities that will be served by the program and program graduates. By including relevant partners and expanding the sources of data that inform competency development, the competencies identified as a result of the ÐA-CBE should be more representative of the socioeconomic and cultural knowledge(s) of those that the curriculum will impact.

In addition to expanding the sources of knowledge(s) that inform competency development, the ÐA-CBE also sought to broaden CBE curriculum delivery by collecting data on relevant partners' learning processes, views on learning, and methods of teaching. Understanding Indigenous methods of learning and teaching can help curriculum designers to consider culturally relevant teaching methods when designing curriculum and courses. Finally, I designed the ÐA-CBE to be an ongoing process where curriculum designers seek feedback from relevant partners throughout the competency identification, program design, and program effectiveness processes. The goal of a fully implemented ÐA-CBE is what Stein (2017) refers to as Institutionalized Interdisciplines, or programs of study within the traditional higher education setting that de-center Western knowledge.

By expanding knowledge sources, denaturalizing knowledge, diversifying knowledge sources, and using knowledges (plural) as the foundation, the curriculum has the potential to disrupt epistemic dominance (Stein 2017). Yet, this process of identifying, describing, and assessing competence repackages the colonization of Indigenous knowledges . . . in other words, the model does not decolonize curriculum. And it can never do so. Quijano (2007) described how knowledge(s) is/are colonized:

colonizers were expropriating from the colonized their knowledge . . . The repression fell, above all, over the modes of knowing, of producing knowledge, or producing perspectives . . . it was followed by the imposition of the use of the rulers' own patterns of expression, and of their beliefs and images with reference to the supernatural. (169)

By identifying Indigenous knowledges and then segmenting and re-packaging them, the ÐA-CBE furthered instead of challenged the colonization of knowledge(s). Artificially fragmenting knowledge(s) into competencies communicates that knowledge(s) can be isolated into separate parts when knowledge(s) are interrelated, contradictory, or reinforcing. Finally, reducing knowledge(s) to competencies defines knowledge(s) as something that can be pursued, attained, and owned by an individual. The assumption of a right to ownership and claiming ownership of Indigenous knowledges is an overtly colonizing act. Fundamentally, the ÐA-CBE perpetuated the colonization of knowledge(s).

The ÐA-CBE aimed to 1) expand who informs the development of the competencies and 2) apply a postcolonial approach (Harding 1998) to privilege minoritized and Indigenous knowledges,

and 3) take a critical lens when identifying where and how colonization, power, and privilege influence each aspect of the process. I defined a postcolonial approach to curriculum design as an attempt to explore the “past and present impacts of colonialism and racism on social, political, and economic systems” (Given 2008, 650). Specifically, a postcolonial lens maintains a:

commitment to unpacking the complex connections between “race,” ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and many other forms of social stratification. These works tend to move beyond an additive model of identity, instead examining the specific ways in which various forms of inequality intersect in particular discourses and in particular historical locales. (Given 2008, 651)

Because the model sought to include Indigenous knowledges and voices, I initially labeled the model as a postcolonial approach to CBE. When validating the model with Indigenous participants early in the process, I learned that many viewed the term postcolonial negatively and changed the name of the model to a decolonizing approach to CBE, or $\text{\textcircled{D}}$ A-CBE. The $\text{\textcircled{D}}$ A-CBE set out to center minoritized and Indigenous knowledges by building curriculum around them. However, by packaging them into Western curriculum models to be distributed through Western models of delivery, the model still reinforces Western structures, even if the knowledge(s) presented are more diverse. This is another reason why the $\text{\textcircled{D}}$ A-CBE is not decolonizing, but it also highlights the danger of how the $\text{\textcircled{D}}$ A-CBE model might further the colonization of Eastern and Indigenous knowledges by repackaging them into a Western set and labeling them as emancipatory, empowering, and decolonizing.

In the following sections, I discuss the $\text{\textcircled{D}}$ A-CBE approach. Following a review of the model and its application in the present study, I critique the model on a broader scale and discuss any potential contributions that may result from its development.

Stage one

Stage one of the $\text{\textcircled{D}}$ A-CBE (see Figure 1) requires seven steps. The $\text{\textcircled{D}}$ A-CBE places students, graduates, faculty, and staff (with attention to relevant partners who hold identities that have been historically marginalized in higher education) at the center of the curriculum design process instead of only faculty (and, in some programs, future employers) (Parson 2021). I center relevant partners from a variety of perspectives and backgrounds so that competencies are dynamic and responsive to the people(s) that graduates of the final program will serve and the communities they will work in. This contrasts with a process that identifies competencies that only represent the current state of the field and do not provide room for critique.

As part of the model, interviews and focus groups with relevant partners inform the development and naming of competencies that, in turn, leads to the development of a curriculum for a program designed to help learners develop “competence.” In the following section, I use portions of the technical report submitted at the conclusion of the American Institutes for Research sponsored project (Parson 2021). These descriptions are reprinted here with edits to reflect development in the process and more equitable language, with their permission.

Stage one steps:

1. Identify relevant partners.

Stage one begins by identifying and collecting data from key relevant partners. The pool of relevant partners forms the population from which those who are willing to inform the curriculum design and those who will evaluate it are identified.⁷

2. Identify participants

The next step involves asking participants to engage in a competency identification and development process. Depending on the site (e.g., public higher education institution, private organization, community organization, sovereign community), this may involve obtaining ethical permission, although the standards of ethics in research should be followed even if an institution does not require IRB approval for program evaluation or curriculum development activities. The designer should ask all relevant partners for ethical permissions prior to participation.

3. Describe and understand

The goal of this stage is to build a comprehensive understanding of the current state of the field, the professional standards that govern those who wish to enter the field, the ethics and values of the field, and the vision of the future of the field (I adapted these categories from the IBSTPI generic competency development model categories; Koszalka et al. 2013). To meet this goal, designers could hold focus groups, interviews, surveys, and collaborative writing activities with the inclusion of the following categories of questions, which are informed by the IBSTPI generic competency defined process (Koszalka et al. 2013):

1. Questions that assess the current state of the field (e.g., what could be improved about preparation programs?);
2. Questions that seek to identify the professional expectations are for the field;
3. Questions that define the ethics and values that characterize the field; and
4. Questions that allow key partners to describe their vision for the future (i.e., how do you hope the field will look?).

I recommend both interviews and focus groups; interviews may validate themes across the data, while focus groups allow for generative and productive discussions that lead to a deeper exploration of the field and opportunities for improvement. Interviews and focus groups questions might also seek to understand the knowledge, skills, and attitudes (KSAs) of professionals and/or leaders in the field. I use “attitude” and not “ability” for A of KSA, because I want to focus on dispositions. The exact nature of the questions can vary according to the program. After conducting the interviews and focus groups, designers should transcribe them as close to verbatim as possible.

With a focus on KSAs, the surveys, collaborative writing exercises, and online data gathering tools (see Delphi method, Hsu, and Sandford 2007) supplement the understanding gained from interviews and focus groups. For example, designers could ask relevant partners to complete a survey where they identify the necessary KSAs professionals in the field need to develop. Finally, designers can collect secondary data to illustrate the state of the field (e.g., hiring projections), expected knowledge of professionals in the field (e.g., scholarly literature evaluating current education programs, the current state of the field, and the success of professionals in the field), vision and challenges facing the field (e.g., publications for professional organizations for professionals in the field, scholarly research), performance and promotion requirements (e.g., job descriptions, performance evaluations), and values and ethics of the field (e.g., publications from professional organizations).

4. Analyze data

While the process of analyzing the data can begin before collection is complete, the first step in data analysis is identifying KSAs with each artifact. In some cases, the KSA might be easy to identify

(e.g., a relevant partner describes a skill that professionals in the field need, or a job description lists what successful applicants should know). However, relevant partners might also describe what they do not want to see from applicants or, perhaps, outline challenges to educating future professionals or obstacles the field is facing. This step of data analysis breaks the data into discrete parts that will, in the next step, lead to the creation of competencies.

I pause here to highlight how this step in the DA-CBE process illustrates one way it is not decolonizing. Breaking apart and labeling is, at its core, a colonizing act. It is colonizing because coding and labeling (and then, counting and reorganizing) disassembles and reassembles without consideration of the whole. It is possible and, perhaps, likely, that the reassembly of the data into competencies and curriculum will not serve the original intention of the speaker or the writer (relevant partners), especially in the case of interviews and focus groups. Verifying and validating the competencies and future curriculum with relevant partners is done with the goal of ensuring that original intent was not lost. However, this process does not make the practice less colonizing, because deconstructing for the sole purpose of reconstructing to fit into a Western structure must occur. There are several limits to the DA-CBE model, but the biggest is that the name represents something the model cannot do. More so, it is impossible for the model to be decolonizing while adapting, molding, interpreting, and (re)creating curriculum for the purposes of delivery through institutions of higher education.

5. Create competencies

I suggest preceding step 5 by reviewing the literature and professional organizations for the relevant field as well as related ones to determine if competencies have already been⁸ created. When possible, then, in the process of creating competencies, one should use previously identified competencies when possible, only creating new ones when they do not exist. In some cases, this means adapting previously created competencies to align with the data while citing the original source within the competency. This is an important step because it situates the competencies created through this process within the profession and field of study, adds validity to the new competencies by relating them to existing ones (and the research that created them), and moves the field forward in terms of creating a body of literature on educating and developing professionals in that field.

The process of creating competencies is similar to a qualitative thematic coding process, where the KSA statements identified in step 4 are labeled with a competency. The existence of previous competencies can complicate the competency creation process in the same way that KSAs labeled *in vivo* (e.g., created during the coding analysis process in contrast to identifying codes prior to beginning the coding process and labeling the data with them) that are similar but not exactly the same. For example, if I have one KSA that “communicates effectively” and another labeled “communicates with subordinates effectively” and yet another that is “communicates with others effectively,” this part of step 5 includes determining if these are separate competencies or if they can be merged into one. Similarly, the challenges in evaluating if there is a match between a KSA identified in step 4 with a previously created competency comes in identifying if a KSA fits into the definition of a previously identified one and labeling it as such or choosing to define new competencies for KSAs not covered in existing competencies. In my initial pass through the data, I will follow a qualitative thematic *a priori* and *in vivo* coding process where previously identified competencies are my *a priori* codes and I create new codes *vis-à-vis* *in vivo* coding for the rest. In cases where there is a large dataset, this might mean creating duplicate codes; in the first few coding passes, I do not worry about duplicates; instead, I try to ensure that every KSA statement identified in step 4 has a competency.

Once I have identified a competency for each KSA statement, I revisit just the competencies that I have identified and merge those that are identical or similar. A qualitative analysis software makes this process easy, because it automatically reflects the merged codes throughout the dataset. This can also be done using a spreadsheet with the find and replace function. Once I have merged codes into separate KSAs, I review the data once again to make sure that the merged codes reflect the KSA and that each is represented by an appropriate competency.

6. Organize competencies into domains or lessons

After identifying competencies, I follow a process that is similar to the qualitative data analysis process of creating themes (Saldaña 2016). In qualitative research, this process sorts codes into categories as a way to sort them. Research questions guide the process of sorting codes or the research may aim to find similarities between the codes, level or type of analysis, or other commonalities. In the case of organizing competencies, I organize competencies into content “domains.” Domains describe a broader category of knowledges and skills (Koszalka et al. 2013); Deciding how to sort KSAs will vary according to the field one is creating a curriculum for. Course designers could, for example, organize competencies into content-based themes when the concepts and skills reflected in the KSAs are logically related, either because one is foundational knowledge required to understand or learn later skills or because the knowledge is required for skill development. A competency associated with understanding a mathematical concept would be related to the skill of solving a mathematical problem using that concept; competencies tied to that knowledge(s) and skills(s) could be organized into one domain.

Course designers could also organize competencies according to learning processes by grouping easier foundational concepts and skills together, and sorting harder or more advanced skills into a separate group. Different ways to organize content will be dictated by the content; other ways to organize could include chronological, geographical, and type of role.

Once designers identify domains, they can organize domains into a curriculum. This might involve grouping similar domains together, if there are a larger number of domains that courses/credits available. For example, if one is developing a graduate certificate, which might be four courses, but they have 27 domains identified, they will need to organize the 27 domains into four courses.⁹ However, if one is developing an undergraduate degree program, they might be able to develop 13 courses, so they would not need to have as many competencies covered in each course. The curriculum format and level will dictate how one needs to organize the competencies.

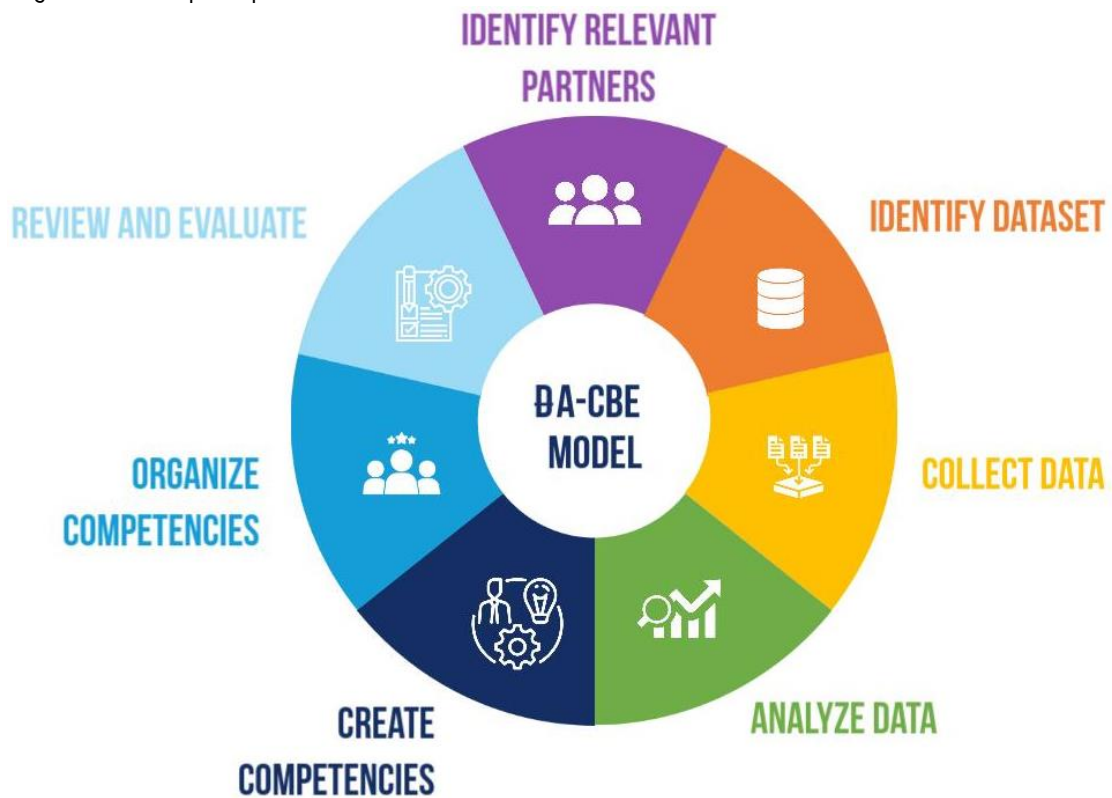
Next, I organize the courses created in the previous steps according to the ways that students may experience them. This is likely a logical extension of the previous step, as the creation of domains relates to decisions about where content belongs; this process could involve identifying which courses are foundational or introductory and which need to be taken prior to learning more advanced topics. The curriculum designer could organize the remaining courses by topic, chronology, role, or another organizing theme, usually dictated by the field. In some fields, this could also involve organizing competencies and domains into different tracks or emphasis areas, a process that includes organizing courses that come later in the program into different areas according to student interest and career goals. This allows for the inclusion of a large number of competencies and courses (too many to be required in one degree program) in the ways that allow students to identify which domains of competencies are most relevant to their needs, interests, and career goals. This process can still apply if one is developing a course instead of a full curriculum. In that case, the different domains become course topics that often align with learning objectives (discussed in stage two).

7. Review and evaluate

After developing an outline, the next step is to review and evaluate the developed curriculum. The most important aspect of the evaluation stage is the presentation of the proposed curriculum to relevant partners for review and analysis. Ideally, this could happen in a group; the curriculum can be presented for review, and relevant partners have time to ask questions and discuss. However, this can also be done in one-on-one conversations or electronically. Once relevant partners provide feedback, the course designer adjusts the curriculum as suggested, starting with themes (similar notes and comments in the feedback received across relevant partners).

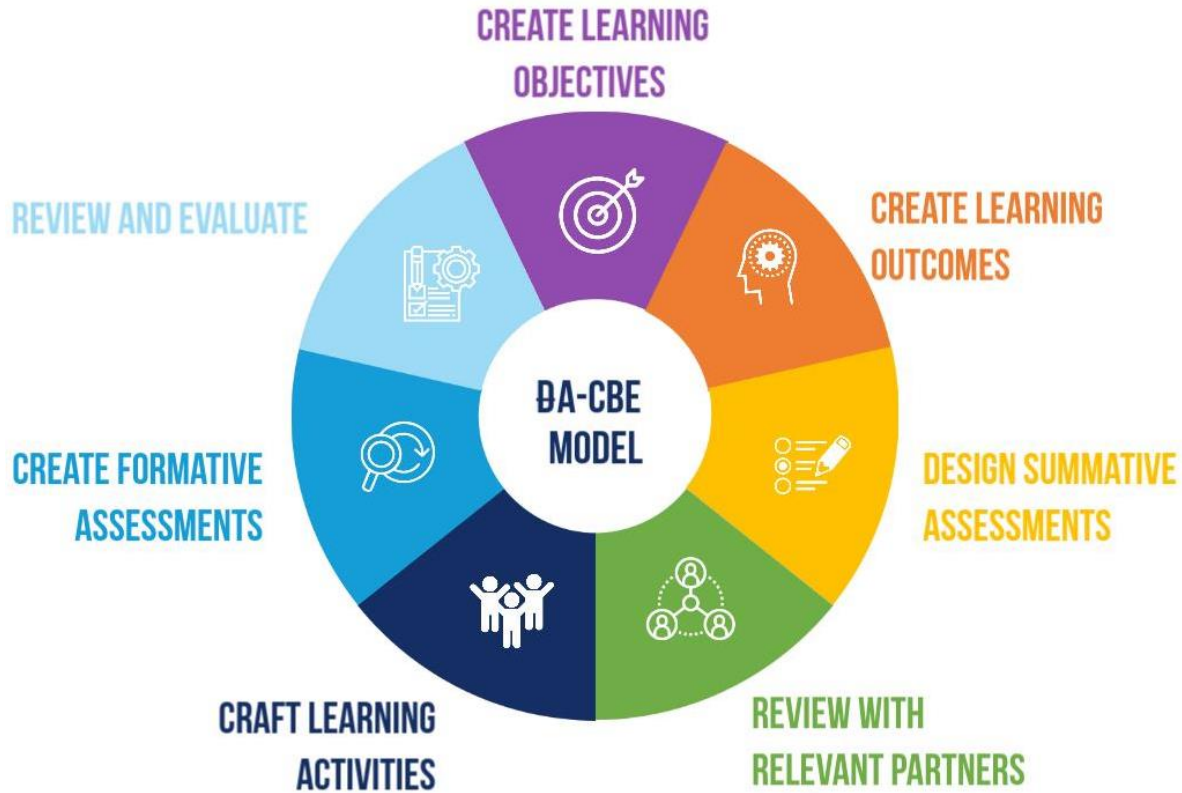
Second, it is usually relevant to look at other programs in the field to determine how the curriculum developed compares to existing programs. Differences between curriculums are not requirements to change what one has developed, however they might illuminate overlooked or missing areas of study or courses. It may also, however, serve to illuminate how the curriculum developed by academic insiders varies from a diverse range of relevant partners; it is important to understand how the curriculum one has developed is different from existing curriculum, especially for programs that will require various levels of institutional approval before implementation.

Figure 1. Stage one: Develop competencies



Stage two: Curriculum development and evaluation

Stage two has two goals illustrated by two figures: curriculum development and evaluation (see Figures 2 and 3). The main goal is to develop learning objectives from each competency and create assessments and learning activities that contribute to the development of each competency.

Figure 2. Stage two: Goal 1

This part of stage two largely follows the process of backward design (see, for example, Wiggins and McTighe 2005). The difference between traditional curriculum design and the DA-CBE model is the implementation of feedback from the relevant partners on both content and learning methods. That is, relevant partners at this stage in the process both review and evaluate the assessments chosen but also provide their perspective on the best ways to learn and develop competence. I designed goal one of stage two with the aim of creating authentic assessments that were not just applicable to the real world but are also reflective of cultural settings. While I built evaluation into the DA-CBE model throughout, the second goal of stage two is a formal implementation of an evaluation plan.

In sum, the DA-CBE sought to decolonize curriculum design, an effort I assert was impossible, by redefining who informed what knowledges, skills, and attitudes comprised competencies as well as the process of learning those KSAs. Specifically, DA-CBE aimed to provide a mechanism to ensure that Eastern and Indigenous processes of learning were a part of the curriculum in ways that were relevant and appropriate for the content. Similarly, the DA-CBE sought to provide a process where Indigenous and Eastern perspectives of assessment informed assessment and assessment techniques.

Figure 3. Stage two: Goal 2

Goal two begins with the implementation of the curriculum designed in the previous goal. Developed in goal one, course designers should review formative assessment data as the curriculum is being taught; they should implement relevant feedback as soon as possible (e.g., in the same course, for the same student group). After the first iteration of the curriculum, they should review summative assessments in order to assess how students met the desired learning objectives (e.g., if and how they developed competence). Along with that summative assessment data, they should survey instructors and students, asking about their impressions of the curriculum, experiences with the learning processes, and their suggestions for improvement. All of that data should be compiled and reviewed with key relevant partners.

Sharing the data with relevant partners could occur in a focus group, one-on-one interviews, or electronically. The outcome of those meetings, relevant partner feedback, and summative assessment data should inform the development of a revised curriculum that responds to feedback and assessment results in ways that better help students to meet learning objectives and deliver content more effectively. Then, the designer should implement the curriculum again. Through continual review and analysis, each iteration repeats goal two of stage two.

In general, curriculum development, review, and re-design should be a continual, iterative process—never complete—and the DA-CBE model sought to provide a framework for development, evaluation, and revision. Because I believe that curriculum should be responsive to changes in society and the student body, the steps in each stage of the DA-CBE should occur as necessary across time,

context, and place. Making changes might mean reviewing, revising, removing, or adding competencies as the context and profession changes. Further, while the model is artificially broken up into two stages, the entire process should be iterative. For those at the beginning of the process (i.e., when developing a new curriculum or when revising an existing curriculum), it might make the most sense to begin from the steps as they are outlined and consult with key relevant partners about which stages are necessary.

Next, I problematize the Δ A-CBE as described above and consider why it is not decolonizing before discussing if there are any contributions to creating a more equitable curriculum design process that the Δ A-CBE can offer to practitioners, even if it is not decolonizing.

APPROACH: WHAT DECOLONIZATION IS NOT

First, as I problematize the Δ A-CBE, I consider if and how it can decolonize curricula and curriculum design in higher education. To do that, I critique both the existence and name of the Δ A-CBE, guided by literature on what decolonization is and is not. Concepts of colonization are often divided conceptually and somewhat artificially into settler colonization (those who stayed; e.g., United States) and colonization (those who rule from afar; e.g., British empire). Broadly, colonization refers to the dominating effects of central power systems that include occupation, exploitation, and control of land, knowledge, politics, language, bodies, psyches, discourses, and economies (Asher 2009; Calderon 2014; Parson and Weise 2020). Higher education serves as a tool to reinforce and replicate colonization through the hegemonic efforts of curricula that defines which knowledges are valid (Calderon 2014) and categorizes individuals into “Self” and “Other” (Desai and Sanya 2016, 715). Higher education controls knowledge “production” through research, teaching, and publications, maintaining a rigid control of what is deemed to be “knowledge” and who is designated as “knowledge-holders” that excludes, exploits, or co-opts Indigenous and Eastern knowledges (Stein 2017).

I noted from the outset that this model, as a curriculum-based model of change, cannot be termed “decolonizing.” Specifically, I look to Tuck and Yang (2012, 2) for guidance on what decolonization is and what it is not:

decolonization, which we assert is a distinct project from other civil and human rights-based social justice projects, is far too often subsumed into the directives of these projects, with no regard for how decolonization wants something different than those forms of justice.

The Δ A-CBE, as conceptualized and reported on in the technical report I wrote as a requirement for the completion of the grant funded by American Institutes for Research (AIR), did just that—it subsumed decolonization into a social justice project.

Specifically, the Δ A-CBE conflated decolonization with social justice efforts to create more equitable higher education settings for Black, Indigenous, and Persons of Color (BIPOC) students. While the Δ A-CBE was grounded in decolonial/decolonizing language, it was not conceptualized or articulated as different from other typical social justice movements. Indeed, the Δ A-CBE preserves the colonizing structures of higher education curriculum design and delivery, because curriculum designers applying the Δ A-CBE are instructed to insert Indigenous knowledges into Western structures. This act not only fails to decolonize the curriculum, it also may reinforce colonization by recontextualizing and artificially segmenting Indigenous knowledges into Western epistemic and organizational structures.

THE IMPOSSIBILITIES OF A “DECOLONIZING APPROACH” TO CURRICULUM DESIGN

Western values are built into the systems, processes, structures, discourses, and procedures that coordinate the work of students, faculty, administrators, and staff. For example, Grosfoguel (2013) explored how the philosophical foundation of humanities curriculum in Western universities largely consisted of theories (re)produced from men from five Western European countries yet, despite that limited perspective, those theories aimed to explain all phenomena across cultures, contexts, and time. As a result, higher education privileges knowledge produced from those theories over those produced from other regions, times, and identities (Grosfoguel 2013). Curriculum works to reinforce Western values by controlling what and how knowledge, skills, and attitudes are taught, ensuring that the goodness and unassailable rightness of the higher education system is perpetuated. Building curriculum is a colonizing act (Martin et al. 2020) and simply changing the curriculum content (specifically KSAs) without changing the rest of the system packages non-Western¹⁰ knowledges into Western boxes (e.g., shadow curricula; Richardson 2011).

As such, while the DA-CBE model may reposition learning and decenter the knowledge and values of oppressive forces, it is not actually doing so in alignment with the goals of decolonization. Specifically, I lean on Tuck and Yang (2012) who discuss the ways that decolonization is not a metaphor:

When metaphor invades decolonization, it kills the very possibility of decolonization; it recenters whiteness, it resettles theory, it extends innocence to the settler, it entertains a settler future. Decolonize (a verb) and decolonization (a noun) cannot easily be grafted onto pre-existing discourses/frameworks, even if they are critical, even if they are antiracist, even if they are justice frameworks. (3)

Decolonization is irreconcilable with both the DA-CBE process and the model. In talking about school curriculum, Martin and colleagues (2020) offer that “the concept of a ‘decolonizing curriculum’ is a contradiction of terms, because how can the curriculum change to become its opposite, namely a decolonizing technology?” (314). The DA-CBE does not decolonize graduate program curriculum, as the two cannot (and should not) be reconciled.

Altogether, if curriculum cannot be decolonized (see Martin et al. 2020), the DA-CBE should more aptly be considered a “repositioning” of CBE, not as a decolonizing practice.

DISCUSSION

In hindsight, problematizing the model prior to validating it would be preferable, yet I only recognized the limits of the model as I validated it. I experienced the process of validating this model as one of learning and reflection, but I should have engaged in more self-reflection and critical exploration of the DA-CBE model prior to its application. I share this to be transparent about how I failed and to demonstrate the ways I am trying to make meaning from this research experience. As Martin and colleagues (2020, 319) offered, “the colonial settlers need to undertake deep self-reflection in order to build relationality, and to seek immersive experiences and embodied acts to help develop ‘deep listening.’”

Yet, still, these reflections and learnings do not contribute to the goals of decolonization. I remember feeling empowered after the first data collection trip, even telling a colleague that this was the “most important work I will do!”, which replicates what Tuck and Yang (2012) discuss as the risk of believing that critical consciousness is decolonizing *enough*:

The front-loading of critical consciousness building can waylay decolonization, even though the experience of teaching and learning to be critical of settler colonialism can be so powerful it can feel like it is indeed making change. Until stolen land is relinquished, critical consciousness does not translate into action that disrupts settler colonialism. (Tuck and Yang 2012, 19)

Conflating reflection and critical learning with doing decolonizing work is dangerous and tenuous. So, by problematizing the Δ A-CBE model and the method it proposes, I hope you are able to identify the tensions with me (and to include more of your own). Overall, I hope that this approach to this paper highlights the tensions within curriculum models in higher education and the task of purporting to change higher education, an institution that is deeply colonized, colonizing, violent, and oppressive. Yet, to be clear, by writing this article, I am still not doing decolonizing work.

Can a curriculum really begin with Indigenous knowledges if it is designed within the bounds of Western understandings? I suggest that it is possible that the inclusion of knowledge, skills, and attitudes described by traditionally minoritized persons as well as Indigenous and Eastern knowledges within the curriculum could lead to the creation of a curriculum that is more inclusive and, therefore, could affirm students by validating their knowledge(s) and their roles as creators of knowledge. Yet, the Δ A-CBE process, itself, applies knowledges gathered from individuals and, through a systematic data analysis process, it segments, labels, and reassembles stories and narratives. The model does so, ostensibly, to create competencies and courses and programs of study, yet this process resembles what Martin and colleagues (2020) referred to as the tendency for Western knowledge to be fragmented, linear, and rational, which runs the risk of making invisible the roots and essence of the original knowledges. Indeed, the Δ A-CBE segmented Indigenous knowledges into a Western resource for human use (Martin et al. 2020).

More troubling, as “creators” of this curriculum, designers could claim ownership of the resultant curriculum. If so, the Δ A-CBE provides a path for continued Western ownership of Indigenous knowledges by repackaging it into Western frameworks. This illustrates firsthand how the curriculum design process, even one centered on Indigenous and/or Eastern knowledges, is still inherently colonizing:

The claim that items of Indigenous knowledge can be “added” to teaching programmes is therefore problematic: the above argument suggests any attempt to include Indigenous knowledge in the curriculum is bound to distort Indigenous knowledge. The result is often cultural caricature: inert knowledge, shorn of its original contexts, webs of meaning, and corresponding fields of practice. Such incremental change may make the curriculum more appealing but ought not be blithely elided with the paradoxical notion of a decolonizing curriculum. (Martin et al. 2020, 314)

Even a “postcolonial” lens is, in effect, colonizing. If a postcolonial approach “strives to remake and subvert it [colonialism]” (Tuck and Yang 2012, 19) and decolonizing requires “the repatriation of Indigenous land and life” (Tuck and Yang, 2012, abstract), then the Δ A-CBE is not, and cannot be, decolonizing.

CONCLUSIONS

Δ A-CBE may contribute well to the efforts of curriculum design but not as one that is “generalizable” or “right.” Instead, the Δ A-CBE is a model of curriculum design that has the potential

to include and validate a more diverse and inclusive range of knowledges in higher education degree programs. While this model does challenge ideas of current curriculum design methods, the DA-CBE is irreconcilable with the ideas and aims of decolonization. As a result, the DA-CBE needs to be renamed, again. Further, in support of the scholars referenced in this paper, I recommend that higher education administrators commit to troubling and problematizing the use of “decolonizing approaches” in Western educational spaces.

Possibilities

The first draft of this article ended here. As a white woman working in higher education, making recommendations to others based on this work felt (and feels) like I would be stepping far outside the bounds of what I should say from my position(s). Yet, as one reviewer pointed out:

Although acknowledging our privilege to have the possibility to be attentive to the contradictions within injustice in societies affected by colonialism, we must play the scientific game on the borders of knowledge production. To do that is necessary to take a position not only about what we cannot do but what can be possible.

This prompting and gentle correction reinforced one final lesson I learned: while I have focused almost exclusively in this manuscript on what decolonization is not, decolonization is about possibilities. “Decolonization itself, the whole discourse around it, is a gift itself, an invitation to engage in dialogue . . . For decolonization, concepts need to be conceived as invitations to dialogue and not as impositions” (Maldonado-Torres 2007, 261). In decolonization, there is hope. Now, perhaps it is appropriate to discuss what decolonization might be and might offer to this conversation.

The DA-CBE is not what I hoped it would be. That does not mean that decolonization practices cannot inform any curriculum that results from the DA-CBE process or, more broadly, curriculum design. Decolonization offers curriculum, curriculum design, and, broadly, our approach to knowledge creation and consumption, a reminder of the importance of context and the opportunities of learning from Indigenous communities. Oliveira (2021), when describing what Indigenous teachings can and cannot do, reinforced the importance of context:

These communities are diverse and complex, and do not have answers applicable in all contexts. They cannot tell us exactly how to swim in the waters rising around us because their techniques are specific to their particular contexts. On the other hand, they do have practices that remind us that the flood is coming for us as well, that our bodies can swim, that human bodies are mostly water, that we are entangled with water as a living entity, that our existence begins in the water, and that beyond our temporal human embodiment we also are the water. (38)

In a local context, learning with and from Indigenous communities may provide local answers. But even when not immediately local, exploring Indigenous knowledges is still an opportunity for a more expansive worldview, more holistic perspectives, and paths to discuss global solutions. Importantly, this learning does not come from replacing one worldview with another or trying to find new universal truths. Quijano (2007) described the process of decolonization as coming to acknowledge the “heterogeneity of all reality . . . the historical diversity and heterogeneity of society, of every society” (177). A decolonizing approach requires openness, equanimity, and, above all, a rejection of absolutes.

Finally, the decolonizing approach reminds us that just like knowledge(s) are diverse, vast, and interrelated, curriculum does not exist in a vacuum. Oliveira (2021) described a way of envisioning society as metabolism (in addition to individualism and collectivism). Imagining society as a metabolism “evokes nested systems and entities that operate in rhythms and cycles and that are constantly exchanging and processing energy and matter” (Oliveira 2021, 215). Through that lens, curriculum is affected by and affects higher education and, similarly, is affected by and affects society. Knowledge(s), curriculum, curriculum design—none of these occur in a vacuum. All are personal, contextual, interrelated, complicated, and, in the case of curriculum, incomplete. Quijano (2007) described the colonization of knowledge as the mystification of the knowledge production process. If we can acknowledge the limitations of curriculum and describe the imperfect processes that led to the curriculum we teach today, then maybe we can open up a conversation about curriculum, knowledge(s), and higher education that demystifies higher education.

NOTES

1. I use strikethrough here and throughout the article to denote the name of the model as described previously but to acknowledge that the proposed process is not decolonizing.
2. While I do not want to essentialize systems of knowledge and acknowledge that there is great diversity of thought across regions and systems of knowing, I refer to Indigenous knowledge in alignment with the UNESCO definition of Local and Indigenous Knowledge Systems, “Local and indigenous knowledge refers to the understandings, skills and philosophies developed by societies with long histories of interaction with their natural surroundings” (UNESCO 2017, 8). When I consider Eastern knowledges, I include epistemologies of knowing that originated in the Eastern hemisphere such as Buddhism and Taoism. And while Western systems of knowing have often been built on, refer to, or have stolen from Eastern and Indigenous ways of knowing, I consider Western knowledges as built of ways of knowing that emphasize a separation between mind and body that emphasize reason and intellect.
3. For a complete technical description of the DA-CBE model, please see (Parson 2021) and (Parson and Weise 2020). For brevity and to avoid self-plagiarism, I provide an overview focusing on functional steps for this report, so the chapter and technical report should be consulted for a complete overview and discussion of the model.
4. I cite Graduate Medical Education as an example of competency-based education (CBE), because CBE is widely accepted and utilized across graduate medical education. Another example of CBE is seen at Western Governor’s University, an institution that offers degree programs organized around competencies in Business, IT, Health and Nursing, and Education. The competency areas for a degree in Educational Leadership include Leadership Foundations and Ethics, School Law, People and Talent in Educational Leadership, School Financial Leadership, Systems Management and School Operations, two practicums in Instruction and Operations and Professional Practices, Leading Inclusive Schools, Data Literacy and Evidence-based practices, Cultural Competency and Social-Emotional Learning, and Educational Inquiry (see WGU.edu).
5. Koszalka and colleagues (2013) defined the competency development models as consisting of three phases: 1. Identification of foundational research; 2. Competency drafting; and 3. Competency validation and rewriting (loc 438). The DA-CBE expands and provides specificity to those phases in Stage 1 by expanding the notion of who is considered a relevant partner, what knowledge is considered valid and relevant, expanding and specifying what information

informs competency drafting, defining the competency drafting process as a qualitative research method, formalizing the process of competency validation, and specifying the setting for course and curriculum development that results from the competency-design process as formal higher education settings.

6. I use “relevant partners” in this manuscript instead of stakeholders to acknowledge the history of the term “stakeholder” and to work toward the “decolonization of language in research” (Reed 2022, par. 2). In the original prospectus of this study and in early versions of this manuscript, I used the term stakeholders, before I learned about the connotations of using that word.
7. I refer both those who participate in competency identification and those who help evaluate the competencies and review the curriculum “relevant partners.” As roles and availability changes, the specific people informing competency identification and/or evaluating the curriculum is likely to change, yet the core purpose and mission will not change. Changes in who is participating will also provide opportunities for new perspectives and divergent opinions that will enrich the design and evaluation process.
8. Even if competencies do exist for the specific field I am working on, I will still complete the entire process, because most competency-development processes (and therefore the associated competency lists) do not include a variety of datapoints and a diverse sample of relevant partners. I attempt to build on and from existing competencies whenever possible.
9. The DA-CBE diverges from some competency-based programs in that it assumes the curriculum will be incorporated into a traditional higher education institution, which is still credit/course-based and has set expectations for curriculum, courses, and credit numbers. This limits the decolonizing potential for the DA-CBE and diverges from many models of competency-based education, yet this approach also allows for this model to be used in the university as it exists today.
10. The use of the term “non-Western” furthers colonizing efforts to create hierarchies of superior and inferior persons, where colonized persons are labeled as “other” and “different than” the colonizers. This “coloniality of power” is organized by race (Quijano 2007), often justified by so-called scientific biological rationales. The “coloniality of power” replicates a hierarchy of humanness (e.g., evidenced by questions like do Indians have Christian souls?; Maldonado-Torres 2007) is presented as natural and used to justify the irrationality of Eastern and Indigenous knowledges. I preserved non-Western here to acknowledge our complicity in that process but use specific language moving forward.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Special thanks to Fredricka Saunders who assisted in the development of Figures 1, 2, and 3.

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DISCLOSURE

I used Generative AI software (ChatGPT) to transition citations and references from American Psychological Association Style 7th Edition to Chicago Manual of Style 18, author-date. I also

used it to validate references for accuracy and to verify that the manuscript matched the formatting guidelines for *Teaching & Learning Inquiry* as described in the style guide. Any errors remain the responsibility of the author.

ETHICS

The Auburn University ethical review board approved this research.

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