

Over-Tested and Under-Prepared

The curriculum-driven instructional model has been the standard method of teaching for more than a century, but it is consistently failing to produce well-educated citizens and lifelong learners. Pressured by standardized testing and rigid pacing guidelines, teachers are forced to cover too much content too quickly, without being able to meet the needs of individual students. In this powerful new book from acclaimed author and speaker Bob Sornson, you'll learn how shifting from curriculum-based instruction to competency based learning can help students become more successful, confident, and engaged learners. Topics include:

- ◆ Understanding the curriculum-driven model and the problems with “cover and sort” methodology;
- ◆ Making the transition from curriculum-driven to competency based learning;
- ◆ Identifying crucial learning outcomes and giving students all the time and instruction needed to fully master these outcomes;
- ◆ Building a positive teaching and learning environment;
- ◆ And more!

Each chapter is short and easy to digest, and provides compelling research, strategies, and anecdotes to inspire conversation and action. Teachers, administrators, and community leaders will all find helpful resources and arguments for re-working our current educational system into a new, dynamic model of teaching and learning.

Bob Sornson is the founder of the Early Learning Foundation and is a former classroom teacher and school administrator. He works with schools and education organizations across the country, focusing primarily on developing comprehensive programs that support early learning success.

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Over-Tested and Under-Prepared

Using Competency
Based Learning to Transform
Our Schools

Bob Sornson

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To every educator who knows there is a better way and who holds on to the belief that somehow adults can thoughtfully consider, collaborate, and find that way.

To every parent who believes that children can fall in love with learning and wants each child to have an opportunity to find success.

To every child who loves to learn.

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About the Author

Bob Sornson is an education leader calling for programs and practices that support competency based learning, early learning success, and high-quality early childhood learning programs. He is the father of four grown children and works internationally with school districts, universities, and parent organizations.

Born and raised in Detroit, MI, along with his six siblings, Bob earned a bachelor's and master's degree at the University of Michigan, an education specialist degree from Central Michigan

University, and his Ph.D. from Andrews University. For over thirty years, he worked as a teacher and as an administrator in Michigan public schools, developed an acclaimed model early learning success initiative, and in 2001 founded the **Early Learning Foundation**.

A prolific author, Bob has written best-selling books for educators, parents, and children, along with many journal publications. His books include *Essential Math Skills* (Shell Education), *Fanatically Formative* (Corwin Press), *Stand in My Shoes: Kids Learning about Empathy* (Love and Logic Press), *The Juice Box Bully* (Early Learning Foundation Press), *Teaching and Joy* (ASCD), and *Creating Classrooms Where Teachers Love to Teach and Students Love to Learn* (Love and Logic Press). He has offered workshops and keynotes in forty-seven states and in other nations.

Bob Sornson is dedicated to giving far more students a real chance for success. Schools that cover, test, and sort do not



Courtesy of Lynn Gregg

effectively serve the needs of kids, families, or society. Nor do schools that allow students to fall into patterns of struggle and failure in the early years of learning. Nor do parents who do not yet know how to build positive family routines, set limits without anger, and help build the solid base of connection and love that allow children to thrive and build purposeful lives. In modern society, we are challenged to use the wealth of knowledge and information available to us to build systems and societies in which kids thrive, care for each other, demonstrate personal character, love to learn, and work collaboratively.

Bob's work involves developing thought patterns, behavior patterns, and institutional patterns to build a world we are proud to bequeath to our children and grandchildren. He lives with his wife Nancy in Brighton, MI, and can be contacted at earlylearningfoundation.com.

Acknowledgments

After more than three decades of “school reform,” the disappointing implementation and results of No Child Left Behind, and the thinly disguised federalization of schools that was Race to the Top, the American public has become disheartened. They question whether education leaders and our government have the capacity to thoughtfully consider and implement a plan for the meaningful improvement of our system of education. Many educators are discouraged. Principals and teachers wonder where the joy went. Young men and women with the capacity to be extraordinary teachers look for another path.

And yet, everywhere I travel there are educators, parents, and community leaders who still have that spark in their eyes, holding on to a vision of learning systems that effectively serve students of every race and level of affluence, giving our children a chance to compete in the global society, inspiring a love of learning that can last a lifetime. This book is for you.

The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy.

—Martin Luther King, Jr.

To my great fortune, I get to meet and work with people who believe in their hearts and souls that we can build educational systems and institutions that truly serve our students, respecting their differences and honoring their strengths. They are not deterred from effective action by political drama and smothering bureaucracies. They are committed to building a better world for our children, and schools that work is part of that vision. They are found from Mississippi to Michigan, from

California to Maine, and in nations around the world. They inspire me.

I am especially grateful to the following people who made this book possible:

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To Rebecca, Matt, Alicia, and Molly, whose lives inspire my belief that ideas can make a difference and that I might find a way to shine a light.

To Nancy, who walks the path with me, whose kindness and decency surrounds every project and each day.

Reader's Guide

This book describes a model of learning unlike the one most of us experienced as students. It is my hope that readers will respond to the clear need for improved systems and refrain from the ever handy “We can’t possibly do that because it has not been done like that before” response. Instead, imagine the creation of a new way, based on solid science and a heavy dose of common sense.

The first chapters begin with a look at what’s possible, just enough to fill your heart with hope. Then we look back at the intended design of the education model we’ve used in schools for well more than a hundred years, with an eye for understanding why it was built as it is. By understanding the basic architecture of our system, we can more fully understand why it no longer serves the vast majority of students who desperately need an opportunity to become successful learners. Chapters nine through seventeen describe a new way of thinking about learning, in school and in life. Subsequent chapters describe the many ongoing efforts to build and use competency based learning systems. In the final chapters, we consider the steps you might take to lead the transformation in your school or community.

Educators, parents, students, and community leaders can study this text with many varied purposes, perhaps including the following:

- ◆ Read and share. Create a new vision for schools and learning that better serves students, parents, communities, and employers. Become an idea leader in your community.
- ◆ Read with the purpose of gathering resources or specific ideas for the transformation you already want to occur.
- ◆ Create personal or professional learning communities, using this book as a catalyst to dialog and collaboration toward the creation of new learning systems.

- ♦ Identify crucial learning outcomes for yourself or your organization, and use the many resources in this book to help you design a plan for sustained learning.
- ♦ Develop a leadership team to transform your schools or to build synergy between learning organizations, and build your transformation plan with the insights of those who have already traveled this path.

You have brains in your head. You have feet in your shoes.
You can steer yourself any direction you choose.

—Dr. Seuss

Introduction

With only a month remaining in the school year, a young high school biology teacher is confronted with an unpleasant challenge. Three more chapters to go. He's teaching an honors class, but for the past several months he's been struggling to manage behavior and keep his students on-task. Many of them are frustrated and struggling to understand the material. Some have already disengaged from the learning process, having decided that science is too hard, not fun, and incredibly boring.

Three more chapters, with content including Population Ecology, Behavioral Biology, Community Biology, Ecosystems, and Conservation Biology. All the other Bio teachers are on-track to finish every chapter in the text, and the district clearly expects him to cover all this content. So he will rush through instruction for the science concepts he loves with students who are already disinterested or disconnected.

Half-way through the year, a third grade teacher prepares to move on to the next math lesson. She's been teaching for many years, but it is getting harder. The pressure of the state assessment looms. Looking around her classroom, she can easily identify which students love math. There are only a few. The others don't get it. The math program moves so quickly through the material. It feels like a race.

Her district has adopted a math program that allows no room for variance. Everyone gets the same lesson on the same day. Some of the kids lack basic number sense. Many of them have memorized facts and formulas but do not fully comprehend why these rules apply. Spiraling, they told her. Don't slow down. In a few months the expertly designed math curriculum will spiral around and cover the same material, so if students don't understand basic concepts now, just keep going. Teaching math used to be fun, but not anymore.

It's the beginning of the year. A sixth grade teacher considers her new class, goofy adolescents vying for attention and respect, searching for social connection, hoping for safety and status. But in her hands is the pacing guide, the guide for what must be taught, how quickly, and in what sequence.

She looks at her beautiful students. Every impulse in her begs to get to know them, build relationships with them. She wants to build a positive classroom culture, help them get to know each other, set standards for how we treat others and want to be treated. She would like to assess their learning needs and figure out each child's strengths. She would like to find out their special interests, the things that might motivate them to work a little harder. But she cannot.

In response to diminished outcomes on the state test, her district has adopted a more rigorous curriculum, a pacing guide for every subject, and biweekly assessments. Each day she is required to write the code for the CCSS standards that are being addressed by today's lessons on the whiteboard. If an administrator comes into the classroom and finds that she is not focused on those standards, she could be reprimanded.

Scanning her classroom, she sees the students who are nervous and socially awkward. She pauses, makes eye contact with each of them, and smiles. She notices the kids who are wiggly, who need movement and lots of practice learning to be calm and self-regulated. Then glancing at the pacing guide, she forges ahead. Ready or not, here it comes.

In the 21st century, good teachers are being asked to use the supercharged version of a curriculum-driven instructional model that treats kids as if they were learning on an assembly line. Covering way too much content at an unreasonable rate, with rigid pacing guides that make it impossible to find time to shape instruction to meet the individual needs of students, the system is breaking down. In spite of teaching to the test, our children are not doing better on international comparisons or compared to previous decades. Good teachers are discouraged. Many of the best and brightest college students cannot imagine subjecting themselves to working in such a broken system. State and national legislators fiddle mindlessly with our schools,

adding layers of regulation that confuse and befuddle both educators and parents. In the information age, an era in which learning skills and the desire to learn have never been more important, many capable students are not developing the skills needed to achieve economic and personal success.

In this book, we will explore simple ideas that will help teacher-leaders, administrators, and parents create learning systems in which both educators and students have a much better chance to succeed. The steps are simple. Identify crucial learning outcomes. Teach and practice crucial learning outcomes for as long as it takes to develop competency. Design instruction for crucial outcomes in a student's zone of proximal development. Learn to track the progress of each student along the pathways to crucial outcomes. Include students in the planning process for developing advanced-level learning plans. Deliver instruction and monitor progress in all the domains of development that contribute to a life of learning and success.

Beginning with the end in mind, we will reflect on a new vision for our schools, along with strategies to convert an obsolete system into a dynamic model of teaching and learning. We will carefully consider the history of how our present system was developed, not to criticize but to understand. Then we will look at the learning and implementation challenges we may face at every level of instruction and consider steps forward. Change is challenging. Transformation is possible. And this is the time for both in our schools.

Most educators who work in our schools are among the most dedicated and compassionate people in the world. The students who come to our schools need us to do better, not by adding more pressure to our existing structure, but by re-conceptualizing our system to meet the needs of modern learners. Learning outcomes have never been more important. This book suggests a change in the underlying architecture of our design for education that will allow us to make teaching an honor and pleasure and to help students fall in love with learning for life.

We are at the inception of the most exciting time in the history of education. For those who are ready to innovate, the

opportunities to lead and create are endless. We have barely scratched the surface of the potential for human learning. Decades of discovery and transformation lie ahead, and some of you reading this book will likely lead the way. From the ashes of decades of failed school reform, you will construct education systems that bring learning alive for our children, offer the most effective antidote to poverty, bring respect and collegiality back to the profession of teaching, and create a more productive and peaceful world for all our children.

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Teaching Differently

“It’s my job to deliver the content. It’s the students’ job to keep up,” a high school social studies teacher once explained to me. As a beginning high school special education teacher, his words told me all I needed to know: that I should never place another of our handicapped learners in his class and that many other students would suffer under his instruction. While this view is incredibly insensitive to the needs of students, it is also consistent with the structure of most curriculum-driven instructional systems. Teachers are given a lot to cover, told that they should be able to use their time well, cover every chapter and content expectation, manage behavior, and somehow motivate kids to try harder so they achieve higher test scores.

Imagine a school bus driver given a route to drive that is longer than could be reasonably managed in the time allowed. In this metaphor, drivers who race through the bus route and get to school on time are given kudos. And if you arrive at school with only a handful of kids, nobody complains.

When covering content is the prime objective, other behaviors suffer: taking time to build relationships, teaching and

practicing classroom routines, helping kids get to know and trust each other, exploring each student's special interests, creating projects and activities that bring learning to life, developing intrinsic motivation to learn, and developing values and character.

Many new teachers have been trained to efficiently deliver content and lessons. When they reach the classroom, they confront the reality of behavior management, absenteeism, different learning skills, interests, and rates of learning, and the futility of "covering content" when students are not learning. These issues, along with complex school bureaucracies and a lack of professionalism in many school cultures, drives some of our best young educators away from teaching.

For those educators who have chosen to stay, the pressure to cover and the pressure to achieve better test scores has increased year by year. Because Cover Test and Sort is such a pervasive model, many educators don't even consider the alternatives. As we transition to competency based learning, the basic training we provide to teachers will change, on-going professional development will be important, and we will bring a much needed love of learning back into the schools and into our lives as professionals.

Learning to become a competency based educator is and will be a challenge. Instead of having one set of lessons to cover, the teacher will understand and respond to the diverse learning needs of her students. Instead of keeping all students on the same page at the same time, students work at their level of readiness. Instead of assuming all students learn in the same way, we recognize the many different ways in which competency might be achieved.

The rubric for high-quality instruction will change. No longer will the standard include:

- ♦ Lesson plans are consistent with the pacing guide and the prescribed GLCEs for each day.
- ♦ All students are receiving the prescribed and scripted lesson.
- ♦ Complete lessons are delivered in the 55-minute period.

Instead the rubric for high-quality instruction may include:

- ♦ Students are working toward essential outcomes at their own instructional level.
- ♦ Each student can identify the learning outcomes toward which he/she is working.
- ♦ Students understand what competency for each essential outcome will look like and how it can be demonstrated.
- ♦ Students seek help and support from each other, as well as from the teacher.
- ♦ The classroom is calm, and the students have developed a trusting relationship with teacher and classmates.
- ♦ The teacher effectively uses formative assessment to adjust instructional plans for each student.
- ♦ The teacher ensures that each student achieves true competency in every essential skill or step in a learning sequence.

At the secondary level, competency based learning can take many forms. Within a course-based competency framework, specific competencies for the completion of each course would be clearly defined. Students might test out of some of the specific competencies for each course, use blended learning options, gain experience or skill on the job, or show demonstrations of competency based on summer learning or work experiences.

A competency framework could be based on major areas of study rather than specific courses. These might include science, math, language arts, social science, technology, physical development, and the arts. In some schools, character development could

be included as an expected aspect of development. Minimum standards for graduation/completion would be established, much like the New Hampshire K-12 Science Competencies (2014). Schools, working with students and families, might use varied options for learning to help students meet and exceed these standards.

To work within these competency based learning frameworks, the concept of high school itself may shift away from the identification of a place of learning to the experience of learning, wherever it may occur. Learning may shift away from curriculum silos (English, social studies, science, math) and will certainly shift away from the time-limited systems we currently use.

A competency based elementary program will focus on building all the important learning skills and habits that build the foundation of learning for life. New paradigms require different teaching methodologies and skills. Rather than using rigid one-size-fits-all pacing guides for essential learning outcomes, students are given instruction at their level. Group work is still appropriate for exploration and enrichment, and for projects and activities. Blended learning structures will develop, combining digital and in-person learning, but the importance of using high-quality educators to design instructional plans and to deliver crucial learning experiences will be preserved.

Using a competency based elementary learning system will open up new possibilities for parent involvement in the progress of their children. Parents and teachers working together can give children the practice time needed for proper skill development and accelerate progress on the pathways to high-level skill development.

In a competency based elementary classroom, there could be a small but clear set of crucial learning outcomes for each

grade/age level. The importance of building a safe learning environment, teaching social skills and self-regulation through clear classroom and school procedures, and building a community of learners will be a priority.

Some portion of learning time may be filled with whole group instruction, activities, or projects. Using on-going assessments of progress, teachers will know exactly which children have achieved proficiency in the continuum of essential oral language, literacy, social skills, motor skills, numeracy, behavior, and self-regulation skills.

Some children may still be working on skills from the previous grade level. Others will be working at grade-level, and still others will be working on skills from a more advanced level. Proficiency in a skill will only be noted when a student has demonstrated deep understanding of a skill or concept on several occasions, over a period of time, and using several different types of learning materials to ensure both understanding and application.

Blended learning options will continue to increase and improve, as technology systems and learning programs are further improved. A deeper understanding of the content and skills that require social interaction, human language interaction, and/or the use of manipulatives will be developed, as content learning options are digitized.

Simpson County School District in rural Mississippi began implementation of a competency based early learning structure in 2008–09. Using the *Essential Skill Inventories* (Sornson, 2012a) in kindergarten, first, and second grade, staff learned to:

- ♦ Clearly identify essential learning outcomes in all the domains of early childhood;
- ♦ Use systematic assessment to determine the readiness levels of students in relation to essential outcomes;
- ♦ Offer informed instruction and carefully monitor progress until these skills/objectives are deeply understood (competency);
- ♦ Allow students to move on to more advanced learning as soon as they are ready.

The district aligned report cards with the *Essential Skill Inventories*, which encouraged staff to help parents understand the concept of crucial learning outcomes and to understand the competencies students were being asked to develop.

As part of an evaluation of improved teacher behaviors based on the use of this competency based learning model, teachers reported significant improvements in their teaching skills and behaviors associated with early learning success (Sornson, 2015). They reported improvement in systematic formative assessment, with the largest gain reported in their ability to embed assessment into the design of instruction. They described significant improvements in their skills for instructional design, with the largest gains reported in giving some students more time to learn essential skills and re-teaching essential skills until students reached deep understanding. Teachers described significant improvements in their skills and behaviors supporting differentiated instruction, and also significant improvements in their ability to understand the learning needs of the whole child.

Teacher perception of changes in their skills and behaviors is supported by changes in student outcomes at Simpson Central School, the pilot school that was the first Mississippi school to begin implementation. Both math and language arts scores have improved significantly on state assessments, and this school has risen from low performing to an A-rated school of excellence.

Competency based instruction is different than Cover Test and Sort. It offers a different contextual framework for planning and delivering instruction, which will require a different set of teaching skills.

University and technical competency based learning options are already beginning to proliferate. Employers are clamoring for applicants with the skills needed for success on the job, and higher education is responding. On-line and blended options are widely available. The availability of free Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and other digital learning options add

energy to this change. Around the world, nations have begun the transformation to a more efficient and personalized system of adult learning.

School to work programs, technical certificate programs, and degree programs recognize the need to have outcomes that matter and are reshaping their learning options. Competency based learning could be designed within a course-based framework, in which specific competencies for the completion of each course would be clearly defined. Or a degree program might define exit outcomes, assess student needs, and design a learning plan that helps students develop the required competencies. Students might test out of some of the specific competencies for each course or program, use blended learning options, gain experience or skill on the job, or show demonstrations of competency based on summer learning or work experiences. The pace of learning can vary, with some students more quickly moving along the skill pathways that lead to crucial exit outcomes.

High-quality CBL Teachers Will

- ◆ Use formative and summative assessment to understand the learning skills and needs of each student;
- ◆ Work unrushed within a viable curriculum;
- ◆ Teach crucial skills at the student's level of readiness;
- ◆ Differentiate instruction based on student learning needs;
- ◆ Use systematic formative assessment to monitor progress;
- ◆ Refine instruction as students show progress;
- ◆ Consider blended learning options;
- ◆ Develop working relationships with students and parents;
- ◆ Support instruction/learning until crucial skills and content are fully proficient.

No amount of tweaking to the assembly line CTS model will adequately meet the learning needs of our future. The competency based teacher will be a well-trained and highly skilled professional educator, able to identify crucial outcomes, assess student learning needs, and differentiate instruction towards the development of competency. We are stepping into a new age, in which educators will be valued professionals, helping lead our students to the learning skills needed to be successful men and women in the modern world.