

Handout: Conscious Competence Learning Matrix

Conscious Competence Learning Matrix

Think of almost any skill that can be known or performed with proficiency by someone. Dunking a basketball, playing a concerto, creating an application for an iPad, catering a meal, speaking a 2nd language, or helping students master academic vocabulary.

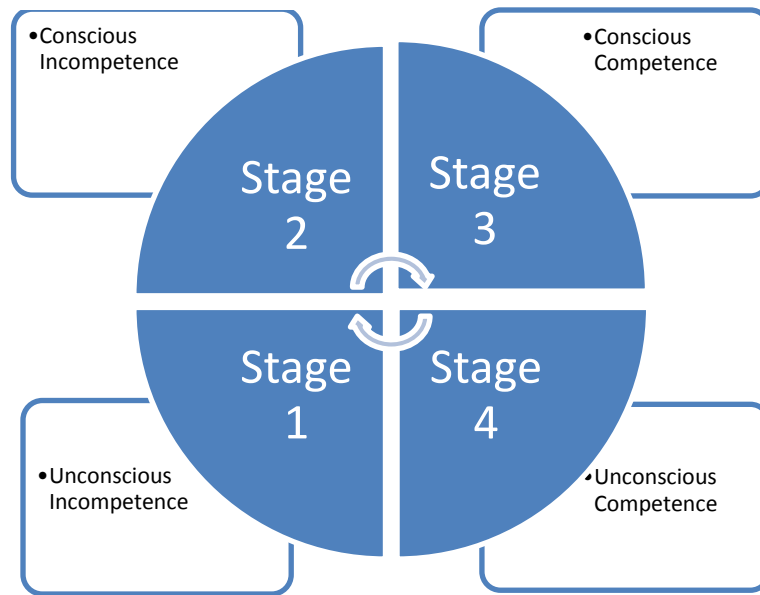
Now think of yourself in relation to any skill that might be involved in implementing the CCSS and how you might - or might not - know how to perform it. In this sense you are at 1 of four places:

- You **don't know** what you don't know.
- You **know** that you don't know.
- You **know how** to do it.
- You **just do it** and no longer actually think about it.

There are a number of variations to this model often attributed to Dr. Thomas Gordon (March 11, 1918 – August 26, 2002). Gordon was an American clinical psychologist recognized as a pioneer whose ideas were applied in a number of contexts (communication skills, education, business, conflict resolution methods, etc). The model he developed came to known as the Gordon Model or the Gordon Method.

As highly accomplished learners themselves, teachers naturally are concerned when there are areas of their practice where proficiency has not **yet** been achieved. The importance of the “yet” is that many teachers are aware of areas needing growth and work very intentionally to create learning conditions for themselves in order to grow. Whether it is being engaged in a professional learning community (PLC), or a book study, or engaging in job-embedded professional opportunities – teachers are often in the process of moving from “I know that I don't know how to do this (aspect of my job)” to “I know how to do this now!”

The following information is provided to help you **frame your own learning curve** while implementing the Common Core State Standards. The learner of a new skill begins at stage 1 - 'unconscious incompetence', and ends at stage 4 - 'unconscious competence', having passed through stage 2 - 'conscious incompetence' and - 3 'conscious competence'.



The general schema or “Conscious Competence Learning Matrix” in an educational setting can be applied to professionals or students. The following is written primarily for teachers thinking about their work with students at various stages of competence in skills being taught:

Stage 1: Unconscious Incompetence

- The learner is not aware of the existence or relevance of the skill area.
- The learner is not aware that they have a particular deficiency in the area concerned
- The learner might deny the relevance or usefulness of the new skill.
- The aim of the Teacher is to first to help the learner develop awareness of the role of the Teacher as an ally in the learning process which will result in 'conscious incompetence' stage.

Stage 2: Conscious Incompetence

The learner becomes aware of the existence and relevance of a skill; he becomes aware that he **cannot** perform the skill:

- The learner is therefore also aware of their deficiency in this area, ideally by attempting or trying to use the skill after quality instruction
- The learner realizes that by improving their skill or ability in this area their effectiveness will improve
- Ideally the learner has a measure of the extent of their deficiency in the relevant skill, and a measure of what level of skill is required for their own competence
- The learner makes a commitment to learn and practice the new skill, and to move to the 'conscious competence' stage.
- Formative assessment data is known to the learner and helps make progress toward competence visible.

Stage 3: Conscious Competence

The learner achieves 'conscious competence' in a skill when he can perform it reliably at will

- The learner will need to concentrate and think in order to perform the skill
- The learner can perform the skill without assistance
- The learner will not reliably perform the skill unless thinking about it - the skill is not yet 'second nature' or 'automatic'
- The learner should be able to demonstrate the skill to another, but is unlikely to be able to teach it well to another person
- The learner should ideally continue to practice the new skill, and if appropriate commit to becoming 'unconsciously competent' at the new skill
- Perfect practice is the single most effective way to move from stage 3 to 4. Practice makes permanent – but only “perfect practice makes perfect.”

Stage 4: Unconscious Competence

The skill becomes so practiced that it enters the unconscious parts of the brain - it becomes '**second nature**'

- Common examples are driving, sports activities, typing, manual dexterity tasks, listening and communicating dexterity tasks, listening and communicating
- It becomes possible for certain skills to be performed while doing something else, for example, knitting while reading a book
- The person might now be able to teach others in the skill concerned, although after some time of being unconsciously competent the person might actually have difficulty in explaining exactly how they do it — the skill has become largely instinctual
- This gives rise to the need for long-standing unconscious competence to be **checked periodically against new standards**

The model illustrates how skills become so integrated that they become "unconscious" and instinctual. But if it stopped there, it would give the impression that this "unconsciousness" is the highest stage of learning — such as the artist, dancer, craftsman who practices their skill at the highest level but does not know how to articulate it or teach it to others. This would be problematic in an educational setting.

Reflective Practice

Of course, in a setting where the expectation is that those “who know” help those who “do not yet know”, the need exists at all times for those “who know” to be able to share what they know in ways that those with less competence can benefit. This level is often associated with coaches, expert teachers, or mentors. In an educational setting, teachers must have awareness of both their own stages of competence building as well as an awareness of where all of their students are at any given time.

There are some skills that become so practiced that they enter the unconscious parts of the brain - it becomes 'second nature' (minimum effort is required for maximum quality

output). What distinguishes a “Stage 4” from something beyond (or a Stage 5) is that the practitioner **can also articulate the fine details of the skill to others**.

- Fluent, highly efficient and accurate performance occurs instinctively (no longer requiring conscious, deliberate and careful execution) but is also accompanied by the capability to **articulate** the underlying explanation of one's own performance and why it is successful.
- The highest level of performance (and self-assessment of that performance) involves exhibiting fully integrated metacognitive (invisible) skills with the performance of the primary/visible skill.
- This level may be awkwardly described as "conscious competence of unconscious competence".

The context in which this information is offered is for implementation of the Common Core State Standards. Teachers implementing the CCSS often can identify they are at different Stages (1-4) with respect to different aspects of implementing the CCSS. For example, if a teacher has worked extensively with standards before the CCSS and has applied what they know to the CCSS, the work of knowing “the what of the CCSS” may move readily from Stage 2 to Stage 3 or even to Stage 4. For other areas, such as designing instruction so rigor is accessible to all learners, could be at Stage 2. If any area is at Stage 2, a teacher will be looking for ways to move to Stage 3 of competence. In terms of implementing the CCSS, the bulk of the work shifts from knowing “the what” of the standards toward “the how” of implementation.

Perhaps it is obvious – but any area where a teacher’s skill or competence is at Stage 1 it poses a significant challenge on several levels. First, it impacts the teacher’s self-efficacy to meet the needs of a diverse learning population. Unfortunately, without full awareness the teacher may be tempted to conclude that the source of the challenge rests entirely with the students. This raises a second concern, that in a classroom where students themselves are at various stages of competence a teacher operating from Stage 1 in any area may negatively impact learners. A third level of concern is the simple reality that many teachers continue to work in relative isolation and therefore have few opportunities to become aware of Stage 1 challenges. This puts a lot of pressure on educational systems to create opportunities for teachers to develop awareness and subsequent opportunities to develop.

There is also a related concern that a teacher who has little awareness of how to support learners to develop their own competence may simply perpetuate **existing** levels of skills already developed. If a teacher conceives of their role as to deliver instruction (only) and not to support students to develop competence, then the operational norms within the classroom may perpetuate levels of competence that already exist. Though it is an over-simplification, in a typical class where students have competence to varying degrees, it is every teacher’s challenge to create learning conditions that develop competence for all learners. Stage 1 competence levels for teachers in **any area** are hard to overcome and show results with learners who themselves are at Stage 1 and Stage 2 in their own development.

Educators may make the mistake of assuming that learners are always in Stage 2 and are aware of their own need to develop. If the learner is at Stage 1 then the initial work

will not be about developing competence in the skill itself, but in developing awareness for the need to develop the skill at some point. Failure to recognize that these are two **different kinds of work** for teachers is at least a partial explanation why so many students feel “lost in school” and so many teachers feel frustrated by students who appear to be unmotivated. If you “don’t know what you don’t know” as a student and you don’t view the teacher as an ally in the learning process – what are your real options for learning?

Initial formation of a partnership for learning with students at Stage 1 in a particular area is necessary before moving the student to Stage 3. The fundamental method for creating the conditions for such initial awareness is through ongoing formative assessment and subsequent prescriptive feedback conversations with students, not about them. Until the **learner** has achieved awareness of a weakness or a need to learn ('conscious incompetence'), the learner has no interest, attention or motivation for the learning process.

Generally speaking, no ownership for learning can exist until someone is aware of what it is they don’t actually know. It is like an “**engagement blindspot**” for the learner.

Considering the Student Perspective

As educators it is very common to think of students in terms of their competence levels. It is also important to consider what the student’s experience of those levels of competence. For example, while we might know from assessment data that a student is at a particular level of language acquisition as an ELL, we should also wonder, “What does that level of competence feel like in my classroom?” Or consider a student with a disability experiencing frustration while working on a skill that is directly impacted by the disability. Ask yourself, “How would it feel if every day you felt that in *this particular area* it seemed like you were always beginning from Stage 2 competence?”

Learners will respond best to learning conditions when they are first aware of (1) their own need for conditions that meet their need and (2) the personal benefits they will derive from engaging in their own learning opportunities and (3) they are in the care of a caring adult who designs learning opportunities with them in mind. In order for learning opportunities to actually be learning opportunities they must meet students where they truly are....in their “zone of proximal development” (Vygotsky).

The irony, however, is that while attempting to create as welcoming as possible of a learning environment to foster “school connectedness” it simultaneously requires helping each learner develop awareness of their “incompetence” to some degree. From a “**growth mindset**” (Carol Dweck), it is imperative to stress to learners your own growth has come through countless cycles through a learning matrix like the Conscious Competence Learning Matrix.

Reflective Questions:

I have a **method for learning from others** or in my educational system what my own areas of Stage 1 competence might be:

Strongly agree

Somewhat agree

Disagree

✓ Comments:

With regard to implementing the CCSS, I have a way of making sense of **my own learning and need for support** to move from Stage 2 to Stage 3 (in applicable areas):

Strongly agree

Somewhat agree

Disagree

✓ Comments:

I have taken time to **intentionally pre-teach students** about what a “growth mindset” is, my role as an ally in the learning process, and how prescriptive feedback helps students increase their odds of growing:

Strongly agree

Somewhat agree

Disagree

✓ Comments:

My students know that I am a learner, too, and that as I learn various strategies to support them I also develop competence as a teacher.

Strongly agree

Somewhat agree

Disagree

✓ Comments: