

THE FOUR STAGES OF COMPETENCE: HOW DO THEY AFFECT ONLINE COURSE DESIGN?

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Have you ever had a class of advanced students struggle with a paper asking them to deploy foundational skills that you know they've practiced before? Or maybe you've had a group of beginner students who seem quite confident in the first week of class, only to become demoralized when they begin receiving feedback on their work?

These are common experiences for many instructors. Sometimes they lead us to throw up our hands in frustration with our students, or even question our own abilities as teachers. But in fact, the problem sometimes lies in our own status as expert learners. We enjoy "unconscious competence" when it comes to knowledge and skills in our own field. In order to understand students' struggles—and help them push through difficulty—it helps to step back and think about mastery as a journey through four stages of competence. As you read about the stages below, reflect on your own educational history and try to recall moments where you fell into each category.

UNCONCIOUS INCOMPETENCE

Students don't know what they don't know/ what skills they need to acquire

CONSCIOUS INCOMPETENCE

Students are aware of what they don't know/need to become competent at doing

CONSCIOUS COMPETENCE

Students have started to develop a skill or knowledge base but are aware of their effort

UNCONSCIOUS COMPETENCE

Students master something to the point where it's effortless—it has become "second nature"

The advanced students who have trouble combining individual "beginner" skills in a paper are likely at the stage of conscious competence. They have lots of knowledge and skills, but they still find it effortful to put the pieces together. The beginning students who start the semester in a state of seeming overconfidence are, in fact, simply unconscious (so far) of what they don't know: they are in the state of unconscious incompetence. They will be ready to learn—but their first shift into conscious incompetence can be emotionally difficult.

Fortunately, there are a variety of supports we can use to help students through the stages of competence. Moreover, when designing an online course, we can leverage key affordances of the LMS and of the asynchronous learning format to promote students' journey toward mastery. With careful planning, online courses allow us to better support individual students and their unique pathways toward mastery, because we can give students the space for self-checks and feedback-seeking without worrying that they might seem foolish in front of their classmates.

KNOWLEDGE CHECKS

In order to develop mastery, students must first acquire key component skills (Ambrose, et al., 2010). We can assist them in moving through the four stages of competence by encouraging active reflection on the skills-acquisition process. In an online course, consider using:

- [Practice quizzes](#) in Canvas as pre- and / or post-checks for knowledge or skills acquisition. A pre-check practice quiz allows students to test their prior knowledge before engaging with the course content that is designed to introduce that knowledge (e.g. readings, video lectures). A post-check practice quiz can give students feedback on their progress after engaging with the relevant course content.
- Interactive knowledge checks that give instant feedback. When you design an online course with Miami Online, your Learning Designer can build these types of interactions for your course. You can build your own anytime using Google Slides: [see this YouTube tutorial](#), which includes a slide template.

COLLABORATIVE PRACTICE

Students need opportunities to practice integrating their new skills and knowledge into their existing base of learning. In an online course, it's ideal to have students collaborate, giving each other feedback on low-stakes practice attempts. Consider trying the following:

- Discussion boards that allow students to try out an idea, practice a skill, or apply course concepts to real life situations. Use discussion replies as a forum for students to give each other feedback. ([Find some great discussion approaches here.](#))
- Peer review [in Canvas](#), to encourage students to seek assistance from one another (not just from you) and become more autonomous users of their new skills.
- Collaborative concept maps that allow students to work together to organize knowledge and explain relationships between concepts. Free tools include [Mindmeister](#), [Coggle](#), and [Google Jamboard](#).

TRANSPARENT TEACHING

Part of our job, as expert learners, is to help students see when and how to apply what they learn in our classes. In other words, we need to be transparent about which skills or concepts to deploy in each assignment. In your online classes, consider building assignments that:

- Explicitly describe the purpose
- Point to specific skills or knowledge covered so far in class (or in prerequisite courses) that are required for the assignment
- Link back to practice / scaffolding activities or knowledge checks that students have already completed to prepare them for the current assignment
- Remind students which prior feedback to consult in completing the current assignment

The [TILT Higher Ed website](#) offers lots of great research and examples to inspire your work on transparent teaching.

REFERENCES:

Ambrose, S. A. (2010). How learning works : seven research-based principles for smart teaching (1st ed). Jossey-Bass.