

BOOK REVIEW

Book Review of *Educating Decision Makers: The Abola Decision-Centered Learning Framework™ for Higher Education*

Knowledge as a Means and the Purpose of Higher Education

Kshitij Taluja

Undergraduate Researcher, Bachelor of Computer Science, Golden Gate University

Jasreet Kaur

Undergraduate Researcher, Bachelor of Science in Analytics, Golden Gate University

Dr. Smrite Goudhaman

Global Professor of Practice, Golden Gate University

Author: Paula Abola

Title: *Educating Decision Makers: The Abola Decision-Centered Learning Framework™ for Higher Education*

Publisher: EIU Press, Paris

Year: 2026

ISBN: 978-2-489410-03-7

Pages: 270

Abstract

Educating Decision Makers posits that developing knowledge alone will not enable students to make decisions when faced with uncertainty, and instead proposes a new way of organizing curricula based on the kinds of decisions graduates are expected to make as opposed to what graduates are expected to know. This evaluation reviews that proposal along with the impacts of the proposed change on how courses are designed and assessed, and ultimately, how institutions function. What distinguishes this review is its attention to how the book utilizes the epistemology of evidence-based clinical practice to inform curriculum theory. That is an observation regarding the book's intellectual heritage as opposed to a claim that it has originated something unique within the field. The main unresolved issue is the apparent contradiction between the author's stated intent to utilize the framework to assess student decision-making capabilities across all fields, and her acknowledgment that assessing decision-making through decision-centered assessments can be inconsistent.

Keywords: higher education; curriculum design; decision-making; assessment; professional judgment

Abola's starting point is a question many universities answer every day without ever asking it: what is the purpose of knowledge? Their answer sits in the structure of the curriculum, in the courses and subjects, rather than in written form. Universities determine what students should know and assess whether they know it, and it is assumed that students can then act on that knowledge. Many graduates find out later that although they have received a great deal of

discipline-specific education, they lack experience in the area where they will spend the majority of their working lives, which is taking action when the situation does not match the exam.

Educating Decision Makers focuses on this gap. Dr. Paula Abola argues that the connection between the knowledge students receive at university and their ability to use it in judging what to do next often goes unstated, and therefore unexamined. Much of what universities see as confusing regarding their graduates' preparedness for entering the workforce becomes legible when they focus on what students need to be able to decide.

The Abola Decision-Centered Learning Framework™ (A-DCL™) provides a series of five stages to guide learners: Define the Decision, Gather Evidence, Evaluate Alternatives, Make and Defend the Decision, and Reflect and Adapt. Viewed simply as a process, the sequence resembles a typical model of reflection. The primary difference is where it starts. Most pedagogy that claims to improve learners' ability to use judgment begins at the point at which a problem is presented to learners. The case method presents a case (Garvin, 2003); problem-based learning presents a problem (Barrows & Tamblyn, 1980); simulation presents a scenario (Gaba, 2004). Chapter 5 goes back further still, stating that many of the greatest failures of professionals arise primarily due to framing failure.

The persuasive power of the framework lies in an assertion that may be easily made but difficult to prove; specifically, that framing decision-making can be learned (as opposed to being a byproduct of professional experience). The author uses examples to support her argument, but the comparative advantage of A-DCL™ over established educational approaches remains theoretically argued rather than empirically demonstrated.

One of the biggest challenges in developing a decision-centered approach to learning is that if students are to be taught to define decisions, they must be allowed to define those decisions poorly, and to move some way along a decision-making path that is based on a poor definition of the decision before they realize their mistake. Of all the features of A-DCL™, the one that differs the most from current ways in which universities measure student success is the first stage, defining decisions.

What is perhaps the most revealing aspect of *Educating Decision Makers* is never mentioned in it. However, it can be seen in its references section. Abola uses two sets of literature that rarely exist together. One set consists of curriculum development and learning sciences literature such as Dewey, Bloom, Biggs and Tang, Wiggins and McTighe, and Gulikers. The

second set includes decision science and evidence-based practice literature including Simon, Kahneman and Tversky, Hammond, Keeney and Raiffa, and Sackett et al. Sackett has been selected for inclusion in this educational monograph due to his pioneering work in Evidence-Based Medicine (EBM), an approach to practice which combines the practitioner's knowledge and experience with the current best available evidence to guide decision-making under highly uncertain conditions. The similarities between this paradigm and A-DCL™ are striking. In Chapter 20 Abola describes her progression from medicinal chemistry into clinical research and then into teaching, curriculum design and academic leadership as having emerged through decisions rather than plans.

This inheritance provides justification for those design decisions that may otherwise seem random. It shows why assessing evidence (Stage 2) takes place entirely on its own rather than within Stage 1, and why the process of determining and justifying a course of action (Stage 4) is separate from the determination of alternative courses of action, a separation that appears redundant until Chapter 8 describes the process of moving from analysis to commitment as a separate capability. In addition, this inheritance explains why the framework is designed with modest expectations. Clinical reasoning does not provide guarantees of correct decisions; it only provides guarantees of defensible ones. A-DCL™ inherits this standard, and therefore Chapter 17 grants a great deal of ground without granting any essential ground.

The organization of the book as a whole has a quiet resemblance to the model that it advocates. Part I establishes the decision that all colleges face; Parts II and III bring together the evidence and evaluate options in practice; Part IV makes the case and defends it, first placing A-DCL™ relative to existing theories and then opening it to criticism; Part V reflects and adapts. Chapter 17 is Stage 5 applied to the framework itself.

Particular attention should be given to Chapter 3 since it is easily misinterpreted. The Multiple-Choice Illusion™ is not a critique of multiple-choice test format but a critique of an epistemology. Learners who spend years identifying predetermined correct responses will infer many things about reality itself, including that meaningful questions have answers that can be discovered. An epistemological worldview acquired through systematic means will therefore require a systemic remedy, and that is exactly why Chapter 15's decision-centered university is not an increase in ambition but a necessary structural change.

Chapter 11 contains the most significant potential for institutional impact. By taking Biggs's principle that assessment demonstrates an institution's actual priorities, Abola points to a gap

she argues many institutions would prefer to leave unexamined: universities that name judgment and adaptability among their graduate attributes may continue to rely on assessment methods rewarding the identification of correct answers rather than critical engagement with problems. Students do not fail to learn what they are told. They learn precisely what is assessed.

There exists a tension between two of the chapters with the most authority, and it is unaddressed. Chapter 12 asserts that A-DCL™ applies universally across all academic disciplines; Chapter 17 admits that decision-centered assessments are difficult. The most significant distinction to draw here is between how the framework structures decision-making and the criteria applied within that structure. The five stages of Define the Decision, Gather Evidence, Evaluate Alternatives, Make and Defend the Decision, and Reflect and Adapt may well provide a common decision-making structure that anyone could use to think through a problem. The standards through which performance is assessed at each stage, however, necessarily remain discipline-specific. What constitutes good enough evidence to base a decision on, and what decision is defensible on that basis, is determined by discipline-based conventions rather than by the framework. The general nature of the process therefore exists apart from the specific application of it, which means that the way students are assessed will vary substantially between a hospital setting, an engineering laboratory and a research library, despite the fact that the overall framework has not changed. The framework remains conceptual at this stage, and whether decision-centered design produces measurably stronger decision-makers is an important direction for subsequent research and testing rather than a shortcoming of what the book sets out to do.

The contribution that this volume provides is at the level of conceptualization as opposed to empiricism. It does not provide empirical evidence about how students learn. Instead, the book reframes the questions that are being answered by curricula and provides an outline for intentionally answering those questions. This type of contribution can often be underestimated simply because there is nothing tangible, such as a discovery, to reference, and its success will still depend upon additional empirical support and discipline-based adaptations that have yet to occur.

Clinical reasoning was given a formalized, evidence-based approach in order to address the gap between knowledge and decision-making, and the evidence-based practice movement provided an explicit epistemological basis for making decisions under uncertainty. Abola states that the gap between knowing and deciding is not limited to clinical disciplines. She argues

that curriculum theory does not have to develop a response as if there were no prior work on this issue. Whether the nature of the gap is consistent across all areas of study is something the author asserts but does not demonstrate. Universities have long produced decision makers, whether or not they have designed themselves to do so. This book asks them to acknowledge that and to operate accordingly.

References

- Abola, P. (2026). *Educating decision makers: The Abola Decision-Centered Learning Framework™ for higher education*. EIU Press.
- Barrows, H. S., & Tamblyn, R. M. (1980). *Problem-based learning: An approach to medical education*. Springer.
- Biggs, J., & Tang, C. (2011). *Teaching for quality learning at university* (4th ed.). Open University Press.
- Bloom, B. S., Engelhart, M. D., Furst, E. J., Hill, W. H., & Krathwohl, D. R. (1956). *Taxonomy of educational objectives: Handbook I: Cognitive domain*. David McKay.
- Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience and education*. Macmillan.
- Gaba, D. M. (2004). The future vision of simulation in health care. *Quality and Safety in Health Care*, 13(Suppl 1), i2–i10. <https://doi.org/10.1136/qshc.2004.009878>
- Garvin, D. A. (2003). Making the case: Professional education for the world of practice. *Harvard Magazine*, 106(1), 56–65.
- Gulikers, J. T. M., Bastiaens, T. J., & Kirschner, P. A. (2004). A five-dimensional framework for authentic assessment. *Educational Technology Research and Development*, 52(3), 67–86. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02504676>
- Hammond, J. S., Keeney, R. L., & Raiffa, H. (1999). *Smart choices: A practical guide to making better decisions*. Harvard Business School Press.
- Kahneman, D., & Tversky, A. (1984). Choices, values, and frames. *American Psychologist*, 39(4), 341–350. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.39.4.341>
- Sackett, D. L., Rosenberg, W. M. C., Gray, J. A. M., Haynes, R. B., & Richardson, W. S. (1996). Evidence based medicine: What it is and what it isn't. *BMJ*, 312(7023), 71–72. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.312.7023.71>
- Simon, H. A. (1997). *Administrative behavior: A study of decision-making processes in administrative organizations* (4th ed.). Free Press. (Original work published 1947)

Wiggins, G., & McTighe, J. (2005). *Understanding by design* (2nd ed.). Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.