Contextualizing the Competency-Based Schooling

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INTRODUCTION
To a classroom teacher the current debate about work-related competencies might appear far removed from his/her classroom and have no significance for teacher education. Yet the proposed policy changes are likely to affect the work and the professional status of teachers in a very direct way. As Whitty and Willmott (1991: 312) point out, one of the fundamental problems of competency-based teaching/training (CBT) approach consists in the difficulty to define just how narrow or broad the competencies might be. A too narrow definition based on observable work-related skills might indicate a radical departure from the traditional role teachers played in the old and more liberal educational system, and consequently the status of the reflective professional might be questioned if teachers become mere technical instructors and skills assessors. A too broad definition, on the other hand, can make it impossible to define criteria of competence in any meaningful way.

The second, and no less important ramification of the CBT approach is related to the capacity of a CBT system to produce intellectually autonomous and reflective citizens. The consequences of having skilled but not necessarily intelligent citizens might not become evident in the short term; however, the future social and moral developments of our civilization might be threatened should the CBT system prove inefficient in delivering such desired outcomes.

The scenario suggested above might seem unreal from the present vantage point. Yet the current thrust of our educational policy – the tendency to collapse the dichotomy between work skills and a capacity for an intelligent, autonomous reflection into a unified work-related training system – indicates that such scenario might be a distinct possibility. In the final analysis, however, it will be the teachers themselves who will implement these policies. It is for this reason that the support or otherwise they might lend to the new training system be informed by insights drawn from a broader social and moral perspective that would take account not only of what happens in their school or classroom, but also of the changes taking place in the global and national political and economic systems.

In other words, the decision we have to make at the present juncture is to what extent should we allow economic imperatives to influence the concepts of educational work and the professional status of teachers? This article will aim to help teachers and teacher educators make such an informed decision.

Part 1 will look briefly at the restructuring of the global economic system. Part 2 will describe the new skills formation paradigm, and argue that the skills formation strategy has been chiefly informed by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECF) generated policy proposals. Part 3 will closely interrogate the concept of competence as it is used in the Mayer (1992), Finn (1991), Carmichael (March and July, 1992), and Ashenden (1991) Reports to the Australian Educational Council. This section will identify difficulties inherent in the Competence Based Training (CBT). Part 4 will discuss the notion of competence elaborated by Habermas (1972, 1979, 1984, 1989). Part 5 will critique the new skills paradigm from the position of the critical theory. The critique will focus especially on the domains of language, knowledge, intersubjectivity, and ego identity and ethics. Finally, the article will discuss the pedagogical implications of the performative (i.e., communicative) versus formal (i.e., CBT) teaching strategies.

PART 1: RESTRUCTURING GLOBAL ECONOMY
Over the last decade or so most Western economies have been undergoing a restructuring process prompted by the prolonged crisis of capital accumulation which has begun to emerge in the late 1960's and early 1970's (Walliser, 1980, 1985; Gordon, 1980; Lipietz, 1987; Catley, 1975; Crouth et al, 1981, Crough and Wheelwright, 1982). This crisis has been qualitatively different from previous business cycle crises which could be more or less contained through allocative interventions by national-state governments within the confines of the Fordist accumulation regime. The present crisis thus needs to be understood as a conjunctural crisis – its resolution requires a fundamental re-working of the social structures of accumulation, because their usefulness to the capital accumulation process had been exhausted by the mid-1970's.

Working from within the system-theoretic paradigm, the neoclassical economists located the malaise of the failing international economy in its inefficiency, low productivity, and lack of competitiveness. This assessment was not entirely incorrect; however, being exclusively focused on the economic system alone, it failed to take into consideration the possible social ramifications of economic rationalist policies. The above diagnosis had, subsequently, become the driving force behind global macro- and micro-economic reforms. The former being expressed in a general thrust towards a deregulated free-market economic environment and chiefly in the deregulation of capital flows and the financial system. The latter in the downgrading of work-places, privatization of the corporate capital, and the privatization and corporatization of state enterprises and provision of some public services. Underpinning the strategy was an explicit trust in market mechanisms with the alleged advancement, which simultaneously provided a wishful even somewhat utopian panacea for the perceived economic ills, and, at the same time, handed a sense of legitimacy to the growing disparity between the fewer wealthy and growing poor (Wheelwright, 1990).

The unprecedented global concentration of economic power and capital (Castells & Henderson, 1987: 1-2; Crough & Wheelwright, 1982: 11-31) which has undoubtedly played a considerable body of evidence which suggests that behind the individual nation-states' efforts to rework social structures of capital accumulation there appears to be an unmistakable uniformity of approach, an invisible hand, as it were, molding the way we understand and talk about economic priorities such as international competitiveness, or the virtues of weeding out the weak and curing the welfare dependency syndrome by withdrawing transfer payments.

It is for this reason that the educational changes in Australia and other OECD countries over the past decade need to be viewed as forming an integral part of the new global economic settlement described elsewhere as the post-Fordist settlement (Jessop, 1983, 1989; Rustin, 1989). Clearly, to conceptualize these changes as primarily educational reforms is no longer a sustainable proposition.

In the area of policy-formation, the new structural selectivity procedures3 put in place by the technical movement in the 1980's brought about three major shifts: (1) the introduction of the principles of performance-oriented management by measurable objectives into the State departments, including education, encouraged the new skills reformulation of the Australian educational system towards work-related skills development (Marshall, 1988: 29; Soucek, 1992: 135-137); (2) the structural selectivity of the State transferred the initiative for reworking educational standards and functions from educators and bureaucrats to corporate and business bodies, whose understanding of learning processes was quite naturally defined in terms of observable skills or performance and (3) as a consequence of the above, the "reformist" policy-makers were able to articulate new educational goals in terms of specific and discrete skills-requirements.

Traditionally, public education undertaking was perceived as an attempt at approximating an ideal balance between work-related skills, personal social and moral development, and laying foundations for future cognitive, social, and moral individual growth whether in the workplace, through tertiary studies, or other life careers. It was precisely the availability of public education structures which, in principle at least, underpinned and informed the notions of equity...
and social justice, especially with regard to the equalizing function public education was presumed to perform vis-à-vis the existing social inequality. This article will examine the impact of the changes noted above, and will argue that, in spite of its rhetoric, the competency-based schooling “reform” represents a radical departure from the traditional role our schools have been understood to fulfill.

PART 2: THE GLOBAL RESTRUCTURING OF EDUCATION AND THE AUSTRALIAN INITIATIVE

Who sets the agenda of educational change?

As suggested in the introduction, from as early as the late 1960’s the global economy began to experience considerable difficulties. The initial response of governments and the corporate sector alike was to blame the schooling systems of individuals. The blame-the-schools campaign became evident in the plethora of Commission Reports in all major OECD countries. As a think-tank, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) played an extremely influential part in the subsequent shaping of the member countries’ educational policies.

The realization that the crisis of schooling to the capital accumulation function was outlined in ‘Structural Adjustment and Economic Performance’ (OECD, 1987), but the specific policy proposals were more clearly and explicitly outlined in the document, ‘Education and the Economy in a Changing Society’ (OECD, 1989).

Education and Economy in a Changing Society summarises and articulates the theme of the 1980’s global educational changes and, at the same time, sets the agenda for the 1990’s: it argues simply and persuasively that the explosion of knowledge in the 1970’s and 1980’s somewhat overloaded the educational curriculum, and rendered it incoherent. The curriculum, therefore, needs to be revitalized; even the very notion of the basics needs to be redefined. This implies that certain choices need to be made. In two lines the document paraphrases the traditional curriculum’s concerns with “individual development and education for an informed citizenship” (OECD, 1989:28), and then focuses firmly on the need for more adequate introduction to jobs, careers, and the world of work in schools and familiarisation with and command of information technologies” (OECD, 1989:30). Most importantly, the document argues that direct public funding for education should occur only when the labour-market indicators show clearly the need for such education (OECD, 1989:48). Having already acknowledged the necessity of future high unemployment (OECD, 1989:48), the document is clearly maintaining a contradictory position: on the one hand, it argues for a continuous education, on the other, it seems to be saying that only those individuals likely to be employed should be educated at the public expense. Given that the unemployment rates might remain high indefinitely, this suggests that only some citizens will have the right to be educated at public cost. The document argues that further education and training be explicitly viewed as part of investment strategies, with the objective to ensure that human capital development costs are treated in much the same way as physical capital investment costs (OECD, 1989:74).

Moreover, the document explicitly advocates the new skills-formation paradigm, arguing that the skills required should be conceptualised as competencies, that is, “the ability to perform tasks, the learners “can do” (OECD, 1989:35). It further states that the skills formation approach “demonstrates genuine mastery of the subject matter, that are understood by all concerned, and that are comparable with one another, against recognizably applicable qualifications” (OECD, 1989:34). Such skills should be work-related, generic, documented, and transferable (OECD, 1989:73). On the issue of the higher-order thinking skills, the document recommends that “the availability of technologies to perform routine tasks that before involved elaborate mental exercises may encourage [the promotion of] mechanical ability rather than enhanced understanding” (OECD, 1989:32). The crucial emphasis should be put on outcomes such as attitudes to innovation, team-work, and productivity (OECD, 1989:38).

In the current economic climate, the new vocational training systems clearly cannot expect further financial assistance, the document argues, claiming that the costs of further education and training thus need to be met by enterprises and individuals through loans rather than grants (OECD, 1989:73). Finally, the document recommends that the emphasis on vocational training is clearly justified, because the distinction between education and training is "blurring" (OECD, 1989:68), that it will increasingly be more difficult to discern which is which as the future labour markets will require a continuous skills adjustment of the labour force.

In summary, the educational changes proposed by the OECD document encompass the following: skills are conceptualised as competencies; competencies must be work-related, documented and transferable skills, and nationally recognised; mechanical ability to use technology is preferred to complex knowledge or understanding; skills training is to be paid for by enterprises and individuals; and outcomes such as positive attitudes to innovation, team-work, and productivity must be given priority.

In so far as the new global economic order is concerned, the OECD’s educational initiative signifies a major re-alignment of the schooling provision with the more general restructuring of the global economic enterprise and with the up-to-date requirements of the international capital.

Australian Vocational Certificate training system

The new vocational training paradigm is outlined in the Employment and Skills Formation Council’s (ESFC) document, ‘Australian Vocational Certificate Training System’ (March, 1992 [Carmichael Report]). The document is a bold statement, which recognises the inadequacy of the present model of education and training to keep up with the face of a rapidly changing labour market conditions. It proposes a tight, yet flexible training system, with multiple points of entry and exit, as part of investment strategies, with the understanding that direct public funding for education should occur only when the labour-market indicators show clearly the need for such education (OECD, 1989:48).

There are two central themes that underpin the new training paradigm: the learning process has been reworked as a process of skills acquisition, and the existing vocational division of labour has been dissolved and replaced with a unifying principle of competency-based education/training.

Even though the new training paradigm appears to have emerged as a unique consequence of an extended public debate, this article will argue that the AVO system is largely an adaptation of the globally initiated policy proposals. The next section will examine in some detail the concept of competency based skills.

PART 3: THE NEW PARADIGM

The notion of work-related educational competence underpins the thinking of all major education policy documents commissioned by the Australian Education Council (AEC), which emerged in the wake of the 1989 OECD’s education policy statement. There are, however, two key documents that deal specifically with the issue of work-related competency standards in Australian schools. These are the Report of the Australian Education Council Review Committee, Young People’s Participation in Post-compulsory Education and Training (the Finn Report), published in July, 1991, and the Mayer Committee Report, Employment-related Key Competencies: A Proposal for Consultation (the Mayer Report), published in May, 1992. Whereas the Finn Report looks specifically at the key competencies in the post-compulsory schooling, that is, from the Year 11 onwards, the Finn Report took a broader view and included in its considerations the primary and the secondary schooling years. Thus among other things it recommends that key competencies, which it expects will be employment related, be incorporated into the school curriculum from Year 4 onwards (Finn, 1991: 64), and through the key competencies present in school subject profiles from Year 1. Such approach would have further implications for the mainstream schools as well as the Australian schools will be exposed to. This article will look at this issue in more detail in the second part of this section. At the present moment, let us examine more closely on key competencies themselves.

The Mayer Report (1992) was commissioned to further explore the concept of work-related key competencies. Even though its emphasis from the outset is on employment related skills, The Mayer Report nevertheless defines competency in broad, all-inclusive terms. The key areas of competency do include critical and creative thinking, and issues related to personal moral and social development. This is, however, a well-established style employed by most governmental and corporate policy proposals throughout the 1970’s and 1980’s. Articulating educational goals, competencies and general standards in broad, all-inclusive terms serves to establish as broad a
The definition of competence

At the outset the Mayer Report (1992) has adopted a "broad definition of competence which recognises that skills are underpinned by knowledge and understanding, and that competence involves both the ability to perform in a given context and the capacity to transfer knowledge and skills to new tasks and situations" (Mayer, 1992: 4).

The Report emphasises that these capabilities should be mindful and thoughtful, and should incorporate a sense of the learner as one who builds concepts and develops understandings which inform application. The Report thus clearly claims that skills and knowledge are inseparable, but it seems to limit its definition of knowledge and understanding to a formal technical performance. It would appear that it is interested initially in the type of thinking needed either for a psycho-motor performance or for a formal application (as opposed to a performative action) of abstract skills such as collecting and organising information, for example.

Some difficulties inherent in the competency based curriculum

The relationship between a demonstrated skill and understanding which underpins the skill is a tenuous one. As we have already seen, the OECD (1989) policy document favours a focus on skills as routine tasks and mechanical ability rather than enhanced understanding. Similarly the Finn Report favours the approach based on discrete modules or units rather than knowledge and understanding per se (Finn, 1991: 57). The Carmichael Report also proposes that educational outcomes must be demonstrable, and suggests that the most suitable delivery of competence based learning is modular and self-paced. The certification of such competence is equated with a specific mix of knowledge, skills and applications (Carmichael, 1992: 24-5). These reports simply assume that understanding and knowledge somehow issue from the skill-testing situation. Yet this conflation of skills-testing and knowledge and understanding (which supposedly underpin the tested skills) might not be quite justified. The danger is precisely in the assumption that a limited number of specifically defined skills might demonstrate the presence of knowledge and understanding that supposedly underpin those skills. There are many educationalists who question the validity of that assumption.

The other difficulty that arises in the competency based approach relates to who actually determines what is to be learned. As Ashenden points out, "the outcomes defined are not the familiaris of education talk - 'understanding', 'awareness', 'grasp' and so on, but the capacity to do something" (Ashenden, 1991: 18). But more importantly, he goes on, this capacity is derived directly from a particular job, workplace or industry. In other words, it is increasingly the employers, not educationalists, who determine what is to be learned in the classroom. The point being made here is that existing employment-related skills might not often be underpinned by any more complex knowledge or understanding; the acquisition of such skills will be correspondingly beneficial of any deeper knowledge or understanding, too.

There are, of course, some obvious advantages in having small modules of skills or units of knowledge. They might provide more flexibility to students, who can thus exercise more individual choice in mixing different components of curricula. But there are also clear disadvantages. The discontinuity of development of ideas might completely break down. Consequently, even after a prolonged period of study, students might fail to penetrate deeply into any area of skill or understanding. They might acquire a number of skills, but these might allow them merely to skip over the surface of what informs those skills. This is an obvious risk of any modular curriculum.

Perhaps the most appropriate criticism of modular curriculum comes from teachers themselves. Their reaction to unitization of curriculum in Western Australia, for example, is well documented. Within the context of the present discussion, some of their major criticism was directed at the lack of continuity or depth of curriculum. This was noted in all core subjects. The general perception of teachers was that students indeed “keep skipping over the surface of what normally underpins the general knowledge skills.” Furthermore, the 10 week modules of delivery made the traditional mentor or pastoral role of teachers impossible to fulfil, to the extent that many teachers did not in fact know their students’ faces.

This latter point is important especially in the context of developing interpersonal or inter subjective competence of students. This article suggests that a modularised and competence-based curriculum might jeopardise the development of personal and interpersonal competence, because the competence-testing approach focuses on an isolated act of behaviour. The problematic of choosing one behavioural pattern (e.g., respect of other persons’ right to become equal partners in communication) and rejecting the other (e.g., using one’s own position of power to manipulate other persons in order to achieve a per locutionary [i.e., unstated] goal) is never really addressed. There simply appears a flaw in the logic of competence based curriculum. This flaw consists in the assumption that: if “general knowledge, understanding and internalisation of social and moral principles (p)” tend to produce, in a given situation, an “intersubjectively competent reaction (q)” then, conversely, an isolated learned instance of “intersubjectively competent behaviour (q)” might lead to the development of “social and moral principles (p)” underpinning such behaviour.

This is clearly a mistaken assumption, because from the proposition:

\[ p \quad \text{if} \quad q \]

all we can infer is a conclusion:

\[ q \quad \text{if} \quad p \]

that is, “if there is no intersubjectively competent behaviour then neither is there the ‘knowledge of general intersubjective/moral principles’,” but never:

\[ q \quad \text{if} \quad p \]

Key areas of competence

In defining the key areas of competence, the Mayer report adopts the recommendations of the earlier Finn Report (1991). These are as follows:

- **Language and communication** - this area includes knowledge and skills related to: speaking, listening, reading, writing, accessing and using information.

- **Using Mathematics** - i.e., computing, measurement, understanding mathematical symbols.

- **Scientific and technological understanding** - i.e., understanding technological and scientific concepts and their impact on society, scientific, technological and computing skills.

- **Cultural understanding** - i.e., understanding and knowledge of Australia’s historical, geographical, and political context, understanding of major global issues, understanding of the world of work, its importance and requirements.

- **Problem solving** - i.e., analysing, critical thinking, decision making, creative thinking, skills transfer to new context.

- **Personal and interpersonal** - i.e., personal management, planning, and career planning, negotiating and team skills, initiative and leadership, adaptability to change, self esteem, ethics.

At a first glance, the key competency areas reflect the traditional educational goals; namely, they appear to reconcile the aspect of personal growth, with social, cultural, and economic needs of a broader community. Under a closer scrutiny, however, what becomes clear is that the space for the learner to become themselves is missing – the learner is not expected to self-actualise, but to learn specific technical skills. In the Habermasian sense, the Report acknowledges only the technical knowledge. Both the emancipatory knowledge and the practical knowledge (Habermas, 1989) are ignored.

The overall emphasis in the key areas of competence is on technical managerial skills; for example, managing information, using technology, individual adaptability, and managing others. Even in the area of problem solving, which appears to emphasize critical and creative thinking, such competencies are related only to technical problem-solving. Nowhere in the document is there a suggestion that a desired educational outcome or competence might include the ability to interrogate the value judgements that underpin the social purposes of technical problem solving, team-work, or developing and using technology.

The competencies described in the report are non-personal and strongly functional. The linguistic competence is not defined in terms of critical,
creative, or reflective thinking, even though such processes are ineluctably circumscribed by the ability to use language. Rather the language competence is defined as the ability to access and use information. The Mayer Report thus seems extremely reluctant to engage dealing with competencies that might promote autonomous, socially reflective and critical thinking.

The Key Competences clearly don't pay a sufficient attention to the future potential developments in the area of moral and social principles that underpin our present thinking, our current social order. In the view of the author of this article, this is an inexcusable flaw of the competencies based approach. It is an arrogant approach as it presumes that our Australian community has reached the pinnacle of social and moral understanding, and thus the application of the currently dominant standards of social and moral behaviour needs no further interrogation.

The latter part of this article will also discuss the issue of developmental stages at a phylogenetic level. Specifically, it will consider Habermas' key competency strands which would integrate the identified key areas of competence. The point being made here is that the key competency strands define formal cognitive, creative/expressive, affective, and moral learning experiences are completely ignored.

One additional point needs to be emphasised in this respect. This article is not arguing against formal cognitive competences, such as being able to access, organize, synthesize and communicate information or factual data, for example. What is being suggested here, however, is that such formal operations need to be bolstered with a socially meaningful context, with an emphasis on the continuity rather than discontinuity of ideas and concepts. A modularised curriculum, characterised by decontextualisation and segmentation of skills, simply in itself no capacity to produce anything else but contextually limited formal cognitive skills.

If we transpose such acquired skills into the concrete life of the policy-making, one consequence of such a technical reductionist approach might be a failure to ask socially relevant questions. To use an example from the current restructuration of the State Education Ministries, I would suggest, the following and crucial question has not been addressed: How is a restructuring of the educational provision (informed by the Structural Efficiency Principle) going to affect the teachers' work and the learning of the students? Accordingly, I would like to argue that defining the problem-solving task in purely technical terms deprives any social action of its necessary contextual/social depth.

This article, therefore, disagrees with the limits imposed on the concept of "contextual learning" advocated by the Carmichael Council, which defines contextual learning as learning that is relevant to the work goals of students (July, 1992: 10-11).14

Performance levels

Performance levels describe levels in the development of competence within each of the key competency strands. The report proposes three performance levels.

There are two comments I would like to make in this respect. Firstly, the proposed levels of competence are in themselves quite trivial. For example, as a top performance in the key competency strand, Working with others in a team, the report lists an example of "being able to work effectively in a team on a multi-story building site". As a bottom, Level 1, performance, it cites the ability to "be able to serve behind a counter in a fast-food outlet."

The point that needs to be made is that the proposed performance levels might be interpreted as aiming at reducing educational achievements to a very specific basic level of education. True, at this stage it is not quite clear how much of the overall school assessment will be comprised of work-related competences. However, to the extent the student outcomes in this area are likely to become indicators of teachers' performance, it might be possible to see the future education of our children as being overwhelmingly consumed by such "educational trivia."

The second point I would like to make is related to my earlier discussion of the OECD (1989) policy proposal, the document argued that increasingly more people will be destined for a life-long career of unemployment, and that public education should be funded only to the extent that its outcomes might be useful in the labour market. At the same time, as Fisher and Mandell (1988: 52) point out, the growth in high-tech and other highly-skilled jobs in the USA will be approximately 5% of the total job growth. Most noticeable growth is predicted in such job categories as cashiers, kitchen helpers, guards and fast-food outlet operators. That is, performance Level 1 jobs. If we are to take the OECD proposal seriously, the implication is that the bulk of school-leavers might be streamed into performance Level 1 outcomes. And this is perhaps the most strikingly distinguishing feature of the new global economic order: its deliberate and manipulative streaming into discrete life-chances for the students, life-chances that might be increasingly and selectively over-determined by the wealth of individual students.

Can education be reduced to vocational training? Can the society become a function of the economic system?

Over the past decade, the educational policy discourse in Australia has been characterised by a diminishing importance of traditional educationalists and a corresponding rise in prominence of system theorists and business or other corporate bodies. My aim here is not, however, to examine the causes of why this should be so. Let it suffice that structural reasons (duly underpinned by the present economic strategy) have emerged which tend to promote a specific structurally selective bias in favour of the domestic and increasingly international capital. Educational policy reports discussed in this article bear witness to this claim. What I would like to address in this section, however, are its potential consequences for our educational system in the first instant, and for the whole society in the last.

In the previous section we have seen that the proposed vocational education/training system should be set up with the objective of work-related skills. The traditional educational values inscribed in such concepts as intellectual autonomy, realising personal and workplace-independent potential, or critical and creative thinking have been somewhat neglected in current policy proposals commissioned by the Central Governmental Agencies. It is, of course, important to acknowledge a due respect and need for vocational skills. These should be cultivated and perceived for no complex society can possibly function without a capacity to physically produce and create wealth. In this sense this article endorses the initiative taken by the Carmichael Council (July, 1992). Its orientation (i.e., its strong emphasis on training and the restructuring of the educational provision) have emerged which tend to promote a specific structurally selective bias in favour of the economic system (with respect to the educational curriculum) is, however, of some concern.

What is of a particular concern is the claim that the "distinction between education and training is blurring" (Carmichael Council, 1992). The OECD document goes even further and argues that public funding of schooling should be determined by labour market conditions, that is, by the needs of the economic system (OECD, 1989: 74). Similar sentiments are echoed in all key policy documents. Thus Carmichael (July, 1992: 10) argues that "both individual and industry needs are leading to an increasing convergence of general and vocational education." The Finn Report recommends that "in the schools sector [the need for experiential
Both Carmichael Reports (March, 1992: 17, and July, 1992) advocate a Competency Based Training System which would integrate all post-compulsory schooling such as TAFE, upper secondary and higher education, and other training bodies. Given that competencies are essentially segmented, work-related skills, based mostly on fragmented technical knowledge or understanding, such approach to education might clearly take away the social capacity for reflective, critical and individually empowering thinking.

It is with some urgency, therefore, that we need to ask: Just what might the appropriate mix of general education and vocational training be in order that the economic well-being of citizens might be sustained, and yet conditions would prevail to encourage further institutionally and individually autonomous interrogation of the existing social relations and moral principals underpinning the social arrangements? Or, conversely: Just to what extent can we allow the encroachment of the new training paradigm onto the territory of our educational systems without, at the same time, jeopardising the social and cultural developmental project of humankind?

In the next section I will address and re-conceptualise the notion of educational competence. In this I will be guided by the theory of communicative competence developed by Habermas (1970, 1979, 1984, 1989).

PART 4: EDUCATIONAL COMPETENCE RE-CONCEPTUALISED

Habermas and the theory of communicative competence

The theory of communicative competence goes far beyond the domain of linguistic and cognitive competence. It also embraces the areas of social (or intersubjective) and moral development, all of which are underpinned by the speaker’s egological (or ego-identity) development.11 Let me, firstly, draw an attention to what Habermas (Habermas, 1997: 5-6) considers a fallacious and unjustified separation of language from speech (langue vs. parole). Together, these consequences of this arbitrary separation is that, at one level, the study of language concerns itself exclusively with the study of phonetics, syntax, and semantics, totally ignoring the social implications which linguistic structures impose on the pragmatic use of the language as it is spoken. Conversely, at the pragmatic level of the analysis (i.e., psycholinguistics or sociolinguistics), the language structures are ignored, and the analysis is conducted in purely empirical terms.

The theory of communicative competence aims to redress the analytical deficiency that flows from such separation (i.e., structuralist vs. pragmatic) by bringing the two together and by showing how the linguistic structures might radically shape the utterances (spoken language) not only in the sense of language competence, but also in the sense of cognitive (e.g., What do I know and, is what I know valid?), interactional (e.g., Is the social interaction conducted on a fair and equitable basis?), and ecological (e.g., Do I allow my self-interest to dominate my social conduct?) competences. In other words, a competent communicative person is not only an accomplished user of the language, but he/she is also well-informed, and socially and morally, and psychologically mature person.

A speech act, therefore, is not only a symbolic representation of a linguistic competence but expresses at the same time the (often intangible) norms, rules, and belief systems that underpin the conditions of any social interaction. Thus a school bully might brow-beat his weaker opposition into submission because of a “shared” perception of the bully’s power; similarly an employee might feel somewhat tentative vis-a-vis his/her employer, or a school teacher might feel uneasy whose dealing with the school authorities. The distinction being made here is that between a discourse based on commonly agreed and articulated norms, assumptions, and rules, and where the goal of a social action is known to all participants (i.e., illocutionary social action), on the one hand, and a discourse guided by unofficial power-relationships which tend to privilege one participant at the expense of the other(s), and where the real goal of a social action is known only to the intended participant (i.e., perlocutionary social action).

As such, a speech act can then be analyzed in terms of illocutionary force and propositional content. (Habermas, 1972: 138). Thus, for example, utterances: “I order you to return within one hour!” or “I would appreciate if you returned within one hour!” express with varying degrees of force the two propositional contents of the utterance. Every speech act thus consists of two sentences: a dominating sentence (e.g., “I order you!”), which establishes the illocutionary force of the utterance, and a sentence of propositional content (e.g., a person is asked to return within one hour) (McCarthy, 1984: 275).

Every utterance then situates both the speaker and the listener in a world of physical and social reality. Its illocutionary aspect reveals the social relationship between the speaker and the listener; its propositional content might reveal the external or inner reality. Understood in this way, every utterance can be said to raise validity claims in at least one of the above areas. Respectively, these validity claims refer to comprehensibility, truth, appropriateness, and truthfulness.

Educational competence thus involves not only a mastery of linguistic and cognitive operations, but also a capacity to acknowledge other persons’ right to a “complete symmetry in the distribution of assertion and disputation, revelation and hiding, prescription and following among the parties, which implies that the learner is capable to interact inequality, not for the sake of proving his/her point or seeking some other personal benefit, but to search for a true understanding (or its approximation) of any given social or moral dilemma. This latter competence is more challenging for the speaker, but also a capacity to acknowledge other persons’ own validity claims. The ultimate aim of pedagogy informed by the above notion of competence is to help the learner attain this post-formal-operational stage of social/moral development, which is characterised by intellectual autonomy. This means that the learner is able to perform or fulfill his/her social and moral responsibilities independently of external sanctions or penalties.

The Competency Based Education/Training approach limits its frame of reference to work-related skills. Consequently, and perhaps quite unwittingly, it thus finds itself defining knowledge in technical terms, such as doing developmental things, or managing oneself and others. The theory of communicative action, on the other hand, recognises other than work-related or technical skills or competencies. It therefore had to go outside the technical knowledge to seek the generic foundations for such competencies, and thus came to recognize also emancipatory and practical knowledge. This knowledge might be underpinned by the humanist notion of becoming oneself, but also involves the broader area of social emancipation. It quite naturally questions the social and moral values that underpin the social structures, which, the empirical evidence might indicate, tend to block the individual emancipatory struggles. The practical knowledge can refer to the analysis of discourse procedures implicated in the maintenance or re-working of such social structures, but at the same time it embraces basically all communicative activity.

Combined, the broadly defined domain of knowledge and competencies understood as an ongoing process of becoming oneself (and thus a more mature and socially and morally more responsible person) converge to what Habermas calls an ideal speech situation. The concept of ideal speech situation is, however, only a theoretical condition and never envisaged that it might become an empirical possibility. Neither it is suggested that there might be some predetermined evolutionary pattern waiting to be discovered by humankind. It is, nevertheless, an orientation point for social action-it describes the conditions of private and institutional discourse, and it names structural obstacles to emancipatory struggles.

In the final analysis, the value claims, which are central to the process of emancipation, can be challenged or redeemed only through discourse. It is, however, possible to argue that there might be many types of qualitatively different discourses; for example, a free, authoritative, authoritarian, or liberal. Some discourses might be structured by norms that favour one participant in the discourse, whilst handicapping the other, for example. It is, therefore necessary that in an emancipatory discourse all belief systems, norms, and values be allowed to be challenged, with a proviso that all participants be given symmetrical rights to dispute and assert, and claim and redeem, with the aim of achieving consensus. The communicative action envisaged by this discourse would be such that our education system should aim to develop a capacity in the learner to take an active and competent part in such discourse. At the ontological level such developmental stage is characterized by the second stage of the Kohbergian scheme of social and moral development. The Figure 1 shows its relationship to the Kohlbergian scheme of social and moral development.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stages of consciousness</th>
<th>Idea of the good and just life</th>
<th>Sanctions/motivation</th>
<th>Communicative inter-subjectivity</th>
<th>Social action orientation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preoperational thought</td>
<td>Understand and follow behavioural expectations</td>
<td>Generalized pleasure/pain</td>
<td>Award/punishment</td>
<td>Incomplete intersubjectivity guided by concrete actions and consequences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concrete operational thought</td>
<td>Understand and follow reflexive behavioural expectations (norms) - law and order orientation</td>
<td>Culturally socialised needs - concrete morality of a customary system of norms</td>
<td>Award/punishment - shame (withdrawal of love and social recognition)</td>
<td>Incomplete intersubjectivity guided by roles and system of norms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formal operational thought</td>
<td>Social-contractual legalism - ethical principled orientation</td>
<td>Civil liberty and public welfare - moral freedom</td>
<td>Guilt (reaction of conscience)</td>
<td>Towards achieving a concrete purpose of norms, rules, power-relations relations, and social precedents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capacity to enter into an argument</td>
<td>All ethical norms rendered redeemable through discursive procedures</td>
<td>Moral and political freedom</td>
<td>Not appropriate because of natural predisposition to the ideal speech situation</td>
<td>Complete inter-subjectivity towards understanding - i.e., ideal speech situation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

With this in mind, I re-examine in Part 5, the key competency areas as outlined in the Meyer, Finn, Carmichael and Ashenden Reports, and using analytical categories developed in this section to name and describe these competences and their related validity claims.

**PART 8: COMPETENCE-BASED SKILLING vis-a-vis**

**COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE**

In Parts 3 and 4 a critique of the competency based approach to education was advanced on the following grounds: (i) its focus was on technical skills only and thus other important learning domains were neglected, (ii) its underpinning assumption that a successful isolated-skill testing necessarily indicates an existence of a deeper knowledge and understanding was found invalid, and (iii) the combination of the above makes it somewhat unlikely that such educational systems might produce “thinkers” able to reflect critically on the existing social and moral practices.

In this section I will project the preferred outcomes as articulated in the policy documents under discussion on the Habermasian scheme of communicative competence, and re-articulate their technical language in terms of the emancipatory/practical language. Figure 2 attempts to interpret the new-training-paradigm competencies in terms of the Habermas’ theory of communicative action.

**Language and knowledge**

Economic rationalism has not only introduced into our schools and social life new ways of doing things and new organizational hierarchies, but it also brought different concepts and different language. I would like to argue that the language of economic rationalism has become actively implicated in reshaping the way our society is conceptually viewing itself, and that it serves to re-legitimate the power of property rights over citizen rights.

What is the basis of my claim? It is an accepted fact that language contains elements of a conception of the world (Gramsci, 1987: 348; Giroux, 1988: 191). To become ourselves, to develop a sense of identity, we use language. As the language is thus actively involved in constructing our meanings, it effectively directs or shapes the way we conceptualise the world. As Jackson Lears argues, the language thus becomes a political player in the negotiation of power relations in a society by marking

“the boundaries of permissible discourse [and] discouraging the clarification of social alternatives, making it [then] difficult for the dispossessed to locate the source of their sense, let alone remedy it”


Grace (1989: 211,220) calls this strategy of colonising the language domain of discourse an ideological manoeuvre, arguing that in the public sphere set up by the State, the rules of educational policy discourse (and public policy in general) in a way that tends to privilege specific sectional and corporate interests while marginalising other (and especially critical-pedagogy) voices. As Triado (1984:47) observes:

The organization of the functional groups in corporatist bodies (which are designed to reduce the conflict potential between participating parties and to restrict the range of societal inputs into public policy formation), inevitably entails the marginalization of “vital areas” of social life reflecting important, at times compelling, needs of the lifeworld.

But perhaps the most damaging aspect of the new paradigm of skills formation is its understanding and treatment of knowledge. In fact, the push in the Australian educational policy towards labour market relevant education first emerged in the Williams Report (1979). Freeland describes the realignment of education as outlined in the report in following terms: “The ideological call of the early 1970's for equality, diversity, and devolution was displaced by the much more 'dry' concerns of quality, efficiency, and answerability” (Freeland, 1986: 230).
Language: There is an increasing dissonance between the hegemonic paleosymbols and public language (e.g., "devolution of power to schools" stands for "increased control by the central agency" [e.g., Angus, 1998: 5]). Corporate speak (e.g., "upgrading the stock of human capital," [OECD, 1989]) increasingly defines the way we are encouraged to think about education.

Validity claim: comprehensibility. Progressively, only concepts akin to economic rationalism are deemed valid and politically legitimate. The linguistic concepts thus become implicated in the promotion of the new "regime of truth."

Knowledge: is increasingly instrumentalised, fragmented, and modularised. Knowing and understanding is reduced to an acquisition of an appropriate mix of skills. The emphasis is on cognitive functions. Intellectual autonomy tends to cease to be a desirable educational result (outcome).

Validity claim: truth. True knowledge is work related, documented, and transferable. It must be objectively testable. It is defined as a marketable skill. Original thinking is considered valuable only in so far as it might enhance, in a pre-specified way, the system's performance. Non-hegemonic critical thinking is deemed dysfunctional.

Discourse/intersubjectivity: The agenda of policy discourse is progressively set and controlled by hegemonic forces, but a special care is taken to give an appearance of consensus. The post-Fordist "regime of truth" tends to increasingly empower those agents whose thinking skills, and orientation to success emanate from the "nodal point of economic rationalism."

Validity claim: appropriateness. The right to participate in policy discourse is determined by property, corporate standing, and ideological attitude. This selectivity of participants (stake holders) which politically structures policy discourse in order to ensure consensus, legitimates the hegemonic agenda, and delegitimizes or marginalises non-hegemonic positions.

Ego identity and moral development: Ego is systematically fragmented and commodified. Legitimate characteristics include: self-interest and self-reliance, and the capacity to adjust personal aspirations to the system's requirements. Moral development is arrested at the social-contractual level. The notion of common good either ceases to have any legitimate meaning, or the meaning is radically re-worked in such a way that it legitimates "private good" vis-a-vis "private deprivation".

Validity claim: truthfulness. Desirable attitudinal outcomes include: positive work attitude, respect for autonomy, optimistic conformism, dispositional adjustment, and a mixture of a collectivist identity, which is able to accept uncritically the system-defined priorities, and of orientation to success. Moral orientation is defined in terms of social-contractual legalism. The right to participate in policy discourse is determined by property, corporate standing, and ideological attitude. This selectivity of participants (stake holders) which politically structures policy discourse in order to ensure consensus, legitimates the hegemonic agenda, and delegitimizes or marginalises non-hegemonic positions.

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public education policy formation and directly affects three distinct levels of educational provision: (i) at a public discourse level it affects what is said about education and who has the legitimate right to make claims about it; (ii) at a teacher-training level it determines the course content and the method of intellectual inquiry; and (iii) at a classroom level it predicates the subject-matter taught and the type of interaction between students, their teachers, and administrators. The "preferred" type of communicative competence thus might directly permeate all levels of educational provision from policy formation to the classroom delivery.

Performative versus formal competence.

In Part I I suggested that at the ontological level we might be able to identify (in addition to the Kohlbergian scheme) the fourth, Argumentative stage of development. The communicative capacity embedded in achieving such stage might be, perhaps, best described as a societal, grounded reason to a universal principles.

Young (1990: 117) further argues that the children's capacity to enter into a moral argument is ontogenetically given, and that "there is no formal logical difference between a rational adult and a three year old child in this respect". What is important is that children's argumentative capacity develop in a societal context. In a classroom situation the sequential level of a child's cognitive/moral capacity to argue rationally is manifest in his/her capacity to solve societal moral problems. The key issue here in so far as pedagogy is concerned is the relationship between the level at which the child can currently solve such problems and the curricular problem level with which the child is asked to interact. In other words, the question is how can moral problems be pitched at exactly the level slightly above the child's present ability to solve these problems and below the limit beyond which the child's present capacity cannot extend.

Clearly, there are direct implications for classroom pedagogy. As Young (1990: 118) points out, only the student him/herself can ultimately "fine-tune" the actual level at which he/she might successfully perform and thus extend his/her moral capacity. The teacher's task is to provide approximate limits of the problem level. Such pedagogical practice requires a great deal of cooperative learning, whereby the student must participate in the control of teacher/learner interaction. The important point Young makes is that the learner must perceive him/herself to be at least partially control of the learning experience if he/she is to become an independent, autonomous, and critical learner.

Success in solving a moral problem in an autonomous fashion has an empowering and character-forming effect on the student. It empowers him/her in the sense of becoming less dependent on the authority's provision of moral principles. In fact, also provides epistemological grounding for a challenge to authoritative norms; and it has a character-forming effect in the sense that the implicit moral dimension of the resolved problem is internalised and the student's character is thus extended or even altered.

The situation in which the student participates in solving the problem level of his/her moral-problem learning experience, whereby he/she first explores his/her own cognitive and moral capacity to help set the moral problem in a social context and then finally succeeds in resolving the dilemma, needs to be clearly distinguished from a situation in which a problem might be given to the student without the student's participation and involvement in, firstly, establishing the appropriate problem level; and, secondly, in setting or socially contextualizing the moral problem. The latter approach appears to be flawed with respect to: (i) the failure to provide an opportunity for an emotional investment in the learning task, (ii) the student perceives the task as belonging to someone else - the moral dimension implicit in the resolution of the problem is, therefore, unlikely to be internalized by the student, and (iii) the student might perceive it not as a real challenge to his/her own capacity to autonomously and creatively resolve the dilemma, but rather as a task requiring him/her to guess what the teacher thinks is the "right" answer. The important point that needs to be made in this respect is that a moral dimension implicit in the resolution of this type cannot be executed in a coercive, non-participatory and pre-determined fashion (Young, 1990: 118).

Miller's insights into the ontogenetically marked problem-solving capacity of children, and especially its relation to fostering children's rational autonomy, have direct implications for school curriculum and classroom pedagogy. In Young's words:

If it is possible to devise a curriculum which does not simply ignore the problem levels at which children are capable of operating, it must provide opportunities for the student's reasoning to be enhanced and to be used in their development, allowing for respect for and preservation of children's rational autonomy, can we justify not doing so, or setting for a curriculum based on heteronomy?

(Young, 1990: 118)

Most importantly, the distinction Young is making is that between a formal moral capacity to comprehend and argue, which is derived from formal skills such as being able to identify the main ideas, ... paraphrase them, ... record them [and] sort out information from fact and to ensure that they do not allow their own personal opinions or assumptions to prevent them from comprehending information being presented

(Querc, 1985: 70)

and which thus remains in a very real sense an abstract and non-participative exercise of cognitive faculties, from a performative moral capacity, which is born out of a personal intellectual struggle of discovery, a struggle that involves the child and might discern the moral implications of teaching/learning interaction, but, most importantly, also the normative and expressive dimensions.

My argument is that the latter fosters the child's capacity to enter into a rational moral or social argument with an orientation towards reaching understanding and with a capacity to acknowledge which owns errors, an attitude likely to inspire a type of sharing of reasons and of moral argumentation, stipulates that a capacity to reflect and defend one's own capacities, or, in the Habermasian sense, in the direction of idealized communicative competence. Clearly, such capacity or competence cannot be conceptualised as objective data, in the positivist sense. Instead, it needs to be understood as a personality dimension of the child and, consequently, the post-Fordist pedagogy recognizes it only when the principles of autonomous and participative learning are used, and third Miller's insights into the ontogenetically bound sequential developments in the learner's capacity to socially and morally mature.

The concept of performative moral capacity as discussed above, I believe, corresponds to Habermas' concept of communicative competence. Clearly, such capacity or competence cannot be conceptualised as objective data, in the positivist sense. Instead, it needs to be understood as a personality dimension of the child and, consequently, the post-Fordist pedagogy recognizes it only when the principles of autonomous and participative learning are used, and third Miller's insights into the ontogenetically bound sequential developments in the learner's capacity to socially and morally mature.
development of future generations to a specific social and moral developmental level. The implications of Miller’s insights into how pedagogical principles might affect our children’s moral development, therefore, reach far beyond the classroom door.

CONCLUSION

This article recognises the need for our educational system to develop mechanisms through which it might become more responsive to the labour markets’ requirements. In this respect, but with some notable reservations, it endorses the Carmichael Reports’ (March and July, 1992) initiative to develop a comprehensive educational and training system in Australia. However, this article identifies several areas within the “preferred” competency-based training approach, which is to underpin the new educational/training system, that are of a particular concern. Among these are the most critical limitations identified, more than the notion that a tested skill does represent a deeper knowledge, that educational goals can be collapsed into labour-market relevant skills, and that the CBT approach fails to acknowledge (contrary to its ostensible rhetoric) other than technical domains of learning. This article further suggests that one likely outcome of the new training paradigm, should it be implemented as it is proposed in the documents discussed, might be the loss of our capacity to reflect critically on our social and institutional practices. Lastly, the article suggests that the CBT approach might result in a further fragmentation of our societal moral fibre, with possible disastrous ramifications for the social cohesion of our community.

Given that the critical points raised do not provide particularly new insights into the problematic of the CBT, yet are being consistently ignored by the policy-makers, it is, perhaps, time for a more substantive critique precisely of the power-base underpinning the selectivity procedures which tend to steer the policy formation process in a seemingly predetermined direction. It is for this reason, that in their struggle to understand the current changes in the Australian educational provision, the teachers and teacher educators need to locate these changes within the political economic terrain of educational policy formation. This article was aiming to encourage such a move.

ENDNOTES

1. This article is based on a paper presented at the National Conference of the Philosophy of Education Society of Australasia, Perth, 24-28 September, 1992.

2. That is, the structures designed to support the current economic strategy. In the area of education such re-working of structures supporting accumulation involves the restructuring of state education departments, and higher and post-secondary education along the requirements of the structural productivity principle, for example. As part of the overall economic strategy, the restructuring of education has three major goals: (i) provide cost-effective education and training, (ii) supply labour-market-specific outcomes, and (iii) minimize and marginalize the critique of the new economic regime. For further reading on structures supporting accumulation see Gordon (1980), and Soucek (1992, especially Chapters 2 and 5).

3. For example, short-term interest rates are at present the only remaining monetary policy instrument the Australian government has at its disposal (Phillips, 1992: 17).


5. This phrase refers to the structural correspondence between the requirements of a capital accumulation strategy and the State Central Agencies’ organizational structures and decision-making principles designed to support the capital accumulation process. It is also referred to as structural isomorphism (see Hargreaves and Reynolds [1989], Chapter 1).

6. AVC level 2 equates with, for example, full-time study to Year 12 + a vocational year at TAFE + six months structured training and work experience.

7. For examples of this see Soucek, 1992, Chapter 6.

8. See the section, Performative vs. formal competence, in this article.

9. See, for example, R. Linke’s commentary in Education now (ABC tapes), broadcast 5 Dec., 1991.

10. For further discussion of this topic see Soucek (Winter/1992); Robertson and Soucek (March, 1991); and The Ministerial Taskforce Report (Nov., 1990).

11. Modus Ponens and Modus Tollens, respectively, are basic rules of logical inference.

12. I am referring to the Freudian notion of using the ontogenetic development (i.e., development of an individual being) as a basis for interpreting the development of the species. For more on this subject see, for example, H. Marcuse (1973), especially pp. 55-67.

13. The Carmichael Council suggests that learning should be based on an application of theoretical knowledge in real life situations. However, from the above discussion it would appear that the Key Competencies curriculum does not have the capacity to deal with theoretical knowledge at a more complex level.

14. The term “ecological development” refers to the development of “ego identity”. In other words, it refers to the developmental stage of “rule competence” and “moral consciousness”.

15. Identified and discussed by Piven and Cloward (1982).

16. OECD’s major decisions are taken by the Economic Policy Committee, consisting of economic officials and heads of central banks. The purpose of the organization: to achieve the highest sustainable economic growth, ... maintain financial stability and to contribute to the development of the world economy...[is] to be achieved by liberalizing international trade and capital movements.” (Encyclopedia Britannica, 1981; Encyclopedia Americana, 1984.)

17. The point made here is that it is precisely the capacity to make one’s own values and assumptions problematic which distinguishes the communicative competence from the type of competence proposed by the new skills-formation paradigm.

REFERENCES


