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Developing Capable And Competent Employees In The 21st Century – Who Controls The Agenda?

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Abstract

The training agenda in Australia has been dominated by the competency movement since the technical and higher education reforms took place in the late 80's and early 90's. This also applies in many other countries with similar employment relations and training systems. Training is highly regulated in these contexts and tradeoffs negotiated between various governments and the major players in the area has allowed certain stakeholders to exercise considerable power over the curricula and the delivery processes. The arbitrary application of the competency framework has centralised and homogenised training options available to employers and employees alike. That centralisation has led to a bureaucratic entanglement which often does not meet requirements of either party.

The adoption of competencies has also impacted on the higher education sector by tightening the interface between training for competency and the broader aims of education for capability. However, the use of competencies as the basis for curriculum development, assessment and accreditation has enabled key groups to control the national training agenda. For these and other more positive reasons it is recommended that higher level training curricula should be based on capabilities, which are defined to include competencies. As well, it is recommended that there be greater freedom for employers and employees to strike more suitable agreements in relation to training and education, still within an official framework but not arbitrarily controlled by other entities not directly affected by the agreement. A case study and industry examples are used to demonstrate the impact of the system on the training agenda and to demonstrate how this may be improved.

Introduction

In the negotiation of employment contracts and agreements, human resource development issues are of mutual concern to the employer and employee. Ideally, the employer and employee would negotiate appropriate working arrangements to meet the employer's requirements, and the employee's expectations. They should also be able to engage in relatively unencumbered negotiations so as to specify rewards and changes to rewards which would match changes in roles and responsibilities resulting from the proposed staff development. However, this is not the case – at least not in Australia and other countries with similar regimented and restrictive training and education agendas dominated by the proponents of the competency paradigm (see for example Weightman, 1994, Prais and Wagner, 1988). Arguments will be presented here to move the training and development agenda forward from the overly regulated competency based paradigm towards one based on the more appropriate open ended and institutionally unconstrained concept of capability.

Recent history of the development of the training and development agenda in Australia

In the last quarter of the 20th century the Australian Higher Education and Training systems were subjected to a radical realignment of policies and structures. The Hawke Labor government of the time together with the Australian Council of Trade Unions embarked on a series of initiatives to integrate higher education and training with workplace and industrial needs. A fundamental part of this process involved the identification of what was considered the essential outcomes of training courses, which were referred to as core competencies. This applied especially to courses provided by TAFE but it also impacted in time on higher education and all private industry training courses. These were well intentioned moves as it was identified that the training agenda was fragmented, did not allow articulation of training achievements from one employer to another or from one training provider to another, was uncoordinated even across individual industries, and essentially did not meet Australian industry needs at a national level. The first moves were to set down guidelines which were then implemented through requirements placed on Commonwealth funded institutions, and encouraged participation of others through the provision of funds targeted at the setting up of powerful Industry Training Advisory Boards (ITAB's), and the development of competencies as the basis for curricula and assessment. The conditions set down for receiving this funding was that the processes had to involve all industry, trade and professional stakeholders. This included - reasonably at the time, but somewhat unfortunately as subsequent events were to show - the trade unions, industry groups and traditional training providers.

It was not long before the discussion and argument about the validity of particular competencies had moved past the semantic to a more substantive treatment. Certification and recognition of competencies became more than the pedagogical building block, rather, they were tools in a test of strength and a battle for territory. For example the recognition of competencies was often an issue in the negotiation of wage increases or the claim for Recognition for Prior Learning (RPL) and applications for advanced standing into tertiary institutions. It was not long before it was recognised by the higher education sector that specific competencies needed to be matched by capability. However, the

traditional training sector (TAFE and private providers in key industries) remained ambivalent and have not yet moved to introduce the concept of capability where competencies limit broader educational outcomes.

In the post-Dawkins era (1987 on) the realignment of industry, TAFE and universities resulted in competencies being applied across all areas of the training and education curriculum with the regulatory bodies acting as gatekeepers. Universities were joined by TAFE and private providers as official self accrediting institutions. However to oversee this self-regulation, a powerful machinery of compliance was established. These included:

- National Training Board (NTB)
- Employment and Skills Formation Council (ESFC)
- Australian National Training Authority (ANTA),
- Standards and Curriculum Council (SCC)
- Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF)
- Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA).
- Australian Education Systems Officials Committee (AESOC)

Reference to the web sites for these various entities will quickly demonstrate the complexity of the regulatory systems, and the authoritative nature of their operations. The intention that these systems would control the post secondary education and training agenda was made clear in the various official documents and reports which emerged. For example a major enquiry chaired by the Labor appointed trade union executive member Laurie Carmichael, resulted in the Carmichael Report (Carmichael, 1992) which used the term 'competency' in two separate ways. Firstly in the standard use as a "key area of competence which is curriculum related", and secondly in the context of competency levels as in those set down in the Australian Standards Framework. With this latter concept the intention was explicit, "eventually the entire Australian workforce from production workers to professors will be placed in the eight ASF levels." (Vanderfeen, 1992, p. 60).

The key principles of the training agenda reform which came into effect in 1995 are essentially the same today. All training was to be competency based and all competencies were determined for each industry area by representative groups selected for the purpose and established as ITAB's. The units of competence having been defined by industry, are then "nationally recognised and form the basis of training for that specific industry" (National Training Industry Services, 2004). Training organizations wishing to provide training in a particular industry then were required to use the competencies as set down for the specific award in the specific industry. What is more significant is that if the training was not based on these competencies then they would not be recognised in any official way. This meant that staff would not be promoted if they had not received training based on the appropriate competencies, employers would not fund training which was not based on the acquisition of officially sanctioned competencies, other training organizations especially TAFE would not recognise qualifications which were gained using curricula which were not sanctioned by the relevant authorities. Universities were encouraged to use RPL and Competency certificates as the basis for applications for advanced standing. As will be indicated later even advertising by training providers was (and still is) controlled in this system.

As time has progressed all training providers issuing certificates must be registered training organizations, and these organisations are listed by the NTIS and have been categorised according to their role(s). Some are providers of training, whilst others provide training materials. As is now stated on the web site:

Those organisations listed as providers of training have satisfied the national criteria for provision of services and have been registered by a State/Territory Training Authority.

Registered training organisations provide students with training that results in qualifications and statements of attainment that are recognised and accepted by industry and other registered training organisations throughout Australia. (NTIS, 2004)

Situation now

In keeping with the nature of a regulatory regime, various key stakeholders have emerged to control the training agenda. In particular the union movement saw both threats and opportunities in the system. By accepting or rejecting training arrangements in their workplace agreements, unions could wield considerable power over their members and ultimately over employers. As an example, when the Department of Defence in the mid 1990s attempted to introduce a Graduate Diploma program as a required course for their contract staff, it was rejected by the union who argued that it was unreasonable to require their members to attain tertiary education for employment which had not previously required this. The response of the Department of Defence was to acquiesce to the union's demands and to repackage the same content as an Advanced Managed Program, based on competencies, which was then accepted by the unions. This was clearly to the disadvantage of the Department of Defence who needed to up-skill their staff to professional level and in the long term to the disadvantage of the staff members who were prevented from having their careers moved from clerical to professional level. Similarly, in certain industries, for example mining and resources especially where shift work is common, employers were concerned about the demands on employees' time and the costs of accreditation. With the development of curriculum and assessment instruments it was deemed advisable to have union representation

on the curriculum committees. Unfortunately this membership introduced a conservative influence over the training agenda often to the long-term disadvantage of the employees' skill levels and even the industry capability.

Industry bodies, through the ITAB's, could influence, and in some cases determine, the competencies in their industry, so that claims for wage increases based on the (now low) levels of skill attained would not be justified. Finally, through membership on boards various major players such as TAFE colleges have been able to protect their position by limiting the entry of new players into the labour market training programs. In particular the involvement of TAFE staff as auditors in the process of determining registered training organisations has frustrated suitable applicants. Further the requirements to maintain the status of RTO have made it virtually impossible for new entrants with anything other than standard programs meeting standard competencies to become registered and to maintain that registration. This means that organizations with particular needs are forced to accept the current providers of training and the current training curriculum even if it does not meet their needs. They are at the behest of existing RTO's who may often have no other qualification other than that their systems meet the RTO standards. In order to understand how this occurs it is necessary to consider how the Australian system operates ie how the Australian Qualifications Training Framework (AQTF) operates.

Operation of the Australian Qualifications Training Framework (AQTF) standards and legal requirements

The operation of the AQTF involves a number of key controls. These are based on a set of standards which must be complied with and which provide the basis upon which a training organisation can operate. An organisation wishing to become involved in training must become a Registered Training Organisation (RTO). For this to happen an independent audit is carried out by appointed auditors. Without the status of an RTO, training organisations cannot issue any formal certification (Certificates, Advanced Diplomas etc) for accredited courses. This is an Australian wide system which has been agreed to by all state and territory governments and the federal government. Achieving RTO status can be quite expensive and onerous. The recent experience of a Queensland Government department highlights just how difficult this can be. This department applied and attempted judiciously to demonstrate that the department met the requirements for RTO status. After an inspection process, the appointed auditor reported that there were non-conformances. Despite considerable effort to comply and to remove non-conformances, the department was informed that they were still unsuccessful. On enquiring what options they now had they were told they would need to apply to the magistrate's court for a review of the decision. This department is involved in innovative, internationally acclaimed training for over 5000 staff members over a four year period. At no time did the department in question believe that their systems were in any way deficient. Many of the requests of the auditor were considered trivial or inconsequential to the quality of the training product. Further, the decision appeared to be the responsibility of one person - the auditor.

RTO accredited, organisations need to comply with the *Vocational Education, Training and Employment Act 2000* which is both expensive and onerous. These include requirements to document all processes and to keep extensive records of all participants, the courses offered and the certificates issued. There are regular audits of the systems and their application. The major failing of this system is that there is no audit of the content of the courses, nor of the relevance of the training to the needs of the individuals or their organisations. Audits purport to deal with the 'quality and integrity of vocational education and training', however they merely examine the processes which are documented. What happens in practice is deemed to be appropriate providing the documentation is approved. Advertising by training organisations is controlled and standards are set down in a number of areas including the *Vocational Education, Training and Employment Act 2000*, the AQTF standards for RTO's and the Nationally Recognised Training (NRT) logo specifications. There is also a guide for marketing and issuing of qualifications for RTO's and non-RTO's. Annual service fees are payable and penalties apply for non-compliance. (AQTF, 2004)

Effect of the regulatory systems

The key stakeholders in the labour market-place have understood that controlling the competencies and the training is critical. The system, through its regulatory nature allows this to happen and in a sense because of the mandatory requirements makes change difficult. More importantly, the arbitrary application of competencies stifles developments outside the existing industry and educational institutions' arrangements. This has led to highly specific training for reproduction at the expense of education for broader capability, that is education for reconstruction and renewal.

Competencies have become both a source of inspiration for those in technical disciplines where behavioural outcomes are more easily measured and frustration for those areas of the curriculum dealing in more abstract knowledge and practice. As universities began competing with TAFE for students the use of competencies broadened. Universities were encouraged to meet industry standards and specify their curriculum in terms of competencies. This has proven to be cumbersome. While the intention of the use of the term competency is to be all encompassing, ultimately it comes down to specification of those skills or that knowledge which can be measured in an observable manner. In attempting to specify curricula in terms of competencies, universities either end up with programs which are so detailed and complex as to be impractical to teach and assess except in on-the-job settings.

Case study on the innovative use of capabilities

The competency based training model is effective for technical activities, but not a practical basis for curriculum in more complex areas which rely on higher order abstract and cross-disciplinary knowledge. More importantly the regulatory systems which have been set up to control the development and use of competency based curriculum is cumbersome and restrictive, especially for the recognition and adoption of innovative practices. This applies also to areas of training which have become more complex and demanding because industry changes have been difficult to accommodate.

Queensland Purchasing training provides a case study of our argument. Queensland Purchasing is a division of the Department of Public Works with responsibility for the implementation and support of the State Purchasing Policy, including all training and development for some 14 000 staff involved in purchasing throughout the State. A new Purchasing Policy was introduced in 2000 which recommended a major change in the practices and principles which had been utilised in Government Purchasing in Queensland and in fact throughout Australia (Dooley and Tonkin,2003). An assessment of available curricula and RTO's showed these to be totally inadequate. There was a limited curriculum and no units to cover emerging areas of practice. Furthermore, the trainers owned the registered materials, demanded significant payment for their use, and were unwilling to modify them as it is an expensive and bureaucratic process. The existing competencies for purchasing training were based on practices and principles which Queensland Purchasing judged to be outmoded and inadequate for the required staff development. (Dooley and Tonkin,2003).

Hence, in 1999 with the advent of a new purchasing policy, Queensland Purchasing developed a complete training and development system. This was an eight level certification system for purchasing officers with curriculum for all eight levels based on capabilities which were more appropriate for their requirements. While these capabilities were in turn based on competencies, they went further and spelt out the requirements that Queensland Purchasing required to implement the new Policy. The individual capabilities were established through a combination of training and education designed to develop specific competencies, and to provide desired educational experiences reinforced and supported through experience gained in the work place. Complete training and educational programs were provided to support the eight certification levels for purchasing staff. The eight levels aligned with the Australian Standards Framework. Training programs for Levels 1 –4 are essentially the same as the existing four levels of training which are currently accredited. Based on an independent analysis of the competencies covered in the training curricula, accreditation for the modified training programs has been sought and has been granted from the Public Sector Education and Training Authority (PSETA). Accreditation of training/education for levels 5 –8 has been established through use of existing university Diplomas, Advanced Diplomas, Degrees and Postgraduate qualifications.

Examining the concepts of Competency and Capability

Based on the problems of the competency based system and the machinery outlined above, a fresh approach is necessary. This approach is centred on a progressive development of curricula which will be based on capabilities as opposed to a system based solely on competencies.

A generally accepted definition of competence is:

'The attributes(knowledge, skill, attitudes) which enable an individual or group to perform a role or set of tasks to an appropriate level or grade of quality or achievement (ie an appropriate standard) and thus make the individual or group competent in that role.'

Similarly competency may be defined as:

'A combination of attributes of varying complexity underlying some aspect of competent performance; the ability to perform certain tasks or activities.'

Note that the focus is on tasks and/or activities. These are generally concrete, observable and often involve physical activity and the transformation of goods or provision of services which are almost always accompanied by tangible components. There is often immediate results and immediate feedback is also normally possible.

Capability is defined very generally as:

Ability, power; the condition of being capable

Capable in turn is defined as

1. Competent, able gifted. 2. Having the ability or fitness or necessary quality for ...
(Australian Concise Oxford Dictionary, 1999, p 189)

Regardless of the formal word definition, the practical use of the word 'capability' is seen to "encompass both 'competence' and 'capacity' and represents a broader concept than 'competence'". (Hase et al, 1998)

Used in the context of the workplace an individual may be recognised as possessing a specific capability to carry out a task or tasks, and/or successfully complete a process, and/or to fulfil an obligation, and/or to meet a requirement. Note

the combination of requirements is possible and that the activity may be non-physical, may not have any tangible results and the results may not be observable for some time after the tasks and/or activities have been carried out. The development of capability will be based on a combination of acquiring of a competency, or a number of competencies, the successful completion of a specific educational process, together with gaining necessary appropriate experience. The concept of capability is more complex and involves a combination of skills and/or knowledge, and/or attitudes which are developed through similarly complex processes. Yet the use of the term is totally compatible with competency and may be competency based, however it goes further than competency. To some extent capability deals with the impossible task of determining whether a person can be deemed to be able to carry out a role where it is impossible to test them adequately. To overcome this problem, capability focuses on the long term outcome. This is not to preclude a grander use of the term. For example, the view expressed by Rutherford (1995, p.5) is

The idea of competency in the workplace extends beyond the ability to employ skills needed on the job. It includes the ability to perform a whole range of activities in a specific occupational or vocational area, transfer skills and knowledge to new situations, and to manage a wide variety of tasks within the job.

Unfortunately the systems which have been developed while attempting to deal with the problems of complexity and non-testability have been bogged down in a quagmire of rules and regulations which may be appropriate when dealing with simple observable tasks but which quickly become unworkable when applied to the specification of abstract and complex tasks and activities. Even if it was possible to spell out the myriad competences required for complex tasks and activities, it would be difficult and expensive to implement within a tightly controlled and regulated training environment. Where this does occur (for example, training of airline pilots or surgeons), the training systems are expensive and thoroughly time consuming. This was the problem confronted by Queensland Purchasing which was solved by using the term 'capability' as the building block for the complete curriculum.

The use of capabilities as the basis of certification levels

As industry becomes more complex and more competitive and organizations realise that they will only survive if they develop and maintain capabilities which provide them with a purpose and/or a competitive edge, the specific tasks of training and the innovative role of education will become ever more important. Organisations must be free and able to develop capable staff.

Capable people are those who know how to learn; are creative; have a high degree of self-efficacy; can apply competencies in a novel as well as familiar situations' and work well with others' In comparison to competency, which involves the acquisition of knowledge and skills, capability is a holistic attribute. (Hase, 2000)

This argument is presented from the view point of the organisation requiring its staff to be trained to meet both its immediate *and* emerging requirements. Employees need to be both competent and capable. This is the desired outcome of any training and/or education provided. Unfortunately, with the concentration on specific individual competencies there is no guarantee that competencies will translate into capability. At its most simple level, competency based training has become 'competencies' based training, the attainment or recognition of a collection of competencies. It was for this reason that Queensland Purchasing shifted its focus to capabilities.

The problems with competencies

Arguments have been developed to focus on capabilities and not simply on competencies. (see for example Ashworth and Saxton, 1990). Some of these criticisms relate to the use of competencies rather than the competency model itself (see for example Arden, 1998). These include:

- the focus of competencies is on relatively low level skills
- difficulty in expressing higher level skill requirements
- lack of attention is paid to attributes such as team work
- difficulty in expressing complex attributes in terms of competencies
- difficulty in assessing higher level skill requirements
- emphasis on objective measurement as opposed to subjective judgement
- emphasis on observable assessment as opposed to judgement based on intuitive assessment
- difficulty of assessing work performance in a holistic way
- problems associated with giving learners unlimited time

Some industries have taken a narrow view of competence and this has led to an over emphasis on measurable performance at the expense of attributes such as cooperation, communication and independent decision making. Phelps (2003) has researched the area of developing computer capabilities and has presented an argument detailing the use of capabilities to overcome the inadequacy of the competency based approach. Also, participants in training who are declared competent may not remain competent unless they revisit the learning outcomes after being assessed. Achieving

competence can be reduced to the attainment of certification rather than to capacity to perform tasks, or carry out processes in the work place, particularly in new, foreign or irregular environments.

Other attempts to resolve the dilemma

Some have identified the problems of competency based training and development but persevered with the basic unit of competency (see for example Roger and Lindsay, 1997). Others (Townsend Cairns, 2003) have opted to move beyond competency. Other examples include

- the Australian Public Service a framework for managing learning and development in the APS has been developed and the title of this is 'Building Capability'.

Further under the heading of capability acquired the topics of 'knowledge, skills, competency' are listed. The thrust of the evaluation must be to ensure that the training and development meets the required 'agency capability'. Furthermore under the heading 'capability acquired' it asks – 'did the individual and therefore the agency gain the required capability, knowledge, attitude or competency'. (APSC, 2004)

- an organisation referred to as the Capability Network has developed what is referred to as the 'People Capability Maturity Model'. This People Capability Maturity Model (People CMM)

consists of five maturity levels that establish successive foundations for continuously improving individual competencies, developing effective teams, motivating improved performance, and shaping the workforce the organization needs to accomplish its future business plans. Each maturity level is a well-defined evolutionary plateau that institutionalises new capabilities for developing the organization's workforce. (SEI, 2004)

This model is based on the premise that the main outcome of training should be the organisational capabilities as developed in the individual and these capabilities in turn are based on 'individual competencies'.

- the QUT law school has evaluated the content of its programs and attempted to set down all the requirements of their courses. The study focused on the 'graduate attributes' which were to be inculcated into the students as they progressed through their studies. Further elaboration stated that, "They are qualities that also prepare graduates as agents for social good in an unknown future and are called generic capabilities." (Kift, 2003)

Conclusion

The problems with competencies can be resolved by the judicious use of capabilities. Whether the move to use capabilities as well as competencies is seen as a paradigm shift or simply a significant expansion in the training and development agenda will become evident over time. In those countries which have restrictive training regimes, the proposed changes are significant and in the authors' view urgently needed.

The major issues centre around three main themes. Firstly that the use of competencies as the basis of all training, with the inherent focus on skills and technical knowledge, limits the outcomes, especially for higher education and emerging fields of knowledge and practice. Secondly, the way that the regulatory training and development systems have developed by governments have led to rigid and complex structures at variance with an ever changing world. Thirdly, the way that various parties with entrenched interests have used (or even abused) the competency based training system leaves some with no option but to move outside the current system to meet their current and emerging needs. In light of the above difficulties, capabilities should be accepted as an alternative component in the specification of higher level learning and training curricula, especially in areas which can not be adequately described and specified in terms of competencies. A less rigid qualifications framework system needs to be set in place which allows organizations to be more flexible in specifying their training and development requirements. As a simple variation it could be recommended that the AQTF framework be modified with Vocational qualifications generally based on competencies and the Educational or Professional column generally based on capabilities. Finally it is recommended that in many circumstances, training and development should be based on the needs of the organisation not on the industry in that each organisation should have the right to determine its training and development requirements and to specify those in a way that meets its own particular requirements. After all it is the responsibility of the individual organisation to develop its organisational capabilities in order to remain competitive if in the private sector and/or to fulfil its mission if operating in the public or not-for-profit sector.

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