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What counts as a competency in the arts?

Abstract: The national curriculum is built out of top-down discrete profile statements to guide assessment through eight separate levels. The educational worth of quality, autonomy and understanding necessary to a competent surgeon or a creative understanding of the visual arts cannot be broken down scientifically into countable or accountable skills, knowledge or products. Assessment of competencies can only take place through a collaborative narrative which connects human understandings and reasons for acting.

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For many children assessment means enduring a form of mental and emotional derangement, the morbid exchange of a warm, living experience for a cold, dead reckoning. Accountability in education has to be rescued from the accountants - mere reckoning must make way for the lively exchange of human insight and intuition.

(Ross et al, 1993, p.168)

Why was the National Curriculum rejected by the states?

The Finn Review of Postcompulsory Education and Training had the potential to introduce a reform of higher education as significant as the Martin Report of 1964 or the Whitlam Report of 1974. It set out to improve education and training for all school leavers, to converge vocational and general education so as to provide a skilled and knowledgeable workforce, and to treat investment in education and training as an essential element. It set out to achieve the following:

- By the year 2001, 95% of all 19 year olds should have completed year 12 or other post-school education and training.
- All young people should have completed studies in a specified set of employment related Key Competencies and National Curriculum Principles.
- Flexible pathways and credit recognition were to be built into integrated employment and educational settings.
- Education and training were to be closely tied into competency and skills formation award requirements.
- TAFE was to be expanded to achieve these ends, with significant increases in TAFE funding.

But while most Australian states are still working quietly on adopting its underlying principles for their own state frameworks, in July this year they rejected its implementation

through a national curriculum. Perhaps the reasons for its rejection were purely political, as Beazley suggested. I suggest that there were assumptions built into the national framework that were inimical to teachers' perceptions of education, and recognition of those assumptions persuaded those closer to the classrooms than Canberra to reject it.

I will focus my remarks on one area, the visual arts, that seemed to support the national framework for fear of being excluded from it if they did not meet its requirements. Many arts educators were vehemently opposed to it. I will argue that their opposition was largely based on a perception that the necessary educational components of quality, autonomy and understanding could not be counted in the form of assessment of competencies required by the national profiles.

Competere and computare

Etymology has always fascinated me. The changing meanings of words reflect the changing world views of societies which otherwise would remain invisible. Look at the origins of 'competency', for example. It comes from the Latin *com-petere*, meaning literally "to seek together". That would seem to make it an appropriate goal for education. For that is what education is ideally about, students and teachers seeking the truth together. But the same word is also the root of competition, and has since the seventeenth century meant sufficiency of qualification, capacity. In today's jargon, and certainly in the Mayer and Finn formulation of competencies, 'competency' is used to mean suitable, fit, proper, answering the requirements of the case, sufficient in amount quality or degree, properly qualified. But its history is still embedded in its meaning and the inherent contradictions in seeking truth together and competing for places and jobs in the community may well lead to an internal division which makes the competency-based national curriculum unworkable in practice.

When we ask what counts as a competency in any area, we are not only asking for the criteria which allow a skill or knowledge to be placed in the framework of competencies. Indeed our understanding of what counts involves similar tensions as those of competency. 'Counting' comes to us through Middle English and French (*compter*) which in turn comes from a Latin verb *com-putare* (to consider together). When we count something we tell over it one by one so as to ascertain the number of individuals in a collection, we reckon up.

The etymology of a word does not provide an argument for or against competencies or counting. But, like Foucault's

archaeologies of sexuality, discipline and punishment, our awareness of past customs makes us aware of the constraints of our current perspectives. The Western Australian Ministry of Education had had a strong commitment to the development of student outcome statements that made teachers and students accountable well before its involvement in the collaborative work on a national curriculum. Student outcome statements describe eight levels of achievement attained by students as they progress from K to 10 in eight curriculum areas. The draft Mayer key competencies, intended to apply to students in Years 11 and 12, are currently being considered together by more than 300 school administrators and educators in this state. The views of administrators are of more worth than those of teachers because competency statements are tools to assist teachers in planning and assessment. So CURASS in its wisdom has decided that if we are to determine whether students are fit to enter the workplace, if they are to be deemed qualified to leave school, their competencies shall have been considered together, that is placed into a framework of discrete parts in which each part shall be counted. The outcome statements are countable, that is, to make them accountable, to give them any power, they have to be countable.

The effort of dividing the arts curriculum into discrete and countable units resulted in much debate about the best way to separate strand organisers. But because counting comes from considering together, it also has another sense which includes values. What counts isn't just what can be divided or added up. In that sense, what counts cannot be divided up, because one's notion of quality is what informs the divisions.

In the arts the need to be accountable and countable required a focus on art forms as symbol systems - constructed sets of meanings embedded in historical social and cultural contexts.

While the writers of the National Curriculum claim that the profile for the arts has no one theoretical approach underlying it, they do consistently omit the role of artistic creativity to reconstruct and change those very cultural values presented through art history and current art practices. This is understandable if the outcomes have to reach a nationally prescribed standard. By what standards can one judge an outcome that changes those same standards? So creativity, the essential reforming impulse in the arts, becomes redefined as "exploring and developing ideas", using imagination and "an awareness of aesthetic considerations." (CC, 1993, p.8). At level 2, this creativity is reduced to "using combinations of colours to create different effects in printmaking, painting or drawing " (CC, 1993, p.29) At level 8, the students show

competency in visual arts if they can "integrate technical and structural elements in an imaginative, skilful and coherent way to make art works", "design and make works in clay, wood, glass or metal that reflect a knowledge of Australian domestic design." Even the expressive aspects were valued "for their capacity to enhance life for aesthetic or felt experience"(CC, 1993, p.4) rather than their place in constructing personal meaning.

Creating, making and presenting concentrates on the surface qualities of making things, rather than its meaningful aspects of revising our existing culture. Art as revisionary, or the means by which students create personal meaning, is a goal that is invisible in the framework. Creativity appears from the profile statements to have more to do with simply expressing, or recombining. The framework of values that treats education as a means to national productivity will also define students as a means to that end rather than autonomous human beings.

Why quality and cultural understanding don't count

The general reaction against the national curriculum as a competency framework has largely hinged around the problem that what the bureaucrats want to count in the mathematical sense is not considered worthwhile by teachers, and many educators. This is echoed by many of the critics of the national curriculum statements. The preoccupation with useful and countable outcomes (the "yardstick mentality") of the key competency proposals ignores the fundamental processes of teaching and learning which aim at quality understanding. Mathematicians have said that the implementation of certain of these documents would lead to a dramatic lowering of the standards of mathematics education in the country's schools (Education Monitor, Spring 1993, p.9) The Studies of Society and Environment documents subordinate knowledge to "concepts, skills and learning techniques, and that they are unduly influenced by 'politically correct' causes rather than educational values"(Education Monitor, Spring, 1993, p.1).

Leonie Kramer is only one of many vocal critics of the National Curriculum. She speaks of the disquiet among teacher and university teachers about the quality of the national statements. She cites the current attempts to establish national curriculum statements, and to institute key competency assessment and so-called contextual learning as examples of the misapplication of theory, and of faith in assumptions which will not stand close inspection.

It might be argued that a university-led complaint about quality will beg the question. Yet it was not that the competencies shifted away from the traditional knowledge enshrined in universities to TAFE workskills that was unsettling these critics. The notion of competencies need not exclude professional

knowledge. A competent surgeon or a competent bricklayer both need knowledge to inform their actions. The problem is not the

basence of knowledge from competencies, but the functionalist approach which tries to find evidence for competencies in products and visible skills.

If we want to see if a surgeon is competent, for example, we can watch him/her remove an appendix. But we don't look at the neatness of the cut to determine that competence. The appendix in the jar isn't sufficient evidence of competence either, even if it is swollen and diseased. We need to know how much suffering it was causing or would have caused to its former owner, and how well the patient is as a consequence of the operation, that is, the reasons the surgeon had for removing it. But even that doesn't help us. If the patient dies two months later from lung cancer, the surgeon's skill has not demonstrated his competence. Evidence for competence does not lie on the surface, in the skills, the knowledge or the products. It relies on the way these are connected, and seeing the connections requires interpretation of human intentions and reasons.

The notion of accountability has inbuilt into it a notion of evidence. What is evidence of a student's competence in the visual arts? We see the surgeon as competent because of real events in the world that show him to be so, but they are events and not behaviour, that is they require us to infer a meaning behind them. Certain things happen in the operating theatre or in the classroom that are defined as successful or competent because of the situation they take place in. So it doesn't make sense to talk of removing an appendix competently if it's done with no reason at a drunken party.

A student's use of discarded materials may indicate that student's financial status rather than an understanding of Klippel's aesthetic considerations for discarded materials (CC, p. 87), but the reasons for using discarded materials is crucial to making a judgement of his or her competence. It is the surgeon's understanding of why it was important to remove that appendix like that that makes his actions competent or incompetent. It is how the student understands the connections between the discrete components of the levels that will make the difference between competence and incompetence. And that understanding cannot be reduced to behaviour, skills or products.

We can't look at behaviour, or even products of student learning as if they were simply caused by a teacher's action. The problem with competency frameworks is that they presume scientifically

clean causal links between national goals and student outcomes. We don't want to deny that what a teacher does is unimportant to a child's education. It's just that what counts as a cause is already defined by a whole set of values and expectations, a frame of looking too. It's just like what counts as a competency. It's not a matter of a cause being there or not to be measured. It's not a matter of truth. It's a matter of interpretation. And interpretation requires holistic values and beliefs.

Finn's seven key competencies cover language and communication, mathematics, scientific and technological understanding, cultural understanding, problem-solving and personal and interpersonal skills. Dame Leonie was particularly alarmed that Mayer removed cultural competencies. He has since repeated his point that cultural understanding is not a competency. Is that because it cannot be discretely assessed? Playing the counting game for accountability means focussing on the separate items rather than the connections students or teachers make between them.

Understanding one's culture is impossible without understanding

beliefs, contexts, intentions. It goes beyond causal connections. Arts had to fight for a place in the national curriculum. But in achieving that place it may have had to sacrifice cultural understanding, creativity, and quality for a more visible and functional reality which evades beliefs and intentions. How for instance is one to decide if a student has reached cultural understanding, if at level 7 that student displays historical knowledge by comparing and contrasting characteristics such as style, themes, purposes and content in the arts"? (CC, 1993, p.9). If we don't separate out knowledge, products and skills, we cannot count them. And if we do separate them out, we cannot arrive at understanding, which is what really counts.

Autonomy, purposes and principles

The writers of the national curriculum were accused of concentrating on the competencies needed in the world of work as if it excluded human purposes, values and intentions. Defenders of the National Curriculum pointed out that the competencies were based not only on steps to be passed in the developmental framework, but they were there to meet the broad educational principles that teachers themselves drew up at the Hobart Declaration, the principles of access, participation, confidence and commitment, excellence and diversity. But appealing to those broad principles will not in itself foster general acceptance of the competencies. It's as difficult to disagree with these broad principles as it is to find fault with democracy and motherhood. Anyone can agree with concepts at that level. It's like agreeing that democracy and motherhood are good. It's when you try to

translate them into competencies that have to be met that the real tensions surface.

The very notion of national competencies, national standards and other national regulatory bodies cuts across the idea of seeking knowledge together, of autonomy of the teacher which the devolution from State ministries had in theory supported. As the competencies stand, they mean less autonomy, more central direction, more standardisation of education and training around Australia. Each student becomes reduced to one means to national ends. The Canberra bureaucrats insist that they are simply stating the learning outcomes and leaving teachers free to get children to those outcomes in whatever way they want. That doesn't count as working together with real commitment to individual autonomy.

Assessment and autonomy

One healthy consequence of the move away from university-centred exams to TAFE-centred skills has been a shift away from assessing simply in terms of learned content, the acquisition and rehearsal of facts. The emphasis on objectivity-focussed assessment has still however focussed teachers on the outcomes, whether they are products or skills. Hence the concentration on a portfolio or visual diary in the assessment of art education. The product or artefact is viewed from a number of perspectives and informed judgements made by 'experts' on the quality of the artwork. There is still left implicit and inaccessible to scrutiny and/or observation the subjective intention and inner emotional and cognitive struggle that makes up the creative process.

Mayer took pains to insist that his proposal for key competencies were open for further consultation and discussion, but by administrators and educators rather than by teachers and students. Administrators were to carry out research to see whether the framework of competencies improved skills in schools or not and gradually refine them where necessary so that they captured more accurately what standards students were qualified to meet. It still seemed to many that even if the Procrustean

bed was potentially adaptable to the needs of the population at large, many individual students would still not want to lie on it. Generalisations about student competencies do not fit easily, especially in the arts.

Doug Boughton (1992) was critical of the reforms because even when Mayer explicitly included knowledge and understanding as well as skill he still depended on operationalised competencies. Any statement that is precise enough to describe levels of achievement in one set of possibilities will exclude more than it

includes. Boughton expressed a hope that research in schools would reveal this inadequacy, but research presumes the very counting and imposition of theory that Boughton himself described as magisterial and non-educational. The theories we have about education are only the embodiments of our practical wisdom concerning the behaviour of people; they are not the precursors of any strict scientific laws of a future economic or psychological theory, There are none to be had (Davidson, 1980,p.219, 274).

In any human enquiry known laws do not follow confirmable empirical generalisations, and hope for their systematic refinement is vain. The subsequent behaviour of an agent gives rise to refinements and revisions of our estimate of the competency of students. The familiar generalisations connecting reasons with actions remain immune, another feature setting them apart from inductively conformable empirical generalisations. The giving of a reason for any action is not causal in a lawlike way. It is explanatory because it shows what the action contributes to the agent's life as a rational animal, that is, a person who pursues his own projects informed by his own beliefs, memories and expectations.

Assessment, while we are in an etymological mood, comes from the Latin *ad-sedere* - to sit down together. In the arts there has always been concern that three-hours' drawing of a still life or writing essays on art history somehow miss the point of art lessons. But even more so do marking against a prescribed framework of exemplars which are said to act as pointers to development.

There has been an international move away from equating assessment with simple testing and, through testing, selection, which the competency framework seemed to ignore. It is an integral part of teaching and learning in the classroom. Teachers discuss with pupils, guide their work, ask and answer questions, observe, encourage, challenge, help and focus. In addition, they mark and review written work and other outcomes. And more and more one of the key values of education is seen as helping children to think for themselves. Both research and assessment within predetermined parameters deny this goal. For that reason Ross et al promote radically different methods of assessment, involving student-teacher talk and reflective conversation which can allow the teacher access to the values and beliefs of students.

It is time to return to the origins of competencies, counting and assessment. *computere* to consider together, *competere* to seek together and *adsedere*, to sit down together. If competencies are to be defined as intentional action rather than trained

behaviour, we are going to have to engage the commitment of students and understand their reasons for acting. If we are going to decide what skills and competencies children should have at any level in school, we are going to have to engage the commitment of the students to meeting the standards of the national profiles as well as the administrators and educators.

Brown makes much the same point when he points out (1992, p.45) that the sort of education in which teachers and students sit together, seek together, consider together, involves collaborative action, action which is unified by the commitment of the cooperating parties to a common goal. Trust within collaboration does not depend necessarily upon idealised notions of cooperative spirit such as friendship, or upon common beliefs. Two groups antagonistic to each other may still be able to collaborate effectively if appropriately "committed to the same enterprise". But dialectical collaboration begins with the ethical presumption of not treating students as means to an end, and with ethical considerations of at least a participatory and vocal equality which was absent when the Key Learning Areas were defined in the National Curriculum. Students are not pawns in a grand master plan, but if they are to participate competently in a community, they must be encouraged in schools to develop a reasoned critique of the standards by which they are assessed. Brown presents collaborative frameworks for visual art education and Ross et al present case studies in which that assessment in an ethical community of inquiry is possible through narrative. An ongoing renegotiation of quality creates the autonomy without which the understanding necessary for competencies is impossible.

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