

ESTABLISHING ADULT BASIC EDUCATION TEACHER COMPETENCIES - A CASE STUDY FOR ALL TEACHING?

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1. THE CURRENT SITUATION ON COMPETENCY ANALYSIS AND THE PROFESSIONS

Many professions in Australia are well down the path of adopting competency-based standards. Already pharmacy and nursing have done so, while architecture, engineering, dietetics, occupational therapy, veterinary science, physiotherapy and others are in the process of doing so. Recent policy developments at both the international (GATT) and national levels (Special State Premiers' Conference on qualifications recognition) will encourage other professions to do the same. GATT's major agenda for the 1990s is to free up the trade in professional services, so as to enable qualified competent professionals to practise worldwide. In Australia similar moves are occurring, including the initiatives by the States to institute uniform recognition of qualifications and competency standards nationwide.

Of course the fact that other professions are engaged in developing competency standards is not of itself sufficient reason for teaching in general, or adult basic education teaching in particular, to do so. There are however significant advantages in adopting competency standards. These include:

- Maintenance of professional standards.

Competency standards provide explicit statements of what people need to be able to do to practice successfully as a professional. Both entry to and progress within the profession are able to be based on more objective and valid criteria than currently exist. This can raise morale within the profession, as the standards encourage practitioners to think of the range and variety of their work in a fresh light.

- Basis for Professional Development

In addition to helping Universities plan initial teacher education courses, competency standards would aid a profession in planning continuing education courses and individuals in planning their career development.

Whether the suggested benefits actually occur, however, will depend on the way professional competence is conceptualised and how the competency standards are used.

Historically the competency movement has close ties with the more general behaviourist movement which influenced education in the 1960's and 70's. This influence is still strong in the competency-based analysis of trades and middle level occupations which is characterised by a desire to develop lists of tasks and sub-tasks which can be measured by the use of a

checklist.

Whether this approach is valid for the trades is a moot point but it is clearly not suitable for teaching. It is based on the premise that there is a standard or 'best way' of performing tasks or roles. Teaching, by contrast, is distinguished by its complexity and by legitimate differences of opinion about both its aims and what constitutes appropriate practice.

A second way of looking at professional competence is in terms of the general attributes of the practitioner that are crucial to the effective performance of professional tasks. In doing so, this approach highlights the higher levels competencies neglected by the first approach, things such as problem solving, communication and so on. The weakness of this approach is that it neglects the context in which these competencies are applied. A general problem solving capacity, as measured by a critical thinking test for example, might say little about how well teachers solve the problems faced in their work.

A third approach seeks to integrate the best of the two previous approaches. The aim is to identify areas of professional practice in which it is essential to demonstrate competence and then to analyse these in terms of the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed by the practitioner. This approach provides a balance between specific and higher level competencies and enables a valid and cost effective assessment procedure to be developed. It is particularly useful for professional development since it is amenable to the setting of different levels of competence in performing the same tasks and roles.

2. PREVIOUS COMPETENCY ANALYSIS OF TEACHING

The first approach to conceptualising professional competence (discussed above), inspired by behaviourism, viewed a profession as a series of discrete, immediately observable tasks. It was found to have serious limitations. That such an approach is totally inappropriate for professions like teaching is evidenced by repeated failures in the USA this century of attempts to define it as a long series of technical tasks. The best known of these was CBTE. The failure of CBTE has been widely documented, e.g. Short, 1984; Haney et al., 1987; Simons and Elliott, 1989. Major weaknesses included the assumption that all teachers would carry out a given task in the same way. In practice there is usually a variety of ways to carry out the task satisfactorily. Also, by concentrating on discrete pieces of knowledge and skill, CBTE only dealt with fairly superficial aspects of teaching, whilst ignoring the holistic way in which such knowledge and skill is integrated and coordinated in actual professional teaching practice.

3. APPLYING THE INTEGRATED APPROACH TO ADULT BASIC EDUCATION TEACHING

A promising approach to the establishment of the competencies for Adult Basic Education (hereafter ABE) teachers is suggested by the third approach

discussed above. The authors have been funded by the ILY Secretariat to undertake a study based on this approach in 1991/2.

ABE teachers provide innovative and flexible quality literacy and numeracy programs to:

- people before they enter employment, education and training;
- people during employment, education and training;
- people wanting to function more effectively as members of society.

ABE programs focus on achieving the objectives of individual students and take place in a very diverse range of contexts. ABE teachers also provide consultancy services and training to community agencies, employers and educators, and promote literacy and numeracy generally.

In the study being undertaken by the authors, the competencies of ABE teachers are being identified and validated, and appropriate standards and cues set, by the following main steps:

1. Functional Analysis modified by the researchers to include attributes of competent practitioners, plus initial writing of standards and cues. This requires a series of workshops facilitated by the researchers and 8 or 9 experienced, classroom practitioners and ABE teacher educators drawn nationally so as to represent the variety of contexts in which ABE takes place. Functional Analysis focusses on the key purposes of the ABE teacher's role and delineates what needs to happen for these key purposes to be achieved. (See, e.g. Mansfield, 1989; Miller, 1989) Our experience has been that standard functional analysis by itself is not adequate for professional work. The modifications that we have developed ensure that professional attributes as well as tasks are central to the analysis.

2. Critical Incident techniques to verify and refine the competencies, standards and cues produced in step 1. This requires interviews by the researchers with (say) 20 experienced, classroom practitioners not involved in step 1, and subsequent analysis of the interview data. Critical Incident techniques standardly focus on the attributes that enable successful resolution of significant professional dilemmas / problem situations. In this case the questions used are developed by reference to the results of step 1. The transcriptions of the interviews will be examined and verified by the participants.

3. Further verification and refinement of the competencies, standards and cues by comparison with pre-existing data such as duty statements, curricula for ABE professional courses and the like.

4. Further verification and refinement of the competencies, standards and cues by observation of ABE teachers in the classroom. The framework for conducting the observations will focus on what 'good' teachers do in the classroom, including the strategies and methodologies for promoting cognitive development.

4. RATIONALE FOR THIS COMBINATION OF ACTIVITIES

Our approach to identifying competencies and developing standards and cues is based on analysis combining carefully selected actual work tasks and attributes of the ABE teacher. As defined earlier, attributes, such as the capacity to think critically or show initiative, underlie competence and are usually difficult to directly observe. Nevertheless they are important in professional (and other) work. In essence this approach allows for the complexity of professional work while focusing on actual work contexts.

The main benefits of this approach are that it delivers a manageable and assessable set of competencies (a previous major project, developing competency standards for the profession of Dietetics, resulted in 8 major units (or competency areas) and about 30 elements (or competencies)). Our expectation for ABE teaching is a similar sized or slightly larger set of competencies.

The combination of the three nominated techniques (modified Functional Analysis, Critical Incidents, Observation) has been carefully chosen to control for the limitations each of them has if used in isolation. (See Gonczi et al., 1990, Section 6, for discussion of the importance of such controls).

5. EXPECTED OUTCOMES

The outcomes of the ABE teacher competency analysis will be:

1. A competency profile for ABE teachers which consists of about 7 or so units (or competency areas), each with a set of the elements that constitute the competency.
2. A set of standards for each element. The standards are detailed descriptions plus cues that would enable trained ABE assessors to judge whether a candidate meets the standard. (The need to properly train assessors is obviously an important issue here). As is appropriate for teaching, the standards will allow for more than one "correct" or acceptable way to perform many professional tasks. Hence the importance of the cues. (See Gonczi et al., 1990, Section 5 and Masters and McCurry, 1990). Both standards and cues will be drafted after the modified Functional Analysis step and revised and refined during the remaining steps. Subsequent experience in their use will lead to continuous refinement by the ABE teaching profession.
3. The resulting set of competencies, standards and cues for a good, competent ABE teacher would be readily amenable to later development for different levels if so desired. That is, competencies for other levels such as entry level teacher, advanced skills teacher, etc. could be established. This could be adapted to cover, for example, volunteer tutors.
4. The resulting set of competencies, standards and cues for a good,

competent ABE teacher will be the focus of a published report for ABE practitioners. This report will detail what a competency profile is, how it can be used to benefit the profession, how it was developed and how it will be further refined and updated with use.

5. A Forum/ Conference on the report and research findings and their implications for ABE practitioners will be organised. Speakers from around Australia, including academics, TAFE and community ABE teachers, AMES teachers, Board of Adult Education representatives, etc. will be invited. The Proceedings of the Forum/ Conference will be published.

6. While not falling within the current project brief, it is anticipated that the research results will be of major significance for the initial preparation and continuing education needs of ABE teachers. The researchers will present papers on their results at suitable ABE forums, conferences, etc. If further funding was available a special conference on the curriculum and assessment implications for ABE teacher preparation could be organised.

Overall we are confident that this project will yield a forward looking set of competency-based standards that will have great potential to enhance the professional development of the ABE teaching community.

6. SOME IMPORTANT ISSUES

(a) Purpose of the project.

After discussion with participants at the first workshop and consultation with the ABE community, it was recommended that this project should focus on ways to help teachers by identifying what good teachers do as a band of competencies. As a guide the project focus is on a good experienced teacher who lies somewhere between novice and expert. Hence the competency analysis will assist staff development, career planning, course development, etc.

(b) Audiences.

The final report will be particularly addressed to:

1. The International Literacy Year Secretariat who commissioned it.
2. Practitioners and program managers in ABE.
3. Bureaucrats whose responsibilities include ABE.

(c) Definitions.

For the purposes of this project, the ABE teacher includes:

1. the classroom practitioner;
2. those in other contexts than classrooms;
3. head teachers of ABE.

(d) Contexts

A continuing question is whether there are any contexts so different that they cannot be incorporated into a general set of competencies (e.g.

community, workplace, country)?

If there are inherently different contexts, to what extent do we need separate competencies? There may be some common elements, and some elements specific to a context.

(e) Numeracy

Is this a sub-set, like ESL, disability? Is numeracy integral to literacy? Participants have viewed this project as an opportunity to articulate this issue.

7. PROGRESS SO FAR

The project is at about the halfway stage, hence the following is subject to revision. So far modified functional analysis has resulted in the following key purpose, units (or areas of competence) and elements (or competencies). Also shown are draft standards (or performance criteria) for two of the elements.

KEY PURPOSE OF ABE TEACHING:

To enable adults to identify and meet literacy/numeracy goals for vocational, educational and social purposes.

UNITS (draft)

1. Teaching and Learning Approaches and Practices.
2. Selection and Placement of Students.
3. Managing Learning Situations.
4. Monitoring Student Progress.
5. Representing and Planning.
6. Continuing Professional Development.
7. Evaluation of Programs.

UNIT 1 TEACHING AND LEARNING APPROACHES AND PRACTICES

ELEMENTS:

1. Apply knowledge of theory of language and language learning to develop literacy and numeracy skills.
2. Apply knowledge of the development of mathematical concepts to develop numeracy skills.
3. Incorporate adult learning principles into professional practice.
4. Use a variety of teaching strategies to develop literacy and numeracy skills.

DRAFT STANDARD FOR 3. Incorporate adult learning principles into professional practice:

In any ABE situation, the competent ABE teacher will:

*Promote independence and self-direction in the learner.

*Model ways of learning and using language.

*Challenge students to expand their learning horizons at the same time as meeting students' expressed immediate needs.

*Acknowledge and incorporate the experiences that adults bring to the classroom into learning activities.

*Use the classroom dynamic to reflect mutual respect between teacher and student.

DRAFT CUES: (These are things to look for as a guide on whether the standard is being met)

1. Makes allowances within the program for students' commitments outside of the classroom.
2. Texts used are related to needs and interests of students.
3. Adapts lesson plan to incorporate students' immediate concerns.
4. Models use of dictionary, shows students that the teacher does not always know how to spell, etc.
5. Encourages critical thinking by challenging students.
6. Points out other useful resources.
7. Adapts future session plans on basis of students' interests.

UNIT 2: SELECTION AND PLACEMENT OF STUDENTS

ELEMENTS

1. In selecting students, take into account social context, individual's needs and goals, and government / institutional policies.
2. Interview and assess students.
3. In consultation with students, place or refer.
4. Establish a documentation system to ensure orderly and consistent progress of students and to satisfy institution and government departments.
5. Conduct needs analysis and literacy audits as appropriate.

DRAFT STANDARD FOR 2. Interview and assess students:

In interviewing and assessing students, the competent ABE teacher will:

* Use interview techniques which draw out relevant information, inform students of a variety of possibilities, set students at ease and negotiate a joint decision. As well the teacher will continually reappraise information throughout the interview and set aside prior

judgements.

*Recognise students' expressed immediate needs and future needs and take into account the cultural context of the interviewees.

* Use assessment tools and procedures based on a theory of language which views language learning as occurring in purposeful, meaning-centred tasks.

UNIT 3: MANAGING LEARNING SITUATIONS.

ELEMENTS

1. Develop a workable curriculum framework compatible with the goals of student, group, and the program.
2. Manage time, space and resources to maximise educational outcomes.
3. Modify program in the light of changing circumstances and changing student needs.
4. Place and refer as appropriate to learning situation.

UNIT 4: Monitoring Student Progress.

Elements

1. Use wide variety of assessment methods and select appropriate methods in different contexts.
2. Follow, track and modify an individual's program on the basis of the results of the monitoring program.
3. Document student's program in ways intelligible to students and supervisors.
4. Reflect on own practice following monitoring/evaluation of students and programs and ensure appropriate and timely exit/articulation of students.

UNIT 5: Representing and Planning.

Elements

1. Raise awareness, consult and negotiate with a range of agencies with a view to planning literacy programs.
2. Discuss with college/workplace/unions in respect of a literacy program and help to develop management plans.

3. Participate in staff meetings and committees, and represent literacy issues and students.
4. Prepare budget, prioritise funds and allocate resources.
5. Identify funding sources, and write submissions for funds.

UNIT 6: CONTINUING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT.

ELEMENTS

1. Keep up-to-date with political and educational issues which form the context of ABE.
2. Reflect on personal strengths and weaknesses as an ABE teacher and be prepared to act to change practice.
3. Be actively involved in continuing professional education and contribute to the field of ABE.

UNIT 7: EVALUATION OF PROGRAMS.

ELEMENTS

1. Critically analyse current theory and practice.
2. Critically appraise models of evaluation to select and incorporate appropriate evaluation strategies.
3. Use evaluations to continually plan and develop programs.
4. Report to relevant audiences.

Conclusion

This paper has briefly reported the overall rationale and progress of a research project to establish competency standards for Adult Basic Education teaching. The approach used is quite different from the task analysis approach which has typically been favoured for competency analysis in the past. This project seeks to identify areas of professional practice in which it is essential for the teacher to demonstrate competence and then to analyse these in terms of the knowledge, skills and attitudes required. The emphasis is on the combination of carefully chosen methods that can be used to progressively develop, refine and validate a manageable and usable set of professional competencies, standards and cues. To the extent that this approach works for ABE teaching, the authors think that it would be equally applicable to other kinds of teaching.

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