Conceptualising the Key Competencies

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How to Think of Competence and Competencies

There are various possible ways of thinking about competence. As the
Australian experience with competency standards has grown, it has
become very clear that the so-called 'integrated' view of competence is
the one that best meets the overall requirements of both education and
the workplace (see, e.g. Hager, Athanasou & Gonczi 1994, Part 1).
According to the 'integrated' conception of competence, competence is
conceptualised in terms of knowledge, abilities, skills and attitudes
displayed in the context of a carefully chosen set of realistic
occupational tasks which are of an appropriate level of generality.
Such an integration of attributes with tasks of an appropriate level of
generality accords with the root meaning of the term 'competence'. This
approach to competence seeks to link general attributes to the context
in which these attributes will be employed.

Thus, a competency is defined as a complex combination of attributes
(knowledge, attitudes, and skills) that underpins some aspect of
occupational performance.

A feature of this integrated approach is that it avoids the problem of
a myriad of tasks by selecting key tasks or elements that are central
to the practice of the occupation. The main attributes that are
required for the competent performance of these key tasks or elements
are then identified. When both of these are integrated to produce
competency standards, the results capture the holistic richness of the
practice of an occupation, including such things as professional
judgement. This approach also allows for there being more than one
appropriate response in a given situation, as well as for the framing
of unique responses to changing contexts.

Some important implications flow from the integrated definition of
competence:

(a) Performance is what is directly observable, whereas competence is
not directly observable, rather it is inferred from performance. This
is why competencies were defined as combinations of attributes that
underlie successful performance.
(b) Both attributes of the performer and performance on elements or key occupational tasks are essential ingredients of the above definition of competence. This means that attributes of individuals do not in themselves constitute competence. Nor is competence the mere performance of a series of tasks. Rather, the notion of competence integrates attributes with performance. According to this integrated conception, competence incorporates knowledge, skills and attitudes displayed in the context of a carefully chosen set of realistic occupational tasks or elements which are of an appropriate level of generality.

Since integrated competency standards are based on the idea that competence is a construct which is not directly observable, but rather is inferred from successful performance, it is clear that performance will be important for assessment in many cases. Some of the competency standards, however, will be less easily assessed through performance than others. Equally important will be the requirement that sufficient evidence be gathered to justify the inference. While evidence from performance will be important to assessment, it often will be supplemented by other types of evidence. This is particularly the case with a complex knowledge base which may not be able to be inferred from performance.

What is a Key Competency on the Integrated Approach to Competence?

The key competencies are thought to be generic in the sense that they underpin (and facilitate) the acquisition of more specific competencies. The preceding discussion of the integrated definition of competence suggests some important points about these key competencies:

1. Since performance is what is directly observable, whereas competence is not directly observable, possession of the key competencies will be inferred from performance of some kind rather than directly observed. Thus is the key competencies, like all competencies, are combinations of attributes that underlie successful performance.

2. As noted above, both attributes of the performer and performance on elements or key occupational tasks are essential ingredients of the integrated definition of competence. According to this integrated conception, competence incorporates knowledge, skills and attitudes displayed in the context of a carefully chosen set of realistic occupational tasks or elements which are of an appropriate level of generality. Thus, the key competencies should not be thought of as discrete, free-floating entities. Rather they will always be embedded in a context. So, for example, someone will not be able to demonstrate that they possess the problem solving key competency in the abstract. Rather, they will demonstrate the capacity to solve particular problems in particular contexts. Thus, the issue of the range and types of
problems that need to be solved in order to demonstrate possession of this key competency becomes important. The different forms that key competencies take in different workplace contexts has now been confirmed by both Australian (Gonczi et al 1995, Hager et al 1996) and overseas (Stasz et al 1996) research. The Australian research found, amongst other things, that different combinations of key competencies are required in different industries and occupations. Also, that the customer service industries, in contrast to other industries studied, seemed to require a wider range of the key competencies. Stasz et al concluded that:

....whereas generic skills and dispositions are identifiable in all jobs, their specific characteristics and importance vary among jobs. The characteristics of problem solving, teamwork, communication, and disposition are related to job demands, which in turn depend on the purpose of the work, the tasks that constitute the job, the organisation of the work, and other aspects of the work context. (1996, p. 102)

Clearly, the contextual nature of the key competencies will also be a crucial consideration for their role in schooling.

3. It has been very common to think of the key competencies as discrete independent skills each to be taught and assessed singly. This type of thinking has apparently been encouraged by acquaintance with the psychological literature on transfer with its emphasis on minimising and controlling variables. However, a consideration of the role of key competencies in workplaces suggests that when any significant unit of work is considered the key competencies occur in complex clusters along with other more specific competencies. This relationship between relatively specific work skills and generic skills (key competencies) is not generally understood. However, when significant work activities are considered they typically feature both specific work skills and key competencies (usually more than one) as well as aspects of the particular work context. Thus, work contexts integrate specific skills and key competencies.

Why is this relatively simple point so little understood? There are, no doubt, various reasons. One reason is a prevailing myth that key competencies are free floating entities that only need to be described and taught in isolation. On this erroneous view, key competencies take on a life of their own and people simply have to learn them in isolation and then transfer them to new situations. In reality the key competencies are more holistic. Another reason for the lack of understanding of the key competencies is the propensity to favour specific skills descriptions when analysing work. This reliance on very narrow descriptions of specific skills makes it seem an 'objective' fact that such skills are independent of the key competencies. However,
as recent research projects repeatedly found (Gonczi et al 1995, Hager et al 1996), specific skills are deployed in a context which typically changes somewhat from client to client, from order to order, from case to case. The requirement that skilled work take into account changing context is, on its own, usually enough to bring the key competencies into play. Thus work is seldom as narrow as task-based competency standards might suggest. Any significant unit of work activity can be seen as embodying simultaneously both specific skills and several of the key competencies.

Hence the conclusion that the key competencies are far from being 'optional extras' in workplace learning and training. If these activities are being carried out well then they will automatically incorporate and contextualise at least some of the key competencies. Although it is acknowledged that schooling is different in important ways from workplace learning and training, a proper understanding of the role of the key competencies in the workplace might be suggestive for thinking about their appropriate role in schooling. Could it be, for example, that all that is required in schools is some change in the emphasis of teaching and assessment practices rather than the drastic changes that some have feared?

4. It is important that the acquisition of proficiency in the key competencies needs to be seen as a developmental process stretching over a substantial part of the life span. When trainees/apprentices start their employment with a firm, their participation is peripheral and they are seen as only partly legitimate members of that enterprise. The more that trainees/apprentices become full participants in the social and technical world of the enterprise the higher the level of the key competencies that they exhibit in their work performance. Thus from the early years of schooling and before, learners can be expected to be in situations in which they would be acquiring some basic proficiency in deploying at least some of the key competencies, e.g. using household microelectronic technology. One outcome of a sound education would be a growing capacity to deploy successfully the key competencies in an increasingly diverse range of situations and contexts.

This suggests that the development of the key competencies should become gradually more integrated and holistic as young people move through schooling. The idea is that sound performance in very many of life's situations centres on successful deployment of suitable combinations of key competencies. Such a staged development of the key competencies would facilitate students' transition to work and other post-school activities.

It is crucial that the key competencies should be thought of more broadly than in terms of just school and work. These competencies
represent a basis for lifelong learning in all kinds of life situations. Rather than being viewed as discrete skills that people learn to transfer, the key competencies should be seen as learnt capacities to handle an increasing variety of diverse situations. Thus transfer becomes more a growth in confidence and adaptability as learners experience ever more success in their deployment of the key competencies to a range of situations. To put it another way, perhaps it is not so much the key competencies that transfer, as growing understanding of how to deal with different contexts. In this way, non-work experiences can benefit workplace performance and vice versa.

Conclusion

The Australian key competencies are each underpinned by various combinations of attributes (knowledge, skills both cognitive and non-cognitive, and attitudes). Which combination of these various attributes occurs in a given example of a key competency being exercised depends very much on the particular context. So it is difficult to say much that is general about the attributes that underpin the key competencies. It is also notable that the breadth and scope of these key competencies may not be the same in each case.

Some common problems to avoid in conceptualising the key competencies are:

Overemphasis of knowledge

For example, the foundational knowledge debate. The key competencies integrate various sorts of knowledge with skills and attitudes/values. Thus the standard assumption that education is primarily about knowledge has difficulty with the key competencies.

Winchester has proposed a somewhat different way of thinking about this point. Winchester points out, quite correctly, that confusion about competencies occurs when people mix up three logically distinct categories: performance, the process of learning to perform, and the attributes that underpin performance. Or, in classroom terms, the outcomes of learning (or, more accurately, student performance on assessment tasks), processes of learning and assessment, and various inputs such as curriculum, ideas, etc.

Atomistic assumptions

For example, the levels debate. By focussing on level of attainment of a single discrete key competency, we lose sight of the fact that context makes all the difference. Also that in real contexts, the key competencies occur in clusters rather than singly.

Decontextualising the key competencies
This creates, for example, the foundational knowledge difficulty. Foundational knowledge only makes sense once contexts are specified.

Also the levels debate illustrates this problem. Levels are specified in a decontextualised way. But the main point is how to combine the key competencies in appropriate ways, rather than increase proficiency in a linear way in single discrete key competencies.

Also, there is the mistaken view that the key competencies in themselves are learning outcomes. Strictly speaking, they only become outcomes when the context is specified.

References


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