

Speaking of *Competence*: Toward a Cross-translation for Human Resource Development (HRD) and Continuing Professional Education (CPE)

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This paper compares and contrasts literature on competence that resides in the disciplines of HRD and CPE. Definitions, Purposes, Assessments and Achievements related to the competence conceptual framework are examined for contextual cues and connections between theory and practice in an effort to contribute to greater dialog and interdisciplinary collaboration.

Keywords: Competence, Interdisciplinary, Theory to Practice

Problem and Context

Although researchers and practitioners often lament the dearth of sound theory-to-practice connections in workplace-based HRD and CPE, many of the words used to signify concepts, constructs, and principles become embedded in the language of practice with remarkable agility. *Competence* is such a term, found in both HRD and CPE literatures, generally indicating a desirable state, but the various forms of the word (competent, competencies, competently) and their meanings do not translate well across disciplinary boundaries. Further, the once distinct purposes, goals, and contexts of CPE and HRD have blurred. As Cervero (2000) noted, more CPE is provided in the workplace than through any other venue and at least 25% of the American workforce claims membership in the professions (p. 3). There is a pressing need for HRD professionals and CPE program planners to speak the same language because, in many settings, their roles are now combined. Accordingly, this paper seeks to begin a cross-translation of the term *competence*. We borrow the phrase, cross-translation, from researchers who develop instruments for cross-cultural applications; it means more than matching forward and back translations and encompasses processes leading to meaning making, such as historical analyses of literatures in their originally situated contexts, e.g., HRD and CPE (Brislin, Lonner, and Thorndike, 1993). Moreover, Norris (1991) noted, “As tacit understandings of the word [*competence*] have been overtaken by the need to define precisely and operationalise concepts, the practical has become shrouded in theoretical confusion and the apparently simple has become profoundly complicated” (p. 332).

Theoretical Framework

There is a move afoot in both the CPE and the HRD research communities, and interest on the part of frustrated professionals in both domains, to develop a more interdisciplinary perspective. This project contributes to an emerging dialog, which began at the AHRD Preconference on CPE in 2001. This paper builds on the work of Daley and Bierma (2002) that explored connections and intersections of CPE and HRD. In their extensive literature review they found no “theoretical analyses of the concepts, principles, and theories that underlie and support each of these two specialties within adult education [in an integrated fashion]” (p. 1). Further, they noted that although adult learning theory underlies programmatic responses, “distinct differences [were found] in the purposes of the educational offerings, the view of the participant as a professional or employee, the outcomes achieved, and in the emphasis on revenue generation and cost benefit” (p.1). In this sense, our inquiry is lacking a readily identifiable theoretical framework in that it is asking epistemological questions regarding the relationship between the realities of evolving practice in two fields, which appear to be merging, and existing theoretical descriptions.

If we think about the situated nature of various terms in these two literatures as philosophical problems for applied fields, then we can begin to think about their aims in relationship to their context, the accompanying teaching-learning dilemmas, and program development issues and problems – all highly relevant issues for practitioners, stemming from theory that has not kept pace with changes in practice.

A perplexing problem, particularly in practice, is the varied cultural connotations of the term, *competence*.

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Drawing on the work of Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1998), Cseh (2003) recently discussed the dilemma of “achievement versus ascription” (p.30). That is: To what degree is competence defined by cultural literacy including various group identities such as race, gender, age, class (ascription), and to what degree is it defined by demonstrable behaviors in the field (achievement)? This dilemma is confounded by the extent to which ascription provides access to education and career opportunities that enable achievement. As much as the behavioral and skill based performance assessments portend to be “neutral and objective,” the ascriptive elements remain present and troubling for today’s increasingly diverse workplaces.

At first glance, a recent article by Stoof, Martens, Van Merriënboer, and Bastiaens (2002) nearly rendered our project as superfluous. It offered a constructivist approach for defining and using the concept of *competence* by the subjects within a given context. However, Fenwick’s (2000) critique of the constructivist view in which she stated, “. . . constructivism falsely presumes a cut universe in which subjects are divided from the environment and from their own experiences, and reflection is posited as the great integrator, bridging separations that it creates instead of reorienting us to the whole” (p. 249), focused us once again on our intention to create a starting point for cross-translation. The theoretical framework developed by Stoof et al. acknowledged and explored the same boundary issues that concern us. The results of our literature review provide an accessible database of concepts associated with term *competence* and a practical tool for cautiously experimenting with the constructivist approach to defining and developing HRD and CPE notions and practice related to *competence*. In this sense, we see our work as complementary.

Still, we continue to be troubled by the issues raised in Fenwick’s critique regarding the positioning of context in the constructivist view. Recent work calling for renewed attention to the centrality of context and the power relations that reside within it (Hansman & Wilson, 2002), support Fenwick’s (2000) concerns that, . . . “ in the constructivist view, the learner is still viewed as fundamentally autonomous from his or her surroundings. The learner moves through context, is in it and affected by it, but the learner’s meanings still exist in the learner’s head and move with the learner from one context to the next” (p. 250). Given the current tenuous nature of employment in any organization and the rapidly increasing regulation of professional practice through standards, certification, and mandatory CPE, a framework that does not theorize power relations as part of knowledge construction is problematic. Resituating existing language and concepts related to the term *competence* in their original contexts of HRD and CPE highlights each field’s cultural practices including the use of power. Many of our decisions related to article selection and data display were informed by these concerns and our desire to stay as close to the two practice contexts as possible.

Research Questions

In an iterative fashion, we found direction and support from the “logistic” approach to philosophical inquiry, which as McKeon (1965) noted, “seeks to trace knowledge back to the elements of which it is composed, the processes by which they are related and the contexts in which they emerge” (p. 94). Subsequently we developed the following research question: In the literature from the fields of HRD and CPE, what are the definitions, purposes, assessments, achievements, applicability, and concerns of the term competence (broadened to include the variations of the term noted earlier)?

Methodology and Limitations

Hermeneutical Analysis

Although the particular manner in which we parsed the literature on *competence* was guided by categories noted in the research question, other factors informed our selections as well. Our practice contexts in higher education, HRD consulting, and accreditation of continuing medical education provided filters (some might say biases) for our selection of perspectives. Accordingly, seeking authoritative sources was mediated by our exposure to them largely through teaching and practice. Clearly, for a starting point, we wanted to focus our review on sources that guide practice. Ease of access was another criterion that we selected as a barometer of utilization, as was frequency of citation in practitioner literature. Not surprisingly, these selection criteria favored broad overviews over single-issue papers. Limiting our search along these lines fit our purpose of staying as close as possible to the cultural, social, and political realities of *practice*, which allows us to take on the hermeneutical task of selecting from and examining contexts that shape interpretations of texts and their application (Rossman & Rallis, 1998). As Gadotti noted (1994), the identification of themes that are relevant and meaningful to a group is preparatory work that assists in understanding and revealing a group’s social reality. Further, as Madison (1990) reminded us, striving for hermeneutical understanding depends upon the active engagement of the contexts, texts, ideological frameworks, and especially the positionality of the interpreters. These insights guided our data collection and categorical analysis

far beyond more conventional methods such as content analysis. Since our overarching purpose is to open a conversation, we have approached this topic from a problem-posing and invitational stance.

In keeping with the technical aspects of cross-translation, what is included in our results section constitutes the first phase (essentially a pilot) of this project. Our data display, sorted by the first five subjects of the central research question, permits readers to examine how various concepts related to the term *competence* are discussed in HRD and CPE, enabling a dialog across these two domains. While we might have chosen to circulate our findings among a panel of peer reviewers of our choosing, we decided against that option because it might have confounded the effects of our filters. Our preference is to cast a wider net through research and practice conference presentations to get feedback, not only on the validity of our findings but on the research design itself as a learning tool for interdisciplinary collaboration.

Results of the Literature Review

The tables included here display our findings according to three criteria: the context (HRD or CPE or both), the focus of the research question on definition, purpose, assessment and achievement. The research question related to concerns is addressed in the **Discussion** section following the tables.

Table 1. *Definitions of Competency from an HRD and CPE Perspective*

<i>HRD Concepts/Author</i>	<i>CPE Concepts/Author</i>
“[Competence] rests on a description of behavior (sometimes referred to as range statements) in a form that is capable of demonstration and observation” (Norris, 1991, p. 2).	“What a person knows and can do under ideal circumstances. There is a distinction between competence and performance by defining performance as what is actually done under existing circumstances,” (Messick, 1984 p. 216).
“Competence is usually treated as something a person is or should be able to do. It is a description of action, behaviour [sic] or outcome in a form that is capable of demonstration, observation and assessment” (Norris, 1991, p. 2).	“Competence is about potential whereas performance is about situated behavior” (Norris, 1991, p. 3).
[Competence is] simply to describe any piece of knowledge and/or skill that might be considered relevant” (Eraut, 1994, p. 179).	Wood and Powers (1987) define competence from a developmental perspective as resting on “an integrated deep structure (understanding) on the general ability to co-ordinate appropriate internal cognitive, affective, and other resources necessary for successful adaptation” (p. 414).
“Competencies may be thought of as the core elements in a periodic table of human behavior” (Russ-Eft, 1995, p. 329).	“So the everyday use of the term ‘competent’ carries some performance-referencing, although it may be neither extensive or specific. It tends to be treated as a characteristic of the person rather than a statement about the range of their competence” (Eraut, 1994, p. 164).
“Even the word ‘competency’ can be used either in a direct performance-related sense: a competency...is an element of vocational competence [or]...a performance capability needed by workers in a specified area.” (Herman and Kenyon, 1987 p. 1)	“The generic competency approach favours [sic] empirical investigation to establish the competencies, which discriminate between average and expert performers as opposed to the theoretical or logical requirements of a particular function” (Norris, 1991, p. 3).
[Competence is] simply to describe any piece of knowledge and/or skill that might be considered relevant” (Eraut, 1994, p. 179).	
“A competency can also be considered a group of related knowledge, skills, and attitudes that that influence performance” (Nitardy and McLean, 2002, p. 2).	
“The essence of the competency approach is the fact that employees have to be assessed on performance and output” (Boon and van der Klink, 2002, p. 2).	
“Competence is a conceptual tool to describe the interdependency between professional skills and metacognitive skills” (Boon and van der Klink, 2002, p. 3).	
“Competence refers to innate abilities, emotions, attitudes, skills and knowledge, and the motivation and ability to apply in certain context” (Boon and van der Klink, 2002, p. 4).	

Table 2. *Purposes of Using Competencies from an HRD and CPE Perspective*

<i>HRD Concepts/Author</i>	<i>CPE Concepts/Author</i>
“Associated with a statement of competence is usually a performance criterion and it is this emphasis on “treating achievements in performance as qualities of persons which Short (1984, p. 166) and others have criticised [sic] as unwarranted” (Norris, 1991, pp. 2-3).	“Conceptualization of competence would show “how specific competencies are integrated at a higher level and would also accommodate changing patterns of salience among these skills and abilities at different ages and in different contexts” (Norris, 1991, p. 4).
CBT and generic competences sought to validate competence in terms of performance, CBT at a highly specific level and generic competence at a more abstract level. However, research in cognitive psychology has frequently sought to distinguish competence from performance” (Eraut, 1994, p. 177).	“We emphasise [sic] the importance of developing an approach to competence that is not fixated by operational definitions such that what we can measure is to be taken to be what develops” (Wood and Powers, 1987, p. 415).
“The generic competency approach favours[sic] the elicitation through behavioural [sic] events or critical incident interviewing of those general abilities associated with expert performers” (Norris, 1991, p. 3).	“Like the objective model, competency-based approaches to professional education and training attempt to improve educational practice by increasing clarity about ends” (Norris, 1991, p. 4).
“Assessment of competence should be grounded in performance in the workplace” (Norris, 1991, p. 4).	“Assessment of competence is that assessment criteria should be transparent for all to see” (Norris, 1991, p. 4).
“Greater reliance should, therefore, be placed on testing competencies rather than intelligence” (Russ-Eft, 1995, p. 329).	“Much of learning that takes place in one’s profession comes about in response to the problems of practice itself” (Mott, 2000, p. 28)”
“A competence is specific to an occupation it is, by definition, related to the technical aspects of performance” (Stewart and Hamlin, 1994, p. 4).	“Competence embraces the structure of knowledge and abilities, whereas performance subsumes as well the processes of accessing and utilising [sic] those structures and a host of affective, motivational, attentional, and stylistics factors that might influence the ultimate response” (Eraut, 1994, p. 178).
The concept of competence would be most often applied in sectors that are facing turbulent developments” (Boon and van der Klink, 2002, p. 4).	“[The general competency approach] eschews the specification of competencies in terms of the endless reduction of the job into its composite knowledge, procedures, skills and tasks that are characteristic of many training manual (Norris, 1991, p. 3).
“When the enterprise is in good shape, there is no obvious need for the development of a competency approach” (Boon and van der Klink, 2002, p. 4).	“Competency Based Training is designed to ensure that all workers are sufficiently competent to do what is required of them, generic competences are concerns with what enables them to do it; and this includes what are sometimes called personal qualities” (Eraut, 1994, p. 172).
“Various developments within and outside of organizations in a direct and indirect way to the attention of competencies” (Boon and van der Klink, 2002, p. 2).	
“One needs to develop continually new competencies in an environment that is continually changing” (Nitardy and McLean, 2002, p. 3).	

Table 3. *Assessments Used in Competencies from an HRD and CPE Perspective*

<i>HRD Concepts/Author</i>	<i>CPE Concepts/Author</i>
“There is a need to determine the existing level of competency of HRD practitioners” (Nitardy and McLean, 2002, p. 8).	“Is whether knowledge relevant to an occupation needs to be assessed separately or whether it can be inferred from appropriate and effective action?” (Norris, 1991, p. 6).
“Measurement of very different characteristics of employees is often seen as a solution. . . to keep record of a large amount of characteristics that in need of development” (Boon and van der Klink, 2002, p. 3).	“It appeals to those who see professional judgment as resting as much on tacit understanding as it does on propositional knowledge” (Norris, 1991, p. 7).
“What range of activities, settings or circumstances does a person have to act appropriately and effectively to be deemed competent?” (Norris, 1991, p. 7).	“Standards of criticism and principles of professional judgment are needed that can inform action in the context of uncertainty and change” (Norris, 1991, p. 7).
“It is clear that assessment is a major problem in this respect [assessing knowledge instead of competencies], demanding the design of valid types of assessment that covers all aspects of competencies in an integrated manner” (Boon and van der Klink, 2002, p. 5).	“Fielding’s (1988) analysis locates the definition of competence firmly within the interaction between values and situational decision-making. In large measure this is a descriptive account of competence grounded in working practices” (Norris, 1991, p. 8).
	“If the assessment of competence presents difficulties of standards settings this is in part because the relationship between standards and good practice or best practice is not at all straightforward” (Norris, 1991, p. 6).

Table 4. *Achievements by Using Competencies from an HRD and CPE Perspective*

<i>HRD Concepts/Author</i>	<i>CPE Concepts/Author</i>
“Often competence is seen as evidenced in the performance or as supplementary evidence to performance demonstration that is required to support generalization [sic]” (Norris, 1991, p. 6).	“People will also be continuously developing the quality of their work in a number of areas, beyond the level of competence to one of proficiency or expertise” (Eraut, 1994, p. 167).
“Achieving a competency is not an end to be achieved, rather it is a road to be traveled” (Nitardy and McLean, 2002, p. 7).	“Where a person is judged to be either component or not competent, or on a graduated scale where ‘competent’ is a position on a continuum from ‘novice’ to ‘expert’” (Eraut, 1994, p. 167).
“The concept of competence is functioning as a vague but useful term, bridging the gap between education and job requirements” ((Boon and van der Klink, 2002, p. 6).	“[competencies} can be interpreted not as an attempt to create different grades of competence, but rather a meaning at what level of tasks does he/she remain or cease to be competent” (Eraut, 1994, p. 167).

Placement in the Tables – Selection Decisions

Norris (1991) and Eraut (1994) compared and contrasted views of *competence* from both HRD and CPE perspectives. They tended to associate cognitive and behavioral orientations with overall development of skills for the improvement of job performance, and development of expertise (often embodied in an individual striving to become an expert) was often linked to stage-based models of professional development. Our decisions to place a certain comment or view in either the HRD or CPE perspective arose out of the particular context to which they referred. Publication venues and introductory remarks addressing certain audiences provided contextual cues for the remaining sources.

Concerns Related to Definitions and Purposes

With the exception of Eraut (1994) and Boon and van der Klink (2002) authors made little attempt to situate notions of *competence* either historically or in terms of socio-cultural practices. However, philosophical orientations, such as a behaviorist or a performance orientation, were easy to find and provided the few cues to context beyond the author's identity and publication venue. The absence of socio-cultural nuances is disturbing in light of the strong bonds between identifying *competencies* and tying them to practice standards. These standards, once developed, find their way into practice through certification of people and processes, through accrediting agencies (public and private) for all sorts of educational programs, and through qualification examinations and licensure requirements. With all this gate keeping going on, who are the *competent* people passing through? As we look around us in our conferences, workplaces, classrooms, they appear to be mostly white and from the middle-class. The commodification of *competence* into certifiable *competencies* privileges the KSA (knowledge, skills and attitudes) worldview, and turns what Boon and vander Klink (2002) found to be a somewhat flexible concept into a rigid sorting mechanism that may have grave consequences for marginalized groups.

Concerns Related to Assessments and Achievements

A glance at the Table 3, displaying the comments from various sources in relation to the assessment of *competence*, reveals more questions and concerns than assertions regarding the viability of measuring *competence*. Similarly, a brief look at Table 4 (Achievements) reveals few statements related to what is accomplished through the application of a *competence*-based approach to individual development in the workplace from either the HRD or CPE perspective. Although definitions and intended purposes abound, we found few sources that included theorizing the concept in a way that made sound connections between theory and practice, making it difficult to operationalize and test (Patterson, 1983). Whetton (1989) might say that the “So What” is missing for the use of competence-based theories and models in either HRD or CPE.

Returning to our earlier proposition (p. 2), that capturing situated notions of *competence* and then comparing them across contexts (HRD and CPE) would assist in thinking about their aims in relationship to their context, the accompanying teaching-learning dilemmas, and program development issues and problems, fell short of our expectations. Undoubtedly, one reason for this is the literature we reviewed. However, when we examined applications-based literature in academic and practitioner journals we found it to be instrumental, prescriptive, and lacking either a formative or summative evaluative focus that might have taken the needs of stakeholders and the influence of context into consideration. This conundrum presents striking evidence of Eraut's (1994) assertion that contexts of use are distinct and that the contextual boundaries not only exist across disciplines but within them, creating language and experience barriers that are difficult to cross and serve to maintain isolation of academicians, managers, and front-line practitioners from one another (p. 32).

Conclusions and Implications for Theory and Practice

Does the Cross-Translation Stand up to Scrutiny?

Capturing “sound bites” from the literature as we have done here barely scratches the surface of the task, but we offer it to stimulate dialog and reflection in both HRD and CPE as researchers and practitioners continue to grapple with the concept of *competence*. Just as cross-translations are refined through expert review and rounds of focus groups, expanding understanding of *competence* will be a continuing project. Daley and Bierema (2002) proposed several areas where joint exploration might benefit both CPE and HRD. They asserted that, “In addition to [the need to become] more critically reflective as a field, HRD needs to expand its focus to include non-profit, service, government, and higher education settings [traditional domains of CPE]” (p. 10). Alternatively, “HRD offers a wider range of strategies for development than CPE . . .” (p. 10), where the classroom-based update model, mandated continuing education, and government regulated accountability to “standards” have become the Holy Grail of professional development.

Although we are guardedly optimistic about greater collaboration between HRD and CPE (tempered by the reality of the current organization of graduate curricula in the two domains), we are less confident of bridging the theory and practice contexts so aptly described by Eraut (1994). We see ourselves standing in one of two rooms connected by a door. One side of the door is labeled “Theory Enabled Practice” and the other side of the door is labeled “Practice Enabled Theory,” but the door is locked. Once a tool (*competence*) is unleashed, instrumentalism appears to guide application stripping the framework from its origins. Researchers and practitioners in both CPE and HRD would do well to problematize the tool itself and ask, not how well is it working in a given context, but should it be used given its definitions and purposes and what are the effects, both intended and unintended?

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