

Locating the Fault Line: The Intersection of Internationalisation and Competency-based Training

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This paper argues that the Tertiary and Further Education system in Australia has responded to globalisation in two paradoxical ways; the pro-active response of internationalisation and the reactive response of competency-based training. Competency-based training currently has a strangle hold on the TAFE sector and education has become a process of domestication and reproduction rather than liberation and inspiration. Using Bateson's systems model and Foucault's notions of discourse, it is argued that direct resistance to competency-based training is not an effective strategy and may even prove counterproductive. Given that internationalisation is a discourse that is allowed in TAFE in the current context, it is argued that educators can use this as a tool to critique competency-based training and gain space for education that is liberatory and constructive.

Globalisation, internationalisation, competency-based training,
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INTRODUCTION

The institution of competency-based training in the vocational sector in Australia has led to a narrow, reproductive form of education. Many educators within the system are concerned that while this form of training may appear efficient in the short term, it would lead to stagnation in the longer term through lack of diversity and change. Direct criticism of competency-based training is difficult in the current culture because the discourse of economic rationalism, which dominates this era of rapid globalisation, constrains what may be legitimately said. This paper provides an explanation of the current circumstances, my positioning with them, and an alternative paradigm of internationalisation. This paradigm may be utilised as a tool to prune back the hegemony of competency-based training to gain space for education that is liberatory and constructive. Further, internationalisation allows the possibility for the sector to respond to globalisation in positive ways that enable a larger goal for education, namely, the development of responsible citizenship at the local and global levels.

THE NATION STATE UNDER PRESSURE FROM GLOBALISATION.

Globalisation is the "compression of the world and the intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole" (Robertson, quoted in Edwards, 1995, p.242). Through information technology, travel, migration and the media, globalisation has brought different cultures into contact with each other and through commerce has interconnected national economies. The reconfiguration of the accumulation of capital based on globalisation has led to national policy agendas being dominated by the interests of privately owned transnational business structures (Yeatman, 1993, p.3) and to the discourse of economic rationalism being foisted on policy makers and practitioners as if "There is no other way" (Thatcher quoted in McTaggart, 1992, p.73).

Lynn Hoffman (1982), following the work of Bateson (1972), says that living systems follow “ a homeostatic self-maintaining design” and that they will remain stable as long as the environment around them does not change. When new conditions arise, this puts the system under pressure and the system comes into crisis (p.16). The homeostatic tendency of the system brings on “ever intensifying corrective sweeps that get out of control” (p.17). The steep increase in the rate of globalisation has put huge pressure on many systems and nation states, in particular, are in a resultant state of crisis.

“Economic globalisation” according to Korsgaard (1997, p.15) “involves a qualitative change in which distinct national economies are subsumed and rearticulated into the system through international processes and transactions”. Rather than challenge the power of the transnational market , what appears to have happened is that national governments have reframed the problem in terms of education and training, an arena over which they are able to exert control. In the United Kingdom, for example, Edwards and Usher (1994, p.10) note that

since the Ruskin College speech by the then Prime Minister, Callaghan, in 1976, there has been an overwhelming number of reports, speeches, white papers, and media items on the failure of the education system to provide the skill necessary for the U.K to be competitive within the globally integrated markets of late twentieth century capitalism... It seems that the further the UK slips in terms of competitiveness, the more responsibility is placed on the education and training system as a major cause.

AUSTRALIA’S RESPONSE TO THE PRESSURE OF GLOBALISATION

A similar process is currently occurring in Australia with regard to the vocational education system. As a response to the perceived lack of national economic control through changes in the global environment, there has been a counter surge to reinforce control in education at the national level. People with knowledge of education have been systematically replaced with economists in the Department of Employment, Education and Training (McTaggart, 1992, p.76). Economic rationalism has become the reigning paradigm and competency-based training subsequently imposed. Edwards and Usher (1994) identify the disciplining role of competence, Jones and Moore (1993, p.392) describe the “massive extension of surveillance” and the “regulation of experts” while Collins (quoted in Beevers, 1993, p.56) contends that competency-based training is “mainly about increasing the steering capacity of the Minister...down to the classroom”. Adding weight to this theory, Stevenson (1993, p.96) in his table of “Historical Patterns of Concerns in Education” indicates that this concern with the “relevance of education” and the introduction of “control” measures has occurred in regular cycles over the past 100 years in times of economic stress. This supports the argument that competency-based training is the most recent of a series of systemic reactionary responses to threats of change in the environment.

It is my contention, however, that the Australian Technical and Further Education (TAFE) system has responded to globalisation in two paradoxical ways. While there has been the strong reactionary response of competency-based training, there has also been a pro-active response, internationalisation, that has been allowed to occur. This is because economists are concerned with a positive budget balance and international education has become a five billion dollar per year export earner for Australia. (Nelson, 2002).

Internationalisation

The Australian Technical And Further Education sector has begun the process of internationalisation in recognition that it is operating in an “emerging global environment” (Australian TAFE International National Strategic Plan 1995-97, p.12). Internationalisation is defined by TAFE as:

a process that prepares TAFE and its students for successful participation in an increasingly interdependent world. The process should permeate all facets of the work of TAFE fostering global understanding and developing skills, attitudes, and values for effective living and working in a diverse world. It should link to the multicultural reality of Australian society and contribute to the capability of Australian industry in competing in a global economy. In doing this it will open TAFE to international best practice and foster an ethos of continuous improvement and ongoing learning. (Australian TAFE International, 1996, p.4)

This internationalisation process is to be guided by the values and principles of: “client focus, cultural understanding, supporting values, a strategic investment approach and an enterprise culture”. The client focus value specifies that

if this involves international students or clients in another country it will require an in-depth knowledge of conditions in that country, cultural understanding and sensitivity and capacity to deliver products and services that are responsive to the distinctive needs of the client. (Australia TAFE International, 1996, p.5)

Competency-based training

In 1987 the ACTU report *Australia Reconstructed*, addressing the balance of payments problems, advised the government of a need for a tripartite system of negotiation between unions, employers education and training institution, those who administer training and employment programs, and community and social welfare groups. The government responded with a series of reports (Dawkins and Holding 1987, Finn 1991, Carmichael 1992, Mayer 1992) which developed the theme of the need for skills and competencies in the Australian workforce. In this context competency-based training was introduced as the “panacea to solve Australia’s skilling needs” (Southern Cross University, 1994, p.21) with a Special Ministerial Conference in 1990 agreeing to implement Competency-based Training with substantial progress to have been made by 1993 (NBEET, 1991, p.1).

The competency-based approach to training focuses on outcomes of what a person can do in the work situation as a result of training. It is concerned with the attainment, and demonstration of specific knowledge and skill and the application needed for effective performance in the work place at the required level. These skills are being defined through national competency standards, which are currently being developed for industry and occupations. (DEET, 1994, p.1)

The National Training Board defines a competency standard as “the specification of the knowledge and skill and the application of that knowledge and skill within an occupation or industry level to the standard of performance required in employment”(NBEET, 1991, p.2).

The focus of a competency-based training system is on outcomes, what an individual can demonstrate that he or she can do, rather than on inputs, in the form of prescribed periods of training. (NBEET, 1991, p.2)

A PATHWAY FOR THE ADULT EDUCATOR

As an adult educator, my own response to globalisation has been mediated by writers such as Korsgaard (1997) who emphasises the common destiny that communities share and Stevenson (1993, p.91) who suggests that a “post-industrial conservator society” is a more rational basis to build economic policy. Although I share Marginson’s (1992, p.3) concerns that globalisation has the potential for monoculturalism, I also join in his hopes that international education could provide the opportunity for learning to see through “‘other’ eyes; to expand the situated

self”(Marginson, 1999-2000, p.5). I am also persuaded by Korsgaard’s (1997) argument that working towards the establishment of global democratic structures, including organs for civil society, is the only alternative to leaving global integration to the technological and economic levels which might end democracy. I am thus attempting to develop a view of my work as ‘education for global citizenship’, based on “human centred development and a participatory society” as proposed by the *Hamburg Declaration on Adult Learning* (UNESCO, 1997). This includes a commitment to a worldwide struggle for equality of gender and race, for conservation and the more equitable distribution of the earth’s resources.

Freire (quoted in Youngman, 1996b, p.199) says that education can be for liberation or domestication. I contend that internationalisation has possibilities for the former alternative while competency-based training fits with the latter. Competency-based training has detached student-centred learning away from its traditional meaning which “involved open-endedness in learning outcomes and the space for generating alternative views, knowledges and practices” (Edwards and Usher, 1994, p.14). It has redefined student-centred learning in commercial terms as customer service in the education ‘convenience store’ where students purchase bite-sized modularised and pre-packaged learning material.

Positioning assessment as the primary function in education, competency-based training has repositioned the educator’s main role to that of assessor and relegated the educator to the status of follower and servant to industry and the bureaucrats. Indeed Collins (quoted in Payne, 1995, p.39) says that this “obsession with...technical rationality has induced modern adult education to evade serious engagement with critical, ethical and political issues. It has effectively sidelined adult education as a social movement and supports movements that tend to de-skill the practitioners pedagogical role.”

Usher, Bryant and Johnston (1997, p.40) warn of the danger of “getting trapped within utopian oppositions to the educational *status quo*”. They exhort disillusioned educators to heed the advice of Foucault and “make allowance for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling block a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy”. TAFE, along with most institutions in Australia, is in the grip of the discourse of economic rationalism which dismisses idealistic notions as uneconomic. This means that the beliefs and attitudes of most educators, which were formed during an earlier era of Liberalism, are ignored by those who are now in power as they do not have value in the market place and criticalism is not allowed in this era of reproductive education. If space is to be found within the current system and educators empowered to fulfil their vision, then contestation will need to use discourses that are allowed in economic rationalism.

I would also argue, from a systems perspective, that strong direct opposition to the hegemony of competency-based training is likely to be met with more of the same as competency-based training is a reactionary response to a perceived loss of control. Direct opposition is likely to be interpreted by the system as a further attack on control and to elicit even more reactionary responses. As competency-based training and internationalisation, however, are both embraced within economic rationalism, then the contradictions between them provide a wedge for educators to gain space and power to do their work.

COMPETENCY-BASED TRAINING AND INTERNATIONALISATION: THE CONTRADICTIONS

As discussed, competency-based training and internationalisation are both discourses that are allowed under economic rationalism. However, as they are actually forces operating in opposite

directions, comparisons of them against a range of variables illuminates a variety of useful contradictions.

Scope: Education for work versus education for life

One of the most disheartening aspects of competency-based training for adult educators has been its narrow prescription of education as training for work. What is allowed within its parameters are the “specific mix of knowledge skills, and applications required for effective performance at the relevant occupational level” (NBEET, 1991, p.2). Beevers (1993, p.92) laments that this model “leaves little if any space for the learning domains of the personal, social, ethical, humanistic, emancipatory, political, economic or environmental awareness and responsibility”.

Internationalisation, however, leaves room for claiming backspace towards a wider definition of education. Australian TAFE International (1996, p.4) says that the process should “permeate all facets of the work of TAFE” and foster “global understanding” and the development of “skills and attitudes for effective living and working in a diverse world. Further, it describes the process as a response to globalisation “in all its dimensions: economic, technological, social and cultural”. Thus, while economic considerations might often be the bottom line in current practice, at least internationalisation opens the possibility of dialogue that allows wider considerations.

Time focus: Education for the past or education for the future

The locus of education in competency-based training is the past, as competences are described as the “knowledge and skill ... that are required in industry”. The process for making this determination is for industry to describe what has been done in the recent past. This past then becomes the blue print for at least five years into the future (life of a curriculum). The Australian Vice Chancellors Committee expressed concern about this process that leaves “judgement about what will be necessary in the future to the judgement of those whose knowledge and experience are grounded in present or past practice” (quoted in Blunden, 1995, p.35). Gray (1994, p.93) believes that industry has a focus on immediate needs that are often not synonymous with the long-term needs of the individual worker or of industry.

Internationalisation, on the other hand, has its vision focused on the future. It is not interested in mere replication of what has been happening in the here and now but reaches forward to an evolution to “world class performance”(Australian TAFE International, 1996, p.12) and contextualises learning in a “dynamic context of change” (p.5). This allows scope for the contestation of the power of local industry to dictate a prescription for education that assumes an outcome of self-reproduction.

The location of education: Nationalisation or the local-global nexus

It is ironic that the education system is being pushed towards nationalisation through competency-based training precisely at the time that many such as Davey (1998) and Reich (cited in Korsgaard, 1997) are predicting the demise of the importance of the nation-state and national economies as a result of globalisation. This process of national standardisation has depowered the educator at the local level in responding to local needs and issues and in being visionary in incorporating new ideas from international journals or conferences.

Edwards and Usher (1998) argue that what is becoming increasingly important is the global-local nexus and this seems to fit with Australian TAFE International’s rhetoric concerning internationalisation. It talks of the requirement of “opening TAFE to the world” (1996, p.2), developing an “enlarged sense of community ... to the world community” (1996, p.13) and the “active pursual of international best practice (National Strategic Plan 1995-97, p.11). At the same time it underlines “the critical importance of innovation at the local level of the individual

institute” (A.T.I. 1996, p.6) and the need for “TAFE institutes that are responsive to the changing conditions and requirements”(1996, p.13).

International twinning arrangements, joint projects and the clustering of students from particular countries will mean that there will be a growth in differentiation at the local level as institutes respond to internationalisation. This permission to differentiate, innovate and respond may be an avenue that can be pursued by educators to claim back some of their power as educators and to challenge their current role as, so-called ‘box tickers’ in the regime of national standardisation.

The simple versus the complex

The basis of competency-based training is standardisation of outcomes and Christie’s (1997, p.63) fears that this focus on outcomes “may bring rigidity in curriculum, pedagogy and assessment” are well founded. Wood (1992, p.5) notes that a “commonly held view” in Australian TAFE Colleges is that competency-based training is “just another name for self-paced learning” which I would argue is another name for ‘pre-packaged’ learning. This pre-packaging assumes the heterogenous learner with heterogeneous needs and interests and does not allow for a constructionist approach to learning. Internationalisation, on the other hand calls for responsiveness (ATI, 1996, p.13) and encourages those responses to be “innovative and creative” (1996, p.1).

The assumption that students can just dip into education to collect the competencies that have not been ticked off means that the whole learning process has to be standardised and compartmentalised, a “factory model of learning” (Little, 1985, quoted in Beevers, 1993, p.93).

Internationalisation however, makes this so-called ‘factory model’ of education problematic as it introduces notions of diversity, difference and change (Australian TAFE International, 1996). It recognises the social and cultural nature of competence which is in opposition to the NTB model which Beevers (1993, p.90) says is “built on positivist notions that tend to treat ‘skill formation’ and ‘competence’ as value free concepts”. This may confront the view that has been promoted by exponents of competency-based training “that skills are ‘transparent’ simple, unproblematic representations of ‘how things are’” (Jones and Moore, 1993, p.394). Such “decontextualising methods” Jones and Moore (1993, p.389) argue are “in opposition to cultural practices in ‘everyday life’”. Because Internationalisation allows for the discussion of culture, (albeit with intended reference to other cultures), it may open up the space to acknowledge the inherently cultural nature of skills and redress the neglect of issues of value, power and ideology. With its emphasis on context, internationalisation may be used to highlight the often disembedded nature of competencies and the need for recontextualising learning.

What drives the educational process: Curriculum versus assessment focus

A common analogy among teaching staff is that in the competency-based training system the “tail is wagging the dog” and by this they are referring to the “focus on outcomes”(NBEET, 1991, p.2). Even supporters of competency assessment such as Hager and Beckett (1995, p.17) have acknowledged the “rightness” of educators objecting to “technologies of measurement becoming ends in themselves” as has happened in the subtle switch from competency-based assessment to competency-based training. Edwards and Usher (1994, p.8) argue that the discourse of competence “attempts to repress knowledge and understanding” and it is a concern that in this regime of efficiency what ultimately will end up being allowed as knowledge is that which is amenable to testing in the competency framework. What competency-based training is “deliberately silent on” is “the process of learning” (Kinsman 1992 cited in Beevers, 1993, p.100). While proponents of competency-based training argue that this silence is freedom, in practice this is illusory as the unstated assumptions exert power in reducing the possibilities and thus “impose standardisation on curriculum practice” (Stevenson, 1993, p.94).

In the internationalisation paradigm, curriculum is often talked about and there is almost silence about assessment. Internationalisation of curriculum is declared as an objective, but, in my experience, there is almost unfailing, a so-called 'glossing over' of the process. An example is the DETE seminar held in Adelaide in 1998 on "Globalism, Tertiary Education and Cultural Diversity" which advertised a stream of speakers on internationalising curricula. On the day this session was modified somewhat to the topic "Providing Effective Learning Experiences for International Students" and the collection of papers went on tangents from that topic. Only one speaker actually mentioned internationalising curriculum, and his strategy, while valid, was limited as it involved having one overseas lecturer who gave feedback on the curriculum.

Is this a case of the 'emperor's new clothing' or is it avoidance of the inevitable clash that would occur if internationalisation was put into practice in more than a tokenistic way? Certainly it has been my experience, in practice, that is often impossible to follow the directions of both paradigms at the same time (for example see McKay, 1997) and I believe that a project to explore further this intersection would be most enlightening. Hopefully it would encourage the power brokers in each paradigm to engage and thus free educators from the double bind of contradictory imperatives.

Australian TAFE International (1996, p.6) demands that internationalisation "should permeate all facets of the work of TAFE", insists on "mainstreaming international perspectives" and plans to "develop an international perspective in TAFE curriculum". The approach to learning has, however, in practice been one of marginalisation. Rather than tackling the problematic area of the embedded nature of knowledge, which would be necessary for a holistic approach, it has chosen instead to engage with competency-based training by negotiating the addition of an extra key competency, 'cultural understanding'.

A Culture of Mediocrity versus a Culture of Excellence

The culture of competency-based training defines standards as a dichotomy (that is, a performance is either competent or not yet competent). Students who are able to perform at the benchmark are encouraged to move on to another competency as quickly as possible. There is no encouragement for students to aspire further than the bare pass mark and educators are actually discouraged by the system of crediting hours from indulging in such uneconomic behaviour as promoting extension of knowledge or skills. Students are locked into training for current industrial practice and there is no preparation for criticism or improvement of the *status quo* (Stevenson, 1993, p.98).

The internationalisation paradigm does not fit within the competency framework as it challenges TAFE to work towards excellence. Instead of promoting competent performance, it urges TAFE to "foster a shared vision of world class performance" (ATI, 1996, p.12) and sets as its goals "international best practice...continuous improvement and ongoing learning" (p.4). The notion of international best practice is, of course, inherently problematic as it assumes that there is one practice that is generically best regardless of context. Nevertheless, the ideology of internationalism opens up space for the consideration of qualitative difference, challenges the notion that performance may only be considered as a dichotomy and opens up the possibility that success may be other than a repetition of the *status quo*.

CONCLUSION

Korsgaard (1997, p.23) says that "to build a democratic society is an art which does not originate from the state or from the market but from the citizenship of civil society" and warns that "if the key institutions of society do not support this art, it will be destroyed". Youngman (1996a, p.4) contends that "spaces can be found if adult educators are clear about their social goals". I believe

that clarification of values in regards to citizenship in the global context and its implications is the first step for adult educators.

The next step is to align with the forces for change within the system, which I believe can currently be found in the paradigm of internationalisation. This alignment will need to be a cautious one because of the possibility of cultural imperialism rather than a respect for pluralism; and global competition rather than co-operation. I believe, however, there is an opening for educators to have influence in this arena as the system acknowledges that they are the resource on which the success of international programs are largely dependant.

Finally, I would suggest that adult educators harness internationalisation as a useful tool for pruning the hegemonic power of competency-based training and demanding space for education which is holistic, reflexive, responsive and creative. This they may do by subjecting competency-based training to scrutiny under a lens fashioned within the parameters of Internationalisation. As Gustavsson (citing the work of Ricouer) suggests, our task as adult educators is to “point out contradictions, bring them into conflict and through communication between them bring out something creatively new” (1997, p.248).

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