

New Competencies: They just don't make the grade

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Abstract

This essay examines the philosophy behind the use of Competency Based Training (CBT) in timber grading training. It argues that the 'narrow' view of competencies, in the behaviourist tradition, is the most appropriate approach to use for this type of training. It further argues that the progressive move away from the narrow view, towards a more humanist approach, has led competency standards to be used in areas to which they are unsuited.

Introduction

I work as a training consultant for a timber industry training company. One of my responsibilities is to train sawmill workers to grade timber to the relevant Australian Standards. The format I use is to provide a general overview of the principles of grading, followed by hands-on practice sessions to reinforce the rules that are being learnt. When the trainees are ready to be assessed, they undertake an on-the-job test, comprising 100 pieces of timber which must be graded correctly to their relevant Standard.

The pass mark for the test is 91%. If the learner achieves this mark, they receive a grader's ticket and are entered onto a register held by the training company. If they do not meet the requirement, they are given the opportunity to go through the process again and be re-assessed at some time in the future.

Philosophical basis for timber grading training

Timber grading is a precise skill. The grading rules are set out in explicit term, and although there are subtleties involved in interpreting particular characteristics, there is not much room for differences of opinion in terms of the final grade attributed to a piece. A grader needs to be able to weigh up the relative strengths and weaknesses in a piece by looking at its defects and other characteristics, and then accurately assess the stress it would be able to withstand when subjected to a load. This is called 'visual stress grading'.

Assessing the skills of a learner grader is very straightforward: if the learner judges a piece to be of a certain grade, they are considered to be right if the assessor agrees with them, or wrong if the assessor disagrees. There is no hint of relativity here, because ultimately the strength of the piece is an empirical question, and both the learner and the

assessor can be put to the real test—the piece could be broken to see just how much force it does withstand before it fractures.

Thus, the grader can be said to be performing competently if they show a ‘demonstrated capacity to do a specific task’, to use Borthwick’s definition of competence (Poole, Nielsen, Horrigan and Lang-Fox, 1998:88). As such, the training methodology used by me and other trainers in this area is competency based, firmly in the tradition of the behaviourist model of observing and assessing overt behaviour.

I realise that this is an ultra-narrow definition of competence, but I would like to argue in this essay that competency based training (CBT) in its traditional form plays a valuable role in workplace training, but has been much maligned in the wider debate over the use of competency standards in educational practice. My view is that CBT has attracted so much criticism in the field of adult education because the concept of competency standards has been applied too widely, particularly in non-technical training areas.

In order to make them fit as broad a range of workplace contexts as possible, competencies have been watered down and decontextualised, so that their modern forms have lost much of their relevance to the workplace skills they are trying to address. This has led to the original CBT philosophy being unfairly criticised for the failings of competency standards in general, with the result that many theorists, such as Chappell, Gonczi and Hager (1995), consider CBT to be anachronistic, and no longer appropriate in modern theories of best practice.

In defence of CBT philosophy

Competency based training grew out of the methods used by the American defence forces to train their personnel in the 1950s. It is based on the idea that ‘standardised training outcomes can be achieved by all learners if a thorough analysis of the behaviours demonstrated by any competent performer is undertaken and then transposed into a set of standardised learning sequences’ (Chappell et al, 1995:176). This approach is often referred to as the ‘narrow’ view of competence, and is the defining feature of the CBT movement (Chappell et al, 1995:176).

There are many industry skills that share the same need for standardised outcomes as do certain military skills. Timber grading is one such skill. When a piece of timber is stamped with a grade marking, the grader warrants that the piece will withstand the load they say it will. Given that the training requires standardised outcomes, the educator needs to take the role of ‘expert instructor’; *expert* in the sense that they have a strong command of the subject matter, and *instructor* in the sense that they provide guidance and direction in the correct techniques to use and the correct decisions to make (Cranton, 1992).

This is the type of training that competency standards were originally developed for, and I believe it is where competencies should have stayed.

However, this narrow, task-oriented view of competency standards has progressively given way to a much broader view in recent years, as competencies became applied more widely to managerial and professional skills. The behaviourist CBT model, with its emphasis on objective, observable, 'standardised' outcomes has been diluted by the more humanist goals of the intrinsic development of the learner as a participant and as a person. Hence in more recent years there has been a much greater emphasis on personal development and human inter-relations in training outcomes (Merriam and Brockett et al, 1997).

This shift in emphasis has not only occurred in the competencies that address job-specific skills, but it is also the impetus behind the development of an over arching set of generic competencies designed to capture the general skills needed by people working together in any organization.

For example, I was recently asked to prepare a training plan for a sawmill in Casino, NSW. Because the training was going to be funded by the Department of Education and Training (DET), I was required to assess the skills of the workers in terms of Forest Industries competency standards, and recommend training programmes that were linked to specific competencies. This meant that a timber grader, for instance, needed to be assessed in many more competencies than simply *Visually determine hardwood stress grade*. In order to complete the skills analysis of a timber grader, I also needed to assess them in terms of a set of general competencies, including:

- *Work effectively with others*
- *Plan a complete activity*
- *Carry out work in a safe manner*
- *Solve problems in the workplace*
- *Communicate clearly and effectively in the workplace*
(Forest Industries Training Package, 2001).

While these skills are no doubt very important in any workplace, I believe that their assessment becomes demeaning and trivialised when expressed in a competency format. As Chappell et al (1995:179) point out, the very nature of competencies as measurable outcomes for specific tasks makes them inappropriate to be used as 'simplistic, reductionist solutions to complex issues and problems'.

This difficulty is faced whenever competencies are asked to do more than they were originally designed for under the traditional CBT, or 'narrow', approach used in technical skills training. When Scheeres, Gonczi, Hager and Morley-Warner developed a set of professional competency standards for teachers, they found that there were 'usually a variety of ways to carry out a task satisfactorily' (UNE study guide, 2001:35). In response to this lack of uniformity, they developed a list of competency elements that tried to incorporate all of the diverse teaching styles found in adult basic education. However, their competencies ended up being so bland and all-encompassing that they are almost devoid of meaning. Two such examples are:

- 1.3: *Applies knowledge of theories of learning, including learning relevant to adults in any Adult Basic Education situation*
- 1.4: *Uses a variety of learning and teaching strategies to pursue literacy and numeracy goals for personal, social, educational and vocational purposes (in UNE study guide, 2001).*

Although these statements have the appearance of competency standard elements, they have none of the punchy precision of the directly observable, measurable outcomes that are used in traditional CBT standards. These are an example of the ‘humanist’ genre of competencies that emphasise learner attributes and holistic teaching at the expense of objective outcomes.

How to ruin a good competency standard

Two years ago I was asked to write a training course for timber flooring installers. Part of the brief was to map the course outcomes to existing competency standards, and identify any gaps where new competencies needed to be developed. This was at the time when there was a great deal of activity among Industry Training Advisory Bodies (ITABs) as they set about developing Training Packages for their industries. It turned out that one new competency did need to be written to address the specific skill of applying surface finishes to timber floors.

I wrote the relevant competency standard so that it would be precise, clear and assessable. I called it *Finish timber floors*, because I wanted to give it the same feel as other competencies I had used in the flooring course, such as *Install sheet flooring* and *Install parquet flooring*. However, by the time it had made its way into the Training Package, the ITAB had diluted it to broaden its applicability, and renamed it *Apply finishes to timber and cork floors*. Although the ITAB’s changes to my original submission were only slight, they had the effect of blurring a very tight competency standard, making it less exacting for timber floors, and quite inappropriate for cork floors.

A far more serious problem in the development of industry Training Packages is the use of competency standards to describe aspects of a job that are not even tasks. This is very much the case with competencies written in the ‘humanist’ genre to define attributes or types of knowledge possessed by people doing a particular task. Chappell et al (1995) make the point that competencies used in their ‘narrow’ form demand measurable outcomes and observable criteria. They go on to say that ‘though it is reasonably easy to produce these sorts of descriptions when the focus is limited to the relatively straightforward task skills needed in the workplace, attempts to produce descriptions of more complex work practices, commonly involving complicated interactions of various sets of knowledge, skills and abilities, generally fail.’ (Chappel et al., 1995:176).

At the Casino sawmill where I assessed the timber graders, I was also required to assess the mill manager so that he could be included in the same DET funded training programme. The competencies he needed to be assessed on included:

- *Communicate workplace information*
- *Work with and lead workgroups*
- *Plan a complex activity*
- *Collect, analyse and organise information*
(Forest Industries Training Package, 2001).

These competencies fail because they involve management, interpersonal and problem-solving skills that are not directly observable and not objectively measurable. As the competencies broaden and become less well defined, so their performance criteria become increasingly vague and subjective, and the essence of the job characteristic being described is lost in the competency's very attempt to capture it. Pye says, in reference to the competencies needed by managers: 'high-level managers tend to know a good manager when they come across one, but are unable to describe all the qualities of a good manager' (Poole, Nielsen, Horrigan and Lang-Fox, 1998:92).

Since these qualities that describe a good manager are unable to be defined in standardised, measurable, behaviourist terms, I believe they are outside the domain of competency standards.

A critique of critical theory

Some of the most vocal critics of the philosophical approach behind CBT are critical theorists such as Paulo Freire, who claim that there is no such thing as neutral education, because all education is influenced by people's attitudes towards knowledge, and the relationship between education and society (Merriam and Brockett, 1997). Thus any attempt to objectify performance and knowledge, and separate them from the performer and society is giving them a 'reality' they do not deserve. Some postmodernist theorists extend this argument further to deny that there is any truth with a capital 'T', but allow instead what they call 'many truths with a small "t"'; in other words, if there is truth, it is relative' (Merriam and Cafferella, 1999:349).

While this view could certainly be applied to the 'truth' of political and religious beliefs, and perhaps some of the theories held in the sciences, it is too sweeping a generalisation to be applied across the board to all forms of knowledge and truth. Some truths, I believe, can be proven empirically, without any reference to sociological factors, such as the fact that a piece of timber will only support a load up to a point, after which it will break and the load will fall through. So my response to the claim that 'what constitutes and what is accepted as knowledge is determined by power' (Merriam and Cafferella, 1999:349). is that in the case of the knowledge that a timber floor will support a given load, that power is gravity. And whether they wish to admit it or not, any post-modernist who takes for granted the strength and safe working load of their own floor has implicitly put their faith in the timber grader to have used truth with a 'T' when their flooring was being graded.

In conclusion

Competency Based Training in its traditional form characterises the ‘narrow’ view of competence in the workplace. Because this hardline approach was clearly unsuitable for the workplace skills that are not directly observable and objectively measurable, a more humanist touch was progressively introduced into the way competency standards were written in an effort to make them more amenable to the wider skills that workers need to carry out their jobs effectively and conduct themselves professionally.

Chappell et al (1995:180) put it this way:

The narrow instrumental conception of competence on which the previous CBT model was based has been rejected by almost all commentators. The broader view of competency-based learning does not confuse performance with competence, and argues that a large variety of attributes which underpin performance must be addressed in any competency analysis. It rejects single acceptable outcomes as being indicative of competency performance ... (arguing instead that) the processes undertaken by the worker during work activity are often a more valid indicator of competence than the products or outcomes of work’.

My view is that this is where competencies came unstuck. I think that narrow, instrumental competencies with single acceptable outcomes are competencies at their best. It is when they attempt to deal with attributes and processes, rather than focussing on directly observable outcomes, that they lose their objectivity, which is their greatest strength.

When a timber grader is assessed as competent in *Visually determine hardwood stress grade*, they have been acknowledged as having the precise skills required to grade hardwood timber. This says nothing about their attitude to work, or their ability to work in a team. While these factors are crucial in determining a person’s overall job performance, I believe that their description and assessment are outside the scope of competency standards.

References

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