

What skill? Whose knowing? Futures for CBT

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ABSTRACT

It has become commonplace to argue that current trends in the economy, most particularly the global economy, have placed greater emphasis on the needs of the workforce to be able to change their skills. While some work now appears to be quite knowledge-intensive, the skill demands of other work may be in decline. This paper reports on a national evaluation study of competency-based training which was conducted in enterprises in 1998. Findings from this study suggest that distinctively different discourses of competency are developing among different industry sectors and between different workforce groups. Thus, the competency required of operational, technical and trade staff is commonly conceived as 'specific skills for specific jobs'. And, the competency required of managerial and professional staff is commonly conceived more broadly. Various consequences of these different discourses of competence for the contemporary workforce will be explored and some implications for VET policy and practice drawn. Overall, the paper will address the following three questions: (i) what role is CBT playing in skilling the Australian workforce?; (ii) what contribution is it making to the changing character of work, including the creation of the 'knowing worker'; (iii) what contribution is it making to the 'high road' for reform — the formation of a high-skill workforce where opportunities for all to become more knowledgeable are provided?

INTRODUCTION

It has become commonplace to argue that current trends in the economy, most particularly the global economy, have placed greater emphasis on the needs of the workforce to be able to change their skills. Vocational educators and trainers who deliver programs in workplaces directly face the challenges of changing structures of work and economy in what has variously been called post-industrialism, post-Fordism, informational capitalism, fast capitalism, the learning economy, and the knowledge economy, among others. Post-Fordism, for example, is a term used to describe changes which are thought to be occurring currently in the character of industrial organisations. These changes include the move to flexible production systems and flatter organisational structures. Set within global markets, post-Fordist workplaces are claimed to require a workforce that is able to perform many different tasks or is multi-skilled. Workers are constituted as capable of taking shared responsibility for decisions and adept at finding their own solutions to problems. Post-Fordist workplaces strive to continually search for improvement, through approaches such as Quality Assurance and Total Quality Management.

Changes in products, services and work processes are claimed to require increased flexibility with regard to the organisation of work, working practice, working knowledge and working identity. The 'new model worker' (Flecker and Hofbauer, 1998) is taken to be more a 'knower' than 'doer', or, better perhaps, a knower-doer: broadly informed and skilled such that the increasingly varying tasks of the 'flexible firm' are fulfilled. The new model manager is taken to be more a coach than a cop: moving from command and control methods of management toward a greater concern with communication and employee involvement. According to Flecker and Hofbauer (1998, 105), the emergence of these new images reflects two interrelated tendencies: 'first, changing skill needs and attitudinal requirements, encapsulated in the term 'intrapreneur', and, second, the increased dependence of the labour process on workers' active and creative contributions'.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the contribution that competency-based training (CBT) has made to these changing needs and requirements. CBT is informed by the view that global economic and technological change require workers to exhibit a broader range of skills at work, specifically, flexible and adaptable skills. Recent research in Australian enterprises 'suggests a shift in the nature of skills requirements at the enterprise level away from narrow technical skills and towards a new training paradigm that emphasises the need for developing broad sets of generic skills in the

workforce in order to increase adaptability (Smith 1999, 115). Using empirical material gathered in the course of a national research project on CBT, we argue that CBT as constituted currently makes a relatively minor contribution to the development of broad sets of generic skills. If a new 'paradigm' of training is emerging in enterprises, it is most apparent at 'higher' levels of the work process, and supported by training approaches which are supplementary to, or other than, CBT.

RESEARCH METHODS

The study on which this paper draws examined the contribution that CBT has made to outcomes in vocational education and training (VET), most particularly the extent to which it has met the requirements of various stakeholders and contributed to the development of more flexible and adaptable skills at work (Mulcahy & James 1999). One hundred and ninety-five (195) company training managers (or equivalent personnel) were each interviewed by telephone for approximately twenty minutes. The companies contacted were located in both metropolitan and regional areas of Australia, in seven States and Territories (New South Wales, Northern Territory, Queensland, South Australia, Tasmania, Victoria and Western Australia) and were selected largely from the four major industry sectors of Manufacturing, Services, Construction and Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing. Companies varied according to size (small — 1-19 employees; medium — 20-99 employees; large — over 99 employees) and a balanced sampling by size of establishment, location, State/Territory and industry was attempted and, for the most part, achieved.

Eight (8) intensive case studies of competency-based VET programs throughout Australia were also conducted. The selection of companies for these case studies was made according to the same criteria used above. Thus, case studies were undertaken in different industry sectors — Manufacturing (2), Services (2), Construction (2) and Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing (2). The case study companies were of various size (small, medium, large) and located in metropolitan and regional areas of Australia's States and Territories. The case studies involved participant observation of training programs and in-depth, semi-structured interviews (49) with a range of individuals with an investment in training: company manager, training manager, supervisor, trainer(s) and trainees.

COMPETENCY-BASED TRAINING: WHAT SKILL? WHOSE KNOWING?

In researching the impact of new management practices on training in Australian enterprises, Smith (1999, 115) notes that:

The focus of nationally accredited training has been on preparing people for specific jobs and occupations based on the competency standards developed on occupational lines. However, the competency standards focus on the technical skills required in a job or occupation. They rarely cover the broader, behavioural skills that employers seem to be seeking.

Griffin (1998, 8-9) provides a complementary view:

Without exception, the industry based training packages describe competencies in terms of task performance alone and this has led to competency being equated with checklists of tasks which in turn reinforce the status quo of industry practices.

The data on which this paper draws broadly support the above, competence being commonly conceived by interviewees as 'actually go(ing) and do(ing) it' — 'able to do the job that is described'. Thus, comments such as the following were quite common:

To be competent means that they can do all the tasks that are on their job sheets without the need of constant supervision and correction (*Company Manager, small wholesale tree nursery*).

(Being competent means) being able to do the job properly, safely and productively. So we are getting our production, they are doing the job safely, and properly, the way it should be done (*Trainer, large timber processing plant*).

A competency is a task that you have to do to a standard. I demonstrate exactly what is a competency and then show them exactly what it is that they have to achieve to be competent (*On-the-job Trainer, community housing construction project*).

[I]f the supervisor asked me to do some work down there, whether it is pruning or fertilising or using any of the chemicals, I should be able to go up and do it, without bugging the job up, so to speak (*Trainee, small wholesale tree nursery*)

CBT was described by the majority of training managers, with approval, as a 'practical', 'hands-on do programme', in which 'their (workers') performance on the job says it all'. Commonly conceived as 'specific skills for specific jobs', it is training that 'fit(s) directly into known skill sets' and is 'based on standard levels of competency in a particular field'. 'It's not book learning' or 'giving facts, information and technical knowledge'. In essence, it is training that meets job demands.

A 'practical' or performance-based discourse of CBT dominates in enterprises, emphasising the importance of the 'performativity principle' (Garrick 1998, 101, from Lyotard 1984, 44), which holds that the only really useful and valid knowledge is that which is instrumental, or operational, and is demonstrated in optimally efficient and effective performance. Thus what counts as occupational competence in industry and enterprises is the ability to perform at a specified standard: 'really know(ing) how to do it'. The locus of competency (locus of control) is 'outside' everyday work practice and practitioners: 'What we do is round off their knowledge and increase their competency base so that they can achieve ... as per the training package'. It resides in the formal skills requirements of specific occupations and jobs. Trainees tend not to author or construct these requirements, a curious situation given the emerging emphasis upon the individual in enterprise training (Smith 1999, 114). Ultimately, it is improved performance through proficiency in specific skills that employers seem to want from CBT. The focus on specific skills would seem to sit oddly with other broad behavioural requirements like taking responsibility and showing initiative which employers also appear to want. Our data suggest that these requirements are met in a variety of ways, including supplementing CBT with other training or exploiting the developmental potential in new organisational practices (eg. teamwork, project work).

OTHER(ED) COMPETENCE: '(I) AM LOOKING TO PUT BRAIN FOOD IN THERE'

As illustrated above, the performative discourse of CBT privileges technical-rational, operational knowledge, which is tangible and calculable. Some training managers were clearly concerned about this trend. Typical comments were as follows: '(CBT is) useful for skills development but not always effective when attitudinal/behavioural change is required, for example, a cultural shift'. '(With CBT) there is only short contact' and little 'support for people working through these changes'. 'Some competencies in Human Services are difficult to quantify (for example, attitudes, ethics, values) so (CBT) gets put in the "too hard basket"'. 'To be a nurse you have to like people and this is something that you can't measure'. 'Groups of competencies need to be linked effectively to bring about change. There is often a tendency to look at competencies as individual actions'.

The concerns expressed above emerged particularly from occupational areas such as Community Services and Health, Municipal Services, Education and Training, and Architecture, all of which espouse a 'professional' model of skill that includes problem-solving, reasoning and exercising judgement in the context of broad requirements (Bailey & Merritt 1995). In Health Services, for example, it was said that training is to produce 'assertive, informed carers' and, in Community Services, that philosophical standards had been developed 'to ensure that the moral, the ethical and the cultural are not forgotten' — 'to put back the bits that were missing'. Training managers from these areas were also concerned about the personal, as well as the professional, development of their staff that 'reflects in how everyone approaches (their) work'.

Such concerns were not exclusive to the above areas. In the logging industry, a training manager commented: 'CBT training focuses on machines and production to the detriment of a more comprehensive environmental care training'. Indeed, a number of training managers in Manufacturing companies expressed concern that leadership training, personal development and the 'soft', people skills were considered unimportant compared with technical proficiency. More extended comments reveal concern about the potential of CBT to develop social and cognitive skills:

You can make robots of people with CBT. (I) am looking to put brain food in there so that people can manage their work more effectively. Brain food might include teamwork, conflict resolution skills and so on. ... This company is moving towards a philosophy of Human Resource Development, that is, the overall training and development is tied into the strategic development of the company (*Training Manager, large light Manufacturing company*).

I have some concern with the concept of competencies in terms of training people in attitudinal or behavioural type areas. ... I believe that the competency stuff works very well with skills based and that's why it works with field staff and manufacturing and so on and so forth but when you get into areas of things like communication, inter-personal stuff, diversity, I think that you need groups of competencies or another approach to complement it (*Human Resources Manager, large local government organisation*).

I think somewhere within competency standards and competency based training you have to get away from: "This is the way you train somebody, this is the way you da, da, da, da". And have this dirty great big section on human relations dealing face to face with people and how you solve problems talking to people. ... We have to deal with people skills, social skills (*Supervisor, large timber processing plant*).

As might be anticipated, it is socio-cultural elements that present the greatest problem in using CBT. The contesting character of technical-functional elements and socio-cultural elements is clear. At the large local government organisation cited above, this contesting terrain is managed by means of running parallel programmes:

(The) move to team development has come parallel with competency-based training and they work very nicely together. ... You don't do one or the other, you need a nice balance of both sorts of things So I'd say that we're aiming to complement skills development with an actual cultural development and that takes time.

Similarly, on a farming property, psychological and social aspects of competence development are managed by means of working 'home-based training' (informal learning by children on the farm, 'from when they can reach the foot pedals of the vehicle') alongside competency-based training:

CBT supplements home-based training but is not a substitute (for it). ... CBT does not provide trainees with the confidence of those who learn via home-based training. ... a family member often knows how it (farm machinery) works before they are old enough to drive it and so finds developing the machinery skills not overpowering, not near as frightening.

Again, on another farm, tacit knowledge and experiential learning appear to create a problem for competency-based training:

A lot of knowledge (for example, workers' use of initiative and problem-solving skills) isn't competency-based, and so you can't assess on a competency level. ... Sometimes it's not what they know. You want them to be able to sort out the situation for themselves and this can't be assessed through CBT.

The success of CBT relies, on brokering the boundaries between 'objective' and 'subjective' dimensions of development, transferring some element of one dimension into another (Wenger 1998, 109). Overall, the data show that CBT is incomplete and inconsistent: it depends on things (eg. experience, informal learning, situated action, 'put(ing) back the bits that (are) missing') which it does not itself contain.

TWO-TIERED TRAINING PROVISION?: 'IT WORKS WELL IN THE MORE BASIC SKILL LEVELS'

In the views of most training managers, CBT lends itself well to developing basic and specific skills. It is considered particularly effective in relation to operator, trade and traineeship training: 'It works well in the more basic skill levels, but the higher up the tree you get the less CBT training is available, but it is harder for it to be specific'. By all accounts, the demand for skill changes significantly 'the higher up the tree you get'. Concerns were expressed that CBT may be imposed at higher, as well as basic, levels and undermine professional work. A cautionary note was struck by a Retail training manager who commented in relation to management training: 'But national standards can't pigeon-hole everyone ... it can reduce innovation. CBT can't be used for everything. We need to be careful how it's used'. Similarly, a Welfare Provider questioned the wisdom of developing competencies for social work.

The focus 'higher up the tree' is on 'generic competencies' in self-management, problem identifying, problem-solving, decision-making, strategic thinking, risk-taking, innovation and leadership: 'We are actually inserting some generic competencies in all job descriptions and particularly at senior levels we have a major thrust on leadership competencies'. While management training is provided through the VET system's Front-line Management Initiative, and senior managers undertake Australian Institute of Management courses, one training manager complained: 'These high powered managers, they don't believe they need training; they believe that they don't have time to invest in personal

development — perhaps because they need it most'. Post-graduate courses for management (not CBT) were mentioned in many companies, but more often it seemed that: 'Senior management training is limited, insignificant', or 'sporadic and not well-planned'. 'All we do is brush them up', said one interviewee. Yet, in relation to CBT: 'How can you measure something like the ability to develop policies?'

As discussed briefly above, concerns about CBT emerged particularly from occupational areas such as Community Services and Health, Municipal Services, Education and Training, and Architecture, all of which espouse a model of skill in line with the professional view of work which is less structured and more autonomous (Bailey & Merritt 1995, 30). This view (discourse, ideology) plays out in definitions of competency which are broader than 'specific skills for specific jobs'. Thus, in a large local government organisation, competency is conceived in relation to two things: (i) the requirements of jobs:

I would have a look at their job description and hopefully there would be an indicator there of the sorts of competencies required for that particular job. So it's in relation to what they actually perform (*Human Resources Manager*).

and (ii) the requirements of individuals:

We are moving towards competency-based job and person specifications so once they're established, I think that will lead us directly into competency-based training (*Trainer*).

A competent worker might be the person who fits the necessity of the job if you like. The person who has all of the skills, social and technical skills, leadership skills, necessary to fit the bill for that particular job (*Acting Chief Executive Officer*).

Unlike the bulk of the situations described above where competency is located outside individuals ('they can do all the tasks that are on their job sheets'), here, individuals, or, more accurately, attributes of individuals — 'the skills that you can bring to the job' — are part of the competence equation. In a 'professional' discourse of competency, most particularly the discourses of human resource management and development, improving performance is a matter of attending to job demands, the organisational environment, and attributes of individuals:

So we decided that we needed to have a major cultural change in the organisation to create a new culture, a competitive culture, customer focused culture, and bring up the level of professionalism and so on in the organisation (*Acting CEO, large local government organisation*).

[P]articularly at senior levels we have a major thrust on leadership competencies and we're in the process of developing all of that. We've got pretty much a draft competency list for that, that fits into our performance management system but the leadership competencies will actually use, will actually test individuals coming into the organisation on those sorts of competencies. Because that's where we see our future is — attracting highly qualified professional people with that ability to lead (*Human Resources Manager, ibid*).

Less emphasis is placed on specific, observable outcomes that can be reproduced through training and more on broad attributes of the individual that can be 'tied into the strategic development of the company'. Overall, this development is a matter of bringing various strategies together — competency identification, performance management, recruitment, selection, assessment ('testing') — and promoting the importance of competencies that go beyond seemingly straightforward jobs. These more complex competencies (self-management, problem-solving, decision-making and so on) are difficult to define simply as performances to a standard. They require the input (attributes) of 'highly qualified professional people with that ability to lead'.

BEYOND TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT: FUTURES FOR CBT

Germany is a country with a reputation for high average wage rates and quality training, leading some commentators to characterise it as 'having a high skills-high wage paradigm' (Attwell & Rauner 1999, 228). Unlike Australia and the UK (Goodwin et al. 1999), it might be thought to have taken the 'high road' for training and human resource development. Broadly, this road gives priority to developing knowledgeability in work, at all levels of the work process. It also tries to balance economic and social goals and achieve policy coherence across a wide range of fronts — the labour market, social welfare, industrial relations and education and training. Thus, the models of competency training that tend to be preferred by countries travelling this road emphasise outcomes that are broad and diverse.

In the data presented above, two broad models of VET are in evidence: a *training* model which emphasises competence in specific practices ('specific skills for specific jobs') and a *development* model which emphasises competence in generic practices ('things like communication, inter-personal stuff, diversity'). While these emphases differ considerably, both models are directed at achieving improved performance where performance is defined ultimately as economic performance:

(Being competent means) being able to do the job properly, safely and productively. So we are getting our production, they are doing the job safely, and properly, the way it should be done (*Trainer, large timber processing plant*).

We want the staff to be successful. I mean we've got a vision that when contestability comes we can actually be so skilled up and knowledgeable and so on that we can in fact take on work from surrounding councils and make a profit for the ratepayers of the city ... and reduce the reliance on rates. So we've got a much further vision than just surviving (*Acting CEO, large local government organisation*).

Neither model is directed at knowledgeability in work where knowledgeability is a means to ends other than economic improvement. Indeed, with the 'natural evolution' of a training model of VET, whose focus is jobs, into a (human resource) development model, whose (apparent) focus is individuals, this emphasis may increase:

The person-based structure of competency modelling is a natural evolution from the current job-based structure for competency modelling. Whole firm competencies will be structured to leverage organisational capability from individual career behaviours. The leveraging of an individual's motivation by appealing to his or her self-interest for continued employment and employability will dovetail with organisational needs to use human assets in settings that recognise the potential contribution people can make to improved competitiveness through the application of the unique human ability to be creative (Rothwell & Lindholm 1999, 101).

CBT is a highly contested terrain (James 2000; Mulcahy, 2000). Discourses other than training and development discourses wash through the empirical data, for example, critical, educational discourses: 'My definition of competency goes something like the way in which we can effect through the training programme a group of individuals who can be pro-active within their company and therefore can achieve a better work-place for themselves ... for the benefit of the company and themselves'. The most important consideration is not to close the competency account but rather create conditions of possibility where multiple competences (social, technical, economic, critical ...) are tolerated and possible and preferred futures are kept in view. New conceptions of competence need to be crafted. But which ones and by whom?

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