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For accurate communication of the outcomes of competence and attainment, a precision in the use of language in such statements will need to be established, approaching that of a science. The overall model stands or falls on how effectively we can state competence and attainment.

—Gilbert Jessup, 1991, p. 134

The assumption that everything of significance that can be experienced, or known, or communicated, is capable of being uttered in words would be too preposterous to merit a moment's entertainment were it not for the fact that it has underlain so much philosophy in the twentieth century ...

—Bryan Magee, 1998, p. 98

Is it possible to describe such things as skills and capabilities? Can they can be specified and communicated in sufficiently accurate and unequivocal terms by means of language? There is much to recommend the use of such descriptions if they are possible. They hold the promise of giving direction to the educational enterprise, of providing clarity of purpose and a curriculum unencumbered by the irrelevant or merely autochthonous. Having clear and precise descriptions of the skills or capabilities required might help counter the not uncommon tendency for the vocational curriculum to accumulate theory for theory's sake. Such descriptions might foster not only a more effective enterprise but also one which is more open, more accountable and more democratic, one in which the student can benefit from knowing in advance what is to be learnt and what is to be assessed. Indeed, the prospect of precise descriptions is of particular import in the context of assessment, where it has one especially important consequence. For if such descriptions are possible, then it would seem that we are duty-bound to dispense with considerations relating to the kind of preparation a person has received as a measure of fitness to practise in an occupation. Fairness, not to say common sense, would require us to disregard such 'inputs' and afford priority to the overriding issue of whether a person has attained the capabilities described—whether they are competent.

Such sentiments go a long way towards explaining the appeal and increasing prevalence of so-called 'competence'- or 'outcomes'-based approaches in education—approaches perhaps more appropriately identified as 'statement-based', characterised

as they are by the singular assumption that human capabilities can be sufficiently and meaningfully represented in statement form (Lum, 1999). The idea that such descriptions are possible thus underpins a great deal of current educational policy-making and practice in both the UK and Australia where these approaches have been widely adopted. It is perhaps extraordinary that these strategies have gained such widespread acceptance and been afforded such unqualified official approval whilst the very assumption upon which they are based seems hardly to have received any attention. What makes this all the more remarkable is that there would appear to be profound and irrevocable difficulties with the idea that competence can be specified in clear and precise terms.

It is not being suggested that we are incapable of indicating the ends of vocational education in some broad or general way. Indeed, some expression of ultimate aim might reasonably be regarded as a prerequisite to any meaningful educational endeavour. There is nothing unduly problematic, for example, in our determining that a maintenance engineer should, amongst other things, be able to 'maintain engineering assets' and that training should be directed towards that end. However, for those anticipating a precise and unequivocal description of what the engineer should be capable of, a statement such as this is disappointingly devoid of content; as vacuous as it is innocuous, it raises more questions than it answers. What kind of 'engineering assets' are to be maintained? it will be asked. Under what circumstances or in what contexts might this task be performed? What exactly is meant by 'maintain'? Whilst those familiar with the role in question would doubtless find such a statement replete with potential meanings and pregnant with educational possibilities, it could hardly be said to specify, in clear and unambiguous terms, what it is to be competent.

It is at this juncture that those intent on arriving at a more precise description will take a characteristic and, it will turn out, quite crucial step. For it will be presumed that this ambiguity is to be remedied by the creation of further, more specific statements intended to stand in relation to the first, we might say, as sub-statements. On this view the specification that the student be able to 'maintain engineering assets' might be given requisite substance by adding further statements specifying, for instance, the kind of assets to be maintained, the various circumstances or contexts in which the task might be carried out, perhaps detailing along the way any relevant standards, health and safety regulations, and so on. The perception is of an hierarchical, vertically structured framework in which generic statements derive meaning from more specific or more detailed sub-statements. This is the stock approach of 'functional analysis' and it is a strategy very much in evidence in the 'learning outcomes', 'range statements' and 'performance criteria' that characterise outcomes-based curricula and competence-based assessment procedures.

Yet this supposed breaking down of educational objectives is not at all what it seems. The idea that this second group of statements simply represents a more specific or detailed rendering of the first is thrown into doubt when we consider *what* these statements describe. In the case of an occupation such as engineering, for example, they will inevitably be centred on the various equipment, machines, tools, in other words the *things* the engineer may encounter. Few would find anything surprising

or untoward about this and, significantly, many would find it difficult to conceive of how else such an occupation might be specified. Certainly, such descriptions have the advantage of allowing an inordinate degree of precision. Nonetheless, it might be said that there is something distinctly odd about the idea that protracted lists of artefacts and equipment can somehow constitute an *educational* specification. It might reasonably be asked how an inventory of equipment, however detailed, can represent what it is to be skilled or competent.

The issue is brought into sharper relief when we contrast this with the function of the originating, generic statement. For to state, as an expression of educational intent, that the student should be able to 'maintain engineering assets' is above all to say something about the *person*, it is to say something about what we as educators aim to achieve with respect to that person and their capabilities. There is thus a quite radical ontological disparity between what is intended by the generic statement and what is described by its ostensible sub-statements. It would seem that in moving from one kind of statement to the other we shift not to a more precise description of the same thing but, rather, to a description of something else. The implicit assumption that these two kinds of statement stand in some hierarchical relation to each other is mistaken, for what we take to be sub-statements will often be such as to facilitate a *sideways* shift in our attention towards an ontology which is at some remove from the object of our original intentions.

Clearly, not all occupations would or could be described in terms of artefacts and equipment; indeed, if we were to scrutinise a range of specifications for different roles, we would find references to any number of things, including processes, procedural rules, behavioural traits, items of factual knowledge, values, attitudes, kinds of physical dexterity, documents or texts, to name but a few. But the fact that different occupations might be specified in such ontologically disparate terms only underscores the profoundly contingent nature of such descriptions. The elliptical notion that we are simply describing 'tasks' obscures the substantive issue of *what* is being described and *why*.

Any human involvement presents, potentially, an array of manifestations which, in teleological terms, might be thought of as forming a continuum stretching outwards from the person to their intended end; that is, from person to object. It is not without significance that from the perspective of instrumental rationality the direction of this continuum is reversed: i.e. from object to person. Notwithstanding this contrariety, if we trace the path of this continuum we can see that it may involve any number of distinct ontologies each of which may or may not be included in a specification. In describing the work of a craftsman, for example, we may choose to specify the finished product, or we might describe the kinds of materials worked to achieve that end, or the various tools or machines employed; we might describe the procedures adopted, the rules followed; we might detail the kinds of dexterity needed to use the equipment; we might choose to itemise certain behavioural traits; or, at the far end of this continuum, we might try to articulate what it is the craftsman understands, and the kinds of judgements or other mental processes that might be brought to bear in carrying out the task. Now we might choose to describe all or just some of these manifestations. But the crucial point here is that we are

necessarily involved in making certain decisions, we have to *choose* what to describe and how to describe it.

Our aspiring to produce the most comprehensive specification does nothing to rid us of this choice. For as Friederich Waismann recognised, there is no logical solution to the question of what counts as a sufficient or complete description:

If I had to describe (this) right hand of mine, which I am now holding up, I may say different things about it: I may state its size, its shape, its colour, its tissue, the chemical compound of its bones, its cells, and perhaps some more particulars; but however far I go I shall never reach a point where my description will be completed: logically speaking, it is always possible to extend the description by adding some detail or other. (Waismann, 1951, pp. 121–122)

So in specifying just one aspect of a task, a line has to be drawn somewhere, and hence a decision has to be made where it is drawn. It follows, then, that implicit in any specification are a whole range of judgements, not only about which aspects are to be regarded as relevant, but also about what counts as a sufficient description of any aspect and thus, by inference, the relative emphasis placed on each aspect. Once we become sensitive to their substantive ontological focus—rather than accepting at face value the idea that they simply describe ‘tasks’—we can see that specifications are often far from comprehensive; indeed, we begin to appreciate just how narrow and highly selective their focus may be. To take our previous example, by listing in great detail the equipment to be worked on whilst simultaneously leaving unarticulated and indeterminate the issue of what is meant by ‘maintain’, the ontological focus of the statement ‘maintain engineering assets’ is shifted away from the person towards the object. Such a statement would typically be characterised as a ‘behavioural objective’ yet quite plainly it is not focused on behaviour at all. In fact, a specification might often be focused on surprisingly few of the many different manifestations of capability that lie between the person and their ultimate end. But the most important thing here is what it is that determines that focus; why priority is ascribed to one thing rather than another, and why different occupations might come to be described in very different terms.

It is true, of course, that different roles require us to do and know different things, but this commonplace serves to conceal the extent to which radically different modes of description come to be accepted as appropriate for different occupations. To take just one example, the entirely contingent matter of whether or not an occupation happens to have some clearly identifiable, concrete outcome such as a manufactured product will invariably have a significant bearing on how that occupation is specified. An occupation which has such an outcome will almost certainly be described, to a greater or lesser extent, in terms of that object. Yet a role which might be acknowledged to be not dissimilar in terms of the understandings and skills required, but having some far less tangible outcome, necessarily will be specified in very different terms—perhaps in terms of behaviour, rules, procedures, or some other feature. Not only is this sufficient to controvert the often implicit assumption that specifications are always directed at instrumental ends, but it serves to indicate

what it is that determines the substantive focus of any specification, what it is that causes the focus to settle on one thing rather than another. For if such ontologically diffuse specifications can be said to have anything in common, any shared rationale, it is that they are inclined to describe the most readily discernible features of an occupation, those features most favourably disposed to precise description. In short, they gravitate towards what *can* be described rather than perhaps what *ought* to be described.

Of all the various manifestations of human capability the least tangible and the least disposed to precise explication are those centred in the person: the understandings, the capacities for judgement, imagination, problem-solving and the host of other propensities and proficiencies that are so vital for competent action. There is thus an important sense in which the inclusion of these attributes is fundamentally incompatible with the demand for a specification which is precise and unambiguous. The practical repercussions of this are far-reaching. Inevitably, the more ungainly and rudimentary specifications—of which there are many examples within the UK's system of National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs)—will focus upon the more readily discernible features of performance and neglect these all-important attributes. Such specifications will be characterised by their critics as being detrimentally behaviourist or mechanistic—which in their effects, of course, they are. But these are shortcomings born more of philosophical naïvety than of a flawed concept of mind—motivated only by the bureaucratic imperative for clarity and precision.

Our first instinct might be to suppose that this neglect would be most deleterious for those occupations more obviously reliant upon these attributes: the professions, for example. Except that with those occupations this tendency is offset by the fact that this reliance *is* more obvious. But the skewing of specifications towards the more concrete manifestations of capability might be seen to be of particular detriment to those occupations involved with making and doing—i.e. the crafts and blue-collar occupations—simply because those occupations present far greater opportunity for resort to descriptions of artefacts, equipment, etc. Competence in plumbing is likely to be regarded as sufficiently delineated by descriptions of boilers, wrenches and temperature settings, in contrast to competence in, say, law or management, where there may not be the same recourse to an equivalent ontology. It is not difficult to recognise the intensely divisive consequences of this, how easy it is to become ensnared in the socially and educationally damaging dualisms that have long beleaguered vocational education. But of no less concern is the possibility—barely credible though it may seem—that, in practice, the inclusion of person-centred attributes within a specification often may derive less from any particularly distinct conception of those attributes than from the contingent fact of there being little else to describe.

What is surely beyond doubt is that the acknowledgement of these person-centred attributes is crucial for any coherent account of vocational capability. As Paul Hager and David Beckett aptly put it:

occupational competency standards that omit to incorporate attributes such as knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, etc. are akin to a zoo without animals. (Hager & Beckett, 1995, p. 2)

Hager and Beckett argue the case most cogently for an ‘integrated conception of competence’; that is, a conception that ‘integrates attributes with key tasks’ (ibid.) and thus—in terms of the present discussion—widens the focus of the specification to include both person and object. This more comprehensive approach certainly highlights the shortcomings of the more naïve attempts to specify occupational competence. But one difficulty here—one often encountered in talk about ‘conceptions’ of competence—is a tendency to compound two very different things: on the one hand, ‘conception’ as meaning some notion or idea as it appears, to put it crudely, in our head; on the other, ‘conception’ as meaning a notion or idea as it appears in articulated or written form. Clearly, if everything that can be conceived is capable of being uttered in words, then the need to make this distinction disappears. But in the context of the present discussion to conflate these two different meanings is to beg the very question being posed. Suffice it to say that the fundamental doubts concerning our capacity to specify the most important yet least tangible features of vocational capability remain unassuaged. Hager and Beckett themselves affirm the essentially incorporeal nature of such attributes, acknowledging that

competence is inferred from performance, rather than being directly observed. While performance of tasks is directly observable, abilities or capabilities that underlie the performance are necessarily inferred. (Hager & Becket, 1995, p. 3)

We might say, then, that on this view a specification might include two kinds of statement: those which refer to concrete ontologies for which there is direct evidence and those which refer to person-centred aspects of performance, the presence of which must be inferred either from behaviour or the consequences of behaviour. Inference is thus a crucial feature of the integrated conception of competence:

it is clear that, without the integrative inference, the integrated approach would collapse into naïve behaviourism, because all that would be available is observable, i.e. behaviour. (Hager & Beckett, 1995, p. 10)

Now I think that Hager and Beckett are right to place inference at the centre of their conception of competence; indeed, as we shall see, the notion of inference would seem to be of central importance to any coherent understanding of educational provision and assessment. The question now is not so much whether we can describe capabilities sufficiently but, rather, the extent to which it is possible for us to infer competence from evidence of the things that can be described, whether we are justified in making inferences from the more concrete manifestations of capability. In what follows we will see that this raises fundamental issues about philosophical method.

Ryle, Heidegger and the Problem of the ‘Tumbling Man’

In our everyday lives we habitually use terms such as ‘competent’, ‘clever’, ‘intelligent’, ‘sensible’, ‘stupid’, and so on, to predicate the mental attributes of others. Yet, as Gilbert Ryle argued in *The Concept of Mind*, the evidence upon which we base such

judgements appears, on the face of it, to be profoundly limited. We cannot, for instance, look inside someone's head; we can only see how that person behaves and make inferences from that behaviour. As Ryle puts it:

When we describe people as exercising qualities of mind, we are not referring to occult episodes of which their overt acts and utterances are effects; we are referring to those overt acts and utterances themselves. (Ryle, 1949, p. 25)

Ryle's point about the kind of evidence it is possible for us to have access to is certainly compelling; our sense of unease about it stems from its apparently inescapable behaviourist consequences. How, for example, are we to account for the fact that we are able to recognise a performance as skilful if not by resort to descriptions of behaviour? His solution, as the following passage illustrates, was to introduce the notion of 'dispositions':

a skill is not an act. It is therefore neither a witnessable nor an unwitnessable act. To recognise that a performance is an exercise of skill is indeed to appreciate it in the light of a factor which could not be separately recorded by a camera. But the reason why the skill exercised in a performance cannot be separately recorded by a camera is not that it is an occult or ghostly happening, but that it is not a happening at all. It is a disposition, or a complex of dispositions ... (1949, p. 33)

On Ryle's view, then, we are able to distinguish between the tripping and tumbling of a skilful clown and the 'visibly similar trippings and tumblings of a clumsy man' not because we see something extra in the clown's performance, nor because we have access to some internal, 'extra hidden performance executed "in his head"' (ibid.), but because the clown has a *disposition* to behave in a particular way. Significantly, this implies that our judging a performance to be skilful is dependent upon our having a *sufficiency* of evidence—a requirement usually made explicit in competence-based assessment procedures.

But it seems to me that this simply won't do, either as an account of how we make such judgements, or as a way of preventing the slide into behaviourism. The crucial point missed by Ryle is that it is not the clown's disposition but, rather, the dispositions of his audience that are vital here. It is how the *spectator* is disposed to see the performance which determines whether the clown's skilfulness is recognised and differentiated from merely accidental or clumsy behaviour. It is the spectator who is predisposed by past experience of, say, the kind of things that tend to happen in circus tents and the sort of appearance that clowns tend to have. And it is the spectator who is predisposed to interpret what he sees according to the context in which he perceives it: subconsciously picking up clues from the context of the performance, perhaps subtle nuances in the clown's behaviour before he began to fall about, the reactions of other performers, and of the other spectators, etc. Of course, the clown's dispositions are significant too: it is necessary that there is some correspondence between the clown's idea of what a clown is and does and that of the audience; and a good performer might also have an eye to the kind of

contextual clues by which he might predispose his audience to respond in the way he wants. But the clown's dispositions are quite literally meaningless except within the wider context of the dispositions of those he seeks to entertain.

So, with due deference to Ryle, we can say that a skill *is* a witnessable act but it is not a witnessable act in any sense that would satisfy a positivist. A skill is not something that can be witnessed by some 'objective', detached viewer but only by someone who is predisposed to see the world in a particular way. If we adopt Ryle's view of the agent as a disengaged, passive, neutral spectator—a view which, for Ryle, is a corollary of his logical positivism (see Rorty, 1980)—behaviourist consequences are inescapable. But such consequences are avoided if we reject this view in favour of a conception of human agency characterised more by what Charles Taylor (1997) has described as being 'engaged with or at grips with the world' (p. 23), a view of the agent as essentially embodied, an agent whose world is shaped partly by such embodiment and partly by being engaged in shared social practices and forms of life.

Just such a conception is found in Martin Heidegger's famous account, in *Being and Time* (Heidegger, 1962), of Being-in-the-world, and an account of human capability in these terms points to a very different conception of know-how than that outlined by Ryle. As I have argued elsewhere (Lum, 2003), it suggests that vocational capability is first and foremost about being able to perceive and make sense of a 'world' of profoundly interconnected meanings and involvements, a world that is constituted by our understandings and given coherence by virtue of the purposes, goals and priorities we come to hold in common with a community of practitioners. Such understandings, I have suggested, are the very essence of intelligent practice—without them our capacity to recite certain facts or behave in certain ways can be nothing more than empty utterances or unthinking, mechanical actions.

Ryle and Heidegger both share a concern to put practicality at the core of human intelligence and there is even reason to believe that Ryle may have been influenced by *Being and Time*. But whatever leanings *The Concept of Mind* might have towards Heidegger, it is a work very much of its time and place, a time when British philosophy became preoccupied with the use of language and philosophical problems came to be perceived as essentially linguistic problems. Ryle's prime concern, in the manner of Oxford philosophy, is with our *descriptions* of the mental, with what we *mean* when we use words such as 'intelligent' or 'clever'; and, as is typical of work of linguistic analysis, *The Concept of Mind* assimilates questions about things in the world to questions about the meanings of words, often conflating the two and treating answers to the latter as though they were answers to the former.

Now what is hugely significant about this is that Ryle's conception of practicality, in contrast to that of Heidegger's, is circumscribed by what it is possible for us to mean when we make statements about the capabilities of others and this, in turn, is delimited by the kinds of evidence it is possible for us to have access to when we make such statements. The difficulties which beset Ryle's account—its ineluctable behaviourism and its consequent failure to account for how we distinguish a skilful performance from accidental behaviour—are the direct consequence of a conception of human capability circumscribed by what it is possible for us to

observe and describe. On this view, knowledge itself is characterised and classified in terms of the kinds of evidence we can claim to possess: either a knowing *that*, derived from evidence of what people can state, or a knowing *how*, derived from evidence of what they can do (a distinction duplicated, we might note, in the competence approach's 'underpinning knowledge' and 'performance criteria').

By way of contrast, Heidegger's phenomenological account of *Dasein*, the 'there-being' of human existence, shows just how rich our conception of human capability can be when our thinking is given free rein and not restricted to what can be included in a specification—when it is based upon what it *is* to be competent rather than what it is possible to have evidence of. Not least, we are able to see that 'knowing that' and 'knowing how' are not two basic epistemological categories but merely the secondary, derivative and evidential manifestations of the understandings substantively at issue. That such understandings are essentially non-discursive is only to be expected given that our capacity to use language is itself dependent upon them. And it is thus that the challenge for philosophers, as Heidegger understood all too well, is to find ways of communicating such a conception.

An account of vocational capability in these terms—what I have elsewhere (Lum, 2003) termed 'constitutive understandings'—controverts not only the theoretical and philosophical assumptions underpinning the competence approach, but also many longstanding assumptions about vocational education generally. The mistaken idea that vocational education can be non-problematically related to definite ends open to precise specification is one which runs through much of the literature; and this error is sustained by the equally mistaken epistemological assumption that there are essentially two kinds of knowledge, a knowing how and a knowing that, ostensibly describable in terms of objects/behaviours and facts/statements respectively. As we shall see, our rejecting these assumptions has important implications for curriculum design and assessment in vocational education.

Implications for Current Practice in Vocational Education

In spite of the obvious difficulty we have in describing competence there will always be a reluctance to abandon the idea that a sufficient account can be provided by simply itemising the more concrete features of an occupation. Certainly this will be sufficient to satisfy accountants, managers or politicians for whom it is quite satisfactory to infer competence from the hard facts relating to artefacts, outputs, behaviours, production figures or league tables. It is only to be expected that *their* priorities will be couched in terms of such ends. But the crucial thing here is that an account made in these terms is not an *educational* account. To put it bluntly, to describe an artefact is not to describe the skill needed to make it. There is, I want to suggest, a fundamental distinction to be made between instrumental ends and educational ends. It should be stressed that this is not simply to reiterate the traditional demarcation between the vocational and the non-vocational; indeed, the distinction I am proposing cuts across that traditionally drawn between the vocational and the liberal, for the liberal too has its own instrumental ends. It might be said that educators could be more forceful in establishing this distinction in the public

consciousness, making it clear that the failure to distinguish educational from merely instrumental ends—at root an ontological discrepancy induced by the expectation of a precise specification—can only be to the detriment of educational provision.

None of this is to deny that vocational provision should ultimately be directed at, or be such as to cater for instrumental ends. Neither is it to say that we should abandon all attempts to specify the educational enterprise. Rather, it is to draw attention to the very special role of the educator in *inferring* from such ends, first, the nature of the capabilities required, i.e. the *educational* ends, and, second, the kind of procedures most likely to instil those capabilities in the student. It is an account of these procedures which will provide us with the most meaningful specification—our attempting to create anything but the most equivocal descriptions of the capabilities required will only cause us to slide back into descriptions of objects, behaviours, etc. This answers in part the question posed by Gilbert Jessup: ‘If you cannot say what you require, how can you develop it and how do you know you have achieved it’ (1991, p. 134).

This brings us to the issue of assessment. One consequence of abandoning the traditional, dichotomous model of knowledge is that we can break free of the idea that practical and theoretical test procedures function to assess two corresponding forms of knowledge. This prospect raises all kind of issues for assessment, far too numerous to go into at length here. Not least of these is the possibility that theory tests, properly designed—that is, designed to test the understandings substantively at issue rather than the capacity to assimilate facts—might be a far more legitimate means of testing ostensibly ‘practical’ capabilities than is generally supposed. But one issue raised by the present discussion deserves special consideration here. Criticism of competence-based assessment is sometimes taken to be an attack on practical testing *per se* and I think it is important to be clear that the question here is not whether there is a place in vocational education and training for the practical testing of skills and abilities. Practical tests—that is, tests centred on the tasks the student is being trained to perform—have been an indispensable part of the preparatory process for many occupations since long before the advent of competence/outcomes approaches. Yet the traditional function of such tests, their true purpose in the scheme of things, is something that is rarely commented upon. Certainly, they will often be the principal means, sometimes the only means we have to gauge the effectiveness of *our* endeavours as educators, indicating how we might modify or concentrate our efforts to best effect for the individual learner. But whatever the usefulness of such tests for the educator, the overarching issue in vocational education will always be that of fitness to practise, and it is here that the distinction between practical testing and competence-based assessment is at its most apparent. The estimation as to whether a person is fit for practice—and it can only ever be an estimation—is potentially of such serious consequence that it carries with it the responsibility to include every consideration and employ every possible means in order to make that estimation as reliable as possible. It is thus that for all but the most simple, unvarying activities, the facts relating to the kind of preparation a trainee has received, the kind of procedures they have been exposed to, inevitably will be included in this estimation. Of course, without some indication as to the

effectiveness of these procedures such facts are of limited value. It is in this capacity that tests, and in particular practical tests, function as a valuable indicator of the student's capabilities, not because we deem the ability to perform successfully in such tests to be equivalent to vocational capability, but because it indicates the likely effectiveness of those procedures—their effectiveness is *inferred* from the student's performance.

In contrast, the competence approach presupposes just this kind of equivalence. For it follows from the logic of the approach, in particular its claim that standards contain all that is required for competence, that to meet the specified standards is to *be* competent. Whereas success in a practical test would be at most a necessary condition of fitness to practise, attainment of the requisite 'competences' *must* be a sufficient condition: we are therefore compelled to dispense with all other considerations in determining fitness to practise in an occupation. The burden thus carried by competence statements is such that any doubt about the capacity we have to describe competence undermines the entire project. It is no defence to argue that competence assessments are at least as thorough as traditional testing methods, if not more so. If the purpose of a practical test is to indicate the effectiveness of the procedures we have employed, there is no inconsistency in our conceding that practical tests do not measure all that is required for competence, that they can never be entirely comprehensive or achieve the kind of validity we might aspire to. It is acceptable that they merely fulfil their intended purpose as far as is reasonably practicable. But there is no room for such half-measures with competence specifications; either they do describe competence or they do not, and if they do not then the logic of the approach collapses. We should be clear that this is not merely a quantitative shortfall in which some capabilities are successfully described but others not, but rather, a *qualitative* discrepancy which cuts across all the capabilities contained within a specification.

Ultimately, the essentially non-discursive nature of human capability can be seen to have important ramifications for both curriculum design and assessment in vocational education and training. It certainly raises serious doubts about the wisdom of an approach based on the assumption that it is possible to describe competence in precise detail. It would seem that in the last analysis present arrangements can only provide us with an impoverished and insufficient account of the educational enterprise and a mode of assessment which inevitably falls short of what it sets out to do.

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