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What is Wrong with Competence?

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ABSTRACT *The controversy centred on the notion of competence involves epistemological, ethical, and political considerations. Progress with analysing these objections entails classifying such criticisms into those which are integral to the concept of competence, and those which are not. Problems and their resolution can then be conducted within an appropriate framework. Ethical and political considerations concern the appropriateness or otherwise of competence-based schemes within the values of a democratic society. Objections on these grounds, though serious, are not considered fatal to competence-based schemes and they can be met by including more traditional courses within a person's total educational experience. However, analysis reveals that epistemological problems are the most serious difficulties facing competence-based schemes. Competence-based schemes appear to be committed to two different theories of knowledge and meaning. On the one hand, behavioural performances presume that knowing means behaving in a required fashion, and on the other hand, underpinning knowledge presumes that knowing means possessing the causal mental concepts which produce the required behaviour. Such a position is fundamentally incoherent, with the result that such schemes need reformulating with one coherent theory of meaning and one agreed epistemology.*

Introduction

Competence-based courses have become an established feature of post-compulsory education and training, hereafter written as PCET, ranging from initial teacher training programmes to level 1 NVQs in catering. The plethora of criticism that has fallen on competence (Hyland, 1993, 1994, 1997) makes it difficult to give an objective assessment of what is wrong with this model. As a first step towards analysing the objections to competence an attempt should be made to disentangle criticisms by classifying them into epistemological, ethical and political objections. Only then can differences with the competence model be adequately assessed and either accepted or dismissed.

Epistemology

Initially, it seems that there is little to criticise with the competence model in terms of its requirements for knowledge. Contrary to the opinions of some critics, the

competence model appears to satisfy traditional demands for rigour in knowledge. If one takes the traditional model of knowing as:

'*a* knows that *p*', is equivalent to:

- (1) *p* is true;
- (2) *a* believes that *p*; and
- (3) *a*'s belief in *p* is justified,

then the competence model appears to acquit itself reasonably well. Awarding bodies concerned with competence surely present a programme of true beliefs and assess their students accordingly? There might be some room for dispute over justification, but it is the case that modern competence schemes stipulate certain underpinning knowledge and assessors are free to test that knowledge by means of questions. The schemes, then, provide for justification and therefore not only is it possible to check that the student performs the relevant action, but also that he or she knows why that particular action is performed at that stage. Why then the controversy?

Some might object that the competence model is built on a crude behaviourism that equates knowing with a performance. In the past such allegations may have been well founded. Certainly, there is a crude theory of meaning which equates mental terms with overt behaviour, which indeed maintains that mental terms are just the behaviour in question. But such opinions are surely belied by the existence of underpinning knowledge in modern competence schemes. This implicitly recognises problems connected with the assessment of knowledge based on behaviour. For example, the student may have connected the correct wires on the basis of a lucky guess, or because he or she was told which wires to connect by a course member in the corridor. However, the assessment process deals with this on the basis of justification through questioning.

In any case, the problem of the lucky guess and the happy accident is not one peculiar to competence-based schemes. The fact that there are continued attempts in the theory of knowledge to deal with examples of this kind demonstrates that the traditional approach to knowledge faces exactly the same issues (Dancy, 1987; Hamlyn, 1970). The student in an 'A' level class may indeed have made a lucky guess or been given a helpful prompt by a friend. Questioning will again be needed to pursue the issue of justification and a decision will have to be made on the sufficiency of the process. The NVQ assessor will be in the same position as the 'A' level teacher in this respect. Both will need to make a decision on how much questioning is needed as evidence of knowledge. Given the existence of underpinning knowledge in competence schemes and the facility to ask questions which is available to the assessor, it is difficult to see where the problem lies in relation to knowledge with competence schemes.

Critics might allege that competence-based schemes have introduced an inferior kind of knowledge into education. There is now the academic knowledge of the 'A' level class and the practical knowledge of the NVQ course. It is true that the latter may well be more concerned with the knowledge of how to do something, whereas

the 'A' level scheme may well be more concerned with something being the case. However, the difference should not be overemphasised. Successful practice, though it requires more than inert theoretical principles, can demand extensive knowledge that something is the case. Wiring a house successfully requires knowledge of the properties of electricity; injecting a patient skilfully requires knowledge of physiology; the veterinary surgeon completing a deft repair to an animal's ear knows more than how to produce successful stitching. Under such circumstances, practical skill is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for success, just as knowledge of certain principles is a necessary but not a sufficient condition of success. In fact, both practical skill and knowledge of certain principles are jointly sufficient for success. This should warn against any scheme in which practical knowledge is rigidly separated from theoretical knowledge. The tendency to bifurcate knowledge of how to do something and knowledge that something is the case arises when too many examples of very basic practical skills are selected for analysis.

From the knowledge perspective, the question still arises, then, what is wrong with competence? The difficulty arises from the whole notion of underpinning knowledge. It appears that there are two separate features in a competence-based course: performances and underpinning knowledge. Indeed, some might argue that underpinning knowledge appears to be bolted on to competence-based courses, as an afterthought. However, the fact remains that in such courses there is provision for performances and underpinning knowledge as discrete entities. It is important to perceive that such a division is not merely epistemically unsound, but it is also untenable in terms of meaning. One radical criticism that can then be made is that competence courses actually operate two different models of meaning which render them incoherent. Underpinning knowledge, associated with knowledge that something is the case, is a function of mental terms as inner causal entities, whereas performance jargon equates knowledge with the doing of certain operation. For the latter, to say that *a* knows how to word process in side-by-side paragraphs just is for *a* to word process in side-by-side paragraphs. If knowing is equated with the successful performance of a given skill, then the test of whether someone knows something lies in successfully carrying out that operation.

It is important to note that this is a more radical challenge to competence than simply arguing that *a* successfully carrying out a word processing operation is not a sufficient, though a necessary condition, of *a*'s knowing how to use side-by-side paragraphing. For example, *a* may have made a lucky guess on the keyboard. Whilst this exposes the asymmetrical relationship between behaviour and beliefs, one can argue that competence schemes provide for the checking of such a situation by questioning to ascertain underpinning knowledge. The challenge now considered is the more drastic one of alleging that the scheme both equates knowing with a performance, and tries to buttress the position by then invoking knowing as an intellectual operation, such that *a*'s knowledge of word processing means that he/she can then complete a successful performance. The challenge is not even that the successful performance is the outcome of the causal process of knowing; it is the more drastic position of alleging that the scheme is invoking two incompatible theories of the meaning of mental terms. The scheme is defining knowing both as an

inner causal concept and then denying any inner causal role by stipulating knowing as an overt performance. Such a position is incoherent. It is to invoke subsequently that which one has previously denied. Either knowing is a causal mental act or it is an outward behavioural performance. It will not do to argue that assessors are supposed to assess both the outward act in terms of the performance and the inner state in terms of underpinning knowledge. Competence schemes need to reform their concept of mental terms. It is one thing to recognise that knowing terminates in a performance; it is quite another to insist that knowing just is the successful performance. Yet in distinguishing between performance and underpinning knowledge, and placing the emphasis on testing performances, competence schemes bifurcate precisely where they should consolidate.

In fact such a situation goes some way to acquit teachers and assessors in their behaviour of simply focusing upon performance. If knowing how to change a fuse simply is the act of changing the fuse then it is hardly surprising that teachers and assessors should concentrate upon the act of knowing and not seek either to introduce or to verify any further knowledge component. For if knowing is a performance, what else could such a knowledge component be other than a further operation in changing the fuse?

Ethical Objections

Objections to competence, however, may not be restricted to reservations on grounds of epistemological theory. There may be criticisms of competence that are ethical in nature. Here the task is to disentangle objections to competence courses that are primarily reservations concerning programme design and content from those which are criticisms of competence *per se*. Objectors to the former may see competence-based courses as severely constraining learners to vocationally exclusive activities, rather than providing students with a more liberal course containing both general educational and vocational elements. Here, the objection is to the balance of the programme rather than the principle of competence. The weaknesses of competence can be remedied by liberal components in the remainder of the course. That such reservations are primarily valuative can be seen from the fact that education is a selective and purposive activity, providing some experiences rather than others. To provide a curriculum for a course is to commend that course in some way; it is implied that such an experience is good and ought to be followed. In the case of a course that was exclusively competence based, the argument would be that such a course was good in terms of providing a means to the end of employment, or at least the possession of vocational skills. The same position gives implicit approval to an instrumental role for education.

To provide a course that is exclusively vocational is, then, a value position as much as any curriculum choice within education. It is to harness the development of individuals to the demands of the economic system rather than, for example, to give them increasingly sophisticated ways of knowing and analysing the society around them. It should never be forgotten that different models of educational provision are possible, of which an instrumental position is only one. Such a position

subverts the pupil and student educational role to the position of a future employee, rather, for example, than a future citizen, and denies him or her access to wider choices and horizons. It also denies any further opportunity for the development of the student's conceptual framework, whereby he or she can increase their capacity for reflecting on the world and on their own future. It is, in a real sense, to halt the development of mind, by substituting a set of behavioural performances for further progress in conceptual schemes which would permit a more comprehensive and subtle view of the world.

A further ethical feature of competence models is their prescriptive and authoritarian nature. Certainly, there may be very good reasons for prescribing the steps for wiring a house in a particular order. Here the student is working within a means–end situation. But it is quite another issue whether an authoritarian model for progressive skill development should operate as an educational model. In the skill development situation, there are issues of value concerning the parameters of training themselves which are not matters for debate. For example, whether or not a society should have nuclear power is not an issue in training nuclear technicians; it is a given parameter which is above question. Whether in fact the economic system should proceed in the way that it does, or organise work in the way that it does, are matters of ethics which do not come within the purview of the student on the competence-based course. This is not simply a matter of contingent issues about the composition of such courses, rather it is the difference between a behaviourist model which proceeds on the basis of right and wrong responses versus a model which recognises that morality is inherent in most institutional arrangements. The issue of whether it is in fact desirable to have people engaged in keyboard skills for so many hours a day in PCET, for example, is an issue of value on which the training of these people, with its prescriptive content and methods, is not going to encourage reflection of any kind. It is not merely the content of competence-based programmes which constrains, but the method of continually responding to what is laid down as omnipotent and omniscient. To the extent that persons experience competence courses, not merely will they be deprived of an ethical dimension in their lives, they will be inured to such considerations.

Whilst the competence repertoire may perhaps empower the student for a work role, the same schemes fail to empower the student, not merely for wider reflections on the world, but in dealing with agencies which have power over the person by virtue of possessing greater conceptual sophistication and language. For example, the student may well be faced with dealings with agencies such as law or finance, in one form or another. The person who has been empowered by conceptual schemes will have a much greater degree of confidence and involvement in such a situation than the person who has been thoroughly rehearsed in behavioural skills. Indeed, the person who has been restricted to a repertoire of behavioural skills has been used to cater for the demands of the economic system. Such a person has only been empowered in the narrowest sense. A society that limits the development of the person in this way is treating the individual as a means rather than as an end.

Where competence forms the main diet of a person's experience in an institution, such an education is fundamentally an illiberal one. It constrains the development

of an individual's mind rather than frees it for an assessment of the world in which the person lives. It is illiberal in that it both confines the individual to a limited work role and presents a curriculum which precludes the development of conceptual schemes which will enable the person to make informed judgements about their life and the world. In particular, it precludes introducing the person to informed reflections on different models of society and different ways of living. As such, the competence course is essentially anti-democratic.

Democratic Objections

One might respond by saying that this disquiet is ultimately a collision between rival views over the aims of education. But this is to fail to recognise that what can rationally be regarded as valuable in any society stems from political and social imperatives. In the case of a democratic society, the fundamental imperative is the empowerment of choosers (Tarrant, 1989, 1991). It is true that within such a society there will indeed be rival groups with their own agenda for society but, fundamentally, since democracy is concerned with choosing one political regime rather than another, it presupposes on all sides a commitment to a chooser. Granted that different groups will have their own agenda, they actually function as they do within a democratic system. Accordingly, their long run preference must, rationally, be for the workings of that system and to that extent they are committed to an endorsement of a system of choosers. However, empowerment to select in the context of political regimes requires a basis of rational choice. Choosing on the political agenda is selecting one set of policies and principles rather than another. Since these matters deal with different visions of society based on social, economic, and valuative frameworks, pupils and students will only be empowered to the extent that they are inducted into social, economic and valuative schemes.

Now, this does not necessarily mean that competence is condemned as inappropriate for an education in a democratic society. What it does mean is that competence courses are neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for empowerment as a democratic citizen. It also means that these courses, by themselves, will not be able to realise the values that are fundamental within a democratic society. Indeed, what the above notion of a chooser implies is that work preparation is not fundamental in empowering citizens within a democratic society. The worry over competence schemes in this respect is if they should be the exclusive diet of those in education in a democratic society. They may be, and can be, present, but in the education of a democracy they should be subservient to the fundamental requirement of producing a nation of choosers.

An objection may be that the provision of a national curriculum ensures that pupils are empowered as choosers in a democracy. But this is to ignore both the need for a continuous education and the political and social literacy necessary for a democratic citizen. Choosers are not maximally empowered when their age reaches 16 for there is more to learn of the various conceptual schemes comprising different forms of knowledge, and fresh knowledge emerges as a person's life span continues. Moreover, the greater the stress on basic skills in schooling, the more difficult it is

to make provision for those other subjects which are not seen as pivotal to the employment place. The debate over how much time might be given to citizenship is itself a testament to an overcrowded national curriculum. If further evidence of a dispensable national curriculum is needed then let it be found in the option now open to primary schools to go so far as to suspend history teaching in order to ensure sound basic skills.

Conclusion

Competence schemes have emerged within a general emphasis upon vocational education. They may therefore attract the opprobrium that is due to the excessive emphasis on work-related education in general, rather than because of weaknesses inherent within the competence model itself. The whole matter of demanding a preparation for work at the expense of citizenship, conceptual development, and a wider conception of the person than that of an employee, is entirely controversial, and arguably, unethical. This is not a fault inherent in the competence model itself, but the same model does contain serious epistemological problems. Accordingly, what the competence model can do and has to do is to establish a coherent theory of knowledge, preventing the incoherence in its existing bifurcation of performance and underpinning knowledge, and expressing the same in its published programmes.

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