Education Research and Perspectives, Vol.37, No.1

Problems and Prospects in Competencies-based Education: A Curriculum Studies Perspective

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The fundamental premise of this paper is that a broad rather than a narrow definition of 'competency' should inform discussions on 'competencies-based education'. Also, while we see value in drawing on a broad definition when designing curricula, we hold that it is not sufficient on its own for such design if education is to be a humanizing activity along with being a preparation for the societal demands of life. To take this position is to promote a curriculum studies perspective to analyzing competencies-based education. The paper clarifies what we mean by such a perspective. A variety of difficulties inherent in competencies-based education that have been outlined over the last thirty years by significant curriculum theorists are then outlined. The paper concludes with a brief exposition on how a broad-based view of competencies-based education can be accommodated within a curriculum framework that addresses these difficulties and views education as a liberating activity, while also allowing for its contribution to economic and social concerns.

Introduction

'Competency' and 'competencies-based education' are very contested terms. Much of the contestation has arisen out of a tendency to define them in restricted ways, particularly equating them with training, or the preparation of people in a narrow way for some job, position, or function. We agree with those who reject such narrow definitions. On the other hand, they are terms we embrace when they are defined broadly.

It is not our purpose in this paper to canvass the range of broad definitions of 'competency' and 'competencies-based education'.

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Instead, we see it as important that we outline from the outset the particular broad definitions to which we subscribe. In this regard, our view of 'competency' is that put forward nearly twenty years ago by the National Training Board (1992, p. 29) in Australia.

The concept of competency focuses on what is expected of an employee in the workplace rather than on the learning process; and embodies the ability to transfer and apply skills and knowledge to new situations and environments. This is a broad concept of competency in that all aspects of work performance, and not only narrow task skills, are included. It encompasses:

- The requirement to perform individual tasks (task skills);
- The requirement to manage a number of different tasks within the job (task management skills);
- The requirement to respond to irregularities and breakdowns in routine (contingency management skills); and
- The requirement to deal with the responsibilities and expectations of work environments (job/role environment skills), including working with others.

Threaded throughout this definition is the notion that competencies are not automated trained behaviours, but "mindful and thoughtful capabilities, involving the skilled application of underlying understandings" (Harris, Guthrie, Hobart., & Lundberg, 1995, p. 23).

We also subscribe to Harris et al.'s (1995, p. 30) views on competencies-based education programmes. In particular, we are attracted by their presentation of the following five features which they see as being central to such programmes:

- a specification of learning outcomes in measurable terms;
- the prior determination of these outcomes through the analysis of the arena and context in which they are to be demonstrated (such as an occupation or occupational area);

- the measurement of these outcomes as being the criteria of the success of the learning process;
- a learning process that emphasizes the attaining of the specified outcomes of the stated standard rather than the length of time or mode of learning; and
- the recognition of prior learning by crediting that learning rather than demanding a repetition of it.

These features identify competencies-based education with "a quality approach to the conception, design, delivery, assessment and management of education and training programs" (Harris, et al., 1995, p. 30).

Those who promote competencies-based education see definitions like the broad ones outlined above to which we subscribe as also providing frameworks upon which curricula can be built. This, however, is our point of departure. Certainly, we do see value in drawing upon these, our favoured competencies-based orientations, when designing curricula. However, as we seek to demonstrate in the remainder of this paper, on their own they are not sufficient for such design.

We state our position in three main sections. First, we argue that all curriculum ideas, including those advocating competencies-based education, need to be subjected to extensive critique from a 'curriculum studies' perspective, rather than being adopted as, and incorporated uncritically into, one's curriculum frameworks. Secondly, we summarise the broad range of critiques offered by curriculum theorists over the last twenty-five years which have drawn attention to the difficulties with, and limitations to, adopting a competencies-based approach if education is to be a humanizing and liberating activity as much as a preparation for the economic and social demands of life. Finally, we outline a broad framework which permits us to view competencies-based education as a valuable perspective, though not sufficient on its own, for informing curriculum design in order to provide future generations at all levels of the educational system with a well-balanced education.

What it Means to Analyse Competencies-based Education From a Curriculum Studies Perspective

Within many university 'education' departments the term curriculum is used to refer simply to the subject matter that is transmitted to students by teachers and lecturers in schools and colleges. In similar vein, the term 'curriculum studies' is used to denote the teaching approaches that need to be studied, understood and practiced in order to facilitate the effective and efficient transmission of that content. In this view, as Carr has put it, curriculum debate "is a narrow technical debate about the instrumental effectiveness of different pedagogical traditions" (Carr, 1993, p. 5) and one which policy makers do not wish to see extending beyond these parameters. In the previous decade, Sutherland (1985, p. 223) summed up as follows the consequence of this situation for school teachers in particular:

> ….there seems little impetus to serious consideration of central and general aims. Fashions succeed each other, and teachers – theirs not to reason why – are expected to change content and methods of their work in due conformity, following and climbing on each band-wagon as it comes along

Little has changed in the intervening years. In other words, most public debate continues to be about how to achieve in the most cost-effective manner pre-ordained outcomes, but very little debate is about the value of pursuing such outcomes in the first instance. The associated mind-set, including one which values the emphasis being placed on competencies being stated in 'outcomes' format, goes some way towards explaining why competencies-based education has been attractive to politicians, economists and the business community in particular. With the outcomes clear, the argument goes, it is an easy task to decide upon how they can be most effectively and efficiently transmitted. Teachers and lecturers can then be trained to achieve the competencies they need in order to ensure that their students achieve the competencies decided upon by the policy makers.

There is another tradition, however, with a rich academic lineage and which promotes a more enlightened approach. This tradition is based on a definition of 'curriculum' that is not just a description of subject matter, but also sees it as a set of proposals indicating how this subject matter is to be organized, the educational purposes it serves, the learning outcomes it is intended to achieve, and the methods by which such outcomes are to be evaluated. When the meaning of curriculum is conceptualised in this way, 'curriculum studies' becomes a wide-ranging intellectual interrogation of the educational aims and values guiding the selection of curriculum content, the epistemological principles underlying the way that content is organized, and the pedagogical principles underlying the way it is taught, learned and assessed. As Carr (1993, p. 6) has put it:

> Curriculum studies thus becomes an interdisciplinary study concerned with theoretically examining the grounds on which any curriculum proposals have been erected and empirically evaluating the consequences – for both teachers and learners – of efforts to translate these proposals into educational policy and practice. It thus feeds an open discussion about the validity of the educational principles on which the curriculum is based and the feasibility of their practical implementation.

For teachers in particular, this is to promote a view that if 'educational studies', including 'curriculum studies', is to be based in the university, and be concerned with promoting their development as professionals, then their essential practical training needs to be tempered by reflection on what they do, why they do it, and how they do it.

Such an approach is badly needed at the present time, when we are bombarded with a range of curriculum initiatives, most of which have been taken up in various quarters in some form or another without being subjected to the interrogation and reflection of the curriculum theorist, apart from that which appears in the academic literature and is rarely read by teachers, parents and even policy makers. The uncritical embracement of outcomes-based education immediately comes to mind. This approach varies little from its precursor, the 'behavioural objectives' approach, particularly in

terms of stating educational outcomes in behavioural terms (what it is the student should know and be able to do at the end of a lesson and at the end of a programme of study). Solid critiques like those of Lee (2003) have appeared, revealing the absence of a theoretically robust research base to support arranging the school curriculum and assessment systems sequentially in terms of measurable outcome statements and achievement objectives. Rarely, however, are such critiques articulated publicly and in a manner that might pause key stakeholders to pause and think about what the 'real' agenda might be. Could it be, for example, as Lee (2003) holds, that politicians, policymakers and educational administrators are wedded to a competencies and student outcomes approach to the curriculum, not because they are intrinsically worthwhile educationally, but because they facilitate the exercising of surveillance and control over the professional work and lives of school teachers?

It is valuable to continue to focus a little more at this point on the standard critiques of outcomes-based education approaches which have emerged over the last thirty years because of their close connection to competencies-based education. One of the most persuasive of these critiques was offered back in the late 1960s by Eisner (1969), the American curriculum theorist. In his well-known exposition on 'instructional and expressive educational objectives' he argued that education serves two functions. The first function is to assist students "to acquire those intellectual codes and skills which will make it possible for them to profit from the contributions of those who have gone before". Thus, they need to learn a range of such socially defined skills as reading, writing, and arithmetic provided for them by their culture. One can readily see how competencies-based education could play a role in realizing this function. Eisner, however, also argued that students need to learn to make a contribution to their culture. They should be concerned with providing opportunities for the individual to construe his own interpretation to the material he encounters or constructs (1969, np). This, Eisner concludes, is essential, because a simple repetition of the past is the surest path to cultural *rigor mortis*.

Nearly a decade ago the Australian curriculum theorists, Smith and Lovat (2003), articulated a similar position. In their exposition they built on the work of Stenhouse, the British curriculum theorist. All, they argued, need 'training' and 'instruction' in the technical processes necessary to acquire 'basic skills' and 'foundational information'. Again, one can see how a competencies-based education perspective with an outcomes-based approach could usefully inform curriculum design withh such ends in view. Smith and Lovat's (2003), position, however, is that this would not be sufficient for achieving all that is desirable. This is because they also hold that "other types of procedures are necessary for the fullness of education to occur" (Smith and Lovat, 2003, p. 129). They explain as follows:

> After all, being able to set up an easel, splash a little paint and recite certain facts and figures about Rembrandt's life does not constitute an artist. An artist is one who appreciates and understands the aesthetics of art and, ideally, is able to contribute to the world of art in a significant way. Only at these sorts of points can education be deemed to have truly happened. For Stenhouse, these levels of education are catered for through the processes termed 'initiation' and 'induction'. Initiation is the point of socialisation, as it were, into the culture associated with any area of knowledge. Initiation into the areas of knowledge is a subtle process. Also, Stenhouse asserts that induction is the point of true education. He argues that induction into knowledge is successful to the extent that it makes the behavioural outcomes of the students unpredictable. (Smith and Lovat, 2003, p. 129)

It is not difficult to recognise that if one subscribes to the adoption of such a position then teachers need an extensive repertoire of teaching and learning practices. In particular, this should include a range of practices aimed at enhancing the development of students as flexible learners and not just the achievement of a set of pre-ordained outcomes and competencies, both specific and generic.

Gardner's notion of multiple intelligences constitutes another construct which has been largely uncritically adopted within the curriculum of many schools and educational systems. Indeed,

some have taken to it with almost religious zeal. This is not to argue that the notion does not contain insights that can be harnessed to improve pedagogical practice. Yet, few are aware of the rather devastating critique to which it has been subjected by Whyte (2008), who argues convincingly that the credentials of Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences lack justification. He also points to changes in the theory since its inception in 1983 and highlights problems with its application to education

Other examples also present themselves. A curriculum approach that has come into vogue in primary school sectors is that of Regio Amelia. Clearly it is a very popular and successful curriculum approach in its home setting. However, issues of context are very important when it comes to considering what works elsewhere. In this particular case, the fact that the approach thrives in a sector of Italy that is communally based, and which has had a communist government for over 50 years, raises questions about the extent to which we can transplant what are clearly successful curriculum innovations from one context to another.

The uncritical embracement of constructivism by curriculum designers is another case in point. Again, this approach clearly has much to recommend it, particularly in terms of sensitizing us to the importance of trying to harness where the student is 'at' cognitively when deciding on our pedagogical practices. However, those who advocate a constructivist approach to the exclusion of all others fail to take heed of those curriculum theorists who caution against the neglect of other paedagogical approaches, including more traditional approaches. Geddis (1996, p. 254), for example, pointed to the folly of ignoring direct instruction when he highlighted the "incongruity of leaving children on their own to devise scientific perspectives that have taken the human race centuries to articulate".

It should not be taken from what has been said so far that any of the various ideas outlined above cannot be accommodated within a balanced curriculum. Rather, what is being argued is that the grounds on which they have been erected as curriculum proposals

need to be theoretically examined and the possible consequences for both teachers and learners evaluated. To engage in such a process can, as Carr (1993, p. 6) put it, feed "an open discussion about the validity of the educational principles on which the curriculum is based and the feasibility of their practical implementation". It is to this task specifically in relation to outcomes-based education that the next section of this paper is now concerned.

Some Difficulties for Curriculum Design Inherent in the Competencies-based Approach

A variety of difficulties inherent in the competencies-based approach to education have been outlined by curriculum theorists for quite some time. What is striking, however, is the extent to which they have been 'forgotten' in recent years. Nevertheless, we contend that the early arguments still hold today. We now 'resurrect' a variety of them, some extending back over thirty years, in order to balance current debates centred on improving the means to promote competencies-based education with views on the appropriateness of pursuing such ends.

One of the most comprehensive expositions on the difficulties inherent in the competencies-based approach to education was provided by Soucek (1993). We do not intend here to restate all of the problems noted by him. Instead, we focus on three of them to illustrate the sorts of problems which can be posed for curriculum design.

The first problem identified by Soucek relates to the modular nature of many competencies-based approaches. The normal approach in a comprehensive module is that the learning outcomes are outlined as clearly stated objectives. Learning experiences are provided with exercises for practice and immediate feedback, and the module "concludes with an extensive feedback and evaluation sheet" (Harris, Guthrie, Hobart & Lundberg, 1995, p. 139). Modularisation is sometimes justified on the grounds that small modules of skills or units of knowledge can provide students with

more flexibility than was available in more 'traditional' curricula and that it gives them more individual choice in how they put together the different components of a course. On the other hand, it can lead to a fragmentation and isolation of clusters of skills in a way that students are unable to make connections between them. This can then create the impression that learning is about mastering particular segments of knowledge which are organized hierarchically. The danger inherent in this, as Bernstein (1973) put it back in the 1970s, is that we can end up promoting a 'strong classification of knowledge', where students feel they may be moving sequentially to the ultimate mystery, and thus generate an undesirable power system in schools and colleges. Rather, he argues, we need an 'integrated code' where the deep structures, the basic principles of a discipline, or a subject of knowledge, are revealed early on and regularly revisited at greater and greater levels of sophistication.

Richmond (1967, p. 188) was one of the first to summarise succinctly what is meant by organizing the curriculum according to the deep structure of knowledge, rather than according to a linear sequence, when he argued thus:

> ….whatever the subject happens to be, and regardless of its 'difficulty', a way can be found of cutting it down to size, reducing it to a set of basic concepts which constitute its essential framework. Once this framework has been found the complexities and intricacies of subject-matter within the field are greatly simplified. The learner can find his way around the field more easily and see just where, how, and why the bits of information he gathers fit – bits and pieces which would otherwise tend to seem trivial, irrelevant, or accidental….A good example of it is to be found in the 'four great novel ideas' which Whitehead listed as being characteristic of nineteenth century theoretical science – the idea of physical activity pervading the whole of space, the idea of atomicity, the idea of the conversion of energy, and the idea of evolution. Another example of its ruthless application to curriculum reform is to be sen in the Chemical Bond Approach project, which centres on a single idea. According to this, the making and breaking of ties between atoms is chemistry, and everything in the course follows from this, and hinges upon, an understanding of this one idea.

Cognisance also needs to be taken of a number of related positions. Keddie (1971, p. 151), for example, argued that the simple hierarchical sequencing of content knowledge can promote a notion that teachers' and lecturers' presentations are to be taken on trust and can result in students becoming less autonomous. Such sequencing also perpetuates Gagne's (1977) and Gagne and Merrill's (1990) notion that higher-order reasoning should not be attempted until lower-order skills and knowledge are well established. This notion, Bain (1994, p. 5) contended, is "self-defeating", as assembling the elements in a bottom-up sequence does not create a flexible cognitive skill.

A second problem for curriculum designers when considering the value of a competencies-based approach to education was highlighted by Soucek (1993) in his contention that performance does not guarantee a presence of knowledge. The competencies-based approach, he held, "asserts that knowledge is constituted in what people need to know in order to perform or demonstrate a particular skill" (Soucek, 1993, p. 51). While this might be fine in relation to the needs of the economic system, education surely requires preparation also for the social, cultural, and ethical aspects of life. Such preparation, while benefiting from the acquisition of pre-ordained competencies, equally requires the development of the individual's critical thinking skills, and the outcomes of the exercise of these skills is, by definition, not capable of being stated in pre-ordained form. To put it another way, a problem with a competencies-based approach to curriculum design is that it conceptualizes knowledge as static, or as something which the learner only needs to acquire, rather than to produce as an autonomous thinker. Soucek (1993, pp. 50-52) also raises the following associated issues:

- Competency cannot be defined in advance because "it is always situationally specific. As a consequence, predetermined knowledge might not guarantee a competent performance in altered circumstances" (Soucek, 1993, p. 50);

- Because the assessment of a competent performance is at least partially dependent on the assesor's subjectivity, it "assumes that the personal values and knowledge of the assessor and the tested person are identical or at least similar. This might not be the case. A question might arise as to who is the most competent performer, the assessor or the person being assessed" (Soucek, 1993, p. 51);
- The competency-testing approach cannot anticipate all possible permutations of occupational situations. Its "focus on performance rather than on the knowledge, therefore, might fail to equip the future practitioner with the capacity to deal effectively with unforeseen situationally specific problems" (Soucek, 1993, p. 52).

The third problem proposed for curriculum designers by the competencies-based approach to education is that it provides little room for those who consider that the curriculum should pay attention to the dynamics of interpersonal relationships. The importance of the interpersonal in education was put as follows by Buber (1965, p. 89), the existential philosopher:

> There was a master, a philosopher and a coppersmith, whose journeymen and apprentices lived with him and learned by being allowed to share in it, what he had to teach them of his handwork or brainwork. But they also learned without their or his being aware of it; they learned without noting that they did, the mystery of the personal life.

This personal encounter, according to Buber, is the other half of education. Teachers and lecturers are moral agents who initiate students into the human conversation, into a way of life and a culture (Burke, 1992, p. 212; Kerr, 1987). Similarly, Goodlad (1988, p. 108) stated his belief that "the craft of teaching must be honed within the context of moral intention. Otherwise, it is little more than mechanics and might be performed better by a machine".

There is also the danger that if a competencies-based approach is to be the only one countenanced in curriculum design, students

might be deprived of "the richness and complexity of intellectual challenges of that aspect of the curriculum which is deemed irrelevant to the formation to generic work-related skills" (Soucek, 1993, p. 52). Kohl (1967) went some way towards capturing the importance of taking cognizance of this point in his book, *36 Children*. After graduating from Harvard with a degree in philosophy and then undergoing a year of teacher education, he took a sixth-grade class in Harlem. He is one extract from his account of his teaching:

> While teaching about early man *(sic)* I read history, anthropology, archaeology, art criticism: brought in books and pictures and maps for the children, and in trying to answer their questions, found myself looking into things as diverse as the domestication of animals, cave paintings, stone implements, and early technology. The children began to look too, wanted increasingly to answer questions for themselves. Some of them began discovering encyclopaedias in the library – things they had been subjected to before that made no sense to them. Because they saw me researching, they learned to do research. They wouldn't have learned had I merely told them to do it (Kohl, 1967, p. 57).

In similar manner, teachers and lecturers in the humanities and the arts have long contended that in these fields the concern is not for students to achieve competency, but to develop standards of judgement, criticism and taste. McKernan (1993, p. 346) took up this argument as follows:

> To treat knowledge as instrumental is to dismiss a most important possibility, that the justification for education lies within the process itself. The pupils who has been truly educated may lead us into unexplored meanings and outcomes, into unanticipated and unpredictable directions. Imagine a student of Macbeth purchasing a text that includes all the possible interpretations and understandings of that play – surely an absurd scenario. The educated mind will always achieve unique and novel interpretations because knowledge is a tool to think with.

Finally, there are many laudable curriculum objectives which cannot be accommodated within a competencies model of education since it will be many years after pupils and student have completed their formal education before we know whether they

have achieved, and to what degree. Yet, this should not stop us from pursuing such highly laudable goals as the development of good citizens, just and upright individuals, and caring human being concerned about creating a more equitable society.

Viewing Competencies-based Education within a Broad Curriculum Framework

All of the concerns outlined above regarding competencies-based education need to be taken seriously, and not just be glossed over because they raise awkward questions. At the same time, this does not mean that there is no place for competencies-based education within a curriculum framework aimed at providing students with a broad general education. By the latter we mean an education that is concerned not only with preparation for the economic and social demands of life, but is also a humanizing and liberating activity. Furthermore, we wish to stress that responding to the humanistic and liberating concerns of education as much to the economic and social ones does not involve trying to reconcile mutually exclusive perspectives. Rather, they can be seen as complementing each other in a number of ways.

A valuable framework for elaborating on this position is provided by one of the fundamental tenets of the German philosopher, Jurgen Habermas (1972). He holds that our basic condition as humans is such that we are concerned with pursuing three principal 'cognitive interests', namely, the interest in technical control, the interest in understanding, and the interest in liberation. The first of these interests, that of technical control, leads us to want to know all the facts and figures associated with an area of interest, and the answers are provided by empirical-analytic knowledge. Thus, over centuries, but particularly over the last one hundred years, humans, both as physical and social scientists, have spent a great deal of time and effort conducting careful and controlled observations, where they have claimed to locate themselves in the role of dispassionate observers independent of the objects of observation. Smith and Lovatt (1991) have elaborated on what is involved, stating that pursuing technical

knowledge requires a focus on the practices associated with both the behaviourist form of psychology and the functionalist form of sociology. These disciplines, they argue, which are based on fairly specific ideas about human behaviour and human society respectively, have developed precise research approaches with positivist foundations. The typical initial strategy is that of formulating hypotheses, setting up a clinical observation, and recording observations. The latter are regarded as objective devices and, hence, reliable. The next step is to quantify the data and present the findings by means of statistics. Smith and Lovatt conclude by stating that the final set of statistics is seen as providing knowledge which is both objective and generalizable, and which can be used to predict and control events.

The second human cognitive interest, in Habermas' view, is that of understanding. This approach emphasizes social interaction as the basis for knowledge. The researcher uses his or her skills as a social being to try to understand how others understand their world. Knowledge, in this view, is constructed by mutual negotiation and it is specific to the situation being investigated. This contrasts sharply with the positivist's interest in prediction and control. Also, a very different notion of how one knows something is emphasised. Again, the nature of what is involved is addressed by Smith and Lovatt. They argue that this second way in which one knows something can be seen in the method used in attempting to convey understanding through textbooks, where the writer uses words to convey ideas and meanings to the reader. Smith and Lovatt (1991, p. 75) clarify this point as follows:

> The only way that you can prove to us (or we can know) that you have understood my ideas with the meaning that we intended, is for you to paraphrase in your own words, the meaning that you have gained from my words. In other words, a very important way that we come to know something is through a negotiation of meaning through communication.

They conclude by saying that the way one proves one knows these things is through either a verbal or written account, although often

the meanings of such accounts still need to be negotiated between the speaker and the listener, or the writer and the reader.

The third cognitive interest of humans, according to Habermas, is the interest in freedom. He does not discount the value in knowledge acquired through pursuit of the other two human interests. Rather, he stresses the importance of recognising that such knowledge can be problematic and capable of systematic distortion. His contention is that technical knowledge and knowledge aimed at promoting understanding can never be value free, but always represents the interests of some group within society. Consequently, Habermas argues, knowledge has the potential to be either oppressive, or emancipatory.

The consequence for the curriculum theorists in recognising the importance of promoting knowledge for emancipation is not to argue against the promotion of technical knowledge, or knowledge for understanding. Rather, it is important to stress that, concurrently, there should be an emphasis on analysing such knowledge once it has been acquired so that ideologies within it which maintain the status quo can be unmasked, and the "consciousness, or awareness, about the material conditions that oppress, or restrict, people can be raised" (Usher, 1996, p.22). Emphasis needs to be placed on understanding the causes of "powerlessness, recognising systemic oppressive forces and acting individually and collectively to change the conditions of life" (Usher 1996, p.22). Equally stressed alongside this emphasis on social critique is the importance of being guided by the critique in taking social action to improve the quality of human life.

Over thirty years ago, Van Manen, the American curriculum theorist, translated Habermas' notion on humans three cognitive interests into a curriculum framework. This is a framework which still has validity at the present time. Furthermore, it is one within which our views on generic competencies can be accommodated. There are two central aspects to Van Manen's framework, namely, that education should take place at three levels, and that what takes place at each level should be tempered by reflection. His

first level is termed the level of 'technical rationality'. The primary emphasis in 'technical rationality' is on the efficient and effective application of educational knowledge for the purpose of attaining given ends. Here we can prescribe that students learn pre-ordained subject matter and skills in mathematics, science, social science and vocational, commercial and technical subjects, and, if deemed appropriate, to do so in the form of student outcome statements. Here also is where we prescribe the teaching of those competencies deemed desirable by politicians, educational policy makers and 'the barons of industry'. Clearly, this demands engagement in much planning, appropriate pedagogy, and suitable assessment practices in order to maximize attainment in each prescribed competency at stated levels. Concurrently, however, time needs to be provided to engage students in questioning the appropriateness of the required competencies in relation to the stated ends. In other words, while there is no need at this level to engage students in the ends themselves, there is a need to engage them in discussion about what they are expected to acquire in order to achieve those ends.

The second level in Van Manen's framework requires that we engage students in those areas of knowledge which can promote their understanding of the unique and the contingent. Thus, they need to be inducted into those subjects which help us to try to empathise with others, to try to see the world as they see it, and to imagine what it was like to partake in particular events. Traditionally, this has been done through the humanities, particularly literature, philosophy and history. Van Manen, however, also calls for engagement by students at this level in what he calls 'practical reflection'. What this involves is the clarification of the assumptions that are the basis of practical action. The focus is on the moral, ethical and value considerations of the educational enterprise. Thus, in the particular case of the competencies which they are required to pursue at Level One, students should be engaged at Level Two in reflection aimed at deciding their worth as educational goals and experiences, raising the possibility that they should be pursuing alternatives, and indicating what these alternatives might be.

Van Manen's Level Three is concerned with what he termed 'critical reflection'. The concern here is with reflecting on the ways in which goals and practices can become systematically and ideologically distorted by structural forces and work constraints in various social settings. The tools for reflection at this level are those provided by the knowledge and skills acquired at the two levels lower down. Students should use these 'tools' to examine a wide range of practices in society which are accepted as 'normal' and asking 'why are things this way?', 'who says this is the way things ought to be?" and 'whose interests are silenced by things being this way?' It is not difficult to see how, in this way, knowledge acquired at the lower levels can be turned back on itself through the asking of critical questions. Again, specifically in relation to those competencies which they are obliged to acquire at Level One, students should be engaged in a series of questions about who decided on their selection and what alternatives there might have been, as well as being probed to address the most fundamental of all of the questions posed by critical theorists, namely, 'whose interests are served by things being this way?'

Conclusion

This paper was premised on the view that when competencies-based education is defined in broad terms it can constitute a valuable, though not sufficient position for designing a curriculum. This, we have contended, is because we subscribe to a view that while education should be concerned with preparation for the economic and social demands of life, it should also be a humanizing and liberating activity. We elaborated on our position in three main sections. First, we argued that all curriculum ideas, including those advocating competencies-based education, need to be subjected to extensive critique, rather than being incorporated uncritically into one's curriculum frameworks. Secondly, we summarised the broad range of critiques offered by a number of curriculum theorists over the last twenty-five years which have drawn attention to the difficulties with, and limitations to, adopting a competencies-based approach as the sole guide in designing a curriculum. Finally, we drew attention to the views of

Habermas and Van Manen as providing a broad framework which permit us to view competencies-based education as a valuable perspective, though not sufficient on its own, for informing curriculum design in order to provide future generations at all levels of the educational system with a well-balanced education.

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