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Can Competency Assessment Support Struggles for Community Development and Self-determination?

In this paper an argument is presented that if competency assessment is to make any contribution as a potentially "liberating" curriculum strategy for struggles of community development and self-determination then it needs to contest the authoritarianism of the national qualification frameworks that have been established in Australia and New Zealand. This article critiques research and policy efforts, in particular for indigenous learners which seek to merely make authoritarian curriculum and assessment structures more culturally appropriate, more accessible and equitable rather than changing and democratising the structures themselves.

B e i t r ä g e

1. Introduction

In this article I consider how various cultural and political interest groups can engage with competency assessment systems that have been constructed in New Zealand and Australia. The purpose of the article is to support the efforts of:

- indigenous Australians and Maori in New Zealand to develop stronger community controlled vocational education programs,
- educators who are engaged in more than competency development for individuals but also in education for social action and community development,
- educators seeking to develop competency based curriculum strategies and assessment approaches which foster emancipatory learning. Emancipatory learning is understood as learning which helps people "see through and challenge (often taken for granted and) dominant meanings and practices" (Foley 1995, 45, modification by R.F.).

Much of the literature which critically discusses the shortcomings or otherwise of the competency movement only addresses broad philosophical and policy concerns. The literature rarely discusses the practical aspects of challenging the competency movement (Chappell/Gonczi/Hager 2000, Guthrie 2009, Collins 1993, Stevenson 1993). The critique developed in this paper is grounded in my experience working with practitioners who have been forced to engage with competency assessment systems. Specifically, I examine the rules that practitioners are required to follow and discuss ways these rules might be challenged to better serve the interests of indigenous peoples and other political interest and cultural groups. I critique popular notions of culture, access and equity and approaches which merely seek to make education more culturally appropriate.

2. Let's stop being ethnographers

There is a continuing tendency to ask questions about the relationship between educa-tion, assessment and culture like an old fashioned ethnographer. Common questions posed by educators who work with a variety of cultural groups are: What are their preferred learning styles? What would be appropriate teaching and assessment prac-tices? How can we make our courses more culturally relevant? What factors affect access and participation?

Such questions will not help us build cultural partnerships in education and as-sessment. They are not useful for indigenous people struggling to achieve self-deter-mination in education. Partnerships and self-determination will only be achieved by changing structures not by changing practices. Standards based assessment practices in countries, which include Australia, New Zealand, Scotland, England and South Africa, are firmly entrenched in single, monolithic, national structures known as Na-tional Qualifications Frameworks. These frameworks are built on sets of detailed rules which prescribe the way standards should be constructed. The official line of national qualifications authorities is that while there are rules for constructing standards there are no rules about *what* should be in the standards, nor rules about which particular curriculum and assessment strategies should be used. Therefore, so the official policy lines assert, there is plenty of scope for various cultural groups to control their own education.

This argument, that so long as indigenous Australians can determine the content of the standards and develop their own preferred forms of assessment practice the na-tional qualifications frameworks can foster cultural partnerships, is at one level persua-sive. Notions of holistic approaches to assessment have, in fact, been embraced warmly by Maori and Aboriginal educators further encouraging the belief that cultural partner-ships in assessment are being built. But are these frameworks which prescribe uniform ways of constructing assessment standards fostering cultural partnerships? Experience is showing that competency assessment standards are directly shaping teaching and as-sessment practices in ways which lead to more uniformity than diversity.

Despite many efforts to make them holistic, the current rules about writing com-petency assessment standards in a hierarchical, itemised, checklist fashion represent the "coalface" of an authoritarian educational structure. Why do assessment stand-ards have to be written in checklist form? Why can't they be written in narrative prose? Why do they have to be written? Could they be constructed through diagrams and pictures? Or could they be constructed through oral narratives which are docu-mented on video or audio tape? Currently, cultural partnerships are understood by powerbrokers within the national qualification authorities to mean "our framework is flexible, you can have separate standards and qualifications but you must follow our rules." Despite claims to the contrary, one cannot separate rules about writing learning outcomes from curriculum and assessment practices. Outcomes do shape pedagogy.

The sort of cultural partnership I want is one where different groups have real independence to construct standards in ways they determine for themselves. I want to see the democratisation of structures rather than authoritarian structures seeking to be more culturally appropriate. I would like to see diverse ways for standards to be constructed which I think would lead to deeper and richer diversity in assessment practices. If there is to be a national qualifications framework the challenge should be to support different groups to develop their own ways of recognising credentials. This requires much more attention being paid to supporting independent structures rather than seeking to define what culturally appropriate practices are. Australian education authorities do not seek to define culturally appropriate assessment practices for Catholic students or Montessori students, for example. Instead they support Catholic and Montessori structures and leave it up to them to define the detail of curriculum practices. This is the approach that might be taken towards indigenous Australian communities or Maori communities in New Zealand.

3. The potential of standard based assessment to support and undermine struggles for community development and self-determination

The establishment of national accreditation systems in Australia and New Zealand which are based on competency standards and competency assessment approaches *potentially* can contribute in a significant way to struggles for community development and self-determination. This "potential" can, for example, be realised by the increased opportunities provided for a wide range of private and community training providers to deliver recognised education programs. "The so-called de-regulation of the training market has opened up new spaces, allowing more scope for diversity and choice" (Federation of Independent Aboriginal Education Providers, 1996a, 6). A significant and contentious example of the opening up of "new space" is the development of unit standards for Maori carving. These standards might lead to degree programs in Maori carving and the recognition that Maori carving is a field of practice and study of the same depth and complexity as fields of practice such as engineering, physiotherapy and other fields with established professional status. The first graduate of a new Diploma of Maori Early Childhood Education said,

> One of the reasons I applied for the Diploma was because (...) the Diploma gives national recognition to Maori knowledge, skills, qualities and attributes that have never been formally recognised in early childhood education (Ferguson 1996, 8).

Arguably, recognition of "new" fields of practice do not rely on the national qualifications frameworks and their standards based assessment systems. Self-accrediting higher education providers can also initiate courses which recognise hitherto unrecognised fields of knowledge and practice. But what standards based assessment systems

have done is to enable the more ready recognition of community controlled educa-tion initiatives. This means that community groups can decide if they wish to rely on the goodwill of institutional providers to develop and deliver appropriate courses for them or seek to set up independent educational structures. One should, however, be cautious in thinking that competency standards and a place in a new National Qualifications Framework will automatically boost the status of Maori carving. It is, of course, possible that this practice be regarded as trivial by those who are most concerned with appearing internationally competitive.

By being both explicit and public, competency assessment standards have argu-ably introduced a greater level of accountability for educators to learners. Many edu-cators and students who work and learn in community based agencies, who have in many cases been alienated by formal schooling, typically say about standards based assessment: "We understand it, it is clearer than school, and it tests us doing things." By challenging the traditional focus on programmed teaching and prescribed topic based curricula, standards based assessment potentially gives learners opportunity to have more choice about what, when, how and where they learn.

The word "potential" has been emphasised because like any curriculum reform the development of competency based accreditation systems in deregulated education and training markets is keenly contested. It is a contest between those who want to set national targets to appear internationally competitive and those who see education as a means to develop communities, cultures and people.

If the education systems in New Zealand and Australia are to be more democratic and inclusive then they should negotiate partnerships with their indigenous peoples and other community groups. This notion of partnership is not just about the right of indigenous peoples and other community groups to control their own education. It is equally about changing those educational practices which reinforce inequalities, exclude and alienate many New Zealanders and Australians. If education primarily is focused on enhancing the skills of individuals rather than community development, inevitably some individuals will gain while many will not. There is a struggle between those who see the competency movement as a means to merely skill more individuals and those who see possibilities of using the movement to make education more rel-evant and useful to the building of community, culture and identity.

National qualification frameworks, with their structures and processes for rec-ognising and assessing learning wherever it happens, do appear to offer advantage to groups who have been discriminated against. The systems of standards based assess-ment appear to value experiences which historically have not been valued. For exam-ple, the qualification frameworks make much of valuing the experiences of women who manage households of low paid workers, and of indigenous people. Cooper (1996), writing about the introduction of national qualifications framework in South Africa, explains why the discourse of competency standards and assessment

has enormous emotive appeal to ordinary workers. It is aimed at ensuring that those workers who have had little access to formal education in the past but have extensive experience of work, have their experiences valued so as to give them access to further learning and better job opportunities. (...) It is clear why these new discourses around worker education and training should have enjoyed such ascendancy in South Africa at this time. They resonate deeply with worker's desire for recognition, greater equity and opportunities to progress. (...) The heritage of "Bantu Education" and job reservation had excluded black workers from skilled jobs. Workers' experience was never valued: white workers with less experience but with formal certificates got access to such jobs (10–11).

On one level, competency assessment does appear to have potential to support struggles for community development and self-determination. But on another, perhaps deeper level, competency assessment has significant potential to undermine traditions of education for community development. The massive exercises in development of competency standards have arguably transformed the meaning of experience and knowledge with emphasis on credentialling. Consider the type of experience and knowledge that would be most valued by workers organising to improve their working conditions or that would be valued by Maori people organising to strengthen their communities.

> The dominant meaning associated with (their) experience and knowledge has been transformed from something which is shared in order to advance (their) collective interests, into a commodity which is individually owned, which can be exchanged for a qualification and used to compete with other individuals in the struggle for individual upward mobility (Cooper 1996, 11, modifications by R. F.).

This contestation between those who value education for individual skills development versus community development might be seen partly as a struggle between indigenous and "European" perspectives. But the contestation between individual skills versus community development should also be seen as a struggle between contesting perspectives within "European" education. There are those who believe that if education serves the interests of business having more skilled and reliable workers to make more profits then everyone will benefit. There are others who believe that while education should take account of the needs of business, it also has a responsibility to help people create meaningful jobs and strengthen communities. Education has a role to help people who are poor, unemployed, are victims of violence, are being exploited, to develop an analysis which goes beyond blaming themselves to understanding and acting upon those forces which have contributed to their plight.

Arguably, many Maori and Aboriginal educators model a way of education which is much more democratic than education in the schooling and higher education system. It is more democratic because it values learning which is directly relevant to people's needs and is not only concerned with knowledge contained in textbooks

and seeks to strengthen people's culture and identity rather than ignore or suppress it. Many Maori and Aboriginal educators and their allies value education for ordinary people, and not just academic and professional elites (cf. May 1999).

To describe the work of many Maori and Aboriginal educators as above should not be construed as an assertion that there is a single set of common features which characterise their educational work. It is a popular but misleading notion that indigenous people have common cultural and learning characteristics. But what does underpin the above description is an assertion that indigenous peoples share a similar recent history? Indigenous perspectives on education are, for many, borne out of the struggles against invasion, colonial rule, and paternalism. From such struggles people have learnt to value heritage, solidarity, and collaboration in the face of adversity. It is the historical and political context which provides a more useful understanding, rather than fanciful ethnographic theories of cultural difference, of why so much education with Maori and Aboriginal peoples is concerned with community development. In a submission to a federal government inquiry in Australia, the Federation of Independent Aboriginal Education Providers stated 1996: "All our work has a community development focus, and is not just about education defined narrowly in quantifiable outcomes, but about the preservation of life itself."

The intertwining of community development and education is apparent in independent Aboriginal education providers and Maori providers (Miller 2005). Students are treated not just as students but as members of a community who may need accommodation, social and personal support. For example, in many Maori private providers social services are located and integrated into the same organisation. There are other small differences such as beginning each day with a prayer ceremony, students pooling their lunches rather than individually consuming them, and the value placed on personal relationships between students and staff. Donna Ah Chee (1996) describes the view of independent Aboriginal colleges:

> Aboriginal education is firmly based in the real day-to-day experiences of our students and our community. (...) If it were not for us, for the program we provide, many of our students would not have an education, they would not have a life. Unemployment, poor housing, Third World health standards, alcohol and drug abuse, imprisonment, violence – these are day to day realities for the vast majority of Aboriginal people, and our average life span is twenty years less than non-Aboriginal people. (...) We turn no one away, because we know for many, perhaps most of our students, we are their only choice, their only way to survive, and to gain the strength to struggle to change their reality.

In the debates about the competency movement the lines of contestation are often drawn between workers' and employers' interests. Many unions have supported the competency movement as a strategy to develop career paths and to achieve greater workplace control with more skilled workers (cf. Brown 2004). Many employers have

seen the competency movement as a way to exert more control over what workers learn. If competency assessment and associated curricula are to have any chance of supporting struggles for community development there must be a widening of the contestation and debate in the competency movement. Community groups who represent indigenous peoples, and other cultural and political interests, need space and resources to develop education which is not just concerned with workers' and employers' interests but also the interests of community groups.

Maori and Aboriginal education providers should be invited and funded to not only to develop their own courses but also to develop their own strategies for accreditation and assessment. A widespread frustration with the way competency standards are currently constructed and used is that they are seen to value instrumental, vocational skills and marginalise knowledge, values, qualities and attitudes that are perhaps not directly relevant to technical performance but are important because they are seen to contribute to a richer and treasured sense of culture and identity. It is one thing to advocate holistic assessment practices but it is another to rethink how standards are being written or constructed.

4. Challenging the current single set of rules for constructing competency assessment standards

It has been a common criticism that the National Qualifications Framework is a system to introduce standardised curricula. In Australia public accreditation authorities have been set up to "police" new courses to see that curriculum or learning outcomes and assessment practices are closely and "properly" aligned to competency standards.

The theory behind current forms of standards based assessment which are the centre piece of national qualifications frameworks is that the standards are not to be seen as curricula or teaching statements but merely are standards against which candidates should be assessed. The theory is that national competency standards are mechanisms for employer, union and government groups to simply state what they expect candidates to be able to do. How people learn, when, with whom, over what period of time, and even exactly what people learn – so the purist theory of national qualifications frameworks go – are matters for educators and learners. The theory is that standards, despite their significant detail and uniform structures, will not shape the way people teach, learn and assess.

But it is naive idealism to think that the itemised, detailed and hierarchical nature of competency standards does not drive curriculum and assessment practices (cf. Hoy-Mack 2005). Ferguson (1996), writing about her experience working with the standards of the National Qualifications Framework in New Zealand asserts:

> The practice is that learners are so influenced by the implementation of the Framework and their ability to have their learning recorded and credentialled

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via the Unit Standard system that learners are asking whether content and teaching methods on their courses are contributing to their credit for Unit Standards. Content which is outside of Unit Standards is perceived by many as being irrelevant, a misuse of teacher power and control, and a waste of money for students who pay high fees to obtain their credentials. *De jure* the Unit Standards may not be intended to prescribe curricula, *de facto* they are doing just that (11).

Those national standards are influencing curricula content can, in one respect, be seen as a good thing, especially if they contribute to a consistent raising of quality and facilitate portability of qualifications. But it is the detailed, prescriptive and itemised way the standards are constructed which creates cause for concern. The shape and substance of the standards have a deadening influence on curricula. For example, the Workplace Trainer and Workplace Assessor competency standards in Australia have become like a deadweight in the way they have shaped professional development for educators and trainers (Downs/De Luca/Galloway 2009). Although they were intended to be generic standards only, they have been adopted by community educators, workplace trainers, community trainers, vocational educators alike as the benchmark which is to be attained. The Workplace Trainer competency standards have had the affect of stifling any diversity, any sense of independent purpose and philosophy, various groups of educators may have had. Competency standards in their current checklist format with their sense of neatness and completeness offer the "seductive promise of clarity" (Wolf, in McDonald, 1994). The competency standards have been most effective in their publicity and marketing. Learners and their employers want to know if courses are aligned to the standards. University degree courses in adult education have been forced to show how they help students achieve the Workplace Trainer competency standards. Professional development for educators and trainers has become homogenised to the extent that any content that is perceived to not be directly aligned to the Workplace Trainer standards, particularly content concerned with understanding politics and philosophies of education, is seen as merely indulgent.

To deepen the discussions about the merits or otherwise of current forms of competency movements it would then seem timely to consider what challenges various cultural groups are developing. Mawer and Field (1995) in a commissioned report for the federal Australian government asserted that the national training reform agenda had been developed from a narrow and monoculturalist perspective. They argued that the training reform agenda's emphasis on standardisation, and the emphasis on function rather than people, tends to undervalue the resources that employees bring to their work. A key assertion that can be tested is that cultural groups would value being able to inject diversity into the competency movement by being able to construct their own forms of curricula, assessment and accreditation.

5. Challenging popular concepts of culture, access and equity

When considering ways to develop and deliver education for indigenous Australians or Maori New Zealanders a popular approach is to research and propose ways:

1) Education can be made more accessible and equitable.
2) Educators can gain a fuller understanding of, and be more responsive to, the perceived, distinct cultural features of indigenous learners.

But my argument is that less research is needed to make education and training more accessible, equitable and culturally appropriate and more research is needed to advance knowledge of how various cultural and political groups can assert more power and control over the development of competency standards and curricula.

I asserted at the beginning of this article that researchers and policy makers should stop playing ethnographers. They should stop trying to understand what are perceived as exotic cultural practices because that is "letting the main game off the hook". As a university teacher one of the most common requests I have received from non-indigenous students researching a project related to indigenous education, is for literature about Aboriginal learning styles. I would obligingly dig round and usually pointed them to texts prepared for school teachers. Such texts suggested that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students were culturally different to other Australians. The texts did not define who other Australians were, what their learning styles were, and implicitly portrayed them as some monolithic group who had universal learning characteristics that related more closely to "mainstream" norms. The texts no longer represented the popular and simplified view that all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students prefer to avoid eye contact with teachers, but suggested things like: they were person oriented rather than task, listeners rather than talkers, group oriented rather than individually competitive, as just some examples.

In retrospect what strikes me about both the requests and the texts is that underpinning them is the continuing dominance of a view that is at odds with the reality of a modern indigenous Australia and conjures up images of benign colonial administrators theorising over the "peculiarities of the savages". The majority of non-indigenous students continue to view indigenous peoples through the eyes of pre-war anthropologists. They are, mostly unwittingly, preparing themselves for missionary activity. They want to know what are the features and traits of these Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The student adult educators and trainers want to know what curriculum and teaching styles they should use, which are most sensitive and appropriate. My experience working with indigenous people is that it would be impossible to ascribe to them a common set of learning characteristics.

But the view that there are common cultural and learning characteristics of indigenous peoples is held widely by indigenous educators, by policy makers and eminent scholars. For example, the concept of "two-ways" education has gained influence,

perhaps more so in Northern Australia, at both the policy making and curriculum implementation levels. This concept, whose best known exponent is probably Stephen Harris (1990, 1993), suggests that it is necessary to allow Aboriginal Elders and communities to take responsibility for education which relates to Aboriginal culture. Education which is concerned with the development of competence to survive in "modern" Australian society and the gaining of certificates in schools, colleges and universities should, according to proponents of "two-ways" education, be kept quite separate. The notion of Aboriginal versus "Western" education is presented as a dichotomy. Extensive debates about the merits or otherwise of "two-ways" education have been published. Some of the debate is about the validity of the significant linguistic and ethnographic data which is used to support the concept of "two-ways" education and purportedly suggests that Aboriginal people have a significantly different *Weltanschauung* (world view) to "Westerners". Harris (1990), for example, asserts that

> Aborigines have a preference for dealing with perceived or concrete reality rather than supposition or hypothesis; for dealing with interaction rather than transaction (...) and for first degree abstractions (such as the adjectives "light" and "heavy") rather than second degree abstractions (such as the abstract nouns "weight" and "heaviness") (94).

I have the same problem with the concept of "two-ways" education as I have with all views that seek to give Aboriginal culture and education some sort of monolithic identity and exotic overtones. It is an essentialist analysis which focuses entirely on indigenous people. The notion and system of "Western" education (the term is used by Harris and other authors) is neither defined or problematised. It leads to liberal or institutional curriculum approaches which mostly seek to tinker at the edges of the "Western" or dominant education system by implementing strategies to increase access, ensure program content and teaching processes are appropriate and so on. "Two-ways" education is slightly more radical. It proposes – taken to a logical extreme – that indigenous students can be tanked up with enough confidence and identity if their "culture" is protected through a segregated education system which is able to siphon off that which is indigenous culture and that which is not. Brimming with confidence and identity indigenous students can then brave the cultural hegemony of a dominant education system which may be racist, manipulative and simply not interested in the diverse aspirations of many indigenous peoples.

6. Alternative approaches to competency assessment

Current approaches to competency assessment are more likely to undermine rather than support efforts towards self-determination and community development. The need to research and develop alternative approaches to assessment is apparent. Before discussing some ideas for research tasks and alternative approaches it should be noted what features of competency assessment are worth building on.

In the history of the assessment of learning, competency assessment represents a welcome departure from conventional assessment and educational measurement. Conventional assessment is concerned to find out whether students have learnt what has been taught. It is teacher centred. Educational measurement is deeply concerned about reliability and uses assessment methods which mostly generate many small items of evidence that can be quantified. Competency assessment is part of a movement towards approaches known as "authentic assessment". In competency and authentic assessment the concern is to:

- emphasise gathering evidence of ability to do something in the "real world", i.e. authentic evidence,
- focus on learning outcomes versus teaching input,
- be public and explicit about assessment criteria,
- facilitate recognition of learning that is generic, i.e. portability.

These are core features of competency assessment that are worth building on. But what should be understood is that these features do not rely on the current structures and rules for writing competency standards and management of assessment. It is possible to construct competency standards and manage assessment in alternative ways and build on these features. It is my suggestion that it would be useful for Maori and for indigenous Australians to pursue research which would help them develop alternative approaches to competency assessment.

Here are ideas that might guide this research and development work. When deciding about the form standards and assessment practices should take, one should consider whether they are likely to foster:

- surface or critical learning,
- uniformity or diversity,
- individual skills development at the expense of community development,
- a focus on learning or teaching,
- motivation to continue learning or a sense of complacency that learning has been completed,
- agency versus learner control,
- domination versus self-determination,
- clarity and transparency versus bewilderment and obfuscation.

I suggest an initial line of inquiry could be to develop alternatives to constructing assessment standards in check-list form. They might, for example, be constructed in narrative prose. Here are five reasons why they might be constructed in prose:

1) Prose is open-ended and fosters interpretive assessment which is intent on continuing learning. Check-lists are closed and tend to foster learning which terminates with the last point on the check list.
2) Prose enables "richer" descriptions of practice and knowledge. This encourages and facilitates a valuing of intellectual and cultural knowledge.

3) While checklists may turn the focus from teaching to learning they can also turn the focus from process to results only. Results on their own are not always important, how people learn can be equally, if not more, important. Prose is more likely than check-lists to encourage a balance between a focus on results and process.

4) Assessment need not be limited to individual performance. Broader, more narrative type descriptions foster a sense of collective learning versus point form, hierarchical standards.

5) Assessment tasks, to be authentic, should require learners to do larger, problem-solving type activities rather than fragmented and static activities. Prose is more likely, than a check-list, to describe the context. A check-list is more likely, than prose, to describe fragments of detail.

Given the marked similarity of rules for constructing standards in national qualifications frameworks in various countries it is not surprising that there has arisen a seemingly unquestioned notion among practitioners and policy makers that there is only one way of devising standards. Unless it will be possible to break free of the rigid and imposed sets of national rules, and allow different ways of constructing standards, opportunities for self-determination, and the development of more democratic and emancipatory perspectives on curriculum and assessment, will be limited.

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