

Competence, Curriculum and Control

NANCY S. JACKSON

University of British Columbia

No word better reflects the educational preoccupation of our times than "competence." It signifies a pervasive and protean concern with instrumental and practical action (Aoki 1984) in all aspects of teaching and learning. Despite a long history of cogent criticism and active resistance associated with the implementation of competency-based curriculum (see Collins 1987, 1983; Johnson 1984; Grant 1979; Kliebard 1975; Smith 1975; Macdonald-ross 1975, 1972), the approach has still been called "as close to a panacea for educational ills as one might find for the decade of the eighties" (Fagan 1984:8). The present paper will investigate this remarkable tendency of competency measures to reappear continually in "new trapping" (Goodlad 1975). The case under investigation is the introduction of competency measures at a community college in Canada in the mid-1980's.

The rise of competency measures in the college system is brought into focus here by exploring the relation between questions of pedagogy or educational theory and problems of instructional management in the college setting. Indeed, while the leading critics of the competency paradigm have been theorists schooled in philosophy, psychology or linguistic theory (see the Chomsky/Piaget debates reported in Piatelli-Palmarini 1980; Collins 1987, 1983; Short 1984; MacDonald Ross 1975, 1972), its major proponents have been administrators and managers in education who see competency practices from the perspective of management theory. Where educators have seen in competency measures evidence of "conceptual confusion" and "mistakes," managers have seen the promise of "economy," "efficiency" and "accountability." These latter issues are pivotal to educational administration in the current economic and political climate, and are key to understanding the emergence of competency measures in the college system in Canada (see Muller 1987).

In the community college setting explored below, competency-based educational practices are shown to be integral to the bureaucratic and documentary character of college governance. The competency approach to curriculum design provides a means to substitute formal, institutionalized, documentary information systems for traditional forms of practice-based decision-making by individual educators. In the process, learning is displaced by managing in the shaping of curricular organization. The presence of students and instructors as living and breathing

subjects of the educational enterprise is subsumed by an objectified accounting system in which activities of teaching and learning become the object of a centrally organized management system. In this context, where competence is said to be achieved, it is constituted not as a feature of the performance ability of individuals but as a form of rational administration which makes the educational institution responsive to political and managerial interests. It is a socially organized phenomenon, realized in and through the mediation of texts. The result is a highly ideological practice in which the concept of competence becomes a powerful but little-examined dimension of the phenomenon of technical control.

The application of systems thought to education has been the subject of controversy since the accountability movement emerged in the United States in the late 1960's. Critics point out that the seductive power of such technocratic approaches to educational practice is their promise of scientific certainty and neutrality in determining the educational product. The educational process is divided into separate phases of design and execution. Scientific knowledge and rational problem solving techniques, said to be superior to teachers' methods, are applied to the design process with the claim of maximizing effectiveness and efficiency in teaching and learning. Teachers are assigned an "implementation function," becoming consumers of the educational designs of others (Apple 1986, 1982; Nunan 1983; Buswell 1980). Such a process effectively insulates curriculum decisions from the realm of theoretical, political and ethical debate (Short 1984; Nunan 1983; Bowers 1977) and embeds them instead in the goal of a better return on educational investment (Gamson 1979). In this manner the "logic of capital" embodied in "technical administrative knowledge" is seen to increase its penetration of the educational apparatus (Apple 1982).

The analysis undertaken in this paper attempts to situate these critiques of competency within the context of a political economy framework. To do this, it draws on methods for social inquiry developed in the social organization of knowledge (Smith 1987, 1984, 1983, 1974). The approach directs attention to the ideological practices through which the details of everyday life are transposed into a form in which they are knowable for the purposes of managing and administering. The dominant mode of action in this sphere depends upon documentary and textual forms of "communication, action and social relations" (Smith 1984: 59). Such practices "externalize" the consciousness of individual actors (such as teachers) and reconstruct what they know as "objectified knowledge" or organizational consciousness, which then becomes a "property of formal organization," available to "appropriation by a textual discourse," and the basis for rational action" (Smith 1984: 60). These documentary forms of organization are central to the institutional processes through which contemporary societies are ordered, regulated, and managed.

This approach to analysis is valuable not only for the substantive contribution that it can make to the study of power, but also for its contribution to a central problem of method which is of widespread concern in the sociology of education as elsewhere (see Connell et.al. 1982; Sharpe 1980; Giddens, 1979), specifically

the difficulty of bridging the analytic gap between the apparently stable, organizational features of contemporary society and the ordinary experience of daily life. The method used here for displaying these extended social relations is characterized by Smith (1987) as "institutional ethnography." It is distinguished by its insistence on exploring talk and documents as essential constituents of social action and organization. Approached in this manner, the social relations which organize daily life in contemporary capitalism are not abstract or remote from daily life, though they are indeed commonly obscured from view. Individual experience routinely has its determination in social relations which began outside of the local activity in any given setting, but find their particular manifestations in the midst of everyday life. For instance, they appear in the manner in which people orient to and organize their daily life and work. For this reason, the "point of entry" (Smith 1987) for analysis of this kind is particular moments in the language or talk of the subjects of study. The analytic focus is not on the facticity of what the speaker has to say, but rather on discovering traces of the organizational features of the setting which the speaker relies upon in various ways for her understanding and action, but often does not mention directly in describing her experience.

This relation between individual and organizational action is at the heart of my investigation. In the pages which follow, I explore competency-based curriculum measures through the talk and experience of instructors and administrators in the college setting. Their knowledge of competency-based procedures serves as the starting point for examination of the routine activities through which competence is constituted as an organizational practice.

This use of data will require some special attention on the part of the reader to suspend common sense procedures for factual reading. For example, in the account which follows, a disparity will appear between the experience and understanding of instructors and that of administrators in the college system. For the purposes of this analysis, the relative validity of their opposing claims is of little concern. Rather, we aim to discover how both 'sides' in the dispute arise out of the same set of managerial arrangements which tie the practice of college administration to broader interests in the political and economic arena. To do this requires reading through the experiences of both sides to find the social relations on which they depend. While the actual documents of the curriculum process will not be examined here, evidence of their use in organizing a social process is a centerpiece of the investigation.

The College Setting: Competence and Confusion

Competency methods are explored here through a case study of a program review process in the Department of Business Administration in a community college in British Columbia. The review was undertaken as part of a Five Year Planning requirement of the provincial government. The focal point of the program review process consists of a standard competency technique called a "task analysis." In this procedure, local employers are brought together in a series of workshops

to define the competencies required for the type of entry-level jobs into which graduates of each business program are hired, for instance, in entry-level accounting, administrative, or secretarial positions. A curriculum consultant is hired as a workshop facilitator to direct the discussion toward a definition of work tasks which conforms closely to actual performance on the job, and to produce the documentation which the workshop process intends. This includes a "skills profile chart" representing the job requirements identified by employers, and an accompanying list of curriculum "objectives" detailed in behavioral or performance terms. What is important to establish here is that the documentation which results from this workshop becomes the legitimate basis for the design of instruction. Following the task analysis workshop, instructors are put to work revising and designing materials to meet the documentary specifications: Course outlines are reworked; whole courses may be added and deleted; program requirements may change.

The competency review procedures outlined here represent a considerable change from the discipline-based methods of curriculum decision-making that prevailed in the department in the past. Under the old system, disciplinary groups (such as accounting, economics, or word processing) served as the first level authority over curriculum content, and worked together in a collegial structure to develop what they call "multi-purpose" courses. These were courses which satisfied the requirements for a number of different student destinations — university transfer, to professional accrediting bodies, and entry into the labor market. Course content was juggled to make it possible for one set of core courses to serve students in several program areas in the business department.

Teachers' attitudes and opinions about their programs and the department under the old system reflected the time and labor they invested in determining their shape. They understood the objectives which drove the programs, as well as the constraints and compromises that shaped them and they were proud of the "efficiencies" that were achieved. Faculty were also satisfied with the broad educational objectives which they felt had been built into their curriculum. They recognized that "it's not a Bachelor's degree, by any means" but they feel that their programs offered a "well-rounded" group of courses, designed to teach the students ". . . how to think, . . . how to problem solve, . . . how to apply . . . [as well as] a fuller appreciation of the way the economy works, the way society works". These broad educational concerns were institutionalized in the form of program requirements" for certificates and diplomas. In this way, faculty felt that students were "protected" from being too short-sighted in their course selection. Should they "make a mistake" and decide later that "I'm brighter than I thought" then they would have acquired a good foundation for further studies and would not have "wasted their time".

The introduction of competency-based methods posed a challenge to the logic and orderliness of these established procedures and priorities. Predictably, this sense of disorder was reflected in the contradictory responses of faculty to the introduction of the new methods. At one level, the new procedures were attractive

because they appealed to a kind of common sense scientism that pervades the thinking of instructors, as a feature of their popular consciousness, if not as an explicit product of their professional training. They tend to agree that to plan is a good thing; to plan rationally, even systematically, is probably better. The new systematic design process appeared to be a logical extension of the work faculty had done in the past to learn from employers "what our grads are going to be needing". Furthermore, they found it "understandable" that the administration prefers an "external" rather than a "self-review" since it "adds a lot of credibility" not only in the eyes of industry but in the community at large. They agreed in principle that the new approach is "a very valid process."

At the same time, faculty statements revealed strong evidence of the disruption which is occurring in their work process. In its simplest form, they experience an affront to their professionalism. "Are we not professionals? Do we not know what we're doing?" or "Faculty are not lazy dogs! . . . Has the Dean decided that we are out of touch?" At a more sustained level, faculty expressed resistance to the task analysis process as it became clear that it required much time and brought what seemed to them to be very mixed results. "It makes work for us . . . a lot of work," as one instructor put it succinctly, primarily "repackaging . . . existing curriculum" since "basically the same material is there . . . as in the existing course outlines. Even more important was the fact that those changes which were either recommended or implied often appeared to faculty to be oddly dysfunctional. The task analysis "complicates, confuses the basic thinking, the basic discussion that would take place . . ."

The charge that "confusion" resulted from the new methods was an important one for our investigation. It immediately situated our reading in the midst of a puzzle about the location of the knower. What is confused, for whom, in contrast to what opposing sense of "order"? Again, clues to the puzzle were scattered throughout the talk of teachers. For example, they complained that the task analysis undermined the structure of multi-purpose courses that they had worked so hard to achieve. Each task analysis workshop was geared to a single destination in the labor market, presuming a framework of specialized courses. Instructors argued that this made neither economic nor educational sense.

We can't as a matter of dollars and cents design a particular course for [one] program. You start up with 25 students. You end up with 13 in the third semester . . . [So] as a responsible faculty, you realize you cannot do that . . . It's not cost effective . . . and also probably doesn't make educational sense . . . It's all nonsense . . . it won't happen.

This complaint about "educational sense" reflects a disruption in teachers' commitment to broad educational goals. They fear that the competency approach leads the college toward providing training instead of education and ". . . that's when you'll likely find faculty digging in their heels". They argued that you can't "cut learning into discrete bits and somehow attach them to one another . . . and a whole bunch of them make a program". The focus on fragments and tightly defined performances, they said, tends to exclude "dynamic interaction

between a faculty member and a groups of students in pursuing current topics related to business and the business environment". By contrast, faculty members argued that "learning and knowledge are an organic process; sometimes they come in quantum leaps and sometimes they don't come at all.

These statements suggest that faculty realize something fundamental is changing, but that its logic escapes them. They complained that the new approach must have been designed by people who had never taught, or that it was the "brainchild of someone with a very small brain". One teacher put it, "We're not even teaching 'students' anymore . . . they've become 'through-puts'!" Their compliance with such a system was despite "real reservations:"

From on high . . . there comes a new view of the way the world should be, and [I have] very real reservations . . . I am not so sure that there has been a close enough examination of the objectives, and whether the Dean's objectives for the Business Management program jibe with the faculty and the department objectives . . .

Our interest in these complaints and objections of teachers is not to examine their legitimacy but to understand what might give rise to them. Thus, for the purposes of this analysis, the most important information they convey is evidence that whatever "sense" or orderliness competency methods claim for themselves, it is organized from a place in which the teachers do not stand. The methods appeared to teachers quite literally, as "non-sense." These complaints direct our attention as investigators to a place "on high," which evidently lies outside the daily routines of teachers themselves but has considerable importance for the organization of their work process.

Competence and Accountability

A different kind of "sense" attached to competency measures begins to emerge when we extend the focus of our investigation to include the offices of administrators, both in the college and in the provincial ministry of education. Again, by focussing on the language of their working relationships, we begin to uncover the traces of a complex web of social relations in which the college carries out its daily tasks of instruction, and in which competency procedures are deeply embedded. Their daily concerns are once again the starting place for this search.

The "presenting problem" or complaint of administrators was the trouble they have with faculty. As they saw it, instructors had their own "pet interests" and "hobby horses" that influenced what they teach. "Faculty like doing their own thing, in their own way" and "hide behind the idea of academic freedom . . . not always knowing what it means . . . But they like shutting the door on the classroom." They "don't want anyone meddling in how and what they teach" and they "turn off anything they think intrudes." This behavior of faculty was typically characterized by administrators as "very, very conservative" . For our purposes, these charges imply that autonomy among faculty is a significant impediment to the conduct of administration. But they don't tell us exactly what it "impedes."

Administrators said that the result of such faculty independence was that a lot of "baggage" found its way into the program, material that "is not required by anyone" but was there because "instructors have a passion for it". This condition is called "curriculum creep" or "program creep" which clogs up the system "because it is so damned hard . . . to get rid of the obsolete junk." It becomes a system run by "vested interests" where "employment security dictates curriculum" or where "we are employing instructors for the sake of employing instructors." In the words of the department head, "it doesn't serve any bloody purpose". Such charges are not to be read as a chronicle of the shortcomings of faculty, nor even as a set of claims to be disputed, but only as evidence that the organization of teachers' work that has prevailed in the past does not fit with current administrative requirements. What has made "educational and economic sense" for faculty has become excess "baggage" for current administrative priorities.

From this vantage point behind the desks of administrators, new possibilities for the "sense" of competency practices come into view. They offer solutions to exactly the kinds of administrative problems cited above, because they reorganize the social relations of curriculum decision-making. The actual changes are simple and practical, but their impact is far-reaching. The task analysis initiates this process of change by laying the content of every course open to examination, not by evaluating what is already taught, which would be seen as a direct assault on teachers, but by establishing a new definition of "need" against which every aspect of instruction will have to be justified anew. Need is defined in relation to on-the-job requirements as these are identified by employers in the task analysis, for example, the ability to write business memos or reports. Curriculum objectives are then justified directly in relation to these end goals, and not in terms of the mastery of familiar educational building blocks such as grammar, punctuation and composition. Thus a shift is forced in the standard of "relevance" for course and program content from the traditional educational reference points of instructors, i.e., the "disciplines" of math, English, or accounting, to performance in the workplace.

The task analysis further reorganizes curriculum decision-making by effecting a change in the significant actors in the curriculum design process. That is, it displaces instructors, both individually and collectively, from their role as primary mediators between the workplace and the classroom. In the past, each program maintained, by statutory requirement, an advisory committee of local employers meeting on an irregular basis to advise departments on matters of program content. These committees reported directly to faculty, with the formal endorsement of the Dean and the President's office. Now, administrators argue that faculty have manipulated advisory committees in order "to get their way," so the new system is designed to prevent that.

The task analysis process replaces the old system of consultation with one that largely circumvents the faculty. Faculty are not permitted to attend the task analysis workshop, with the exception of one or two representatives from each program who are sent in the capacity of "staff persons" from the department

head's office, and their presence at the workshop is primarily in the role of observer. Although the basic administrative work of organizing the workshop and coordinating the flow of paper work involved is still delegated to the faculty, these duties are defined strictly as a "support function." Meanwhile, the outside curriculum consultant, hired to facilitate the workshop and write all the documents, reports directly to the Dean's office. This arrangement effectively bypasses, and silences, instructors both as individuals and as a group, denying legitimacy to the knowledge of workplace requirements which they have acquired through professional associations and in intermittent dealings with employers regarding graduates.

The department head was clear about the significance of these new arrangements, calling it the "separation of outcomes from input," which means that "objectives . . . are going to be set by people out there as opposed to people in here . . .". For him, it is a positive step toward rational administration:

In the long run you've implemented something very positive . . . An objective process will be introduced to the system. What the process basically says is that . . . there will be periodical external definition of requirements . . . of these programs. A totally independent, objective statement of what program requirements are . . .

While college administrators are anxious to adopt the new "objective process," they will not agree that instructors at their college were doing a bad job. On the contrary, administrators at all levels insisted that they have "a lot of confidence in existing programs, that by and large faculty are "very responsible people," many are "bright" even "brilliant," and that "95% of the content is what it ought to be." For these reasons, only minor curriculum modifications were expected to result from the task analysis exercise. Thus, on the one hand, the change is described as "almost trivial," while on the other it is considered to be fundamental.

The process we are implementing is a method whereby the faculty assumes the responsibility for assuring that the institution meets those [externally defined] objectives. You know, it's simple — almost trivial — yet it's a major, major shift in direction for the institution . . . because in the past, the faculty have been responsible for the definition of program content and outcome. You cannot have that . . . not when you have an external mandate.

The "major shift in direction" identified above thus referred specifically to the process by which curriculum determinations are made. The department head pointed out that his credibility as an administrator, the credibility of his programs, and the credibility of the college as a whole, depended upon their ability to make this shift visible. They must be able to demonstrate to individuals viewing the college from the outside that their programs "match the requirements of the field" which means that the learning objectives of the program have been "established and validated by the field," that the "pedagogy . . . matches the learning objectives." Only under such conditions will the administration be seen to be "doing its job."

Because as part of our reporting, . . . the fact that we have done a task analysis will indicate that, yes, we are doing our job. We are involved in the community . . . it can make a difference in face validity . . . with the ministry, I think.

“Face validity” is not a matter of turning out employable students but is realized in conducting a program such that satisfying the requirements of industry is accountable for organizational purposes. Furthermore, accountability does not depend upon displaying those intimate features of instruction and evaluation with which pedagogues have been mostly concerned — behavioural objectives and criteria for evaluation. Indeed, ministry officials report that they are not interested in checking up on all the programs under their jurisdiction to see that the provincial competency guidelines or skills profiles are being followed to the letter. This is information that they “don’t necessarily want to know . . . so we don’t go out and ask”. What is emphasized instead is what one administrator called “the spirit” of the program.

Well, I think that from a program management point of view, what you have to have is a method of showing on the part of the institution or the organization that is doing the training, that what they are doing on a day to day basis really meets the spirit of the program (64:32).

The “spirit” to which this administrator refers consists in having programs properly “accounted for” in a documentary reporting system that will stand in for “day-to-day” educational practices at the college. It is through these processes of textual mediation that educational practices at the college are “made real” in the board rooms of the ministry, and that all levels of governments will make claims in the public arena about the implementation of “competency-driven” programs of education and training as a means to bring about greater “responsiveness to the needs of industry” and “more careful targeting” of educational resources (Canada, CMEC, 1985; British Columbia, Ministry of Education, 1983).

Conclusion

I have argued that competence is a socially organized practice, constituted in and through a re-organization of the routine practices of curriculum design and management. In practical terms, the shift may be summarized as follows. In a conventional, teacher-based instructional environment, curriculum decision-making relies upon the practical knowledge of teachers, individually and collectively. It is embedded in their first hand knowledge of the teaching/learning process and their understanding of work place requirements accumulated through interactions with employers. In a competency-based system, this role is withdrawn from teachers and vested in an organizational process which draws on the specialized expertise of employers on the one hand and curriculum technicians on the other to produce a documentary account of “program requirements.” This documentary process reports directly to the Dean’s office, which in turn is accountable to the ministry through the documentary management practices of the college.

In these textual processes are inscribed not the needs-to-know of teachers and learners but the interests of various others whose relation to curriculum decisions is mediated by their location in a managerial process. The documents account for the expectations of employers (expressed as "requirements of the field"), those activities of administrators which count as "doing their job," and the performance of college programs in satisfying their "external mandate" in centrally determined policy. Through these documentary processes, the *accountable* form of competence is not a measure of individual student performance, but a particular organization of administering and managing the delivery of educational services. Thus the concept of competence comes apart from the educational ground which it purports to represent and expresses instead *the relation* of individual actors to a managerial organization of interests in the educational enterprise.

This investigation sheds some light on the enigmatic persistence of the competency paradigm in education, and begins to unravel some of the complexity underlying its apparent inconsistencies and contradictions. The findings suggest, in the words of Henri Bergson, that "Disorder is simply the order we are not looking for" (quoted in Schuman, 1982:xv). That is, the endurance of the competency movement may remain inexplicable as long as our gaze is fixed on the "confusion" it effects in the teaching/learning process or on the "mistaken" scientism of educational measurement. Its success comes into focus when we consider its capacity to mediate the critical issues of power and authority that reside at the heart of the curriculum process — what Wise (1979:xvi) calls the issue of "who rules the schools."

In the case of employment-oriented programs examined above, competency practices effect a shift of authority in the curriculum process, from instructors who think it is important to teach "an appreciation of how the economy works" to those in the offices of industry and government who are interested in securing "a more careful targeting of educational resources." In the process, what is altered is not merely the content of any given educational program, but also the social process through which the educational enterprise is conceptualized, organized and governed. The competency framework installs the "requirements of industry" at the center of the curriculum process, and towards the service of these defined needs it provides a documentary method of coordinating and articulating the actions of employers, administrators, consultants, and instructors engaged in different locations and different moments of the educational enterprise. The dynamic which drives "industry" under conditions of contemporary capitalism (and indeed the drive for "capital accumulation," although this claim exceeds the scope of my present argument), becomes the organizing force behind education as well. In this context, and understanding of competency measures a contributes significantly to analysis of contemporary transformations in the social relations of education, and a to the search to find these determining relations in the midst of our everyday activity.

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