

WORKING GROUP 3 “NEW GOALS”

Stockholm (Sweden), 2-3 November 2016

Reader “Competences”

The importance and definition of competences

Fundamental question, why are developing learners’ competences so important, and why should teaching, learning and assessment be grounded in a competence-based approach? Life is increasingly non-routine, problem-based and technology rich. That’s why education systems are moving away from solely content-led approaches, and focusing more on helping learners develop a range of competences to cope in our complex world. Education today, just as in previous centuries, is intended to promote learners’ personal growth, citizenship and preparation for the world of work. However, the skills needed for this in today’s society, just as in the future society of the 22nd century, are and will continue to be very different from those that were needed in previous times. While some skills, such as numeracy and literacy, are just as important today as they were in the past, other more transversal and higher order skills, such as collaborative problem-solving are increasingly valuable for citizens to be able to effectively take part in life today, whether personally, socially or professionally.

The need for school students to develop competences, also known as ‘key competences’ or ‘21st century skills’, has increasingly gained importance, and has recently become prominent in education systems worldwide thanks to social and economic motivations, as well as developments in educational research. The need to improve the quality and relevance of the competences learners acquire before leaving formal education has been widely recognized, particularly in view of Europe’s current high youth unemployment. Knowledge and basic skills are necessary but no longer sufficient to meet the complex requirements of today’s social demands in an increasingly competitive global economy. In a digital world where functional skills-based professions are in decline, competence oriented education has particular relevance. New technologies are constantly changing the way we learn, work, live and function in a digital and knowledge-based society. So the need to develop learners’ competences seems pretty clear. But what exactly are they, and which ones should we be focusing on?

A useful definition is given by Hoskins and Crick who state that a ‘competence’ can be defined as ‘a complex combination of knowledge, skills, understanding, values, attitudes and desire which lead to effective, embodied human action in the world in a particular domain’. In other words, being competent means being able to effectively apply a combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes to successfully react to a situation or solve a problem in the real world.

The term ‘competence’ was originally used in the professional context in France in the 1970s to refer to what employees needed beyond qualifications to act effectively in a range of work situations. In the 1980s, competence-based approaches started to be developed in vocational education and training in various countries. Since then, the growing importance of competences has meant that competence-based learning has now also been extended to general school education, which is the focus of our course.

Competences are expressed, understood and implemented within each education system in different ways according to national context, depending on educational philosophies, historical and political traditions, as well as outside influences. Countries have therefore developed their own national definitions and competence frameworks, including subject-based as well as transversal competences. In addition to this range of national frameworks, some of which we will look at later in this module, various international competence frameworks have been developed over the past 20 years. These include the European

Union's Recommendation on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning, the UNESCO framework, the OECD DESECO framework, Partnerships 21 framework, and the ATC21S framework. All these frameworks share common points and have been developed in consultation with experts and stakeholders globally. For the purposes of this course, we will mainly use the European Union framework and the ATC21S framework as reference points. You can access all the frameworks mentioned if you are interested in further reading, from our course library.

Let's firstly take a brief look at the ATC 21st century skills framework which includes four dimensions: ways of thinking; ways of living in the world; ways of working; and tools for working. Ways of thinking is conceptualized as including creativity and innovation, critical thinking, problem-solving, decision making and learning to learn. Ways of living in the world includes local and global citizenship, life and career skills, personal and social responsibility and cultural awareness. Ways of working is considered to include collaboration and communication; and tools for working comprises information literacy and ICT literacy. As you will see, the European Framework also refers to all these competences, but is more firmly rooted in the context of the school curriculum. As school education is the focus of our course, let's take a closer look at the European framework.

The European Union Framework, developed by the European Commission in consultation with all member states, includes the following 8 Key Competences:

- Communication in the mother tongue
- Communication in foreign languages
- Mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology
- Digital competence
- Learning to learn
- Social and civic competences
- Sense of initiative and entrepreneurship
- Cultural awareness and expression.

All 8 key competences are considered equally important, because each of them contributes to the personal fulfilment and development of all individuals. Many of the competences overlap and interlock, and they are all interdependent, with the following transversal skills playing an important role in each of them: critical thinking, creativity, initiative, problem solving, risk assessment, decision taking and the constructive management of feelings.

You can access the precise definition of each of the 8 key competences, as well as the knowledge, skills and attitudes associated to each one in the European framework, available in the course library. You are all teachers of different subjects, and while all these competences are interrelated, certain competences may be of more direct interest to you than others. However, there is one particular competence which will be considered extremely important by all of you, and that is the 'learning to learn' competence, as it is the foundation of all learning. As with all the 8 key competences, the European framework firstly provides a definition of learning to learn and then identifies the knowledge, skills and attitudes associated to it.

Learning to learn is defined as the ability to pursue and persist in learning, to organise one's own learning, including through effective management of time and information, both individually and in groups. This competence includes awareness of one's learning process and needs, and the ability to overcome obstacles in order to learn successfully. Learning to learn engages learners to build on prior learning and life experiences in order to use and apply knowledge and skills at home, at work, in education and training.

In terms of the essential knowledge related to this competence, learning to learn requires an individual to know and understand his/her preferred learning strategies, and the strengths and weaknesses of his/her skills and qualifications.

In terms of the essential skills related to this competence, learning to learn firstly requires the acquisition of the fundamental basic skills such as literacy, numeracy and ICT skills that are necessary for further learning. Building on these skills, an individual should be able to access, gain, process and assimilate new knowledge and skills. This requires effective management of one's learning, career and work patterns, and, in particular, the ability to persevere, concentrate for extended periods and to reflect critically on the purposes and aims of learning. Learning to learn skills include being able to learn autonomously and with self-discipline, as well as being able to work collaboratively and share what one has learnt. Learners should be able to organise their own learning, evaluate their own work, and seek advice, information and support when appropriate.

The essential attitudes related to this competence include the motivation and confidence to pursue and succeed at learning throughout one's life. A problem-solving attitude supports both the learning process

itself and an individual's ability to handle obstacles and change. The desire to apply prior learning and life experiences and the curiosity to look for opportunities to learn and apply learning in a variety of life contexts are also essential. Whichever subject and age range you teach, these are the knowledge, skills and attitudes you should be developing in your students to ensure they can be competent lifelong learners.

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What is competence? What is competency?

Competence and competency. What is competence? How has it been reduced to competency? What is the impact on education and training?

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Over the last twenty years the discourse around education and training has shifted. We now tend to use a pseudo-commercial language of markets, investments and products. The interest in 'competence' and 'competency' has been part of this move. A significant pressure behind this in the UK, according to proponents like Jessup (1989: 66), has been the supposed lack of relevance of vocational provision and the need to compete with other economies. Courses and programmes were alleged to concentrate on the gaining of knowledge and theory and to neglect performance ('and it is performance which essentially characterizes competence' op cit). Vocational qualifications were to be recast into statements of competence relevant to work

The move has been heavily influenced by the development of management thinking and practice and, in particular, the rise of 'scientific management' (after F. W. Taylor). Basically what he proposed was greater division of labor with jobs being simplified; an extension of managerial control over all elements of the workplace; and cost accounting based on systematic time-and-motion study. All three elements are associated with the rise of competence and, indeed, the concern with curriculum (Kliebart 1983). This is certainly the current that has run through the construction of a system of national vocational qualifications. As Davies and Durkin (1991: 7) have commented the allocations of power are unmistakable in the new system. 'In charge – the employer, with his or her needs paramount; next as an unavoidable necessity the "engagement of the individual worker", in so far as his or her interests are useful to the employer; and finally, very much as a poor relation – the education service'.

It is both a testament to the continuing power of functionalism and scientific management, and to the lack of sustained reflection within education, that a narrow notion of competence has gained such ground. We can see competence and competencies used as part of the everyday language of teacher education, further education, community work, youth work and community education. It appeared to 'solve' various problems – of relevance, of access, of privilege and of comparability and transfer. The government introduced via the National Council for Vocational Qualification a national CBET (competence-based education and training) system.

What is competence?

In the discussion that occurred in the 1980s in the UK competence was basically approached as 'the ability to do a particular activity to a prescribed standard (Working Group on Vocational Qualifications 1986). UDACE proclaimed that 'competence is concerned with what people can do rather than what they know'. They went on:

This has several implications:

firstly if competence is concerned with doing then it must have a context...;

secondly, competence is an outcome: it describes what someone can do. It does not describe the learning process which the individual has undergone.

thirdly, in order to measure reliably someone's ability to do something, there must be clearly defined and widely accessible standards through which performance is measured and accredited;

fourthly, competence is a measure of what someone can do at a particular point in time. (UDACE 1989: 6 quoted by Tight 1996).

The language of competence is often misunderstood. This is, according to CeVe, because of its association with vocational training and skill rather than understanding. There is some truth in this. The notion of competence described above is a pale and demeaning shadow of the Greek notion of aretè or that of virtue in ancient Rome. Brezinka (1988: 76) describes this as a relatively permanent quality of personality which is valued by the community to which we belong. In this sense it is not simply a skill but is a virtue; a general sense of excellence and goodness. It involves being up to those tasks that life presents us (op cit).

In much current usage this notion has been whittled down to the ability to undertake specific tasks; it has been largely stripped of its social, moral and intellectual qualities. Perhaps the best way of approaching this is to make a distinction between competence (and competences) and competency (and competencies). This is something that Hyland has done usefully with regard to the development of NVQs in the United Kingdom. He argues that there is a tendency to conflate the terms. Competence and competences are broad capacities (which a close relation to the sort of virtues that Brezinka was concerned with). In contrast competency (plural competencies) is narrower, more atomistic concept used to label particular abilities or episodes. In the case of the former we might talk of a competent informal educator; in the latter a competent piece of driving. In this way the first, capacity, sense of the term refers to the evaluation of persons; whereas the second, dispositional, sense refers to activities.

In the current discourse competence as a fully human attribute, has been reduced to competencies – series of discrete activities that people possess the necessary skills, knowledge and understanding to engage in effectively. The implication here is that behavior can be objectively and mechanistically measured. This is a highly questionable assumption – there always has to be some uncertainty about what is being measured. We only have to reflect on questions of success in our work. It is often very difficult to judge what the impact of particular experiences has been. Sometimes it is years after the event that we come to appreciate something of what has happened. Yet there is something more. In order to measure, things have to be broken down into smaller and smaller units. The result is often long lists of trivial skills as is frequently encountered in BTEC programmes and NVQ competency assessments. This can lead to a focus on the parts rather than the whole; on the trivial, rather than the significant. It can lead to an approach to education and assessment which resembles a shopping list. When all the items are ticked, the person has passed the course or has learnt something. The role of overall judgment is sidelined.

In this there is also an orientation to possessing and owning attributes (a having mode) rather than a concern with being.

While the having persons rely on what they have, the being persons rely on the fact that they are, that they are alive and that something new will be born if only they have the courage to let go and respond. They become fully alive in the conversation because they do not stifle themselves by anxious concern with what they have. Their own aliveness is infectious and often helps the other person to transcend his or her egocentricity. Thus the conversation ceases to be an exchange of commodities (information, knowledge, status) and becomes a dialogue in which it does not matter any more who is right. (Fromm 1979)

The problem here is that in the act of deconstruction can come destruction. This is not to argue against analysis, rather it is to say that we must attend very careful to our frame of mind or disposition when undertaking it. The move from competence as a human virtue to a discrete thing that we possess is fundamental. In essence, it involves adopting a way of viewing the world that undermines the very qualities that many of us would argue make for liberatory education.

Competency and product approaches to curriculum making

The concern with competency is very close to technical or product approaches to curriculum making. (As a starter I want to use Shirley Grundy offers one of the simple definition of curriculum: ‘... It is a way of organising a set of human educational practices’ (Grundy 1987: 5). If we approach is curriculum as product – or the technical approach. This approach can be understood in the light of Aristotle’s model of the different dispositions which motivate human action-in the technical disposition towards action:

- the creative idea or image (eidos)
- governs the artisan’s use of skills (techne)
- in the action of making (poietike).

This model illustrates how the impetus to make – to poietike – is controlled from the outset by the eidos which is the initial guiding pattern or idea for the final product. Clearly, the artisan chooses the skills used in achieving the finished product and making this choice is a skill in itself. But it is essentially the original pattern (eidos) which determines the limits on the range of skills appropriate to the task. Importantly, in

curricular terms, the artisan's work will eventually be judged by the extent to which the outcome or product fits the original prescription of the eidos.

As a model of curriculum design and delivery, a product based approach is therefore typically one which controls and assesses learning through establishing preset objectives and outcomes. An obvious example would be teaching cake-making in which the curriculum is governed by the goal of producing a birthday cake shaped like a clown. The skills taught or used in making the cake will be restrained by the preset outcome which in this instance would indicate baking not poaching. The student will be assessed on the success of the cake and not, for example, on its appropriacy for the birthday in question.

In this example, the eidos is to produce a correct form from the student. Students' performance is restrained by the demands of the test which require certain areas of knowledge or competence to be demonstrated but not others. Note how students can become the outcome and the assessment is based on their achieving behavioural objectives.

Assessment based on the degree to which the outcome has been achieved, (a feature of the product based curriculum), is a model taken from production industry. The product should not be adversely affected by the eventual testing or assessment unless it is faulty and fails the test. When the outcome is a person, then the product-based curriculum will seek to achieve behavioural objectives and final testing is a more complicated issue. As I suspect many of us have discovered, it sometimes does adversely affect the person concerned.

In this model of curriculum design, students can only have limited potential to challenge or to negotiate the curriculum. The control of the eidos which is eventually expressed as the product of the learning rests with the curriculum designer. The curriculum designer may be the (cake-making) teacher or the (workplace) assessor. In both cases, we can see how an understanding of the curriculum as product is linked to the achievement of preset objectives.

We can see how these concerns translate into a nicely-ordered procedure: one that is very similar to technical or productive thinking.

Exhibit 1: Planning the product curriculum

- Step 1: Diagnosis of need
 - Step 2: Formulation of objectives
 - Step 3: Selection of content
 - Step 4: Organization of content
 - Step 5: Selection of learning experiences
 - Step 6: Organization of learning experiences
 - Step 7: Determination of what to evaluate and of the ways and means of doing it.
- (Taba 1962: 12)

The attraction of this way of proceeding is that it is systematic and has considerable organising power. Central to the approach is the formulation of behavioural objectives – providing a clear notion of outcome so that content and method may be organised and the results evaluated.

Curriculum as process

This leads me to consider a second model of curriculum: curriculum as process or as practice to bring out some of the contrasts. We have seen that the curriculum as product model is heavily dependent on the setting of behavioural objectives. Another way of looking at curriculum is to view it as process. In this sense it is not a physical thing, but rather the interaction of teachers, students and knowledge. In other words, curriculum is what actually happens in the classroom and what people do to prepare and evaluate. What we have in this model is a number of elements in constant interaction.

Exhibit 2: Curriculum as process

Teachers enter particular schooling and educational situations with

- an ability to think critically, and think-in-action
- an understanding of their role and
- the expectations others have of them, and
- a proposal for action which sets out essential principles and features of the educational encounter.

Guided by these, they encourage

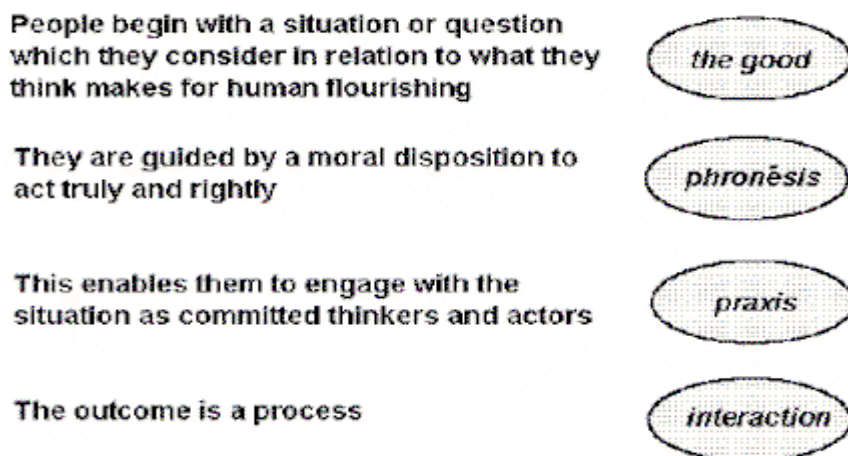
- conversations between, and with, people in the situation out of which may come
- thinking and action.

They continually evaluate the process and what they can see of outcomes.

(Jefferies and Smith 1990)

There I have described that as entering the situation with 'a proposal for action which sets out essential principles and features of the educational encounter'. This form of words echoes those of Lawrence Stenhouse (1974) who produced one of the best-known explorations of a process model of curriculum.

This way, like Grundy's view of curriculum as process, looks back to Aristotle for an initial definition in his identification of phronesis as the impetus which underlies the disposition towards practical action.



Phronesis, usually translated as practical judgement, relies upon a human disposition towards well-doing as an end in itself. The practical action which results from phronesis is praxis. (The term praxis has assumed a specific meaning within liberatory education). Here I focus on phronesis or the process which gives rise to praxis. The *eidos* – the guiding principle – which leads to praxis is the human disposition towards good. Since there is a human disposition towards good, then phronesis involves a process of deliberation about how to achieve this good rather than whether to do so. That process will typically involve participants in actively judging and interpreting. A curriculum model which is based on process therefore involves active participation through learning rather than a passive reception of teaching. The focus is concentrated on the participants and their actions rather than upon predetermined products.

In conclusion

Here we can see the contrasts with a product or competency orientation – in fact we return to the virtues that we saw originally connected with the idea of competence. The language of this area is confusing – but the political and educational differences between competence and competency are profound.

Books on competence and competency

There are any number of dire and uncritical 'how to do it' guides to constructing competency based programmes. Here I have selected some of the better critiques of the movement.

Barnett, R. (1994) *The Limits of Competence. Knowledge, higher education and society*, Buckingham: Open University Press. 205 + x pages. Critique of the state of higher education in relation to current buzz words such as skill, vocationalism, competence, enterprise.

Hodkinson, P. and Issitt, M. (eds.) (1995) *The Challenge of Competence. Professionalism through vocational education and training*, London: Cassell. 163 + vii pages. Collection exploring issues around competence in different sectors.

Hyland, T. (1994) *Competence, Education and NVQs. Dissenting perspectives*, London: Cassell. 166 + x pages. One of the best, critical, overviews of recent developments in the UK and of the nature of competence.

Other references

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Volunteering: Beyond Relevance, Gaining Competence

Every success story begins with a first step forward and things following naturally. As a volunteer experience, ESN has been a stepping stone for many, now successful, individuals. This was also the case for Damien Lamy-Preto, who works for Education First in France as a Business Developer.

After his Erasmus exchange, Damien decided to join ESN in addition to his studies and work in architecture, but **ESN completely changed his career**. He has been involved in ESN for almost ten years, starting from a section member, to the section President of ESN Nancy. Later, he continued his journey as the National Treasurer of ESN France and lastly he became the Treasurer of ESN International.

Through his experience in ESN, **Damien developed an entrepreneurial spirit**. He believed that developing himself as much as he did was only possible due to the love he has for the mission and vision of ESN. So much of what he achieved was due to the effort he put forth and his belief that ESN could be great.

His hard work and involvement was rewarded with **trust from the network, which allowed him to further learn and develop** as he was working to keep that trust. After years of experience, on all levels, he is still convinced that ESN can always do better if the belief and trust in ESN, and its members, continue to grow.

Thanks to his volunteer experience in ESN, **Damien pursued a career that was very different from his studies**. He compares his choice with other students who followed an MBA path to build up their careers and now when he looks back he believes he made a good choice. In his own words:

“In ESN, nothing is impossible. The work fields of ESN are really broad: Education, Management, Finances, IT and so on. I found a real possibility to grow personally and professionally and thanks to the size of the Network this was a long and fruitful adventure.”

In ESN, he had the chance to work with many different institutions and companies which helped him build extensive personal relations and networks. He developed **numerous skills in finance, languages, education management, and leadership**, but above all, he values his friendship skills, which he believes will be essential in his future.

He is convinced that if it hadn't been for ESN **he wouldn't have had these vast opportunities to improve himself** at the level he did and he would have also never gotten in touch with Education First, where he works now.

Damien's experience is a great example for every volunteer in ESN. From time to time, your volunteering work might not always seem important to you, or be relevant to your field, but you are learning a lot and developing competences you do not even realise at the time. **All of this self-improvement will be helpful in your near future.**

ESN is so much more than meets the eye. Search no more for what is relevant. By adding value to the network, you will also be adding value to yourself. ESN itself might not be the reason a company will employ you, **but the skills and experiences you acquire from volunteering in ESN will.**

#myESNcareer

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