

# BEYOND THE OPPOSITION BETWEEN KNOWLEDGE AND COMPETENCIES



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## REFLECTIONS ON THE COMPETENCY-BASED APPROACH AND GENERAL EDUCATION<sup>1</sup>

The purpose of this article is to show that the pedagogical principles underpinning the competency-based approach (CBA) are likely to make accessible a humanist education. To do so, however, we must clarify our concept of the competencies to be developed and define them in greater detail. In particular, we must take into account their strong knowledge content and incorporate strategies to transmit and acquire it.

### A FEW CRITICISMS OF THE COMPETENCY-BASED APPROACH

Despite the fact that the transformation of college programs of study into programs based on competencies is almost complete, the competency-based approach (CBA) still bears the brunt of sharply negative comments especially in the context of general education or pre-university programs of study. A number of events, including the difficulties experienced during the reform at the secondary level, the unexpected abandonment of the CBA in Switzerland and mitigated or bad test results of students at the end of elementary school have fuelled a certain negative “humanist” criticism which opposes the implementation of the CBA. Even though it seems to have been successfully adopted in general education at the CEGEP level, some still question its actual implementation or criticize the reductionism it appears to favour to the detriment of genuine culture. To those who doubt the strength of the opposition movement, I offer the following quotations which summarize the ideas

of certain thinkers generally qualified as “leftist” or “humanist”. Nico Hirtt (2003) writes:

On the one hand, this approach will be unable to achieve the emancipating potential it targets. On the other hand, and even more importantly, it involves –probably involuntarily in the minds of its theorists– a vast instrumentalization process of ‘school’ for the purposes of an economy seeking deregulation and social dualization.

In the same vein, but in a more subtle manner, Gérald Boutin and Louise Julien (2000) offer the following comments:

All in all, the current vision of ‘school’ which is embraced by those responsible for the reform is largely inspired by neoliberal thinking: school is the waiting room to a society which requires the ‘manufacturing’ of citizens moulded according to its objectives of profitability and performance. Any initiative that deviates from this line will be automatically dismissed. Here, education is treated as a commodity, parents and children are treated as customers, and the school as a company, or an industry.

There are large numbers of opponents in some unions and in the *Association pour une solidarité syndicale étudiante* (student association) (2005):

CEGEPs were the first teaching institutions in Québec to test the CBA. This approach, based on a ‘neo-progressive’ pedagogy (centered on the student), is a threat to the very meaning and the humanist ideal of education: the development of free, autonomous and critical beings through the transmission of knowledge. [...] It (the CBA) is guided by labour market indicators and acts as a promoter of the utilitarianism and consumerism of training. It ‘deals more with training than education, less with thinking than with automatism’.

At the heart of this criticism, putting aside the arguments of neoliberalism and the alignment of education with the “labour market”<sup>2</sup>—as if professional and technical training was anything but the training of competent crafts-people and technicians—we find a few specific pedagogical issues. It is said that the CBA would reject any disciplinary contribution, would minimize the transmission of knowledge in favour of know-how, would deny cultural and classical education, would negate the right to personal autonomy, would devalue the role of teachers by transforming them into simple accompanying adults, would reduce education to an instrumentalization of behaviour and, finally, would prevent the development of critical thinking and citizenship. It all adds up to such an overwhelming bad rap that one wonders how this approach ever managed to become current!

We will not attempt to examine each of these arguments individually; rather, we will attempt to demonstrate that the CBA is not contrary to an in-depth cultural

<sup>1</sup> The opinions expressed in this article are solely those of the author.

<sup>2</sup> The author is to be forgiven for excluding these questions not because of their lack of importance but only because they fall outside the scope of the present problem and would require a lengthy development.





education and applies very well to higher education, even in disciplines with no immediate professional aims. Our point is that, in order to implement the CBA in these disciplines, we must take into account their essential characteristics and any major differences that profoundly affect the meaning and implementation of the CBA in this context

### OVERVIEW OF THE CONCEPT OF A COMPETENCY

According to Tardif (2006), a competency is “a complex ability to know how to take action by drawing on the efficient mobilization and combination of various internal and external resources within a family of situations”. In this context, by “competency” we mean the ability to activate these resources in order to act in diversified rather than specific situations which are indefinite in scope; and we also mean the ability to live in society, to contribute to its advancement and even to live a happy and balanced life.

We should underline that Tardif insists on the different dimensions that define the term “competency” which make it broad in scope and flexible. It is a concept which mobilizes “internal and external resources” and not just knowledge. It is integrative, combinatory, developmental, contextual and evolutionary. With these added precisions and broadening of the concept, the notion of “competency” gains in generality and richness, and that makes it more amenable to being used in the definition of educational objectives as they apply to general education.

### A HUMANIST EDUCATION WITHIN A GENERAL EDUCATION: THE CONCEPT OF GENERAL CULTURE

Competencies thus defined and promoted to the rank of educational objectives for certain courses or groups of courses are the vehicles of a humanist education which pursues its own general goals through more specific learning: identifying literary trends, distinguishing philosophical conceptions of human beings, taking charge of one’s health, opening up to anglophone culture and language, initiating oneself to science or art, etc.

Among the possible competencies stemming from the vast pool of general culture, the ministerial authorities made certain selections for general education—for instance, opting for philosophy in francophone colleges and for humanities in anglophone colleges. Ministerial documents identified knowledge that was judged to be essential, the common cultural foundation—philosophy, literature, physical education, English and complementary courses—and certain fundamental knowledge found in specific training programs in the form of contributing disciplines and generic skills. These choices have been the subject of debate but there seems to be an historic consensus regarding the subjects selected.

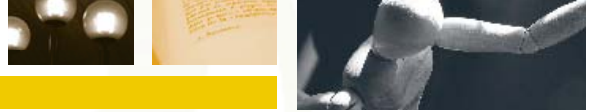
General culture is thus defined as: essential knowledge in the fields of literature, art, science and philosophy; fundamental and transferable abilities such as communication, self-awareness and citizenship awareness; appropriate attitudes, such as openness, curiosity, critical thinking, listening and the ability to work in a team.

When adapted to the general culture in this way, the CBA is a relative but real success in Quebec: graduates have read and analyzed a diversity of literary and philosophical works, many have integrated regular physical activity into their lives and have attained a certain level of competency in English. They have also shown interest in other fields of knowledge and developed abilities and attitudes that relate to intellectual and cultural life (in a broad sense).

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One could ask in what way exactly did the CBA contribute to this success. Could we not have achieved the same results by revising the final objectives and general education specifications using the Objectives Approach (OA)? What is the specific contribution of the CBA? Does it not lead to a different concept of “culture”, one that resembles the description provided by Perrenoud?

It is time to accept the thought that human culture, including its theological and philosophical dimensions, is fundamentally linked to action, to an uncertain and worried presence in the world, and to the desire to anticipate and influence events [...]. Culture, as far as anthropologists are concerned, is not opposed to social practices and human action. On the contrary, it is our own ‘species’ characteristic way of understanding and mastering our condition, using language, sharing, collective memory, and conceptualization (Perrenoud, 2001, p. 8).



This position justifies defining culture as a series of competencies socially qualified as being essential in a given culture and therefore as an extensive ability to take action in context. We should mention here that this definitional bias, derived from the social sciences, which defines culture in terms of attitudes, behaviours, symbolic beliefs and customs, goes against another more classical definition. According to the latter, culture is better understood in terms of scholarship in the fields of literature and art together with a sustained interest in them. Even if the reasoning used by Perrenoud applies to the first definition, it is much less evident in the second example, since even though there is clearly an element of social reproduction in the notion of “cultivated” culture, there is also an element of creative gratuity that is beyond the acquisition of competencies, whatever its significance.

From the standpoint of general education, students educated in a CBA context do acquire, relatively speaking, the bases of certain disciplines, both on a practical and theoretical level.

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This learning however must not lead to a denial of the basic knowledge of each discipline—in principle they integrate them, but do they integrate them all?—even though a certain practical goal is ever-present: to write a dissertation, to analyze and argue, to defend a point of view in a public presentation, etc.

In the disciplines of general education (we could also say: in pre-university programs), it is important to acknowledge these practical objectives while at the same time clarifying the specific character of these competencies which include a great deal of theoretical and consistent knowledge, complex situations and, in some cases, which require levels of distinction when it comes to their undefined development.

On the other hand, we notice that defining these competencies has been more difficult and often less specific in the disciplines of general education than in the technical programs. We also see that some of these competencies cannot be fully developed within a college teaching context (or even in the first cycle of university). So we need to understand them differently, in terms of varying degrees of initiation rather than mastery (complex ability to take action in context), as compared to a strictly academic context. In the text cited previously, Tardif also underlines the intrinsically developmental character of a competency.

We have also already noted that, within the framework of general education courses, competencies are more general in nature, less precise, more open to different interpretations and more disciplinary, that is, more focused on content (Tremblay, 2004). Specialists have often stated that “they are not real competencies”.

In fact, we understand these competencies better when we look at the “components of a competency”; but then we notice that it is often a question of declarative knowledge, of know-how and even of perceptions and attitudes. We think that this result is inevitable whenever our interest turns to fields of general knowledge in which the expected results of education remain general by nature. Far from being defective, these competencies actually respect the true nature of this education.

#### AN ESSENTIAL DIFFERENCE

General education cannot be defined in purely practical terms, as an “ability to take action” across a vast area, without exposing itself to criticism for being reductionist. However, this brings us to take another look at the question of competencies to be developed in disciplines with strong knowledge content, and to re-examine the relation between knowledge acquisition and competency development<sup>3</sup>, without which we would lose the humanist dimension of this education and its fundamental aspiration for knowledge for its own sake, without reference to action.

The declarative knowledge component is often predominant in general education courses since there are so many facts and concepts to assimilate, including explanatory diagrams of concepts and theories. This reality explains the importance of knowledge transmission in these contexts and activities for student appropriation of this knowledge such as reading, memorizing for exams, research assignments in the library and everything else involved in acquiring a vast encyclopaedic knowledge—culture in the classical sense of the word.

<sup>3</sup> In neighbouring Ontario, university programs are defined by knowledge acquisition objectives, by skills to be developed and by objectives relating to specific competencies and transferable competencies at the same time. Is this a better way? Are we not already seeing signs of this in the components of a competency where its true nature is revealed?





### THE COMPLEXITY OF “GENERAL CULTURE” COMPETENCIES

We have no intention here of devaluing “practical” knowledge. It is also essential, but it is characterized by its pragmatic purpose. Concepts are of no interest as such but rather for their use in a given context. The in-depth study of a concept in its most subtle nuances, its historic roots and its multiple meanings in various schools of thought might well seem to be lacking in practicality. The opposite situation prevails in classical liberal disciplines, where knowledge for its own sake, independently of any practical application, becomes increasingly important and where speculation and intersubjectivity occupy a major place. In this context, we can also consider these concepts to be components of a competency to mobilize, but this will take the form of gratuitous scholarship in which the ability to act is necessary but not sufficient in itself.

Le Boterf (2000) lists several types of competencies, including some which are only indirectly an ability to take action, such as theoretical knowledge and social know-how. In particular he makes the following distinctions:

- theoretical knowledge (knowing how to understand, knowing how to interpret);
- procedural knowledge (knowing how to proceed);
- procedural know-how (knowing to proceed, knowing to operate);
- experiential know-how, (knowing what to do, knowing how to act);
- social know-how (knowing how to behave, knowing how to act);
- cognitive know-how (knowing what to do with information, knowing how to reason, knowing how to name what one is doing, knowing how to learn).

However, the particular characteristics of some types of “competencies” are rarely taken into account or clearly distinguished. We act as if there were only one category of competencies and as if all the different programs could define their objectives in the same manner. In reality, this is not what characterizes college teaching in all its richness, which is manifested in part through different types of competencies. These differences entail many pedagogical consequences and they partially explain the sometimes legitimate resistance of teachers toward the implementation of the CBA which many teachers of disciplines in general education perceive to be better adapted to practical settings than to more intellectual disciplines where interpretation, reflection, critical thinking and intersubjectivity play major roles.

In short, the CBA must be carefully enriched in order to adapt it to the context of disciplines that are more theoretical, interpretative or speculative.

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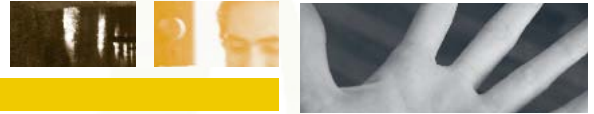
As a result, we should admit that in the field of general culture it is harder to reduce knowledge to practical, restricted “competencies”. Here, practical objectives are limited or academic in nature and include a strong component of declarative knowledge.

In addition, procedures are not always formalized and they may vary from one school of thought to another. The action objectives that are fundamental to the competencies are more difficult to define and are more controversial as we increase the level of speculation as well as in higher education. On the other hand, the importance of assimilating declarative knowledge never decreases, quite the contrary. Some disciplines have no immediate practical objective and are not action-oriented and they can therefore pursue goals that go beyond knowing how to act and refer to a different order of intellectual operations better defined as educational objectives than as competencies.

Even though higher education aims to enable students to face greater degrees of complexity and to lean toward erudite knowledge (in higher cycles), it is harder to integrate meaningful complex tasks relating to the workplace or social situations. So here, competencies take a more scholarly turn: do literary analyses serve any function beyond school, other than working in the field of literature? The fact that the answer to this question is negative does not diminish the value of literary studies which require no extrinsic, economic, personal or social justification: they have intrinsic value as part of the cultural domain. We could, justify their presence by virtue of their usefulness: perfecting written expression, personal enrichment, encouraging cultural consumption (novels and theatre, for instance) or the development of writing skills that can be used in other contexts. All this is true, but the only real objective they need to meet is that of increased awareness.

On another level, the critical aspects of some disciplines make it very risky to try and define high-level competencies, not to mention the ever-present danger





of functional reductionism. Thus, it is important to recognize the intellectual autonomy of these disciplines and the legitimacy of a certain resistance to reducing their knowledge to a long list of competencies to be constructed.

*The objective of developing critical thinking makes it possible to identify a number of different competencies but also to identify educational objectives of a higher order than competencies [...].*

The development of critical thinking plays a crucial, even a foundational role in some of these disciplines, such as philosophy and sociology, and consequently the cumulative character of conditional knowledge that we observe in trades, technical work and professions is less present and harder to detect. According to Ennis<sup>4</sup>, critical thinking is “reflective thinking that is helpful when choosing what it is appropriate to do or to believe”. For his part, Lipman<sup>5</sup> emphasizes the links between critical thinking and creative thinking and mentions in particular making judgements and the rhetoric of expression, the ability to self-correct, sensitivity to context, the flexibility of rules and principles according to contexts, the ability to carry out creative syntheses and even self-transcendence. If critical thinking can be defined in this way, then it is obvious that we can extract from it many competencies to be developed in the form of an ability to take action, according to various degrees of complexity and depth, and that the sum of these competencies does not exhaust what we mean by critical thinking. The objective of developing critical thinking makes it possible to identify a number of different competencies as well as educational objectives of a higher order

than competencies: let's call them final objectives or, in the words of the Ministry of Education, Leisure and Sports, general instructional goals

### ► REHABILITATING THE “TRANSMISSION OF KNOWLEDGE”

The position we are defending does not contradict the tenet of students learning through their own activity (as constructors of their own knowledge). It is unfortunate to note that certain defenders of the CBA often characterize the practice of transmitting knowledge abusively by reducing it to the lecture as its only teaching mode<sup>6</sup>. Pedagogical methods of transmitting knowledge are diverse and can also be student-centered and can rest on a “constructivist” perspective as implemented by the teacher. In the CBA, as well as in the objectives approach (OA), the diversification of teaching methods is precisely, according to us, what accounts for learning success. Take language-learning for example. Based on the initial evaluations available in relation to elementary and secondary teaching, in Québec as in Switzerland, it seems that the CBA has not improved the learning of written language: syntax, proper spelling and grammar rules. We could hypothesize that learning the language code cannot be entirely done through “meaningful writing assignments” and that certain CBA practitioners minimize the contribution of memorization and repetition exercises in the development of competencies, a factor which may lead to disappointing results. Consider the following comment by Gérald Boutin (2004):

Let us look again at the position that negates the transmission of knowledge by the teacher in favour of an integral pedagogy based entirely on discovery. It seems that the refusal to transmit knowledge can lead to the very negation of culture: it seems obvious that today's learners will not be able to discover everything and construct their entire store of knowledge. If these so-called new methods (which, by the way, are not as new as we may think: the project method, teamwork, etc.), are used exclusively, they risk leading more to failure than to success in school.

In short, in some fields, we must make an important place for teaching and the acquisition of knowledge in conjunction with competency development seen as complex ability to take action! This is what Boutin means by a third way, not to reject the CBA as a method for conceiving programs, but to rehabilitate teaching and the acquisition of knowledge for its own sake in the form of cultural content.

#### An example

The particular case of teaching philosophy merits special attention. Michel Tozzi (2003), a reputed innovative didactician, underscores that in a community of inquiry, the process of “searching for the truth in relation to the fundamental question asked of every human being” requires a pre-disposition to:

- “problematize”, that is, to question one's affirmations, to consider one's theses as hypotheses, to return to the problem for which they are supposed to be the solutions, to question the question itself, its assumptions and what it entails;

4 Quoted by Richard Pallascio, in JONNAERT, P., A. M'BATIKA-KIAM and S. BOUFRAHI, *Les réformes curriculaires, chapter 7* «Pensée réflexive et compétences transversales: un lien entre la recherche et la réforme en éducation» 2004, p. 191.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 192.

6 On this subject, see Boutin, 2004, p. 34-35.





- conceptualize, that is, to try to define the concepts we use in order to think, to identify and develop conceptual distinctions, in order to clarify what we are talking about;
- debate, that is, to deconstruct affirmations, to respond to objections, to base one's arguments on reason, in order to determine the truth of one's affirmations.

Here again we can describe these abilities as intellectual competencies—or rather as groups of distinct competencies—which manifest themselves in different ways, in writings, in speeches, and which can be developed, refined and perfected indefinitely. He concludes: “In this ethics of communication, which is at the same time a moral way of thinking, we not only listen to others out of respect but because we need them to progress in resolving the human enigma.” This search for the truth all together, obviously within a socioconstructivist approach, cannot be reduced to the sum of these competencies, but possesses a dimension that transcends them.

Philippe Meirieu (1996), responding to a question on the CBA in the context of teaching philosophy, observes that:

Similarly, the possession of a whole series of competencies (in terms of making distinctions among examples and arguments, of knowledge in matters relating to history and philosophy, a whole range of dissertation know-how) does not guarantee graduating to the level of a philosopher. I might be able to produce a document that is academically correct, but the act of doing philosophy, in my opinion, transcends the sum of conditions that make it possible. These conditions are necessary but not sufficient for doing philosophy.

We observe the same trend to distinguish an order of knowledge that is characteristic of humanist thinking, an order which exceeds the competencies needed to achieve it. It is this dimension that allows the teaching of philosophy to be something more than a simple academic requirement, more or less arbitrary and perceived to be more or less useful. To learn how to argue is perhaps important and educational—in Québec it is the preferred form of philosophical expression—but, adds Meirieu: “It is regrettable that we take a reductionist position and that “dissertative academism” has succeeded in confusing philosophy and dissertation. Historically, I know of no philosophers of major consequence who wrote dissertations to convey their philosophical thinking. I find it strange that this is the only technique promoted today.” In short, the ability to do philosophy can never be defined as a competency to develop and will always imply an existential and interpretative dimension that simply cannot be explained adequately or fully using the concept of competence, in spite of the broad scope that some now accord this concept.

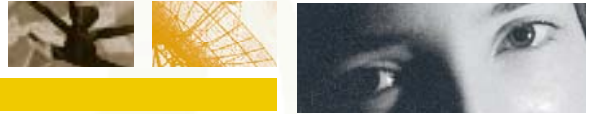
## CONCLUSION

It is therefore important to take into account the distinct characteristics of knowledge in the context of general culture (and pre-university programs) when elaborating programs for competency-based education; otherwise we run the risk of impoverishing our education. In addition, we need to pay attention to utilitarian purposes in order to avoid reducing education to that dimension only. We also have to define competencies with an open mind, while according great importance to the cumulative acquisition of knowledge that constitutes culture.

The CBA is compatible with the development of general culture as long as we do not limit the educational content exclusively to practical expectations and to competencies that are “profitable” in the labour market. We must leave plenty of room for the acquisition of “gratuitous knowledge”, for the simple pleasure of knowing, for a humanist culture and for a comprehensive education of the person and the citizen. We also easily observe that the implementation of the CBA in colleges generally avoids falling into the trap of impoverished education because it tends to quickly exceed a definition overly centered on the ability to take action, no matter how complex the latter may be. We tend however to minimize the importance of acquiring knowledge in general culture or to reduce education only to its immediately practical aspects. Educating the person or the citizen goes way beyond vocational training in the strict sense of the expression and it includes a free share of the benefit which is inherent in the development of autonomous thinking.

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In order to become a universal method for developing programs of study, the CBA must be defined in such a way that leaves room for objectives of another order, broadening the concept of “ability to take action” all the way to the “ability to interpret”, the “ability to judge” and the “ability to reflect”—educational aspirations about which practical interpretations are neither immediate nor obvious. ◆



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