

Cohen-Scali, Valérie

Conclusion

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Valerie Cohen-Scali (ed.)

Competence and Competence Development

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Competence and Competence Development

Study Guides in Adult Education

edited by

Regina Egetenmeyer

Valerie Cohen-Scali (ed.)

Competence and Competence Development

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Preface

In recent decades, the term competence has become a keyword in the international discussion about education. This international discussion was accompanied by several national discussions, which mostly had a different emphasis compared to the international context. Especially in the European Union, competences became the central term in discussions about learning outcomes. Here, competences emerged as a counter-concept to the idea of qualifications – which are strictly bound to (national) educational systems. As the European Union, in the Maastricht Treaty, has agreed not to harmonise the educational systems of its member states, national differences tend to become more pronounced; thus qualifications cannot bring transparency and comparability to European education. Competence, in contrast, is a concept that can be used to compare people's knowledge and skills across national education and training systems.

To look at competences rather than qualifications means to shift the focus from educational input (length of a learning experience, type of institution, etc.) to the outcomes of learning processes. Competences as learning outcomes have nowadays been defined in almost all educational programmes. Furthermore, referring to competences highlights the fact that they can also be developed outside of educational programmes. Therefore, a variety of contexts became relevant that enable or constrain competence development. These contexts include the workplace, social class, family, and friends, for example. As a consequence, the validation – that is, the evaluation, recognition, and certification – of competences acquired outside of educational systems became relevant. To address this issue, a variety of methods and instruments were developed throughout Europe. On this basis, competences can support transparency and comparability in education and lifelong learning in Europe.

What is more, the term *competence* also serves to introduce a new didactic approach to adult education. The competence discussion helps strengthen

individuals' self-responsibility and self-efficacy as they engage in their learning processes. In other words, it is up to the learners to decide whether, where, when, and how they learn or not. Adult education programmes can merely provide contexts to facilitate learning processes and stimulate motivation. This is especially relevant in the education of adults, since adults are much more independent than children in their decisions about what and when to learn.

In this study guide, Valérie Cohen-Scali, Alain Kokosowski, Thierry Piot, and Richard Wittorski introduce the topic of competence development with a special focus on the working context. They give an insight into the Western backgrounds of the competence discussion and show the consequences of this discussion with respect to professionalisation and competence development in adult education. Furthermore, they present a variety of instruments for validating and evaluating competences. Finally, they raise the issue of competence management in adult education and highlight some of the changes in vocational education and training brought on by the competence discussion.

All of the authors are French researchers with special expertise in the area of competences. The study guide, therefore, gives an insight both into the European discussion and into the French discussion about competences. Valérie Cohen-Scali developed this study guide during her guest professorship at the University of Duisburg-Essen. By bringing on board her French colleagues, she created an interdisciplinary team of experts from psychology, human resource management, and education. As a result, the study guide provides an interdisciplinary perspective on the topic. Thanks go to Valérie Cohen-Scali for coordinating this study guide and to all the authors for their contributions to this volume.

Regina Egetenmeyer

1. Introduction

Valérie Cohen-Scali

Since the 1980s, questions around people in the workplace have been addressed more from the point of view of competences than the time match between an individual and a particular role. Approaching work through competences appears to be at odds with a tradition which conceives of work as the association between an individual and a task. This traditional conception of people at work emerged with the development of industrialisation in Europe and the United States in the nineteenth century. It was profoundly influenced by the principles of Scientific Management developed by Frederick Taylor, an engineer, who was invited into factories in the United States in order to help them introduce a more rational way of organising their work. Taylor's primary preoccupation was with the best way of doing a particular job, what an appropriate workload would be, and what fair payment was, with the aim of increasing workers' efficiency and performance. He carried out numerous studies (Kanigel, 1997) of the work stations of manual workers and made recommendations in order to provide workers with the most appropriate tools for the way they worked.

This conception of work as an activity was strengthened in the twentieth century with the advent of the Second World War, which prompted an acceleration in the development of occupational psychology. Military activities led, on the one hand, to the development of psychological evaluation tools to be used on soldiers, and on the other, to the creation of military equipment which was easier to handle and better suited to the morphology and cognitive abilities of its users. Later, social conditions at work came under intense scrutiny, addressing questions such as motivation, job satisfaction and supervision. Nonetheless, work as an activity continued to be perceived in terms of the relationship between the individual and the task.

This may have seemed relatively well suited to a context of stable industrial production, a booming socio-economic environment, and homogeneous demand. The 1970s are associated with the first world economic crisis linked to an increase in the price of fossil fuels. This was accompanied by a harshening of the socio-economic environment and an increase in unemploy-

ment in Western societies. Businesses needed to be more vigilant about the changes occurring in a more uncertain and complex environment. They also needed to prove that they could be more responsive and more flexible. Many national governments focused on vocational training to tackle the changes taking place. This meant training employees with inadequate skills and qualifications to carry out increasingly varied and changing activities, which often required a more extensive range of cognitive abilities.

From this point onwards, the traditional conception of work as a relationship between an individual and a relatively simple task no longer seemed appropriate. Researchers in sociology, psychology, and training reflected on other paradigms which might be better suited to defining the new reality. The term *competences* gradually came into common use. It was initially used by Chomsky in 1960 in relation to linguistics, as a document published by the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) explains:

The use of the term ‘competence’ goes back to Noam Chomsky and was related to his creation of the theory of generative grammar as well as being part of his contributions to linguistics and cognitive psychology ... Chomsky distinguishes between linguistic competence as the speaker/hearer’s knowledge of his language on the one hand and linguistic performance as ‘the actual use of language in concrete situations’ on the other hand. (Cedefop, 2009b, p. 108)

The term *competences* is used to describe the actual use of a particular aptitude in a given context. In the working environment, the term *competences* emphasises on the one hand, the role of the specific context of a particular activity as a determinant of the way a worker will approach a given task, and on the other, highlights the fact that work is essentially an individual and/or collective process of problem solving. According to Weinert, implementing competences in the workplace relies on the use of several processes: ‘ability, knowledge, understanding, skill, action, experience, motivation’ (Winterton, Delamare-Le Deist, & Stringfellow, 2006, p. 34).

Two terms are now commonly used in adult education: competence and competency. According to Eraut, there is a subtle difference between the two:

There is a distinction mostly in the American literature between the term ‘competence’ which is given a generic or holistic meaning and refers to a person’s overall capacity, and the term ‘competency’, which refers to specific capabilities. However even the word competency can be used either in a direct performance-related sense: a competency is an element of vocational competence, a performance capability needed by workers in a specified occupational area or simply to describe any piece of knowledge or skill that might be construed as relevant. (Eraut, 1996, p. 179)

Other, more specific shades of meaning are also found in the literature. For example, instead of generic competences, there are references to key competences:

Key competences are context-independent, applicable and effective across different institutional settings, occupations and tasks. These typically include basal competences, such as literacy, numeracy, general education; methodological competences, like problem solving, IT skills, communication skills, including writing and presentation skills; and judgement competences, such as critical thinking. (Winterton, Delamare-Le Deist, Stringfellow, 2006, p. 33)

A series of other terms used in the literature on competences are defined in the box below.

Keywords: Knowledge, understanding, and capacities

Wittorski (see Chapter 3) defines a number of concepts similar to competences: knowledge (theoretical, action, and professional), understanding, and capacities.

A piece of knowledge can be defined as a socially validated and communicable statement. It is therefore a descriptive or explanatory statement about a given reality. Knowledge can be differentiated in a number of ways:

- Knowledge is described as theoretical when it is established and recognised by a given academic and cultural community at a given time (certain laws of fundamental physics, for example) as a dominant phenomenon, based on a *truth criterion*. Knowledge of this kind is disseminated through encyclopedias, textbooks, and specialist publications in the place and at the time concerned (in the form of slate tablets, papyrus or parchment rolls, papers or books, or files).
- Knowledge can be described as 'action' knowledge when a social community (made up of people who engage in the same activity) decide to validate a statement describing a sequence of actions judged, as a dominant phenomenon, to be 'effective' (*the criterion here is its effectiveness for action*, whilst the challenge is to organise effective local practices and produce a *social identity*).
- Knowledge can be described as 'professional' when an actual or prospective professional community decides to validate a statement describing a sequence of actions judged, as a dominant phenomenon, to be 'distinctive and legitimate' in order to have it acknowledged and recognised in the social arena (the criterion here is that of legitimacy and better recognition in the selected arena, whilst the challenge lies in social intelligibility and the production

of a *professional identity*). Knowledge therefore has a very strong social dimension, combined with an identified or codified process of formalisation.

The judgement or validation criteria mentioned here are not exclusive, but are dominant criteria for each type of knowledge (some theoretical knowledge, for example, may also be validated according to an effectiveness criterion).

Understanding, however, is a social construct which refers both to the process of internalisation and assimilation (transformation) by the individual of the knowledge and/or information passed on to them or which they contribute to producing, and the result of this process. From this point of view, understanding is on the one hand, the process (and the product) of comprehension and memory (i.e. what the individual retains in qualitative and quantitative terms of the knowledge passed on to them), and on the other, the process (and the product) of drawing conclusions from their actions by the individual, which constitute the value they derive from their experience. In this last case, experience, in the sense of 'known' experience, lies more in the subject identifying their modalities of action and the results they produce. Experience is therefore constructed primarily by a process which consists of deriving understanding from one's actions. Understanding therefore has a much stronger subjective dimension.

In the same way that there is a close link between competence and identity, there is a close relationship between understanding, knowledge, and identity. Effectively, knowledge and understanding constitute a communicative situation about or for actions and people, and act to some degree as 'markers' and 'foils' for identity.

Capacities are social constructs which describe a relatively transversal ability to take action. Capacities represent an acquired potential to take action: they are not in use at the point at which they are described but are nonetheless available to be brought into play when needed.

Whilst the notion of competence and research into competences is now widespread, particularly in the context of studies carried out by the European Union (published by Cedefop) in the area of Vocational Education and Training (VET), it must be said that guides to this area aimed particularly at students are rare. The aim of this study guide is to provide European students with an overview of competences and their development, as far as possible from a European perspective. Its objective is therefore both to describe the main theoretical developments in relation to the concept of competences, and to underline the way in which the European Union deals with the question of

competences at both a reflective and practical level in order to support the development of qualifications. The guide has been written by a number of French authors specialised in adult education and training, and tackles the question of competences from a number of different and complementary points of view, with an emphasis on VET professionals and activities.

Chapter 2 describes recent changes in the working environment that explain why competence-based approaches now appear to be particularly relevant in adult education.

Chapter 3 addresses competences from a theoretical perspective, given the imperatives of professionalisation for individuals and the continuous emergence of new activities.

Chapter 4 addresses the question of the transmission of competences and learning in the workplace, with a presentation of professional didactics.

Chapter 5 discusses options for evaluating and validating competences, identifying the evaluation methodologies and validation practices currently in use in various European countries.

Chapter 6 outlines the main features of management practices in relation to competences, which are currently emerging as a recent but major concern in major European businesses.

Chapter 7 focuses on changes in employment in adult education and training and the consequences of these changes on the competences of professionals.

The guide is designed to enable students to work independently or as a group, both inside or outside the classroom, by referring to the suggested exercises and tasks at the end of each chapter. The bibliography lists a large number of English publications and documents to help students gain a more detailed understanding of the theoretical aspects or explore practical illustrations and examples implemented in a number of European countries.

8. Conclusion

Valérie Cohen-Scali

Competences represent an important twofold challenge in the adult education and training sector. The first relates to research. There has been a proliferation of publications on the topic of competences, suggesting an intense amount of research effort. Research in this area seeks to identify the ways in which individual competences are developed, describe the ways in which professionals cooperate and develop collective competences, identify the links between the processes of producing individual, group and organisational competences and analyse the relationship between, for example, the development of competences and the construction of identity. The issue of developing an understanding of competences implies the involvement of several disciplines, such as social and cognitive psychology, professional didactics, and management and education sciences. Research of this kind is essential in the development of all the practices currently emerging in training centres and firms, concerning adult training and education professionals. The other issue relates to the practices prompted by the new approaches to work referred to throughout this book, which emphasise the fact that organisations need to develop more flexible and more individualised tools to support professional development. At the same time, organisational structures are adopting new forms, such as networks, consisting of multiple units with different branches, operating on the basis of different production models. These new forms of organisation make it essential to address the professional development of an ever-increasing number of professionals. They also involve qualitative adjustments in relation to employees, in particular changes to their individual and collective competences.

Thinking about people at work in terms of competences means looking at both the intraindividual psychological level and the macrosocial or even geopolitical level. Effectively, a competences-based approach means taking into account and analysing cognitive dimensions (such as how individuals process information at their workstation) and the emotional aspects of work (such as how individuals manage stress, and what is important to them). It is also important, however, to identify the changes taking place in organisations, their develop-

ment strategies, and new ways of managing the workforce, particularly in relation to relocations and their consequences on employment in Europe.

The question of competences is therefore central to any adult education and training professional. The aim of this study guide is to provide professionals and future professionals in the sector with a number of points of reference to help them to identify the main issues they are facing more clearly. It seemed important to explain the main changes that have taken place in work and people's relationship to work in light of current economic changes from a primarily sociological perspective. We then explored theoretical approaches and models in relation to competences. These models were developed in response to social needs for the professionalisation of individuals and activities, and the development of collective competences. As soon as the question of competences is raised, it becomes important to identify tools which can be used to identify and analyse them. As we have emphasised, professional didactics seems to be a useful discipline for identifying the ways in which individuals at work resolve complex problems and are able to identify their competences. In addition, evaluating competences has now become a major issue, insofar as individuals need to develop their competences and have them recognised through certification frameworks or qualifications developed at a national or European level. Competence management is an essential process, which, as we have seen, relies on a number of different decision-making centres at a European, national, organizational, and individual level, and therefore involves numerous players with varied profiles, as examined in Chapter 6.

Whilst the issue of competence development concerns all workers, people working in the field of adult education and training are particularly affected by it. This study guide has made repeated references to the competences of these professionals and the changes that have affected them (particularly in the final chapter), because they have a key role to play in supporting other employees and helping them to adapt to economic and organisational change. We have also made regular references to the strategy of the European Union. As we have emphasised at several points in this book, the European Union is developing a very active policy designed to identify and value the competences of European citizens, particularly those who are less well qualified, using a range of tools such as:

- the Europass
- the European Qualifications Framework
- the European Credit in Vocational Education and Training.

The topics addressed in this study guide, however, do not constitute an exhaustive view of the problems and practices covered in current work on com-

petences. The question of competences engineering, for example, that is, the explicit development of links between the needs for particular competences and the training required to produce them, has not been explicitly covered. Similarly, most of the competences we have described fall within the category of generic competences. There is scope for looking in more detail at the families of competences used in particular professional situations. Similarly, the question of the role of social contexts in which competences are used (e.g. the role of cultural contexts), could also have been included, insofar as particular contexts may either foster or inhibit the development of competences.

The subject of competences is therefore vast and students are invited to use this study guide as a basic documentary resource, which should then be supplemented by reading the articles, publications, and online reports cited in the bibliography. Understanding this area in all its complexity means alternating regularly between conceptualisations and models of competences and observations and analyses in the field. We can therefore only advise students to take as many opportunities as they can to look at a wide range of work situations and note the variety of ways in which competences are developed and put into practice.

List of Abbreviations

CCEC:	Competences Elicitation Career Counseling
ECVET:	European Credit for Vocational Education and Training
EQF:	European Qualifications Framework
HR:	Human Resources
NCVER:	National Centre for Vocational Education Research
PISA:	Programme for International Student Assessment
SMEs:	Small and Medium Sized Enterprises
TIMSS:	Third International Mathematics and Science Study
TTnet:	Training of Trainers Network
VET:	Vocational Education and Training

Annotated Bibliography

Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-efficacy. The exercise of control.* New York: Freeman

A key book by Albert Bandura, one of the world's leading researchers in social psychology working in the field of social learning and self-efficacy. This book develops the theory that forms the basis of the self-efficacy concept – that is, social cognitive theory – and summarises a set of convincing research results on different topics. It shows the impact of self-efficacy beliefs on the daily life of individuals. Self-efficacy emerges as a key psychological mechanism governing a variety of human activities. This approach suggests that it is possible in certain conditions to question social determinism.

Collin, A. & Young, R. A. (Eds.). (2000). *The future of career.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

The fragmented nature of modern working life has led to fundamental changes in our understanding of the term *career*. Few people now expect to have a lifetime of continuous employment, regardless of their qualifications or the sector they work in. This book presents a kaleidoscopic view of the concept of career, reviewing its past and considering its future. The chapters are wide-ranging, exploring topics such as the changing issues of career, individual career experiences, multicultural issues, women's careers, and the implications for practice and policy-making.

Savickas, M. L., Nota, L., Rossier, J., Dauwalder, J. P., Duarte, M. E., Guichard, J., Soresi, S., Van Esbroeck, R., Van Vianen, A. E. M. (2009). Life designing: A paradigm for career construction in the 21st century. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 3, 239–250.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, a new social arrangement of work poses a series of questions and challenges to scholars who aim to help people develop their competences and working lives. In this article, the authors formulate potentially innovative responses in a kind of international forum. It presents a career counseling model: the life designing model for career interventions. The article offers an overview of different approaches of career counseling models and develops a framework for new methods and tools in career counseling.

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