

“I Don’t Know My Way About”

Problems of Language and Understanding in Competency-based Education and Training systems

Note: The title of this article is a quote from Ludwig Wittgenstein’s ‘Philosophical Investigations’ of 1953. The full quote goes “A philosophical problem has the form: I don’t know my way about”.

One of the reasons why competency-based education and training (CBET) has enjoyed privileged interest in the post-compulsory sector over recent years is because its outcomes are popularly considered to be certain and largely indisputable, whilst those of other assessment methodologies are often held (to a great extent) to be vague and debatable. Recent Governments have placed great pressure on providers to be accountable for their funding, both in terms of the qualitative and quantitative aspects of ‘success’. This has meant that, for many educational organisations, the assumed evidential certainty of the competency-based assessment system not only provides the proof needed to quiet the concerns of politicians urgently pursuing educational quality, but also is a convenient internal recording tool... as hard-edged and clear as any financial management system. The truth of the matter remains: CBET is useful because it is practical, and hence one still sees its continued existence (and growth) across all boundaries of post-compulsory education.

For many adult educationalists, CBET’s expansion means not only the burgeoning of NVQs in colleges either. As someone who has taught in the adult education domain for the past fifteen years, I’ve seen a ubiquitous swing toward accreditation of previously ‘academic’ subjects, as providers (sometimes) reluctantly acknowledged that if they were to survive under current funding mechanisms then they must join the CBET movement. A prominent, though not solitary, example would be the Workers’ Educational Association. Previously the last-bastion of non-certificated study, it is now increasingly involved in developing accreditation systems, some of which have a clear relationship with CBET-style approaches. Though the systems the WEA has taken on board are relatively small scale and may be called by other names than CBET, when you look ‘under the bonnet’ you see the characteristic urging of adult students to:

- Account for what they learn against pre-set objectives,
- Provide physical evidence of what they do and have learned, and to
- Increasingly relate this to global standards of one sort or another.

Whilst one can easily point to instances of improvements in the standard and consistency of adult learning that has come about by virtue of this change, it has also to be said that homogenous approaches to teaching, learning and assessment have their problems, many of which are hidden in the systems themselves waiting to be revealed by time and negative learner experience.

An indication of such a likely problem facing adult students came to my attention during a small-scale research project I conducted some time ago in the Tyneside area (whilst studying at the University of Sunderland). The initial spur began as an examination of a common FE problem: high drop out rates in many NVQ courses. My target was to gain some insight as to why this was happening; what was causing the problem in such a supposedly ‘student-centred’ process? As the work evolved though, it became clear that the provisional findings had potential implications far beyond NVQs. The research took in interviews of more than a dozen adult students, from a broad spread of ages, genders and study levels (ranging from those who had little formal education and qualifications, to those with degrees) on a wide variety of NVQ and NVQ-style courses across the

area. This is obviously a very small sample (limited by time), but the consistency of results was enough to hint at important underlying themes.

Very early on a key factor in student performance that was highlighted was the language of the course performance criteria. Virtually all the participants complained in one form or another that the requirements for assessment were “*hard to understand*”, “*full of long stupid words and jargon*”, “*a very frustrating process*” and that “*the language is standardised and jargonised*” (actual quotes from participants). What was curious is that these comments came from students who were highly literate and articulate; yet who appeared alienated from their experiences and in many cases very negative as to what they had achieved from their learning. It appeared then that there was something unusual about the way in which the assessment materials had been written which was consistent across a range of skill areas. Further examination by computer text analysis of sample criteria used by participants indicated a remarkably high “Gunning Fog Index” (a simple method of judging the readability of text), amounting to 14 to 15 at some points, never less than 9 and averaging 12.8 throughout. The recommended Fog index for clear readability is 7 or 8, whilst 12 would indicate a sample that is too complex for most adults to read. There was also a very high ‘passive voice’ content in the writing: some 30% according to the famous Microsoft Word for Windows grammar checker, which scathingly criticised my criterion sample with the words “*excessive use of passive voice can make the document unclear*”.

I was concerned however that the computer analysis might have been biased by the naturally ‘choppy’ style of much ‘assessment-speak’, and so decided to verify the effectiveness of the various programs I was using by running a non-educational section of text through them as verification. Being interested in philosophy and looking around for something suitable, I came across the ‘Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus’ by Ludwig Wittgenstein (1922). Not only is this one of the most notoriously complex philosophical books written this century, its content is curiously broken up into chopped phrases (propositions) each of which is numbered a little like traditional objectives, or performance criteria are in many CBET-based learning programs. Because of the complexity of the work, I expected the text analysis software to give it an even higher Fog Index, but was very surprised to find that the Tractatus was rated at only 10.9 (average) with a passive voice content of 6%. One might ironically say that Wittgenstein would have been proud that a computer programme finds his seminal positivist analysis so ‘readable’! (Probably not, knowing his dislike of modern technology, but the thought is intriguing).

Whilst acknowledging that this was a small project and not by any means as thorough a job as one might have liked, the indicators that come from it say a lot about language and its use in post-compulsory education. It would appear on consideration that the reason that the Tractatus is a difficult book to comprehend (and I urge readers to try it out for size if you’re not convinced) is not because its language is complex; indeed, Wittgenstein often uses short, simple words and concise active phrases. Rather it is because it’s written as a ‘*language game*’ (a later Wittgenstein term) to address philosophers and uses words in a manner which stems from their ‘*form of life*’ (yet another Wittgensteinian phrase). Individuals who do not share this philosophical lifestyle, background or context naturally find the Tractatus incomprehensible; they can ‘read the words’ but not ‘know what they mean’ so to speak.

This highlights something that, I feel, haunts us all as teachers: that the words we use in encounters with learners mean what our interactions make them mean. No matter how we might appeal to clarity of communication, words are not absolutely fixed in sense; the utter flexibility and creativity of language stands to affirm this remarkable aspect of human living every day. Yet the implication of this (when we come to (say) an NVQ performance criterion, or a behavioural objective, or for that matter WEA learning outcome) is that adult learners encounter language written in the discourse of teachers, implicitly with institutional values and contexts embedded in its meaning. Ironically, this is characteristically presented to learners as if it were objectively abstract, transparent,

certain and 'non-sectarian'. Yet language of this sort apparently cannot exist (as the above implies, and as Wittgenstein asserts in his *Philosophical Investigations* of 1953). Language does not operate in precisely the same way for the students who are doing the learning as it does for teachers, and hence the former can potentially feel dispossessed and alienated from the whole learning process – the language of education becomes a barrier to being in ownership of the learning that is supposedly taking place. I would suggest that many of the students in my interview sample felt exactly this, and expressed it more clearly than I can here; my analysis simply points their complaints towards an underlying factor that contains within it a necessary caution for all adult educators. This warning, as I see it, is clear: if one is teaching and assessing adult students one must be conscious of 'playing within' accessible language games (rather than the teaching profession's) if one is to avoid alienation. Otherwise it is all too easy to simply dictate the language system that will be used, mistakenly allow students to flounder within it (or to need heavy linguistic indoctrination before they can start participating), and to promote those who create and understand the language to the level of 'learning gurus', thereby handing over to them the final arbitrary power of educational decision making.

(It is interesting to note comparability with the work of Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger here; their research into 'Situated Learning' indicated that social groups could easily form their own norms and 'traditions'. Progression of a newcomer (e.g. a learner) into a group (e.g. a course) can depend very much on how easily they adapt to the norms the group has established. In the educational sense, this means adults assimilating how language is used and what is behaviourally expected in order to gain recognised status amongst peers. Such progression can depend on how restrictive or accessible the group norms – including language – are.)

For those of us working within the post-compulsory education system and already involved in teaching CBET systems, the above may seem to be an overly pejorative accusation of lack of care over communication. This is not so: it is solely a pointer to an underlying misconception about language and its relation to the human condition. One cannot blame adult education teachers for following a trend upon which their jobs depend, and that seems so accountable, scientific (the term positivist comes to mind) and certain. It may well be that all that is required is greater attention to clarity of course structures and terminology, but I would also suggest more thought needs to be given to holistic and 'problem-centred' assessment processes in which the meaning of language is rooted more explicitly in the contexts of use. Overall though, given the practicalities of adult education finances, we need (I believe) to be clearly vigilant not to overlook the above problems as course programmes evolve to reflect new thinking in governmental policy over the years ahead.

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1928 words

References

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