Reductionist trends in education and training for work: skills, competences and work-based learning

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Abstract

Recent policy trends in vocational education and training (VET) in the UK and Europe (Hyland, 2006) have been characterised by a neo-behaviourist reductionism which replaces rich conceptions of knowledge, understanding and vocational practice with narrowly prescriptive skills and competences. The principal driving forces consist in a combination of factors including the search for quick and easy solutions to complex problems, the remnants of a neo-liberal project to transform occupational and professional knowledge and culture under the ‘corporate state’ (Ranson, 1994), the crude commercialism which informs the marketing of pre-packaged vocational qualifications (Hyland, 1998) and – arguably, the most powerful driver of VET developments over the last few decades – the pervasive and relentless influence of competence-based education and training (CBET) at all levels of state education systems (Hyland, 1994, 1999).

This behaviourist and simplistic approach to VET reform is criticised by examining the principal weaknesses of attempting to reduce VET aims and objectives to skills and competences. Not only is such a strategy – especially in the form of CBET trends – philosophically and educationally flawed, it fails to achieve even the minimum goals of advancing the reform of VET and enhancing occupational/professional knowledge and practice. In addition to this failure to boost economic capital, such an approach militates against the fostering of that social capital which is now emphasised in the lifelong learning policy statements of most European nations. Indeed, the obsession with pre-specified competences and skills reflected in recent reform programmes has served to morally impoverish large aspects of post-school provision in the UK (Hyland & Merrill, 2003). However, on a more optimistic note, recent initiatives in work-based learning may help to reverse the reductionism by pointing towards richer conceptions of vocationalism which incorporate a greater balance between general and vocational learning and stress both social and economic capital.
Introduction

In addition to the problems faced by most developed countries linked to globalisation factors and skills shortages (DfEE, 1998), the United Kingdom (UK), and especially the English system, has had to deal with a number of historical difficulties connected with low employer interest and investment in VET in addition to the second-class, inferior status of the vocational route compared to general, academic education (Green, 1999; Hyland, 1999). Attempts to enhance the status of VET and create parity of esteem for vocational as against academic learning and qualifications go back at least as far as the last quarter of the 19th century when a Royal Commission on Technical Instruction was convened to make recommendations for the improvement of the English system in the light of superior European models which, even then, were thought to be responsible for Britain’s declining economic position in relation to Germany and France (Musgrave, 1970). Since then, the State’s response to problems in this sphere has typically been one of ‘crisis management…giving rise to schemes and initiatives designed to limit the social damage which followed de-industrialisation’ (Esland, 1990, p.v). More recently, in introducing the University for Industry (now UfI Learndirect) blueprint designed to encourage employers and employers to engage in training, Hillman (1997) remarked that:

Deficiencies in British education and training have been a cause for concern for policy-makers for 150 years…there has been a flurry of reforms in the last ten years…an array of short-term and narrowly focused initiatives which have confused rather than clarified the situation for the learner (pp.29-30).

Amongst this ‘flurry of reforms’ were the many schemes associated with the ‘new vocationalism’ (Avis, et al, 1996; Ainley, 1999) of the 1980s and 1990s such as the various Youth Training Schemes (YTS) designed to remedy the deficiencies of school-leavers by supplying them with employability skills, Training Credits, and the introduction of competence-based education and training (CBET) through National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs). None of these came close to solving the perennial problems of VET and some of them – in particular YTS and the emergence of ‘skill-talk’ (Holt, 1987) and CBET popularised through NVQs – have, arguably, managed to aggravate matters by impoverishing the epistemological and general theoretical foundation of vocational pursuits, thereby devaluing training at all levels (Hyland, 1999). I intend to offer a critical evaluation of the rise of skills and competences in British VET before examining recent trends in work-based learning (WBL) which may offer more hope for the improvement of the system.
Skill-Talk and Vocationalism

During the period of the ‘new vocationalist’ initiatives in the UK in the 1970s and 1980s there was a re-interpretation of the aims and content of education which paralleled the vocationalisation of all educational processes at this time. The educational enterprise as a whole – alongside the increasing merger of education and training – came to be defined in terms of skills and later (following the establishment of the NCVQ in 1986) competences. By the late 1970s, Hart (1978) was noting that ‘you cannot dip much into educational writings without realising that the ambit of so-called “skills” is growing’ (p.205), and a decade later commentators were observing that ‘the word “skill” is ubiquitous in contemporary educational discourse’ (Barrow, 1987, p.188) to the extent that ‘skills are now officially seen as an essential part of the curriculum’ (Griffiths, 1987, p.203).

Although there are contexts in which the concept of ‘skill’ is clearly relevant and applicable (Ainley, 1993), there are three main reasons for objecting to its wholesale and undiscriminating use to describe the outcomes of education and training. 1) It is neither a well-founded nor clearly articulated notion, and there is no consensus of understanding about whether it applies to the cognitive, affective or psycho-motor dimensions of human activity. The term is used ‘indiscriminately of what are at best very different types of skill’ (Barrow, 1987, p.188). All the following are examples of essential ‘skills’ recommended in educational literature over the last few decades:

a) file or sort things, fill in a record book or manual, cutting with one blade (FEU, 1982); taking orders, making conversation (MSC, 1977); writing legibly (DES, 1985);

b) communication, problem-solving, numeracy, information technology (NCC, 1990); planning, fault-finding, making comparisons (Annett and Sparrow, 1985);

c) working with others, improving one’s own learning and performance (NCVQ, 1992); considering other’s views (DES, 1985); human relationship skills (Nelson-Jones, 1989); enterprise skills (TA, 1990).

As Jonathan (1987) has argued, when faced with lists which include ‘life skills, reasoning skills, survival skills, etc.’ (p.93), we are bound to ask questions about whether the same concept of skill is being used in all cases and, indeed, whether the concept can bear the weight of all these diverse interpretations. A common error here seems to involve the invalid move of identifying features common to different skills and, from this, inferring the existence of a common skill. As Dearden (1984) observes in this respect:
…there may indeed be features common to all skilled performances in virtue of which we call them skilled, but it does not follow from this that it is the same skill which is present in each case: in the skater, the juggler, the flautist, the chess player and the linguist (p.78, original italics).

Moreover, if relatively low-level activities such as ‘taking orders’ are to be labelled as skills alongside ‘improving one’s own performance’ and ‘considering others’ views’, it is not obvious how the identification of such diverse accomplishments as skills adds anything at all to the basic description of content or procedures. Clearly, items in list (a) above are simply discrete occupational tasks, list (b) items might be more properly described as core learning activities, whereas type (c) items are, arguably, not skills at all but values, attitudes and dispositions.

2) A second objection to the indiscriminate use of skill-talk is that (like the competence movement) it belittles the role of knowledge and understanding in education and training thereby seriously impoverishing all forms of learning. Moreover the downgrading of knowledge is common to both the skills and competence literature and both have their origins and rationale in behaviourist psychology (Hyland, 1994). As Jessup (1991) claimed in his justification of the NCVQ approach, the primary concern is – not with knowledge, understanding or even learning – but with evidence of competent performance, with identifying ‘what people need in their heads to perform effectively with their hands, feet, voice, eyes, and so on’ (p.121). Furthermore, there is ‘no justification for assessing knowledge for its own sake but only for its contribution to competent performance’ (ibid.,p.123). Similarly, Elliott (1993) in his critique of such approaches in teacher education, notes that the behaviourist foundations mean that ‘the significance of theoretical knowledge in training is a purely technical or instrumental one’ by which knowledge ‘belongs to the realm of inputs rather than outputs’ and ‘can only be justified if it is a necessary condition for generating the desired behavioural outcomes of learning’ (p.17).

Skill-talk displays the same attachment to that view of knowledge revealed in Bloom’s (1956) taxonomy of educational objectives which is criticised by Wilson (1972) for its obsession with the idea that ‘knowledge is like a physical object which can be broken down or built up into a hierarchy of component parts’ (p.106). This distorted perspective, not only mistakenly divorces the theoretical from the practical, but also implies that some basic tasks – such as filing, stacking shelves or answering the telephone – require very little knowledge whereas, for example, management or planning activities might require a foundation of high-level or advanced knowledge. In arguing against attempts by Bloom and others to construct hierarchies which separate factual knowledge from comprehension and application, Gribble (1969)
demonstrates how satisfying the full conditions of knowledge for even basic propositions involves quite complex conceptual understanding. He explains that:

Knowing something involves judging that something is so, and judgement is a complex mental operation. Mental abilities and skills are not separate from knowing something for we are unable to specify mental abilities and skills independently of the various forms of knowledge (p.58).

Skills and competences require a foundation of knowledge and understanding, just as education requires an infrastructure of training which can lead ‘to the confident deployment of skill and technique in a wide variety of situations’ (Winch, 1995, p.324). In this respect it is interesting how the paradigm example of the driving test which used to be offered by competence proponents to illustrate the importance in VET of ‘what people can do rather than what they know’ (UDACE, 1989, p.6) was conveniently dropped when this was supplemented by a written test of knowledge of the highway code! In a similar vein, Holland (1980) suggests that:

In wrestling with the problems that are important in a field of study, ideas not skills are what count; and the problems get solved, or transformed, or bypassed, by the person with the profounder conception (p.23).

Thus, an over-emphasis on skills might easily lead to a descent into the impracticable since those who possess only techniques or knacks do not fully understand the basis of practice. Such an epistemologically shallow conception of skills flies in the face of current conceptions of lifelong learning and the knowledge requirements of a post-Fordist economy.

3) There is a more sinister aspect of skill-talk which separates theoretical from practical knowledge and which, according to Johnson (1998), ‘places under threat rich and deep conceptions of teaching, knowledge and the person’ (p.211). This perspective may be linked to Hart’s (1978) argument that ‘certain activities stand in a peculiarly intimate relation to the kind of people we are’ whereas there is ‘something peripheral in the exercise of a skill…skills are mere appendices to our humanity and not continuous with and constitutive of it (p.215). The point is that knowledge and moral values/dispositions are connected to ideas of personhood in ways in which skills (and competences) are not. Mike Smith (1984) reminds us that, although we can choose whether or not to exercise a skill, ‘one cannot decide to know or understand something in the way that one can consciously decide to read a passage, make and execute a pass in football, or carve a piece of stone’ (p.228).

A similar point is made by Richard Smith (1987) who, in contrasting skills with moral virtues or qualities of character, argues that:

I choose whether to exercise a skill or not from moment to moment. My skill and I are separate: it is not an essential part of me. You learn nothing about what sort of individual I
am if you discover that I have or lack some skill or another: to practise something as a skill is to do so in such a manner that it gives nothing away about the person beneath the persona (p.198).

Personal qualities of character such as temperance, industry, honesty, reliability, patience, and so on, are fundamentally constitutive of persons – definitive of what people are – in the sense in which skills are not. The notion of a good doctor, or good chef, plumber, nurse, electrician, teacher, airline pilot, etc., is not synonymous with the idea of a person who possesses a range of skills or competences. Such occupational roles and descriptions need to incorporate the crucial ethical dimension of working life in which virtues, dispositions, values and attitudes shape social practices in determining how people actually use the skills they have acquired in pursuing aims and goals.

However, notwithstanding this nebulous logical, moral and epistemological status, the rise of skill-talk – from the so-called ‘skills revolution’ of the 1980s (CBI, 1989) to the more recent work of the government’s ‘Skills Task Force’ (DfEE, 2000) – has been relentless, culminating in the highly symbolic change of identity at the highest level as the former Department for Education and Employment became the Department for Education and Skills in 2001. This was paralleled by the establishment of the Learning and Skills Council (LSC, 2001) in the same year to oversee the funding and organisation of all post-school education and training except that undertaken in higher education institutions. The skills mania – based partly on wildly mistaken ideas about the transferability of core or key skills (Hyland and Johnson, 1998) – shows no signs of abating, as discussions about skill deficits, gaps, and shortages are supplemented by ‘skills for life’ and ‘multi-skills’ for a knowledge-driven economy in the ever-expanding firmament of skill-talk. The most recent government document – unifying the goals of and endorsed by the four government departments of the DfES, the Department of Trade and Industry, the Treasury and the Department for Work and Pensions (TSO, 2003) – outlines a ‘skills challenge’ which is intended to cover all aspects of education, vocational training, the economy, employment and the social life of the nation. In light of the critique of skill-talk, it has to be concluded that far too heavy a burden is being placed on an extremely lightweight, ill-defined and educationally vacuous conception of the VET enterprise.

Competence-Based Education and Training
The story of how CBET was introduced into VET in England through the establishment of the NCVQ in 1986 has been told by many commentators in the field
(Bees and Swords, 1990; Burke, 1995; Bates, 1998) including myself (1994). The foundations for a major overhaul of VET were established with the publication of *A New Training Initiative* (DOE, 1981) by the then Department of Employment, though this itself can be viewed as a continuation of MSC strategies introduced with YTS programmes. From the very start, accountability in terms of ‘outputs…the standards that need to be achieved at the end of the learning programme’ (Jessup, 1990, p.18) was predominant. There was an insistence that ‘at the heart of the initiative lie standards of a new kind’ (DOE,1981, p.6), and it was the pursuit of such standards – based on competence outputs constructed through the functional analysis methodology of CBET – which was to provide the driving force for the development of NVQs.

Following the publication of the White Paper *Working Together – Education and Training* (DOE/DES,1986), the NCVQ was established with a remit to design and implement a new national framework of vocational qualifications with the aim of securing national standards of vocational competence throughout all occupational sectors. From the outset, the key aims of the NCVQ were to ‘improve vocational qualifications by basing them on standards of competence required in employment’ and to ‘establish an NVQ framework which is comprehensible and comprehensive and facilitates access, progression and continued learning’ (NCVQ,1989, p.2). The NCVQ was not itself an awarding body but undertook to accredit or hallmark qualifications awarded by other bodies such as City and Guilds, RSA and BTEC, insisting that it would ‘only accredit qualifications which met employment needs’ (ibid.,p.3).

All NVQs had to consist of ‘an agreed statement of competence, which should be determined or endorsed by a lead body with responsibility for defining, maintaining and improving national standards of performance in the sectors of employment where the competence is practised’ (NCVQ,1991, p.1). Eleven occupational sectors were identified and these generated over 180 lead bodies. The agreed statement of competence in each occupational sphere ‘should be derived from an analysis of the functions within the area of competence to which it relates’ and had to be linked to ‘performance criteria’ which ‘identify only the essential aspects of performance necessary for competence’, in addition to ‘range statements’ which ‘express the various circumstances in which the competence must be applied’ (ibid.,pp.2-3).

This process of functional analysis used by lead bodies to determine competence involved the identification of the ‘expectations in employment as a whole…breaking
the work role for a particular area into purposes and functions’ (Mitchell, 1989, p.58). The end result was the identification of ‘key purposes’ for all the various occupational sectors, accompanied by ‘units and elements’ linked to relevant performance criteria and range statements. In addition to all this, there was a precisely defined hierarchy of five levels of competence from basic, routine tasks at level 1 to advanced management and supervisory functions at level 5 (Hyland, 1994, p.7).

Following a number of critical reviews and reports about the work of the NCVQ throughout the 1990s (Smithers, 1993; Marks, 1996; Beaumont, 1996; DfEE, 1997), the NCVQ was abolished in 1997 (though G/NVQs are still very much part of the system) and subsumed under the overarching Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA). In my own critique, I argued that NVQs – and indeed all programmes and qualifications supported by CBET functional analysis – were ‘logically and conceptually confused, epistemologically ambiguous, and based on largely discredited behaviourist learning principles’ (Hyland, 1994, p.x). This conclusion was supported by philosophical argument, policy analysis and empirical research, and it would be useful to summarise the principal shortcomings of NVQs and the CBET approach which underpins them under the following headings.

**Inherent flaws and weaknesses**

The replacement of traditional VET programmes with NVQs has led to widespread deskilling of occupational roles, a loss of significant theoretical content and a systematic narrowing and delimiting of vocational focus in fields such as construction (Callender, 1992), plumbing and electrical installation (Smithers, 1993), and in hairdressing, catering and business studies (Hyland and Weller, 1994). Perhaps this was to be expected from a system which – according to its proponents – is concerned only with the assessment of competence in the workplace and has ‘nothing whatsoever to do with training or learning programmes’ (Fletcher, 1991, p.26). Raggatt’s (1994) survey of a wide range of NVQs offered in FE colleges concluded that staff considered the approach to be far too ‘minimalist’ with a content which was ‘too narrow, concerned only with the performance of simple tasks’ (p.66). The major Beaumont (1996) review of NVQs – despite the fact that it was accused by one of its more critical members, Alan Smithers, of soft-peddling in order to hide fundamental problems and shortcomings – still could not disguise the fact that ‘there was a lack of clarity about who [NVQs] are aimed at or what they relate to’ and that the ‘existence of concerns about consistency is enough in itself to threaten the credibility of NVQs’ (Beaumont, 1996, pp.2,36,38). More importantly, the many problems and anomalies subsumed under the innocuous and superficial label of
'language' problems in Beaumont were, for the most part, not superficial but quite serious defects inherent in the CBET system of functional analysis and its behaviourist underpinnings. As Ashworth (1992) concluded, the NCVQ system was seeking to implement an approach based on learning outcomes which was ‘normally inappropriate to the description of human action or to the facilitation of the training of human beings’ (p.16). On a more practical level, Grugulis (2002) has argued that NVQs are almost always less effective in transmitting and assessing technical skills and knowledge than the qualifications they replace, and Oates (2004) suggests that occupational knowledge and practice cannot be adequately described by a series of technical statements of competence.

**Employer and Industry Involvement**

A number of surveys in the 1990s indicated that employers – who are supposed to be the key players in the NCVQ system which prides itself on employer-defined standards – are ignorant or indifferent about NVQs or, where they have experience of them, see many faults with CBET. A national survey by the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) revealed a ‘widespread lack of knowledge about NVQs, particularly in small firms, and an unwillingness on the part of many of them to become involved in workplace training and assessment’ (FEFC,1994, p.22), and similar findings were reported in a study by the Institute of Employment (IES,1995).

As Smithers (1996) commented, the ‘more employers know about NVQs the less they like them’ (p.2). Key factors in the low take-up of NVQs were reported in a survey by the National Foundation for Educational research (NFER) in which ‘the time and cost involved’ and ‘their perceived lack of credibility or commercial advantage’ (Nichols, 1998, p.36) were highlighted. Similarly, in the Ernst and Young (1995) evaluation of Modern Apprenticeships it was noted that one of the problems of encouraging employers to join the scheme was the difficulty of having to ‘convince them of the benefits of NVQs’ (p.11). More recent DfES research has indicated that – even amongst those employers who have been persuaded to use NVQs – there are still complaints about the bureaucratic nature of the system and its lack of fit with current business needs (DfES, 2002, para.85). There is a special difficulty also with small employers – accounting for 90% of all firms and around 35% of the total workforce – who overwhelmingly view the NVQs system as being irrelevant to their requirements (Matlay and Hyland, 1997). The most recent survey of employer perceptions of NVQs (Roe, Wiseman and Costello, 2006) painted a ‘fairly negative picture’ since ‘fewer than half (45%) of all employers in England have any useful understanding of NVQ’ (p.75). The researchers go on to observe:
Nor has NVQ achieved its original objectives to supplant existing qualifications and to become the major system by which vocational skills are certificated in England. It appears that not only has NVQ not, as intended, reduced the immense array of existing qualifications, but has added its own substantial complexity to that array. When it came to employer evaluations of NVQ, some further evidence of employers’ more frequent preferences for non-NVQ qualifications came through. More employers would prefer candidates for recruitment to have a non-NVQ vocational qualification or an academic qualification than an NVQ. (ibid., p.75).

How are we to understand such findings against the background of the original claim that NVQs were designed to be employer-led at all stages? There is, in fact, little evidence to support the claims about the ‘employer-led’ nature of competence standards and criteria of assessment. The occupational standards tend to be devised by certain approved private consultancies (Stewart and Sambrook, 1995), and the so-called employer representatives on Industry Lead Bodies tend to be made up of training and personnel managers plus a ‘wide sprinkling of consultants, some of whom have a long history of involvement in the Employment Dept and its quangos’ (Field, 1995, p.37). Moreover, comparisons between different occupational groups in Britain, France and Germany (Prais, 1995; Green, 1995) have shown that NVQs are too narrow in scope and too concerned with lower level, task-based activities to raise the general level of workforce skills. The vast majority of NVQs have been awarded at level 2 (DfES, 2006, p.3) – the equivalent of 5 GCSE grades at A-C – and there is still a dearth of intermediate technician qualifications at level 3 and above in areas of skills shortage. The Beaumont Report (1996) revealed that 90% of firms surveyed would only give credence to NVQs awarded by other employers – rather than by colleges or private training providers – yet the most recent statistics show that 82% of awards are made through the FE and private training routes (DfES, 2006, p.4).

**Problems of Assessment**

There never has been much evidence to demonstrate the superiority of CBET over other systems of assessment (Tuxworth, 1989; Wolf, 1995). What needs to be added to the difficulties experienced over the last twenty years with NVQs is the growing body of evidence which indicates the vulnerability of the system to abuse and impropriety (Bell, 1996). In a 1993 Employment Department (ED) report on NVQ implementation, a number of ‘assessment difficulties’ were noted including ‘the cost, the amount of paperwork involved, practical difficulties of assessment in the workplace, and problems about the reliability of assessments’ (ED, 1993, p.35). Similar problems of consistency were noted in the Beaumont review and reflected increased emphasis placed on requirements for ‘sufficiency of evidence’ Bates and Dutson, 995) in workplace assessments. Difficulties in ensuring reliability is a particular problem for CBET systems since they are based unashamedly on criterion-
referencing with a primary emphasis on content validity. Such strategies are characterized by ever-increasing demands for specification of content and prescriptive procedures; As Wolf (1995) observes, the more systems are based on extremely demanding and rigid requirements – as has happened with NVQs – the more likely it becomes that factors which are technically extraneous to assessment will in fact preclude effective and high-quality assessment from taking place (p.125).

In the more recent survey of employers’ use and perceptions of NVQs, the researchers concluded that the ‘attempt to specify competence in terms of extensive lists of behaviours leads to confusion, ambiguity and unreliability’ (Roe, Wiseman and Costello, 2006, p.6). The cost of adopting such approaches – influenced by Jessup’s (1991) call for NCVQ assessments to ‘just forget reliability altogether and concentrate on validity’ (p.191) – has been high indeed, and paid for by the many assessment anomalies and the correspondingly poor regard in which the qualifications are held.

In addition to such technical problems, the combination of a post-school funding regime based predominantly on outputs linked to the award of qualifications with an NVQ system defined in terms of outcomes – described by Hodkinson (1997) as a ‘lethal cocktail’ (p.7) – resulted in assessment abuses on a large scale. A University of Sussex survey of NVQ assessment practices reported that almost 40% of assessors admitting passing sub-standard students, and this has been accompanied by as number of cases involving the award of certificates to ‘bogus’ students (Hyland, 1999). The 1997 report of the Public Accounts Committee (Baty, 1997) noted that ‘incorrect’ payments from the DfEE to NVQ providers had totalled £8.6 million in 1995/96, a figure which the education human rights charity Article 26 described as merely the tip of the corruption iceberg (Bell, 1996). Although it has to be said that assessment and monitoring has been tightened up in recent years following a number of government reviews – and also that anomalies can occur with any type of examination system – the peculiar nature of exclusively outcomes-based criterion-referencing strategies makes them extremely vulnerable in this respect.

Not only have CBET and NVQs failed to remedy the perennial difficulties of English VET, the NCVQ experiment has, arguably, served to downgrade the status of vocational studies by giving certain kinds of vocational training (as YTS did in the 1970s) a very bad name. NVQs are, of course, still part of the UK VET system though the original aims of covering the whole of the workforce with competence-based occupational standards has been abandoned with the demise of the NCVQ.
It was, perhaps, unrealistic anyway to expect that a system which was, after all, designed solely for workplace assessment to have anything more than a ‘niche’ place in the national system. NVQs cover no more than 10-20% of occupationally-related qualifications (with only 12% of the workforce holding an NVQ and 16% of employers in England using NVQs; Roe, Wiseman and Costello, 2006, pp. 13, 75) and most learners in PCET – around three-quarters of all learners in the sector (DfES, 2006) – are doing GNVQ programmes of broad vocationalism. In addition, almost a million vocational awards made in 2004/5 fell outside the National Qualification Framework (NQF) of G/NVQs and Vocational Certificates of Education (vocational GCSEs/A levels), amounting to around half of all vocational qualifications (ibid., p. 1).

The fact that the NVQ system persists – and, indeed, has been exported to other countries – can be explained by the aggressive marketing and commercialism of the international market for pre-packaged VET commodities (Hyland, 1998, 2006) combined with powerful political pressures concerned with face-saving (given the massive public investment in NVQs) and the irresistible appeal of apparently quick and easy solutions to difficult educational and economic problems. It was, for instance, obviously a rich mixture of largely non-educational and political vested interests which inspired the major project reported by Arguelles and Gonczi (2000) involving the mapping of the impact of CBET on educational systems in Mexico, Australia, New Zealand, Costa Rica, France and South Africa. The upshot of this massive public investment (with World Bank support) is summed up by Gonczi in the remarkably frank conclusion that:

Industrial survival in the competitive workplace depends on innovative solutions to improvement which is the antithesis of prescribed procedures (as laid out in competency standards). We are left with the conclusion that the foundation of the CBET system is shaky at best (p. 26, emphasis added).

**Conclusion: The Resurgence of Work-Based Learning**

The obsession with skills and competences in recent VET reform programmes can be explained in terms of a mistaken reductionism motivated by the desire to find quick and easy solutions to long-standing and complex problems. However, both skill-talk and CBET are ill-founded, imprecise and are anti-educational in their conceptions of knowledge, theory and vocational learning. What is required to solve the perennial problems of VET is a genuinely national system of VET provision – involving the state partnerships of government, employers and unions characteristic of the French and German systems (Green 1999) – VET programmes grounded in relevant knowledge, theory and values, and a qualifications framework in which
vocational and academic tracks have parity of status and esteem in terms of overall planning and funding (Hyland, 2002). Possibilities for the development of such a system are contained in the recent renaissance of work-based learning (WBL) strategies in current UK VET policy developments.

WBL has always been an essential feature of VET programmes though, arguably, it has never been accorded the prominence it now has in both Europe and Australia (Symes and McIntrye, 2000). In the Britain, high quality ‘work-based training is at the heart of the Government’s 14-19 agenda’(DfES,2001,p.2) and is central to a host of new policy developments concerned with modern apprenticeships, vocational qualifications and foundation degrees. Described by Boud and Symes (2000) as ‘an idea whose time has come’ and an ‘acknowledgement that work…is imbued with learning opportunities’(pp.14-15), WBL has emerged as one of the key features of VET reforms as systems respond to the demands of globalisation and the knowledge economy. General empirical research on the way people acquire knowledge, skills and values in new settings – especially in workplaces in which learners are typically seeking admission to communities of practice – have confirmed the importance of social as opposed to individualised learning (Hyland, 2003). What Lave & Wenger (2002) call ‘legitimate peripheral participation’ concerns the ways in which newcomers – and, interestingly, workplace learning through forms of apprenticeship is cited as a paradigm case here – come to acquire the knowledge, culture and values that enables them to move from being outsiders to insiders.

It is argued that ‘newcomers participate in a community of practitioners as well as in productive activity’, and that it is important to view ‘learning as part of a social practice’ (Lave & Wenger, 2002,pp.121-2). They go on to observe that the:

Social relations of apprentices within a community change their direct involvement in activities; in the process, the apprentices' understanding and knowledgeable skills develop (ibid.,p.113).

Thus, it could be argued that WBL – in addition to fostering the rich vocational learning and occupational knowledge and skills that go to make up ‘economic’ capital – can, through workplace practice, also facilitate the development of the valuable ‘social’ capital which is located in the ‘kinds of contexts and culture that promote communication and mutual learning as part of the fabric of everyday life’ (Schuller & Field, 1998, p.234).
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