Swimming against the tide: reductionist behaviourism in the harmonisation of european higher education systems

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Abstract
Although there are some positive elements in the aims and procedures of the Bologna process, key objectives for higher education (HE) reform and harmonisation are still overly influenced by a neo-behaviourist reductionism which replaces rich conceptions of knowledge and understanding with narrowly prescriptive competences and skills. The principal driving forces consist in a combination of factors including the remnants of a neo-liberal project to transform public service culture under the ‘corporate state’ (Ranson, 1994), the crude commercialism which informs the marketing of pre-packaged qualifications (Hyland, 1998a) and – arguably, the most powerful driver of educational 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, 1998b, 1999).

This behaviourist and simplistic approach to HE reform is criticised by examining the principal weaknesses of the attempt to reduce educational aims and objectives to competences and skills. Not only is such a strategy – especially in the form of CBET developments – philosophically and educationally flawed, it fails to achieve even the minimum objectives of advancing the reform of vocational education and training (VET) and enhancing professional/occupational knowledge and skill. 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 (Field & Leicester, 2000). Indeed, the obsession with pre-specified competences and skills reflected in recent reform programmes has served to morally impoverish (Hyland & Merrill, 2003) large aspects of the post-school educational enterprise to such an extent that it would be wilfully perverse for educators concerned with HE reform in Europe to have anything to do with such de-humanised and simplistic reductionism.

Behaviourism and the Bologna Process
Any examination of the contextual background to the key Bologna aims of creating transparency between European systems of HE combined with some form of
common qualifications structure (Adam, 2003) needs to take note of a range of philosophical, organisational, pedagogic and curricular changes and developments (Barnett, 1990, 1994, 2000) which have accompanied the move from elite to mass provision in the expansion of HE systems over the last few decades. Alongside the growth of centralised control of education there has been a ‘vocationalisation’ of the curriculum in all fields in line with the ‘growing clamour from industry for the graduates it employs to have more work-related fields’ (Barnett, 1990, p.158). Neave (1992) has commented upon the ‘strengthening of the vocational element in the higher education systems of Western Europe’ (p.23) resulting in a tension between ‘training in the mastery of techniques specifically geared to one precise occupation’ and ‘general study and the acquisition of understanding’ (pp.5-6). In a similar vein, Esland (1996) draws interesting parallels between the ‘globalisation’ of vocational trends since the 1970s and the relentless globalisation of industry and capital in the world neo-liberal climate.

The UK system which – along with Denmark, Ireland, and the Netherlands – has been central to certain aspects of the Bologna process, provides a paradigm case of the vocational transformation of HE. The vocationalisation of education and training in all spheres has been the leitmotif of developments from school to university in Britain over the last few decades. Starting with the ‘new vocationalism’ and youth training schemes in the 1970s and continuing with the CBET system established by the former National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ, now subsumed under the generic Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, QCA) in the 1980s, this process – incorporating the commodification of knowledge and the marketisation of its production and distribution – has travelled downwards into schools and upwards into HE. Contemporary lifelong learning policy, which is dominated almost entirely by economistic talk about employability skills and competences, continues this simplistic and morally impoverished utilitarianism into the new millennium (Hyland & Merrill, 2003). In analysing the last major survey of British HE by Lord Dearing in 1997, Barnett (1998) concluded that the report’s principal conception of the nature and purpose of HE was an economic one in which ‘individual learning and development are to be welcomed…for their contribution to the growth of economic capital’ (p.15). Similarly, general lifelong learning policy established by the New Labour government in Britain since 1997 has been driven by unequivocal economic motives through which the lip-service commitments to social capital are couched in terms of the language of employment skills and the knowledge-driven economy (Hyland, 2002).
Competences and Skills: A Critique

The influence of such developments on aspects of the Bologna process can clearly be discerned in the emerging consensus around ‘output-focussed systems’ linked to benchmarks, credit systems and ‘learning outcomes and competencies’ (Adam, 2003, p.iii). In a similar vein, the Final Report of the Tuning Process (European Commission, 2003) places special emphasis on the use of ‘competencies in the development of the new educational paradigm’ (p.61) for the harmonisation of HE systems. The CBET model developed in the UK – now influential elsewhere as a result of the aggressive marketing of National and Scottish Vocational Qualifications (N/SVQs; see Hyland, 1998a, 1999, 2001) – is clearly a central driving force in this process, yet the only glimpse we are offered of potential difficulties with this strategy is the suggestion that it is ‘controversial’ (Adam, 2003, p.33). This is a monstrous understatement of the position; the CBET model on which all this is founded is philosophically flawed, educationally subversive and pragmatically ineffective.

In seeking to highlight the inherent weaknesses of CBET in critical accounts since the early 1990s, my original position was that this system was ‘logically and conceptually confused, epistemologically ambiguous, and based on largely discredited behaviourist learning principles’ (Hyland, 1994, p.x). Nothing has happened since then to either change my views or to deal with the basic shortcomings of the approach. In relation to the influence of this and cognate models on the Bologna process, it is important to re-emphasise the key educational weaknesses of CBET strategies. It would be useful to summarise the main arguments under three headings – behaviourist foundations, higher learning and individualistic ethics – each of which will demonstrate the glaring inappropriateness of the UK model (and others influenced by it) for European HE reform.

**Behaviourist Foundations**

Notwithstanding putative attempts to popularise alternative models of CBET, the dominant strategy popularised through the development of N/SVQs in the UK and elsewhere is unequivocally behaviourist in its origins, nature and purpose. All critical commentators are in agreement about the behaviourist foundations of CBET (Marshall, 1991; Hyland, 1994, 1997; Hodkinson & Issitt, 1995). Norris (1991) characterises the basic approach succinctly as resting on: a description of behaviour (sometimes called performance) and the situation(s) in which it is to take place (sometimes referred to as range statements) in a form that is capable of demonstration and observation (p.332).
Indeed, this NCVQ model has been referred to as ‘unashamedly behavioural’ (Marshall, 1991, p.61) and incorporated into a CBET system which is ‘ruthlessly applied’ (Smithers, 1993, p.9) in all contexts.

What apologists for this approach (Leicester, 1994; Hager & Beckett, 1995) need to explain is how a system constructed out of a ‘fusion of behavioural objectives and accountability’ (Fagan, 1984, p.5) and rooted in theories of social efficiency can possibly accommodate educational objectives concerned with the development of knowledge, understanding and learner autonomy. In a recent defence of the Australian so-called ‘integrated’ model of competence, Hager (2004) claims that specifying outputs and performance descriptors is not the same as describing behaviour. Yet if all that matters in the end is the assessment of behaviour – not knowledge, understanding, values or the learning process – I do not see how such linguistic re-engineering can alter the behaviourist thrust of CBET.

Higher Learning
In spite of recent attempts to extend CBET beyond its original remit to incorporate so-called ‘higher level skills’ (Barnett, 1994; Employment Department, 1995) there is a fundamental counter-intuitive aspect of an enterprise which seeks to upgrade higher level professional and vocational studies by means of a system whose chief proponents claim ‘has nothing whatsoever to do with training or learning programmes’ (Fletcher, 1991, p.26). If this system really is ‘independent of any specific course, programme or mode of learning’ (NCVQ, 1988,p.v) and ‘firmly rooted in the functions of employment…without imposing an educational model of how people learn or behave’ (Jessup, 1991, p.39) then how can this approach contribute anything at all to the HE curriculum and pedagogy or help to foster a culture of lifelong learning?

In endorsing learning as a process rather than a product, Hager (2004) strangely overlooks the fact that forms of CBET have contributed more to the obsession with products and outcomes that any other approach to VET. It is ludicrously ironic to recommend a new view of learning as the ‘development of competence’ so that ‘the special importance of learning as process is highlighted’ (ibid.,p.426) when it is the competence movement itself which is largely responsible for the state of affairs being criticised. The raison d’etre of CBET systems is the assessment of performance in the workplace; learning is not a part of such strategies. In addition to all this, there is plenty of evidence (Hyland, 1994, 1997,1998a) to suggest that the actual implementation of competence systems (something which Hager and other
apologists do not often address) results in reduced, prescriptive curricula, a loss of significant theoretical content and a widespread de-skilling and de-professionalising of vocational/professional roles. It would monstrous folly to consider the use of such systems in institutions of higher learning.

**Individualistic Ethics**

As mentioned above, the attempt to introduce CBET into higher professional learning has been educationally disastrous. Programmes of professional development in HE and public service professions – though employing a wide range of conceptual schemes and methodologies – tend to share a common distaste for technicist and behavioural models, preferring instead to found practice on ideas developed in the cognitive/experiential tradition (Eraut, 1994; Hodkinson & Issitt, 1995). The radical mismatch between such models of education and learning and CBET approaches is captured perfectly in Kolb’s observation that ‘from the perspective of experiential learning, the tendency to define learning in terms of outcomes can become a definition of non-learning’ and hence is ‘maladaptive’ (1993,p.144). In a similar vein, Ashworth (1992) has argued that the popular mainstream model of competence provides solutions to the specification of learning outcomes which are normally inappropriate to the description of human action or to the facilitation of the training of human beings (p.16)

This mismatch between competence strategies and HE programmes of professional studies was well brought in the recent attempt to introduce such systems in Mexico. In spite of investment by the Mexican government and World Bank support, it was concluded that there was a ‘difficulty of conceptualising academic subjects in terms of core competencies’ and that CBET could not be ‘reconciled with official policy concerning the exercise of professions’ (Arguelles & Gonczi, 2000,pp.58-9).

Moreover, competence models and the new vocationalist obsession with ‘skills’ (Hyland, 1999) are rooted in an individualistic philosophy which marginalises forms of communal, collegial and social values which are an integral part of higher learning institutions. Objectives couched in terms of competences and skills tend to separate theoretical and practical performance in a way which, according to Johnson (1998), ‘places under threat rich and deep conceptions of teaching, knowledge and the person’ (p.211). What is being criticised here is not just the tendency to transmute complex human agency into measurable bits of behaviour but also the notion that learning and education can be reduced to the achievement of prescribed competences and skills. It should also be emphasised that vital personal qualities/virtues – such as temperance, loyalty, patience, industry, sociability, and so
on, which are crucial to education and training at all levels – are fundamentally constitutive of persons in a way in which competences and skills are not. As Smith (1997) has observed, you ‘learn nothing about what sort of individual I am if you discover that I have or lack some skill or another’ (p.198). The concept of a good nurse, teacher, plumber, chef, surgeon, airline pilot etc., is not synonymous with the idea of a person who possesses a range of competences or skills. Knowledge, understanding and moral values are intrinsically linked to personhood, whereas competences and skills are only contingent.

**Economic and Social Capital**

The point made above in relation to the marginalisation of social and communal values in competence approaches has an important link with a number of central policy aims of the Bologna process. The Tuning document quite rightly stresses the role of HE programmes in fostering the qualities in learners linked with ‘knowing how to be…values as an integral element of the way of perceiving and living with others and in a social context’ (European Commission, 2003, p.69). Unfortunately the document then goes on to discuss these important moral aims in terms of ‘interpersonal competences’ (ibid.,p.71). CBET strategies are constitutionally unsuited to the fostering of values of any kind.

As already mentioned, the concept of competence – like that of skill – is systematically ambiguous and ill-founded. There are almost as many definitions of these notions as there are writers on the topic (Hyland, 1994,1999). If we add to this the gross mismatch between competence/skill talk and ideas about fostering qualities of personhood, the attempt to achieve objectives such as ‘the capacity to express one’s own feelings’ and the ‘expression of social or ethical commitment’ (European Commission, 2003, p.71) through competences represents logical nonsense. Talk of instrumental, generic, systemic or interpersonal competences (ibid.) in this context – just like the talk of core, key or transferable skills (Hyland & Johnson, 1998) – thus becomes nonsense on stilts. The moral dimension of higher learning cannot be captured by competence talk and educational programmes concerned to develop social values have nothing to learn from such approaches.

The twin pillars supporting contemporary lifelong learning policy and practice are the development of vocational skills for economic competitiveness and the fostering of social inclusion and cohesion. Recent policy developments in Europe, however, have demonstrated that, in practice, economic capital always takes precedence over
social objectives (Hyland, 2002). Consequently, the Bologna process quite rightly emphasises the social capital dimension of HE learning. If this dimension is to be realised HE institutions would do well to concentrate on what they do best: the development of research and critical practice through engagement with the ‘processes of learning’ (Wyatt, 1990, p.127). What needs to be stressed is the conception of higher learning as a ‘process of human development oriented towards some conception of human being’ (Barnett, 1994, p.189). Not only can competence strategies make little contribution to such a process, they have even failed to produce that economic capital which has become the principal aim of the reform of European education and training systems.

**Coda: Criticism and Collusion**

In spite of their professional commitment to critical reflection and analysis, it is surprising how uncritical many educators are when it comes to dealing with dominant policy developments driven by fashionable concepts such as ‘globalisation’ and the ‘knowledge society’. What Avis et al (1996) have called the ‘post-Fordist myth’ seems to have been swallowed hook, line and sinker by many people who should know better. The demand for high-level knowledge workers is grossly exaggerated and often with dubious ulterior motives in mind. As Coffield (2000) has argued in relation to UK lifelong learning policy:

> The knowledge economy is a myth, whose main function is to feed fears of future mass unemployment and so spur millions of learners on to new and still higher levels of attainment (p.241).

In a similar vein, the darker sides of globalisation are rarely unpacked by commentators concerned to persuade us to adopt a neo-liberal educational agenda. Bales (2000) has shown how the global economy has vastly increased slavery and child prostitution, and Gray (1998) declares unequivocally that:

> The impact of anarchic global markets on the economic cultures of continental Europe institutionalizes high levels of structural unemployment. In these societies the principal source of social division is unequal access to work (p.74).

None of this has prevented educational theorists from recommending programmes of reform in keeping with the global knowledge economy (Hyland, 2001) and, similarly, the comprehensive failure of CBET systems has not interfered with the spread of these strategies around the world. It is, for example, clearly a rich mixture of non-educational vested interests which motivated the major project by Arguelles & Gonczi (2000) which involved mapping the impact of CBET on educational systems in Mexico, Australia, New Zealand, Costa Rica, France and South Africa. The result of
all this massive public investment 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).

QED! There is so much that is rich and valuable in the liberal/humanistic HE learning and critical pedagogic traditions of Europe. It would be sheer criminal folly to allow these to be destroyed by the uncritical adoption of a failed behaviourist model of competence.

**References**


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