PLURALISING CONTINUING EDUCATION AND TRAINING IN A POSTMODERN WORLD:
WHITHER COMPETENCE?¹
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The paper is directed, through a philosophical analysis, to an exploration of the implications of postmodernity for the future of competency-based approaches to continuing education and training. Postmodernity is seen as being contemporary culture that is informed by: (1) a belief in and commitment to the interpretative nature of all perception, the cultural contingency of all belief, and the ontological contingency of being; and (2) a profound scepticism towards all claims to the privileging of knowledge. Competency-based approaches to continuing education are seen as being essentially outcomes driven in nature: both descriptively and normatively. From these premises it is argued that, while there are limited areas of compatibility between competency-based continuing education and postmodernity (particularly their external de-differentiation of the field), the former is overwhelmingly modernist, rather than postmodernist. Areas of incompatibility include the models of humanity upon which each is based, and the competency-based tendencies towards orthodoxy, rationality, simplicity, centralisation, knowledge technicisation, pragmatism, learner dependence, reactiveness, commodification, privatisation, conformatism, internal differentiation, and instrumentalism—in contrast to the postmodernist tendencies towards heterodoxy, expressiveness, complexity, reflexive contextualisation, knowledge diversity, critical understanding, student independence, responsiveness, openness, indeterminacy, participation, internal de-differentiation, and phenomenalism. Competency-based education is thus seen to be largely in conflict with postmodernity. Insofar, then, as the future of Australian society is postmodern, competency-based education and training may be expected to have little to contribute, and would be unlikely to feature importantly in the field, except as one orientation among many. Perhaps we should be wary of moving too strongly into competency-based approaches; they may well be the final educational fling of an outmoded modernity.

Continuing education and training in a postmodern world: Whither competence?

That we are increasingly living in a world of postmodern, rather than modern, characteristics is a matter of which we are reminded repeatedly by the many commentators of postmodernity (e.g. Baudrillard 1983; Bauman 1992; Jencks 1991; Lyotard 1984; Smart 1992; Vattimo 1988). That this world may have, and be having, profound implications for the practice of continuing education has

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been suggested, for example, by Westwood (1991), although there has been little attempt in the literature to identify and explore those implications (but see Stanage 1990).

The present paper addresses the implications of postmodernity with respect to the future of competency-based education in a postmodern world. The analysis begins with a brief examination and characterisation of postmodernity from which are identified implications for continuing education practice. Competency-based education is then briefly characterised and, from that characterisation, there are identified formal tendencies paralleling the educational implications of postmodernity. The compatibility of postmodernist continuing education and competency-based education is then examined through these two sets of tendencies and their underlying models of humanity, before some conclusions are drawn together with respect to the focal concern of the paper. The study is undertaken through an exploratory and speculative, meta theoretical, philosophical analysis. The work is not a critique of postmodernist continuing education. It may, though, be interpreted as one of competency-based education from a postmodern perspective.

For the sake of linguistic simplicity, 'education' is generally used here in the broad sense of those events in which engagement is for the purpose of learning. It therefore includes 'training' in this sense. When a distinction is made between 'education' and 'training' it is to identify the former with engagement for the purpose of contributing to the development of new or critical perspectives, and the latter with the acquisition or refinement of modes of behaviour (including skills). The focus here is on continuing education, in the sense of non-formal programs of education developed specifically for adults—rather than on formal schooling or tertiary education. However, the analysis, in its conclusions, may probably be extended to other, more formal, sectors of the education institution without significant adjustment.

Postmodernity

In spite of, perhaps because of, the increasingly momentous avalanche of analyses of the postmodern condition, there is apparently little agreement as to how it should be perceived (for which see Bagnall, in press). Nevertheless, an overlapping set of qualities may be
recognised with some degree of reliability, by drawing particularly on the philosophical and sociological literature on postmodernity (e.g. Bauman 1992; Fekete 1988; Lash 1990; Lyotard 1984; Smart 1992; Vattimo 1988). It is from such a set that the following account has been distilled. It remains, though, unavoidably selective.

‘Postmodernity’ is seen here as identifying contemporary culture that is informed by: (1) belief in and commitment to the interpretative nature of all perception, the cultural contingency of all belief, and the ontological contingency of being; and (2) a profound scepticism towards all claims to the privileging of knowledge. That culture may be any given set of constructed realities—either perceived or postulated—arising either directly or indirectly from action motivated by the epistemology, including the action itself.

Postmodernity is seen as being opposed to modernity; the scientific, industrial, and social programs, institutions, actions, and artefacts generated by the Enlightenment search for the universal foundations of truth, morality, and aesthetics, in the pursuit of human emancipation. Postmodernity therein includes, but goes beyond, ‘postmodernism’: that contemporary, aesthetic movement against modernism in the arts, including architecture, literature, painting, film, and drama. ‘Modernism’, then, refers to the largely twentieth century movement of autonomous experimentation and criticism (together with its products) in these fields: the movement which arose in opposition to classicism. While adhering to the classical autonomy and élitism of art, it sought to reveal the inner, formal truth behind the superficial appearances, through the triumph of the will over rationality, to the end of establishing an aesthetic justification of life. ‘Postmodernism’ may thus be seen as a rejection of modernism—not a reversion to classicism, since postmodernism denies the meaningfulness of the classical search for truth, and the autonomy of élitism of the enterprise. Postmodernism is, rather, the shifting diversity of aesthetic styles, approaches, and products that is associated with the decentred, socially-embedded, non-progressive, reactive, populist, and critical world of art, literature, and literary criticism.

Perceived in this way, these concepts, although variously labelled, have been well articulated in the literature, for example, as follows: modernism, by Bell (1980, pp. 275-302), Calinescu (1977), and Lunn (1982); postmodernism, by Arac (1987), Docherty (1990), Hassan (1971),

With respect to the informing epistemology of postmodernity, the concept of the interpretative nature of all human perception focuses on our inability to separate fully what we perceive to be the case from the frameworks of our understanding, expectation, and subconscious figuration that we bring to the perceptual task. Given the irremediably normative nature of those frameworks, we are unable, also, to separate entirely matters of fact from matters of value—the former, indeed, may be seen as reducible to the latter (Vattimo 1988).

All belief, then, is seen as being contingent upon the perceptual and linguistic frameworks through which it is mediated, and all knowledge is seen as being provisional and relative to the cultural context of its generation. Knowledge is therefore seen as essentially incoherent, contradictory, and lacking any heteronomous legitimation in universal foundations of truth—such as reason, nature, or the will of God. No one version of the true and the good is therefore recognisably privileged over others. This cultural contextuality of truth and value carries the modernist project of criticism to its ultimate conclusion. In the absence of privileged foundations to knowledge, all belief is open to sceptical questioning, and from a potential infinity of cultural perspectives. Ironical, deconstructive, sceptical, even cynical, criticism pervades, but it lacks any common foundation, standard, norm, or vision from which the criticism may be drawn into belief and conviction of a constructive and progressive nature. Utopian visions, and the ideologies which they foster, are reduced to irrational conventions, all of which may be revealed under selected deconstructive criticism to be hollow, if not anti-social or destructive in some sense. The contingency of all belief thus diminishes the modernist status of reason and rationality, both in the legitimation of belief, and as a determinant of prudential and sane behaviour. However, while rationality itself may be seen as a contingent matter, its universality must be recognised as being presupposed by effective communication. Nevertheless, its epistemological pre-eminence is
questioned in postmodernity and, thereby, the epistemic value of feeling, emotive, non-rational bases of belief is raised.

The identity of the postmodernist individual person is seen similarly as being contingent on the traditions or discourses within which each person acts, and through which his or her identity is therein created. Individual identity is therefore seen as being primarily moulded by those discourses, and as being fragmented among them. While they define the outer limits of individual freedom, they also allow, within those limits, the contingent freedom to construct one's own identity—to select from alternative models in a process of identity self-construction. Indeed, given the postmodernist plethora of competing identity models, postmodernity requires of individuals that they construct their own identities at least to that extent. In its contingency, individual identity thus emerges as being strongly ambivalent, and as generating a profound existential insecurity. Humanity is thus seen as lacking any essence—any properties or tendencies that characterise either the way in which we do behave, or the way in which we ought to behave. In other words, both descriptively and normatively, the qualities that make us human beings—beyond the biological or physiological—are seen to be matters of cultural tradition. The nature of humanity and the norms, values, and moral principles that constrain and restrain our actions are therefore not matters to be elucidated universally and applied globally. Rather, they are matters pertaining to particular cultural traditions.

The postmodernist scepticism towards all claims to the privileging of knowledge problematises any claim for a superior path to what is true, good, or beautiful—whether it be rationally, spiritually, empirically, or otherwise based. Drawing its strength from the postmodern epistemic contingency, this scepticism may serve as a powerful leveller of belief: moral, theoretical, and aesthetic. It therein denies the State any a priori substantive grounds for privileging one set of beliefs over others. The principles upon which postmodernist governance are based, therefore, become matters to be taken empirically from the pluralistic and shifting cultural context, rather than from prevailing ideology or common sense, since both ideology and common sense are culture specific.

Postmodernist culture, then, may be seen as embracing both human action that is motivated by commitment to a postmodern
epistemology, and any cultural artefacts—such as continuing education engagement—resulting from that action. Postmodernist action is seen as being essentially critical but non-utopian, infused with ambivalence, uncertainty, irony, and contradiction, and as tending to be heterodox and eclectic. It celebrates not only rational action, but also the non-rational—behaviour that is motivated by feelings, emotions, and the subconscious. The cultural context may thus be seen as constituting a pluralistic heterogeneity of potentially incommensurable discourses, or patterns of belief and action. Given the non-utopian scepticism towards all grand designs, there would be a tendency for social planning to be devolved to those discourses. The role of government agencies would become largely one of monitoring and regulation, and welfare assistance to the end of moderating and resolving conflicts of interest between groups and cultural entities. Social change would be non-progressive—directed not so much by social policy, as by the shifting plethora of particular cultures or discourses. Choice and responsibility would thus be profoundly indeterminate—complexly embedded in that plurality of discourses. In its egalitarianisation of claims to truth, there would be a massification of modernist élite culture. In its contemporaneity, it would tend to be global and dominated by communication and the mass media, especially television. There would also be what Lash (1990) has identified as the ‘de-differentiation’ of signification: the breaking-down of distinctions between the objects of discourse (the referents), their linguistic or iconic representations (signifiers), and the meanings of those representations (the signifieds). Conceptual, institutional, and political boundaries may be expected to be more fluid, impermanent, and open to reformulation, than has been the case within a modernist framework.

Postmodernity is seen as constituting a cultural force from the 1960s. In developing from modernity, it incorporates but problematises the epistemological, ethical, social, aesthetic, and industrial verities of modernity. In this way, it is quite distinct from historically prior periods of radical contingency in the history of ideas (for which see Bauman 1987; Docherty 1990).

From this perspective, ‘postmodernity’ may be used to refer to any postmodern postulated or perceived set of realities, such as the postulated features of a postmodern education, or the extent to which continuing education engagement already evidences postulated features of postmodernity. It is with the former of these tasks (i.e. as a
postulated set of characteristics) that the present paper is concerned and, therein, specifically with the compatibility of postmodernist and competency-based continuing education.

**Postmodern continuing education**

Crucial to this analysis are the implications of postmodernity for the nature of continuing education practice. These implications may be seen as the structural or curricula tendencies that may be expected to emerge in a cultural context that is substantially postmodern in nature. The tendencies—based on those elaborated elsewhere (Bagnall, in press)—are seen as follows.

1 **Heterodoxy**: a tendency towards education that is intentionally different from the traditional or the orthodox. It is thus highly variable, both temporally (i.e. changeable) and contemporaneously (i.e. diverse or pluralistic). Heterodoxy is seen as arising directly from the postmodern celebration of difference and spontaneity, in the context of freedom from cultural constraint and restraint: educational freedom in this case.

2 **Expressiveness**: a tendency towards education that is spontaneously responsive to and reflective of the non-cognitive, emotive interests, inclinations, and preferences of its participants. It is seen as arising partly from the under-determination of all human action, and its consequential unpredictability and ambiguity. It also, and more importantly, derives from the perceived importance of the subconscious in guiding human action; from the importance therein of feelings, emotions, and unrationalled inclinations; from the privileging of oral expression over the written; and from the importance of the aesthetic in postmodernist realities.

3 **Complexity**: a tendency for the nature of educational engagement, curriculum, and goals to be seen as opaque, multi-layered, and resistant to determinative analysis, criticism and understanding. It is seen as deriving from the postmodern commitment to plurality, to the under-determination of all events, and to a belief in the importance of non-rational influences on human behaviour.
4 Reflexive contextualisation: a tendency towards education that is inseparably immersed within the object and cultural context of its discourse, being both determined (constrained) by and determining of that object and context—epistemically, normatively, and temporally. Education is therefore open to contextual formulation, negotiation and selection, and is thereby open to being shaped by formerly suppressed and marginalised cultural interests. This tendency is seen as arising from the postmodern denial of privileged discourses—of privileged paths to the true, the good, and the beautiful—and from the culturally embedded, historicist contingency of belief.

5 Knowledge diversity: a tendency towards a broadly-based educational focus on the full range of knowledge forms: technical (manual and intellectual manipulative skills), theoretical (understanding and descriptive knowledge), practical (the ethical and the interhuman) and, especially, aesthetic (the harmonious, the beautiful and the creative). It is seen as arising from the celebration of alternative forms of knowing and alternative bases of action.

6 Critical understanding: a tendency towards education that is based upon a view of knowledge and meaning as being properly open to radical reinterpretation, deconstruction, and revision from any contemporaneously and contextually meaningful cultural perspective. It derives, in part, from the strong influence of poststructuralism and critical theory on postmodernism. It may also, though, be seen as deriving from the loss of foundational knowledge in postmodernist belief itself.

7 Learner independence: a tendency to favour and reinforce of learner independence from the educational institution in such activities as the identification of educational interests, the selection of educational goals, and the selection of educational activities. It is seen as a consequence of the postmodernist isolation of the individual from all secure foundations. With all traditions being open to sceptical questioning, none has an importance, a centrality, sufficient to support a dependency on the part of the learners, at least for any length of time.
8 **Responsiveness**: a tendency towards education that is framed by, or responsive to, events: existential realities as they are subjectively experienced by situated individuals. It is seen as arising from the contingency and the phenomenalism of postmodernity, and from the contingent fragmentation of the postmodernist individual.

9 **Openness**: a tendency towards continuing education that evidences and embraces a rich diversity of criteria for its valuation, justification and appraisal: not just or not primarily commodity value, but also and importantly forms of value such as aesthetic, cognitive, spiritual and affective. This tendency is seen as arising from the pluriformity of postmodernist belief and value, and from the postmodernist tendency away from strictly rational modes of thinking and acting.

10 **Indeterminacy**: a tendency towards uncertainty and unpredictability as to the location of authority and responsibility for educational decisions; a decentring of decision-making authority and responsibility from such traditional loci as those of the individual, the State, and elected or appointed offices. It is seen as arising particularly from the fragmentation of individual identity, and the postmodernist perception of the importance of non-rational influences upon human action.

11 **Participation**: a tendency towards education in which educational involvement and control are devolved to the participants. It may be seen as arising from the loss of the constraining effects of the grand social theories of modernity. The consequential contextualisation of educational action—the devolution of educational engagement or involvement and control to particular, local contexts—brings that action and the choices which it presupposes to the level of the particular and the local.

12 **De-differentiation**: a tendency towards the perception of education as being continuous, both in its internal structures and processes, and in its connections with other related fields of human activity (such as research, social work, political activism, and recreation). It is thus seen both as lacking differentiation into distinct structural or functional categories, and as being immersed in and invaded by contingently related discourses. This tendency is seen as arising directly from the impermanence, the
ephemerality, the changeability of all concepts and conceptual boundaries in postmodernity.

13 Phenomenalism: a tendency towards education that gives expression to the value of the engagement in itself—the intrinsic value of the event—rather than to the extrinsic ends to which it may be directed. It is seen as arising particularly from the postmodernist loss of progressive social human vision, and from the value that is placed upon the quality of the immediate experience of engagement.

In consequence of these tendencies, differences between and among events of continuing education engagement would be potentially not only great, but incommensurable: incompatible in their respective epistemic, moral, social, and aesthetic assumptions and beliefs; in short, pluralistic. The individual learner in such a context is likely to experience a profound sense of anomie, of existential insecurity.

Competency-based education and training

Following Gonczi, Hager and Oliver (1990), Hager and Gonczi (1991) and Watson (1991), competency-based education is seen here as education that is directed to the attainment of competency-based standards. These latter are seen as being levels of achievement required for competence in some specified domains of social practice or roles within those domains. They are concerned with the performance of the roles or the tasks associated with them, at or beyond particular minimum levels (the standards). The performance itself is seen as being underpinned by a set of attributes, 'such as knowledge, abilities, skills and attitudes' (Gonczi, Hager & Oliver 1990, p.9), which constitute the competencies: those to be learned through programs of education, if they have not already been attained to the specified standard. By implication, the performance standards are to be met under specified conditions—those judged to be appropriate to the identified domains or roles of social practice (Thomson 1991).

Competency-based education is seen here as being essentially outcomes driven in the sense that it is education directed to the development, in the most efficient and effective manner, of persons as human resources, for the pursuit of their individual and collective
goals within a utilitarian social framework (Bagnall 1994). As such, it exhibits the generic presuppositions and qualities of traditional outcomes-driven educational ideologies, which are firmly rooted in the ideological tradition of classical individualism (ref., e.g. Macpherson 1977; Norton 1991). Such ideologies are based, descriptively, on a model of persons as atomistic, autonomous, egoistic, deracinated, mechanistically rational maximisers of their own, essentially material, interests. Society is viewed as an aggregation of such individuals and the cultural artefacts that they have created. Normatively, the ideal society is seen as a freely competitive, utilitarian system which minimally structures incentives and restraints through a democratically representative political framework, the purpose of which is to moderate any anti-social excesses of otherwise unfettered enlightened self-interest. The normative role of government is therefore seen as being minimally constraining and restraining to the actions of its citizens. The central metaphor of the ideal society is that of the market place, in which individuals and collectivities freely compete for goods and services to satisfy their wants by rationally maximising their interests through their productive effort. Calculations of individual and social utility or value (whether this be time, goods, services, goals, or competencies, etc.) are made through the common currency of economic value. Persons also are therefore viewed as economic resources: 'human capital' or 'human resources'.

Central to this ideological framework is the belief that rational maximisers of their own interests will, as an empirical matter, act in the most efficient and effective manner to obtain their wants. Since social institutions—such as that of education—are considered, normatively, to exist for the purpose of minimally regulating the free exchange of goods and services among the citizenry, it is taken as a matter of moral faith that all such social institutions should be maximally efficient and effective in fulfilling their particular institutional tasks. Efficiency and effectiveness are thus central concepts of this social philosophy, in education as in all other fields of human interaction.

The maximisation of educational effectiveness requires, most importantly:

1. the prior specification of the intended educational outcomes (as goals or objectives) or their consequences;
2 the management of the ensuing education in such a way as to maximise the attainment of those desired ends; and
3 the evaluation of that education and its entailed learning in such a way as to assess the extent to which the desired ends have been realised in actual educational outcomes or their consequences.

The maximisation of educational **efficiency** requires, most importantly:

1 that all educational activity be directed maximally towards the attainment of the specified desired ends;
2 that any educational activity that is directed towards the attainment of other ends, or for the satisfaction of other interests, be minimised; and
3 that educational success be seen as the ratio of (1), the extent to which the desired ends have been attained as a result of those particular educational activities, and (2) the total educational costs (time spent, materials used, other activities foregone, etc.); that is, educational success is seen as falling as the educational costs rise, relative to achievement of the stated desired ends of the activity; educational success, therefore, may be enhanced either by diminishing the costs or by enhancing the attainment of the desired ends.

The function of education, then, is to maximise the ‘human’ capital value of persons, in the most effective and efficient manner, for the pursuit of their individual and collective goals within a utilitarian framework. Educational quality is thus defined in terms of this function—that is, the effective and efficient attainment of such ends. Any assessment of the educational quality of a program therefore requires that it be done in terms of that program’s effectiveness and efficiency as a means of attaining the specified ends—the attainment of desired ends in terms of educational costs. ‘Indicators’ of educational success or performance must therefore focus either directly on individual educational gains, or indirectly on the consequential market outcomes (such as employment gains or reduced criminality). Those performance indicators that focus on educational procedures (such as the attainment of targets for the representation of ethnic minorities in educational programs) are therefore seen as only temporary measures to offset the distorting effects of past ethnic discrimination. The ideal free market in education requires only outcome measures: truly outcomes-driven education.
The model of humanity that is presupposed by competency-based education is therefore one of an aggregation of autonomous individuals working in a mechanistically rational fashion for the egoistic maximisation of their individual self-interest. Individuals, and societies, are seen as flourishing in proportion to the extent to which persons are allowed to conform to this model, under minimal societal constraint and restraint for the prevention only of undue harm to other individuals. Benefit and injury are calculated here within a framework of social utilitarianism—the greatest good for the greatest number. Normatively, then, the educational institution should model and enhance the empirical reality of this ideal.

Competency-based education is essentially a rational, instrumental procedural framework, in which education is seen as being directed, efficiently and effectively, towards ends beyond the educational event itself. Those ends tend to be, but are not necessarily, vocational (Harris, Barnes & Haines 1991; Masters & McCurry 1990). Its emphasis on rational instrumentalism, with its properties of efficiency and effectiveness, demands a high degree of standardisation and centralisation in educational decision-making. Contextual diversity and learner individuality are seen as problems to be reductively overcome through the introduction of individually-responsive learning schedules directed to the attainment of common ends: the competency-based standards (Candy & Harris 1990; Chappell 1991; Field 1991).

**Key tendencies of competency-based education**

From this conception of competency-based education there may be identified a number of structural and curricular tendencies paralleling those identified as being characteristic of postmodernist continuing education. In this case, the tendencies are those of:

1. **Orthodoxy**: a tendency towards education that is conservatively conformative or traditional—directed to the attainment of standardised goals (based on the competencies and competency-based standards) using means that have been empirically demonstrated to be efficient and effective for the task. Educational orthodoxy is seen as being driven by the outcome conservatism of competency-based education, and by the tendency to minimise the risks of innovation in a climate of competitive instrumentalism.
2 **Rationality:** a tendency towards education that is calculated to meet particular, pre-specified, learning outcomes in the most efficient and effective manner. It is a central tenet of classical outcomes-driven education.

3 **Simplicity:** a tendency for the nature of educational engagement, curriculum and goals to be seen as transparent, uni-dimensional, comprehensible, and therefore open to determinative analysis and criticism. It derives from the reductive nature of competency-based education, in which all competencies are seen as being open to analysis, comprehension and standardisation. Reductiveness is pre-supposed and, in so doing, it is imposed on and becomes a characteristic of the educational realities that are created.

4 **Centralisation:** a tendency for decision-making power—in the specification of competencies, the standards of attainment with respect to them, and the procedures for their assessment—to be centralised in government, quasi-government or professional organisations. The goals, and hence the curriculum, of educational events thus tend to be decontextualised in their relative unresponsiveness to the objects and cultural contexts of those events. The form of educational events is thereby largely determined by dominant cultural discourses, and is relatively impervious to shaping by minority and marginalised cultural interests. Centralisation is seen as being driven by such features of competency-based systems as the technical difficulty of competence specification, the rationalism and instrumentalism of the ideology, and its concomitant drive towards standardisation.

5 **Knowledge technicisation:** a tendency towards education that is narrowly or overwhelmingly focussed on technical knowledge (manual and intellectual manipulative skills) at the expense of other forms: the theoretical, practical and aesthetic. It is a consequence of the instrumental, especially the vocational, emphasis of competency-based education, and its focus on the measurable performance of educational outcomes.

6 **Pragmatism:** a tendency towards education that is based upon a view of knowledge and meaning as being rationally and objectively derivable from the empirical study of performance situations (domains) and roles. That knowledge—which is representational of the situations which it describes—is then taken...
as being translatable into performance standards, and educational criteria and goals. Educational pragmatism in this sense is presupposed by competency-based education. Without it, the ideology lacks an epistemic foundation sufficient to sustain the analytic, scientific processes which articulate the effectiveness and efficiency of the program.

7 **Learner dependence**: a tendency towards the favouring and reinforcement of learner dependence on the educational institution, especially with respect to the identification of learning needs (namely, the attainment of the pre-specified competency-based standards), the setting of educational goals (namely, those required to achieve the competency-based standards), and the selection of procedures for the appraisal of student attainment with respect to the goals. In each of these respects learner independence would be seen as a problem—a threat to the efficiency of the system. Only with respect to the selection of educational activities may there be any degree of learner independence, and much is made of this by apologists for competency-based education (ref., e.g. Harris & Schutte 1985). However, even in this regard, it should be appreciated that the dependency of the learner with respect to other aspects of his or her education greatly constrains the freedom to select educational procedures. This tendency is seen as arising straightforwardly from the foundational thrust of competency-based education towards the rationalisation, the centralisation, and the objectification of educational systems.

8 **Reactivity**: a tendency towards education that is framed by objectively perceived situations, such as the competencies required for satisfactory performance in a vocational domain, role, or skill. It is seen in this sense as an objective reaction to an historical problem or need situation, and is directed towards the solution of that problem or the addressing of that perceived need. This tendency is an essential element of the competency-based approach to education, as an outcomes-driven ideology in pursuit of optimal efficiency and effectiveness in the solution of objectified learning problems and needs.

9 **Commodification**: a tendency towards the valuing of education on the basis of its market value—its value in an open and competitive consumer market. The sale and resale value of education is thereby used as the measure of its human value. This tendency is
seen as arising from the competency-based emphasis on vocational instrumentalism, within a framework that emphasises efficiency and effectiveness in meeting those extrinsic, economically-based goals.

10 **Privatisation**: a tendency for educational authority and responsibility (including the responsibility for bearing the cost) to be assigned to or assumed by that sector of society which most immediately benefits from the education concerned. This will commonly mean, within the competency-based realm of concern, that responsibility and authority are variously carried either (or both) by the individual learner (since it is the learner who is seen as owning and benefiting from the marketable competencies) or by an employing organisation (since such organisations are also seen to benefit from the enhanced efficiency and effectiveness of employees who demonstrate the identified competency-based standards). Privatisation is seen as deriving from the rationalist and individualist foundations of the ideology, and from the vocational emphasis which its instrumentalism has taken.

11 **Conformatism**: a tendency towards education in which involvement and control are constrained by the parameters defined through the competency-based standards and the most efficient and effective means elucidated for facilitating their attainment. It derives from the essentially instrumental and rational nature of competency-based education.

12 **Internal differentiation**: a tendency towards a perception of education as being divided into recognisably distinct but interrelated functional categories or components, such as goals, objectives, criteria for assessment, instruction, curriculum, and learner performance. This tendency is seen as being a function of the competency-based emphasis on the effective and efficient attainment of extrinsic ends, since rationally-derived calculations of efficiency and effectiveness demand this sort of reductive differentiation if they are to have any validity and reliability.

13 **External de-differentiation**: a tendency towards a perception of education as being continuous in its connection with other related fields of human activity, most particularly the occupational or vocational. In this regard, competency-based education may be seen as immersed in and invaded by the occupational realm.
However, any de-differentiation with respect to other fields of human activity (such as research, social work, or political activism) is highly questionable, since competency-based education has little contemporary focus on such fields. The indicated de-differentiation in relation to the occupational realm is a function of the overwhelming preoccupation of contemporary competency-based education with the addressing of the perceived needs of vocational education; each thereby becoming immersed within the other.

14 Instrumentalism: a tendency towards the directing of education to the meeting of interests beyond those of the learning itself: to extrinsic ends outside the educational event. In competency-based education, those ends are commonly, but not necessarily, vocational competence. Instrumentalism is seen as being a central value in competency-based education, as it is in all outcomes-driven education. It is sharpened therein by the other core values of efficiency and effectiveness.

Compatibilities and incompatibilities

Competency-based education is ideologically driven. It is based on a normative view of education, of humanity, of society, and of the relationship between and among these entities. That view seeks the realisation of certain values through education. Those values—most importantly, individualism, rationality, efficiency, effectiveness, and instrumental vocationalism—combine to frame a powerfully and appealingly simplistic vision of what good education amounts to. A commitment to competency-based education entails a commitment to that vision, that ideology.

In radical contrast, postmodernist education is anti-ideological, anti-visionary. It rests on a foundation of critical pluralism, which regards all ideology as suspect. It stands opposed to the assumptive pre-eminence of each of the core values of the competency-based ideology. From a postmodernist perspective, that ideology is seen as selective, simplistic, hegemonic and oppressive. While it may be acknowledged as having a role to play, it would be only a very limited one, and one which should be constantly questioned and challenged.
This fundamental incompatibility between postmodernity and competency-based education reflects and is expressive of the divergent models of humanity on which each is based. The fragmented, contingent, contradictory postmodernist identity conflicts strongly with the autonomous, essentialist, mechanistically rational identity of the competency-based learner. The postmodern celebration of cultural plurality—in education, as in all matters—conflicts strongly with the social utilitarianism of the ideal society to which competency-based education is seen as contributing.

Similarly, the validity of representationalism—which is presupposed by competency-based education in the identification of competencies, the setting of competency-based standards, and the formulation of assessment procedures—is denied in postmodernity.

The incompatibility is also expressed in the disparity between postmodernity and competency-based education at the level of the structural and curricular tendencies which have been enumerated and characterised above. In summary, the contrasts are drawn together in Table 1.

The one dimension of compatibility between postmodernist education and competency-based education to emerge from this analysis is that between the external de-differentiation of postmodernist education and that of competency-based education in relation to vocational discourse. This is, though, a qualified similarity, given the uncertainty of external de-differentiation of competency-based education in relation to other fields of social endeavour.

Overall, there appears to be an overwhelming dissonance between postmodernist and competency-based education. Both in terms of informing beliefs, and in terms of the educational implications of those beliefs, there is a high degree of incompatibility between them. While they may co-exist in their difference, it is inconceivable that they could do so on the basis of their similarities.
Table 1: The contrasting structural and curricular tendencies of postmodernist education and competency-based education

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<td>1 Heterodoxy</td>
<td>Orthodoxy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Expressiveness</td>
<td>Rationality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Complexity</td>
<td>Simplicity</td>
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<tr>
<td>4 Reflexive contextualisation</td>
<td>Centralisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Knowledge diversity</td>
<td>Knowledge technicisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Critical understanding</td>
<td>Pragmatism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Learner independence</td>
<td>Learner dependence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Responsiveness</td>
<td>Reactiveness</td>
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<tr>
<td>9 Openness</td>
<td>Privatisation</td>
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<td>10 Indeterminacy</td>
<td>Conformatism</td>
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<td>11 Participation</td>
<td>Internal differentiation</td>
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<td>12 Internal de-differentiation</td>
<td>Instrumentalism</td>
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<td>13 Phenomenalism</td>
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</table>

**Conclusion**

Competency-based education is paradigmatically modernist in all of its features. From a postmodern perspective it is primitive, simplistic and oppressive. Insofar as the future will be a postmodern one, there can be little room in it for competency-based education, although it may be expected to survive, in modified form, in particular educational situations.

If we assume for the moment that the world will, indeed, become increasingly postmodern (and I for one would see it as becoming so), then to that extent, what is the likely future of competency-based education? I suggest that it would be seen for what it is in a postmodernist framework: a narrow form of vocational training and assessment. It would be side-lined as an educational irrelevance; an expensive modernist mistake, typical of the grand social reformist programs of high modernity. Contrary to its professed aims, it may increase the difference between training and education, and diminish the social value and status of training, through its attempt to conflate education with a simplified and distorted conception of training.
The currently major issues with respect to competency-based education—such as whether or not the goals of enhancing educational efficiency, effectiveness, equity, access and impartiality are empirically realisable through its program—would be irrelevant in a postmodern world. The interpretations placed on those goals in competency-based education, and the nature of those activities which are undertaken towards their attainment, are based on a framework of belief and action that is rejected and transcended by postmodernist belief. In its program to culturally cleanse traditional education of inefficiency, ineffectiveness, partiality, inequity, and artificial barriers, the competency-based education movement has failed to perceive that the world decreasingly values such a monocultural view of sociality and of education; it has failed to perceive that the vision is falling into disrepute. Increasingly important are such values as those of difference, openness, sensitivity, and tolerance—none of which is a significant constraint in competency-based education.

The implications of this analysis for the competency-based movement in education are clear: to the extent that contemporary society is already postmodern, and to the extent that the future will be increasingly so, the quality of both education and training would be greatly enhanced by the demise of that movement. To the extent that these contingencies are realities, we may also look forward to the marginalisation of competency-based education as an irrelevance of misguided modernist reformist zeal.

References


