Understanding and developing communication competence in vocational education and training: an adult communication management perspective

Michael Kaye

Introduction

In recent months, provocative Australian policy statements such as the Finn and the Mayer Committee reports have underscored the importance of developing and ‘assessing’ certain ‘key competencies’. Included in the list of ‘key competencies’ are ‘personal and interpersonal competence’ and ‘language and communication’ competence. This emphasis on higher-order competencies such as interpersonal communication is a welcome change from previous seemingly depersonalised reform agendas which focused on tasks rather than on those who had to perform them. As well, this evidently recent discovery that individuals should learn to communicate effectively with others appears to derive from a belief that developing competent communicators in the workplace will contribute to the economic recovery of the nation.

The push for the development of these competencies has emanated predominantly from political, bureaucratic, and union groups, rather than from applied social scientists. It is argued, in this paper, that the work of scholars in applied communication theory and research should inform the politicians, bureaucrats, and unionists who are clearly setting educational research agendas, especially in relation to vocational education and training, and who appear to be unaware of communication as a field of study.

Communication competence has been the subject of study by academics and professional specialists for several decades. Academic perspectives on communication competence have included ‘the maximisation of goal attainment’ perspective, the ‘essential skills’ perspective, and the ‘personal control’ perspective. There is no evidence in reports like the Finn Report that important literature of this kind has been addressed. This paper, therefore, provides a basis for understanding the nature of communication competence as applied to vocational education and training. It also examines ways in which vocational educators and trainers can be helped to develop communication competence.

Specifically, the explanation of communication competence and how this can be developed is grounded in adult communication management theory. This is an evolving new applied theory which synthesises concepts from interpersonal communication theory, organisational communication and change management literature, and research on communication competence. It is argued that adult communication management theory provides a useful basis for understanding, analysing and developing communication competence in vocational education and training.
The politics of promoting communication competence

In recent times, the ability to communicate effectively has been conceptualised as an area of 'key competence' (Finn Report 1991; Mayer Committee Report, 1991). Both these reports have been the subject of much discussion and celebration by educational bureaucrats, policy-makers, and practitioners. The veneration of these reports has even extended to select parts of academia, though it should be emphasised that these reports have very little new or revolutionary information for applied social science scholars concerned with the study of the human communication process. Indeed, scholars of human communication would find sections of these reports confusing and in conflict with findings from scientific theory and research.

It is, of course, commendable that the Finn and Mayer Committees do acknowledge the importance of competence in communication. In so doing, these committees are promoting a view which has been held as axiomatic by applied social scientists for at least four decades in this century. On reflection, this relatively recent discovery, by bureaucrats and practitioners, of the importance of communication competence for the upskilling and multiskilling of the workforce is consistent with the rapidly increasing trend in Australia for educational reform agenda to be driven by politicians, bureaucrats, unionists and practitioners rather than by educational scholars and researchers.

There appears to be developing, therefore, a belief that in order to be the 'clever country', Australia should be listening to its political decision-makers instead of its scholars and scientific thinkers. I do not wish to give the impression that political agenda for educational reform invariably lack merit or vision, or that the only worthwhile kind of educational change results from the thinking of academics or intellectuals. Indeed, in fields of practice like adult education, much of the theory and research is probably influenced more by the thinking of practitioners, bureaucrats, unionists and politicians than by renowned scholars and researchers in the traditional applied disciplines and interdisciplinary fields of study.

On this point, one writer has argued that adult educators have become the 'professional amateurs' of the educational community (Israeli 1988, p. 11). This argument was developed further with the recognition of 'the issue of the balance between research and practice in adult education. First, there is little cross-fertilization among adult educators; second, there is only a small "academic body of knowledge"; third, there is little thinking about alternatives'. (Israeli 1988, p. 15).

One possible explanation for these observations is that adult education as a field of scholarship is comparatively new. Many of its contemporary scholars were formerly practitioners who made a transition to the academic life. The conceptual framework for many of these adult education scholars was grounded in workplace or community practices. Adult education scholars today, therefore, for the most part tend not to be guided by principles and concepts derived from scholarship and research in applied disciplines such as educational psychology or in interdisciplinary fields of study such as interpersonal communication.

Discoveries made by practitioner-focused scholars like those currently in adult education, therefore, are often seen to be revolutionary by practitioners and non-scientific thinkers. At times, it is possible to identify similar discoveries made years ago by scholars in established applied disciplines and interdisciplinary fields of study. For example, one could attribute the original concept of experience-based learning to the eminent philosopher of education, John Dewey (Dewey 1938). Similarly, the notion of self-directed learning could be argued to have its roots in discovery learning (Bruner...
1961), inquiry training (Suchman 1960) and in the classic work of Postman and Weingartner (1972).

To discipline-based scholars, therefore, the discoveries of practitioner-focused scholars are often symptoms of reinventing the wheel. This may well be true of vocational educators and trainers since it has been suggested that 'many practitioners "reinvent the wheel" each time there is a demand for a new training situation' (Martin 1986 p. 112). The issue of communication competence serves as a good example of wheel reinvention. Whilst the Finn and Mayer Committees press for the development and assessment of young adults' communication competence in post-compulsory education, there is a strong indication in the scholarly literature on communication competence that issues of assessment and development have been exhaustively addressed (Kaye 1992a, 1992b, 1992c, 1992d, 1989; Kaye and McArthur 1989; Parks 1985, 1977).

It seems appropriate, therefore, to provide a summary of state-of-the-art thinking by scholars whose investigations have focused on the phenomenon of communication competence. Juxtaposed in this summary are comparisons, where appropriate, with claims and statements made by the Finn and Mayer Committees. These comparisons will serve to demonstrate points of convergence or divergence between the scientific and the bureaucratic/practitioner perspectives.

The nature of communication competence

It is difficult to imagine any human context where the ability to communicate competently is not prized or essential. To this extent, the instructional setting of vocational education and training is no exception. In fact, effective communication and relationships between learners and educators are essential attributes of worthwhile experiences in formal educational settings. The conceptualisation of the teaching-learning process as a form of interpersonal communication is well established in the scientific literature (Hansford 1988; Bruschke and Gartner 1991; Kaye 1989c, 1987, 1986a, 1986b, 1986c; Bassett and Smythe 1979). Thus, being an effective teacher or trainer also means being an effective communicator. In turn, being an effective communicator necessitates the acquisition, development, and refinement of communication competence.

Whilst 'communication competence' is often equated with the terms 'communicative competence' or 'communicator competence' (Parks 1985, 1977), it has also been associated with specialised communication subfields. For example, it is possible to refer to 'interpersonal communication competence' (e.g. Spitzberg 1989; Spitzberg and Cupach 1984; Irwin 1981, 1985a, 1985b; Penman 1981, 1985; Glaser 1980) or to 'intercultural (or crosscultural) communication competence' (e.g. Collier 1989; Martin and Hammer 1989; Ruben 1989; Abe and Wiseman 1983; Hammer, Gudykunst and Wiseman 1978). The term 'communication competence', therefore, is too broad in scientific literature since it could mean any one or more of several things.

'Communicative (or, 'communicator') competence' is the nearest equivalent of a broad, generic concept. According to Parks (1985, p. 175), 'communicative competence represents the degree to which individuals perceive they have satisfied their goals in a given social situation without jeopardising their ability or opportunity to pursue their other subjectively more important goals'. This definition suggests a close association between the notions of 'communicative competence' and of 'personal control'.

Personal control, or 'effectance' as it is sometimes called, refers to people's abilities to influence their environments, including their social or interpersonal environments. When
individuals can demonstrate substantial degrees of personal control, they can be said to have reached high levels of communicative competence. On the other hand, people who experience lack of personal control in their social worlds may very quickly come to perceive themselves as communicatively incompetent. In reality, it is difficult to think of any definition of communicative competence without some reference to personal control. As it has been observed, 'the concept of effectance or control is at the intellectual core of almost all conceptualizations of communicative competence' (Parks 1985, p. 173).

One way in which it is possible to determine whether individuals have developed personal control, is to verify whether they have realised their goals in particular interpersonal situations. Note that Parks' (1985) definition refers to two categories of goals. Thus, there are 'goals in given social situations', and there are 'subjectively more important goals'. The distinction can be easily illustrated. For example, people may go to professional or academic conferences ostensibly to learn what others in their fields are doing, or perhaps to renew friendships. These are predictable and legitimate 'goals in given social situations'. Conversely, the covert reason for going to conferences may be to make an impression on luminaries in the audiences. These luminaries may later prove to be supportive referees in possible job applications. Thus, impressing certain others may become a 'subjectively more important goal'.

Apart from understanding communicative competence in terms of goal attainment or personal control, one could identify the component communication abilities or skills which collectively represent the competence domain (e.g. Cushman and Craig 1976). The problem with this method of conceptualising communicative (or 'communicator') competence is that 'whilst most textbooks include a common core of chapter headings or topics which appear to delineate important component abilities or skills, there is no absolute consensus as to which skills are central or marginal to the development of communicator competence' (Kaye 1992b, p. 4).

Of all possible component abilities, 'listening' appears to be the one most commonly regarded as central or critical to communicative competence (Bostrom 1991, 1990; Storey and McQuillen 1991; Cooper 1991; Husband Cooper and Monsour 1988; Wolvin and Coakley 1988; Rubin 1982). Closely following the ability to listen effectively, there are certain abilities considered by many to be part of the communicative competence core. Included here are skills of assertiveness (Bolton 1979; Fensterheim and Baer 1989), the expression and interpretation of nonverbal cues (Woolfolk 1981; Woolfolk and Brooks 1985; Kaye 1986c, 1983a, 1983b, 1980, 1979a), negotiation (Fisher and Ury 1986), conflict resolution (Donohue and Kolt 1992; De Bono 1986; Bolton 1979; Kaye 1992d), and overcoming communication apprehension (McCroskey 1977; Hansford and Hattie 1982; Buller 1987; Kaye 1992d). In recent times, 'questioning' has also become seen as an essential communication skill for teachers and trainers (Hansford 1988; Dillon 1990).

From the point of view of vocational educators and trainers, all of these abilities are unquestionably necessary for communicating and relating effectively with learners. Nevertheless, the question which needs to be asked is 'which skills are the most essential both for survival in teaching, initially, and as a basis for the continuing and future development of communicator competence?' (Kaye 1992b, p. 4). Apart from the communication skills mentioned above, higher-order abilities such as accuracy in person perception and attribution of intent, impression formation and management, social-perspective taking, the effective use of language in interpersonal settings, and the construction and coordination of meanings in intercultural classrooms, could all be argued to have primacy in the repertoire of ingredients which collectively constitute communicative competence.
One of the most compelling and useful ways in which communicative competence has been previously conceptualised is in terms of 'control theory' (Powers 1973; Carver and Scheier 1982). This theory holds that the control process is composed of a series of nine cybernetically interconnected and hierarchically organised levels of communicative competence. The lowest level, Level 1 competency, also labelled 'intensity control', sees communicative competence in terms of fundamental sensory contact with the outside environment. Level 2 competency is known as 'sensation control'. It refers to the ability of people to receive sensory information accurately and then send signals for action to the appropriate muscles. At Level 3, 'configuration control' involves control over limb movement, body position, perception of visual forms, and speech at the phonemic level.

Beyond these three base levels, 'transition control', the Level 4 competency, allows people to execute organised movements like head nodding, changing the tone of voice, or word pronunciation. Transition control also allows individuals to recognise these kinds of movements in other people. In effect, transition control builds on the lower level competencies by summarising sensory information and directing microscopic changes in these lower order configurations.

The fifth level of communicative competence is called 'sequence control'. At this level, individuals are capable of putting words into phrases. According to Parks (1985, p. 179), 'communicative competence at this level generally consists of the ability to organise perception and action in ways that serve higher-order goals'. This ability to organise perception depends on the extent to which individuals have developed skill in discriminating between the various blocks and sequences of perception and behaviour. An example of this capacity to discriminate is the ability of people to decode or interpret accurately the nonverbal cues of other persons.

Level 6 competency, or 'relationship control', involves people's ability to categorise and classify behavioural experiences and to make predictions and create expectancies about happenings in their interpersonal worlds. Much of the research on this level of communicative competence is based on the earlier work of Kelly (1955) whose personal construct theory had a major influence on the thinking of subsequent social cognition scholars. Foremost amongst these scholars are the constructivists who define communication as the reciprocal construction of meaning. The constructivists also reason that communicative effectiveness depends on the degree to which individuals are able to differentiate information and to think in abstractions. The more capable people are of demonstrating differentiation and abstraction, the more likely they are to construct and adapt effective persuasive messages. Again, effective communicators are generally able to construe meanings about messages from a variety of perspectives. The most comprehensive statement of constructivist theory may be found in the work of Delia, O'Keefe and O'Keefe (1982).

Linked with the ability to construct and share meanings is the ability of people to make accurate attributions about the personalities, communication and actions of others. Although attribution theory derives from somewhat dated sources (e.g. Heider 1958), it continues to provide a useful basis for explaining interpersonal communication resulting from communicators' interpretations of individuals' actions and speech. Communicative competence at Level 6, therefore, is to a considerable extent concerned with the way people interpret, judge, and control their relationships with others.

Level 7 competency, or 'program control', involves the ability of individuals to structure their constructs and attributions into a coherent framework which can then serve as a 'program' for directing these individuals' communication and behaviours, for facilitating the making of predictions and explanations of the behaviours of others, and for the
reduction of uncertainty (Berger and Bradac 1982). By the time people have reached adulthood, they are likely to have developed thousands of program-like representations which can become the basis for goal-oriented, strategic communication and behaviour. These representations may be verbal or in nonverbal form (e.g. Roloff and Berger 1982). Lack of control at the seventh level of communicative competence is usually signalled by 'persistent mindlessness'.

Within the control hierarchy of communicative competence, Level 8 Competency, also known as 'principle control', is essentially concerned with communicators' principles or goals in given situations. Effective communicators not only adhere to their principles but also are guided by their principles in making strategic choices for entering programs. In essence, 'communicative competence at the level of principle control rests on the ability to select or create programs that achieve the goals inherent in the principles' (Parks 1985, p. 185). People, of course, may not reach this level of competence because they are unable to create programs to realise their principles. For example, academics may have the goal of being recognised by their peers, but in some cases may not know how best to go about gaining such recognition.

The highest point of the control hierarchy of communicative competence is Level 9 or 'system concept control'. Here, competent communicators are able to use systems of idealised concepts as reference points for their communication with others. Such systems of idealised concepts enable people to develop principles and goals which in turn govern interpersonal communication and behaviour. For example, individuals whose idealised self-concept is to be a person of professional integrity are likely to live up to this concept by acting on the principle of quality and not expediency in the performance of tasks.

In retrospect, the value of the control hierarchy approach to understanding communicative competence is that it permits the evaluation of both specific and general competencies at any level. Generally, people assess their own level of communicative competence at the highest level of the hierarchy by determining their own abilities to achieve their goals, and to assume responsibility for the success or failure of their goal attainment. As it has been suggested, 'we can evaluate competency in general by tapping the individual's own competency judgements' (Parks 1985, p. 187).

Since communicative lack of competence is signalled by some failure in control, individuals who are unable to form idealised self-concepts and principles to guide their attainment of communicative goals, typically enter a state of 'learned helplessness'. Learned helplessness has been closely associated with such internal states as communication apprehension (McCroskey 1977, 1982), shyness (Zimbardo 1977), and willingness or unwillingness to communicate (Richmond and Roach 1992; McCroskey and Richmond 1991, 1987).

Initial conceptions of learned helplessness were based on the notion of animals being incapable of influencing their environment because of their experience of uncontrollable aversive stimuli. Subsequent research on the learned helplessness construct emphasised cognitive elements and personality traits which could lead people to feel helpless in social encounters (Miller and Norman 1979; Abramson, Seligman and Teasdale 1978). As a result of feeling helpless, individuals are likely to communicate less competently on future occasions. In turn, future failures to communicate competently very probably will lead to these individuals' expectations of continued and repeated communication failure.

It would appear, therefore, that efforts to overcome or reduce learned helplessness should result in greater confidence in people's abilities to control their environments and thus to become more communicatively competent. As well, it has been suggested that 'training
aimed at cognitively restructuring the attribution process can alleviate the effects of learned helplessness' (Parks 1985, p. 189). Research with adults has shown that teaching people to attribute failure to external rather than to internal causes is more effective in reducing learned helplessness than therapies involving antidepressive drugs or behavioural skills training (e.g. Rush, Beck, Kovacs and Hollon 1977; Shaw 1977).

From the preceding discussion it is apparent that the control theory of communicative competence is a scientific perspective which was given serious attention by scholars in the seventies and up to the mid-eighties. This perspective certainly represented an advance over the simplistic notion of communicative competence as a rag-bag collection of communication microskills. It is also evident that the study, by scholars, of communicative competence, reached its zenith almost a decade ago. In all probability, one reason for this was the recognition by scholars, of the futility of attempting to 'assess' in simple, policy-driven ways, complex higher-order communicative processes from which the presence or absence of competence could be inferred.

Whilst these developments have taken place in the realm of scholarship, the world of practitioners has evidenced the discovery of the notion of 'competence', and especially 'higher-order competence', in the nineties. As was mentioned earlier, the Finn and the Mayer Committee reports emphasise the need for people to develop key competencies like language and communication, and an area labelled as 'personal and interpersonal'. When analysed, these 'key areas of competence' appear to be broken down into basic knowledge and skill components. For example, the key area of language and communication competence is comprised of knowledge and skills related to speaking, listening, reading, writing, and accessing and using information (Mayer Committee, 1992, p.9).

These current policy documents, therefore, appear to be presenting a case for the development of key competencies on the basis of a perspective largely abandoned by scholars before the 1970's. There is no evidence moreover, in the Finn and Mayer Committee reports, that the contributors to these reports had any knowledge or awareness of the most up-to-date research and scholarship on key competencies, especially in the area of communication. Additionally, the rationale for the setting out of these key competencies is puzzling. As it has been noted, 'one cannot also help wondering why there is an arbitrary separation between the "interpersonal" key competency area and the "language and communication" key competency area. Are not listening and group communication skills very much a part of the interpersonal communication competence domain? In some ways, such "language and communication" key competence "activities" as "working in a team" and "interacting with others one to one" would be more logically grouped with "interpersonal" key competence "activities" like "negotiation", "team skills", and "leadership"' (Kaye 1992b,p.7).

Similarly, the separation, in the Mayer Committee Report (1992), of 'decision-making' in the key competence area of problem-solving, from 'initiative and leadership' in the personal and interpersonal key competence area is difficult to understand. In part, this is explained by the argument that the 'strands', or presumably, the component knowledge and skills within key areas of competence, are not mutually exclusive. Thus, it has been suggested that 'each of the strands draws to some extent on knowledge and skills of all of the Key Areas' (Mayer Committee 1992, p.9). Nevertheless, the linking of decision-making with leadership is self-evident in contemporary managerial and organisational communication scholarly literature.

The fuzzy and indeterminate location of these 'strands' is again apparent when critical thinking is divided from the intrapersonal and interpersonal domain. Whilst there is
good reason to situate critical thinking within the key area of problem-solving competence, it is equally possible to make out a case for the centrality of critical thinking in negotiating or in career planning. Alternatively, critical thinking may be associated with 'critical listening' (Wolvin and Coakley 1988) or, indeed with any of the other strands in the language and communication key competence area. It has been noted, moreover, that 'the ability to think critically is closely linked with and a powerful indicator of one's ability to communicate with others. Viewed from a social cognition perspective, human communication is inextricably bound up with human reasoning processes' (Kaye and Hager 1991, p. 90).

In general, the Mayer Committee (1992) adopted 'a broad definition of competence which recognises that performance is underpinned not only by skill but also by knowledge and understanding, and that competence involves both the ability to perform in a given context and the capacity to transfer knowledge and skills to new tasks and situations' (Mayer Committee Report 1992, p. 4). This broader notion of competence suggests that competence is not synonymous with 'automated, "trained" behaviours'. The Committee went on to suggest that these key competencies are 'mindful, thoughtful capabilities. In this sense, they cannot be explained or inculcated through the use of behaviourist learning theories which rely on low-level drill and reinforcement' (Mayer Committee 1992, p. 5).

There are at least two serious misconceptions in this kind of thinking. First, the notion of 'inculcating' competence is simply nonsense. This kind of notion is on a par with trivial and educationally meaningless statements like 'the imparting of knowledge or skill'. Regardless of whether one is of a behaviourist persuasion or not, it is a stupidity to think that individuals can 'inculcate' competence in others. This must certainly apply to key competence areas like interpersonal communication. People do not develop communicative competence because of the effects of other people's teaching or instruction.

Secondly, it is false to assume that behaviourist theory was ever aimed at the explanation of competence development. It is more probable that inexpert and semi-ignorant 'professional amateurs' chose to think that reinforcement theory provided a basis for conceptualising competence. Much of this confused thinking, moreover, was compounded by misrepresentations of the 'management by objectives' (MBO) concept introduced by Drucker (1954). Clearly, MBO was concerned with the identification and development of specific human skills which would lead to effective task performance and thus to individual and organisational change. Again, the focus was on skill rather than on competence. It would be fair to say that MBO is a philosophy rather than simply a technique of management. Subordinates worked closely with their superiors in determining appropriate objectives for the improvement of their performance on tasks. One of the problems with MBO was with its emphasis on measurable objectives. Not all objectives lend themselves readily to measurement. Thus, important objectives could be overlooked. In all probability, objectives that are difficult to measure may relate to higher-order domains of competence. Nevertheless, the concept of MBO appears, paradoxically, to be very similar in orientation to the notion of 'key competence' as defined by the Mayer Committee (1992), since both MBO and key competence are concerned with results or outcomes. By contrast, the scholarly literature on communicative competence acknowledges the importance of an internal locus of control as an indicator of competence development. In other words, since not all results or outcomes are observable or measurable, the possession of competence can be more appropriately inferred from individuals' internalised understandings and interpretations of their communicative experiences. Clearly, this scientific conception of communicative competence contradicts the rationale for MBO which, in its contemporary form, can be likened to 'performance management' where 'individual goal setting is related to business planning and subsequently to personal and professional development, appraisal and
rewards' (Dunphy and Stace 1990, p, 124). A third reason to question the soundness of the Mayer Committee's critical comments about a 'Behaviourist' view of competence is in the allusion to 'low level' drill and the grouping of low level drill with the more modern concept of 'reinforcement'. In the psychological sense, 'drill' was a Thorndykan notion to explain the strengthening of linkages between stimuli and responses. This was, in fact, the central tenet of the 'theory of connectionism'. As connectionist theory is now very dated, the Mayer Committee's criticism of the behaviourist notion of competence on the grounds of 'drill' being its central concept, is like holding up the design of the Tiger Moth as a representative example of modern aviation technology, or the phonograph as the definitive symbol of current state-of-the-art audio-electronics.

In summary, therefore, scientific, scholarly explanations of communicative competence are qualitatively significantly different from non-scientific, bureaucratically-driven notions in a number of ways. Most importantly, these bureaucratic notions of competence appear not to have caught up with the scholarly research of the 1970's and appear to be addressing notions of competence popular among scholars in the 1950's and 1960's. This is certainly the case in relation to communication competence. There is good reason, therefore, to be concerned about the promulgation, by bureaucrats and other non-scientifically oriented influence groups, of outmoded and invalid conceptions of communication competence as a key area.

Bureaucratic perspectives on competence and its assessment

There is little doubt that bureaucrats and educational policy-makers are taking seriously the need for vocational educators and trainers to become professionally competent. In putting forward the assertion that current provisions in Australian universities for the initial training of vocational teachers is inappropriate, one recent report recommended that TAFE 'should insist that staff receive training relevant to achievement of at least minimum educational and vocational (technical) competencies' (Predl 1992, p. 11).

Two points emerge from this claim. Firstly, the established notion of teacher education is evidently being replaced by the notion of teacher training. This naturally lends weight to other arguments in the Predl (1992) report that initial teacher training need not be a lengthy process. Whilst all Australian university providers of vocational teacher education have recently developed Bachelor of Teaching courses for beginning undergraduate teachers, the Predl Committee appears to be recommending a winding back of the clock to pre-award days. This desire for attenuated teacher training also seems to emanate from a belief that current vocational teacher education courses are not only inappropriate but also lacking in substance.

One wonders how the Predl Committee could envisage a more substantial vocational teacher training course which is significantly shorter in duration and which insists on staff receiving 'training relevant to achievement of at least minimum educational and vocational (technical) competencies'. Does it equate minimum levels of 'educational competence' with minimum levels of 'key competence'? Does the inclusion of the words 'at least' imply that more than minimum levels of educational competence should be aimed for in the shorter time allowed by the proposed abbreviated teacher training programs? In other words, is the Predl Committee arguing for a more appropriate and substantial vocational teacher training curriculum which is significantly shorter than the present provision for vocational teacher education? It is tempting to draw the cynical inference that the real motive behind the Predl report is not a quest for educational quality or excellence but rather a desire to justify reductions to expenditure on vocational teacher education.
The Predl Committee evidently has another misconception about what teacher education can achieve. Clearly, this Committee believes that initial teacher trainees should receive training 'relevant for the achievement of at least minimum levels of educational competence'. Implicit in this belief is the popular view that the achievement of competence in learners results from the training experience. In reality, all that training can do is raise awareness of what individuals need to know and do in order to become competent. Consciousness raising alone provides no guarantee that learning is taking place or that competence is, *ipso facto*, being developed.

In the light of this analysis, it is worth considering just how beginning vocational teachers and trainers can be helped to develop 'at least minimum levels of communication competence'. Using the control hierarchy of communicative competence, at what point is an acceptable minimum level of communicative competence located? Alternatively, if the component skills approach is followed, just how well do people have to listen, to be assertive, to ask questions, or to negotiate in order to have been deemed to be minimally competent?

More importantly, how will the possession of minimal levels of communicative competence be determined or, in the preferred term used by current bureaucrats, 'assessed'? Who will be undertaking the assessing? What should the criteria for such competency assessment be? Currently, bureaucratic bodies like the National Training Board (NTB) are pushing the view that 'national competency-based standards' are effectively the criteria for competency-based assessment. These 'standards', for the teaching profession in particular, supposedly 'provide a means of assessment and a guide for education ... Some occupations and professions devise entry level standards and support lengthy practice as part of initial education and assessment, thereby supporting a strong skills as well as a knowledge base—that is, they seek entry level competence' (National Board of Employment, Education and Training 1992, p. 12).

Passionate support for the development of national competency standards for professions is also evident in the Carmichael Report in which it is argued that 'nationally consistent outcomes can be achieved from a diversity of vocational education and training providers through national competency standards, competency based delivery, assessment and certification of training, the national framework for recognition of training, open training markets and articulation and credit transfer' (EFSC 1992, p. 20).

The glibness of this sort of rhetoric gives one the impression that the assessment of competence is a relatively straightforward and simple matter. In addition, these kinds of statements tend to lead people to see competence in the very mechanistic ways which are denigrated in the Mayer Committee Report. There appears, therefore, to be some inconsistency between the thinking of different bureaucratic groups purportedly addressing similar educational issues and problems. One is left wondering whether these kinds of reports are based on any more than 'off the top of the head' reasoning.

For example, by its own admission, the Finn Committee 'drew on its own expertise to compile a list of key employment related competencies which it considered were essential for all young people in post-compulsory education or training, regardless of the ability or vocational/educational destination of the young person or whether they were in school or in a training environment' (Australian Education Council 1991, p. 57). According to the Finn Committee, this list was then 'tested against similar lists in the literature'. It is difficult to know precisely what 'literature' was consulted by the Committee. Certainly, in the case of the key competence areas of language and communication, personal and interpersonal, and problem-solving, the literature consulted was evidently not from contemporary interpersonal communication theory and research as shown in the earlier
part of this paper, or from contemporary scholarship on problem-solving, particularly in relation to critical thinking (Hager and Kaye 1992).

One of the major problems with using these kinds of bureaucratic reports as a basis for research recommendations is that the core aspects of these reports (e.g. key competencies) are very weakly conceptualised. In part, this may be because many educational policy-makers in recent times have not been educationists but rather influential people drawn from non-educational sectors. On this point, it has been noted that the policy prescriptions in the Finn, Mayer and Carmichael documents lead people 'to the inevitable conclusion that the competencies agenda is, in fact, a bureaucratic and managerial solution to the problems Australian education faces. As Collins (1992) has shown, the Finn proposals were developed by a committee made up of almost entirely senior managers, responding to an industrial agenda already set in the neo-corporatist style of decision-making that has become the hallmark of the Labor Government... The Carmichael proposals are even more closely linked to the industrial concerns of the ACTU's training agenda. They have been developed by a committee that was already committed to adopting a universalist solution that required tying educational, training and industrial concerns into one neat package that could be delivered to schools and TAFE colleges and monitored by a centralised bureaucracy' (Porter, Rizvi, Knight and Lingard 1992, p. 53).

In essence, the current educational reform agenda of the bureaucrats, unionists and politicians appear to be grounded on economic rationalist premises. There is a disturbing move, moreover, toward uniformity, national competency-based standards, and the mechanistic simplification of the concept of competence to a measurable or assessable entity. In the wake of this competency-based movement, a plethora of new jargon and buzzwords has been spawned. These simplistic notions of competence have resulted in the emergence of a new vocabulary comprised of terms like recognition of prior learning (RPL), transferability, credit transfer, national targets, national curriculum principles, and key competence structures.

The new educational order, intended in documents like the Finn, Mayer, and Carmichael reports, is one characterised by an essentialist-rationalist philosophy. As it has been suggested, the most worrying part of the competency-based reform agenda 'is its essentialism, which reifies Australia's economic context. In this sense, the definition of the policy problem, as well as its solution, is magisterial... presented from a position of authority in a unidirectional way to students, teachers, other educators and the community generally. The language of the three reports commands and instructs rather than invites dialogue (Porter et al. 1992, p. 53).

Nearly everything in these reports appears to be geared to the service of specific national economic goals. People are being seen as 'human capital' instrumental in leading, through reformed systems of education, the economic recovery of the nation. Perhaps the most concerning aspect of all, in these reports, is the way the processes of teaching and learning, the core areas of interest in any educational endeavour, are conceived. As Porter et al. (1992, p. 56) put it, 'the logic of the competencies movement would still seem to be based on the notion that a teacher/trainer "gives" information to a student/learner who "absorbs" it and proceeds to demonstrate their individual "acquisition" on a technical competency assessment grid. This demonstration has also been prioritised. With ends determined and assessment standardised there is little room for pedagogic manoeuvrability. This is still a static view of teaching and learning which bears little relation to the dynamic picture built up through more recent research, especially for what are predominantly adult learners. It also calls into question major issues of ends and means'.

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In this light, the scientific view of communication competence as individuals' qualitatively increasing levels of control over their interactions with their personal and social worlds, appears to be virtually meaningless. The only notion of communication competence to fit the logic of the competencies movement can only be some mechanistic, simplistic, non-scientific view of 'communication skill'. For this reason, the focus in this paper will now shift to a more legitimate way of considering how communication competence, as conceptualised in the scholarly literature of communication theory and research, can be developed by vocational educators and trainers.

Developing the communication competence of vocational educators and trainers

It is important to recognise, at the outset, that scholars in the past have understandably devoted more attention to explaining the nature of communication competence than to the issue of how to assess or develop it. Thus, there has been relatively little written on ways of developing communication competence in vocational educators and trainers. One possible perspective from which to address the issue of communication competence development may be found in adult communication management theory (Kaye 1992a).

This theory has an eclectic, applied focus. Its basic concepts and principles are derived from a synthesis of three major contributing theoretical sources. At the heart of the adult communication management perspective is the constructivist theory of interpersonal communication (Delia, O'Keefe and O'Keefe 1982). Constructivists argue that communication takes place when the individuals involved construct meanings about shared messages. Hence, people's interpretations of their relationships and interactions with others form the basis of their future communication and behaviour toward those others.

The second contributing source to adult communication management theory is the communicative competence perspective which forms the basis of this paper. It has also been suggested that communication competence may be inferred from the ability of individuals to interpret accurately the intentions and dispositions of others. This ability has been conventionally referred to as 'attributional accuracy'. According to Kaye (1992b), one way in which attributional accuracy has been shown to develop, especially by classroom teachers, is through a structured process of self-analysis. A major benefit of self-analysis is that teachers have the opportunity to develop their ability to make decisions about how to improve their teaching and how to be innovative and creative in their teaching (Kaye 1992b).

Thirdly, the 'people-in-systems' perspective, sometimes referred to as the 'change agent skills' perspective (Egan 1988a, 1988b, 1985; Egan and Cowan 1979) contributes a contextual basis for understanding how communicating people manage their communication processes and relationships with others. With the emphasis in the people-in-systems perspective on 'communication as the lifeblood of systems', the process of meaning construction is contextualised. Human systems, varying from nuclear families through groups and organisations to communities and neighbourhoods, can be seriously affected by the ways members of those systems communicate with each other. For example, when informal communication becomes powerful in organisations, a 'shadow side' of communication, characterised by the unexpectedness, unpredictability, and undiscussability of messages, may develop (Egan 1992, 1991).

It is not the purpose of this paper to outline in detail adult communication management theory, as this has already been done (Kaye 1992a). Instead, the intention here is to examine how adult communication management theory may provide a rationale for an
understanding of communication competence and its development in vocational education and training systems. In part, the search for such a rationale has already begun, as adult communication management theory has been recently applied to such issues as the assessment of interpersonal communication competence and the development of intercultural communication competence in vocational education and training systems (Kaye 1992b, 1992c).

Facilitating the development of communication competence in vocational educators and trainers involves the cooperative efforts and support of specific interested stakeholders. Apart from the educators and trainers themselves, these stakeholders include teacher educators in universities, staff development experts in vocational education and training systems, and the employers of these vocational educators and trainers. The first requirement, therefore, for optimising the opportunities for educators and trainers to develop communication competence is a commitment to this goal from all stakeholders.

It is important to note that the stakeholders should be committed to the same goal. In other words, they need to be clear as to what is meant by 'communication competence'. The suggestion in this paper is that an established scientific view of communication competence is preferable to the conjectural notions of non-scientific educational policy-makers. More particularly, the recommendation in this paper is that if the quest for communication competence is worth pursuing at all, the most promising way of conceptualising communication competence is in terms of personal control theory.

How people come to understand the ways in which they can learn to develop greater control over their personal and social worlds is, of course, a complex question. What also makes this question problematic is that most people who have not seriously studied the field of communication continue to see communication as the simple act of individuals exchanging messages. A second requirement for assisting people to develop communication competence is that staff developers and teacher educators include in their number, experts in the application of contemporary communication theory. In a sense, this also means that teacher educators and staff developers without such expertise must be prepared to acknowledge this deficit and not proceed on the assumption that they really do know what's best for their learners. Essentially, therefore, some teacher educators and staff developers of the present time will need to change their approach towards establishing a conceptual framework for understanding and addressing the communication competence needs of learners.

Given that the development of communication competence does not automatically result from training or classroom learning experiences, it is important that those who need to develop communication competence discover ways of transferring their understanding and skill from one kind of learning situation to another e.g. from the training room to the workplace. A third point, therefore, is that those who need to develop communication competence be encouraged as far as possible to assume responsibility for their own learning processes. Whilst this injunction may be axiomatic to contemporary educational scholars, particularly in the field of adult learning, the belief still persists in some areas of teacher education and training that learners learn by being told what to do by their instructors or advisers.

One way of encouraging people to assume responsibility for their own learning is to help them acquire and refine the skills and techniques of self-analysis. These techniques have been successfully used and developed by primary school trainee teachers in several schools in the Sydney metropolitan area (Kaye 1979b). There is no reason why self-analysis could not be developed and practised by adult educators like vocational
educators and trainers. Thus, a fourth recommendation is that vocational educators and trainers be encouraged to be aware of their own development of communication competence through some structured process of self-analysis.

The focus on 'structured' suggests that self-analysis should involve more than random reflection on experience. A good example of a structured self-analysis technique is the one developed by Noller and Callan (1989) to enable individuals to recall specific thoughts and feelings they experienced at some previous point of time. Here the recall process is assisted by the replay of a videotape of the incident in question. The essential aim of this technique is, according to these researchers, the tapping of 'insider data'. Similarly, university teacher educators in schools like the School of Adult Vocational Education at the University of Technology, Sydney, have been encouraging trainee vocational teachers to apply theory to practice through structured reflections in personal journals or diaries.

Within particular parts of the entire communication field, specific approaches for developing communication competence have been identified. For example, in the area of intercultural communication, six basic approaches to cross-cultural training have been advocated for intra- and interpersonal change (Brislin, Landis and Brandt 1983). These approaches range from information or fact-oriented training where trainees are presented with factual information through lectures, video presentations etc. to cognitive-behaviour modification and experiential learning processes. The fifth recommendation, therefore, is that vocational educators and trainers who work with multicultural groups be urged to experiment with specific approaches like these which have been identified and used by applied researchers and scholars.

The assumption of responsibility for one's own learning is not only linked to self-analysis but also to the 'learning to learn' approach. Whilst this has been most closely associated with cross-cultural training (Martin 1986), it is potentially generalisable to all communication training contexts. In essence, the learning to learn approach acknowledges that trainees cannot know everything there is to know about communication competence from instructors or facilitators. Hence, trainees need to be helped to develop ways of learning for themselves. Amongst the more successful approaches which have been used to promote skill in learning how to learn are those relating to models of experiential learning (Kolb 1984, 1981; Kolb and Fry 1975).

The learning to learn approach, therefore, is recommended as one potentially valuable strategy for helping individuals to develop increasingly higher levels of communication competence. This approach has proved to be successful with respect to the development of communicative competence in vocational teachers (Saunders, Kaye, Gilpin and Collingwood 1990a, 1990b). It is also apparent that these authors have been among the first, if not the first in Australia, to facilitate, in a systematic way, communicative competence development in vocational teaching. On this basis, it has been observed that 'the recognition of the value and importance of promoting heuristic competence cannot be overstated and may well be a belated yet welcome discovery on the part of contemporary communication scholars in the United States' (Kaye 1992c, p. 12).

A seventh recommendation for creating opportunities for individuals to develop communicative competence is that closer interaction take place between theorists and practitioners. As has been a theme of this paper, there appears to have been comparatively little attention given by Australian practitioners, bureaucrats and other non-academic groups like union leaders, to scholarly research on issues of perceived national importance e.g. communication as a key competence. On the other hand, there is growing evidence that the notion of developing theoretical perspectives grounded on an
epistemology of practice appears to be being taken more seriously now than in previous years (Egan 1992; Kaye 1992b, 1992c). Thus, it has been suggested that dialogue between scholars and practitioners will increasingly occur when practitioners begin to take note of current scholarly thinking and developments in the field of communication, just as researchers and scholars should be informing their thinking from happenings in the relevant field of application and practice.

Finally, it is recommended that since the field of communication is highly diverse and multidisciplinary (Kaye 1988), any attempts to create opportunities for individuals to develop communicative competence will be greatly assisted if the training focus is also a multidisciplinary one. Thus, the synthesis of knowledge and concepts drawn from fields like educational and developmental psychology, managerial and organisation development, and the various subfields of applied communication theory and research (e.g. instructional, interpersonal, group and organisational communication) is likely to lead to a substantially enriched basis for understanding the nature of communicative competence. With such improved understandings of human communication processes and ways of managing these effectively, facilitators will be in a stronger position to devise more valid and reliable strategies for helping vocational educators and trainers to develop communicative competence.

Conclusion

This paper has focused on the need for educational policy-makers of the present time to recognise the substantial contributions of scholars in the field of applied communication theory and research. Clearly, the current and evident proliferation of new educational policy-making groups in Australia suggests that it is imperative that these groups be as well informed as possible of scientifically known research and scholarship on matters upon which future policies will be based. The track record of some policy-making groups, however, continues to reflect an ignorance of potentially revolutionary scholarly resources. In part, this happens because many scholars of note have been well ahead of their time and consequently, have not had their thinking taken seriously by the intended consumer market i.e. the practitioners.

If new educational policy groups continue to spurn the advice of scholars in relevant areas, then their vision of the ‘clever country’ is based on the notion of the blind leading the sighted. It is really difficult to understand why this appears to have been the case in such committees as the Finn and Mayer Committees. Nevertheless, since discoveries about the presumed importance of key competencies like communication are emanating from these kinds of policy-makers, scholars in relevant fields should make known the results of their critical investigations to the policy-makers concerned, to ensure that these policies are sound.

Judging from current experience, scholars will not be invited by political or bureaucratic power brokers to participate in, or contribute to the shaping of future educational policies. Scholars will need to shout loudly to be heard. This paper represents one such attempt to shout loudly so that policies based on ignorance rather than on informed scholarship will be duly amended instead of being reified.

References


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