

# ‘Competences’ for a Critical Formation. An Educationist’s Perspective

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**Abstract:** *This paper starts with reference to the all-pervasive use of the term ‘competence’. It argues that the contemporary conventional usage is reductionist and smacks of a preoccupation with what Lyotard calls ‘performativity’ and a culture of standardization. It argues that to use this term, for want of a better word, in the context of critical formation, the underlying philosophy needs to be broadened. An expansive, holistic notion of competences needs to be provided, to highlight notions such as praxis and the collective dimensions of knowledge and social action. A set of ‘competences’ or features, related to critical formation and pedagogy, is proposed.*

**Keywords:** *Critical literacy, citizenship, collectivity.*

**Riassunto:** *L'articolo prende le mosse dal riferimento all'uso sempre più persuasivo del termine ‘competenza’. Argomenta che il suo attuale uso convenzionale è riduzionista e manifesta la preoccupazione per ciò che Lyotard chiama “performatività” e per una cultura della standardizzazione. Argomenta, inoltre, che per usare questo termine, in mancanza di una parola migliore, in un contesto di formazione critica, è necessario ampliare la sua filosofia di fondo. Bisogna fornire una nozione ampia e olistica di competenza per illuminare nozioni come quella di prassi e le dimensioni collettive della conoscenza e dell'azione sociale. L'articolo propone, infine, un insieme di ‘competenze’ o caratteristiche relative alla formazione e alla pedagogia critica.*

**Parole-chiave:** *Alfabetizzazione critica, cittadinanza, collettività*

The term ‘competence’ is all pervasive. It has become customary to highlight even an entire philosophy regarding what makes a good teacher, a good social worker, a good dentists etc. in terms of a taxonomy of ‘competences.’ As far as learning is concerned, and I suspect this can be said of many other forms of human action, the discourse highlights a ‘commercially and market-oriented’ type of competence-based learning (Gadotti, 2008: 43). The approach, in these circumstances, is often positivist, technical-rational, based on ‘performativity’ – according to Lyotard (1989), that can be measured in terms of direct and quantified outcomes – and which reflects an all embracing view underlining entrepreneurship, competitiveness and the mobility of capital and labour in a world characterized by the intensification of globalization. Much has been written about this discourse and I too contributed in my own way to the debate (see English & Mayo, 2012; Mayo, 2013). The lit-

Introduction 

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erature is so vast and easily available that there is no need, in this short piece, to rehearse the various points made.

*For want of a better term*

While ‘competence’ is not my preferred term to indicate qualities that one would propose for an alternative discourse on education and learning, notably critical learning, I do recognise the tactical need to use and subvert the dominant discourse in order to connect with current patterns of thinking and articulation and go beyond them, broadening the conceptual frameworks involved. I take this opportunity, provided by this symposium, to attempt such a task, drawing on ideas I have published elsewhere (Mayo, 2008, 2009, 2013; English & Mayo, 2012)<sup>1</sup>.

In the first place, we would need a more holistic model of ‘competences’ if we are to carry out this task. Such a holistic model exists in countries such as Germany and Austria (see Sultana, 2008; Winterton *et al.*, 2005) presumably linked to the concept of *Bildung*, which though ‘broad,’ ‘humanistic’ and difficult to capture exactly in English translation, suffers from elitist connotations which should not be ignored. Adopting this alternative model on broad humanistic and holistic lines would however allow us to develop a repertoire of ‘competences’ that are open and flexible enough for persons to develop as subjects exerting an active control over their own life (Batini, 2008: 37).

I am thinking here of a broad notion of ‘competences’ that enable persons to become, in the words of the Italian critical pedagogue, Lorenzo Milani, ‘cittadini sovrani’ (sovereign citizens). These competences are meant to equip persons not only individually but also collectively, as advocated by Paulo Freire. Persons would thus be equipped with a range of competences that would allow them to contribute to the development of a genuinely democratic environment. This should stand in contrast to much of the contemporary reductionist discourse on competences and education.

*EU’s discourse and critical literacy*

The EU discourse on lifelong learning which is over ten years old and has not been revised or revitalised, emphasises new basic skills, or new literacies. But these are mainly related to work and ICT.

<sup>1</sup> A version of this paper was presented as an invited talk at the conference “II Congreso Internacional sobre Aprendizaje Permanente Competencias para una Formación Crítica. Aprender a lo Largo de la Vida,” Universidad Jaume I Castelló de la Plana, 21, 22, 23 June 2012 and published in Spanish translation in the book of conference proceedings: P. Mayo, “‘Competencias’ para una formación crítica: La perspectiva de un Pedagogo”, in M.M. Puig, & J.G. Gomez (eds.), *Aprendizaje Permanente Competencias para una Formación Crítica. Aprender a lo Largo de la Vida*, Xativa: Crec, 2012.

One wonders, also given the criticisms leveled at this discourse, whether a revised memorandum on the subject would have introduced Freire's concept of critical literacy which lies at the heart of what is known as critical pedagogy (see Giroux, 2011; McLaren, 1997; McLaren & Kincheloe, 2007, Darder *et al.*, 2008)<sup>2</sup>. Critical literacy entails developing the 'competence' of being able to engage in a critical reading of the world – reading not only the word but also the world. We are here referring to the type of reading in which the students of Lorenzo Milani (see Scuola di Barbiana, 1996) were engaged at Barbiana when they read newspapers and discussed articles to which they responded by means of a collective approach to writing. A critical reading of the world would, in my view, become the principal competence to develop within a genuinely democratic educational process. We would here speak of 'thick democracy' (see Gandin & Apple, 2002) marked by direct social participation and by the conception of people as not simply producers/consumers but primarily as social actors. I would refer as examples here to the citizenship schools such as those in Porto Alegre that allow persons to develop the qualities necessary for them to participate directly in the debates concerning the participatory budget (PB). This project was later also adopted elsewhere (see Lucio-Villegas Ramos, 2004; Lucio-Villegas Ramos *et al.*, 2009). It is a democratic process in which community members directly decide how to spend part of a public budget (see Baierle, 2007), although it would be interesting to explore how this approach tallies with or differs from the current discourse concerning the acquisition of 'financial literacy' (see English & Mayo, 2012) – this is based on making people responsible for their financial upkeep with the implication that poverty can be blamed on them: they were not or did not learn to be financially literate and therefore budget well. As always such a discourse would absolve the state of any responsibilities in this regard. A word of caution is however necessary here as many countries and municipalities attempt to adopt a participatory budget. As with Freire's and Milani's ideas, the key word in this context is 'reinvent.' One cannot transplant ideas and projects given the contextually specific characteristics involved. Milani was adamant that the School of Barbiana started at Barbiana and was to end at Barbiana. Freire himself states that experiments cannot be transplanted but must be reinvented.

<sup>2</sup> See the site: *Paulo & Nita Freire International Project for Critical Pedagogy* <http://www.freireproject.org>.

Most daring in my view would be the attempt to subvert the dominant individualistic discourse of ‘competences’ by broadening it to incorporate aspects of learning within social movements. This notion of competences would certainly have a collective dimension. Many progressive social movements, including subaltern southern social movements in Africa and India including the landless peasant movement (MST) in Brazil, the Chipko movement in India and the Zapatista movement in Chiapas, Mexico (see Kapoor, 2009), carve out the sort of space that can lead to the acquisition and learning of various ‘competences.’ The ‘competences’ for active citizenship involved include the ability to mobilise persons around public issues, to develop organisational skills and to exercise rights which would otherwise remain unknown to the persons concerned. They also include the ability to conceive of and create processes of social learning such as methods of non violent protests, ‘teach-ins’ and ‘occupy’ strategies. The Occupy Wall Street Movement (OWS) was instructive in the way it carried out alternative (to mainstream) learning sessions, created moving libraries, provided food distribution etc and continues to generate new ‘competences’ in the various approaches it is adopting and will continue to adopt. There is also much work being carried out in Europe and elsewhere concerning the acquisition of ‘competences’ for the development of a social solidarity economy (SSE), based on the concept of ‘social creation’ (De Vita, 2009) which returns money to its rightful place, namely as an instrument that facilitates exchanges rather than financial speculation, so relevant in terms of the current dire state of financial capital which seemed wholly geared to accommodate the 1% at the expense of the 99%. SSE is said to pioneer new forms of exchanges<sup>3</sup>.

#### *Alternative use of conventional competences*

The kind of ‘competences’ for critical and responsible living promoted by these social movements of course includes those competences that are given importance in the dominant discourse, for example the use of internet, computers etc. There is a certain body of knowledge which needs to be mastered with the difference lying in the use one makes of them. Developing an alternative model does not imply throwing out the baby with the bath water. In this case, however, the competences, which are imparted through an integrated, holistic approach, have a social purpose and are considered as vehicles to update strategies and modes of communication. The so-called ‘internet war,’ engaged in by the Zapatistas, comes to mind. It is a

<sup>3</sup> I am indebted to Alessio Surian for this point. See [http://www.lux09.lu/fileadmin/lux09/Newsletter/Lux09-91jours/Charter\\_of\\_RIPESS\\_En\\_.pdf](http://www.lux09.lu/fileadmin/lux09/Newsletter/Lux09-91jours/Charter_of_RIPESS_En_.pdf) Accessed 17th April 2009.

politics of persuasion and mobilization, related to issues concerning the politics of NAFTA, land reform and indigeneity, and the right of local communities for autonomy and proper representation in national democratic structures,<sup>4</sup> carried out via electronic networking and information and argumentation on the web.

### *Critical citizenship*


Nevertheless, another important competence needs to be added to these for a genuine education for active and participatory citizenship, what might be called a 'critical citizenship.' This competence derives from the approach to education developed by Lorenzo Milani and Paulo Freire: the ability to read critically all that is transmitted via the mass media, including the very same communication and information technologies that are often uncritically celebrated in the dominant discourse. I am convinced that if Louis Althusser were writing today, he would consider the mass media, a major source of 'public pedagogy' (Giroux, 2001), as the principal Ideological State Apparatus which, as he indicated with regard to all State apparatuses (Althusser, 1971: 145), has both its ideological and repressive dimensions. The competence for critical citizenship to be acquired in this context is that of critical media literacy:

Critical media literacy, in our conception, is tied to the project of radical democracy and is concerned to develop skills that will enhance democratization and civic participation. It takes a comprehensive approach that teaches critical skills and how to use media as instruments of social communication and change. The technologies of communication are becoming more and more accessible to young people and ordinary citizens, and can be used to promote education, democratic self-expression, and social justice. (Kellner & Share, 2009: 289)

If I might add to the phrase rendered famous by Paulo Freire in a set of conversations with Donaldo Macedo, this entails reading not only the world but also the construction of the world through the mass media.

What 'competences,' for want of a better term, or simply to engage and enlarge the dominant doxa, are required of teachers to act as critical pedagogues? At a recent talk to the Turkish education union in Ankara (Eğitim Sen), I highlighted a number of competences that connect with a certain attitude to teaching, social action and the development of knowledge. In the first place, teachers need to recognize that education is political. They therefore ought to

*Competences for  
critical pedagogy  
and teacher*



<sup>4</sup> I am indebted to Michael Briguglio, University of Malta, for the formulation of this point.

develop a sensitivity to the politics of knowledge. They also need to confront a very disturbing question: on whose side am I when I teach/act? The educator ought to take sides – “better a fascist than indifferent,” in Don Milani’s famous phrase. A critical attitude is called for, centering around the question concerning pedagogical decisions, curricular choices, policy options and current and historical situations: who benefits? Who suffers? Who is included and excluded? Which culture is valorised at the expense of which other cultures? Furthermore, humility is an important, if not so easy to adopt, trait. I am referring here to the humility of teachers who, with a dialogical and democratic disposition towards students, are inclined to relearn what they think they already know.

*Some ‘competences’*

Competences in this context would include:

- Promoting and encouraging the collective dimensions of learning;
- ‘Peer tutoring’ with students acting as teachers as well as students, sharing what they are learning with others, as did the students at Barbiana under Lorenzo Milani’s direction.
- Developing a dialogical disposition in the sense of interpersonal communication encouraged by Martin Buber and Paulo Freire. In this respect, one develops the competence and attitude to eschew a unidirectional, top-to-bottom process of teacher-student transmission, that is often symptomatic of a wider prescriptive process of communication constituting a domesticating education (banking education). The roles of educator and learner are almost interchangeable, as all learn from each other, but this is not to say that the learner and educator are on an equal footing. It implies not a *laissez faire* pedagogy but a directive pedagogy.
- Engaging meaningfully, and not romantically or sentimentally, with social difference in terms of class, ‘race’/ethnicity, gender, ability, age, without overlooking the overarching, structuring forces (related to capitalism) that help shape the various discriminations and isms (e.g. sexism, racism, homophobia) that, alas, characterize our age.
- The ability to read and enable students to read history and other social situations against the grain (see Simon, 1992).
- The ability to help oneself and students decolonize the mind through reading, thinking and acting beyond the exclusively euro-centric framework.
- In this regard, one need develop the ‘competence’ of engaging in contrapuntal reading of texts, including literary texts to adopt Edward Said’s favoured expression from music and literary theory.

- Developing the competence of engaging with different aspects and forms of culture including popular culture, none of which should be romanticised.
- Developing the ability to engage critically with prescribed content, indicating the biases involved, what is chosen and left out, how are people, communities represented – critical literacy.
- The key 'competence' would be that of engaging in Praxis: encouraging students to 'extraordinarily' re-experience the ordinary.
- One key 'competence' here would be developing the 'pedagogy of the question.' Knowledge is problematised. Things are called into question in what is a problem posing rather than a problem solving approach. One must help foster an appreciation of the fact that there is not necessarily a straightforward answer to every question posed; there might indeed be no answer at all. This entails challenging dogmas, taken for granted assumptions.
- Developing the ability to command a certain amount of authority (bestowed on the educator by the learner because of the former's competence in the field of learning and as a pedagogue) which should not be allowed to degenerate into authoritarianism lest the spirit of genuine dialogue would be destroyed.

This set of 'competences,' once again for lack of a more appropriate term, is not exhaustive as the realm of critical pedagogical and social engagement knows no bounds. It is also tied to a situation in which the educator accepts the challenge of moving out of one's 'comfort zone,' seeing students as 'subjects' and not 'objects.' The struggle as a critical actor or pedagogue involves a struggle to move between two ends of a continuum – criticality and prescription. These abilities or 'competences' would enable the educator or actor to strive to move to the 'critical' end of the continuum while being buffeted towards the other conventional prescriptive end by a number of forces – employment diktats, prescribed curricula, syllabuses, set texts, parental pressure etc. In my view, being critical entails accepting the tension arising out of the struggle involved.

Conclusion



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