

Competences and the right to learning¹

The discourse that highlights a ‘commercially and market-oriented’ type of competences (Gadotti, 2008, 43), often measured through a positivist approach and according to outcomes, is among the most widespread in education today.

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It partly reflects a broader discourse that promotes entrepreneurship, competitiveness and the mobility of capital and labour in a world characterized by the intensification of globalization. In this article, I shall analyse the implications of this discourse with respect to the right to lifelong learning. What counts as lifelong learning according to this discourse? Which important notions of lifelong learning are left out of this discourse? Drawing on Paulo Freire and Lorenzo Milani, I propose the right to an alternative and more expansive notion of lifelong learning, related to the concept of critical citizenship. As a person committed to a holistic and

social justice oriented education, and as a Head of department recently bombarded with all sorts of templates to fill regarding measurable outcomes, I am duly concerned about the prevalent discourse concerning a reductionist view of competences in education.

In several places, the discourse regarding this type of competences made its presence strongly felt in the area of vocational education. As the Australian adult educator Andrew Gonczi wrote in 2004:

When I and my colleagues undertook work on developing a framework for competency-based education in Australia some 13 years ago, we were drawn into a fierce policy

debate. The Australian government had decided that all vocational education should become competency based, without any real idea of what that might mean – except that education needed to be based on outcomes rather than inputs. What evolved was a highly reductionist and behaviourist concept of competence . . . The essence of each task, it was believed, would be revealed as it was broken down into its various components. (Gonczi, 2004, pp. 19–20)

This criticism is not unique to Australia. What is worrying is that this discourse is not restricted to vocational education. It is a hegemonic discourse

that reflects an attempt to render such areas as the education of adults, and the broader all embracing process of lifelong learning, competence and outcomes based. One can detect here the influence of the OECD (1996; 2007) and the European Union, as manifest in the various documents concerning lifelong learning. The *Memorandum on Lifelong Learning* is a case in point (CEC, 2000). For a variety of reasons, including that of facilitating the harmonisation of various national educational systems, *everything has to produce results that can be measured* (Wain, 2004b; Surian, 2006; Harris, 2007) *in terms of effective outcomes*, a process referred to by Jean Francois Lyotard (1989, pp. 47–53) as “performativity”. This militates against in-depth interpretative qualitative research processes as everything needs to translate to a quantitative measurement. This is all part and parcel of what has come to be regarded as the “evaluator state” (Gentili, 2005) that exerts control over educational processes through various evaluation schemes, standardisation procedures classifications, outcomes-based funding mechanisms and league tables (Gentili, 2005, p. 141; CHEPS, 2007, section II).

As Carmel Borg and I (2006) and other authors (Brine, 1999; Williamson, 1998; Wain, 2004a; Bauman, 2005) have shown, the dominant discourse on lifelong learning focuses on vocational education and ICT. The old UNESCO discourse on lifelong education, to which Ettore Gelpi, Bogdan Suchodolski, Paul Lengrand and others made contributions, and which was based on an expansive and humanist concept of education and human capacities, is reduced to a discourse of learning that gestures in the direction of projecting a two-dimensional image of human beings: human beings conceived of as producers/consumers. This notion was decried by the Frankfurt School theorists, especially Herbert Marcuse in his writings on the one di-

mensional person where production and consumption are considered together.

EMPLOYABILITY

The emphasis throughout the EU discourse is on ‘employability’: everything is targeted towards rendering the European economy the most competitive ‘knowledge economy’ in the world. One should recall, here, Ettore Gelpi’s (2002) remark that ‘employability’ does not necessarily signify ‘employment’. This remark makes sense given the level of economic precariousness experienced in various contexts. The emphasis on ‘employability’ characterises the field of EU funded adult education, especially that which draws on the European Social Fund (ESF). Many adult education organisations are ESF dependant.

The kind of competences given importance in the dominant discourse are those that should, in theory, enable persons to become more in demand in the labour market, more ‘marketable’. This is all in keeping with the commodification of education. Education is conceived of not as a public good but as a consumer product. In this context, ‘Lifelong Learning’ signifies the updating of competences in a vocational sense, in view of the mobility of capital and the opportunities and hazards this mobility provides for employment. Apart from controlling the inward flow of labour through stiff immigration policies and rigid detention procedures, which give it the appearance of a ‘police’ or ‘carceral’ state (Giroux, 2001), the Neoliberal state takes on the responsibility of developing the infrastructure for the mobility of capital. Education, and especially post-compulsory education, serves to develop the so-called ‘human resources.’ Developing human resources signifies, in this context, the attainment of those competences that attract investment and that permit the labour force to render industry more competitive.

One ought to recognize the need for a good vocational education set up. This is not problematic. What is problematic however is the reduction of what ought to be a broad range of human competences in education to narrowly defined competences, those that fit the labour market and the perceived demands of the economy. Equally worrying is the tendency to promote the idea of education as an individual and not a social responsibility. I also regard this tendency as Neoliberal, or at best a concession (a painful one?), by influential but, as always, non-monolithic institutions (e.g. the EU), to the global neoliberal scenario. According to this perspective, individuals are called on to finance wholly or partially their own access to education, as though they are purchasing a consumer product rather than availing themselves of a public service to which they are entitled as citizens.

Once again, we are here referring to a rather reductive notion of competences imposed by the world of work. A publication documenting ‘best practice’ in lifelong learning among EU member states (Cedefop & Eurydice, 2001) contains information and comments regarding projects in Denmark, the Netherlands, Finland and Germany highlighting those that facilitate the transfer of a series of competences from the economic to the social sector (Borg & Mayo, 2006, p. 23). Raymond Morrow and Carlos Alberto Torres (2000, p. 47) state that:

To drastically overhaul educational systems on the basis of such problematic assumptions about the post-Fordist workplace may be in the immediate interests of many types of employers, but it is not clear that it will effectively serve the broader interests of society, let alone workers in general. The overall effect is to shift education toward competence-based skills at the expense of the more fundamental forms of critical competence required for autonomous learning and active citizenship.

HOLISTIC MODELS

If we are serious about a person's right to education, then we must develop a broader notion of 'competences.' Europe has a tradition on which to draw here. Winterton et al (2005), as indicated by Sultana (2009), reveal that there is a difference in the use of competence based training and education in different countries: behaviourist in the USA, functionalistic in Britain and multidimensional and holistic in Austria, France, and Germany (Sultana, 2009, pp. 21–22). The holistic use of competence based education, in the case of Austria and Germany, is probably in keeping with the concept of *Bildung*. In this respect, as Sultana (2009) argues, the integrative/holistic models draw on a variety of approaches and redress the criticisms leveled at the earlier models, the type of criticism provided by Gonczi in Australia. The holistic model would allow us to develop, in the words of the Italian scholar Federico Batini, a repertoire of competences that are open and flexible enough and which allow persons to develop as subjects exerting an active control over themselves, their existence and their choices in life (Batini, 2008, p. 37). Unfortunately, there is a widening gap between holistic views of education and the needs of the labour market. Formerly (until the 1970s) companies could absorb well educated youths and adults and would take care of their training and professional development (at least those which enjoyed the economies of scale to do so). Owing to the present day fierce competition over labour costs, a holistic type of education is no longer being deemed sufficient to enter the job market.² But then should education be tailored solely to the needs of the labour market? Is this a return to the once maligned Human Capital theory in education? Surely there is more to education than simply employability. Competences required for the economy can be subsumed within a

broader range which also includes the competences for genuinely active democratic citizenship.

Broadening the notion of 'competences' in this vein, we can speak of competences that enable persons to become, in the words of 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. A reductionist discourse concerning competences and education would lead to a democratic deficit. It is important to hearken back to the still relevant discourse concerning education, democracy and the public sphere developed by John Dewey, Jürgen Habermas, Aldo Capitini, Maxine Greene and others.

READING THE WORLD

It would be interesting to take a brief look at the list of competences and basic skills included by the EU in the first of its six key messages on the *Memo-randum on Lifelong Learning*. There is talk of new basic skills and we find, among them, skills related to ICT – becoming ICT literate. There is nothing wrong with this as attempts are constantly being made to bridge the digital divide. There seems to be no room, however, in this EU discourse, for the Freirean concept of *critical literacy*. This entails developing the competence, if you will, of being able to engage in a critical reading of the world – reading not only the word but also the world. I am here referring to the type of reading in which the students of Don Milani were engaged at Barbiana when they read newspapers and discussed articles to which they responded by means of a collective approach to writing. I would maintain that a critical reading of the world should constitute the principal

competence to develop within an educational process intended to strengthen and regenerate the public sphere – the agora. This can contribute to the development of a kind of democracy often referred to as 'thick democracy' that is characterized by direct social participation. I would refer here to non-governmental organizations or the citizenship schools such as, in the latter case, those in Porto Alegre that allow persons to acquire the baggage of competences necessary for them to participate directly in the debates concerning the participatory budget (PB), a project which is nowadays also being adopted and possibly reinvented in Portugal, Spain, France, Italy and Germany, while the UK is going to implement PB in every municipality starting in 2012³. PB is a democratic process in which community members directly decide how to spend part of a public budget (see Sergio Baierle in Borg and Mayo, 2007)⁴. With respect to the Participatory Budget, Daniel Schugurensky states that while many 'local planners, city officials, community organizers and participants do not perceive the pedagogical potential of participatory democracy', a number of "active participants" in the Porto Alegre project 'understand the Participatory Budget as an educational space', often referring to it as a "citizenship school" (Schugurensky, 2002, p. 72). He goes on to say, with respect to the Participatory Budget, that by 'engaging actively in deliberation and decision making processes, individuals and communities learn and adopt basic democratic competences and values' (*ibid*).

One should also think here of social movements engaged in promoting social justice. These movements create the kind of environment which is conducive to the acquisition and learning of various competences. Apart from the various movements that left their mark on the Western world, I would mention such movements as the landless peasant

movement (MST) in Brazil, the Chipko movement in India and the Zapatista movement in Chiapas, Mexico. The competences 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 so forth. They also comprise the acquisition of competences for the development of a social solidarity economy. According to the RIPESS (an international network for the promotion of the social solidarity economy) this type of economy fosters 'respect for men, women and the environment'⁵. It returns money to its rightful place, namely as an instrument that facilitates exchanges rather than financial speculation. It is said to pioneer new forms of exchanges⁶.

Social justice oriented movements are developing a concept of education that offers an alternative to the dominant model. The concept also entails use of competences that are given importance in the dominant discourse, for example the use of internet, computers etc. 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 politics of persuasion and mobilization, related to issues concerning the politics of NAFTA, land reform and indigenity, and the right of local communities for autonomy and proper representation in national democratic structures⁷, carried out via electronic networking and information and argumentation on the web.

Nevertheless, another important competence needs to be added to these. This competence derives from the ap-

proach to education developed by Lorenzo Milani and Paulo Freire to which I made reference earlier: 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 lauded in the dominant discourse. The competence to be acquired in this context is that of *critical media literacy*. The challenge here is to read not only the word and the world but also the construction of the world through the mass media which help shape subjectivities and condition consent for a state of affairs that can prevent people from realising that another world, a more socially just world, is possible.

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END NOTES

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- 6 I am indebted to Professor Alessio Surian for this point. See http://www.lux09.lu/fileadmin/lux09/Newsletter/Lux09-91jours/Charter_of_RIPESS__En_.pdf. Accessed 17 April, 2009.
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This article has been refereed.