

A THEORY OF COLLECTIVE COMPETENCE: CHALLENGING THE NEO-LIBERAL INDIVIDUALISATION OF PERFORMANCE AT WORK

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ABSTRACT: Contemporary work-related education and training policy represents occupational competence as the outcome of individual performance at work. This paper presents a critique of this neo-liberal assumption, arguing that in many cases competence should be regarded as an attribute of groups, teams and communities. It proposes a theory of collective competence in terms of (1) making collective sense of events in the workplace, (2) developing and using a collective knowledge base and (3) developing a sense of interdependency. It suggests that the language of competence would become a more effective tool for understanding performance at work if the collectivistic sense of the term 'competence' were used in conjunction with the more established individualistic sense.

Keywords: competence, individualism, collectivism, activity theory

1. INTRODUCTION

Some years ago we licensed a process to build a paraxylene plant to the Japanese. ... We were simultaneously building an identical one in the UK. ... Imagine our chagrin when not only did they complete their plant seven months before us, but also it worked at first go while ours suffered the usual teething troubles ... (Harvey-Jones, 1989, pp. 99-100).

The Japanese plant was built by a team which shared a single large office ... They were in each others' minds and did not have to send a memo, or make a telephone call, to check the effects of, for example, locating a valve somewhere else. Any one of them could cover for anybody else ... (Harvey-Jones, 1993, p. 178).

The focus of this paper is occupational competence, and the point of entry to the argument is the distinction between 'individualism'

and ‘collectivism’ introduced into cultural studies several decades ago by Hofstede (1980). Individualism is usually defined as the tendency to treat the self as the most significant social unit; societies described as ‘individualist’ value the development of a distinctive personality, and encourage self-help, self-directed learning and personal initiative in making one’s way through life. By contrast, societies characterised as ‘collectivist’ treat the group to which one belongs, such as the family or work team, as the most significant social unit. They value the subordination of personal wishes to the priorities of the group, and encourage intra-group harmony rather than individual ambition. They also perceive the relationship between the individual and the group differently. Explaining the success of Japanese industry in the early 1990s in terms of their collaborative industrial culture, Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) observe that ‘while Western societies promote the realisation of the individual self as the goal of life, the Japanese ideal of life is to exist among others harmoniously as a collective self’ (p. 31), the significance of which was appreciated by the British industrialist Harvey-Jones, cited at the head of this paper.

Since Hofstede’s (1980) pioneering work, empirical studies have cautioned against labelling entire societies as individualist or collectivist, and have contested the dichotomy implied by the use of these binary terms. Research in this field has produced convincing evidence that most societies embody both individualist and collectivist traditions, and that they tend to foreground one or the other in different societal contexts and at different times in their histories (Triandis, 1995). Today, with many scholars favouring a discursive rather than a functionalist reading of Hofstede’s distinction, it is becoming common to regard individualism and collectivism as cultural ideologies that can be challenged and revised from within, and the institutions that embody them as open to active social reconstruction (Gergen, 1999).

2. THE INDIVIDUALISATION OF OCCUPATIONAL COMPETENCE

Against this background, a development of major significance for work-related education and training in the UK was the ideological shift that occurred following the Conservative election victory of 1979. The story of how the adoption of neo-liberal economic policies was followed by a root-and-branch marketisation and commodification of the further education system in the 1980s and 90s has been well covered by Brown and Lauder (1992), Avis *et al.* (1996) and many others. Less discussed, however, is the way in which the education

system was used to promote individual values in support of the government's commitment to free enterprise and its lionisation of 'entrepreneurs'. The new policy emerged in 1989 when the Confederation of British Industry issued a statement that 'As manual work declines, the emphasis is on *individual responsibility* ...' (CBI, 1989, para. 5, emphasis added) in tandem with the Secretary of State for Education's announcement of the government's policy to prioritise 'key skills ... those generic skills which *individuals* need in order to be effective members of a flexible, adaptable and competitive work force ...' (Baker, 1989, emphasis added).

The 1980s was the decade in which the UK government issued instructions to further education college lecturers running government-funded courses for unemployed school leavers forbidding them to attribute unemployment to its economic policy. Instead, lecturers were required to convince their students that their lack of a job was due to deficits in their personal repertoire of skills. The extent to which subsequent policies, both Conservative and New Labour, have reinforced this individualistic culture can be seen in the way government financial support for vocational study is designed to reinforce self-help, through (for example) career development awards and the ill-fated Individual Learning Accounts. Individualism has also dominated the work of the National Skills Task Force, a body set up by a former Secretary of State for Education and Employment to report on skills gaps in the UK workforce. One of the Task Force deliverables is a 'national skills agenda' which currently guides government policy making in this field. Part of this agenda is 'to successfully instil a culture of lifelong learning in the UK in which *all individuals* ... recognise the importance of regular reskilling ...' (DfEE, 2000, para. 1.5, emphasis added). It might also be remarked that the original notion of a learning *society*, which was widely debated by educationalists in the 1970s but largely ignored by the government of the day, has recently resurfaced in the form of more powerful government-led discourses of a *lifelong learning market* in which individuals are constructed as having to take personal responsibility for acquiring the skills that will make them employable (Edwards and Boreham, 2003).

Fundamental to this way of thinking is the assumption that occupational competence is an attribute of individuals. This assumption underpins the UK's system of National/Scottish Vocational Qualifications (N/SVQs) which assesses trainees and awards them qualifications on an individual basis, regardless of the extent to which their performance is embedded in the collective activity of the workplace. Yet this was by no means an inevitable consequence of adopting a competence-based qualifications system. The consultants retained by

the UK Employment Department to design the new system, Barbara Shelborn Developments Ltd., advised that the attribute of competence 'could equally well apply to a department, an organization or an occupation' (Mansfield, 1989, p. 28). But through the individualistic lens of the right-wing government of the day, this essential qualification went quickly out of focus and made no impact on policy.

Contrary to the neo-liberal insistence on the individual ownership of competence, I wish to argue that it makes perfectly good sense to regard competence as an attribute of a group, team or indeed a community. I am not suggesting that there are no individual competencies; rather, that we should recognise both individualistic and collectivistic ways of construing competence, and where appropriate, regard them as mutually constitutive. The ultimate purpose of the paper is to develop linguistic and conceptual resources, organised around the central concept of 'collective competence', to loosen the restrictive and ultimately regressive way of construing people's work-related competence along pathways established by several decades of state-sponsored individualism. From an historical perspective, this is not such a startling proposal. Many social scientists have explained individual behaviour as a construction out of group processes, dismissing attempts to explain the latter in terms of aggregations of individual behaviour. Thus Mead (1967) represents *mind* and *self* as constructs out of the social process of communication, while Berger and Luckmann (1967) propose that an individual's capabilities are transferred to him or her from a symbolic universe constructed by the collective sensemaking of countless others. More recently, Weick and Roberts (1993) have provided support for the concept of collective competence in their study of crews working on the flight decks of aircraft carriers. Their research shows that the crews work as single units, guided by a collective mind which comes into existence when each individual gives conscious attention to the system-level consequences of his or her actions. Crew members are socialised into a collective way of thinking similar to what Gustavsson (2001) calls interactive consciousness: 'The rules of the network of activities in the organisation connect people: each member knows what needs to be done in relation to what others in the organisation are doing and thus a group consciousness is created relying on the predetermined activities' (p. 360). Another highly relevant example is Brown and Lauder's (2000) concept of collective intelligence, which they locate within the development of a post-industrial society, while Harkin (1998), analysing theories of the collective aspects of human language and endeavour, proposes that 'in the process of education, language use ought fundamentally to be about cooperation ...' (p. 438).

3. A THEORY OF COLLECTIVE COMPETENCE

In the remainder of this paper I wish to propose a theory of collective competence, drawing on the studies of activity carried out by the Russian psychologist Leont'ev (1974, 1978) and on studies of various occupational groups including the staff of hospital accident and emergency departments (Boreham *et al.*, 2000) and process operators in the chemicals industry (Boreham and Morgan, 2002). Activity theory depicts work as the function of a group which addresses its effort towards a common object (Engeström, 1987, calls the group an 'activity system'). According to Leont'ev, the driving force of an activity system is its members' consciousness of the object of their activity, which he insists is collective: 'consciousness is *co-knowing*, but only in the sense that individual consciousness may exist only in the presence of social consciousness and of language that is its real substrate' (Leont'ev, 1978, p. 60). Thus, as in the work of Mead (1967) and Berger and Luckmann (1967), the dynamics of the group are deemed to be ontologically prior to the actions of individual members. Engeström (1987), in his development of Leont'ev's theory, postulates that an activity system has a division of labour and a set of rules for ordering everyday interaction. It is through the ordering of joint activity by these means, mediated by language and other artifacts, that the activity system is able to achieve its object (and thereby demonstrate its competence, or lack of competence if it should fail). In this paper, I wish to propose that there are at least three normative principles to which an activity system must conform if it is to act competently: *making collective sense of events in the workplace, developing and using a collective knowledge base and developing a sense of interdependency.*

Making Collective Sense of Events in the Workplace

According to activity theory, the effectiveness of a work group depends on the way in which it approaches the object of its activity – its 'orientation'. However, Leont'ev and later activity theorists such as Engeström (1999) and Norros and Nuutinen (2002) stress the difficulty teams and groups have in ascertaining what the precise object of their activity ought to be. One way of representing this difficulty is in terms of contradictions in the object. Arguably, apart from employees of the purest forms of Taylorist organisation, whose work is minutely programmed and proceduralised, most people's work involves dealing with constant contradictions. Examples include being exhorted to maintain quality while also being expected to cut costs, observing safety procedures which impede the flow of work

needed to achieve productivity targets, giving a client professional advice she cannot afford to follow – the list is endless. What really tests a work group's competence is not so much the practical aspects of challenges such as these, but the doubt and uncertainty which they generate. The first requirement for a group to deal competently with a problem then becomes to make sense of the situation by resolving the contradictions in the object.

According to Heidegger (1962), the true function of language is not to describe reality, but to construct it, a perspective that emphasises the central role of language in sense making. In problematic situations, while the group members' initial experiences may be confusing, language can help them make sense of these experiences by attaching signs to them. The availability of linguistic resources for collective sense making is crucial because language is public, enabling personal bewilderment to be dispelled by positioning oneself within the more ordered structure of collective experience. Czarniawska (1997) identifies the key activity by which work groups make sense of predicaments as narrating (p. 24). She argues that the uncertainty of the situation poses the problem of how people ought to act, this creates negative emotions such as anxiety, and these in turn make people question their identity. Research by Eide (2000) suggests that a typical response to challenging situations is a spontaneous discussion between workers. This is not primarily a search for a technical solution to the problem, but an exchange of *feelings* about the situation, which focuses on defining the boundaries of the occupational roles of those involved, which ultimately becomes an attempt to preserve personal identity. The challenging situation provides material for narratives or stories which are exchanged within the group; according to Eide, the collective re-interpretation of these is the way in which the group makes sense of what is happening.

Developing and Using a Collective Knowledge Base

For effective narration to take place, a group must possess knowledge resources. Research on the use of language in the workplace indicates that many organisations develop specialist sub-languages tailored to the specific events in their domains (von Krogh and Roos, 1995). Concepts of the work process formed in this way are maintained as concepts over time, which organisational members continue to bring up in their conversation and thinking: 'A lawyer speaks from the tradition of his [or her] law firm ... a production engineer speaks from the tradition of his [or her] manufacturing organization; a doctor speaks from the tradition of his [or her] profession ...'

(von Krogh and Roos, 1995, p. 101). The term ‘collective knowledge’ refers to the epistemic precondition for this kind of language use (Boreham, 2000). The suggestion that an organisation can possess knowledge over and above the knowledge of its individual members is examined by Lyles and Schwenck (1992). They relate collective knowledge to organisational identity, suggesting that the uniqueness of an organisation depends on its capacity to develop a ‘knowledge structure’ which can be maintained on a more enduring basis than the individual knowledge bases of its members. As von Krogh *et al.* (1996) put it, ‘Individuals may leave the group (for example, a physicist may retire from his [or her] department and field) but the knowledge of the group does not vanish’ (p. 178).

In their studies of collective mind on flight decks, Weick and Roberts (1993) found that an important part of the crew’s knowledge was embedded in the patterns of *heedful interrelating* which characterised their collective activity. In a very strong sense, this knowledge existed only within the matrix of the crew members’ interactions, and disappeared as soon as the crew dispersed. One way in which a collective knowledge base might come into existence is by reaching agreement on interpretations of common experiences (Daft and Weick, 1984). An example of this is provided by a study of fire fighters in the south of France by Rogalski *et al.* (2002), which found that teams deployed to fight forest fires possessed a shared ‘model of tactical reasoning’ (or game-plan) which enabled them to anticipate each other’s actions and interpret each other’s messages when fighting fires. The model developed naturally within each team as a result of experience, but after it was made explicit by the researchers, it was codified and used by trainers to coach new teams.

Developing a Sense of Interdependency

The third constituent of collective competence is a sense of interdependency among members of the group. Fundamental to Schein’s (1992) analysis of organisational culture is the recognition that organisations contain sub-systems (either groups or individuals), each of which has a life of its own. The problem facing most organisations is that what is rational within one sub-system might not be aligned with the goals of the group as a whole. Collective activity, which requires co-operation and communication between sub-systems, depends on the group’s capacity to overcome the fragmenting tendencies of the different perceptions of the sub-systems by developing a sense of interdependency. Lacking this, the members of a complex organisation may act without regard for each other’s needs. Gozdz

(1995) points out that the sense of interdependency in a work group generally grows from seeds that were sown in a crisis. He points out that this might disappear once the crisis is past, which on the present view would constitute a loss of collective competence. Clearly, a sense of interdependency cannot be produced by ordering people to feel that way. But Gozdz argues that there are strategies which work teams can adopt as a matter of deliberate policy in order to create and maintain this feeling. He cites two types of learning experience which can prove valuable in this connection. The first is encouraging everyone in the group to perceive and acknowledge the internal divisions that exist, especially those which could undermine its collective efforts. The second is planning and making attempts to transcend these differences by negotiation and joint activity.

Although the idea of collective competence is alien to the UK's individualistic competency culture, it is implicit in many state-of-the-art training techniques. An example is crew resource management (CRM), which originated in the aviation industry and has been applied in many other fields including medicine. CRM developed out of the post-accident analysis of flight recorders and cockpit voice recorders, which indicated that many aviation incidents did not result from an individual's lack of skill, nor from malfunctioning equipment, but from the failure of the crew to co-ordinate its collective response to a problematic situation. In an attempt to address this problem, CRM emphasises developing collective competence. Its two main aims are to develop the crew's capacity to construct a shared mental model of problematic situations encountered during a flight, and to establish mutual understanding.

CRM has been defined as 'a process of interaction between crew members, whereby each individual is empowered and encouraged to contribute to the overall task of the team' (Royal Aeronautical Society, 1999, para. 14.) It takes place during the period of pre-flight briefing conducted by the captain before the passengers and/or cargo are loaded and the aircraft takes off. It is co-terminous with the work process; there is no expectation that, having participated in one such briefing, an employee can be considered 'competent' at dealing with incidents on future occasions (clearly the assumption of N/SVQs). This is because CRM recognises that each crew member's sense of the emotions the other members are experiencing as they assemble for the flight is a transient state. The process is designed to create a here-and-now awareness of being dependent on one another as the crew embarks on the momentous activity of taking an aircraft off the ground. Ginnett (1993) describes the feeling-state which CRM tries to achieve as one in which the crew are ready to enact any of these

four exchanges: '(1) I need to talk to you; (2) I listen to you; (3) I need you to talk to me; or even (4) I expect you to talk to me' (p. 88). Important for the development of CRM-technique has been the increasing recognition that this feeling-state must be shared across the barriers which separate different categories of employee. Originally defined as *cockpit* resource management, CRM was redefined as *crew* resource management to include the cabin crew, and subsequently extended to include the gate staff – for in reality, the whole team must be competent collectively if the safety of the flight is to be assured.

4. CONCLUSIONS

It is clear that we already possess a language of collective competence and that pedagogies exist for developing it. These have extensive theoretical underpinnings in the social sciences. However, over the last few decades, UK public policy debates on occupational competence (such as the occupational standards debate, the key skills debate and, increasingly, the lifelong learning debate) have marginalised talk about collective competence by promoting an official language of competence which both reflects and continues to construct the individualistic values of the post-1979 right-wing political hegemony. The aim of developing a theory of collective competence in this paper is to counter this bias. The term 'collective competence' is a neologism, but it is not a reification: using 'collective' to qualify 'competence' is a linguistic practice intended to give the collectivistic sense of the term equal illocutionary force to the already-established individualistic sense. If, as many argue, our perceptions and identities are wholly or partially constituted in our use of language, then new linguistic practices are essential to overcome the bias in the way we think, talk and act about vocational competence.

Ultimately, it is change in the world of employment that is making new linguistic practices necessary, especially transformations in labour processes which have occurred as advanced capitalist economies have grappled with the challenges of globalisation and the liberalisation of world trade. Although the trend has not been uniform, there has been a noticeable shift in the dominant type of work organisation, away from hierarchy, segmented work roles and fixed working procedures towards more organic structures with flexible labour processes in which all grades of employee engage in collaborative inquiry and continuous improvement (Boreham, 2002). A common feature of the new ways of organising work is their emphasis on teamwork, and the delegation of considerable degrees of autonomy from the centre to the periphery. 'Self-managing teams'

are the basis of the increasingly popular cellular work structure, in which people and/or machines are grouped around information or product flows, reinforcing the identification of the team with its own product or service, and increasing the capacity of the organisation to respond to market changes. Studies of self-managing teams by Appelbaum and Batt (1994) and Benders and van Hooft (1999) reveal that they take responsibility for a whole product or service, integrate functions previously carried out by different departments, manage themselves without continuous direct supervision, evaluate their own performance and organise at least some of their own training. The distinctive characteristic of the self-managing team is autopoiesis – the capacity of a living organism for self-regulation. The principle of autopoiesis is that a living system recreates itself by drawing on its internal resources in a recursive, closed and autonomous manner (Varela, 1979) – this is the source of its capacity to respond to changes in the external environment. As autopoiesis is a characteristic of the team as a whole, not of its individual members, the competence of the self-managing team has an irreducibly collective component.

I am not making the essentialist claim that all competence is in the final analysis collective. My argument is the social constructivist one that the vocabulary of competence should be extended to include both its collectivistic and individualistic senses, and that we should of course bring our practice in line with this new way of thinking. This implies that we should not privilege the collectivistic sense of competence any more than the individualistic one. Work is complex – some of its constitutive activities are the responsibility of individuals and some the responsibility of teams. Moreover, if we look within teams themselves, a new layer of complexity is revealed. Some teams have a permanent membership with differentiated roles (common in bureaucracies), some have a permanent membership with undifferentiated roles (juries, for example), some have a transitory membership with differentiated roles (many operating department teams, for example) and some have a transitory membership with undifferentiated roles (*ad hoc* working parties, for example). Further complexity is reached at the level of the individual – in most professions, an individual will exercise agency through a combination of individual action and membership of several different teams. Individual and collective competencies are inextricably interwoven into most people's jobs.

For this reason, it is important not to polarise our thinking about individual and collective competence. While these concepts have distinctive meanings, we need to appreciate the ways in which their meanings interpenetrate. At a surface level of analysis, we can identify some competencies as individual and some as collective, but going

deeper we will discover individual competencies whose purpose is to promote collective competence, and collective competencies whose purpose is to promote individual competence. For example, Hinsz (1990) observed that teams in the early stages of their activity followed collective practices for stimulating the recall of individual members in order to retrieve information which was then put to collective use. Similarly, team members often need to take the initiative in exercising individual competencies in support of collective activity (for example, listening, critical reflection on their own assumptions, presentation of self, accurate record keeping and personal time management, to mention only a few).

In the last analysis, developing a language of competence which accords equal illocutionary force to the individualistic and collectivistic senses of the term implies that competence cannot be conceptualised independently of either the culture of the workplace or the process of learning. The post-1979 re-ordering of vocational education and training in the UK marginalised both culture and process by defining competencies as the material outcomes of work, specifically excluding work activity and learning from consideration (see Jessup, 1991). But on the view developed here, culture and process are fundamental constituents of vocational competence. Schein (1992) defines culture as a complex of shared assumptions which a work group learns as it solves its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, and the theory of collective competence developed in this paper is expressed in precisely these terms. As there is a mutually constitutive relationship between collective and individual competence, it follows that the latter must also be defined in terms of culture and process, leading inexorably to a repudiation of the outcomes model of competence. If this is one of the implications of acknowledging the importance of collective competence, then surely it could only be an advantage.

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