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Competency-based training (CBT) is a curriculum model employed in educational sectors, professions and industries around the world. A significant feature of the model is its permeability to control by interests outside education. In this article, a 'Neoliberal' version of CBT is described and analysed in the context of Australian Vocational Education and Training (VET). In this version of the model, a division of curriculum labour is instituted that, from the perspective of Neoliberal theory, allows the interests of educators to be limited in accordance with the belief that they will neglect the interests of students and other stakeholders if they have control over the whole curriculum construction process. But this version of CBT denigrates the expertise of educators by forcing them to set aside their own judgement about what is important to teach and implement a pre-existing picture of an occupation that may or may not be an effective representation. Empirical evidence is reviewed that suggests curriculum work in VET is indeed alienating for educators. Existing critiques of CBT are considered and found to have overlooked the specifically Neoliberal form of CBT in VET analysed in the article.

Keywords: adult education; curriculum; Foucault; teachers' work and identities; vocational education and training

Introduction

Competency-based training (CBT) is a curriculum model that exists in multiple variants, is tied to diverse purposes, is the subject of intense, long-running debate, and shapes the educational experience of millions of people around the world. What is common to diverse implementations of CBT is a focus on a practice (rather than a discipline or subject) and the breakdown and representation of the target practice in multiple competency texts. One of the features of CBT that makes it a hallmark of Neoliberal educational discourse is permeability to control by interests outside the institutions and practices of education, a feature that has been salient since the emergence of the model in Cold War America (Hodge, 2007). CBT was and remains a mechanism by which parties such as governments, regulators and business exert direct influence over what transpires in educational settings. It should be noted that the spread of CBT in states, professions, industries and educational sectors has not been even. For example, there has traditionally been resistance to the model by universities (Barnett, 1994) and schools (Jansen, 1998), and not all professions have fully embraced the model (e.g. nursing). Some systems and industries have already watered down or retreated from the model after initial enthusiasm for it (Hyland & Winch, 2007). But there are numerous cases where adoption of CBT has been robust (e.g. the Australian VET sector, the management profession) and there are also new vistas opening up for the model in industries that have been dominated by 'traditional' curriculum models until relatively recently (e.g. aviation).

While much has been written about CBT, there has been relatively little attention directed to the effects of the model on the curriculum work of educational practitioners. In this context, curriculum work is a complex practice which includes identifying what is important to teach newcomers to an occupation, articulating importance, modelling tacit and embodied knowledges, and passing on stories and other imagery that affirm the occupation. CBT is a particular approach to these key curriculum tasks. It is argued here that under certain forms of CBT – in this case the Neoliberal version of it – curriculum work can be difficult for educators, even alienating. In brief, educators have consistently reported experiences of disorientation and discontent when working with the model (e.g. Robinson, 1993a, 1993b). In this article I explore the connections between the Neoliberal version of CBT and the

challenging work of educators who must use the model to determine their practice and ask the question, how can Neoliberal approaches to CBT alienate curriculum workers?

My critical exploration focuses on the case of CBT in Australian Vocational Education and Training (VET). This is a case of particularly robust adoption of the Neoliberal version of CBT. I trace the emergence of CBT in the upheaval of VET called 'training reform' in the early 1990s (Smith & Keating, 2003), and highlight the impact of Neoliberal economic theories on the course of the reform agenda. To substantiate the claim that alienation characterises curriculum work within the sector, I draw on a series of studies which provide glimpses of the experience of educators working with CBT. This research includes a study by the author (Hodge, 2014) which will be examined in some detail to build a picture of the alienating curriculum work undertaken by contemporary educators. The argument that builds up through these two lines of investigation is that Neoliberal CBT is designed on the assumption that curriculum work will necessarily be misguided if it is left in the hands of educators, and that their interests require a 'checking' mechanism that ensures educators serve the interests of clients in a systematic way.

Neoliberal CBT is the mechanism that checks the interests of educators, but in doing so comes into conflict with the structure of the work of educators, at least in the vocational education sphere. These educators are hired for their expertise. Indeed, Australian regulations demand that VET educators bring relevant expertise to the work and that they maintain it whilst engaged as educators. But this form of CBT overrides educator expertise in conformity with the Neoliberal image of the educator as one who will pursue their own interests at the expense of those who and for whom they teach. It is this collision of education constructed according to Neoliberal economic theory and the fundamental structure of educator work that I contend is at the basis of alienating curriculum work in Australian VET.

In the final section alienating curriculum work in VET is theorised and critiqued. Marx's seminal concept of alienation will be discussed, and the special sense in which alienation is used in the argument is distinguished. Existing critiques of CBT are also considered, including neo-Marxist (Field, 1991), Foucauldian (Edwards & Usher, 1994) and Bernsteinian (Wheelahan, 2007), but they are found to neglect the specific

role of Neoliberal theory in the division of curriculum work that is problematic for educators. The argument of this article emerges as a unique contribution to the critical project of understanding and challenging Neoliberal CBT.

Competency-based training

Competency-based training (CBT) is a twentieth-century curriculum model that took shape in American Cold War educational discourse and has spread across the world (Hodge, 2007). Implementations of CBT involve the identification and specification of skills, knowledge and techniques associated with a target practice. In its earliest form, the competency-based approach or 'Performance-Based Teacher Education' (PBTE) was used to develop curriculum for teacher pre-service programmes. Here, the target practice was 'competent' school teaching which was observed and analysed to determine the behaviours which constitute competent teaching. The information from these analyses was translated into structured texts generally called 'competencies' that were then used to construct curriculum in teachers' colleges. Programming, teaching, assessment and evaluation processes all revolved around the competency texts. By the 1970s, PBTE – or as it came be known, 'Competency-Based Teacher Education' (CBTE) – was a 'movement' that the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education sought to define and standardise. Their spokesman, Stanley Elam, offered a definition in his 'State of the Art' address of 1971. According to Elam, 'essential' characteristics of PBTE were:

(1) Competencies (knowledge, skills, behaviors) to be demonstrated by the student are
   - derived from explicit conceptions of teacher roles,
   - stated so as to make possible assessment of a student's behavior in relation to specific competencies, and
   - made public in advance;
(2) Criteria to be employed in assessing competencies are
   - based upon, and in harmony with, specified competencies,
   - explicit in stating expected levels of mastery under specified conditions,

and

- made public in advance;

(3) Assessment of the student's competency

- uses his performance as the primary source of evidence,
- takes into account evidence of the student's knowledge relevant to planning for, analyzing, interpreting, or evaluating situations or behaviour, and
- strives for objectivity;

(4) The student's rate of progress through the program is determined by demonstrated competency rather than by time or course completion;

(5) The instructional program is intended to facilitate the development and evaluation of the student's achievement of competencies specified. (Elam, 1971, pp. 6–7)

During the 1970s, the competency-based model was taken up in occupational fields outside teaching, such as management (Estep, 2008), youth programmes (Glendenning, 1973), and then in whole sectors (the UK VET system in the late 1980s). Today, CBT is an established model used not only in education and training, but in recruitment, job design, professional development, recognition of prior learning processes, performance development and review regimes, and also for the purpose of establishing or 'professionalising' occupational practitioner groups. The model has also been applied to generic or 'transferable' abilities such as communication and even to disciplinary knowledge, although critics have voiced concern over the 'fragmenting' effect of the representation of fields of knowledge in series of discrete texts (Buchanan, Yu, Marginson, & Wheelahan, 2009).

With respect to the argument of this article – that Neoliberal CBT is an alienating model of curriculum for educators – it must be emphasised that the CBT model itself is not inherently alienating. When educators control the whole process of curriculum construction using CBT, satisfaction and educational benefits may be claimed. It becomes a variant of objectives or outcomes-based curriculum, with 'progressive' pedagogies such as self-paced and mastery learning potentially a part of the mix. For

example, in trials of CBT (in this instance termed 'Competency-based Education and Training' – CBET) in panel-beating apprenticeship programmes in the early 1980s, researchers led by Roger Harris found that educators who developed the curriculum were highly engaged, and that assessed learning outcomes were generally higher than for 'traditional' forms of curriculum (Harris, Barnes, Haines, & Hobart, 1985). In later interviews with educators involved in this trial it became apparent that they seized the opportunity provided by the new model to entrench occupational ideals in the competency texts that they wrote as part of the curriculum work (Harris & Hodge, 2009).

As an educational model, CBT has been criticised for limitations that stem from the methods used to analyse and represent target practices. For example, the theory of behavioural objectives is a popular source of guidance for analysing and representing competence. It is a theory that stresses the observation and precise description of task performances as a way to capture and communicate the essential features of the target practice. When competency texts are developed using the principles of behavioural objectives it is suggested that crucial determinants of practice are neglected and potentially trivial aspects of practice valorised (Ashworth & Saxton, 1990). Indeed, any method used to produce competency texts must share the limitation imposed by the fact that only so much of human activity can be codified in texts, as intimated by accounts of practice that base them on tacit knowledge (Polanyi, 1974) or embodied knowledge (Merleau-Ponty, 2012). The potential for misrepresentation or incomplete representation of practices in competency texts remains a vexed issue in implementations of CBT. But the vulnerability inherent in the model does not relate directly to the question of whether or not the model is alienating for educators, although it will be suggested that it can contribute to the problem.

That CBT can be alienating for educators is a possibility harboured in the structure of the model. Because the production of competency texts *may* be undertaken as a discrete activity, the potential is there to institute a division of curriculum labour between the production of texts and the activities of interpreting and implementing them. And because the materiality of the texts allows them to transcend the contexts in which they are written and used, it becomes possible to centralise and remotely

direct programming, teaching and assessment based on them. These features underpin the 'permeability' to external control claimed for CBT earlier. It is argued that in the case of Australian VET, Neoliberal policy accessed and appropriated the levers of control implicit in the CBT model.

Neoliberalism and Australian training reform

Australian training reform – the process that transformed VET and mandated CBT as the curriculum model for the entire sector – was not an isolated initiative, but was part of a range of Neoliberal policy initiatives across Australia and other industrialised nations with the aim of fundamentally overhauling the management of economies (Harvey, 2007). In part, this global phenomenon was a response to the economic stagnation in the 1970s of industrialised nations that had embraced various interventionist approaches to economic government. Harvey terms these post–World War II models 'embedded liberalism'. This terms refers to the way

> market processes and entrepreneurial and corporate activities were surrounded by a web of social and political constraints and a regulatory environment that sometimes restrained but in other instances led the way in economic and industrial strategy….The Neoliberal project is to disembed capital from these constraints. (2007, p. 11)

Embedded liberalism had driven high rates of growth in advanced economies during the 1950s and 1960s, but by the end of this period, fiscal crises had engulfed Western economies leading to high inflation, high unemployment, falling tax revenues and unsustainable expenditure on social programmes (Harvey, 2007). Neoliberalism gained ground as the policy makers of the West scrambled for solutions to the crisis.

Training reform in Australia and Britain can be viewed as an element of the Neoliberal reforms that gathered pace in the 1980s. Finegold and Soskice (1988) explain the link between the (Neoliberal) solution and VET:

> In the last decade, education and training (ET) reform has become a major issue in many of the world's industrial powers. One theme which runs throughout these reform

> initiatives is the need to adapt ET systems to the changing economic environment. These changes include: the increasing integration of world markets, the shift in mass manufacturing towards newly developed nations and the rapid development of new technologies, most notably information technologies. Education and training are seen to play a crucial role in restoring or maintaining international competitiveness, both at the macro-level, by easing the transition of the work- force into new industries, and at the micro-level, where firms producing high quality, specialized goods and services require a well qualified workforce capable of rapid adjustment to changes in the work process and continual product innovation. (1988, p. 21)

The goal of VET and other reforms (e.g. labour market reforms) was to engineer an economy with a 'high skills equilibrium' (Froy, 2009). According to this Neoliberal theory, a state possesses a high skills equilibrium when its institutions and systems foster a well-trained, capable and innovative workforce which produce goods and services that sustain high wages. Economic models based on embedded liberalism were thought to be conducive to a low skills equilibrium. Finegold and Soskice (1988, p. 22) describe (embedded-liberal) Britain as 'trapped in a low skills equilibrium, in which the majority of enterprises staffed by poorly trained managers and workers produce low quality goods and services'. According to Neoliberal theory, reform of several institutions, including industrial relations, financial markets and the VET system, would be required to shift equilibrium in a given industrialised nation to a high skill state.

The analysis of the relationship between VET and the benefits of Neoliberal reform summarised by Finegold and Soskice (1988) was present in Australian policy thinking during the 1980s. Numerous 'white papers' and government-sponsored reports of the period (e.g. Australian Council of Trade Unions and Trade Development Council [ACTU/ TDC], 1987; Clark & Associates, 1986; Departments of Labour Advisory Committee [DOLAC], 1988; Kirby, 1985) argued for a move to a 'high skills economy' and high- lighted the need to change the VET system to get there. The influential *Australia Reconstructed* report diagnosed that 'Australia is not producing the right skills as well as not producing enough skilled people' (ACTU/TDC, 1987, p. 118).

Part of the prescription for VET reform both in Britain (e.g. Finegold &

Soskice, 1988) and Australia (e.g. ACTU/TDC, 1987) was to reduce the autonomy of educators and their institutions in relation to curriculum making by forcing them into a relationship with employers. The argument was put bluntly in the *Australia Reconstructed*
report:

> Australian firms spend very little on training and therefore depend on the tertiary education system as the main provider of skills…it is clear that the tertiary education system has to lift its game if Australia's skill base is to be improved. The most effective way of doing this is through forging closer links between education authorities and industry. (ACTU/TDC, 1987, p. 119)

Implicit in this reasoning is the opinion that education has been contributing to the maintenance of a low skills economy. After all, if education had already been ahead in the 'game' it would presumably not attract this kind of rebuke, and if it was capable then of contributing to the development of a high skills economy, it would not require fundamental reform.

In terms of *curriculum* work in VET, the key argument in the rationale for training reform was 'public choice' theory (Buchanan, 1984) with its rejection of 'romantic' explanations of the motives of public sector professionals (such as VET educators in the 1980s) and its solution of 'checking' the interests of such professionals as a way to ensure their work served the interests of the intended beneficiaries of public services. Public choice theory was employed to analyse and criticise existing state service provision arrangements typical of embedded-liberal governments and to mark out an plausible alternative. The theory taps into a central tenet of Adam Smith's philosophy of human motivation and the role of markets in ensuring productive and stable societies. According to Smith,

> It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer or the baker that we expect our dinner but their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves not to their humanity but to their self-love, and never talk to them of our own necessities but of their advantages. (Le Grand, 2003, p. 1)

This principle – that all human behaviour should be understood as fundamentally self-interested – is a basic Neoliberal dogma (Le Grand, 2003, p. 12). For Smith, the reason human society is ever productive of collective good is not that humans are inclined to serve the interests of others, but that there is a crucial factor called into play when we exchange goods and services. According to Smith – and for Neoliberal thought in general – it is the mechanism of the *market* that is believed to sublimate the self-interested activity of individuals into a system conducive to the good of society, a factor Smith described as the 'invisible hand'. It is the invisible hand of the market that reconciles the self-interested behaviour of individuals to respecting and furthering the interests of others. As Le Grand explains,

> the market is the mechanism by which self-interest can be harnessed to serve the common good. Economic agents operating in a competitive market will find it in their self-interest to provide goods and services of high quality and at low prices; for, if they do not, they will lose business and therefore income and ultimately their livelihood. (2003, p. 12)

Adam Smith's conceptualisation of human motivation and the role of markets in sublimating self-interest is confronted when it comes to comprehending the motivation of public servants and other professional groups whose interests are bound up with acting in the interests of others. Le Grand (2003) refers to the 'knightly' behaviour expected of public servants and professionals in the heyday of embedded-liberal Britain. In this climate, public sector professionals were trusted to know and serve the interests of others. The Neoliberal public choice theory of government and public service, on the contrary, expects 'knavish' behaviour of any group or individual whose self-interest cannot be controlled by a market mechanism. As Le Grand explains, in the 1970s 'there was an increasing acceptance of the argument of the public choice school of economists and political scientists that the behaviour of public officials and professionals could be better understood if they were assumed to be largely self-interested' (2003, p. 8). The change in beliefs regarding the motives of public servants and professionals was epitomised by the new Thatcher government

that took power in 1979:

> The new government viewed the public sector in general, and public-sector professionals in particular, with great suspicion. It considered professionals and other workers in the public sector to be much more in the business of pursuing their own concerns than in pursuing the public interest: more knaves than knights. Moreover, because of the state monopoly in provision of social services, these knaves were able to exploit their monopoly position and treat the users of services as pawns. (Le Grand, 2003, p. 9)

As public service professionals, educators from all sectors were subject to the moralising analysis of public choice theory, and a range of policy responses was initiated to check their autonomy and ensure that the interests of students and other stakeholders could not but remain the focus of their work. Le Grand (2003, p. 8) notes that in the schooling sector some stakeholders sought to bring educators into line by calling for an end to teacher control over the curriculum, an attack on school teacher professionalism that was identified and analysed by Angus (1993). Similar concerns about the behaviour of educators were registered in the VET context. In Finegold and Soskice's (1988) analysis of VET the argument is made that,

> Running a complex [education and training] system is a problem in principal-agent relationships. However clear the ideas of the government (the principal) and however effective its own research and development activities, the cooperation of teachers and trainers as agents is essential to efficient course development, assessment, etc. *But educators will have their own interests.* (Japan is a case in point, where educationalists dominate the development of 16–18 education, business has no influence, and where rote learning still plays a major role.)….A more effective solution is to balance the interests of educators against the interests of employers and those of employees. Hence the case for involving their agents, to bring about more balanced objects. (1988, p. 47, emphasis added)

The answer to the question of what was wrong with existing VET arrangements was held to be that the interests of educators had been allowed to dominate the institution

of VET, a situation Margaret Thatcher portrayed as 'provider capture' that necessarily led to the mismanagement, if not exploitation, of their position (in Le Grand, 2003, p. 45). Finegold and Soskice (1988) suggest that to balance educator and employer/employee interests, 'employer involvement is needed to help develop curricula, monitoring of "trainers", assessment procedures, and so on' (1988, p. 41). As noted earlier, a similar solution to that envisaged by Finegold and Soskice was proposed for Australian VET that involved 'forging closer links' between education and industry (ACTU/TDC, 1987, p. 119).

Neoliberal reform and CBT

The mechanism adopted for implementing the prescription for restructuring Australian VET to align it with Neoliberal theory was CBT. As pointed out above, in some parts of VET prior to training reform, competency-based approaches were already in use (Harris & Hodge, 2009). In one sense then, CBT was not an entirely new practice in the sector. However, the way it was reconceptualised as a mechanism for 'balancing' the interests of educators and drawing employers into VET was new. Unlike the forms of CBT implemented by VET educators and institutions in the early 1980s – in which educators formulated competency standards as well as taught and assessed them (2009) – the version of CBT introduced with training reform entailed a sharp division of curriculum labour between employers and educators. CBT became the key practice in which are balanced the interests of educators and employers (although the representation of employee interests advocated by Finegold and Soskice (1988) has never been effectively institutionalised in training reform era VET).

The Neoliberal form of CBT was mandated by special ministerial conferences in 1989 and 1990 (Harris & Hodge, 2009). Among the objectives for a 'National Vocational Education and Training System' published by the Ministers of Education, Employment and Training (MOVEET) council in 1992 were: 'close interaction between industry and VET providers, to ensure that the training system operates within a strategic plan that reflects industry's needs and priorities', 'an effective training market, with public and private provision of both high level, advanced technical training and further education opportunities for the workforce and for the community generally' and 'an efficient and productive network of publicly funded

providers that can compete effectively in the training market' (in Smith & Keating, 2003, pp. 49–50). These objectives were central to Australian training reform, and continued the process of translating Neoliberal, high skills equilibrium and public choice theories for the national context.

CBT may be regarded a concrete expression of the principles of public choice theory. In the first division of the curriculum process in Australian VET, employer representatives specify the outcomes of learning in the form of competency standards. 'Industry Skills Councils' (ISCs) are government-sponsored organisations that consult with employers and other occupational experts to identify the skills employers want and document them following a standardised 'template'. These templates have been heavily influenced by the theory of behavioural objectives according to which learning intentions are best communicated by a simple description of a performance of the skill in question accompanied by a statement of the level or criterion of the performance and an enumeration of the conditions under which the performance is to be made. ISCs are responsible for translating the insights garnered through consultations into the categories of the competency texts and maintaining the relevance of them through regular cycles of review.

Competencies specify discrete job tasks and must be combined to encompass the performances typical of an occupation. Rules exist for the purpose of combining competencies into qualifications that apply to whole jobs, with flexibility generally allowed through a core-and-electives model to customise qualifications. An administrative abstraction called a 'training package' contains related competencies and presents rules for their combination into qualifications. The scope of a typical training package is a whole industry. Several jobs at different levels may characterise the workforce of an industry and the training package aligned to it will thus include competencies at different levels and for different roles as well as rules for constructing qualifications that distinguish different jobs. Individual industries are able to specify special conditions on assessment of competencies within their training package and include them in the package. Once this work is completed by an ISC, another government-funded body publishes the training packages for implementation. The packages and competencies are publically accessible through the 'training.gov.au' website.

VET educators are formally introduced to work with competencies and training packages through training conducted in accordance with competencies drawn from the *Training and Education* training package developed and maintained by the Innovation and Business Skills Australia (IBSA) ISC. The typical form of introduction to the competency-based system of VET is study of the *Certificate IV in Training and Assessment*, a qualification constructed from ten different competencies from the training package that specify main roles of an educator in VET. Apart from completing all or selected competencies from the Certificate IV, to be eligible to practise in the Australian VET system an educator must possess a level of occupational expertise appropriate to the competencies that will be taught and/or assessed by the educator. This expectation – which has in the past been expressed in terms of years in the occupation but now in terms of demonstrated competency – is mandated (National Skills Standards Council [NSSC], 2013), but also reflects assumptions of students, employers and society about the skill and knowledge base of any educator (Robertson, 2008). Exactly why a VET educator requires occupational expertise in addition to the expertise necessary to read, analyse and interpret competencies is not stated anywhere, but it may have its basis in the assumptions of system users and clients just indicated.

Alienating curriculum work in Australian VET

The experiences of educators working in VET suggest the conditions produced by the division of labour under Neoliberal CBT can produce alienation for educators in their lived curriculum practice. Early studies that focussed on educator responses to training reform in Australia indicate they resented the introduction of CBT. Robinson (1993a) researched educators' experiences of the new approach to curriculum and found that they were disoriented by it. Framing the problem in terms of a conflict between competencies and educator exercise of 'tacit judgement' (i.e. expertise), Robinson explains that

> All the teachers in the study were experienced, and were considered by their supervisors

> to be capable and professional. It would be expected that they would have highly developed tacit judgement about the competence of students and that they would feel comfortable in the exercise of that judgement. The observation of the researcher however was that the introduction of competency-based training has resulted in considerable anxiety on the part of the teachers regarding the exercise of tacit judgement. (1993a, p. 24)

The anxiety observed by Robinson derived from the fact that the educators had to constantly refer and defer to competency standards rather than use their own judgement. The mechanism of CBT created a situation where educators were alienated from the use of their own expertise. The competency texts represented an external source of authority over the educators' practice which Robinson (1993b) analysed in terms of Foucault's theory of disciplinary power.

Another early study by Lowrie, Smith, and Hill (1999) of professional development in VET reported that for the educators, 'CBT is seen as something that is imposed from outside and not necessarily related to what they do in the classroom' (p. 53). The participants in this research, like those in Robinson's (1993a) study, did not experience the competencies as a representation of expertise that corresponded with their own, but rather as an imposition that interfered with the exercise of expertise. Lowrie et al. (1999) suggested that perhaps over time educators would appreciate the supposed benefits of the change. But more than a decade after Robinson's (1993a) research, Harris, Simons, and Clayton (2005) found that educators remained ambivalent about CBT. In terms of the degree of 'control' over their work under CBT reported by educators and managers, Harris, Simons, and Clayton explain that

> Perhaps not surprisingly, those holding some managing role reported feeling that they were more in control in relation to the changes, than did teachers and trainers. While 74% of those in managing roles recorded a positive sense of control (that is, ratings of 6 to 10), only 48% of teachers/trainers did so. (2005, p. 56)

Although this research does not delve into the reasons educators had for reporting relatively low perceptions of control over their work, it seems likely these

reasons would be consistent with the kinds reported in the work of Robinson (1993a) and Lowrie et al. (1999).

A study by Harris and Hodge (2009) sought to garner perceptions about the evolution of CBT by VET educators who had been involved in trials of CBT in the early 1980s. These trials were of a form of CBT in which the educators had control over both the formulation and implementation of competencies. Instead of an experience of alienation, Harris and Hodge claim that educators employed CBT in a way that affirmed the value of their expertise and of the occupation in which they possessed expertise. Some of these educators had remained in the VET system through the process of the introduction of the training reform version of CBT. According to Harris and Hodge (2009), these educators believed that once the formulation of competencies was taken out of the hands of educators, links between content and actual work practices were weakened leading to standards that were too vague to promote excellence in the occupation. As one of the participants explained, 'I don't call Competency Standards "standards" any more. You could drive a truck through the damned things!' (2009, p. 130). This research thus produced a message consistent with that of the earlier studies review: that the content of competency standards was experienced as out-of-step with the expertise of the implementing educators.

The findings of the author's (Hodge, 2014) research are congruent with this message of alienation. The study involved semi-structured interviews with 30 qualified VET educators. The focus of the interviews was on practices of interpreting and implementing competencies. In the study, evidence of alienation took several forms: perceptions that the language in which the content of competencies is expressed is deficient; perceptions that competency content has not been formulated by people with occupational expertise; and augmenting competency content to correct for perceived deficiencies. Regarding the language of competencies, 26 participants expressed frustration. Asked to describe this language, participants used terms which included 'fluffy', 'ambiguous', 'fuzzy', 'vague', 'jargonised', 'convoluted', 'leaves a lot to be desired', 'not well written', 'poorly written' and 'written just appallingly'. A more elaborate response was provided by a participant who irrupted with laughter when asked to explain *why* the language of competencies was deficient:

> I'm laughing because in the Advanced Diploma area, when I was working at [a small RTO with two other trainers], who were both trainers doing the same work as what I was, we'd often question this [the language of competencies] and say, 'Well what a load of rubbish, why don't people talk in language that person studying gets it?' It's almost like it's been written for an academic environment rather than the level that it's pitched at.

Another participant stated that the competencies are 'written for insiders'. When it was suggested that the participant herself could perhaps be regarded an insider, she responded,

> No, I'm not. I don't feel like it. By the insiders, I don't mean teachers, I mean they're policy people. I think they seem to be political documents, written to satisfy too many masters. They don't seem to me to be written with the student or the teacher in mind. Because I, as a conscientious and intelligent person, should be able to read through one and have it make sense. Perhaps not immediately, but on the second reading, go, 'Yeah, I get where this is going, I see what I need to do, what I need.' They're written for auditing requirements I think.

Five participants spontaneously suggested that the problem with the language of competencies was due to the involvement of non-industry people in the formulation of content. For example, one said,

> Look, there's got to be some industry people, I reckon there's got to be industry people in there that are writing these but sometimes I can read and think, 'Oh, that hasn't been written by an industry person.'

Hodge (2014) also asked participants whether they augmented the content of the competencies. The expectation in VET is that educators will 'deliver' exactly what is contained in the competences. This expectation is reinforced by funding regimes that allow relatively little time for the development of competencies. However, eight of

the participants in the author's research openly declared they added to the content of competencies. One said to the question whether they find it necessary to add to the content of competencies,

> Absolutely. I do it all the time. There's a lot of things that aren't in the competencies that I think they [the students] need to know, that need to be added.

Yet these participants felt that the system did not condone such exercise of discretion. After confirming that she would use additional content in teaching because of gaps in a competency, one participant quipped, 'I'm sure I'd be slapped for saying that!' This statement reflects the sense that educators ought to give priority to the content of competencies over their own judgements about what should be included in curriculum.

Research into educator experiences of Neoliberal CBT indicates that the division of curriculum work definitive of the model indeed translates into alienated practice. Early studies reveal that apart from resenting the change to curriculum practice introduced by training reform, educators felt that their work was imposed upon, producing anxiety and lack of control. Later research (Hodge, 2014) was consistent with these findings, and reported in addition specifics of the experiences of educators that included difficulties understanding the language, suspicions about the validity of the content of competencies and practices of working around and augmenting perceived deficiencies in competencies. Although resentment at change has dissipated over the decades since the reform era, educators remain in a problematic practice.

Theorising and critiquing curriculum work in VET

As an educational practice, CBT is a medley of techniques with potential for curriculum division and control by interests outside education. The way Neoliberal theory and policy realised this potential in the case of Australian VET has been reviewed. In this setting, policy makers instituted a form of CBT that transferred curriculum design responsibility to employers and left educators to implement curriculum intentions recorded in competency texts. The reform that instituted these arrangements is Neoliberal at two levels. On the one hand, the use of CBT and in

this particular form is justified by a prescription for transforming national economies to promote a high skills equilibrium state thought to be conducive to the growth and sustainability of Western-style prosperity. National institutions and systems have to be reformed to produce the conditions necessary for such growth, including education and training systems. These reforms had the goal of removing constraints on the operation of market mechanisms (Harvey, 2007). On the other hand, an obstacle to high functioning economies in Neoliberal thinking is the exercise of too much autonomy by public sector professionals such as teachers and trainers. Neoliberal public choice theory has it that groups such as public sector educators will naturally attend to their own interests over those of groups they are hired to serve – students, employers – unless mechanisms are introduced to check these interests (Le Grand, 2003). Neoliberal reform in Australia during the 1980s and 1990s included reform to the VET sector and CBT was the mechanism favoured for checking educator interests.

The division of curriculum work instituted with training reform produces conditions for the alienation of educators in the system. The principles of public choice theory demand a mechanism for checking or balancing the interests of educators in the public system of VET (Finegold & Soskice, 1988), but the goal of the theory is at odds with the structure of educator work, at least in the vocational education sphere. In this context, educators are hired for their expertise in an occupation. Their expertise allows them to fully participate in an occupational practice in which they draw on tacit and explicit knowledge. They are equipped to determine what is important to transmit to newcomers to the practice, and can model the tacit, embodied knowledges that form a crucial part of practice. They pass on the stories, moral codes and images that shape the understanding and practice of the occupation. They are uniquely qualified, in short, to define and enact a curriculum appropriate to a complex, skilled practice. But under the curriculum model of Neoliberal CBT, the determination of what is important to impart to newcomers to an occupation, and the exact specification of what is important, is done for educators. A fundamental component of the curriculum work VET educators are capable of is taken out of their hands.

The curriculum arrangements of Neoliberal CBT are problematic for educators in

two ways. First, these educators are formally excluded from the curriculum construction process. When an educator comes to work in VET, they find that the goals, objectives and outcomes of education work are already fixed within the competency texts. Not only are they sharply defined, they have become almost fetishised within a system over-shadowed by auditing regimes (Black & Reich, 2010) designed to ensure strict adherence of teaching and assessment to the competencies. To work in VET, an educator not only has to renounce any real prospect of contributing to the determination of what is valuable to teach, but they must set aside what they consider to be important and assiduously attend to the official version of what is important. Their curriculum work is forcibly circumscribed and their expertise channelled into questions of 'delivery'.

A second way in which the Neoliberal CBT of Australian VET is problematic is the role of behavioural objectives theory in the representation of what is important to teach. It was explained earlier that the use of the principles and categories of behavioural objectives for writing competency texts heightens an intrinsic vulnerability of the CBT model to partial representation and misrepresentation of the target practice. The stress placed by behavioural theory on the observable aspects of practice (Ashworth & Saxton, 1990) means that only particular performances of competent work can be described in a competency while the contribution of tacit and embodied knowledge must be overlooked. Educators who work with competency texts constructed according to behavioural principles are confronted with a static description of their own area of expertise and are obliged to train learners to emulate the performances described in them. If things are done differently under different circumstances or in different workplaces, if performances depend on judgements that cannot be codified and 'made public in advance' (Elam, 1971), if the reason for behaviours is couched in the values and images of a practice, then those determinants of competent practice must be neglected. The use of the principles of behavioural objectives thus compounds the denigration of the value of educator expertise in CBT with an educationally unsound model of curriculum construction that forces educators to work with what may be a caricature of their own practice.

Research summarised above suggests that VET educators experience and respond

these arrangements in ways that suggest they have difficulties with the official model of CBT. Earlier studies (e.g. Lowrie et al., 1999; Robinson, 1993a) found that educators perceived the new curriculum model as an imposition and generated anxiety about exercise of professional judgement. Recent research suggests that educators continue to view competencies as something externally imposed. Their descriptions of work with competencies suggest experience of a separation between their own expertise and the content of the competency texts. It would seem that over time VET educators consistently experience alienation with regard to their curriculum work.

The use of the term 'alienation' to describe the relationship between VET educators and the VET curriculum model necessarily invokes the notion of 'alienated labour' used by Marx (1977) to analyse the situation of workers in capitalist society. According to Marx's theory, workers in this system are compelled to submit their expertise to sharply circumscribed roles and accept remuneration for their efforts out of proportion to the value they add to materials in the production of commodities. For Marx, alienation characterises labour in capitalism in a few interrelated ways. There is the obvious alienation of the worker's output under the system of capital by owners of capital, and to this Marx adds the alienation of the process of applying skills during production. But the overarching issue in Marx's analysis is the alienation of the worker from their own 'species-being' (1977, p. 82). That is, humans are essentially a being who creatively work with the materials of nature to produce the material and cultural life of the species. This essential species-being is what is alienated when the worker submits to the capitalist system of production that denies the workers' deep need to work creatively on the materials of nature to produce its context.

Education researchers have found that Marx's account of alienated labour may be applied in the analysis of contemporary education systems. For example, Lave and McDermott (2002) made a case for regarding mass schooling as a form of production that alienates learners from the institutions and processes of learning, compelling them to regard the outcomes of education as a special kind of commodity. In their argument, educators must occupy a position similar to factory floor supervisors who implement the imperatives of capitalism. However, the present discussion does not seek to directly contribute to a Marxist analysis of education. Although the work of VET educators may be conceptualised as a component of the capitalist machine and

as leading to their own alienation along with that of learners, alienation here is the estrangement of educators from contributing to curriculum in the performance of their work. No attempt is made to relate this alienation back to alienation of products or of species-being, or to the critique of capitalism. Parallels may be observed between the alienating curriculum work described here and the kind of alienation Marx found in the process of skilled production but this analysis exceeds the scope of this article.

Critiques of CBT that look beyond the educational issues introduced when behavioural theory is employed to guide analysis and representation have not isolated and scrutinised the role of Neoliberal theory in the division of curriculum work characteristic of the model, nor have they focused on curriculum work under it. Criticism influenced by the Marxist tradition regarded competence-based education as a new way for dominant groups to control the supply and activity of skilled labour. Field (1991) argued that CBT in the UK was a response to the breakdown of traditional modes of labour development and supply in the face of economic and work changes. Employers needed workers with new skills who are equipped to be trained and retrained throughout their working lives for constantly changing job roles. The CBT model serves these needs with its inherently modularised curriculum system with content that can be continuously updated and transformed, allowing narrower or broader skill sets to be developed as the industrial situation at any given time requires. Field's analysis, however, does not consider the impact of CBT on curriculum work although he does acknowledge the ambiguous role of educators who may resist the introduction of CBT and may question its value for learners. Foucauldian critiques (Edwards & Usher, 1994; Hodge & Harris, 2012; Robinson, 1993b) neglect the potential role of theories in the formation and experience of CBT in accordance with Foucault's view that practices such as CBT emerge from discourses and through the transformation of existing techniques with qualitatively different objects. However, these critiques have picked up on the plight of educators working within the system. Robinson (1993b), for example, argued that the anxiety of educators was due to the pervasive sense that their work was under constant surveillance. In contrast with a Foucauldian approach, the investigation undertaken in this article asserts the pivotal role of theory – Neoliberal public choice theory – in the formation of practices. It

also contends that the experience of educators can be understood in terms of the denigration of their expertise in curriculum formulation and the dubious quality of the representation of their area of expertise in curriculum that is a condition of work in the system.

An alternative critique employing concepts from Bernstein's sociology undertaken by Wheelahan (2007) suggests that the training reform version of CBT reflects a broader social dynamic by which privileged groups maintain control over powerful forms of knowledge. CBT is the curriculum model of an educational sector that traditionally serves less privileged groups. The structure of CBT is a mechanism that fractures 'powerful' knowledge, forcing learners to master incoherent, context-bound fragments of knowledge. In this respect the educational flaws of the model have social implications. The dominance of CBT in a sector serving the working class means that members of this group are unable to access powerful knowledge and therefore cannot enjoy its benefits. The effects of CBT on learners thus derive from the fact that it is a flawed model implemented in a sector associated with a particular social group. In terms of this critique, the role of Neoliberal theory in accounting for CBT is at most secondary to the structuring effects of class struggle. In addition, Wheelahan's (2007) Bernsteinian critique does not specifically address the experiences of educators who work with this form of CBT, but rather focuses on the social implications of a curricular flaw.

The critique of CBT undertaken in this article is unique in its insistence on the specific role of Neoliberal theory in the structure and effects of training reform CBT. The potential for division of curriculum labour in the structure of CBT is realised in the Neoliberal form of the model which was implemented in Australian VET in the early 1990s. However, this model conflicts with the structure of educator work. VET educators are experts in their occupational field, and come to educator work equipped to discern what is important to teach newcomers to the occupation. System regulations demand that these educators possess occupational expertise on entering the sector and that they maintain their expertise even when education is their main activity. But these educators come to a system that has already decided what is important to teach, that offers them little if any opportunity to contribute to the development of curriculum,

and uses behavioural principles in the design of curriculum that have long drawn censure for producing partial or distorted representations of target practices.

The argument presented here is a useful contribution to the critical project of ameliorating the excesses of Neoliberal dogma in the educational sphere. The argument says educators are intentionally barred from a full role in curriculum construction because they cannot be trusted to know and serve the needs of learners and employers. In a sense, Neoliberal CBT is an alienating curriculum practice by design. But this message has no place in the official rhetoric about Neoliberal reform which instead embroiders the theme of high skills economies and the dangers posed by any lapse in efforts to spread the use of market mechanisms in society. It is important to make public choice theory's image of the educator explicit, and to see that CBT as we know it is a direct implementation of the theory. The contribution of the article is also important for quickening debate about alternatives to CBT. Until the model is dislodged, educators will be consigned to alienated curriculum work and their students (and ultimately employers, too) will be subject to an educationally impoverished model that is as flawed a learning platform as it is an effective and sleek mechanism of Neoliberal control.

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