

The limits of competency-based training & the implications for work

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Competency-based training is a feature of vocational qualifications in many Anglophone nations. Australia is of particular interest because it has gone further than most other countries in insisting that all and not just some of its publicly funded qualifications in vocational education and training (VET) be based on CBT. Australian VET qualifications are derived from training packages, which are the equivalent of British National Vocational Qualifications. Governments introduced CBT to ensure that VET qualifications met the needs of industry and to ensure industry 'control' over VET. CBT putatively meets the needs of industry because qualifications are made up of units of competency that describe workplace tasks or roles, and learning outcomes are expressed as performances in the workplace. Learning *outcomes* are divorced from *processes* of learning and curriculum. Proponents of CBT insist that units of competency are not curriculum because they merely specify the outcomes of learning, and that this 'frees' teachers to develop creative and innovative 'delivery strategies' that meet the needs of 'clients'.

In contrast, this chapter argues that the structure and content of CBT acts as a mechanism for social power by privileging employer perspectives. It uses Australia as an illustrative case study to demonstrate that competency-based VET qualifications deny students access to the theoretical knowledge that underpins vocational practice. They result in unitary and unproblematic conceptions of work because students are not provided with the means to participate in theoretical debates shaping their field of practice. CBT is thus a form of 'silencing' because it excludes students from access to the means needed to envisage alternative futures within their field. The first section of the chapter draws on the work of Basil Bernstein, who was a key English sociologist of education from the 1970s till the end of the century, to distinguish between theoretical and everyday knowledge, and to argue for the centrality of theoretical knowledge in vocational qualifications. The second section considers whether CBT shapes curriculum. The final section illustrates the chapter's argument by comparing two qualifications in community development; one is based on CBT and it replaced the other, which was not based on CBT.