PRIFYSGOL glyndŵr UNIVERSITY

Glyndŵr University
Glyndŵr University Research Online

Professional and Vocational Education Research Unit

Education

1-1-2008

Implementing Competencies and their impact on Social Education

Thoby Miller
Glyndwr University, t.miller@glyndwr.ac.uk

Follow this and additional works at: http://epubs.glyndwr.ac.uk/cprs

Part of the Curriculum and Social Inquiry Commons, Educational Administration and Supervision Commons, and the Educational Assessment, Evaluation, and Research Commons

Copyright © 2008 European Journal of Social Education. This is the author's final version of the work after peer review. This paper was first published in Volume 14/15 of the European Journal of Social 2008. Information about the journal is available at http://www.feset.org/en/home/journal/single/article/n1213-2007-kopie-1.html?tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=3&cHash=423b393bc3

Recommended Citation
Miller, T. (2008) 'Implementing Competencies and their impact on Social Education'. European Journal of Social Education No 14/15

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Education at Glyndŵr University Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in Professional and Vocational Education Research Unit by an authorized administrator of Glyndŵr University Research Online. For more information, please contact d.jepson@glyndwr.ac.uk.

The devil in the detail; competencies and their impact on creative social education

Thoby Miller
Glyndŵr University
Wrexham
Wales

Abstract
This paper examines the benefits and problems of implementing a system of competencies, with particular reference to social education in the UK. It recognises the potential value of National Occupational Standards as a means of promoting public esteem and recognition by other professionals, providing a framework for the discussing and enhancing practice and a means of maintaining quality and standards. However, the narrow instrumental emphasis on outcomes involves a lack of emphasis on the process of learning, marginalises professional values and ignores the context in which learning takes place. Consequently National Occupational Standards are only useful when used in conjunction with a broad-based education and training programme, which encourages creative practice and innovation and is aimed at producing fully-reflective and self-critical practitioners.

Introduction

It is generally accepted that social education practice is defined and underpinned by a number of guiding principles. These represent how practice within that occupational area has been carried out in the past and provide a framework for the education and training of future professionals. Yet when we attempt to identify those competencies through the process of mapping existing practice, we begin to encounter difficulties. Reaching a consensus over which elements of practice are most important can be a lengthy process and one that is always liable to result in a dilution of content and a resulting indeterminacy in how the substance of the competencies are expressed. Once the competencies are agreed upon, we are confronted by a further problem of how they can be integrated into the profession, both at the level of education and training and in relation to existing practitioners. To what extent do education programmes need to be re-drafted or at least adjusted in line with the new framework? What is gained and lost in that process?

At the level of existing practice, the difficulties are more intractable. Social education emphasises the process of learning, the importance of the occupational value-base and the necessity creating effective practice that is appropriate to the context. National Occupational Standards are too narrow and instrumental in their focus to encompass these essential elements.

The implementation of a series of competencies appears to carry quite a specific and restricted message to practitioners who may feel they have already developed a much broader style of practice; one which stresses the

process of learning within a explicit value-base and which is relevant to the context in which they are working.

It is argued here that this raises questions concerning the importance of encouraging the sort of creative expression that is essential to social education. For example, in their attempt to curb poor practice, does the implementation of occupational competencies limit the possibilities for innovation? Are they framed in such a way that they encourage inspirational creativity? Are they sensitive to the idea of social education as living dynamic, performed through sequences of reflexive interaction with service users?

This paper seeks to evaluate the possible effects of the implementation of competencies and offers a model of practice that could be used to ensure the process of introducing these frameworks enhances social education practice.

The case for competencies

On a simple level, a system of competencies is an attempt to encapsulate key elements of an area of professional practice. Taken together they aim to describe the different ways in which good practice in that sector can be expressed and so can used a way for the public to recognise and understand the legitimacy of the work being carried out. For youth and community workers in the UK, this is a vital function, since the work they do is often misunderstood and as a result, undervalued by the general public. Regrettably, it is also the case that some professionals working in adjacent sectors like teaching and social workers have been known to exhibit a similar mixture of ignorance and prejudice over the purpose and practice of social education. In this respect, the National Occupational Standards [NOS] for Youth Work and for Community Work can represent a means of challenging the problem and promoting an understanding of the parameters of meaningful education as far wider than they are sometimes considered to be.
National Occupational Standards can also give practitioners a framework for evaluating ways of working, although this is dependent on the way that competencies are conceptualised and implemented. If they are used as guidelines, open to revision and amendment through critical reflection, the process can be a means of generating creative practice and incorporating new ideas. If however, competencies are seen as a means of gaining compliance, then it is likely that the possibilities for innovation will be severely limited. If the manner of implementation is viewed as being imposed, practitioners can adopt a tokenistic response to their implementation; a nominal adherence that does not coincide with what practice actually occurs.

Competencies can also be used to facilitate the validation and endorsement of programmes of education and training and the inspection of current practice. Used in this way, they can promote the achievement of consistent quality and standards of delivery between different education and training providers as well as providing transparent public accountability. Once again,

the impact of these processes is dependent on the manner in which they are conducted. They can be used to celebrate good practice and encourage future improvements or they can undermine staff morale and intrude disproportionately into the day to day work of delivering a programme of study.

The problems which competencies can cause

The following discussion of the problems associated with the implementation of systems of competencies will concentrate on three areas:

- mapping an occupational sector and how the resulting competencies should be expressed
- integrating the framework into education and training
- integrating the framework into the occupational sector

Mapping an occupational sector and reaching a consensus

Mapping an occupational sector is carried out by means of a widespread consultation process involving practitioners, educators and trainers. This is intended to underwrite the credibility of the competencies devised so that educators and trainers, employers and practitioners can accept that the frameworks are representative of current professional activities. Such a consultation is a development from previous strategies which involved using independent consultants to conduct the exercise. It can be argued that using independent analysts to carry out mapping the sector generated a more objective perspective, yet the evidence in the UK is that these claims are questionable. Many of those working in the sector doubted the value of this less grounded view and believed the resulting competencies lacked a depth. However even when a thorough consultation of the sector is carried out, there are still difficulties in reaching agreement over the way that the competencies are framed. In some cases, that the need to achieve a consensus among all those involved has resulted in wording that is too generalised. Elsewhere, the attempt to include all shades of opinion results in a level of repetition that is unhelpful.
The following example from the NOS for Community Development Work illustrate the problem of how the key purposes of this area of social education can become obscured through over-elaboration. Yet, this is not to say that he six key purposes identified do not provide a comprehensive summary of the roles which a community development worker should be expected to demonstrate in order to carry out their work adequately:

- Develop working relationships with communities and organisations
- Encourage people to work with and learn from each other
- Work with people in communities to plan for change and take collective action
- Work with people in communities to develop and use frameworks for evaluation
- Develop community organisations
- Reflect on develop own practice and role

These key roles are clear and precise. Yet once they are broken down into specific tasks, the problem of over-specification and repetition begins to emerge. For example, the detail on the second of these key purposes – Key Role B 'Encourage people to work with and learn from each other' – describes this role as comprising seven elements, with each of these further subdivided into two or three tasks. But it is difficult, even at the level of the seven elements, to differentiate between them. B4 ('Promote and support learning from practice and experience') and B5 ('Create opportunities for learning from practice and experience') appear to be almost identical. Is there really a practical distinction between promoting and creating opportunities? Even if it is felt that there is, could they not have been combined into one point?

The further sub-divisions compound this repetition. It could be said that promoting the value of learning from practice and experience and supporting and facilitating that learning are all part of the same process not discrete tasks. It is likely that supporting and facilitating learning will include revisiting the value of the enterprise as part of a process of critical reflection. To break down what is a re-iterative process into finite tasks is not merely unnecessary but actually misleading, seeming to suggest that promoting the value of learning from practice and experience is a task to be carried out only once before moving on.

Neither is this an isolated instance. Key Role C ('Work with people in communities to plan for change and take collective action') breaks down planning into what appears to be separate and consecutive activities, when Key Role F on Reflection and Development of Practice indicates the need for an ongoing process of self-evaluation; a circular rather than a linear approach. This artificial separation of tasks encourages the practitioner to provide a series of separate responses, when effective critical self-reflection indicates a much more flexible process. So C1 ('Select options and make plans for collective action') may be an activity that needs to be re-visited on several occasions to refine and develop that the options selected.

The resulting NOS represent competent practice as consisting of a series of finite tasks when this is evidently not the case. Promoting ongoing reflection in professional practice is a means of constantly re-visiting and re-evaluating the effectiveness of a particular course of action and consequently the implementation of NOS needs to be mediated by a programme of education, which facilitates the integration of these frameworks into a more flexible mode of practice. As Wells (2005) has argued, a series of inter-related hierarchies of task are not a means of providing a student or a new employee with the informational context to function as a fully reflective and creative practitioner.

Integrating the framework into education and training

The fundamental problem in integrating a system of competencies into existing programmes of education is the inconsistency between the notion of competency and the process of learning or learning how to learn. The kind of summative assessment that these outcome-based frameworks rely upon only provide a statement of what someone can do, whereas a genuinely educative process includes elements of formative assessment where the learner is

consistently given feedback to enable them to explore way to enhance their performance. Competencies try to use tightly structured information to describe tasks while inclusive education engages with the meanings that individual and groups construct in relation to the information and the motivations which they have for learning. Outcomes-based systems infer competence regardless of context whereas formative education considers how specific settings encourage or inhibit the learning process.
As a result of this lack of emphasis on a situated dynamic of learning, competencies can only provide a framework for informed discussion and analysis of how professional roles can be carried out in particular settings and in relation to a developing process of understanding. Inevitably this limits the use of competencies in the workplace unless they are complemented by the means of interrogating, analysing and applying the framework.

NOS and other competency-based frameworks normally seek to adopt a value-neutral form of expression, considered by many to be virtually impossible to achieve. As Oates (2004) demonstrates there is a fundamental naivety at the heart of such a venture. It shows a failure to acknowledge that unintended bias is always likely to occur and that consequently, any language set needs to be open to analysis in order to identify particular orientations. Although for the most part, NOS overlook the value base of a particular occupational sector, there are occasions when values do appear and when they do, they can either obscure in their meaning or questionable in their assumptions.
For example, the NOS for Youth Work (PAULO 2002) quite rightly identify that a key role of youth worker is to 'Build relationships with young people'. Yet, once again the detailed elements of this role are too opaque. As a sub-section to A3 'Enable young people to be active citizens', A.3.1 says 'Assist young people to understand their communities and their own roles within them.' In that the word 'community' is generally recognised as being one of the most contentious in the English language and one which university graduates generally struggle to conceptualise with any clarity, it is difficult for an inexperienced practitioner to know how best to approach the task. Of course, there are many strategies that can be used to encourage young people to consider the importance of the community they live in and their role within it but does this comprise 'understanding'?
Elsewhere in the NOS for Youth Work, the competencies make assertions about the nature of organisations when there should be room to debate. Section D covers 'Work with Young People in accordance with the Core Values of Youth Work' and D3 'Manage your work and create effective work relationships' contains the competency D.3.1 'Work in line with organisational strategies, policies and procedures'. Whilst no-one would want to youth workers to disregard the strategies, policies and procedures of the organisation that they are a part of, the requirement to 'work in line' suggests an entirely passive acceptance of them and fails to consider the concept of a learning organisation. In equating competence with obedience, this indicates a demand for compliance where there is a need for critical consideration of how effective the strategies, policies and procedures of an organisation are at any one time. Surely it should be the case that qualifying and newly-qualified practitioners demonstrate the competence of being able to interrogate the way

their organisation works in order to help maintain its effectiveness within rapidly changing environments. In this respect, an ability to consider the importance of the context in which key tasks are carried out is essential. Both the form and content of NOS fail to encourage this and this is why, whilst they constitute a series of valuable guidelines, they cannot be effective in isolation from a thorough programme of education and training.

Yet even within the context of a programme of education or training, the incorporation of NOS presents difficulties. To what extent does the process of mapping NOS into existing programmes of study have a significant impact on the content and style of that programme? It is sometimes hard to say whether or not precisely whether any one competency is addressed by the learning outcomes of a particular module. The re-drafting of a module specification to include NOS might well result in arbitrary decisions regarding which elements to specify, for it is not seen as appropriate to include too many.
Since competencies could be said to involve an attempt to reduce professional practice to a number of constituent parts, it is perhaps unsurprising that it is difficult to integrate them into an education programme based upon a desire to open up students' understanding. Such a narrowing down of professional tasks does not sit easily with an educational process that is rich in information and content and framed around developmental learning. Consequently, within the context of a lively and wide-ranging discussion of practice that might occur in a particular module, it is possible that any element of the NOS might be referred to and used as evidence.

Integrating the framework into the occupational sector

This concluding section of this paper links the discussion of implementation of competencies to a model of practice which emphasises the importance of the creative performance in social education. It is argued that this is essential in order to maintain a continuous learning dynamic between the service-user and the professional social educator, through a process of critical self-reflection. As a result, the promotion of competencies has to be carried out in a way that acknowledges the need for creative practice and provides a framework for this creativity to thrive.
The model of practice proposed suggests combining the concept of performativity as used by Judith Butler and other gender theorists with the notion of critical self-reflection to generate a view of social education as ideally involved in a continual process of self-generation. Such a model encourages social educators to see their work as defined by networks of communication which enable them to produce and re-produce their professional identities, so that those identities become part of a more fluid process; one that responds to the identified needs of service-users more precisely.
There is a deliberate attempt to re-define the use of the word performativity as a creative, open-ended professional performance, responsive to expressed needs with changing conditions. This is in sharp contrast to its current use in connection with performance indicators as a means of accountability.

The importance of the use of creative performance in this context is to place NOS as a framework of occupational guidelines; the basis for constructing a discursive space for developing innovative practice rather than a finite description of what good practice should comprise. This is not in any way to disregard the value of professional activity as carried on previously but an attempt to ensure that corpus of knowledge and understanding that defines an occupational sector is effectively used to encourage and facilitate the most appropriate forms of practice in the future.