

# **A Foucauldian strategy for vocational education and training research**

**Steven Hodge**

## **Abstract**

Vocational education and training (VET) is an area of research dominated by positivist approaches. Such approaches complement the behaviourist educational philosophy known as 'competency-based training' (CBT) that underpins Australia's VET system. This paper reflects on a quandary encountered by researchers examining the history of competency-based education at a TAFE institution in South Australia. The issue was how to account for a series of mutations in the way CBT was understood and practised that subverted the largely unquestioned expectation of progress. The researchers found that Foucault's 'genealogical' approach allowed for the construction of a mode of intelligibility that lends the history a disturbing cogency. At the centre of this construction is an understanding of CBT as a highly permeable system whose configurability supports the reticulation of multiple forms of power.

In 1983 a trial of competency-based training (CBT) commenced in the automotive section of the Croydon Park College of TAFE in South Australia. This approach to training, an incongruous-seeming combination of behavioural techniques with a humanist rationale, was first deployed as an ensemble during the 'Performance-Based Teacher Education' (PBTE) movement of the 1970s in the United States. Many formulations of PBTE were published, but they all basically exhibit the pattern articulated by Elam (1971, pp. 6–7), who provided the following list of 'essential characteristics' of PBTE:

1. Competencies (knowledge, skills, behaviours) 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 behaviour in relation to specific competencies
  - 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
  - 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, analysing, interpreting, or evaluating situations or behaviour
  - 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.

The Croydon Park program included all of the features in Elam's list, but placed extra emphasis on the fourth characteristic, leading to a progressive program that was admired by educators around Australia for replacing the massed 'lock step' progression of traditional apprenticeships with a regime of 'individualised' and 'self-paced' learning. CBT finally allowed this particular apprenticeship to be brought into line with the philosophy of the 'Kangan reforms' of the Australian vocational education and training (VET) sector in the 1970s which stressed individual development alongside the goal of vocational skill acquisition (Smith & Keating 2003).

An examination of the process of the formulation of competency standards and assessment criteria in the Croydon program points to tensions over the control of the apprentice's curriculum. Instead of the behaviours being based on actual job performances in workplaces, the staff took the opportunity to entrench an idealised vision of the occupation and industry so that apprentices would always know the right way to do the work despite the perceived reality of shoddy, cost-cutting work practices back in their workplace. CBT allowed educators to articulate a definitive truth of the trade and act as custodians of a tradition that seemed threatened by a culture of compromise out in the industry.

While CBT was being trialled and established at Croydon Park in the 1980s, at the national level a profound alteration in the perspective of policy makers on the economic significance of VET took place. It was argued that VET should be integrated into the national economic system to contribute to the competitiveness of an economy with global aspirations. CBT was selected as the form of the new national VET system because it appeared to offer, with its publically accessible curriculum and built-in guarantee of vocational relevance, the greatest capacity for integration into the market economy. Responsibility for the formulation of competences (Elam's first characteristic) was allocated to industry bodies, while a new 'demand-driven' market environment was constructed for VET supply (Smith & Keating 2003).

Throughout the 1990s training reform gathered pace and by the end of that decade had completely transformed Australian VET. At Croydon Park the new practice of CBT was progressively introduced by institution managers. Interviews with original staff in 2008 revealed a pervasive sense that the new system betrayed the principles of CBT, particularly in

relation to self-paced learning, which turned out to be uneconomical and was axed by the institution in 2000. The staff also resented loss of control over the formulation of competency standards and curriculum development, arguing that this process led to a decline in the standards and undermined their own professionalism. From the viewpoint of the educators who pioneered CBT at Croydon Park, disclosed in the 2008 interviews, the breathtaking elevation in stature of CBT that marks Australian training reform paradoxically led to an impoverished educational practice.

Some of Foucault's ideas lend this history a disturbing cogency. His 'genealogical' method suggests we give up the hope of finding a progressive unfolding of educational truth in the phenomena. As Dreyfus and Rabinow explain, 'Genealogy opposes itself to traditional historical method ... Genealogy seeks out discontinuities where others found continuous development. It finds recurrences and play where others found progress and seriousness' (1983, p. 106). Foucault himself asserts that 'The traditional devices for constructing a comprehensive view of history and for retracing the past as a patient and continuous development must be systematically dismantled' (1984, p. 88). In the place of historical constants, an 'effective history' would identify the 'technologies of power', strategies and objectives that govern the practices that emerge, overlap and succeed each other in the 25 years of CBT at Croydon Park.

One of the technologies described by Foucault (1979) is 'disciplinary power', which replaced displays of sovereign power in punishment spectacles with humane, highly organised techniques of control in penal institutions. Disciplinary techniques serve to disperse power, with sovereign exercise making room for the delegation of control and even exercise by the subject on the subject. This type of power, as a 'means of correct training' applies as well to other modern institutions such as factories, schools and armies. Commentators such as Usher and Edwards (1994) see CBT as a fruitful field for analysis in terms of disciplinary power. CBT is nothing if not a prescription for 'the means of correct training'. It concentrates techniques of surveillance, normalisation and examination into a system that sharply foregrounds the trainee-subject against a discrete scaffold of power. The specification and documentation of vocational competence in behavioural terms is a prominent feature of all competence-based programs, and is uniquely amenable to the panoptic gaze of the disciplinary power analysed by Foucault. At the same time, the statements define 'standards'

of competence that express the norm of workplace performance. The examination of competence is a ritual in which evidence is submitted to a judgement of 'competent' or 'not-yet-competent' against the workplace standard in which process the truth of the assessee-subject as a competent/not-yet-competent worker is articulated, registered and broadcast.

Usher and Edwards (1994) draw attention to the apparently anomalous incorporation of a 'liberal humanist' element in the form of 'student-centred learning' among the behavioural components of CBT. Emphasis on this element was noted in the Croydon program, and clearly positions the program in the Australian VET discourse of the 1970s and 80s. This was the period of the Kangan reforms, which raised the profile of VET in the educational landscape and also embedded it in a broader liberal-humanist discourse that stressed individual development and equity. At the same time, the experimental nature of the Croydon program allowed educators to take firm control of the curriculum, acting according to a defensive mentality that insulated the program from the industry it ostensibly served.

A key argument of this paper is that the faultline dividing the CBT practices at Croydon Park is that the form of CBT introduced under training reform represents disciplinary technology that has been redeployed as a governmental mechanism. Foucault contrasted disciplinary power with a mode of power that takes whole populations as its object. This other type of power, which is articulated in terms of security and 'biopower', is concerned with the prosperity of the whole, with averages, movements and risk, and sets collective phenomena within milieux which, if understood well enough, can be manipulated to manage populations (Foucault 2007). In the environment of training reform, this kind of power can be observed in the effort to tie VET into broader economic processes so it would be able to contribute to the nation's economic security, the 'marketisation' of VET so that the costly exercise of vocational education could be governed by the natural mechanisms of the market thus mitigating arbitrary and potential wasteful expenditure, the creation of processes and institutions (such as the National Centre for Vocational Education Research) to generate a continuous stream of statistical data on VET participation, and the introduction of a suite of entry-level qualifications to maintain the unemployed population in a state of readiness for productive work.

‘Governmentality’ is a term that covers the superimposition of the techniques of security – concerned with collectives – over disciplinary techniques – concerned with individuals (Gordon 1991). The amalgam played out in governmental rationality therefore reaches the level of individual conduct and connects it with a focus on the social whole. In terms of Australia’s VET system, the new context of disciplinary technologies served to heighten the disciplinary effectiveness of the mechanisms. Training reform led to the codification of tens of thousands of competency standards, covering virtually all aspects and levels of most occupations, producing a stupendous grid for articulating the contents and context of the trainee-worker. The great grid of competencies was aligned with a new national qualifications framework, which, through the technology of ‘recognition of prior learning’ assessment, allows workers and potential workers to discover what they have become, and points the way to what they could yet be. In the new system the trainee-subject is encouraged to take responsibility for their own skill development and expected to manage themselves as entrepreneurs of their own ‘skill sets’ on the job market. A new field that also opened up was the educator and their work. Training reform disciplined the trainer too, by removing their control over curriculum, and forcing them to undertake a new mandatory qualification in training that acts as an induction into the training reform version of CBT.

At Croydon Park, what was once an isolated, experimental application of disciplinary technology was displaced by an apparatus that, while deploying the same techniques, set them within a new, globalised context. Techniques of surveillance, normalisation and examination that make up CBT were discovered and appropriated by a neo-liberal governmentality and inscribed in a new register of power that produced, in the eyes of the original educators, a practice that was dubious in its effects and CBT in name only.

**Steven Hodge** is a PhD candidate in the Centre for Research in Education, Equity and Work at the University of South Australia, where he is researching learning in vocational education. He was a secondary art teacher and also studied philosophy. Steven has worked in the vocational education sector over the last decade, becoming interested in epistemological problems in Australia’s vocational education system along the way.

[steven.hodge@unisa.edu.au](mailto:steven.hodge@unisa.edu.au)

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