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**Title:** Between rationality and emancipation : (De)constructing competency-based education

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**Citation style:** Przybylska Irena. (2015). Between rationality and emancipation : (De)constructing competency-based education. W: A. Stopińska-Pajak (red.), "Between history and the theory of education : methodology, traditions, quest" (S. 111-130). Katowice : Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego.



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## Between rationality and emancipation: (De)constructing competency-based education

Since the 1970s a qualitative change in educational demand has been observed and emphasized in pedagogical discourse. The change in question resulted from fundamental changes in sociocultural life which in turn resulted in a shift of social needs and expectations. Being aware of the broad and ever-changing context of education as a whole we are increasingly more sceptical and inclined to distance ourselves from defining the goals of education in rigid, narrow, and acontextual categories of skill, technology or craftsmanship.

The rationally and technically oriented tendency in education was initially a product of the first educational systems whose aim was to provide general access to education for the purposes of social adaptation. Formulating educational enterprises as knowledge and action procedures (skills and schemas) that can easily be measured and assessed has its roots in behavioral psychology and positivist concepts of knowledge and science. The cult of reason and cognition it imposes, so characteristic to Western civilization, has helped forge a rationalistic vision of an individual and education.

Bureaucracy, the supremacy of technological interest and pro-meritocratic argumentation are the reasons why education has become an utterly reified means to ideological ends with the individual and social progress or development treated in an equally objectified manner. The popularization of IT technologies reinforces this negative tendency (Czerepaniak-Walczak, 2006). Critical philosophy has dubbed this process desocialization — a condition in which school does not serve any emancipatory purposes and “the rules of interpersonal interactions take on the traits one could describe as ‘inhuman.’ An individual thus turns into a ‘peripheral apparatus,’ an interface of the operative structure” (p. 125).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> All the ensuing translations from Polish come from the translator.

The new discourse on education is interrelated to the search for language and critical reflection, as well as argumentation to support the development of both the individual and the society. The synergistic teleology of individual and social development has been strongly represented in philosophy and pedagogy since the beginning of the 20th century (the examples of which are Theodor Adorno, Jürgen Habermas, John Dewey, and Sergey Hessen, among others) but dates back to the concept of the human subject from the times of the Enlightenment (John Locke, Jean Jacques Rousseau). Still, it appears that the rhetoric of the discussion on education should shift from adaptational to emancipatory and critical. What can currently be observed is that the trust in reason as the sole strategy of overcoming limitations, of understanding and operating in the world is being replaced with the belief in a multifaceted nature of development and its various determinants. For these reasons, I will refer in this paper to a context broader than just philosophical rationalism or psychological intellectualism and draw from pragmatism, progressivism, cognitive constructionism, and Habermas's theory of rationality.

The reflection on the new aspects of constructing and employing knowledge and skill, but also their situatedness in the structure of personal and social developmental processes results in a multiplicity of educational discourses and consequent attempts at mapping the phenomena and categories anew. The idea of competency-based education is definitely one such attempt, whose goal is to work out coherent, common educational standards for all European citizens.

Since the 1970s many lists of professional competences have been prepared for various occupational groups. These sets of detailed skill descriptions are to enhance the effectiveness of educational actions as well as facilitate adaptation to ever-changing circumstances. In 1996, the International Commission on Education for the 21st century, chaired by Jacques Delors prepared an educational report entitled "Learning: The Treasure Within" (Part One, Chap. One, Recommendation no. 3), (<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0010/001095/109590eo.pdf>). When pointing to the historically unprecedented conditions for the circulation of knowledge, the authors of the report referred to two seemingly dichotomous educational imperatives: to hand down as much knowledge and skill as possible and to help individuals to steer "the world towards greater mutual understanding, a greater sense of responsibility and greater solidarity, through acceptance of our spiritual and cultural differences" (Delors, 1996). The concept of education oriented on the development of competences was born precisely as a result of a quest for such educational goals whose realization would prepare an individual for creative adaptation in a postindustrial world. It is in such a context that the category of competences understood as knowledge, attitudes, and practical skills that would enable one to position oneself in the world and make use of

technological advancements was initially popularized. Nevertheless, when reading the abovementioned Delors report, or similar documents for that matter, one can sense a certain troubling instrumentalization at work. There are reasons to suspect that speaking of "handing down" or "providing" knowledge runs the risk of being turned into a practice as the colonizing of minds: shaping habits, perpetuating certain patterns, and/or perpetuating schematic ways of thinking that hinder peoples' intellectual independence. Instead of a map of activities or precise competences, a person's "steering wheel" can be a competence much closer to reflectivity and wisdom than the list of the so-called key competences would have one think (Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 December 2006 on key competences for lifelong learning. <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:32006H0962>).

"One can be in the world in a variety of ways" – we can either be subjects or play a pre-existing part (Czerepaniak-Walczak, 2006, p. 116). Accordingly, education can facilitate adaptation to a role, a part to be played, and thus be a mere socializing process. A human being as a subject has the right to acknowledge one's natural needs, but also to voice a critique, or one's own cultural expression, and to strive for social emancipation. Paulo Freire cautioned against narrowing the mission of the school institution to fostering adaptation, in a social as well as intellectual sense: to teaching how to memorize instead of developing a reflective criticality towards reality, and the ability to understand (Freire, 2001). Maria Czerepaniak-Walczak points to a peculiar paradox of education, whose goal should be to prepare the individual for adulthood understood as living independently and responsibly. Despite that glorious goal, it turns out that accepting what education has to offer amounts to adjusting to a prescribed role, "speaking in quotes," the effect of which is, more often than not, settling for replicating the social status of one's parents (Czerepaniak-Walczak, 117). In other words, at best the process is completed with acquiring adaptational competences and endowing the individual with the status of an adult. Transgressing these limitations in education would only be possible by creating a project whose contents, methods, and the pace of acquiring certain "model" skills are tailored to individual needs. Competences have both a personal and a social dimension. Jürgen Habermas emphasized this interrelation as he wrote that the "evolutionary learning process of societies is dependent on the competence of the single members. These, in turn, do not acquire their competences as isolated monads, but by growing into the symbolic structure of their social world" (Czerepaniak-Walczak, p. 128). Independence, proactiveness, consciousness should be the standard markers of achieving "adulthood," maturity or competency, but also the instruments of social democratization.

## Competences: Skills or wisdom?

Competences are a concept associated with an instrumental trend in education, a specialist preparation to fulfilling certain professional roles or with particular technical skills. Currently, and largely thanks to the ongoing implementation of the European standards of education, this concept as a kind of a theoretical construct has become a synonym for all kinds of human behaviors and capabilities that determine the effectiveness of one's actions. Competences are identified to be a wide range of attitudes, traits, skills or abilities, talents, motivations, and many other categories. Despite quite precise estimations at hand enumerating what skills are indispensable, it still remains problematic which are the "most important" without which an individual is only a sum of loose predispositions, a capital in constant need of investment by the interested institutions. Although the dissidents of education have declared that competency-based education will eradicate the disproportions between individual social expectations (including those of the employers), it is debatable whether the calibrating abilities which individuals should acquire may serve only to uphold the existing status quo of the free market or also fostering thoughtful adaptation.

Due to its ambiguity this concept is in common use and has become a euphemism, endowed with meanings that change depending on the context. Maria Czerepaniak-Walczak noted that competences as a keyword has started to be used just whenever one is at a loss to describe individual qualities (p. 128).

The concept of competences is employed in colloquial speech, psychology, sociology, and economic science. Since the 1990s it has also taken root in the educational sciences. Colloquially, we tend to identify this concept with qualifications or an ability to operate smoothly in the professional arena. The term has gained its popularity thanks to linguistics and Noam Chomsky's concept of communicative competence (Chomsky, 1965). Even theories on human resources management use definitions (Kossowska & Sołtysińska, 2002) drawing from the theory of motivation which state that competences are a conglomerate of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that express a readiness to perform (Tomaszewski, 1987, p. 491). The category of experience becomes the pivotal point in the process of shaping and expanding competences as they are a personal predisposition, developed in performance.

When looking for the sources of a competency-based performance one could refer to the ideology of education, philosophy, and psychology. The place one occupies on the subject-object, ability-wisdom, or passivity-activity continua are only three realms for reconstructing competency-based educa-

tion in the context of: (1) Technological orientation; (2) Humanistic orientation; and (3) Progressive-Critical orientation.

The above indicates various spaces of acquiring, developing, and actualizing competences within human attitudes and performance. Each of them is inscribed in a different scientific paradigm and refers to different ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions (Kwiatkowska, 1998). What is more, each reflects a different ideological and social context. Their order (hierarchy) is not random either.

Within the technological paradigm competences are conceived as a set of abilities, skills, behaviors, and practical knowledge. Seen in this light competency-based education is an instrumental kind of education where competences are acquired by means of social learning, familiarizing oneself with practice, and the structure of reinforcements.

The technological approach to learning and competences has its rationale in the psychology of behavioral learning, within the positivist paradigm. If we were to refer to the traditions drawing from Burrhus Frederik Skinner and Edward Thorndike then learning competences would be an instrumental, behavioral process, taking place because of extraneous stimuli. The positivist take on knowledge and cognition as well as treating them in instrumental categories, namely as an instrument of controlling and changing the environment, means that the goal of education is to prepare one for intelligent adjustment to the external reality (see Habermas, 1984). Therefore, competences understood in technological terms are utterly devoid of the category of subjectivity, autonomy, and a system of values, being limited to knowledge, ready-made practices and chosen personality traits. Knowledge does not actualize itself here in the process of its own construction but is acquired through observation of the so-called good practice and has a purely practical dimension. Professionalism and skillfulness are the characteristics of professions not typically associated with general human development. Instrumental competence orientation manifests itself in actions effective by way of exploiting proven methods and schematic scenarios. Acquiring knowledge, as one of the elements that constitute competences, is conceived as the transmission of information, tradition, norms and values generalized by the past generations (cf. Kwiatkowska, pp. 34–50). The instrumental approach to human activity and the process of life-preparation is expressive of the so-called cognitive-instrumental reason (Giroux calls this rationality a technical one, whereas Kwaśnica — an adaptational one). Garry Evert thus commented the cognitive-instrumental reason: “The end result is the reduction of ‘moral, aesthetic, educational and political issues to technical problems: why and what are reduced to how’” (Evert, 1991).

Within such a framework competences are of an “instant” (cf. Melosik, 2009) character: condensed to typically technical, practical solutions, not de-

manding reflection but rather flexibility and guaranteeing a quick, “instant” outcome, an immediate reaction. Such an education is narrow, specialized and a means to professional and social adaptation. Developing competences understood in those terms is an externally steered process, modelled on the transmission of knowledge, values, and norms.

Exteriority and objectivity are categories that both in education and life simplify human activity to receiving messages and adjusting to the expectations of the environment. Education built around instrumental competences is a repetitive process of preparation to stereotypical actions and circumstances. Aims are set and defined in terms of fixed knowledge and skills prescribed in accordance with the standards of cultural propriety (cf. Kohlberg & Mayer, 1972). Lists of practical competences for teachers, be they substantive, diagnostic, organizational, communicational, research-related, IT-related, etc. (Kwiatkowska, 1988, p. 17) are demonstrative of precisely such a reductionist approach. These competence lists characterize and pin down the knowledge, skills, and behavior which teachers should acquire in a very strict way and, theoretically at least, guarantee the effectiveness of undertaken actions.

Accepting the dependence of society on impersonal information codes, a technical/rationalistic concept of competences which is thoroughly saturated with passivity and a unification of educational standards, as if their aim was to produce a “collective identity” (see Kohlberg & Mayer, 1972). Despite the fact that technical competences by definition should foster adaptation to professional and social roles, a disadaptationality of such a strategy of education can be observed, which corresponds neither to individual nor social demands. Most dimensions of social and cultural life demand a greater degree of one’s own thoughtfulness, responsibility, and independence; the importance of the so-called personal soft skills (Goleman, 1994): communicational, interpersonal or emotional is also emphasized.

Habermas argued that individual need for communication in modern society is less and less satisfied by interpretations rooted in tradition and we are increasingly inclined to build the consensus either drawing from first-hand experience of social participation or expert knowledge which then becomes internalized (see Habermas, 1984). As the society is increasingly incapable of rationalizing these by empirical/analytical means the shift from cognitive-instrumental to communicational rationality seems justified (see Habermas, 1984).

Communicational rationality takes the emphasis from the consensus arbitrarily enforced by tradition and lays it on actions oriented at communication. By communicating, we achieve an understanding and consensus, while subjects interrelate. Striving for a state of an understanding and negotiating meanings generates practical interests, including those of an emancipatory

nature provided that the criteria or claims of “importance” such as authenticity, rightness, truth, and clarity are met (see Habermas, 1984). Communicationality is also an ontic trait of subjects, based on the assumption that both means and ends of human activity are of a communicational character.

The multiformity of human rationality and the complexity of the social reality as formulated by Habermas require a complementary approach to developing competences in education. An answer to the needs resulting from the technologization of society and relativization of the essential categories can be found in a holistic interpretation of competences as an expression of a critical attitude towards the environment and one’s place therein. Accordingly, a proposition to conceive of competences in a humanistic and critical perspective resurfaces and will be developed further in the remainder of this paper.

David Carr differentiates between understanding competences in terms of predispositions when talking about lists, sets of competences (plural) and competence (singular) which is a holistic capability for opinion and judgement (1995, pp. 262–263). Competence and competences in the rhetoric of this theorist are not part of the same continuum: a shift from competences as a set of predispositions to competence as a reflective factor is by no means obvious. We could say, referring to Lawrence Kohlberg, that professional competence, for instance, can only be acquired at a post-conventional stage of development. What is characteristic for all earlier stages, particularly the pre-conventional one, is acting in accordance with the conventional models of professional and social roles, which requires competences in the instrumental register of the word. The conventional stage would roughly mean a gradual transition from imitative, schematic, and largely repetitive actions, to independent and creative ones (Kohlberg & Turiel, 1973). What is more, adaptational competences, characteristic of the early stages, do not guarantee attaining a broadly understood competence (professionalism, expertise, reflectivity) at a post-conventional stage” (Kohlberg & Hersh, 1977). Professional competence cannot be reduced to competences in the instrumental sense of the word as competence is an actualization of the moral values of a given profession” (Carr, 1995, p. 264). A contemplative disposition, self-knowledge and motivation — the preconditions for activity and active experiencing, are indispensable for developing competences understood in those terms. Here the individual subjectivity is the core around which competences are constructed, therefore one could call such an approach to defining competences a humanistic one.

The “discovery” of the human, as a person in educational sciences took place mostly thanks to humanist psychology. An interest with the human and the inner determiners of the developmental process was already present in educational sciences in the form of the psychologizing theories of the early

20th century, in paedocentrism and, at least partly, in pragmatism. However, it was the development of humanist psychology that has contributed to revaluations of the aims of education and the rules of its organization in a crucial way.

When reconstructing the thinking on competences bearing the assumptions of humanist psychology in mind (humanist orientation), one can distinguish the interest in the personal dimensions of competency. Focusing on the human being and, above all, on the process of “becoming” a person has caused the stress to shift from the “effects” of educational endeavors (competence) to the very process of development and learning. Janusz Koziński strongly emphasized the uniqueness of individual personality that cannot be reduced to a set of alienated components: attitudes, needs, thoughts, and skills (Koziński, 1980, p. 258). This “singularity” of personality makes education a very personal process, happening at an individual pace and direction. By the same token competences could only be conceived of as personally determined, varying from person to person and realized in the process of self-actualization.

Accordingly, acquiring and developing competences is also an individual process, originating from the inside and realized in human interactions. Competences are actualized via human personality and their development is integrated with personal development (see also Kwiatkowska, 2008). What logically follows in this line of thinking is that education is not really a process of acquiring competences, but of their unravelling, creating, and expanding while an individual will not be able to develop his or her competences if he or she lacks inner motivation and is not an active participant in the learning process.

When Robert W. White (1959) studied human motivation in 1959 he put forward a concept of individual competence as a factor significantly boosting the effectiveness of human actions and operating in one’s environment. Being different from biological motives, competence motives are never satisfied in an absolute way which boosts individual development. Personal competence seen in the light of White’s theses is an ability to engage in interactions in a changing, often disadvantageous social and physical environment (White, pp. 297–333). Simultaneously, it is the very contact with the environment (particularly in terms of language and society) that causes predispositions to grow. If confronting the environment is limited to adaptation because it is expected and demanded, individual competences might also be limited to those of an adaptational character. The full repertoire of competences can thrive only when individuals are expected to adapt in a creative way. Competence motivation would then seem close to Abraham Maslov’s concept on self-actualization as the ultimate human need. Formulated in such a fashion self-actualization is an infinite process, perpetually open (Maslov, 1997).

Accepting the fundamental claims of the of the humanist tendencies that argue that the human being is an autonomous totality and cognition is a subjective materialized in a communicational relationship with the world one should assume that competency-driven actions can only find "closure" in and via human personality. The development of competence in a humanistic sense of the word is directly linked to personal development and happens only by way of the subject's direct participation. If Carl Rogers' claim that a person is a process is true, then becoming a person cannot be of secondary importance with respect to learning life and work tactics and strategies as the common interpretation of competences would have it (Thorne, 2003). This means that every single student, every person by nature has the right to pursue a different, individual kind of competences that are partly determined by predispositions, but also susceptible to extraneous influences (educational or social).

The source of the third, progressive-critical orientation in defining competences is to be found in progressivism as well as in cognitive psychology and refers to critical thinking and functionalist epistemology. Following Kohlberg and Mayer one could assume that it is a progressive orientation, whereas if one were to draw from Kwiatkowska and her concept of the education of teachers it should more aptly be called functional.

Within this type of orientation, competences are to be conceived of in a dynamic fashion, as a cognitive structure subject to reorganizing rather than a set of skills and knowledge or attitudes. The development in this instance can be identified with progress towards higher stages of development that enable one to expand both cognitive and personal competences. These stages, referring also to Jean Piaget are relatively constant, qualitatively different and structured hierarchically, with the lower stages as the basis for the ones to follow (Garz, 2009, p. 34). When interpreting the stages of moral development distinguished by Kohlberg, Kwaśnica noted that competences are never finite and development consists in going beyond them. The highest standard of competences is achieved at a post-conventional stage, while the previous stages (pre-conventional and conventional) are of a preparatory character (Kwaśnica, 1995).

The progressivists insist on the importance of interaction in the developmental process where experience and cognitive conflict play an important part. Both experience conceived by the progressivists as a process of verifying, redefining attitudes, thoughts, behaviors, and cognitive conflict as a discomfort of the educational situation are indispensable for the development of competences. To experience authentically leads to the confrontation of competences: if their implications are experientially exhausted through a dialogic reaction with the environment then progress (i.e. development) can ensue (Kohlberg & Mayer, 1972, pp. 30–31). Accordingly, as John Dewey

(1910) pointed out, only those experiences that leave their creative imprint on future experiences are of educational value while the subject's activity stimulated by curiosity and doubt leads to the reorganization of thinking, emotions and morality which amounts to a change in attitude and, in consequence, of competences.

The development of competences framed in such a manner is thus a reorganization of their structures through experiencing and interactions, not the exercise of skills (technological orientation) or self-actualization (humanistic orientation). The aim of fostering competences is a functional development of cognitive structures which are the source of the ability to interpret reality, to endow it with meanings and take an attitude towards it. In this context competences would need to be seen as a complex, hierarchical structure developing towards reflectivity, intellectual and moral independence. It appears that such an understanding would bring the meaning of competences closer to wisdom: "Knowledge is information in context whereas wisdom is knowledge embedded in a system of values for the proper use of data, information, and knowledge" (Pachociński, 1999, p. 58).

The greatest cognitive independence and moral autonomy await on the ultimate, post-conventional stage of development. Probably only at this stage a person can become a fully independent subject, creative and reflective. It is also at that point one's individual way of being in a particular role (social or professional) constituting the core of competences can come to light.

The progressive-critical orientation actualizes the postulate of saturating practical activities with knowledge. This by no means signifies acquiring theoretical knowledge or learning via accumulating experiences (knowledge, skills, values), but is a methodological and research approach in the cognitive process. Lawrence Kohlberg, himself following in the footsteps of Dewey and Piaget, reminds us that mature thinking is the outcome of a reorganization of cognitive structures in an interaction with the environment: "These reorganizations define qualitative levels of thought, levels of increased epistemic adequacy" (Kohlberg & Mayer, 1972, p. 456). Processual-cognitive learning patterns, cognitive constructivism, as well as interaction models also validate such a perspective on acquiring competences.

Progressivism insists on the importance of critical thinking and constructing knowledge as immanently appurtenant to competences which by definition depend on experience. Even though this belief in the importance of developing reflectivity and stimulating the mind, highlighting the role experience plays in cognition (Możdżeń, 2006, pp. 359–362) can be traced back as early as to John Locke's philosophy, it was the instrumental orientation that dominated education already in the second part of the 20th century and still is the predominant tendency.

To conclude, a construction and reconstruction of the cognitive, personal, and operative structures that constitute and foster competences are the markers of the progressive-critical orientation of competences and competency-based education. Simultaneously competences are a structure comprised of: (1) *adaptational competences* — the ones that enable navigating reality, the crucial category therein would be information; (2) *critical competences*, that is the ability to grasp meanings and interpret reality within certain systems of knowledge and values; (3) *emancipatory competences* — responsible for taking action in accordance with one's critical interpretation and introspection (cf. Witkowski, 1995).

Competences formulated in such terms contribute to personal development whose ultimate goal should be the pursuit of achieving post-conventional standards. All of the abovementioned categories account for the quality of a person's performance (and existence in general); truistically enough they are "necessary," but it is not adaptation that should be considered the standard (norm), but reflective emancipation.

Each of the orientations constructed (certainly also the ones not mentioned here emphasizes a different aspect of human functioning with respect to the environment) in conceptualizing and developing competences. Probably it is the context that determines which "type" of competences are at hand: technical, humanistic (individualistic), or functional-critical is to regulate one's behavior in given circumstances. Still, the order of competences implies a hierarchy akin to Habermas's theory of the cognition-determining interests which in itself can be treated as model and basis for competency-based education (Witkowski, p. 24). From this perspective it is vital to shift the interest from the technically-oriented to individualistic and functional aspect of human actions and attitudes, yet whether such a shift can be distinguished in contemporary educational transformation remains an open question.

## Competences in contemporary education

The so-called key competences that have been elaborated as part of the Bologna Process seem to be another convincing wish list enumerating competences necessary to become an active member of the society, namely, to realize one's potential, develop, integrate with the society and proactively navigate the employment markets (cf. Recommendation of the European Parliament..., p. 393/13). It is disconcerting that key competences can be read as a collection of prescriptions that do not constitute a coherent structure, although

the existence of relationships of an indeterminate nature is acknowledged by the authors of the Recommendation of the European Parliament (p. 393/13). The end result of the Recommendation is a list of elements of alleged equal importance. As the Recommendation is a legal document its lapidary language in terms of describing the context of building competences should hardly be a surprise, it even seems all the more important to try to read it from the perspective of educational sciences. A reflective practitioner will surely see the necessity of introducing a structure and, even more so, a hierarchy. The list in question does not propose a single integrating factor that could turn acquiring and using the postulated competences into a reflective process. If we were to (de)construct this model it would appear that only the subject to whom the competences “belong” is the factor integrating all of them into a coherent, operative system.

The competency-based model emphasizes the change in educational paradigm which consisted in shifting stress from content onto the subject, and which is a continuation of the Socratic tradition, but also of the ideas of the Enlightenment as well as progressive ones. Still, in the minds of many practitioners and theorists competency-based education figures rather as a compilation of skills acquired at varying degrees and at different stages of education than a construct or considerable complexity.

The Recommendation verbalizes an expectation that educational systems will develop competences and calibrate the effects. The competences presented require operationalization, a reference to certain behaviors, attitudes, skills, and knowledge so that they can be observed and “measured.” Operationalization, however, runs the risk of a narrowing or simplification of the structure of competences. Referring to a list of abstracted elements of fragmented knowledge, actions and skills without articulating expressly their interrelations and once again, diminishes the potential of education to developing solely adaptational and instrumental skills.

Competences are inherently dynamic, never finite or complete, as is development itself. Every single competence seems to have an endless potential to expand and transgress its limits. At the same time, upon close inspection into the structure of competences one can distinguish their vertical development: from relatively simple such as adaptation, up to the less obvious, complex ones of the critical-emancipatory character and reflectivity. Their open structure makes educational competences educationally valuable in themselves but it is also a precondition for moving to the post-conventional stage. Although reflectivity and autonomy constitute the highest stage of competences-development, every single part of the educational process should contribute to bringing us closer to this state. If competences are ontological features subject to development through education then the idea of competency-based education is submerged in the liberal social and politi-

cal ideology, which manifests itself, among other things, in the concept of a meritocratic society.

Because meritocracy is an ambiguous concept it needs to be emphasized that my usage of the term in this paper denotes a particular methodology of building the social structure where positions are dependent strictly on the competences proven by education (a diploma to be more precise) (Melosik, 2009, p. 106). A meritocratic society sanctions all differences in social positions occupied as consequence of earning diplomas if they result from the differences in skills and motivation (Young, 1958, p. 94, as cited in Melosik, 2009). The educational system by definition should “channel” people into fulfilling certain functions, taking positions both high and low in the social and professional structure in accord with their individual talents (Gmerek, 2001, p. 297) as bases for developing competences. This idea of individual merit inherited from the Enlightenment positions the individual with his or her talents and motivation as the source of success, at the same time attributing to education the power of recognizing and developing personal competences that are a particular form of social capital that determines one’s position and actions within the society.

Making education a strategy of building the human capital runs the risk of reinforcing existing inequalities, conditioning young people to adapt to the highest possible degree to meet the needs of potential employers rather than encourage their emancipation. Thus, the meritocratic rhetoric does not correspond to critical rhetoric (Gmerek, 2001, pp. 109–113). Although the sole rejection of nepotism and oligarchy with respect to building the social structure is a point of reference for building education and society on the foundations of human subjectivity.

From my personal perspective as a pedagogue, a teacher, and an academic, it seems natural and obvious to accept certain romantic (utopian) or maybe simply critical assumptions. If competency-based education is to be focused on the subject and not on credentials then the only preliminary and necessary condition for education is the child and its own individual potential (Recommendation of the European Parliament Act of the Council of 18 December 2006 on key competences for lifelong learning).

Education should be a space for development of competences and motivation, one that optimizes the child’s abilities; not an instrument of assigning positions but a path to a creative construction of one’s identity. Generating capital to bring equally measurable profits should be left to businessmen and bankers.

The Polish PWN dictionary describes meritocracy as a futurological concept and yet already in the first decade of the 21st century it was a collective “rehearsal” of building meritocratic societies — the rule of the “competent” people and the “competent” society.

In the face of an alarmingly growing number of people with a higher education yet unemployed and, more and more frequently — without competences, the meritocratic enterprise has met criticism. We can only hope that the systemic changes in education initiated by the Bologna Declaration will not perpetuate the meritocratic patterns granted that the document be constructively interpreted in terms of reflectivity and wisdom. In the socio-ideological context briefly sketched above the shift from the instrumental and adaptational paradigm to the competency-based/emancipatory one appears to be a *conditio sine qua non* for the idea of humanistic education to last.

### Reflectivity as the highest standard of competences

If we assume that every professional action is founded on thinking then we should agree with the claim that what distinguishes experts from specialists-in-the-making is a symbolic knowledge rooted in experience and consisting in the ability to deduce. Within the expert mind knowledge has already been “compiled,” processed and it might seem that an expert does not need to meditate upon one’s actions. There is even a general presumption that being an expert requires the ability to act immediately in all circumstances, that expertise is a condition of a certain automation of actions. We also often tend to look for experts ready to come to our assistance in an immediate and intellectually effortless way; as if competence was measured by the quickness and accuracy of response. Experts build their competences in heuristic processes which, combined with “scientific” knowledge, turns them into reflective practitioners. If we denied ourselves the opportunity to seek commonsensical knowledge, if we discredited it altogether and isolate it from the totality of social relations then we could operate mechanically, computer-like, using only the repertoire of pre-programmed schemas and patterns.

The threat of “underinterpreting” competency-based education springs precisely from the conviction that competences need to be only of a practical nature to guarantee a smooth, easily noticeable and measurable performance of quality improvement. If we accept the notion of competence as a theoretical construct that delineates the territories or educational endeavours then we should associate it with a progressive-critical context rather than a pragmatic one. First and foremost, it seems that very few activities do not require any reflection whatsoever and we rely solely on learnt behavioral patterns while engaging in them. What is more, the situations we encounter

in the contemporary world tend to be complicated to such a degree that they require constant alertness and consciousness. Donald Schön has dubbed this state of mind reflectivity and a person that operates and performs in a conscious manner — a reflective practitioner (1987, after Gołębnik, 1998, pp. 150–151).

The idea of reflectivity is a result of the critique of a simplified understanding of the correlation between theoretical knowledge and practical actions (Aristotelian practical wisdom) and technical rationality. Habermas describes reflection as self-determination, that is, a process of realizing a pre-determined sociological context and ideological limitations, as well as taking control of this influence (Carr, 1995, pp. 262–263). On the other hand, John Dewey considers reflectivity a state of profound contemplation upon acting, as opposed to acting in a routine manner. Thinking is a constant, active meditation on beliefs, knowledge, and an “ability to ‘turn things over,’ to look at matters deliberately (Dewey, 1910, p. 66). Schön emphasizes the importance of wonder and intuitive knowledge in professional performance. The experience of wonder, of astonishment and contemplation fosters the ability to think one’s actions and their results through in an interactive way as well as helping to develop cognitive intuition which can manifest itself in performance. Such a formulation has the character of a discovery, closely bound with the workings of cognitive schemas (1987, pp. 150–151). If this be true then a practitioner experiments like a researcher, seeks for the hidden “meaning” and for changes in the situation and/or behavior.

Reflectivity is shaped by way of a repetitive personal experience and such a notion of knowledge and practice as the one represented by Schön is close to cognitive constructivism. The processual-structural approach to building knowledge has significantly contributed to the conceiving of education in the categories of competency. Competences of the individual and the knowledge that constitutes them are the result of the student’s psychological construction and his or her way of operating actively. The individual confronts both the environment and oneself in the constant process of organizing and reorganizing one’s own worldview. Reflectivity is thus a manifestation of the highest standard of competences.

Thanks to Jean Piaget and Noam Chomsky the idea that learning begins with familiarizing oneself with particular elements and finds its closure in expertise, with the abstract internalization of sophisticated rules (Illeris, 2003), has found general acceptance. The stages of acquiring competences correspond to this model with reflectivity and autonomy of actions as their ultimate mode. If acquiring competences is a process, then competences can be neither a closed structure nor a collection of simple predispositions, but a totality testifying to achieving the post-conventional stage — thus becoming the consciousness of individual existence.

Thus, the understanding of competences is finally enriched with the human factor: if facts, rules, strategies, quickness, and precision of reaction were to be proof of expertise in a particular field then computers and artificial intelligence would replace humans not only by the assembly lines and in operating steering programs, but also in other fields: managerial, social, etc.

Seen in this light can competences be considered a temporal or rather a universal category? Perhaps we have just coined a new name for our eternal longing for education to “prepare” for living with oneself and with other people?

Such a clear and well justified demand for education focused on a performing subject that would prepare individuals to creative adaptation seems historically unprecedented. Furthermore, never before have the declarations of pursuing this prerogative been so close to realization either. Unfortunately, the ongoing transformations in the theoretical (ideological) domain as well as in the sphere of their realization seem to indicate that competences have yet again been reduced to simple, observable behaviors, practical skills or even to the reproduction of knowledge (e.g. school competency tests that boil down to checking progress in terms of the curriculum). Although some attention is dedicated to new dimensions and strategies of learning, the changes implemented are often of a superficial and chaotic character due to the complexity and multifacetedness of competences. Sadly, one can often hear opinions voiced by malcontent practitioners expressive of a “call it (competences, knowledge, skills) as the politicians or experts wish, we’ll carry on as we always have” approach.

Competences, competency or reflectivity — whichever name we pick to describe personal predispositions — are definitely not a mere collection of skills and experiences or internalized rules. At the same time, they are also something more than intelligence, cognitive-instrumental rationality or knowledge, even of a most advanced kind. That peculiar quality is the sum of one’s intuition and reason, experience and knowledge, consciousness and unconsciousness, adaptation and critical awareness. I am convinced that if education is to develop competences then not only skills should be embraced by its agenda but also reflectivity and critical awareness. Competency-based education is one whose: “[o]utcome is adulthood conceived as the fusion of freedom, independence, and responsibility, as a rational and critical mode of being in the world” (Czerepaniak-Walczak, 2006, p. 117).

## Conclusion

Education has been organized by the society to satisfy its pragmatic demands, and particularly to foster adjustment and adaptation for centuries. It has also performed a stratifying function whereas philosophers have emphasized the autotelic value of science and knowledge. And yet does its autotelic stand in opposition to pragmatism? The history of pedagogical thought and practice proves just how difficult it is to balance the autotelic and the pragmatic aspects of education, the contemporary educational disciplines also testify to this difficulty.

Since the very beginnings of educational systems mass education has induced collective social dissatisfaction with its quality and standards. Academics have either leaned towards the humanities and general education, or towards its practical (pragmatic) counterpart when sketching their pedagogical concepts or ideologies. Similarly today the proposed education built around competences can fall prey to instrumentalization though it seems clear that it can be endowed with a greater, broader sense when enriched by the constructivist-humanist dimension.

Competences as a complex notion run the risk of simplification, of reducing the importance of space between the elements of the structure. To speak of competences has become a euphemism denoting a universal construct applied whenever the concept of wisdom seems outdated and the one of reflectivity too lofty and academic. A superficial, behavioral education limited to developing "necessary" life-skills is a way of distancing the educational enterprise from the humanist values of individuality, reflectivity, and wisdom among others. The contrary practice with excluding practical skills such as communication, conflict resolution, and interpersonal competences carries the risk of inadequate or even destructive behaviors.

The tensions resulting from civilizational changes widen the so-called human gap – the inadequacy of human behaviors towards dangers and the strains they face. Is it possible for competency-based education to "bridge" (Botkin et al., 1998) this gap? It seems that the current state of education fosters neither adaptation nor emancipation but rather hampers becoming a subject and fails to nourish culture. This bridging over the existing discrepancies is more likely if an actual educational shift from the culture of objects to the culture of subjects happens, also with respect to competency-based education (Obuchowski, 1988, p. 59).

The vision of competency-based education I have outlined in this paper is in itself an attempt at bridging the discrepancy between a poststructural reality and the postulates of education. It is an invitation to move on from

developing technical and practical rationality to the emancipatory and post-conventional one.

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Irena Przybylska

Entre la rationalité technique et émancipatrice :  
(Dé)construction d'une formation de compétence

Résumé

Le texte aborde le problème de compétence et compétentialité de la formation présenté dans le contexte des discours philosophiques, idéologiques et éducatifs choisis par l'auteur. Les réflexions sur les compétences prennent naissance dans le rationalisme philosophique et l'intellectualisme psychologique, tout en puisant dans le pragmatisme, progressivisme, constructivisme social et dans la théorie de l'agir communicationnel de J. Habermas. Une partie du texte constitue une tentative de placer la catégorie compétences—compétentialité dans l'orientation instrumentale, humaniste et fonctionnelle de l'éducation, ainsi que de présenter les tendances évolutives de la formation de compétence à la lumière des programmes européens réformant les systèmes scolaires.

La notion de compétence définie comme une catégorie linguistique (euphémisme) contient plusieurs significations. Elle apparaît aussi bien dans la rhétorique scientifique, méritocratique qu'humaniste. Dans les parties finales du texte, les réflexions s'appuient sur l'interprétation dichotomique de la compétence : capacité—réflexivité. L'intention de l'auteur est d'accentuer la nécessité de transférer l'interprétation de la compétence de ses sens acontextuels et purement pragmatiques aux sens vastes, émancipationnels et s'inscrivant dans le développement subjectif de l'homme.

Irena Przybylska

### Między racjonalnością techniczną a emancypacyjną: (De)konstrukcja kształcenia kompetencyjnego

#### Streszczenie

Tekst dotyka problemu kompetencji i kompetencyjności kształcenia w kontekście wybranych filozoficznych, ideologicznych i edukacyjnych dyskursów. Rozważania o kompetencjach wychodzą z filozoficznego racjonalizmu i psychologicznego intelektualizmu, czerpiąc z pragmatyzmu, progresywizmu, konstruktywizmu społecznego i teorii racjonalności J. Habermasa. Część tekstu to próba umieszczenia kategorii kompetencje—kompetencyjność w orientacji instrumentalnej, humanistycznej i funkcjonalnej w edukacji, a także ukazania tendencji rozwojowych kształcenia kompetencyjnego w świetle europejskich programów reformujących systemy oświatowe.

Pojęcie kompetencji ujmowane jako pewna kategoria językowa (eufemizm) niesie wiele znaczeń. Pojawia się zarówno w retoryce scjentystycznej, merytokratycznej, jak i humanistycznej. Konsekwentnie rozważania w końcowych częściach tekstu osadzają się wokół dychotomicznego rozumienia kompetencji: umiejętności—refleksyjności. Intencją autorki jest zaznaczenie konieczności przesunięcia interpretowania kompetencji z akontekstualnych i wyłącznie pragmatycznych znaczeń w kierunku szerokich, emancypacyjnych, wpisujących się w podmiotowy rozwój człowieka.