

Can competency assessment support struggles for community development and self-determination?

Rick Flowers

Keynote address: *Partnerships in Assessment*, Auckland Institute of Technology, New Zealand
September 1996

Abstract

This paper argues that if competency assessment is to make any contribution as a potentially 'liberating' curriculum strategy for struggles of community development and self-determination then it needs to challenge the authoritarianism of the current national qualifications frameworks being established in a growing number of English speaking countries. This paper critiques recent research and policy efforts which seek to make authoritarian structures more culturally appropriate, more accessible and equitable rather than changing and democratising the structures themselves.

INTRODUCTION

This paper considers how various cultural and political interest groups can engage with competency assessment systems that are currently being constructed in a growing number of English speaking countries around the world. The purpose of the paper is to support the efforts of:

- indigenous Australians and Maori in New Zealand to develop stronger community controlled vocational education programs
- educators who are engaged in more than competency development for individuals but also in education for social action and community development
- educators seeking to develop competency based curriculum strategies and assessment approaches which foster emancipatory learning¹.

Much of the literature which critically discusses the shortcomings or otherwise of the competency movement only addresses broad philosophical and policy concerns. The literature rarely discusses the practical aspects of challenging the competency movement.² The critique developed in this paper is grounded in my experience working with practitioners who have been forced to engage

with competency assessment systems. g beyond the rhetorical flourishes of those who praise and those who oppose competency assessment and discuss what is actually happening ‘on the ground.’ Specifically, I examine the rules that practitioners are currently required to follow and discuss ways these rules might be challenged to better serve the interests of indigenous peoples and other political interest and cultural groups. I critique popular notions of culture, access and equity and current approaches which seek to make education more culturally appropriate.

LET’S STOP BEING ETHNOGRAPHERS

There is a continuing tendency to ask questions about the relationship between education, assessment and culture like an old fashioned ethnographer. Common questions posed by educators who work with a variety of cultural groups are:

What are their preferred learning styles? What would be appropriate teaching and assessment practices? How can we make our courses more culturally relevant? What factors affect access and participation?³

These type of qions will not help us build cultural partnerships in education and assessment. They are not useful for indigenous people struggling to achieve self-determination in education. Partnerships and self-determination will only be achieved by changing structures not by changing practices. Currently, standards based assessment practices in countries, which include Australia, New Zealand, Scotland, England and South Africa, are firmly entrenched in single, monolithic, national structures known as National Qualifications Frameworks. These frameworks are built on sets of detailed rules⁴ which prescribe the way standards should be constructed. The official line of national qualifications authorities is that while there are rules for constructing standards there are no rules about *what* should be in the standards, nor rules about which particular *curriculum and assessment strategies* should be used. Therefore, so the official policy lines assert, there is plenty of scope for various cultural groups to control their own education.

This argument, that so long as indigenous Australians and other cultural groups can determine the content of the standards and develop their own preferred forms of assessment practice the

national qualifications frameworks can foster cultural partnerships, is at one level persuasive. Notions of holistic approaches to assessment have, in fact, been embraced warmly by many Maori educators and Aboriginal educators further encouraging the belief that cultural partnerships in assessment are being built. But are these frameworks which prescribe national, uniform ways of constructing assessment standards fostering cultural partnerships? Experience is showing that competency assessment standards are directly shaping teaching and assessment practices in ways which lead to more uniformity than diversity.

The current rules about writing competency assessment standards in a hierarchical, itemised, checklist fashion (despite many efforts to make them holistic) represent the 'coalface' of an authoritarian educational structure. Why do assessment standards have to be written in checklist form? Why can't they be written in narrative? Why do they have to be written? Could they be constructed through diagrams and pictures? Or could they be constructed through narrative prose which is documented on video or tape? Currently, cultural partnerships are understood by powerbrokers within the national qualification authorities to mean 'our framework is flexible, you can have separate standards and qualifications but you must follow our rules.' Despite claims to the contrary, one cannot separate rules about writing learning outcomes from curriculum and assessment practices. Outcomes do shape pedagogy.

The sort of cultural partnership I want is one where different groups have real independence to construct standards in ways they determine for themselves. I want to see the democratisation of structures rather than authoritarian structures seeking to be more culturally appropriate. I would like to see diverse ways for standards to be constructed which I think would lead to deeper and richer diversity in assessment practices. If there is to be a national qualifications framework it's job should be to support different groups to develop their own ways of recognising curriculum and accrediting qualifications. This requires much more attention being paid to supporting independent structures rather than seeking to define what are culturally appropriate practices. Australian education authorities do not seek to define culturally appropriate assessment practices for Catholic students, or Montessori students. Instead they support Catholic and Montessori structures and

leave it up to them to define the detail of curriculum practices. This is the approach that might be taken towards indigenous Australian communities or Maori communities in New Zealand.

THE POTENTIAL OF STANDARDS BASED ASSESSMENT TO SUPPORT AND UNDERMINE STRUGGLES FOR COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND SELF-DETERMINATION

The establishment of new national accreditation systems in Australia and New Zealand which are based on competency standards and competency assessment approaches *potentially* can contribute in a significant way to struggles for community development and self-determination. This *potential* can, for example, be realised by the increased opportunities provided for a wide range of private and community training providers to deliver recognised education programs. “The so-called de-regulation of the training market has opened up new spaces, allowing more scope for diversity and choice” (Federation of Independent Aboriginal Education Providers, 1996, p.6). A significant and contentious example of the opening up of ‘new space’ is the development of unit standards for Maori carving. These standards might lead to degree programs in Maori carving and the recognition that Maori carving is a field of practice and study of the same depth and complexity as fields of practice such as engineering, physiotherapy and other fields with established professional status. The first graduate of a new Diploma of Maori Early Childhood Education said,

“One of the reasons I applied for the Diploma was because I saw it as the taumata, and because it is a Diploma available to Maori. The Diploma gives national recognition to Maori knowledge, skills, qualities and attributes that have never been formally recognised in early childhood education (in QA News, Issue 17, Feb 1993 in Ferguson, 1996, p. 8)

Arguably, recognition of ‘new’ fields of practice do not rely on the national qualifications frameworks and their standards based assessment systems. Self-accrediting higher education providers can also initiate courses which recognise hitherto unrecognised fields of knowledge and practice. But what standards based assessment systems have done is to enable the more ready recognition of community controlled education initiatives. This means that community groups can decide if they wish to rely on the goodwill of institutional providers to develop and deliver

appropriate courses for them or seek to set up independent educational structures. One should, however, be cautious in thinking that competency standards and a place in a new National Qualifications Framework will automatically boost the status of youth work or Maori carving. It is, of course, possible that they will be regarded as trivial by those who are most concerned with appearing internationally competitive.

By being both explicit and public, competency assessment standards have arguably introduced a greater level of accountability for educators to learners. Many educators and students who work and learn in community based agencies, who have in many cases been alienated by formal schooling, typically say about standards based assessment, “we understand it, it is clearer than school, and it tests us doing things.” While standards may be enjoying early popularity with many working class learners and educators it remains to be seen how long it will last as people are likely to become more discerning with the ever increasing volume of standards. In particular, it will be of interest to ascertain how much detail learners and educators will tolerate. My experience has been that while learners may compare competency assessment standards favourably with school, they are often intimidated by the amount of detail in the checklists of performance criteria.

I have been encouraged by the way the focus on outcomes has shifted more attention to learning instead of teaching. The push to more closely integrate learning in workplace and community settings into courses, and to open and flexible learning has been given impetus by the competency movement. The potential for more participant directed learning is obvious. By challenging the traditional focus on programmed teaching and prescribed topic based curricula, standards based assessment potentially gives learners opportunity to have more choice about what, when, how and where they learn.

The word *potential* has been emphasised because like any curriculum reform the development of competency based accreditation systems in deregulated education and training markets is keenly contested. It is a contest between those who want to set national targets to appear internationally competitive and those who see education as a means to develop communities, cultures and people.

If the education systems in New Zealand and Australia are to be more democratic and inclusive then they should negotiate partnerships with their indigenous peoples and other community groups. This notion of partnership is not just about the right of indigenous peoples and other community groups to control their own education. It is equally about changing those educational practices which reinforce inequalities, exclude and alienate many New Zealanders and Australians. If education primarily is focused on enhancing the skills of individuals rather than community development, inevitably some individuals will gain while many will not. There is a struggle between those who see the competency movement as a means to merely skill more individuals and those who see possibilities of using the movement to make education more relevant and useful to the building of community, culture and identity.

On one level national qualifications frameworks, with their structures and processes for recognising and assessing learning wherever it happens, do appear to offer much advantage to groups who have been discriminated against. The systems of standards based assessment appear to value experiences which historically have not been valued. For example, the qualification frameworks make much of valuing the experiences of women who manage households⁵, of low paid workers, and of indigenous people. Cooper (1996), writing about the introduction of national qualifications framework in South Africa, explains why the discourse of competency standards and assessment

“has enormous emotive appeal to ordinary workers. (It) is aimed at ensuring that those workers who have had little access to formal education in the past but have extensive experience of work, have their experiences valued so as to give them access to further learning and better job opportunities..... it is clear why these new discourses around worker education and training should have enjoyed such ascendancy in South Africa at this time. They resonate deeply with worker’s desire for recognition, greater equity and opportunities to progress..... The heritage of ‘Bantu Education’ and job reservation had excluded black workers from skilled jobs. Workers’ experience was never valued: white workers with less experience but with formal certificates got access to such jobs (p. 10-11).

On one level, competency assessment does appear to have much potential to support struggles for community development and self-determination. But on another, perhaps deeper level, competency assessment has significant potential to undermine traditions of education for

community development. The massive exercises in development of standards to name all learning have arguably transformed the meaning of experience and knowledge with the emphasis on credentialling. Consider the type of experience and knowledge that would be most valued by workers organising to improve their working conditions; or that would be valued by Maori people organising to strengthen their communities.

“The dominant meaning associated with (their) experience and knowledge has been transformed from something which is shared in order to advance (their) collective interests, into a commodity which is individually owned, which can be exchanged for a qualification and used to compete with other individuals in the struggle for individual upward mobility” (Cooper, 1996, p. 11, my modifications).

This contestation between those who value education for individual skills development versus community development might be seen partly as a struggle between indigenous and ‘European’ perspectives. But the contestation between individual skills versus community development should also be seen as a struggle between contesting perspectives within ‘European’ education. There are those who believe that if education serves the interests of business having more skilled and reliable workers to make more profits then everyone will benefit. There are others who believe that education does have to take account of the needs of business, but that it also has a responsibility to help people not simply make profits but also to create meaningful jobs, and to build cultures and identities within communities. Education has a role to help people who are poor, unemployed, are victims of violence, are being exploited, to develop an analysis which goes beyond blaming themselves to understanding and acting upon those forces which have contributed to their plight.

It is no coincidence that a significant number of community education providers in New Zealand and Australia are Maori and Aboriginal initiatives. In New Zealand, for example, of a total of about 800 private training providers over 300 are Maori organisations.⁶ It is the Aboriginal and Maori educators who feature so prominently in them which are at the forefront of educational efforts to advance vocational competencies for those who most need them and to build stronger communities. Arguably, many Maori and Aboriginal educators model a way of education which is much more democratic than education in the schooling and higher education system. It is more democratic because it values learning which is directly relevant to people’s needs and is not only

concerned with knowledge contained in textbooks, which are often written by people who do not understand the needs of ordinary people. It is more democratic because it seeks to strengthen people's culture and identity rather than ignore or suppress it. Many Maori and Aboriginal educators and their allies value education for ordinary people not just academic and professional elites.

To describe the work of many Maori and Aboriginal educators as above should not be construed as an assertion that Maori and Aboriginal people can be regarded as a homogeneous group, or that there is a single set of common features which characterise the educational work of Maori and Aboriginal educators. As will be discussed in some detail later in the paper it is a popular but misleading notion that indigenous people have common cultural and learning characteristics. But what does underpin the above description is an assertion that indigenous peoples share a very similar recent history. Indigenous perspectives on education are, for many, borne out of the struggles against invasion, colonial rule, and paternalism. From such struggles people have learnt to value heritage, solidarity, and collaboration in the face of adversity. It is the historical and political context which provides a more useful understanding, rather than fanciful ethnographic theories of cultural difference, of why so much education with Maori and Aboriginal peoples is concerned with community development. In a submission to a federal government inquiry in Australia, the Federation of Independent Aboriginal Education Providers stated:

All our work has a community development focus, and is not just about education defined narrowly in quantifiable outcomes, but about the preservation of life itself (1996).

The intertwining of community development and education is apparent in independent Aboriginal education providers and Maori providers. Students are treated not just as students but as members of a community who may need accommodation, social and personal support. For example, in many Maori private providers social services are located and integrated into the same organisation. There are other small differences such as beginning each day with a prayer ceremony, students pooling their lunches rather than individually consuming them, and the value placed on

personal relationships between students and staff. Donna Ah Chee describes the view of independent Aboriginal colleges:

..... Aboriginal education is firmly based in the real day-to-day experiences of our students and our community..... if it were not for us, for the program we provide, many of our students would not have an education, they would not have a life. Unemployment, poor housing, Third World health standards, alcohol and drug abuse, imprisonment, violence - these are day to day realities for the vast majority of Aboriginal people, and our average life span is twenty years less than non-Aboriginal people..... We turn no one away, because we know for many, perhaps most of our students, we are their only choice, their only way to survive, and to gain the strength to struggle to change their reality (1996).

In the debates about the competency movement the lines of contestation are often drawn between workers' and employers' interests (see Iveson, 1996 for example). Many unions have supported the competency movement as a strategy to develop career paths and to achieve greater workplace control with more skilled workers. Many employers have seen the competency movement as a way to exert more control over what workers learn. If competency assessment and associated curricula are to have any chance of supporting struggles for community development there must be a widening of the contestation and debate in the competency movement. Community groups who represent indigenous peoples, and other cultural and political interests, need space and resources to develop education which is not just concerned with workers' and employers' interests but also the interests of community groups.

New Zealand and Australia have an opportunity to work with Maori and Aboriginal educators to build an education system that is more democratic and which does serve *community* development and not just *economic* development purposes. Independent Maori and Aboriginal education providers should be invited and funded to not only to develop their own courses but also to develop their own strategies for accreditation and assessment. A widespread frustration with the way competency standards are currently constructed and used is that they are seen to value instrumental, vocational skills and marginalise knowledge, values, qualities and attitudes that are perhaps not directly relevant to technical performance but are important because they are seen to contribute to a richer and treasured sense of culture and identity. It is one thing to advocate holistic assessment practices but it is now time to rethink how standards are being written or

constructed, and to challenge the current obsession with reliability or moderation. I go on to discuss these matters in the following sections.

CHALLENGING THE CURRENT SINGLE SET OF RULES FOR CONSTRUCTING COMPETENCY ASSESSMENT STANDARDS

Given the marked similarity of rules for constructing standards in national qualifications frameworks in various countries it is not surprising that there has arisen a seemingly unquestioned notion among practitioners and policy makers that there is only one way of devising standards. In this section I elaborate on arguments introduced in the first section of this paper. I discuss the theory that competency standards will not standardise curriculum and assessment and assert that in practice they are. Current rules for constructing standards do lead to a narrow and prescriptive curriculum and assessment practice. In the concluding section of the paper I go on to discuss principles which might encourage different ways of constructing standards. There are features of standards based assessment which do potentially support the interests of various cultural and political groups but unless it will be possible to break free of the current imposed sets of national rules, and allow different ways of constructing standards, opportunities for self-determination, and the development of more democratic and emancipatory perspectives on curriculum and assessment, will be limited.

It has been a common criticism that the National Qualifications Framework is a system to introduce standardised curricula. This has been commonly rebuffed by saying that curricula and delivery is up to the particular providers. The South African government which is introducing a national qualifications framework responded to this criticism by asserting:

“The National Qualifications Framework is an attempt to bring coherence to education and training while building in the greatest amount of flexibility possible, Thus, while qualifications and the unit standards within them will be determined through a nationally credible process, actual curricula and programmes for delivery will be the domain of the authority, institution and educator to develop. The national standards will be expressed only as outcomes. This encourages maximum flexibility and creativity - the hallmarks of professionalism in education and training” (Human Sciences Research Council, 1995).

In New Zealand, there is perhaps a more purist attempt than in Australia to keep standards separate from curricula and assessment strategies. In Australia public accreditation authorities have been set up to 'police' new courses to see that curriculum or learning outcomes and assessment practices are closely and 'properly' aligned to competency standards.

The theory behind current forms of standards based assessment which are the centre piece of national qualifications frameworks is that the standards are not to be seen as curricula or teaching statements but merely are standards against which candidates should be assessed. The theory is that national competency standards are mechanisms for employer, union and government groups to simply state what they expect candidates to be able to do. How people learn, when, with whom, over what period of time, and even exactly what people learn, so the purist theory of national qualifications frameworks go, are matters for educators and learners. The theory is that standards, despite their significant detail and uniform structures, will not shape the way people teach, learn and assess.

It is naive idealism to think that the itemised, detailed and hierarchical nature of competency standards will not drive curriculum and assessment practices. There are probably countless stories of how standards based assessment has led to over-assessment. I have a vivid recollection once of how a group of assessors I worked with were asking candidates for two pieces of evidence for every assessment criteria. The poor candidates were compiling enormous portfolios of evidence the size of encyclopaedias. I urged them to take what has now become a rather orthodox holistic approach to assessment. I urged them to be less concerned with the detail of the standards and be more concerned with the 'big picture.' But the very shape of the standards in a checklist form begs the question: if there is a list of criteria shouldn't you assess all of them? This notion of 100% assessment is encouraged by most senior officials in the New Zealand Qualifications Authority and course accreditation and standards bodies in Australia. The notion of 100% competency or assessment is built on a highly mechanistic understanding of learning which suggests that people are machines that function or don't function.

Ferguson (1996, p. 10-12), writing about her extensive experience working with the standards of the National Qualifications Framework in New Zealand asserts:

..... the practice is that learners are so influenced by the implementation of the Framework and their ability to have their learning recorded and credentialled via the Unit Standard system that learners are asking whether content and teaching methods on their courses are contributing to their credit for Unit Standards. Content which is outside of Unit Standards is perceived by many as being irrelevant, a misuse of teacher power and control, and a waste of money for students who pay high fees to obtain their credentials. *De jure* the Unit Standards may not be intended to prescribe curricula, *de facto* they are doing just that (p.11).

That national standards are influencing curricula content can, in one respect, be seen as a good thing, especially if they contribute to a consistent raising of quality and facilitate portability of qualifications. But it is the detailed, prescriptive and itemised way the standards are constructed which creates cause for concern. The shape and substance of the standards have a deadening influence on curricula. For example, the Workplace Trainer and Workplace Assessor competency standards in Australia have become like a deadweight in the way they have shaped professional development for educators and trainers. It should be said that these standards are arguably the least detailed and open ended of the many competency standards which have been developed in Australia. Although they were intended to be generic standards only, they have been adopted by community educators, workplace trainers, community trainers, vocational educators alike as the benchmark which is to be attained. The Workplace Trainer competency standards have had the affect of stifling any diversity, any sense of independent purpose and philosophy, various groups of educators may have had. Competency standards in their current checklist format with their sense of neatness and completeness offer the “seductive promise of clarity” (Wolf in McDonald, 1994, p. ?). The competency standards have been most effective in their publicity and marketing. Learners and their employers want to know if courses are aligned to the standards. University degree courses in adult education are being forced, through market demand, to show how they help students achieve the Workplace Trainer competency standards. There is a danger that professional development for educators and trainers will become homogenised to the extent that any content that is perceived to not be directly aligned to the Workplace Trainer standards, particularly content concerned with understanding politics and philosophies of education, will be seen as merely indulgent.

I have been one of those idealists who has advocated holistic approaches to assessment. But I find myself intensely frustrated working with standards that are anything but holistic. I do not think it is a matter of investing more effort in writing better standards. I think it is a matter of being less prescriptive about writing standards in checklist fashion. Because there are such strict rules it is no wonder that the competency movements in various countries have generated such zealous concern about assessing in standardised ways. In a course I recently designed I challenged the rule to have checklists for on-the-job-assessment. The educators and bureaucrats in the relevant peak bodies told me that this was an unwavering rule. They insisted that the public accreditation authority would not back down from this rule. The propaganda of the national training reform agenda has been so effective in Australia that non-government educators on the ground are zealous gatekeepers and guardians of the 'rules.' To the surprise of all, the public accreditation authority did allow us to break the rule.

At the 'coalface' it is remarkable how few educators are questioning the way competency assessment standards are being constructed. But there are significant challenges being posed at guidelines which insist on national uniform ways of determining standards and curricula. For instance, Alison Wolf (1994) claims that many individual firms in the UK "simply do not recognise and accept what is being offered as an 'industry' standard of competence." In a review of literature from across the English speaking world on workplace skills assessment it was noted that "many workplaces are increasingly finding themselves in conflict with the methodologies of national, or industry-wide training initiatives" (Centre for Research on Work, Education and Business Ltd, 1996).

To deepen the discussions about the merits or otherwise of current forms of competency movements it would then seem timely to consider what challenges various cultural groups are developing. Mawer and Field (1995) in a commissioned report for the federal Australian government asserted that the national training reform agenda had been developed from a narrow and monoculturalist perspective. They stated that "the training reform agenda's emphasis on

standardisation, and the emphasis on function rather than people, tends to undervalue the resources that employees bring to their work.” A key assertion that can be tested is that cultural groups would value being able to inject diversity into the competency movement by being able to construct their own forms of curricula, assessment and accreditation.

The theory is that competency standards need not lead to standardised assessment practices. But with the drive for national consistency it is no surprise that assessors on the ground are fearful of exercising too much interpretation and judgment. The zeal for moderation or reliability drives assessors and students to think there are single correct answers. But how similar do standards have to be to ensure enough consistency? How similar does the amount and type of evidence have to be, to ensure sufficient reliability? Has standards based assessment really increased reliability? To what extent would the answers to these questions be based on perception and assertion rather than actual research?⁷

CHALLENGING POPULAR CONCEPTS OF CULTURE, ACCESS AND EQUITY

When considering ways to develop and deliver education for indigenous Australians or Maori New Zealanders a popular approach is to research and propose ways:

- ◆ education can be made more accessible and equitable
- ◆ educators can gain a fuller understanding of, and be more responsive to, the perceived, distinct cultural features of indigenous learners.

This sort of research can be useful. There is a need for more effective cross-cultural teaching and educational management. But the argument I present in this section is that less research is needed to make education and training more accessible, equitable and culturally appropriate and more research is needed to advance knowledge of how various cultural and political groups can assert more power and control over the development of competency standards and curricula.

There has been recent research conducted in Australia which has examined the experiences of Aboriginal people with competency assessment systems. But these research reports have inherent contradictions (see McIntyre, Ardler et. al., 1996; and Athenasou, Golden & Hoggard, 1995). On one hand, they conclude in a broad fashion that Aboriginal people should be given opportunity to design their own curriculum and assessment practices. On the other hand, their starting premises are to find ways existing competency assessment systems can be made more relevant for Aboriginal people. There is a contradiction because the researchers argue for self-determination in Aboriginal education yet do not question the fundamental structures and rules of competency assessment that have been laid down in the Australian national qualifications framework. I have already argued that these structures and rules have created a monolithic and authoritarian framework.

In research commissioned by the Australian National Training Authority McIntyre, Ardler, et. al. investigated the questions:

What factors affect the outcomes of participation for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people? And what might be the implications for policy and practice of a more comprehensive understanding of those factors?

The following explanation is offered for posing these research questions.

.....there is a need for better information about those factors which affect access, participation and success rates of indigenous Australians. Practitioners in TAFE colleges and universities have expressed the need for ways to overcome the alienating effects of institutional requirements on their Aboriginal students and ways of improving the cultural relevance and quality of course delivery.

But the research does not go deeper and question whether the only way to improve the “cultural relevance” of courses is by working within the existing TAFE and university systems. McIntyre, Ardler et. al’s research does not problematise the way Aboriginal people, and for that matter other community groups, have been:

forced into the national VET (vocational education and training) systems model of centrally recognised and accredited CBT (competency based training) courses and programs (Federation of Independent Aboriginal Education Providers, 1996 (b), p. 4).

McIntyre, Ardler et. al. clearly support Aboriginal efforts to develop their own curricula and pedagogy but do not analyse questions of control and power. McIntyre, Ardler et. al. state:

Another principle underlying the research has been that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have the legitimate right to determine the nature of their educational experiences and expected outcomes within VET programs (p.18).

They may have the right but do they have the opportunity? The current VET system, which is dominated by a competency based national qualifications framework, exerts enormous influence on the shape of educational experiences. McIntyre, Ardler et. al. state that:

one underlying theme of the research is the extent to which the institutional arrangements do allow for a ‘possibility of negotiated relationship’ by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with the mainstream culture of institutions, without compromising educational quality” (p.19).

But what sort of negotiation is possible? Is it negotiation between equals or negotiation between a subordinate and dominant partner? How much space is there to negotiate culturally appropriate teaching and learning processes in a vocational education and training system where curriculum is shaped by lists of competencies? These questions about negotiation point to wider questions about where it is most useful to direct research effort. Is too much effort being directed at developing special strategies for ‘cultural’ groups who are implicitly perceived as minorities? A further, related question is what sort of partnerships can be established through special education programs for cultural groups within mainstream structures. For example, how independent are Maori qualification pathways within the current structures and sets of rules that are governed by the New Zealand Qualifications Authority? Could more research effort be directed at investigating the terms of a partnership in which cultural groups have devised their own structures and rules for accreditation and assessment? This scenario raises the question: does an independent, parallel arena provide for a relatively safe environment for self-determination or is it a form of political

management which leads to ghettoization because it keeps minorities outside the real centre of society?

McIntyre, Ardler et al's interest in negotiation is shaped, albeit implicitly, by the politics of multicultural pluralism⁸. One form of multicultural pluralism supports having separate qualification pathways for particular cultural groups, having separate providers and separate lead bodies. But if these special strategies for target groups' are still located within structures and rules they do not control it is a dominant-subordinate relationship rather than a partnership. It means there is no real dialogue between cultural groups. As a non-Aboriginal Australian what this means for me is that the philosophies and politics Aboriginal educators might bring to standards based assessment are not being given an opportunity to re-shape what I have described as a dominant and authoritarian national qualifications framework. An independent qualifications framework for indigenous people with its own forms of standards based assessment would have much more chance of challenging and reconstructing current and dominant assessment practices.

I asserted at the beginning of this paper that researchers and policy makers should stop playing ethnographers. They should stop trying to understand what are perceived as exotic cultural practices because that is "letting the main game off the hook." As a university teacher one of the most common requests I have received from non-indigenous students researching a project related to indigenous education, is for literature about Aboriginal learning styles. I would obligingly dig round and usually pointed them to texts prepared for school teachers. Such texts suggested that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students were culturally different to other Australians.⁹ The texts did not define who other Australians were, what their learning styles were, and implicitly portrayed them as some monolithic group who had universal learning characteristics that related more closely to 'mainstream' norms. The texts no longer represented the popular and simplified view that all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students prefer to avoid eye contact with teachers, but suggested things like: they were person oriented rather than task, listeners rather than talkers, group oriented rather than individually competitive, as just some examples.

In retrospect what strikes me about both the requests and the texts is that underpinning them is the continuing dominance of a view that is at odds with the reality of a modern indigenous Australia and conjures up images of benign colonial administrators theorising over the 'peculiarities of the savages.' The majority of non-indigenous students continue to view indigenous peoples through the eyes of pre-war anthropologists.¹⁰ They are, mostly unwittingly, preparing themselves for missionary activity. They want to know what are the features and traits of these Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The student adult educators and trainers want to know what curriculum and teaching styles they should use; which are most sensitive and appropriate. My experience working with indigenous people, mostly from NSW, is that it would be impossible to ascribe to them a common set of learning characteristics.

But the view that there are common cultural and learning characteristics of indigenous peoples is held widely by indigenous educators, by policy makers and eminent scholars. For example, the concept of 'two ways' education has gained significant influence, perhaps more so in Northern Australia, at both the policy making and curriculum implementation levels. This concept, whose best known exponent is probably Stephen Harris (1988b, 1988c, 1990, 1991, 1993), suggests that it is necessary to allow Aboriginal Elders and communities to take responsibility for education which relates to Aboriginal culture. Education which is concerned with the development of competence to survive in 'modern' Australian society and the gaining of certificates in schools, colleges and universities should, according to proponents of 'two ways' education, be kept quite separate. The notion of Aboriginal vs 'Western' education is presented as a dichotomy. Extensive debates about the merits or otherwise of 'two ways' education have been published.¹¹ Some of the debate is about the validity of the significant linguistic and ethnographic data which is used to support the concept of 'two ways' education and purportedly suggests that Aboriginal people have a significantly different *Weltanschauung* (world view) to 'Westerners'. Harris (1990, p. 94), for example, asserts that "Aborigines have a preference for dealing with perceived or concrete reality rather than supposition or hypothesis; for dealing with interaction rather than transaction,and for first degree abstractions (such as the adjectives 'light' and 'heavy') rather than second degree abstractions (such as the abstract nouns 'weight' and 'heaviness')."

I have the same problem with the concept of 'two ways' education as I have with all views that seek to give Aboriginal culture and education some sort of monolithic identity and exotic overtones. It is a culturalist analysis which focuses entirely on indigenous people. The notion and system of 'Western' (the term used by Harris and other authors)¹² education is neither defined or problematised. It leads to liberal or institutional curriculum approaches which mostly seek to tinker at the edges of the 'Western' or dominant education system by implementing strategies to increase access, ensure program content and teaching processes are appropriate and so on. 'Two ways' education is slightly more radical. It proposes (taken to a logical extreme) that indigenous students can be tanked up with enough confidence and identity if their 'culture' is protected through a segregated education system which is able to siphon off that which is indigenous culture and that which is not. Brimming with confidence and identity indigenous students can then brave the cultural hegemony of a dominant education system which may be racist, manipulative and simply not interested in the diverse aspirations of many indigenous peoples.¹³

Recent research which examined the question, is competency assessment able to accommodate Aboriginal students' approaches to learning, falls into a culturalist analysis as does the theory of two ways education (see Athenasou, Golden & Hoggard, 1995). While the researchers do acknowledge the view that "Aboriginal people are a heterogenous group" (p. 7) they go on to assert their view that "there may be a core of common features and preferences of Aboriginal students that enhance learning" (p. 7). Drawing on a small sample of non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal authors they construct a table listing what they claim are 'key features of Aboriginal learning' (p. 7-8). Like researchers before them they express respect and admiration for perceived Aboriginal values. The limitation of this research is that it directs attention to understanding Aboriginal learners rather than understanding the nature of curriculum and how it can either oppress or liberate learners. Athenasou, Golden & Hoggard claim that competency assessment is flexible and is able to accommodate a range of learning approaches. I have already presented my argument which disputes this notion of flexibility. It is curious why the researchers did not investigate how Aboriginal people may be able to change the rules of current systems of

competency assessment, rather than investigate how Aboriginal people cope with the existing rules. Athenasou, Golden & Hoggard suggest themselves that:

“Aboriginal people may wish to provide their contribution to the implementation of competency based training reforms, rather than deal with a situation that has been imposed upon them” (p.10).

.... .instead of adapting assessments for a target group, it may be that this target group has a great deal to teach us about the ways in which learning should proceed and the ways in which assessments ought to be delivered generally in vocational education “ (p.32).

ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES TO COMPETENCY ASSESSMENT

Current approaches to competency assessment are more likely to undermine rather than support efforts towards self-determination and community development. The need to research and develop alternative approaches to competency assessment is apparent. Before discussing some ideas for research tasks and alternative approaches it should be noted what features of competency assessment are worth building on.

In the history of the assessment of learning, competency assessment represents a welcome departure from conventional assessment and educational measurement. Conventional assessment is concerned to find out whether students have learnt what has been taught. It is teacher centered. Educational measurement is deeply concerned about reliability and uses assessment methods which mostly generate many small items of evidence that can be quantified. Competency assessment is part of a movement towards new approaches known as authentic assessment. In competency and authentic assessment the concern is to:

- emphasise gathering evidence of ability to do something in the ‘real world’ ie. authentic evidence
- focus on learning outcomes versus teaching input
- be public and explicit about assessment criteria
- facilitate recognition of learning that is generic ie. portability.¹⁴

These are core features of competency assessment that are worth building on. What should be understood is that these features do not rely on the current structures and rules for writing competency standards and management of assessment. It is possible to construct competency standards and manage assessment in alternative ways and build on these features. It is my suggestion that it would be useful for Maori and for indigenous Australians to pursue research which would help them develop alternative approaches to competency assessment.

What I offer here are principles and ideas that might guide this research and development work. When deciding about the form standards and assessment practices should take, one should consider whether they are likely to foster:

- surface or critical learning
- uniformity or diversity
- individual skills development at the expense of community development
- a focus on learning or teaching
- motivation to continue learning or a sense of complacency that learning has been completed
- agency versus learner control
- domination versus self-determination
- clarity and transparency versus bewilderment and obfuscation.

I suggest an initial line of inquiry could be to develop alternatives to constructing assessment standards in checklist form. They might, for example, be constructed in narrative prose. Here are five reasons why they might be constructed in prose.

- I. Prose is open ended and fosters interpretive assessment which is intent on continuing learning. Check lists are closed and tend to foster learning which terminates with the last point on the check list.

- II. Prose enables ‘richer’ descriptions of practice and knowledge. This encourages and facilitates a valuing of intellectual and cultural knowledge.
- III. While checklists may turn the focus from teaching to learning they can also turn the focus from process to results only. Results on their own are not always important, how people learn can be equally, if not more, important. Prose is more likely than check lists to encourage a balance between a focus on results and process.
- IV. Assessment need not be limited to individual performance. Broader, more narrative type descriptions foster a sense of collective learning versus point form, hierarchical standards.
- V. Assessment tasks, to be authentic, should require learners to do larger, problem solving type activities rather than fragmented and static activities. Prose is more likely, than a check list, to describe the context. A check list is more likely, than prose, to describe fragments of detail.

Endnotes

1. Emancipatory learning is understood as learning which helps people “see through and challenge (often taken for granted and) dominant meanings and practices” (Foley, 1995, my modification). Emancipatory perspectives draw on critical pedagogy. For a useful and succinct discussion of critical pedagogy refer to Foley, 1990 p. 45-53).
2. For example, refer to Foster, 1996; Seddon, 1993; Gribble, 1993; Collins, 1993; Porter, P, Rivzi, F. et. al., 1992; Stephenson, J., 1993.
3. It was precisely these questions which were the focus of two recent research projects studying the experiences of indigenous Australians with vocational education and training. See Athanasou, J., Golden, D. & Hoggard, L. (1995). *Competency Based Assessment and the Needs of Targetted Groups - Aboriginal Students* and McIntyre, J., Ardler, W., Morley-Warner, T., at. al. (1996). *Culture Matters*.
4. Across the various countries the rules are marked more by their similarities rather than differences. In all countries it is required to construct standards with ‘building blocks’ of units which should contain several elements, that in turn must contain several performance criteria. In all countries there are detailed technical rules about how the units, elements and performance criteria are to be written. These rules refer to verb tense, length, language and what is acceptable type of content. There are further rules about packaging standards in levels and aligning them to other sets of standards. What the rules produce are essentially hierarchical checklist descriptions of competence. Granted, some standards have rather ‘rich’ descriptions of competence, but they are nonetheless, required to be written in checklist form.
5. For instance, in the United Kingdom a set of competency standards have been developed for unpaid workers in the home (Butler and Leigh, 1994). The British government then commissioned a study to examine their relationship to paid occupations. Refer to Report no. 29 (April 1995) of the Learning Methods Branch of the Department of Education and Employment, Qualifications for Work Division.
6. Information obtained from the Maori Education Unit of the Education and Training Support Agency and the Maori Development Unit of the New Zealand Qualifications Authority.
7. Dennis Gunning, Director of the Scottish Vocational Education Commission suggested at a seminar in June 1996 that many policy rules in national qualifications frameworks were based on perception and assertion rather than actual research. He suggested it would be useful to undertake research about the

contribution of moderation systems and standards based assessment to assessment reliability. The seminar was organised by the Research Centre for Vocational Education and Training, University of Technology, Sydney.

8. For a useful discussion about multicultural pluralism refer to Cope & Kalantzis, 1996.
9. See for example Woods 1992, Kale 1988, Osborne 1982, 1986, Eckermann 1988, Harris, S. 1984 and Higgins 1991 and a text prepared by the Queensland Department of Education, (1987) *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Learning Styles*.
10. Garbutcheon Singh (1990) provides a telling account of how anthropological research, "framed within a highly questionable Anglo-dependent, hegemonic prescription" (p. 12) created a picture of indigenous Australians which legitimised efforts to treat them as exotic, fragile and in need of 'special' help. In particular, he describes how the Northern Territory Cattle Producers Council was able to draw upon anthropological research in the argument they developed to oppose an application made in 1965 for equal wages for Aborigines. "An essential part of the submission from the Cattle Producers Council 'was to show on empirical grounds that the Aborigines' work value is known notoriously to be lower than that of Europeans, and that the reason for this is to be found in the cultural and psychological facts of Aboriginal life, even after prolonged association with Europeans' (Stanner 1967, p. 46 in Garbutcheon Singh, p. 12). The knowledge generated by anthropological research..... gave an 'allusive authority to points central to the pastoralists case, eg. the very long period of time needed for the success of assimilation; the Aborigines difficulty with our ideas of time, space, causation, number and so on - in short with categories of European thought and culture; their inability or unwillingness to accept work discipline, or to do any complicated task efficiently without supervision (Stanner 1967, p. 47 in Garbutcheon Singh, p. 12).
11. Refer to Harris 1988b, 1988c, 1990, 1991, 1993; McConvell 1982, 1991; Folds 1988, 1992; McTaggart 1988, 1989; Poulson 1988; Wungungmurra 1988; Vallance 1988; Christie 1993; McCann 1993, 1994.
12. It is noted that Harris at one stage (1988b, p. 185) did suggest that the "term 'industrial society' ... is more accurate than any of the various synonyms used to describe non-Aboriginal society in Australia such as 'white' or 'Western', or 'Anglo'. Whatever term is used the conceptual approach remains, however, the same.
13. This brief critique of two ways education draws upon five main sources. 1. Folds (1992) argues that it is unrealistic and misleading to suggest that there can be a two way equal exchange of knowledge between a dominant majority society and a small minority one. 2. Nakata (in press) does not engage in the debates about two ways education but sharply criticises approaches which problematise the 'culture' of indigenous people but not the dominant education system. 3. McCann (1993, p. 132) writes: "Instead of Aboriginality being seen as a legitimate identity position from which to confront contemporary existence, it is still seen in the documents under study as a liability, something that has to be accommodated with great cost and difficulty. With the emphasis placed on the need to choose between two irreconcilable ends of the spectrum, two ways education is all too often seen as polarising rather than inclusive or even expansive education." 4. Carpenter (1990) argues that much of what has been written about education and indigenous people in the last decade has been located in a psychological framework that focuses on cultural differences and "the relations of the disadvantaged to the education system" (p.8). This focus is criticised because it "mostly ignores the broader political relations of power and control" (p.8). She further argues that proposed measures, such as two ways education, to promote self determination for indigenous people in education with their emphasis on community control have not managed to move away from dominant discourses which continue to reinforce relations of unequal power. "Issues of autonomy at local and specific sites are very much part of the discourse of the day, the discourse of corporatism....." (p. 13). 5. Giroux (1991) argues "critical educators need to reveal the political interests at work in those forms of multicultural education that translate cultural differences into merely learning styles; the ideological task here is to challenge those mystifying ideologies that separate culture from power and struggle while simultaneously treating difference as a technical rather than a political category" (p. 461).
14. This overview draws on Boud (1996) and Eisner (1993).

References

- Ah Chee, D. 1996, June Keynote address at the *Community Work, Youth Work and Popular Education* conference, June 24-26, University of Technology, Sydney
- Athanasou, J., Golden, D. & Hoggard, L. 1995. *Competency Based Assessment and the Needs of Targetted Groups - Aboriginal Students*. Sydney: Assessment Centre for Vocational Education.
- Boud, D. 1996, September Keynote address at the *Partnerships in the Assessment of Student Achievement* conference, September 24-26, Auckland Institute of Technology

- Brynes, J. (Nov. 1993). Aboriginal Learning Styles and Adult Education: Is a Synthesis Possible? *Australian Journal of Adult & Community Education*. vol. 33, no. 3
- Carpenter, C. 1990a. *Some Questions for Aboriginal Education in the 1990's*. Paper presented at the Queensland Curriculum Conference, Griffith University, June, 1990
- Carpenter, C. 1990b. *A socially critical analysis of the assumptions underlying Aboriginal and Islander education*. Paper presented at the Australian Association of Research in Education Conference, Perth, 1990
- Centre for Research on Work, Education and Business Ltd. 1996. *Workplace Skills Assessment: A literature review based on the entries in the NZQA literature database*. Wellington: New Zealand Qualifications Authority.
- Christie, M. J. 1985. *Aboriginal perspectives on experience and learning: The role of language in Aboriginal education*. : Geelong: Deakin University Press.
- Christie, M. J. 1993. Constructing a Galtha curriculum. *Education Australia*. issue 22, p. 15 - 18.
- Collins, C. Ed. 1993. *Competencies: The Competencies Debate in Australian Education and Training*. Canberra: Australian College of Education
- Coogan, P. 1996 Standards-based Assessment: Manageability Lessons for New Zealand from the UK. Paper presented at the *Partnerships in the Assessment of Student Achievement* conference, September 24-26, Auckland Institute of Technology
- Cooper, L. 1996, July. *From 'Rolling Mass Action' to "RPL": The Changing Discourse of Experience and Learning in the South African Labour Movement*. Paper presented the International Council of Experiential Learning conference, Cape Town
- Cope, B. & Kalantzis, M. 1995/96 Summer. Pedagogy after Pluralism: how multicultural education can reconstruct the mainstream. *Education Links*. no. 51
- Eckermann, A. 1988. Learning styles, classroom management, teacher characteristics and rural-urban Aboriginal people: Some thoughts. *The Aboriginal Child at School*. vol. 16. no. 1, p. 3 - 19.
- Eisner, E. 1993. Reshaping assessment in education: some criteria in search of practice. *Curriculum Studies*, vol. 25, no. 3
- Federation of Independent Aboriginal Education Providers 1996a *1996 submission to Inquiry into the developments in adult and community education since 1991*
- Federation of Independent Aboriginal Education Providers 1996b *A Response to Kay Schofield & Associates Discussion paper on The Role of ACE in the Implementation of a National System for Vocational Education and Training*
- Ferguson, P. 1996, September *Do Unit Standards produce Standard Units? or Is the Assessment Dog wagging the Educational Dog?* Paper presented at the *Partnerships in the Assessment of Student Achievement* conference, September 24-26, Auckland Institute of Technology
- Folds, R. 1987. *Whitefella school*. Sydney : Allen and Unwin: Sydney.
- Folds, R. & Marika, D. 1989. Aboriginal education and training at the crossroads: Reproducing the present or choosing the future? *The Aboriginal Child at School*. 17. No. 2, April/May, p. 5-12.
- Folds, R. 1987. The social relationships of tribal Aboriginal schooling in Australia. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*. vol. 8. no. 4, p. 447 - 460.
- Folds, R. 1988. Choosing a curriculum for Aboriginal schools. *Curriculum Perspectives*. vol. 8. no. 2, pages 67 - 68.
- Folds, R. 1989. A socio-cultural approach to the bilingual curriculum in Central Australian schools. *Curriculum Inquiry*. vol. 19. no. 1, pages 33 - 50.
- Folds, R. 1992. Yellow brick roads in Aboriginal education. *Aboriginal child at school*. vol. 20. no. 2 April/May
- Foley, G. 1995. A framework for understanding adult learning and education. In G. Foley ed. *Understanding Adult Education and Training*. Sydney. Allen & Unwin
- Foley, G., & Flowers, R. 1990. *Strategies for self-determination: Aboriginal adult education, training and community development in NSW*. Sydney : University of Technology, Sydney.
- Forster, K. 1996. Competencies and the curriculum: Can schooling contribute to the reconstruction of work? *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, vol. 28, no. 1
- Garbutcheon-Singh, M. 1990. Curriculum knowledge and Aboriginality: Conservative, capitalistic and favourable to long-continued paternalism. *Curriculum Perspectives*. vol. 10. no. 2, May 1990, p. 10 - 19.

- Giroux, H. 1991. Postmodernism as Border Pedagogy: Redefining the Boundaries of Race and Ethnicity. in: *Postmodernism, Feminism, and Cultural Politics: Redrawing Educational Boundaries*. New York: State University of New York Press
- Gribble, H. 1993. Claiming Common Ground. *Education Links*, no. 44
- Gunning, D. 1996, August Address to *Assessment: The Big Questions*, a seminar at the Research Centre for Vocational Education and Training, University of Technology, Sydney
- Harris, S. 1990a. *Two way Aboriginal schooling, education and cultural survival*. Canberra : Aboriginal Studies Press.
- Harris, S. & Harris, J. 1988a. Aboriginal communication styles, assessment and social change. In G. Davidson Eds., *Ethnicity and Cognitive Assessment*. p. 71 - 80. Darwin : Darwin Institute of Technology Press.
- Harris, S. 1984. Aboriginal Learning Styles and Formal Schooling. *Aboriginal Child at School*. vol. 18. no. 4
- Harris, S. 1988b. Coming up level without losing themselves - The dilemma of formal tertiary training for Aborigines. In Harvey, B. & McGinty, S. Eds., *Learning my way*. p. 169-187. Institute of Applied Aboriginal Studies W.A.C.A.E.
- Harris, S. 1988c. Culture boundaries, culture maintenance-in-charge, and two-way Aboriginal schools. *Curriculum Perspectives*. vol. 8. no. 2, p. 76 - 83.
- Harris, S. 1990b. We are learning slowly. *The Aboriginal Child at School*. vol. 18. no. 1, p. 30 - 34.
- Harris, S. 1991. Reply to McConvells two way blind alley paper. *Australian Aboriginal Studies, Canberra*. no. 2, p. 19 - 26.
- Harris, S. 1993. In defence of bilingual education. *Education Australia*. issue 22, p. 13 - 14.
- Higgins, R. 1991. Effective teaching strategies in isolated Aboriginal communities: Some issues to consider. *The Aboriginal Child at School*. 19. No. 4, August/September, p. 3-13.
- Human Sciences Research Council, 1995, *Ways of Seeing the National Qualifications Framework*. Pretoria, South Africa
- Iveson, K. 1994, June *Why turn everything young people do into competencies?* Paper presented at Social, Action, Learning and Training conference, University of Technology, Sydney
- Jeffs, T. & Smith, M. 1993. A Question of Competence. *Concept, Journal of Contemporary Community Education Practice Theory*. vol. 3, no. 1, Spring
- Kale, J. 1988. Establishing positive learning environments for Aboriginal and Islander children in the earliest years of schooling. *The Aboriginal child at school*. vol. 16. no. 13, pages 45 - 51.
- Luke, A., Nakata, M., Garbutcheon Singh, M. & Smith, R. 1993. *Policy and Politics of Representation: Torres Strait Islanders and Aborigines at the Margins*. in Lingard, B., Knight, J. & Porter, P. Eds. *Schooling Reform in Hard Times*. London : Falmer Press
- Marginson, S. 1993. The training market. *Education Links*, no. 44
- Mawer, G. & Field, L. 1995. *One Size Fits Some: Competency-based training and non-English speaking background people*. Canberra: AGPS
- McCann, H. 1993. *Opening up new space: Aboriginal community controlled adult education*. M.Ed thesis. University of Southern Queensland, Hervey Bay Campus
- McCann, H. 1994. *Aboriginal community controlled adult education*. policy context and lessons for other community providers. in: Proceedings of Social Action, Learning and Training in the Community Sector conference, Department of Community and Aboriginal Education, UTS
- McDonald, R. 1994, October *Led Astray by Competence?* Paper delivered at the Australian National Training Authority, Brisbane
- McIntyre, J., Ardler, W., Morley-Warner, T., et al. 1996. *Culture Matters*. Sydney: Research Centre for Vocational Education and Training
- McTaggart, R. 1988. Aboriginal pedagogy versus colonisation of the mind. *Curriculum Perspectives*. vol. 8. no. 2
- McTaggart, R. 1989. Aboriginalisation implies empowerment and disempowerment. *The Aboriginal Child at School*. 17. No. 2, April/May, p. 37-43.
- Nakata, M. 1991 *Constituting the Torres Strait Islander. A Foucauldian discourse analysis of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy*. Unpublished B. Ed. Honours thesis, James Cook University of North Queensland.

- Nakata, M. 1995. Culture in education: For us or for them? In N. Loos & T. Osanai Eds., *The struggle for human rights: Reading in the history, culture, education and future of the Ainu of Japan and the Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders of Australia*. Tokyo : San You-Sha.
- Porter, P., Rivzi, F., Knight, J. & Lingard, R. 1992. Competencies for a clever country: Building on a house of cards? *Ideas for Education*
- Poulson, C. J. 1988, The School Curriculum I would like for my children. In: *Curriculum Perspectives*. vol. 8. no. 2, pages 68 - 69.
- Seddon, T. 1993 An historical reckoning: education and training reform. *Education Links*, no. 44
- Snow, D. 1993. *A new politics of colonisation: Recent Aboriginal education*. University of Auckland: Paper submitted to Access: Critical perspectives on education policy: September 1993
- Stevenson, J. 1993,. Competency based training in Australia: An analysis of assumptions. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Vocational Education Research*. vol. 1, no. 1
- Vallance, R. & Vallance, D. 1988. Punmu Wangka: A 'right way' desert school curriculum 1948-87. *Curriculum Perspectives*. vol. 8. no. 2, pages 71 - 76.
- Wolf, A. 1994, *Competence Based Assessment: Does it shift the demarcation lines?* Paper prepared for the symposium session: Dimensions of a Vocational Core Curriculum: Controversies about competencies and key qualifications, Milan
- Woods, D. 1992, Teaching strategies. *Queensland Teachers Journal*. Feb. 27, p. 8.
- Wunungmurra, W. 1988, "Dhawurrpunaramirra" Finding the common ground for a new Aboriginal curriculum. *Curriculum Perspectives*. vol. 8. no. 2, pages 69 - 71.
- Yunupingu, M. 1990. Language and power: The Yolngu rise to power at Yirrkala School. In *Language: Maintenance, power and education in Australian Aboriginal contexts*. pages 3 - 6.

¹ Emancipatory learning is understood as learning which helps people “see through and challenge (often taken for granted and) dominant meanings and practices” (Foley, 1995, my modification). Emancipatory perspectives draw on critical pedagogy. For a useful and succinct discussion of critical pedagogy refer to Foley, 1990 p. 45-53).

² For example, refer to Foster, 1996; Seddon, 1993; Gribble, 1993; Collins, 1993; Porter, P, Rivzi, F. et. al., 1992; Stephenson, J., 1993.

³ It was precisely these questions which were the focus of two recent research projects studying the experiences of indigenous Australians with vocational education and training. See Athanasou, J., Golden, D. & Hoggard, L. (1995). *Competency Based Assessment and the Needs of Targetted Groups - Aboriginal Students* and McIntyre, J., Ardler, W., Morley-Warner, T., et. al. (1996). *Culture Matters*.

⁴ Across the various countries the rules are marked more by their similarities rather than differences. In all countries it is required to construct standards with ‘building blocks’ of units which should contain several elements, that in turn must contain several performance criteria. In all countries there are detailed technical rules about how the units, elements and performance criteria are to be written. These rules refer to verb tense, length, language and what is acceptable type of content. There are further rules about packaging standards in levels and aligning them to other sets of standards. What the rules produce are essentially hierarchical checklist descriptions of competence. Granted, some standards have rather ‘rich’ descriptions of competence, but they are nonetheless, required to be written in checklist form.

⁵ For instance, in the United Kingdom a set of competency standards have been developed for unpaid workers in the home (Butler and Leigh, 1994). The British government then commissioned a study to examine their relationship to paid occupations. Refer to Report no. 29 (April 1995) of the Learning Methods Branch of the Department of Education and Employment, Qualifications for Work Division.

⁶ Information obtained from the Maori Education Unit of the Education and Training Support Agency and the Maori Development Unit of the New Zealand Qualifications Authority.

⁷ Dennis Gunning, Director of the Scottish Vocational Education Commission suggested at a seminar in June 1996 that many policy rules in national qualifications frameworks were based on perception and assertion rather than actual research. He suggested it would be useful to undertake research about the contribution of moderation systems and standards based assessment to assessment reliability. The seminar was organised by the Research Centre for Vocational Education and Training, University of Technology, Sydney.

⁸ For a useful discussion about multicultural pluralism refer to Cope & Kalantzis, 1996.

⁹ See for example Woods 1992, Kale 1988, Osborne 1982, 1986, Eckermann 1988, Harris, S. 1984 and Higgins 1991 and a text prepared by the Queensland Department of Education, (1987) *Aboriginal and Torres*

Strait Islander Learning Styles.

¹⁰ Garbutcheon Singh (1990) provides a telling account of how anthropological research, "framed within a highly questionable Anglo-dependent, hegemonic prescription" (p. 12) created a picture of indigenous Australians which legitimised efforts to treat them as exotic, fragile and in need of 'special' help. In particular, he describes how the Northern Territory Cattle Producers Council was able to draw upon anthropological research in the argument they developed to oppose an application made in 1965 for equal wages for Aborigines. "An essential part of the submission from the Cattle Producers Council 'was to show on empirical grounds that the Aborigines' work value is known notoriously to be lower than that of Europeans, and that the reason for this is to be found in the cultural and psychological facts of Aboriginal life, even after prolonged association with Europeans' (Stanner 1967, p. 46 in Garbutcheon Singh, p. 12). The knowledge generated by anthropological research..... gave an 'allusive authority to points central to the pastoralists case, eg. the very long period of time needed for the success of assimilation; the Aborigines difficulty with our ideas of time, space, causation, number and so on - in short with categories of European thought and culture; their inability or unwillingness to accept work discipline, or to do any complicated task efficiently without supervision (Stanner 1967, p. 47 in Garbutcheon Singh, p. 12).

¹¹ Refer to Harris 1988b, 1988c, 1990, 1991, 1993; McConvell 1982, 1991; Folds 1988, 1992; McTaggart 1988, 1989; Poulson 1988; Wungungmurra 1988; Vallance 1988; Christie 1993; McCann 1993, 1994.

¹² It is noted that Harris at one stage (1988b, p. 185) did suggest that the "term 'industrial society' ... is more accurate than any of the various synonyms used to describe non-Aboriginal society in Australia such as 'white' or 'Western', or 'Anglo'. Whatever term is used the conceptual approach remains, however, the same.

¹³ This brief critique of two ways education draws upon five main sources. 1. Folds (1992) argues that it is unrealistic and misleading to suggest that there can be a two way equal exchange of knowledge between a dominant majority society and a small minority one. 2. Nakata (in press) does not engage in the debates about two ways education but sharply criticises approaches which problematise the 'culture' of indigenous people but not the dominant education system. 3. McCann (1993, p. 132) writes: "Instead of Aboriginality being seen as a legitimate identity position from which to confront contemporary existence, it is still seen in the documents under study as a liability, something that has to be accommodated with great cost and difficulty. With the emphasis placed on the need to choose between two irreconcilable ends of the spectrum, two ways education is all too often seen as polarising rather than inclusive or even expansive education." 4. Carpenter (1990) argues that much of what has been written about education and indigenous people in the last decade has been located in a psychological framework that focuses on cultural differences and "the relations of the disadvantaged to the education system" (p.8). This focus is criticised because it "mostly ignores the broader political relations of power and control" (p.8). She further argues that proposed measures, such as two ways education, to promote self determination for indigenous people in education with their emphasis on community control have not managed to move away from dominant discourses which continue to reinforce relations of unequal power. "Issues of autonomy at local and specific sites are very much part of the discourse of the day, the discourse of corporatism....." (p. 13). 5. Giroux (1991) argues "critical educators need to reveal the political interests at work in those forms of multicultural education that translate cultural differences into merely learning styles; the ideological task here is to challenge those mystifying ideologies that separate culture from power and struggle while simultaneously treating difference as a technical rather than a political category" (p. 461).

¹⁴ This overview draws on Boud (1996) and Eisner (1993).