

Mayo, P. (2009). The 'Competence' Discourse in Education and the Struggle for Social Agency and Critical Citizenship. *International Journal of Educational Policies*. Vol.3(2) pp. 5-16.

ISSN: 1307-3842

## The 'Competence' Discourse in Education and the Struggle for Social Agency and Critical Citizenship \*

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### Abstract

This paper provides a critical view of the dominant discourse in education centering on 'competences' and the type of slant this discourse takes. It also suggest an alternative discourse in this regard with a more holistic approach in mind and which takes on board the issues of critical literacy and social movement organisation, providing due reference to the ideas of John Dewey, Lorenzo Milani and the School of Barbiana, Paulo Freire and those emerging from the World Social Forum.

**Keywords:** *competences, critical literacy, performativity, media, democracy, public sphere.*

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\* This text draws on two previously published pieces, Mayo (2008) and Mayo, 2009a). It has just been published in Catalan as Mayo (2009).

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The discourse concerning education for citizenship is characterised by a struggle over meaning and values. It reflects the struggle over what kind of world we consider possible and the role that people can play in shaping this ever evolving world. It therefore also involves the struggle over the meaning of education. What purpose should it serve? Put crudely, is it an education intended to integrate persons into the world as we know it, a world in which 'what is' and 'what works' determine what is possible? On the contrary, is it an education that is dynamic and which prepares people for a world not as it is but as it should and can be? The more progressive literature advocates the latter vision and approach. It argues for an education closely connected with a revitalisation of the democratic public sphere and which prepares citizens to contribute to the emergence of a 'substantive democracy' (Giroux, 2001). An education for citizenship, in this context, is a democratic education, one in which students learn about democracy not simply by talking about it but by engaging in a democratic learning experience governed by non hierarchical social relations of education. This is in keeping with John Dewey's over-arching concept of education for democracy.

Alas, this is a far cry from the dominant discourse in education that highlights a 'commercially and market-oriented' type of competence-based learning (Gadotti, 2008, p. 43), competences that are often measured through a positivist approach and according to outcomes. This dominant discourse reflects a broader discourse that promotes entrepreneurship, competitiveness and the mobility of capital and labour in a world characterized by the intensification of globalization.

In several places, the discourse regarding this type of competences originally made its presence strongly felt in the area of vocational education. What is worrying is that this discourse is nowadays not restricted to vocational education. It is a hegemonic discourse that reflects an attempt to render such areas as the education of adults, within the context of the broader all embracing process of lifelong learning, competence and outcomes based. One can detect here the influence of the OECD (1996, 2007) and the European Union (EU), as manifest in the various documents concerning lifelong learning. The 'Memorandum on Lifelong Learning' is a case in point (CEC, 2000). For a

variety of reasons, including that of facilitating the harmonisation of various national educational systems, *everything has to produce results that can be measured* (Wain, 2004; Surian, 2006; Harris, 2007, Landri, 2009) *in terms of effective outcomes*. a process referred to by Jean Francois Lyotard (1989) as 'performativity' (pp. 47-53). This militates against in depth interpretative qualitative research processes as everything needs to translate to a quantitative measurement. This is all part and parcel of what has come to be regarded as the "evaluator state" (Gentili, 2005). The evaluator state exerts control over educational processes through various evaluation schemes, standardisation procedures, classifications, outcomes-based funding mechanisms and league tables (Gentili, 2005, p. 141; CHEPS, 2007, section II).

As several writers have shown (Borg and Mayo, 2006, Brine, 1998; Williamson, 1998; Wain, 2004; Bauman, 2005), the dominant competence-based discourse on adult learning, within the context of lifelong learning, focuses on vocational education and ICT. The old UNESCO discourse on lifelong education, to which Ettore Gelpi, Bogdan Suchodolski, Paul Lengrand, Ravindah H. Dave and others made substantial contributions, and which was based on an expansive and humanist concept of education and human capacities, is reduced to a discourse of learning that serves to project a two-dimensional image of persons, that of producers and consumers.

The kind of competences given importance in the dominant discourse are those that should, in theory, enable persons to become more in demand in the labour market, more 'marketable' as everything seems geared towards an education for 'employability' which, as Ettore Gelpi (2002) reminds us, does not necessarily mean 'employment'. In this context, 'Lifelong Learning,' signifies the updating of competences in a vocational sense in view of the 'technological advancement' and potential 'territorial mobility' of capital. Among other functions, the Neoliberal state takes on the responsibility of developing the infrastructure that facilitates the mobility of capital. Education, and especially post-compulsory education, including adult education, serves to develop the so-called 'human resources.' Developing human resources signifies, in this context, the attainment of those competences that attract and maintain investment and that permit the labour force to render industry more competitive.

Granted, there is a need for a good vocational adult education set up; nothing amiss here. What is amiss, in my view, is the reduction of what ought to be a broad range of human competences in education to narrowly defined competences, those that fit the labour market and the perceived demands of the economy. Equally worrying is the tendency to promote the idea of education as an individual and not a social responsibility. Jane Thompson, leading UK feminist socialist educator and activist, who once edited a very influential volume promoting a radical debate on adult education (Thompson, 1980), is on target when she states:

...the advance of individualism and consumerism in western economies, fuelled by the collapse of communism and promoted by neo-liberal governments as emblematic of freedom and democracy, has shifted the focus of attention from the collective and the public towards the individual and the private. As a consequence no one speaks in favour of working class solidarity anymore. Trade unions have been neutralised and professionalised. Feminism as a political movement has been effectively smashed. Black politics has been co-opted by multiculturalism, controlled by institutionalised racism and poverty, and in some respects, pushed towards reactionary forms of fundamentalism. (Thompson, in Borg and Mayo, 2007, p.65).

This tendency is Neoliberal, or more precisely, a concession, by influential but, as always, non-monolithic institutions (e.g. the EU), to the global neoliberal scenario. According to this perspective, individuals are called on to finance wholly or partially their own access to adult education, as though they are purchasing a consumer product rather than availing themselves of a public service to which they are entitled as citizens. This represents the *commodification* of education.

If we are serious about a person's right to education, then we must develop a broader notion of 'competences.' We need a more holistic model of 'competences' if we are to use this hegemonic term and recast it to suit more expansive democratic purposes. Such a holistic model would be more in keeping with the German and Austrian traditions in this area (Sultana, 2008; Winterton, J., et.al, 2005) traditions which, in Germany's case, are closely linked to the concept of *Bildung*. Adopting this alternative model would allow us to develop a repertoire of competences that are open and flexible enough and which would allow persons to develop as subjects exerting an active control over themselves, their existence and their choices in life (Batini, 2008, p.

37). Unfortunately, there is a widening gap between holistic views of education and the needs of the labour market. A new human capital theory approach seems to be making its presence strongly felt. I would argue, however, that the competences required by the labour market can be subsumed within a broader range which also includes the competences for a genuinely active democratic citizenship.

Broadening the notion of 'competences' in this vein, we can speak of competences that enable persons to become, in the words of the Italian critical pedagogue, Lorenzo Milani, 'cittadini sovrani' (sovereign citizens). These competences are meant to equip persons not only individually but also collectively, as advocated by Paulo Freire. Persons would thus be equipped with a range of competences that would allow them to contribute to the development of a genuinely democratic environment. A reductionist discourse concerning competences and education would lead to a democratic deficit. It is important to hearken back to the still relevant discourse concerning education, democracy and the public sphere developed by John Dewey, Jurgen Habermas, Aldo Capitini (with his notion of grassroots democracy in a post-fascist Italy – *omnicrazia*), Maxine Greene and others. It is a discourse which attaches importance to, among other things as the participatory, affective and creative dimensions of learning, the last mentioned including the cultivation of the imagination much underscored by Maxine Greene (see Baldacchino, 2008).

The much referred to EU Memorandum on Lifelong Learning promotes the learning of new basic skills, or new literacies, mainly related to work and ICT. The Freirean concept of *critical literacy* is however conspicuous by its absence. Critical literacy entails developing the 'competence' of being able to engage in a critical reading of the world – reading not only the word but also the world. We are here referring to the type of reading in which the students of Lorenzo Milani (Scuola di Barbiana, 1996; Borg, Cardona and Caruana, 2009) were engaged at Barbiana when they spent afternoons reading and reacting to articles in the daily newspapers. They discussed articles collectively and often responded by means of a collective approach to writing. A critical reading of the world would, in my view, constitute the principal competence to develop within an educational process intended to strengthen and regenerate the public spaces in a world in which these spaces are shrinking. They are shrinking through their

constant commodification, corporate enclosure and also because people are being given a false sense of freedom though indulging in designer consumer pursuits, while being denied time for social engagement through having to juggle between precarious part-time jobs that deny them non-economic disposable time. 'Corporate time' is constantly taking precedence over 'public time' (Giroux and Searls Giroux, 2004), the latter being the sort of time that is congenial for the 'pedagogy of the snail' (*pedagogia della lumaca*) that Lorenzo Milani had called for in the 60s (see Martinelli, in Borg and Mayo, 2007). Universities and other educational institutions are being caught up through bureaucratic processes and corporatisation which makes corporate time a feature of their work and makes them lose their one time function of serving not only the economy but also the public sphere in providing a higher education for citizenship.

A critical reading of the world can contribute to the development of a kind of democracy often referred to as 'thick democracy' (Gandin and Apple, 2002) that is characterized by direct social participation. I would refer as examples here to the citizenship schools such as those of long standing (e.g. Highlander in Tennessee, Horton and Freire, 1990) and the more recent ones in Porto Alegre that allow persons to acquire the baggage of competences necessary for them to participate directly in the debates concerning the participatory budget (PB). This project was lately adopted and possibly reinvented in Portugal, Spain (Lucio-Villegas Ramos, 2004; Lucio-Villegas, *et al*, 2009, Marino, 2009), France, Italy and Germany.<sup>1</sup> The PB drive seems to have slowed down in the Andalusian city of Seville where it had been in operation recently and for which the adult education programme at the University of Seville was involved. The PB is however a democratic process in which community members deliberate about how part of a public budget should be spent (see Sergio Baierle in Borg and Mayo, 2007).<sup>2</sup> With respect to the Participatory Budget, Daniel Schugurensky states that while many "local planners, city officials, community organizers and participants do not perceive the pedagogical potential of participatory democracy", a number of "active participants" in the Porto Alegre project "understand the Participatory Budget as an educational space",

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1 I am indebted to Daniel Schugurensky from OISE/University of Toronto, for this point.

2 Thanks to Daniel Schugurensky from OISE/University of Toronto and Josh Lerner from the New School in New York for the formulation of this point.

often referring to it as a “citizenship school” (Schugurensky, 2002:72). It involves an educational process of learning the competences for a deliberating democracy by partaking in such a democracy itself, very much as advocated by Dewey. He goes on to say, with respect to the Participatory Budget, “By engaging actively in deliberation and decision making processes, individuals and communities learn and adopt basic democratic competences and values.” (ibid). A word of caution is however necessary here as many countries and municipalities attempt to adopt a participatory budget. As with Freire’s and Milani’s ideas, the key word in this context is ‘reinvent’. One cannot transplant ideas and projects given the contextually specific characteristics involved. Milani was adamant that the School of Barbiana started at Barbiana and was to end at Barbiana. Freire himself states that experiments cannot be transplanted but must be reinvented. Likewise, Sergio Baierle, one of the founders of CIDADE, an NGO that carries out research and capacity building with respect to the Participatory Budget (PB) in Porto Alegre, states:

The Participative Budget is, in a way, the expression of a crisis in local legislative bodies. In my opinion, it is the structural incapacity of these bodies to add and give consequence to demands of the less favored sectors, open a space for the emergence of a fourth power, which is this plebeian public sphere built from the Participative Budget.....

The PB is a process and a structure. As a process it cannot be transferred since it comprises our particular history and cannot be cloned. As a structure, although it was built historically and collectively, the Participative Budget can be reinvented elsewhere. Today, in Brazil, even conservative party administrations are implementing forms of Participative Budgets. The World Bank itself has incorporated the idea of PBs as one of its main cores for local development, i.e., if up to a short time ago the neo-liberal policies seemed to consider themselves above more direct social articulations present neo-liberal consensus carries a social project that incorporates the conversion of projects originally presented by the left, through increased scope of space for philanthropic action of great corporations and the search for active consent. That is why the most important discussion may not be as to the possibility of replication, which tends to grow, but as to: What is it good for? Where do we want to arrive? (Baierle, in Borg and Mayo, 2007, pp. 149-150)

Apart from the PB experiments in citizenship schools and learning, one should also think of the role of various social movements in promoting a citizenship education

predicated on social justice. These movements create the kind of environment which is conducive to the acquisition and learning of various competences. Apart from the various movements that left their mark on the western world, I would mention such movements as the landless peasant movement (MST) in Brazil, the Chipko movement in India and the Zapatista movement in Chiapas, Mexico. The competences for active citizenship involved include the ability to mobilise persons around public issues, to develop organisational skills and to exercise rights which would otherwise remain unknown to the persons concerned. They also include the ability to conceive of and create processes of social learning such as methods of non violent protests, 'teach-ins' and so forth. They also comprise the acquisition of competences for the development of a social solidarity economy (see De Vita, 2004, 2009),<sup>3</sup> where money is used as a vehicle for exchanges rather than for financial speculation. It is used in a manner that generates novel forms of exchanges.<sup>4</sup>

Social justice oriented movements are also engaged in specific alternative models of education for citizenship. These models entail use of competences that are given importance in the dominant discourse, for example the adoption of traditional basic skills of writing and carrying out mathematical computations, making effective use of internet, computers, public speaking etc. The key difference lies in the use made of these skills. For what purpose are they learnt? This also has gross implications for the pedagogy involved. In this case, the competences, learnt via an integrated, holistic approach, have a social purpose. They are vehicles to update strategies and modes of communication. The so-called 'internet war,' engaged in by the Zapatistas, comes to mind. It is a politics of persuasion and mobilization, related to issues concerning the politics of NAFTA, land reform and indigeneity, and the right of local communities for autonomy and proper representation in national democratic structures,<sup>5</sup> carried out via electronic networking and information, blogging etc.

Nevertheless, another important competence needs to be added to these for a genuine education for active and participatory citizenship. This can be called a 'critical

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3 I am indebted to Alessio Surian for this.

4 I am indebted to Alessio Surian for this point. See [http://www.lux09.lu/fileadmin/lux09/Newsletter/Lux09-91jours/Charter\\_of\\_RIPESS\\_\\_En\\_.pdf](http://www.lux09.lu/fileadmin/lux09/Newsletter/Lux09-91jours/Charter_of_RIPESS__En_.pdf) Accessed 17th April 2009.

5 I am indebted to Michael Briguglio, University of Malta, for the formulation of this point.

citizenship.' This competence derives from the approach to education developed by such educators as Lorenzo Milani and Paulo Freire: the ability to read critically all that is transmitted via the mass media, including the very same communication and information technologies that are often uncritically celebrated in the dominant discourse. I am convinced that if Louis Althusser were writing today, he would consider the mass media, a major source of 'public pedagogy' (Giroux, 2001), as the principal Ideological State Apparatus which, as he indicated with regard to all State apparatuses (Althusser, 1971, p. 145), has both its ideological and repressive dimensions.<sup>6</sup> The competence for critical citizenship to be acquired in this context is that of *critical media literacy*:

Critical media literacy, in our conception, is tied to the project of radical democracy and is concerned to develop skills that will enhance democratization and civic participation. It takes a comprehensive approach that teaches critical skills and how to use media as instruments of social communication and change. The technologies of communication are becoming more and more accessible to young people and ordinary citizens, and can be used to promote education, democratic self-expression, and social justice. (Kellner and Share, 2009, p. 289).

The challenge here is to read not only the word and the world but also the *construction* of the world through the mass media. The media influence is all-pervasive, and as many have indicated, the media conditions different aspects of our life, having both positive and negative consequences with regard to the shaping of our subjectivities. It represents an invisible but effective form of power. The challenge therefore involves, as Douglas Kellner and Jeff Share indicate, the competence to make effective use of the media, to *write* (Taylor, 1993) or *speak* the word and the world, with a view to contributing effectively to the creation of that alternative world that is possible!

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<sup>6</sup> One wonders whether Althusser's assertion that the school is the leading Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) still holds today given the power and all pervasiveness of the global media. I would see the mass media as the number one ISA in this day and age. And where would the repressive element be there, given that, as Althusser correctly points out, there is no such thing as a purely ideological or repressive state apparatus? Well perhaps in its treatment of journalists, opinion leaders etc, who gets aired and who does not, which journalist is sidelined (as with the late Enzo Biagi in Berlusconi's Italy) who is forced to tow the line etc., how one's statements on air are edited etc, how they invade one's privacy., etc. I am indebted to Dave Hill and Mike Cole for discussing this issue with me through a series of e mail exchanges.

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*International Journal of Educational Policies*

ISSN: 1307-3842

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