

Competencies and incompetencies in teaching and training teachers

by PROFESSOR BURTON BLATT

Reflecting on competencies and incompetencies, instruction and destruction, individualization and depersonalization, Professor Burton Blatt, Director of the Division of Special Education and Rehabilitation at Syracuse University, takes a biased look at the "competency-based approach" to training teachers in the U.S.

I. Biases

I was almost inclined to tiptoe onto the bandwagon, if not volunteer as its driver, that is until the state informed me that my presence was expected — in truth, demanded. Long ago I became convinced that, although I think of myself as a loyal citizen, the state (and the federal government) have ways of making it easy for one to separate the American Ideal from the American Experience. Therefore, when we were enjoined by the Regents of the State of New York to redesign our teacher preparation program in special education in such a manner as to reflect a "competency-based approach", I decided it would be a realistic reflection of past experiences to assume my locally famous conceptual fetal position and, as they say, stonewall it. If the state thought there was "something" in the competency-performance-accountability movement, then I suspected from past experiences that there might be nothing in it for me. I've given notice that this section sets out my biases, so I'm comfortable saying: If government has an opportunity to screw something up, it will find a way. And, an all-time prize example now seems to be competency-based teacher preparation or, as the pro's say, CBTE.

Fetal positions notwithstanding, the Regents made it clear that they will entertain no exceptions; each teacher preparation program in special education is to present a redesigned curriculum by February 1975, else it will have to find other ways to serve humanity. What with Deans, colleagues, primary and secondary constituents, I never had much of a chance in ignoring or stonewalling the mandate. Consequently, in self-defense, I did what I usually do in such circumstances; I applied for a grant to study the competency-based movement. Federal and state officials, joint benefactors, were thrilled with our proposal and showered us with the dollars needed to comprehend competency-based cur-

riculum development in teacher education. Our proposal claimed it was a simple task confronting us; What was needed was a field-based curriculum designed to prepare special educators, a curriculum embracing relevant, clear and concise entrance and exit criteria for students.

One of the first things we attempted, after appointment of a project co-ordinator and small staff, was to define competency-based teacher education. I thought this would be a reasonable assignment, neither particularly difficult nor time consuming. It's always an amazement how wrong I am about certain things. Certainly, I should have remembered that definitions of metaphors are slippery things indeed. My very naive and gross understanding of CBTE was that it is very similar to what the schools call performance contracting. CBTE is concerned with what teachers do in their training, and what professors do with their students. Performance contracting is more concerned with what teachers do with the children. However, I thought of both as very much related, possibly aspects of but one general model for thinking about teachers, pupils, and teaching. In some fuzzy ways, I thought of CBTE as promising new opportunities to bring together diverse elements of a community — teachers, parents, consumers and the organizations they represent — to solve together problems confronting those who would educate our people. I thought that this movement would promise to confront the mindlessness of much of what is called teacher preparation, e.g. the idea that one should, or that anyone ever really tries to, teach curriculum and methods apart from the psychological-social settings of children, teachers, and community life.¹ As I noted earlier, I would have been interested in the problem had the Regents not told us we must be interested; in fact, had they not, I might have been even more interested, certainly less defensive.

Our search for a definition of CBTE led everywhere and, therefore, nowhere. Some colleagues asserted that a critical element of the model is the *individualization of instruction*. We bought that. Others added that, even more central, the program had to be *field-based*. We bought that too. Still others not disagreeing with the aforementioned elements added the idea of a wider sharing of program responsibility and authority to include not only university professors, but college students, public school teachers, administrators, and consumers; they claimed that such *parity* was a differentiating characteristic of CBTE. We thought this was entirely reasonable. There were those who described CBTE as programs that reify abstract concepts and artificial settings by bringing the *real world* to the college classroom and, even more so, the college classroom to the *real world*. We expected that this would be very desirable. An important factor in the movement was the intrusion of *Instructional Technology*, embedding hitherto untapped traditional facets of the curriculum. We agreed that teacher preparation might better embrace the wonders available in this scientific age. We were told that CBTE must utilize new instructional modes to deliver individualized real world stuff. Therefore, there would be new emphases on *modules, mini-courses, and team teaching*.

These new elements appeared to be propelling us to new, if not scary and sometimes uncontrollable, heights; so, somewhat scared and not in full control, we actually agreed to apply for provisional membership in the Society of CBTEs. One of the compelling reasons for the movement was the public's seeming disenchantment with traditional teacher preparation. The bits and pieces of their unhappiness were funnelled through ideological loudspeakers — legislators, elected executives, and their appointees — and what we once thought were muted voices and timid whimpers became the roars of zealots and revolutionaries. Legislators leaned on Regents, who leaned on commissioners, who leaned on functionaries, who now lean on teacher educators. So, what else is new? Nothing is new, but how we wish something would be new, or different, anything not to have what we now have (*Writer's note: for reasons such as illustrated in the aforementioned, this section was clearly labelled*). The problem with accountability (making public clear criteria for entrance to teacher preparation programs, success bench-marks, and criteria for program completion) is a simple one: We do not have either



the evaluation skills or tools or interests, and some will claim that we have no need, to accurately measure what someone in the pedagogy business is doing, much less assess how successful or unsuccessful he is. It's a little like the Pompeian wishing for a seismograph.

After reading a great deal about the CBTE model, listening at more meetings than is my custom (something almost guaranteed to make me irritable), and indiscriminately buttonholing friends and those not so friendly, I had to conclude that CBTE is either a very large umbrella or a very fragile idea. Literally, it was impossible to find a single "expert" in that field willing to define CBTE in other than the most global manner, including in such a definition everything that seems to be virtuous and right-headed about training. Further, at least among the "experts" that I encountered, there was unwillingness to exclude from the category those who were less (or not at all) interested in modules or technology, those who were more (or singularly) interested in traditional formal courses, those who had hardly worked towards (or worked not at all for) an accountability model. I had to conclude that CBTE was either Mother Earth herself in pedagogical guise or just another school marm with another grandiose idea to save the world.

¹If there is to be a debate about this, it should not be whether one can or can't but, rather, whether one should or shouldn't teach curriculum as if it can be separated from some describable reality. That there is not agreement with the above observation may account for, if not explain, the irresolution surrounding CBTE, i.e. the attempt to find can-type

answers to should-type questions. That's the Ying and the Yang of it all, the constant tension between prescription and discovery, creation and conservation, the difference between those who think in "can-can't" terms and those who are more concerned with "should we or shouldn't we."

II. More Biases

This section continues the first. However, even biases may be categorized; they appear to be more official that way, less like biases. I began with the implicit claim that CBTE is a metaphor, and if not that an inkblot, with many understandings, therefore many misunderstandings, about the concept. It is either something very important or very trivial, and my bias had led me to believe the latter. Now, in this section, I want to discuss several inconsistencies — non sequiturs — observable to one who observes this movement with my biased eye. One of the unusually fascinating things about CBTE concerns its adherents, their past polemics, and their current nostrums. *Look it up if you doubt me, but those who advocate today that teacher preparation must be centered in children's schools rather than in the universities are, more often than by chance, those reformers who but a few years ago admonished us to evacuate the public schools.* First, some of our leaders told us that the public schools were dry and dead places, neither fit for learning or human congregation of any sort. Now, some of these same colleagues scold or shame us to entrust our university students to those dangerous and precarious environments. Exactly, what do they mean? What's good and what's bad? How can a school be a dead place one year and the "only" place the next year? It's difficult to understand all of this, first the castigation, then the invasion, now the love affair. Possibly, those critics are like so many others today, those who have the idea that romantic love affairs outlast arranged marriages. Possibly, not until educational critics were able to fall in love with the schools would they consent to its value. And, now that there is love, possibly because it dawned upon the reformers that the schools are where the people are, it became obvious that children's schools are not only the best places for children but, maybe even more so, for those who are preparing to be teachers.

I hope the reformers know what they are saying and doing. I hope they have studied the data. If they haven't, they may wish to begin with the data on marriages, real marriages, which indicate that arranged affairs appear to be at least as successful as waiting and working for romantic love; look it up in the divorce statistics. Or, better, reread the section of Genesis that tells us that Isaac took Rebekah for his wife, then he loved her. The point of all of this is simple, I think. If the reformers, or the conservators, would first make their commitment to principles, there would be less of this wishy-washiness in education, less of these on-again and off-again relationships, less of perennial searches for romantic love affairs, and more agreements or arrangements where people

devote themselves to making things work because it's right, or decent, or necessary.

One of the advertised strengths of CBTE is connected with the "publication" of what is required to enter a program, to succeed in it, and to be certificated. It is claimed that, eventually, a "book" will be created which will include the explication of task analyses, teacher competencies, and evaluative criteria — preferably in a three column arrangement; or is it a four column arrangement, or four rows? Even now, today, we have available to us the catalogues of "this" State Department of Education, and "that" University, and growing numbers of catalogues from other state department and university groups, each detailing four hundred, or four thousand, or forty thousand competencies that teachers have, or should have, or would have if the colleges would but use this model, or that model, or this and that model. Where is it written that the "book" is really very helpful, either in pedagogy or in other spheres of human struggle? How many times do we hear someone plead, or we plead ourselves, that the "book" be set aside? How many times do we hear, or say, or think that the "book" is a roadblock to justice, to thoughtfulness, to parity, to understanding the views of the people, to doing the "right" thing?

It appears so ironic, yet so fitting, because we've been on this road so many times before, that the



very problems that the competency-based movement were created to attenuate may actually become more worrisome because of the movement. Going by the "book" seems more certain to lead us to normative, (what's good for the group is good for the person) not individualized, approaches to education, seems to be less rather than more humanistic, seems to promote thoughtlessness and not thoughtfulness, seems to be connected more with technical than with professional preparation.

III. And More Biases

What is the purpose of the university? What is education? What is learning? What is culture? What is the objective of it all, or the objectives, or the idea of the educated life? I have written so much about these matters in past years that I fret now, worried that this paper will divert from conviction to parody. So, I shut out the memory of past shibboleths and slogans, that is if I can. I try to say things as plainly and simply as possible, which for me is not very plain or simple. Possibly to invigorate myself, probably to escape this task, I stop for a bit to read Alfred North Whitehead's, *The Aims of Education* (1964). I am invigorated. Whitehead had the right ideas, my ideas. He reminds me of an old French proverb, "To understand all is to forgive all." Where did I see it before? Was it on the entrance way to Hull House, Jane Addams community centre in Chicago? Did I read that proverb there during a visit to the Chicago Circle Campus of the University of Illinois, now surrounding Hull House, once a place for weary but education-hungry immigrants and their children, now a museum of sorts extolling what we were and lamenting what we are? Isn't it strange, or a coincidence, that Whitehead would quote this proverb, when there were so many others he could have chosen from? Strange, because it's one of my favourites, yet I'm not certain that I understand it; but why should I understand, I'm not always forgiving; I guess it's all very complicated.

Yet, as I reread Whitehead's book, I think again of some of the ideas I had written about, ideas dealing with clinical and normative teaching and the educational supermarkets that serve the pedagogical enterprise. I think about the promises that the CBTEs are making: teachers will be prepared better to utilize relevant curricula; teacher competencies can be identified, measured; teacher competencies can be validated against the measurement of change in children; there are better curricula than others and better methods than others and, these too, can be identified, particularized, measured, and reproduced at will. All nonsense, sheer nonsense! There is nothing, absolutely nothing, in our literature that supports adherence to any one

method, curriculum or administrative design over any other method, curriculum, or design. What we really have are lots of competing insights and prejudices. Some methods work under certain circumstances and not under others, and what works is often dependent upon how one stipulates criteria for what does or doesn't work.

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Then, why have all this curriculum and methodological development, this search for new procedures? It's part of the need to do something and record the history of our efforts. Disseminating summaries of our curricula, or methods, or designs is very important work, not because such dissemination offers better prescriptions for treating subsequent clients, but because it's by common definition a method to understand the ways in which educational problems were once viewed, and measured, and dealt with. It's all so clear to me, yet I feel that the curriculum makers and the methodologists either don't understand what I'm getting at or have reasons of their own for ignoring what I'm getting at.

Permit me to deal with the curriculum-methodology question another way. Let's look specifically at the colleges and universities. Who should inhabit, or matriculate at, colleges and universities? Everyone, anyone, only some? For many generations, the colleges and universities were ruled by so-called scholars, that is those individuals who had procedures to collect data, who were skilled in the reliable reduction of data, and who did not dare proceed beyond their data. Essentially, scholars are a conservative and very valuable lot. More and more today, intellectuals and "unhinged scholars" are inhabiting places for higher education, and some have gained considerable support there. Intellectuals are willing to go beyond the scope of what is known, beyond data and facts. Intellectuals are less bound by science and scholarship, although the better ones are much more than dilettantes, or merely facile and witty verbalizers. Now, so it seems to me, not only will the intellectual, but the scholar himself — he who once owned the university — be forced to move aside for the technician. What the CBTEs are saying is that we probably never had and certainly don't need creators of educational environments: Teachers are not bright enough, inquisitive enough, or talented enough to create learning environments; we must help them more than we have, we must provide them with the technical supports necessary for them to manage good learning environments; we must make them more competent, as we define com-

petency, as we who are competent can now dictate the competencies they must have before they can be certificated. I think that, if Education was a Monolith before CBTE, it will become a monstrous Monolith once the movement gains final control, if it does.

IV. And Yet More Biases

While this new Monolith is developed, one wonders about the thousands (millions?) of person hours now devoted to the identification and parsing of competencies. Where will these professors find time for their scholarship, for the development of their clinical skills, or their research? Is it so urgent that education be standardized more than it is today? Enough already! How much standardization do we want, or need? In fact, there are some who would claim that teacher preparation is much more standardized than it should be. There are some who have observed that the teacher's college in one state is little different from the teacher's college in another, which is little different from the teacher's college in a third, which is little different from the teacher's college in a fourth, or fifth, or sixth. There are some who would claim that, irrespective of whatever differences exist in teacher education, the Educational Monolith is such that in three or four months after initial appointments, all teachers behave alike, and think alike, and are alike. Some will say it's enough already, what is needed is not more standardization but more exceptions, more uniqueness, more diversification, more idiosyncrasy. Some will say that what we need, more desperately than standardization and catalogues of competencies, is an effusion of creative people passionately interested in their own educations and in opportunities to help others develop. That, some will say, would be Utopia, more so than the S, Y, or Z State University catalogue of competencies, three columns, four columns, or whatever.

V. After Biases, What Remains? Biases.

I once wrote that the teacher — not the book, not machines, not curricula, not hardware, not software, not procedures, not even the "methods" — is the method, as the pupil and the teacher are the purposes of it all. Good methods are good teachers and poor methods are poor teachers. Since that time, I have seen a lot and done a few things, and I have read and heard a lot about Competency-based Teacher Education (CBTE). And, from what I've seen and heard, from what the literature on CBTE informs us about, I have not been dissuaded that what there is within the teacher contributes more to differentiate teaching than whatever variance exists between and among the various methods, curricula, and administrative designs. And, further,



the CBTE literature cannot offer adequate contradiction to this belief. The CBTE literature, in fact, explains very little; rather, it defends its position and, almost in an instant, rolls it out for our approval. But, hardly anywhere, in psychology, education, and social policy, will one find justification for adherence to a competency-based model, either on theoretical grounds or because of widespread agreement with its principles and values espoused. There are available enormous catalogues on competencies, but how many substantive discussions, and how many contain data? What we need from the CBTEs are less of those catalogues and more of what they claim is important, facts. After all, isn't this why they're cashing in on tradition?

How much of the CBTE position is based on the implicit belief that teachers are more often technicians than creators, both in the sense of what they do as well as what they are judged to be capable of doing? It is also based on the implicit belief that learning is more efficiently and effectively promoted when it is supervised in the context of small definable operations and tasks as on a factory assembly line, with the order of difficulty increasing in some lawful manner. Is there sufficient evidence in our literature or experience to support the idea that this is how most people, or some people, learn best, or more efficiently? I don't believe so. Can a stronger case, or any case, be made for anatomizing the learning of anything that is important to the individual, really important? What I am saying is that maybe, just maybe, one can learn syllables, or how to give an intelligence

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test, or how to administer a standardized reading test, as the result of some discrete competency-based modular experience. However, does the model have equal relevance with respect to teaching styles, values, whatever it is in the teacher that makes the teacher a teacher? Again, rather than read the various state catalogues, we might be better prepared to appreciate these issues were we to read Alfred North Whitehead. We might be less persuaded that learning should always evolve from a less difficult to a more difficult task, from concrete to abstract substance. We might better comprehend that, although antecedents always influence matters — learning tasks, competency attainment, anything — antecedents are not easily understood; they have a way of gumming up simplistic analyses. Great profit would accrue to those who read or write competency catalogues if they were to spend some time with Alfred North Whitehead.

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In the context of this discussion, one cannot avoid raising the freedom issue. Certainly, citizens should have the right to choose their community's teachers. Long overdue, the principle of local determination must extend to teacher selection. In one sense, the competency-based movement adheres to this principle. At least in my state, New York, there will be the requirement for local participation in teacher preparation programs. However, in another sense CBTE will only deepen national standardization, control, and certification of teachers. Local community representatives will be invited to participate in the design of college and university teacher preparation programs, but only as those designs do not deviate significantly from the state, or region, or wherever, mandated standards and models. Rather, communities should be given the plain right to choose their teachers in whatever manner they wish, utilizing whatever criteria they develop, competency-based or not, traditional or not, what you or I think is appropriate or not. For exactly the same reason, to safeguard their responsibilities to pursue their historic missions, colleges and universities must be equally protected. Communities are entitled to hire the teachers in their ways, and colleges are entitled to prepare teachers in theirs. Our representation should be *caveat emptor*, let the buyer beware, not "thou shalt not" or "thou must," or whatever it is that state departments and certifying agencies often choose as a slogan.

All of the above is related to things I have thought about and read about for a number of years, matters connected with our desire to protect people more than to guarantee their freedom. These concerns also relate to one's fundamental conception of how development unfolds — not for ambiguous children but for oneself. Such interests also relate to concepts of teaching, normative and clinical styles, process and substance, alchemy, the efficacy studies, slot machine teacher preparation, centralization and decentralization, certifying bodies, local prerogatives and national interests, who the schools are for, what schools do, what they should do, what we do, you, and the inevitable me, what I do.

Possibly, it is not too late to reverse or impede the tide, to inhibit adding a new layer to the Educational Monolith. It may have been because of some of these concerns that the Attorney General of Texas ruled recently that:

" . . . it is not within the authority of the State Board of Education or the State Commissioner of Education to stipulate that institutions seeking approval for teacher education programs must present performance-based applications, but the Board, with the advice of the Commissioner, may promulgate rules and regulations whereby institutions seeking such approval could choose between alternative plans for program approval (one or more of which might be 'performance-based') and submit applications accordingly." (Memorandum by J. W. Edgar, Commissioner of Education, Texas Education Agency, to the Presidents of Teacher Preparation Colleges/Universities and Deans of Education, January 15, 1974.)

I think about lighting candles in the dark, and that the Attorney General's opinion may be no more than the flicker of a firefly as summer wanes. On the other hand, it may be the beginning of something and to continue but redirect and mix the metaphor, an example when it is better to curse and extinguish a misbegotten light than to be led in frivolous or cynical paths.

VI. And, Last Biases

Enough, already, with the threat to force colleges and universities to kneel before the power of the state, or its commissioners, or its regents. By what right does a state claim authority to demand not only the substance of a credentialling program but, also, the manner in which that substance is to be transmitted? It's enough, probably too much, to have to live with the state bent on credentialling almost everything from teachers, to barbers, to

doctors, to lawyers, to real estate salesmen, you name it. Now, it would even tell us how we are to transmit those facts, values, and skills. If such nonsense is constitutional, then the constitution isn't as constitutional as I thought it to be.

I wish I could understand all so I could forgive the CBTErs. Or, better, I wish they understood all so they could forgive those poor professors who are more interested in learning for its own sake, scholarship for the thrill of it all, and creating rather than implementing environments. I wish somebody in authority, really in authority, agreed with me that the universities are places for students — intellectuals and scholars — and not for technicians, memorizers, cultists, or thoughtless applicators. I wish those in charge would understand better the difference between reverence for life (which is very important), reverence for competency (which is probably what built America so quickly and powerfully), and reverence for freedom (which is what America is really about, or supposed to have been about). That is, I wish that those in charge would understand better that competency involves mainly technical matters, but freedom concerns itself with not only the means to achieve competency but the stuff at the end, if we get there. I wish that those in charge would better appreciate the difference between individualizing programs and individualizing goals; the competency-based movement is great at accomplishing the former, and a dismal disaster in even recognizing

the importance of the latter. I wish those in charge would appreciate the distinction offered by one of my colleagues, the difference between a teacher who has developed various competencies and a competent teacher. I wish that those in charge would truly believe that, when all else fails, or succeeds — when everything, or nothing, matters — one must do something for himself, not for the state, not even for the client, but just for himself; and, could someone in charge truly believe that the learner always learns just for himself?

I wish, once or twice in a generation, somebody right at the top — in charge of those in charge — would have listened when his grandma told him stories with important lessons to be learned, maybe a story like this:

An animal once asked a centipede how he manages to walk with those 100 legs. The centipede thought hard and long about the question and, finally, said "I take the right front leg, then the . . ." And, he thought more about the matter, and more, and he never walked again.

What happened to the centipede could well happen to our most gifted teachers.

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