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Incorporating a Competency Approach into Graduate Public Policy Programs

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ABSTRACT

Most university-based Masters courses for professionals have all but ignored competency-based teaching and assessment (CBTA). The general attitude has been that CBTA is only valid for technical and industrial skills and cannot contribute to the development of the higher order analytical and problem-solving skills required by senior professionals. However, industry training boards have been developing competency units in a wide range of areas that use higher order skills, such as public policy development and implementation, and they are increasingly being used as the basis for training programs outside the university sector. This article documents the work of a university lecturer to evaluate whether there is a need to incorporate a competency approach into a Masters-level subject on public policy. The conclusion was that some aspects of CBTA should be introduced into the subject and examples are provided of the suggested new content.

Incorporating a Competency Approach into Graduate Public Policy Programs

Introduction

In 2001, the Australasian Police Commissioners' Conference formally endorsed a series of workplace competencies for policing, jointly developed by the Australasian Police Professional Standards Council and the Public Safety Industry Training Board. The endorsement of these competencies has served as catalyst for a wide range of providers to give greater consideration of how to incorporate competency-based approaches to training and education into all levels of policing in Australia.

The Australian Graduate School of Policing (AGSP) at Charles Sturt University was one education provider that in the past had essentially ignored the competency approach. The AGSP had always sought to deliver applied education aimed at addressing workplace problems but, true to its university-based perspective, it paid little heed to the emerging competency-based initiatives and had relied on its own industry advisory committees to determine the content of its masters and doctoral level programs. This input was deemed sufficient to determine the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed by the police and public safety managers who study in AGSP programs. The development of competencies was seen as an initiative impacting only on more technical areas of policing and not on the management or public policy issues taught in the graduate programs at the AGSP.

As a lecturer in the Master of Public Policy and Administration at the AGSP, I observed the development of workplace competencies with interest, and became increasingly convinced that it was essential to better understand how they related to the programs offered at university graduate level. I therefore decided to undertake a workplace learning project to explore the relationship between university-based teaching and assessment (UBTA) and competency-based teaching and assessment (CBTA), focusing on comparing recently developed competency units on public policy development and implementation with and the corresponding content of a Masters subject I teach, *Power, Politics and Public Policy*. The goal of the project was to decide if I should be incorporating aspects of a competency framework in my Masters subjects.

The theory is that UBTA and CBTA are significantly different – and many authors seek to emphasize these differences by referring to university “education” and competency “training” – but my own first impression was that there are more similarities than differences. The project gave me a chance to test my impressions and to directly compare my teaching in the field of public policy with what had been developed in competency-based units.

This article documents the journey I took to explore the relevance of CBTA for my work as a university lecturer on public policy. The project focused on the assessment dimension of teaching and learning, as CBTA places significant emphasis on the assessment of the identified competencies and my current UBTA teaching is primarily

through distance education, which places particular importance on assessment tasks as a key teaching tool.

Public Policy at the AGSP and in Policing and Public Sector Competencies

The learning objectives of *Politics Power and Public Policy*, the subject I teach in the Master of Public Policy and Administration program at the AGSP, include in part:

- To enhance understanding of the essential features and dynamics of the public policy making process and its interaction with the political system.
- To facilitate analysis of public policy including its formulation, implementation and evaluation.
- To improve practitioners skills for effectively participating in the policy making process (AGSP 2002).

The subject was incorporated into the Masters program in response to the identified need to provide police and other public safety managers with a solid understanding of the process of development of public policies and of their role in that process. The subject comprises three modules: the first module explores the distribution of power in the political arena, the second module examines the policy process itself, and the third module analyses the role of public service professionals in the process. In addition to the learning objectives listed above, which are specific to the second module, the subject also includes other objectives related to students' understanding of the distribution of power in and of the specific policing and public safety context of policy.

The learning objectives from the Masters subjects can be matched to analogous policing and public sector competencies. The Australasian Police Professional Standards Council concentrated primarily on core operational areas of policing, but among the management competencies it also included a unit *PUAPOL019A Contribute to Policy Formulation and Revision*. This competency unit comprises the following elements:

- Revise and formulate policy
- Contribute to policy promotion and implementation (APPSC 2001)

Moreover, in the more general areas of public sector competencies, as defined by the industry-based training board Public Service Education and Training Australia in the Public Services Training Package (PSETA 2001), there is a whole suite of units that address the issue of policy development and implementation, which undoubtedly will be incorporated into future programs aimed at developing police managers. Table 1 lists these policy competency units.

Table 1: Public Service Policy Competency Units

National Code	Unit of Competency Name
PSPPOLD401A	Contribute to the development of policy
PSPPOLD501A	Develop organisation policy
PSPPOLD502A	Manage the policy development process
PSPPOLD601A	Develop public policy
PSPPOLI401A	Support policy implementation
PSPPOLI601A	Manage policy implementation

(Source: PSETA 2001)

Even with only this brief outline of the Masters subject on public policy and the corresponding competency units from the public service sector, it is evident that there is considerable overlap in the areas they aspire to teach and assess. Both the university subject and the public sector competency units seek to ensure that students understand the policy process and can use their insights to improve policy development and implementation in their workplace.

But there remain apparent differences in the pedagogical approaches they espouse and the educational levels they target. Therefore, before I outline the activities of my project to reconcile these differences, it is necessary to explore more closely the “controversy” that exists between the proponents of CBTA and UBTA.

CBTA and UBTA

The CBTA movement arose from performance-based vocational programs in the US in the 1970s (Kerka, 20001) and was adopted in Australia in the 1980s as a way of improving the relationship between teaching and workplace needs (Cornford, 1997). CBTA is seen as being more able to respond to the learning needs in the workplace through more individualised teaching and assessment based on the identification and analysis of the skills and knowledge required for workplace performance (Sullivan 1995).

In Australia there is a highly institutionalised structure of CBTA implementation. The Australian National Training Authority works with a network of specific industry training advisory boards that work with their constituencies to identify competencies, to group them into qualification areas and to create industry-wide training and assessment packages. A national competency framework has been set in place to both meet industry training needs and to provide individual workers with the means of obtaining vocational qualifications based on industry-wide standards.

The teaching and assessment that derives from CBTA is often juxtapositioned with "traditional" teaching, such as that offered in UBTA. The Australian National Training Authority expresses the difference in the following terms:

The traditional approach to [teaching] was not seen as appropriate with its emphasis on the completion of a particular course over a set time. Nor were the courses seen as being based on workplace requirements (ANTA 1999, p.13)

In contrast, CBTA purports to respond to vocational needs and provide outcomes that directly impact on the ability of workers to more effectively perform their workplace tasks. It promotes itself as a win-win framework that allows employers to ensure the skills of employees and provides workers the means to receive recognition of their developing skills and identify areas of further training needs.

For its opponents, however, CBTA is seen as excessively reductionist, narrow, rigid, atomized, and theoretically, empirically, and pedagogically unsound (Kerka 2001). By concentrating on deconstructing workplace tasks, no matter how complex they may be, into component elements, there is a tendency to breakdown all associated knowledge and learning into corresponding self-contained units. Courses based on competency units are generally short and tend not to relate practice to evolving theoretical ideas or to reflect on connections between different workplace issues. Any assessment of these courses focus on individual elements and often divorce them from a wider context and generally do not require students to link current practices with past or emerging theories.

The creation of learning packages based on competency units, and the training and education policy implications that flow from them, are also criticised as enshrining a flawed tendency towards uniform and standardized guidelines which are likely to prevent more creative curriculum developments. They are also seen as creating qualification pathways and program funding schemes which may jeopardize quality in the race to deem candidates competent and guarantee income streams (Smith 2001).

On broader level, CBTA is also criticised for focusing teaching on economic production and productivity issues and by adopting a CBTA approach, teaching institutions are seen to become servants of economic rationalist imperatives instead of centres of learning excellence. There is also a concern that CBTA approach is structured to those who already work and so serve to increase the marginalisation of the unemployed (Smith 2001). A more colourful criticism rates CBTA as just one more noxious foreign import to Australia, along with rabbits and river carp (Now in Fe 2000).

University education, on the other hand, is seen by its advocates as developing higher order skills of analysis, problem solving, as well as academic skills related to ordering and expressing ideas and arguments. But, as noted above, it has traditionally been criticised for not offering students skills and knowledge that have direct application in the workplace. Over the last two decades universities have sought to reinvent themselves with a greater focus on vocationally oriented course and through the provision of graduate programs to working professionals. Despite important advances in developing a workplace orientation and the continued popularity of university education, which continues to see enrolments increase at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels, universities continue to be regarded by some sectors as "ivory towers" struggling to demonstrate their direct relevance to the workplace (Gonczi 2001).

So which of these apparently opposing approaches will lead to more effective pedagogical outcomes? When the focus is on purely technical workplace skills (often termed "hard" skills) and when there is a specific vocational training need for identifiable tasks there is more consensus about the need for a CBTA approach. Equally, when the focus is on more behavioural workplace skills such as higher order analytical and problem solving skills that can be applied to diverse situations (often also termed "soft skills"), there is more consensus about the need for a UBTA approach.

The controversies arise when there is an attempt to take CBTA from hard skills to soft or higher order skills, such as in the area of public policy development and implementation, or an attempt to apply UBTA into workplace skills, such as through the provision of professional Masters programs. CBTA is often seen as too rigid to facilitate the development of soft skills while UBTA is seen as too removed from workplace realities to provide present and future practitioners with the hard skills needed to effectively carry out a range of workplace tasks.

There is also the difference in teaching/learning levels. The CBTA units listed in the previous section are at the Diploma and Advanced Diploma level, designated as Levels 5 and 6 on the Australian Qualifications Framework, while the program I teach in covers the range Graduate Certificate to Masters Degree, or Levels 8 to 10 on the Australian Qualifications Framework. The relationship between these qualifications is represented by the following table:

Table 2: Australian Qualifications Framework

Levels	Vocational Education and Training Sector Qualifications	Higher Education Qualifications
1	Certificate I	<i>Not applicable</i>
2	Certificate II	<i>Not applicable</i>
3	Certificate III	<i>Not applicable</i>
4	Certificate IV	<i>Not applicable</i>
5	Diploma	Diploma
6	Advanced Diploma	Advanced Diploma
7	<i>Not applicable</i>	Bachelor Degree
8	<i>Not applicable</i>	Graduate Certificate
9	<i>Not applicable</i>	Graduate Diploma
10	<i>Not applicable</i>	Masters Degree
11	<i>Not applicable</i>	Doctoral Degree

(Source: Author, adapted from AQF 2001)

The programs I analysed in my project are, in theory, at significantly different levels. However when we examine the outcomes sought by the programs, we can see that there may not be such a great difference. I cited earlier the learning objectives of my subject *Power, Politics and Public Policy* and the elements the of competency units in public policy, and they appear to be analogous. These similarities extend to the more general educational outcomes of the programs.

The outcomes for the Advanced Diploma uses descriptors such as:

- Demonstrate understanding of specialised knowledge with depth in some areas.
- Analyse diagnose, design and execute judgements across a broad range of technical or management functions
- Generate ideas through the analysis of information and concepts at abstract levels (ANTA 1999, p. 9)

The outcomes for Masters Degrees uses descriptors such as:

- Learning outcomes at this level include the mastery of relevant field of professional practice and the acquisition of specific professional or vocational knowledge.
- A graduate of a Masters degree will demonstrate a higher order of skill in analysis, critical evaluation, and professional application through the planning and execution of a piece of scholarship or research (AQF 2001).

In this project I also sought to explore the parameters of the similarities and differences in qualification level.

It is important to note that the debates outlined in this section are not just restricted to the realm of pedagogical theory. They translate into significant policy controversies regarding professional preparation. Two industries which are embracing higher levels of professionalism, policing and nursing, typify this dimension of the debate as they both relatively recently moved from a more vocational approach to pre-service preparation to a more university-based system. In both professions there are constant tensions between those who see university-based preparation as essential for preparing future practitioners in an increasing complex workplace and those who see this preparation at best as superfluous and at worst as detrimental because it fails to prepare new practitioners for the reality of the difficult and sometimes dangerous tasks they will be asked to perform (see for example Longbottom and Van Kernbeek, 1999). The critics of university preparation for nurses and police officers call for a return to a more vocational and more workplace-based pre-service training. While the advocates of one or other of the views do not necessarily couch their arguments in terms of UBTA and CBTA, the motives espoused use similar terminology

Moreover, any of the debates outlined in this section are not only between the approaches but are also internal to each sector. For example, evaluation research funded by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research indicates that CBTA has not been successful in developing flexibility and adaptability in trainees and may not have the capacity to develop transferable skills (Bloch 1999, NCVET 2001), so many teachers using CBTA are seeking ways to ensure that more theory is brought into competency units (Smith 2001). Within the UBTA sector there has long been an internal clamour to make universities more relevant to workplace training and education needs. There is a long tradition of encouraging problem-based learning and constructivist approaches (Lander et al. 1995, Biggs 1989) and the push for workplace relevance extends all the way to the doctoral level, as evidenced by the relatively recent introduction of professional doctorates (Brennan, 1998).

Project to Compare UBTA and CBTA Approaches to Public Policy

The project to explore the relationship between UBTA and CBTA approaches to public policy teaching and assessment and to ultimately incorporate aspects of the competency approach in my Masters subjects was conducted in two stages. These stages coincided with workplace learning activities undertaken to meet the requirements of two teaching qualifications I was concurrently completing. These two qualifications were a Certificate IV in Assessment and Workplace Training, the basic qualification for teaching using CBTA, and a Graduate Certificate in University Teaching and Learning, based on a UBTA approach. The stages and learning activities were the following:

1) Stage 1 was part of the Certificate IV course and involved the design of an assessment program for competency units. I chose to focus on the policy development and implementation competency units published by Public Service Education and Training Australia. The competency units are the two highest-level units outlined in Table 1: *PSPPOLD601A Develop public policy*; and, *PSPPOLI601A Manage policy implementation*

2) Stage 2 was completed as part of the Graduate Certificate and involved analysing the outcomes of Stage 1 and applying the conclusions to my own teaching of public policy in the Masters DE subject *Power, Politics and Public Policy*.

Stage 1: Design of Assessment Activities for Public Service Competencies

The two Public Service Education and Training Australia competency units *PSPPOLD601A Develop Public Policy* and *PSPPOLI601A Manage Policy Implementation* refer to different stages of what is commonly termed the "policy cycle" (Bridgeman and Davis, 2000) and both address the evaluation phase of the cycle. Together the units cover the full policy cycle, from identification of events or issues that are likely to require policy intervention through to the evaluation of the implemented policies and decisions about subsequent policy changes.

I therefore decide to treat these two units as a cluster and co-assess them through a single assessment process. For this co-assessment of the two units, the elements and performance criteria were combined as follows (Table 3):

Table 3: Elements of Policy Development, Implementation and Evaluation

Element	Performance Criteria
1) Identify, select and define public policy issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Events, issues or government policies likely to require changes to public policy are accurately identified • The implications and impact of events that might require policy development are identified • Where possible, areas for policy development are prioritised • Policy requirements are defined in terms of context, issues to be addressed, expected outcomes, possible complications, precedents and key stakeholders
2) Gather and analyse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information required to support the policy process is identified

information for public policy development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Information required to support the policy development process is gathered, analysed and interpreted An analytical framework for the development of an appropriate public policy is determined
3) Formulate and communicate public policy options	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A range of policy options is developed for the government, including mechanisms for implementation, monitoring and evaluation The range of policy options is communicated in a timely and understandable way to those responsible for selecting the policy direction Recommendations are made for policy options based on likely effectiveness, implementation time frame and costs (including infrastructure), interaction with other policies (existing or being developed) and consistency with broader government policy Where appropriate, specific policy options are promoted to government
4) Select best public policy option and communicate government policy decisions to stakeholder	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> If responsible for selection, the best policy option is selected based on information provided All stakeholders, particularly those who will be responsible for implementing the new or revised policy are appropriately informed of the nature of the policy change, the outcomes expected by stakeholders, issues, expected costs, timelines and contextual factors (including any impact on other related policies)
5) Interpret and explain policy to staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The expected outcomes of policy implementation are clearly stated and communicated to staff Policy is interpreted relative to workplace responsibilities and accountabilities The impact on work activities of policy implementation is clearly stated and communicated to staff Staff are assisted with the implementation of policy and its application to their work Policy and its implications are explained to other stakeholders
6) Apply policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Work plans are prepared in consultation with staff to ensure that policy will be correctly implemented Staff performance is monitored to ensure that it complies with policy Staff are assisted in adjusting to changes
7) Evaluated policy outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Information relating to the actual outcomes of public policy is gathered during and following policy implementation and analysed and reported Recommendations for the improvement of the policy implementation process are prepared Recommendations for the improvement of the policy are prepared Potential or impending policy changes are identified and strategies prepared to accommodate those changes Information relating to the expected outcomes of the revised policy is gathered, analysed and reported

(Source: Author, based on elements from Public Service Education and Training Australia competency units: PSPPOLD601A *Develop Public Policy* and PSPPOLI601A *Manage Policy Implementation*)

From Table 3 it can be seen that the competencies being assessed in these units are what were referred to earlier as soft and higher order skills (analysis, reflection, decision-making, application of subjective criteria, evaluation, communication etc). Moreover, in the field of public policy the application of skills are mediated by the reality of the political process. Although we may be able to define "good" policy development and implementation according to the tenets of a competency approach, we have to accept that

this "good" policy may lose out to more politically expedient and popular "bad" policy that has not in theory met the competency requirements. Policy is ultimately judged on whether it contributed to the re-election or continued popularity of a government and not by whether it meets technical criteria. Moreover, many of the criteria from the competency elements, such as "the best policy option is selected" (Element 4 in Table 3) and "likely effectiveness" (Element 3 in Table 3), are highly subjective at best and dependent on the particular historical, social and political context of the implementation. Even the "accurate identification" of a policy issue (Element 1 in Table 3) is a subjective and politicised process.

Equally importantly, the competency units assessed assume a rational cyclical model of policy making. Yet, since the 1950s, political scientists such as Charles Lindbom and Amatai Etzioni have questioned the validity of rational models (Bridgeman and Davis, 2000) and have proposed a number of alternate models which combine the vagaries of the political process with the frailties of the human motivations. Authors on public policy often use the cyclical model as an analytical framework, but quickly point out that while it is useful for analysis it bears only a sketchy resemblance to the complexity of policy development in the real world.

The units also assume that a policy is easily identifiable and observable and that it is the result of deliberate action by government, yet most authors work with a broader definition of policy which includes government inaction as well as action. Furthermore, informal actions, such as those by front-line workers, often constitute a "policy" that is in variation with a more formal government policy (Bridgeman and Davis, 2000).

In defense of the competency units, it could be argued that they only seek to reflect the work of public servants who operate in one small realm of the wider and considerably complex policy world. While this argument is valid to a certain extent, the reality remains that the work of public servants is intimately connected with, and profoundly affected by, the wider context they work in and any evaluation of policy competency cannot be separated from it. Policies that they shepherd through the first three elements in Table 3 may simply be discarded by their political masters in response to other political imperatives. Moreover, given the specialisation of responsibilities, it is unlikely that any one worker would work through the entire process in any one policy area. At best, a policy practitioner might be able to demonstrate competence by piecing together their experiences from a range of diverse policy initiatives.

Given these issues, any competency assessment in the field of policy development and implementation is likely to be problematic. Ultimately, assessees may only be able prove they know how to develop and implement policy and not that they successfully developed and implemented policy -- yet, competency-based assessment purports to go beyond mere know-how -- and while every effort can be made to demonstrate competency in the past, there is no guarantee that this means successful policy development and implementation in the future -- yet competency assessment seeks to certify capacity to complete future tasks. Therefore, any claims to meet the technical

principles for competency assessment (validity, reliability, flexibility and fairness) must be qualified.

Following the suggested guidelines for assessment published by the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA 1999) and using templates available in the Public Service Education and Training Australia document *Putting It All Together: Exemplars for Assessment* (PSETA 2001), the following assessment methods for the competencies in Table 3 were considered:

- portfolios,
- interviews with candidates,
- workplace projects,
- evidence gathered by colleagues through structured observation and reporting,
- structured simulations of workplace situations through the use of case studies, role plays and written or oral exercises in assessment centres or in front of assessment panels.

The structured simulations would normally be done in assessment centres or with another form of assessment panels. Given that the organisation of these centres and panels require considerable resources, they can normally only be done with the full cooperation of the agencies where the assessees work. For the purposes of my project, I assumed that I would not have this level of resources and that I was dealing with candidates who are seeking to demonstrate their competency through smaller-scale processes. I therefore concentrated on the design of assessment tools that allow for assessment by an individual assessor. Table 4 details the assessment methods I designed.

Table 4: Assessment Methods for the Public Policy Competency Units

Assessment Method	Description
Portfolio	<p>The assessee presents a portfolio of evidence of meeting the competency standards.</p> <p>The portfolio should contain materials relevant to the assessee's claim of meeting the competency standard and can include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Statistical data • Memos and letters prepared by assessee • Minutes from meetings • Reports prepared by assessee • Information collected as part of the evaluation processes, including stakeholder opinions • Certification of relevant qualifications • Curriculum Vitae <p>The portfolio should also include a summary table which indicates how the evidence presented meets the performance criteria for each of the elements outlined in the competency units.</p>
Interview	<p>The assessee attends a one-hour interview with an assessor who asks questions about the assessee's experience in the development, implementation and evaluation of policy and evaluates her/his knowledge about the policy process.</p> <p>All interviews are individualised, based on the assessee's workplace and</p>

	<p>professional experience. The questions are based on both the performance criteria outlined in the competency units and on the underpinning knowledge required for the units. Examples of the questions that may be asked are:</p> <p>Regarding the competency elements:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do you identify an issue for policy intervention and what evidence do you gather? • Who do you involve in the evaluation of a policy? <p>Regarding the underpinning knowledge:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the legislative framework for policy in your field? • Do you think that [a specific policy] has moved through the different stages of the policy process? • How do you ensure that the policy meets the need of a culturally and linguistically diverse society?
Workplace project	<p>The assessee completes a 15-20 page project based on a policy that she/he has managed in the workplace.</p> <p>The project is individualised, based on the assessee's workplace and professional experience. An example of the project that may be set is:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Choose a policy that you have worked on in the last three years. Explain the social and legislative context of the policy and identify the stakeholders that have been involved. Using the elements in the competency units as a guideline, explain how the policy has evolved, how decisions about policy implementation were made and how the policy has been evaluated and modified. Do you agree that this has been an example of "good policy"? <p>The project must be accompanied by a signed declaration that confirms that the project is original work and that it has been prepared for the purpose of assessment of the two units.</p>
Case Scenarios	<p>The assessee prepares a 15-20 page response to questions based on case scenarios prepared by the assessor. The case scenarios reflect actual policy events and the assessee is required to evaluate the processes depicted and recommend alternative strategies and processes where appropriate.</p>
Evidence provided by colleagues, through structured observation and reporting	<p>The assessee requests that at least two colleagues to respond to confidential questionnaires that directly assess the competence of the assessee in the elements listed in the competency units. The colleagues can be supervisors, managers or colleagues who have already completed competency units in policy development and implementation.</p> <p>The assessor sends the questionnaire to the colleagues nominated by the assessee and receives the responses directly from them. The assessor meets with the nominated colleagues if there is a need to clarify any of the issues raised.</p>

(Source: Author)

Given the subjective nature of the issues involved in the competency elements, I felt it was necessary that an assessee should normally be required to complete at least two of the five assessment tasks.

It is important to note that the assessment methods I designed for the Table 3 competencies are similar to many of the processes I already use in my Master course. To assess the Masters subject, I currently use case scenarios, workplace projects, and pose questions similar to the ones to be used in the competency interview. This similarity between my existing UBTA assessment and the new CBTA assessment may of course be due to my a priori experiences with applied Masters programs which influenced my design of competency assessment. However, I endeavoured to avoid a "top down" design of assessment tasks based on my past experience and instead to sought to create them "bottom up" based on the material in the Certificate IV course and in the Australian National Training Authority and Public Service Education and Training Australia guidelines for assessment. As I went through this process however, it soon became evident that the competency assessment would end up similar to the assessment methods I use in the Masters. The only CBTA assessment tools I had not used previously were those which involved either self-evaluation (portfolios) or reporting by colleagues (questionnaires).

In the end, I came to the conclusion that in the field of public policy -- and perhaps in other areas of soft and higher order skills -- there is in effect not that much difference between CBTA and UBTA approaches to assessment, assuming that the UBTA course already take an applied approach and use workplace projects and case studies as learning and assessment tools. The difference is mainly "structural" in that CBTA is usually conducted by and in conjunction with the workplace and assumes that the candidates have experience in the subject matter. In UBTA, we usually cannot observe our students in the workplace, we have no access to their colleagues, and we have a range of students with different professional experiences.

Stage 2: Analysis and Application to UBTA

Based on the first stage of the project, which included the completion of the Certificate IV in Assessment and Workplace Training, I was able to analyse the contribution that the CBTA approach could make to my university teaching in the field of public policy development and implementation. My understanding of CBTA was also informed during this period by a number of conferences and workshops on CBTA I attended and a police service leadership development program I taught in that primarily used a competency framework.

General Analysis of the CBTA approach

It is important to note from the outset that I have generally been impressed by the work done by organisations such as Australasian Police Professional Standards Council, Public Safety Industry Training Board and Public Service Education and Training Australia to identify workplace competencies. I regard it as a positive step that by identifying these competencies there has been a systematic approach to defining the content of jobs and areas of knowledge. If nothing else, the competency framework provides a solid basis for audit style checklists which allow workers to reflect on and analyse their own work, and

can serve as a basis for presenting evidence of competence or for identifying aspects of one's work that needs development.

But, there appear to also be real dangers in the CBTA approach when dealing with soft and higher order skill areas. After examining a wide range of CBTA materials and practices, I find that I share the concerns of critics I cited earlier in this article. Much of the competency-based teaching and assessment I came into contact with seems to strip content of anything that might reek of theory. A single approach to an issue is often simply assumed to be the "right" answer and students are often not required to take any sort of critical approach to the competencies being taught or to any underpinning knowledge necessary to understand the application of the skills.

Competency-based units break down processes into component elements and by doing so there is a danger that workers seeking to demonstrate the competencies do not look at the whole picture or question where the conceptualisation of the parts come from. In the area of policy development and implementation, this issue is of particular concern as the competency units are all based on only one cyclical model of the policy process, which fits in neatly with a component elements approach, whereas in fact there is considerable debates about how the policy process works. While some mention is made in the competency units of alternative approaches, there is no real encouragement for students to reflect on the interconnections between elements. Instead the emphasis is on simply demonstrating that they meet the criteria in each individual element.

The question of the difference in standards between the CBTA and UBTA approaches to the assessment of policy-related skills and knowledge is more vexing. The competency units I assessed for in the Certificate IV activity in Stage 1 are at Level 6 in the AQF, while the Masters subject I teach is at Level 10. As I noted earlier, Level 6, the Advanced Diploma, requires candidates to "analyse, diagnose, design and execute judgements across a broad range of technical or management functions", while Level 10, the Masters, requires candidates "to demonstrate a higher order of skill in analysis, critical evaluation, and professional application through the planning and execution of a piece of scholarship or research".

In soft and higher order skill areas such as public policy, the levels are extremely difficult to define operationally in both CBTA and UBTA. In CBTA, the definitions often appear to be tied more to the expectations attributed to a person's level or rank in an organisation than to the learning outcomes of a CBTA course. Staff with less supervisory or managerial experience have lower expectations placed on them while higher-level managers are expected to display higher-level skills, even though they are doing the same competency units and in the end may all be deemed "competent". In UBTA, the demonstration of the skill involves both an academic skills and reflection on workplace practice.

Another dimension of the difference in CBTA and UBTA assessment is the extended use in CBTA on the dualistic grading system of competent/not-yet-competent as opposed to

the system in UBTA which generally grades students along a Fail-High Distinction continuum (or equivalents such as 1-10, or D-A). While I won't address this issue directly in this article, it is worth noting that research by CBTA organisations recognise that there is concern among practitioners that assessment may be responding to minimum standards and not to best standards and that there is limited opportunity to acknowledge the efforts of higher achievers. The question often becomes how to differentiate between competence and excellence (Bloch 1999, NCVET 2001). In UBTA, assessment continues to be an on-going debate, both in terms of controversies about standards and "soft marking", and a concern in professional programs to make assessment more relevant to the workplace.

Ultimately the difference in the assessment of public policy competencies between CBTA and UBTA lie in the context in which the material is presented. In the competency approach, the tendency is to deconstruct work competencies into discrete skills and, although policy competency units do acknowledge contextual issues, the focus is only on the elements identified. In my Masters course, the exploration of the public policy process is embedded in the wider context of a discussion of power, the exploration of the role of the professionals in that process, and the applicability of the theoretical approaches to the student's workplace experiences.

Incorporation of Competency-Language in UBTA

Based on the above analysis, I came to the conclusion that giving too great an emphasis on a CBTA approach to the teaching of public policy in my Masters subject is neither desirable nor viable. Not desirable because I believe that the knowledge and skills related to the policy process must be contextualised and any identification of the component elements must emphasise the interconnections between them and the complex, somewhat chaotic nature of their evolution. Not viable because we work with students outside the context of their workplace and so are not in a position to judge their actual workplace performance.

But the CBTA work that has been done in the area of policy development and implementation is important and should receive serious consideration in UBTA programs. The documentation of a version of the policy process and its translation into workplace competencies provides students with an important applied framework for analysing their own work. Although there are shortcomings in the Australasian Police Professional Standards Council and Public Service Education and Training Australia competency units, they are similar to checklists and audit guidelines that appear in many textbooks on public policy (see for example the series of checklists in Bridegman and Davis 2000), and the competency approach is a significant part of international research on management skills in the public sector (Horton 2000). The language of CBTA has a lot to offer university educators in terms of linking their teaching to workplace realities and promoting a move from theoretical to applied assessment processes.

Equally importantly, CBTA is a reality that our students face in the workplace as current organisational training and development practices are very much based on competency

frameworks. Industry training advisory boards such as Australasian Police Professional Standards Council and Public Service Education and Training Australia work closely with public sector human resource managers and the competency-based certification has become increasingly widespread. In addition to certification, other CBTA related techniques such as assessment centres are used in a wide range of staff selection and developmental activities. UBTA cannot stay at the margin of these new processes. UBTA has been somewhat negligent and university teachers have generally taken the approach that if they ignore CBTA it will go away. It won't go away, so it's incumbent on university teachers to demonstrate that we understand the CBTA approach and that we can give our students the analytical tools to address the workplace issues it raises.

By identifying the competencies relevant to the subjects we teach and encouraging students to reflect on their preparation for assessment in these areas, the competencies can be an important tool in university teaching and learning processes and can increase students' confidence in the capacity of universities to prepare them for workplace challenges. The use of CBTA concepts and language in Masters programs has the potential of increasing expectations that the students use the subject materials to critically explore and reflect on their own professional practice.

Therefore, while my teaching remains firmly based on a UBTA approach, I have taken a number of steps to incorporate aspects of the CBTA approach into the Masters subject *Power Politics and Public Policy*. The new material introduced into the subject is the following:

- A) In the Subject Outline of *Power Politics and Public Policy* I have introduced a new section that provide a justification for the assessment tasks using language based on current police services' descriptors of senior executive competencies. The goal is to provide students with an explicit crosswalk that links the subject content and assessment tasks with competencies they should already recognise from their workplace.

EXAMPLE 1 (from Subject Outline): Justification for the Assessment Tasks Using Competency Language

The three assessment tasks are designed to elicit responses that demonstrate students' management competencies in the following areas:

Competency Area	Description
Conceptualisation, Analysis and Problem Solving	The students can identify key issues in problems and make decisions about possible alternative responses based on logical assumptions and factual information.
Organisational Awareness	The students understand the systems, situations, and cultures inside their organisations and they can identify potential problems and opportunities, and anticipate the impact of alternative courses of action.
Strategic Leadership and Planning	Students can create a vision of the future of their organisation and establish a course of action to

	accomplish medium- and long-range goals.
Communication	The students are able to define, elaborate and defend an argument and effectively express their ideas in writing.

In addition, the online assessment task seeks to develop students' familiarity with new communications technologies.

- B) In the same section, I also clearly indicate to students that the assessment tasks in the Masters subject are similar to some of the tasks and activities they may be required to complete in workplace CBTA assessment processes. The goal is to emphasise to students that the assessment tasks in Masters subject will help prepare them for workplace assessment.

EXAMPLE 2 (from Subject Outline): Indication to Students that the Masters Assessment Tasks are Similar to Competency Tasks

All the assessment tasks are designed to provoke reflection on actual events and situations in your workplace and they are similar to the tasks you are required to complete in workplace competency assessment processes such as assessment centres.

- C) In Module 2 on the policy process, I have included PSPPOLD601A *Develop public policy*; PSPPOLI601A *Manage policy implementation*, the competency units I explored as part of my Certificate IV project, as core readings. The commentary on the readings asks students to compare and contrast the models of the policy process presented in these competencies with other models that appear in the literature. The goal is to allow the students to become familiar with current competency units in public policy and to encourage them to analyse the competency elements in the context of other readings.

EXAMPLE 3 (from Module 2): Introduction of Information on Relevant Competencies into Learning Materials

Competencies in Public Policy

Among the competencies recently published by the Australasian Police Professional Standards Council (APPSC) and the Public Safety Industry Advisory Board (PSITAB) there is a competency unit PUAPOL019A *Contribute to Policy Formulation and Revision*, which has the following elements:

- Revise and formulate policy
- Contribute to policy promotion and implementation

Moreover, in the more general areas of public sector competencies, as defined by the Public Service Education and Training Australia (PSETA), there is a whole suite of units that address

the issue of policy development, implementation and evaluation. These units are likely to be incorporated into future training programs for public safety managers. The PSETA competency units are:

National Code	Unit of Competency Name
PSPPOLD401A	Contribute to the development of policy
PSPPOLD501A	Develop organisation policy
PSPPOLD502A	Manage the policy development process
PSPPOLD601A	Develop public policy
PSPPOLI 401A	Support policy implementation
PSPPOLI 601A	Manage policy implementation

The two Level 6 competency units (PSPPOLD601A and PSPPOLI601A) are the ones most relevant to this subject. The following two tables reproduce the elements and performance criteria in these two units.

(Tables not included in this example)

Compare these elements and performance criteria with the Checklists for Policy Development in Chapter 13 of the Bridgeman and Davis textbook.

It is also highly recommended that you take a look at the full content of all the competency units for public policy developed by APPSC/PSITAB and by the PSETA. They can all be found online at:

PSITAB (Public Safety Industry Advisory Board). <http://www.psitab.org.au/>

APPSC (Australasian Police Professional Standards Council) <http://www.appsc.com.au/>

PSETA (Public Service Education and Training Australia) *Public Service Training Package PSP99* <http://www.pseta.com.au/html/framepackage.htm>

Study question

What is the difference in language and concepts between the competency elements for policy development and implementation detailed in the two above tables and the checklists in the textbook?

- D) I have incorporated CBTA language into the assessment process. One of the assignment questions gives the students the option of either using criteria from the subject textbook or elements from *PSPPOLI601A Manage policy implementation* to evaluate public policy processes in their workplace. The goal is to allow them to explore the utility of the competency approach for reflecting on their work.

EXAMPLE 4 (from Assignment 2): Use of Criteria from Competency Unit as Alternative to Textbook Criteria

Alternative 1: Essay

Choose any media article (newspaper, magazine, or web page) that has been published after November 2001 that illustrates the current state of a policy that affects your agency. This can be a wider social policy (drugs, youth crime, aboriginal affairs, etc.), or an organisational policy (new promotion program, community consultation, distribution of area command resources, etc.)

Using this article and policy as your “case study”, address the following two questions:

- Which of the policy models covered in the readings in Module 2 best describes the evolution of this policy? Why?
 - Choose any two objectives from the checklist on pages 154–155 of the Bridgeman and Davis textbook, or any two elements from the public policy competencies on pages 7-8 of Module 2, and use the criteria in these two objectives/elements to decide if your case is an example of a “good” policy process.
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E) As an alternative to one of the three assignments in the subject, I have given students more experienced in policy development and implementation the opportunity to present a portfolio of their work using the structure of one of the competency units. The goal is to allow more experienced students to reflect on and evaluate their own work and to gather materials which could be used to prepare for workplace assessment processes.

EXAMPLE 5 (from Assignment 2): Competency Portfolio as Alternative Assessment Task

Alternative 2: Portfolio (for students with experience in policy-making)

Prepare a portfolio of evidence to demonstrate your knowledge and experience in policy-making, according to the elements in the competency unit *PSPPOLD601A Develop Public Policy* (see Module 2: page 7).

The portfolio should begin with an introductory section that gives the background to the policy you are using as an example. It should then have five “chapters” that correspond to the five elements in the unit. In these chapters you should provide evidence on how you have met the performance criteria, using the readings in Module 2 to “evaluate” your own performance. The evidence can include:

- Statistical data
 - Memos and letters
 - Minutes from meetings
 - Reports prepared
 - Information collected as part of the evaluation processes, including stakeholder opinions
 - Narratives describing your work on the policy.
-

These materials represent relatively minor changes to earlier versions of the subject. The new competency language in the justification for assessment (Examples 1 and 2) complements existing language regarding the learning outcomes of the subject; the competency reading added to Module 2 (Example 3) is one of a number of readings on the policy process; and the new competency options in the assessment tasks (Examples 4 and 5) change one of the three previously existing tasks. However, the materials represent a significant change in orientation by incorporating competency frameworks into a subject that previously did not acknowledge their existence. By adding this competency dimension to *Power Politics and Public Policy*, the subject better bridges the theory-practice gap.

In future revisions of the subject, I intend to incorporate more CBTA language into the learning objectives related to professional practice.

Discussion and Conclusions

Throughout my work on the project to explore the utility of the competency approach for my Masters level public policy teaching, I found a surprising level of suspicion, self-righteousness and even hostility on both sides of the CBTA-UBTA fence. When I mentioned the project to university lecturers, they would often react with a condescending raising of the eyebrows and rolling of the eyes; when I went to a public safety sector CBTA conference, attended mainly by industry-based trainers, university education seemed to be regarded as somewhat irrelevant to industry organisational development and training.

Yet, as the analysis that resulted from my project confirmed, in soft and higher order skill areas such as public policy, the two approaches need not necessarily be opposing. Admittedly, there are extremes: CBTA teachers stuck in an anti-intellectual, process-obsessed attempt to teach and assess skills without any significant references to underpinning knowledge and theory and UBTA teachers who seem incapable of going beyond theoretical reflection in order to address authentic workplace problems. But, in fact, the largest majority of practitioners of both CBTA and UBTA are responsible and knowledgeable educators that understand that in professional education, a combination of both approaches is needed. A recent survey of CBTA practitioners identified as a key concern that CBTA assessment is not sufficiently inclusive of "underpinning knowledge, skills, attitudes and ethics" (Bloch 1999, NCVER 2001) and the adoption of pedagogical approaches such as problem-based learning and the case method in UBTA attest to the fact that relevance to the workplace has long been an obsession of professionally oriented university programs.

At times, the differences between CBTA and UBTA appear to be more symbolic, linguistic and cultural than substantive. On one side, the CBTA approach is generally the preserve of those who work in human resources, organisational development and industry-based training. Those who manage CBTA usually come from professional backgrounds and often treat academe with some disdain. On the other side, UBTA is the academic domain that often continues to treat those in the training industry as unwelcome interlopers. CBTA speak of competencies, while UBTA speaks of the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed in the workplace (the very concepts that in the NCVER study cited above CBTA assessors sought to include more in their work). CBTA and UBTA teachers are often simply using different language when speaking of the same need to ensure that learners are able to effectively carry out their workplace tasks and attribute different labels to the same teaching and learning approaches.

Despite any reservations I may have about the CBTA approach to the teaching and assessment of public policy teaching and assessment, I fully acknowledge that it makes an important contribution to translating our understanding of the policy process into workplace skills. The initiatives I have described above to introduce CBTA frameworks

into my Masters subject will considerably strengthen my students' understanding of the link between the textbook theories and their application in the workplace.

University educators have to learn the language of competencies and to appropriately use the substantial research that has been generated by the CBTA. For some university educators it may mean substantially changing their current teaching and assessment practices. For others it will be more a matter of learning new jargon and re-labeling some their current practices.

The CBTA and UBTA approaches are likely to be seen as competing paradigms in the near future. But, ultimately both approaches need to be grounded in good pedagogical practices that engage students in active learning that combine the reality of workplace context with critical reflection (Lander et al. 1995, Biggs 1989). The needs of learners and industries will not be well served if we continue to maintain false dichotomies between CTBA and UBTA. There is a need for situational learning based on competency approaches (Gonczi 2001), but there is also a need to for learners to remove themselves from the workplace and to analyse their current practice through external frameworks and to become familiar with new approaches (Smith 2002). Both CBTA and UBTA make key contributions to developing the capacity of professionals to carry out their current tasks more effectively and to prepare them for future challenges.

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