Competency-Based Training: Nostradamus’s Nostrum:
What happened and where might we “capably” go?

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Preamble

The foundation question for this paper is - “Has competency-based training (CBT) – as developed from its early 90s introduction to Australia – delivered according to the promise?” And, given the now entrenchment of CBT, the question arises - “How might the Australian future outcomes from CBT be enhanced?”

In a paper published in 1992, Len Cairns offered the cautionary challenge that advocates of the introduction of CBET to Australia were acting in a Nostradamus like way in predicting that CBET (referred to in this paper as CBT) would prove to be the panacea (or Nostrum) for the perceived inadequacy of the approaches to vocational education and training (VET) that were prevailing from the mid 1980s; and in a conclusion to his commentary, Cairns urged consideration of capability as a more efficacious notion than the narrow meaning being applied to competency within the Australian systems (Cairns 1992)

During the period from the mid 1980s to 1996, through cooperation between the Commonwealth, State and Territory governments, the National Training Reform Agenda (NTRA) was progressively pursued to improve the competitiveness of Australian industry through strengthening Vocational Education and Training (NCVER 2009).

The aims of the National Training Reform Agenda (NTRA) were to introduce:

- Competency-based training of high quality
- More flexible, broadly based and modular training arrangements
- National consistency in training standards and certification
- Better articulation of on-the-job and off-the-job training and credit transfer between courses
- National recognition of competencies, however attained
- An open training market
- Equitable access to vocational education and training
- An integrated entry-level training system

(Guthrie 2008, p. 5 – drawing upon Harris et al. 1995)

Whilst the outcomes from the NTRA have largely met the generality-defined objectives, this is not to say that success would be applauded against benchmarks had they been set. It can be argued that inadequate implementation resourcing such as preparation of teachers/trainers and availability of quality support materials was a retarding factor; and the tensions arising from the polarisation of VET educator versus industrial interests diverted implementation energy. The apparent deliberate exclusion of VET educators (Pusey 1991; Harris, Simons & Maher 2009) from the Australian training reforms was a source of much tension and fuelled concerns that CBT approaches would lead to undermining learning in a holistic sense. In this regard, the Cairns capability advocacy was akin to a rear-guard action and, with the benefit of hindsight, had value as a prompt to cause looking at the donut and not the hole. Among the critics, it seems to have gone largely unnoticed that there is (and always has been) an embedding of coping with the new and unexpected capability...
attributes within the Australian notion of competency – as evidenced by the breadth of the dimensions of competency being increasingly subject to assessment (Hughes 2006). It could be that the manner in which the CBT agenda was driven across Australian industry and training systems, in the period of its birth and early growth, generated more heat than light in the understanding of potential dimensions within the conceptualisation. Adherence to a USA derived set of definitions and styles of debate based heavily on behavioural notions of “what you can do or see being done” as the core elements did not support broader considerations.

There is a corollary between the Dark Ages of European history when there was much afoot, but not recorded, and the installing of Training Packages as the prime vehicle for CBT in Australia. Even now, it has gone largely unnoticed that competency brings with it the National Training Board implied requirement (as noted on page 5 of this paper) to capably draw upon knowledge and skill (NTB 1992) – an opportunity to assert educator influence has been overlooked. But this said, there is cause for empathy with those educators who have continuing concern that the introduction of CBT to Australia weakens valuing of the learning experience. However whilst the perception of threat is understandable, the reality is different as the quest for capability has always been implicitly embedded within Training Packages which are the vehicles for the delivery of CBT in Australia (Hughes 2006). Capability is now emerging as an inferred (but not yet, and possibly never, explicitly mandated) inclusion through the highlighting of coping with change dimensions of competency and the requirement upon the learner to extrapolate from original learning. This extrapolation requires the learner to perform appropriately in new and emerging roles.

In consideration of the foregoing, this paper is offered from the perspective that an individual and, hence, the employer and the wider community benefit from strengthening the capability of the individual to confidently perform in circumstances of unfamiliar problems and unfamiliar contexts – as Stephenson (1998) views capability. Whilst John Stephenson (1998) was focused upon a higher education context, a capability outcome for a vocational education and training (VET) learner is also of value – although it could be argued that there are gradations of application according to the level of autonomy in job roles, but this argument might equally be advanced in respect of a higher education learner.

First the Good News

Notwithstanding the later commentary in this paper regarding what might have been done better and suggesting approaches to strengthening outcomes, there is an indication of much “good” having arisen from the circa 1990 introduction of CBT to Australia. However, the question remains - What would have been the outcome if the delivery of VET had remained in its, to then, traditional format – i.e. a focus upon the delivery of a defined curriculum rather than the CBT focus upon specified competency outcomes? Cognisant of this question, the following offerings of apparent positive outcome are acknowledged as vulnerable to “What if?” challenge; and are more of a hypothesis than avowed researched findings – this is highlighted by the Billet et al. (1999) observation of the problematic nature of ascribing the emergence of a more adaptive and flexible workforce to the introduction of CBT.

Even though the Federal Government motivation, in consort with State and Territory governments during the early years of the CBT developments, was human capital orientated – embedded in the rhetoric of maintaining international competitiveness through skills strengthening – there is the potential for social capital outcomes arising from the expanded engagement which CBT encourages.

In human capital terms, the following are examples of what has accrued from the coupled actions of training reform and the introduction of CBT -

- The acknowledgement (certification) of competency being grounded in demonstration of competency is far more reliable than having just completed a course. The importance, to employers, of having confidence that a qualification is based upon achievement of defined standards is a key message arising from the Townsend, Waterhouse and Malloch (2005) research; and it follows from this that there is much reliance
upon maintaining confidence in the integrity, across-the system, of assessment approaches – maybe the Achilles heel, but not unique to CBT.

- Participation in VET (which, inferring from NCVER 2008 is of the order of 63% CBT engaged) has increased. Student participation did grow from 985,900 in 1991 to 1,756,800 in 2001 which is a growth rate of 7.8% per year over the ten year period (ANTA 2003). However, in the 2003 to 2008 period student participation did plateau in the 1,600,000 to 1,690,000 per year range (NCVER 2008) which is an increase on the 1991 level, but invites exploration of the cause of this subsequent levelling.

- The number of pathways to qualification has increased (ANTA 2003). This includes VET in Schools, Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL – sometimes referred to as Recognition of Current Competency) and Australian Apprenticeships (initially known as New Apprenticeships) which are aligned to CBT specified competency standards and attendant approaches to learning – i.e. not based upon time served and with other flexibility attributes inherent in CBT.

- Arising from the “opening the training market” component of the training reforms, with CBT as an enabler, the training market has been expanded to a more diverse range of providers (ANTA 2003) – adding to learner choice and customisation of delivery. In addition to the traditional technical institutes (TAFE Institutes), there is now an expanded publicly funded VET delivery network and also a growing number of what are styled as Private Registered Training Organisations (Private RTOs) which are not community based (2,325 – 4th August 2009 emailed advice from the National Training Information Service); however there are attendant quality maintenance issues – especially when the RTO is primarily entrepreneurial business orientated.

- The benefits to Australian industry have included strengthening relationships with VET providers and the specification of national industry standards or enterprise standards (NCVER 2000).

- From a workforce perspective, the benefits have included giving greater prominence to work-based learning and the acquisition of Australian Qualifications Framework AQF) credentials; and there has also been status given to enterprise standards [albeit relatively small in number] as well as industry standards (NCVER 2000). Associated with this, licensing requirements such as apply to high risk activity (e.g. forklift truck operation and scaffold erection) have come within the CBT/Training Packages realm, but not without difficulty in achieving accord between State and Territory licensing authorities.

- In a systemic sense, as identified by Guthrie (2008), the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) and the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF) are two enabling guiding structures of high value to the VET stakeholders in Australia – especially as they are not static with current review of the AQF underway (Refer, AQF Council 2009) and the AQTF recently revised (Refer, DEST 2007).

**Note:**
The AQF embraces the senior years of secondary education, VET, and higher education.

The AQTF has three standards (each with sub-elements) –

**Standard 1:** The Registered Training Organisation provides quality training and assessment across all of its operations.

**Standard 2:** The Registered Training Organisation adheres to principles of access and equity and maximises outcomes for its clients.

**Standard 3:** Management systems are responsive to the needs of clients, staff and stakeholders, and the environment in which the Registered Training Organisation operates.

(Refer - DEST 2007)
Although presently more of a potential nature, the following are examples of early-leader social capital outcomes from the coupled actions of training reform and the introduction of CBT -

- Four Wheel Drive Clubs are offering CBT to members as a membership recruiting and strengthening initiative. An example of this can be viewed at <http://www.whyalla4wd.org.au/training.php> - accessed 26/05/09.

- Volunteer involving community organisations such as surf life saving, volunteer fire fighting, environment conservation, and community care are drawing upon CBT to combine efficiency of operations with recruiting, retention and overt expression of valuing volunteers. It should be noted that volunteering in Australia is a substantial community strengthening (social capital and of economic value) asset. In 2006, Australia volunteering involved 3.1 million people (aged 18 years and over) who worked at least once a fortnight for one or more organisations (ABS 2008).

- Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) being offered to volunteers as a way of a volunteer involving organisation giving something in return for services rendered (Hughes 2007a – unpublished consultation and research report; Hughes 2008a)

- The CBT flexibility of access to learning, and valuing (giving credit) outcomes from lifelong learning, has potential for recruitment purposes to the community services and health industries (Hughes 2008b). These industries are facing significant future staffing challenges; however, there is a strong recruitment connection to social capital values already in play.

Prompted by the foregoing, and in partial response to the potential improvement question, there are aspects of CBT which invite further research regarding the integration of human capital and social capital outcomes. In reflecting upon this, the Schuller (2005) Table 1 comparisons are helpful.

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<th>Human Capital</th>
<th>Social Capital</th>
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<td>Focus</td>
<td>Individual agent</td>
<td>Relationships</td>
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<tr>
<td>Measures</td>
<td>Duration of schooling</td>
<td>Attitudes/values</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Qualifications</td>
<td>Membership/participation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Outcomes</td>
<td>Direct: income, productivity</td>
<td>Social cohesion</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Indirect: health, civic activity</td>
<td>Economic achievement</td>
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<td>More social capital</td>
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<td>Model</td>
<td>Linear</td>
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Exploration of the social capital possibilities is suggested with two purposes in mind. Firstly, this is a vehicle which could bring about opening the collective VET/Industry systemic mind to an expanded view of the value of CBT; and thus assisting with breaking free of the highly focussed learning outcome objective, which has caused an element of soullessness to inhabit CBT in Australia, to the detriment of it being valued as a whole-of-life education experience. Secondly, and entwined with the foregoing, exploring the relevance of social capital assists with looking ahead to meet expanding needs in changing times – different from a human capital focus which is inclined to be focussed upon near future and narrow industrial needs.

In the absence of definitive research, personal experience indicates that enterprises – CBT beneficiaries, with an eye to sustainability – do look to their futures through an integrated human capital and social capital prism. Also, resonating with this, VET teachers/trainers (where so disposed and capable) bring entwined human capital and social capital values to bear in establishing relevance and enthusiasm for the learning – i.e. nurturing engaging-of-learners in learning cultures.
With regard to nurturing learning cultures, the nature of the learning environment (as facilitated by the VET teacher/trainer) has significant influence upon an adult learner changing employment direction and committing to putting effort into acquiring new knowledge and skills which are required when changing employment direction (Hughes 2008b). However, this finding is in respect of community service careers where it could be said that there is a predisposition to strong human capital valuing.

Consequent upon the embryonic expanding Australian vision of the attribute of competency, introducing “social capital” into the discussion has relationship to advocating attention to capability. Arguably, for too long there has been (in practice) a shallow understanding of what it is to be a competent person within the Australian tradition. This has flowed on to the training of trainers and thus entrenching a low horizon vision. Identifying, and valuing, the contribution to social capital of CBT in Australia is a lifting-the-vision device in respect of the “system”, the teachers/trainers, the learners and the milieu of stakeholders.

**Now the Bad News**

There really isn’t much bad news in the sense that harm has been done. However, as is properly the case in an environment where continuous improvement is valued, there are things which could have been done better. But there is an abiding undermining of planning and action certainty arising from the frequency of change in the VET systemic structure – an issue for discussion at another time.

**Grounding definition of competency – as applies to Australia**

Drawing from National Training Board (NTB 1992), Harris et al. (1995) cite the definition of competency as –

> The concept of competency focuses on what is expected of an employee in the workplace rather than on the learning process; and embodies the ability to transfer and apply skills and knowledge to new situations and environments. This is a broad concept of competency in that all aspects of work performance, and not only narrow task skills, are included. It encompasses:

- the requirement to perform individual tasks (task skills);
- the requirement to manage a number of different tasks within the job (task management skills);
- the requirement to respond to irregularities and breakdowns in routine (contingency management skills);
- the requirement to deal with the responsibilities and expectations of work environment (job/role environment skills), including working with others.

(NTB (1992, p. 29) – as cited by Harris et al. (1995, p. 20)

With this expectation of competency outcomes as the guiding mantra, had VET educators been at the Training Package planning table, rather than excluded from it (Pusey 1991, p. 148; Harris, Simons & Maher 2009 p. 29), the expectation could have been that the capability aspects of competency were cause to preserve the nurturing of more holistic learning outcomes. Such preservation of valuing learning across its broad spectrum is advantageous to underpinning the transfer of acquired competency to the vagaries of individual and evolving workplaces, and to changing times. Instead, arguably, consequent upon not valuing what accrues from a rich learning experience, the focus has been upon task skills and only to a small (if at all) degree upon the contingency management and job/role environment skills. It may be, albeit with hindsight, that the movement to establish and consolidate the CBT approach across a range of industries and particularly within what had traditionally been deemed “trade” areas, there was a push to specify competencies and to have the sets of such elements “endorsed” by industry groups; and the attendant extra “frills” were discounted as unnecessary in the short term and thus did not arise for many years as a central necessity.
With reference to embracing CBT, in 1992 the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (peak employer body) explained CBT to its members and to the wider audience as follows –

A way of approaching (vocational) training that places primary emphasis on what a person can do as a result of the training (the outcome), and as such represents a shift away from an emphasis on the process involved in the training (the inputs). It is concerned with training to industry specific standards rather than an individual’s achievement relative to others in the group (ACCI 1992).

This type of definition set up the dichotomy between the new CBT advocates and the “learning as process” educators who saw the CBT ideas as reductionist and narrow (Cairns 1992).

Notwithstanding wide acceptance of the ACCI explanation as usefully definitive, in 2009, this has been reduced by Federal Government agency to -

**Competency-based training** (or CBT) - training which develops the skills, knowledge and attitudes required to achieve competency standards (National Training System Glossary – accessed 28 May 2009)

These questions arise –
Is this reduction of explanation an acknowledgement that the shift from time based learning to assessed attainment of competency (Harris et al. 1995, p. 25) is understood by all and therefore doesn’t require mention? OR Has the significance of the early 1990s shift slipped from systemic consciousness? OR Is this a systemic device for opening the way to reassert the value of the learning pathway?

In raising these questions, there is also the possibility (intended or accidental) that retiring the implied emphasis upon shift is a means of re-building the bridge between VET educators and VET authority which earlier caused damaging tensions – including loss of trust by educators and their loss of respect for “the system”. In this regard, the term educators is used with an intent of emphasising the commitment to facilitating and nurturing learning which, although focussed upon a particular acquisition of knowledge and skill, is of a holistic nature and contributing to whole-of-life capacity in the learner.

“Stop Press” – In the course of writing this paper, the first recommendation from the 2009 review of VET has been articulated as follows:

**Recommendation 1** – Revise the definition of competency as follows: Competency is the consistent application of knowledge and skill to the standard of performance required in the workplace. It embodies the ability to transfer and apply skills and knowledge to new situations and environments. (NQC 2009)

From the perspective of capability advocates, this is a very encouraging outcome of a major review. Significantly, this review has been undertaken on behalf of the Steering Committee of the National Quality Council (NQC) and the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) Skills and Workforce Development Subgroup. However, there is an apparent reluctance to voice the capability term as this paper sees it; but the overt drawing of attention to transferability to the new aspect of VET in Australia bodes well. This said, Recommendation 8 does urge a stronger focus on preparatory and enabling qualifications with the aim of building general workforce capability, but does so in a manner which appears to be just another way of referring to competency. What is driving contemporary VET authors to infer that CBT is a pathway to capability? Why aren’t they consistent in using “competency” as the goal?
“A curriculum free zone” - an unfortunate and erroneous notion

With the benefit of hindsight, at the circa 1997 time of their introduction, the perception that the delivery of Training Packages was a curriculum free zone, consequent upon shifting the focus from the learning experience to the competency possessed, was cause for alarm. Whilst the actual authorship of this notion is difficult to identify, and the particularity of the descriptor might now be brought into question, in the late 1990s there was a strong sense that this was the governing mantra. Fuelled by the notion that curriculum was of little importance it is not surprising that a de-valuing of the learning pathway was associated with not having a system mandated curriculum – i.e. an arising perception that the learning journey is not significant and it is only the point of arrival which is important. Lost in the message was that a learning pathway (curriculum) is required as is appropriate to the need, but this is in the hands of the facilitator – not mandated by the system.

Far from reducing the need for autonomous learning design, the introduction of CBT required creativity and innovation by the facilitator, but the logic of this being supported by the educators who had much to contribute to their training facilitator colleagues was ignored. Instead, VET teachers/trainers were cast adrift to a new, inadequately highlighted, learning design role for which they were both technically and emotionally ill prepared.

Although there isn’t (apparently) documented certainty that the 1999 rationale, in respect of Training Package support materials for quality guidance was a bridging initiative to lift the quality of publicly funded resources, it is understood that this was a significant part of the reasoning. This was achieved through the appointment of a panel of Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) Quality Assurance consultants who, in some instances, evolved to a valued critical friend relationship with the material developers of both publicly and privately funded resources. A recently completed review of this process, whereby Training Package support materials are evaluated as being of a quality which merits noting by the NQC, indicated that the process was valuable but requires strengthening/re-design; accordingly, the current program has been terminated pending development of a new approach.

For those who are not familiar with the Australian concept of Training Packages, it is helpful to explain that these are not what the name implies. A Training Package is not an assembly of defined curriculum and resources, but is a National Quality Council (NQC) endorsed specification of the competency standards, prescriptive guidelines as to how achievement of the competencies are to be assessed, and a specification of how the competencies are packaged (assembled together) to form a qualification within the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF). Associated with the Delivery of a Training Package, there are also support materials (earlier identified as Non-Endorsed components) which encompass support for learning facilitation, assessment, and professional development of trainers and assessors.

It is not surprising that there were misunderstandings of intent, and means, at the time of introduction of CBT to Australia – and the associated Training Package approach – as the nature of this transition was more revolutionary than evolutionary. In a very short space of time, teachers/trainers who had become accustomed to following prescribed curriculum, and had accumulated aligned resources, were required to engage in learning design and facilitation innovation which had not been part of their practice; and facilitating learning to achieve newly defined competencies. As a consequence, there was early difficulty and – through lack of modelling and weak attention to the correction of misconceptions – a persistent lack of acting on the facilitating requirements of CBT. Further, as a consequence of a significant trend to sessional teachers/trainers the inadequacy of CBT delivery is likely to worsen. Anecdotally, the educator commitment and level of efficacy are not presently strong attributes of this sessional cohort as new sessional entrants replace more experienced/career committed teachers/trainers. This replacing being consequent upon retirement and deliberate re-shaping of the VET teacher/trainer workforce – apparently, targeted at being primarily sessional.

In addition to the “curriculum” misunderstanding, the requirement that competency be demonstrated over time as an assessment rule is, in many instances, overlooked. It is suggested that this is associated with the curriculum issue as teachers/trainers do have institutional budget constraints placed upon them regarding the period and manner of delivery – notwithstanding this being a contradiction of the CBT intent. However, whilst
accepting the practical education business realities, there is room for innovation in respect of assessment over time; but this requires recognising the need/obligation and having the facilitator with a learning design/creative capacity to act. There are other examples of how the CBT intent is not carried through to reality notwithstanding the specification of the AQTF, but to its credit through a process of continuous improvement the system is striving to improve in terms of operation and outcomes.

In these foregoing respects, supporting VET teachers/trainers in acquiring the required competencies to act in accord with CBT principles is clearly important, and inadequacies at the time of transition to CBT are still impacting today – notwithstanding two iterations of a trainer/assessor Certificate IV. However, applause is due to the Innovation & Business Skills Australia (IBSA) Skills Council (one of twelve Industry Skills Councils) for the current reviewing of the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment – refer to IBSA (2009).

Although this paper argues that the persisting inadequate training of VET trainers in respect of “learning” is an iconic manifestation of the worst fears by VET educators, it is a significant needs-based opportunity for concerned educators to step-up and contribute to the recovery of learning design and facilitation capacity within the Australian CBT system. Initiatives such as TAFE Development (a Victorian, sector-wide, professional development initiative) and the National Centre for Vocational Education Research are significant examples of this opportunity for re-engagement with VET educators.

Capability as an embedded component of Training Packages

Whilst it bodes well that “capability”, as a term, is increasingly appearing in the CBT/Training Package literature, this is commonly used in a relatively narrow “ability to do” sense and apparently synonymous with “competency”. However, whilst intrigued by why VET authors are now referring to capability, in this paper the meaning of capability is more profound and embraces the notion of “ability to confidently do in, unpredictable, new and challenging circumstances” – i.e. akin to the National Training Board (NTB) 1992 intention.

With this paper’s meaning of capability in mind, it is curious that the NTB 1992 defining of competency implied alignment with our understanding, but along the way this has been lost. Indeed, in the past, there has been an appearance that the capability model was to be suppressed on the basis that it threatened the competency model. However, had the NTB definition been more fully embraced, the introduction of competency based training into Australia could have been better managed, but the lessons learned do – if embraced - inform a better future. Accordingly, this paper draws upon the history and current circumstances to offer tools aiding the strengthening of CBT. This strengthening to be achieved through comfortably embracing capability as an explicit learning goal and the associated return to overt valuing of the pathway (as travelled by the learner) as a capability nurturing experience. In this regard, Stephen Darwin offers much to reflect upon by offering the view “It is axiomatic that the changing nature of work and learning means the vocational educator is now increasingly in an essential role in cultivating the skills necessary to sustain on going learning beyond the immediate learning environment” (Darwin 2007, p. 67).

The Darwin (2007) sentiment resonates with the advantage to be gained by supporting VET teachers/trainers in deepening their learning in respect of being more innovative in learning design and delivery. From the learner’s perspective the means by which competency is acquired, and adds to their capability, is highly influential upon the expanded quality of the learning outcomes. For example, the degree to which a learner has grown as a confident, self-directed, learner has a strong relationship to the learner’s capability to confidently act in circumstances of encountering unfamiliar problems in unfamiliar contexts. This is now emerging as an overt objective of CBT and is, opportunistically, inviting the educators to assist in the process.

The nature of this VET opportunity for educators in reasserting the value of learning in a broad sense, is indicated by John Stephenson’s position, albeit in regard to higher education learners –

‘Student capability is developed as much by learning experiences as by the specific content of courses. If students are to develop ‘justified confidence’ in their ability to take
purposive and sensible action, and to develop the unsheeply characteristics of confidence in their ability to learn, belief in their power to perform and proven powers of judgement in unfamiliar situations, they need real experiences of being responsible and accountable for their own learning, within the rigorous, supportive and, for them, unfamiliar environment of higher education.’ (Stephenson 1998, p. 6)

The capability view has been well documented over the past twenty years within Australia and Europe (Cairns and Stephenson 2009) and essentially the case has been consistently developed that competency (skills, knowledge and attitudes to current issues and needs) is a basis for the development of capability which involves additional consideration of potential, efficacy and values to enable operation in more flexible and adaptable ways in unfamiliar situations and with unfamiliar problems.

Although the Australian Qualifications Framework implies an escalating appropriateness of the Stephenson view as the learning moves from VET to higher education, there is none-the-less relevance to a VET learner; and, in particular, to the learning of VET facilitators.

An urgent need of the Australian VET system is to reclaim the key role of training-the-trainer by educators, coupled with overt revealing of and acting upon capability as an embedded feature of Training Packages, if the capacity of the system is to align with the intention. With respect to current training the trainers, it could be said that we are breeding generations of inadequate trainers consequent upon one training the next and neither being learning aware and capable as facilitators – being competent (as currently is the norm) is not adequate.

**Strengthening CBT in Australia through explicitly nurturing capability**

From a late 80s beginning, although there is still much to be addressed as exampled by this paper’s orientation toward restoring the valuing of educators, the shift from curriculum mandated (time served) vocational education and training to a focus upon competency defined outcomes is benefiting stakeholders. There is a sound, but narrow, logic in emphasising that it is the competency outcome which is the goal and that the means of getting there (learning pathway) is as is appropriate to the goal. However, this logic has been embraced by some in a manner which has diminished the valuing of the learning experience – as particularly evidenced by the incidence of aspiring VET trainers being offered (and graduating from) *Certificate IV in Training and Assessment* programs which, in some instances, are of 10 days duration (and even less) rather than an intensive learning experience over time. Drawing upon a current example, it is highly unlikely that competency can be achieved from a green fields beginning and demonstrated in 14 units by 10 days of engagement even if distributed over a few months.

<table>
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<th>An instance of significant loss –</th>
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<td>Until circa 1997, in Victoria, the Hawthorn Institute of Education (previously known as the Technical Teachers College and then the State College of Victoria) was the principal facility for training VET teachers. It is a mystery why this institution and its rigorous program of academic learning, and in-the-workplace learning supported by mentors, evaporated (subsequent to the 1991 affiliation with the University of Melbourne) to be replaced by two iterations of a <em>Certificate IV</em> (as the base qualification) which, in many instances, is only superficially addressed. Maybe there is a connection to the systemic trend to sessional teachers and consequent diminishing of expectations with respect to the facilitation of quality learning.</td>
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In the foregoing, the reference to narrow logic is very deliberate. With the benefit of hindsight, the manner of shifting attention almost exclusively to learning outcomes has caused a weakening in valuing the learning experience or process. Indeed, it could be argued that the “weakening” is actually “a loss” leading to learners being denied support in developing their on-going capacity for learning – i.e. the fact of, and the recognition of, an ability to learn is as much a competency attribute as the acquisition of technical knowledge and skill which is required in the moment. Accordingly, there is the prospect of much to be gained by pursuing a sub-objective
that the learner acquires the attribute of being able to **capably draw upon their competency** by conscious engagement with a rich learning experience.

Given the investment which has been made in installing CBT as the mode of delivery for VET in Australia, resistance is to be expected to now shifting to “capability” as an explicit component of the learning objective. It is for this reason that the notion of “capably drawing upon competency” is offered as a strengthening of VET outcomes – i.e. valuing capability as an “enabling” attribute more so than a personal capacity beyond competency. We are suggesting, in the spirit of the case made in previous writings on Capability, that the two terms, Competence and Capability, are not synonymous but rather differ in the consideration of one (viz Competence) as defined and developed in the Australian context as a specific consideration of current skill demonstration to a standard set; whereas the other (viz Capability) seeks to move beyond Competence to ensure transferability and engagement in unfamiliar situations and problems in an era of uncertainty and change as the “whitewater” of this ultra modern age.

In pursuit of the *capability to draw upon competency* as a VET goal, the previously alluded to inadequacy in training trainers/assessors to deliver CBT is at the core of the problem and, hence, the opportunity. In Australia, somewhere along the line, we lost the drive to support VET teachers in acquiring the passion, and the competency, to model for their learners what it is to be a lifelong learner and the capability advantage to self, and others, which accrues from this. Accordingly, explicitly restoring the valuing of the learning pathway in the delivery of CBT is appropriate and urgent.

Coupled with the VET system objective of graduating capably competent people (should this be embraced), there would be an expectation that employer organisations value employees with the capability enhancing capacity for lifelong learning; and thus being confident contributors to change and effectively drawing upon what they know and can do – as this personal asset expands – in an environment of change. And, of course, there is an imperative that the VET learners likewise value the **capably competent** outcome. These meshing relationships are illustrated in Figure 1.

![Figure 1: Value coupling, yielding the "capably competent" attribute](image)

**The capably competent way forward**

From an employer’s perspective – as an end-using VET client – there is a simple logic in the proposition that there is a relationship between what employees know and can do and achievement by the organisation. Accordingly it follows that, in instances where an organisation is achieving in changing times, the asset of employees being capably competent is of high value.

Arising from research into the relationship between outcomes from lifelong learning and organisational achievement, Figure 2 is a representation of the LCM Model (Hughes 2007b) as it applies to the valuing of an employee being capably competent.
Returning to the VET learning environment, the LCM Model suggests a requirement that the VET teacher/trainer/facilitator through their modelling and support of the learner -

- strengthens, within the learner, valuing of learning and its outcomes for themselves and others ("L" quality in the LCM Model);
- strengthens, within the learner, valuing of a growing and meeting challenges together work/life culture ("C" quality in the LCM Model); and
- strengthens, within the learner, valuing the motivations of self and others to capably contribute from their expanding stock of competency ("M" quality in the LCM Model)

The LCM Model, as presented here, offers a way forward to both broaden the concept of CBT across the Australian VET sector and to embrace a suitable enhancement of the learning of trainees and skilled labour. It also offers a potential “bridge” between the value systems inherent in the application of educational theories and approaches across the Australian Qualification Framework (AQF). The AQF, while set out as a series of sequential steps in an overall scheme, has vastly different learning approaches once the Technical to University sector steps have been taken. One state, Victoria, has what are referred to as “dual sector” tertiary institutions (i.e. University and TAFE Institutes under one banner) and some TAFE Institutes now offering undergraduate degrees and some RTOs offering accredited degrees even at Masters level – notwithstanding, there has remained a reluctance for university courses to embrace CBT as a form of design.

**Figure 2: LCM Model (Hughes 2007b) as generically applies to valuing being capably competent**

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Taking the view that **capably competent** outcome for learners is an achievement goal for a VET organisation, it follows that this is also the goal of the trainee/trainer learning partnership (Hughes 2009). Under these circumstances, the LCM Model has application as a tool supporting the learning partnership. Accordingly, Figure 3 illustrates drawing upon the model in the context of a teacher/trainer/facilitator activity system acting in association (partnership) with a trainee/learner activity system.

**Figure 3: LCM Model as an Activity System enabling tool to inform effective VET partnership**

In the above, an activity system for a VET facilitator abuts (and interacts with) and activity system for a learner as both parties partner in achieving a **capably competent** outcome. Accordingly, the abutting hinge is forged from the division of labour in which the learner and facilitator are key contributors, but potentially not exclusively so; and the LCM Model tool is drawn upon as strengthens this partnership.
In this abutting of two systems, the mediating linkage (in both instances) between object and rules is shown as being in contradiction. Presently, CBT purists of limited vision would maintain that a person is either competent or not-yet-competent – there isn’t a place for accepting gradations in competency; and introduction of the notion of strengthening capability (i.e. a performance attribute with gradations of strength) has no place in a competency model. It is in consideration of this contradiction, and taking the opportunity for enhancing the notion of competency, that the suggestion is made to pursue a **capably competent** objective.

**Conclusion**

Since its early inception in the Australian scene, and its usage across the Vocational Training area, what was termed Competency-Based Training (CBT) emerged to dominate Australian Technical and Further Education in the trade and allied areas. The replacement of “time served” notions with a clearer idea of “what one can do” in terms of skill, demonstrated to a set standard, became the core for Australia’s Training Reform Agenda during the 1980s to the current time.

We have argued that there have been a number of successes flowing from this activity through a wide range of experiences over the years since the critical piece was written by one of us in 1992. The critique arose particularly from the then dichotomous attention given to the Competency advocates presenting a case and definitions based largely on a narrow behaviourist model of observable actions as opposed to a learning process ideology that prevailed amongst educators. Teacher Education had attempted a Competency-Based approach in the USA, and to a lesser extent across Australia in the 1970s, but the foibles and failures of that approach were not drawn into the debate about the narrow view of Competency embedded within the Australian views in the 1980s. Nevertheless, there have been positive elements of the development of the approach and what is suggested in this paper is a model (LCM) developed and researched by one of us as a way to enhance and moved forward the thinking in the VET area in particular.

We suggest therefore that, whilst there were elements of Nostradamus type “soothsaying” in the original usage and application of the rather narrow view of competence in Australia in the late 1980s and early 1990s, there is potential for the perceived “Nostrum” to be adapted and successfully evolved along the lines we are suggesting for future betterment of Vocational Education and Training in Australia.

**References**


About the authors

Dr Lewis Hughes is the Director of Enviro-sys – an Australian consultancy focused upon making the most of what is known and can be done across the spectrum of organisational and community environments. With respect to individual and organisational capability oriented research, Lewis has a particular interest in people drawing upon the outcomes of their lifelong learning to personal and organisational advantage. Lewis describes his personal vision as - "I strive to make a difference by working with others in achieving the best use of tangible and intangible resources and assets. This is in pursuit of the vision that our global society can be progressively strengthened – valuing differences – within a learning environment in an economic and environmentally (broadly defined) sustainable manner, and with social equity."

Relevant to this paper, for ten years Lewis has been a Federal Government approved quality assurance/critical friend supporting the delivery of Australian Training Packages. From a teaching foundation, Lewis has had broad, multi-sector, corporate involvement whilst continuing to contribute to the strengthening of formal and informal learning outcomes. Lewis is a past National President – and Life Member - of the Australian Institute of Training and Development.

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