



What is competence? A summary and commentary from a research report by Cambridge University press & Assessment

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Last December, Cambridge University Press & Assessment, published the research report by S. Vitello, J. Greatorex, S. Shaw, *What is competence? A shared interpretation of competence to support teaching, learning and assessment* in which an attempt to define the wide and debated concept of competence was started. According to the authors, the need to construct a definition of this concept is fundamental, since a clear, univocal and shared definition of competence is essential for the development of learning pathways based on the acquisition of competences.

For years, the concept of competence has been central in the academic, political and social debate and has been widely used in the educational and training field in relation to learning, curricula and evaluation of training pathways. It is also particularly relevant because of its wide applicability; in fact, the notion of competence is not ascribable to a single national educational tradition, to a particular subject of study or to a particular stage of education or learning, but concerns both institutionalized educational pathways and lifelong learning. In addition, the concept of competence has become increasingly relevant in parallel with the diffusion of a narrative claiming the benefits to society and individual firms of having competent people who can create innovation and development. Despite this diffusion, at present, there is no unanimously agreed definition among scholars and those who define measures and policies of training, to the point that, as the authors remarks, each programme adopts a different perspective on competences. Competences are also often confused with other terms such as skills, knowledge, activities and behaviours.

The authors, before defining the concept, clarify why they use the word "competence" and not "competency". However, the distinction does not exist in our language as in the Italian vocabulary there is no word capable of capturing the subtle nuance of meaning present in the Anglo-Saxon world: *"The terms 'competence' and 'competency' are often used interchangeably. However, when we use these terms with distinct meanings, we can have more productive conversations about competence. According to Hyland, 'competence' attaches to the person and describes their broad qualities in relation to a particular standard*

(e.g. being a competent driver). On the other hand, competencies are narrower, atomistic elements that attach to a task or activity (e.g. the completion of a particular driving manoeuvre)". (p. 8). According to the authors, the concept of competence is valuable for three reasons: (1) it helps explaining how people learn effectively, (2) it is an all-encompassing concept of all components (values, knowledge, skills) that are necessary to be able to perform an action, (3) it is a wide-ranging concept as it is not limited to a specific context, it is not tied to a single subject, stage of education, learning or age group.

The definition developed takes into account approaches from different institutional and academic contexts, adopting an 'integrated, comprehensive approach'. According to the authors: "*Competence is the ability to integrate and apply contextually appropriate knowledge, skills and psychosocial factors (e.g., beliefs, attitudes, values and motivations) to consistently perform successfully within a specified domain*" (p. 11). The report does not limit itself to the definition of competence, but probes in detail all the concepts that make up the definition (*Attitudes, Beliefs, Consistently, Contextually, Domain, Knowledge, Motivations, Skills, Values*).

The authors identify six principles at the basis of the definition that are useful to understand the frame of reference within which to develop pathways aimed at acquiring competences. The first principle is *Competence is linked to a domain and dependent on context*. The domain refers to the field of study, occupation or interest of which the competence is part. While context is related to the settings, situations and conditions surrounding any competence. The second principle is *Competence is a holistic concept*. Competence is seen as part of a complex system; it includes the individual's internal factors (e.g. knowledge, skills, attitudes, values) as well as the contextual factors that underlie competent performance. *Competence is about consistent performance across contexts within a domain, which supports predictions of future performance*. Consistency of performance within a domain (broad or narrow) is an integral part of the concept of competence. Competence is not only about being able to perform successfully within a specific domain, but it is also about being able to consistently perform successfully. Consistency is an explicit feature of competence descriptions within various qualifications and competence-based frameworks. *Competence involves applying contextually-appropriate knowledge and skills*. It is increasingly emphasized that competence implies the use of both knowledge and skills. Competence implies the ability to identify and apply knowledge and skills appropriate to the context in which the competence is used. The context may require knowledge and skills from the competence domain (e.g. plumbing) as well as from other domains or content areas (e.g. mathematics). *Competence involves psychosocial factors, which affect performance and influence learning*. Psychosocial factors (beliefs, attitudes, values, personality traits and motivations) also play an important role in the concept of competence. Psychosocial factors may also influence learning and competence development. *Competence is connected to a specified level of learning or ability*.

The definitional attempt launched in the report highlights the importance of constructing a shared definition among all the actors that, at various levels, deal with learning, training and with social and labour policies in order to increase the professionalism of individual workers. Structuring training interventions aimed at learning, in fact, means intervening on the enhancement of professionalism to support the personal and professional growth of individuals and increase their ability to transition. Competence represents a greater protection for the worker in a moment where working careers are increasingly fragmented and transitional situations multiply.

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