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Competences and European Framework: Which Critical Approach in front of The Great Transformation?

Giuditta Alessandrini ¹

Abstract Purpose. Competence is the ability of people to implement knowledge, skills and attitudes to achieve higher levels of performance, and knowledge for one's development. A wide range of pedagogical literature has been produced on competence, but we think an additional and more dynamic definition of competence is needed.

Design/methodology/approach. Considering the results of a European project – SMEQUAL – and its theoretical insights, the paper discusses the issues of competence considering authors like Salling, Olesen and Weinert.

Findings. The paper reaches the following conclusions: the notion of competence is relevant for both technical knowledge and in terms of relations and ethics concerning people's behaviour. We agree with Olesen's views that there is a need for a new language of competence which moves towards a more relational and holistic view.

Research limitations/implications. This research provides a critical debate about the concept of competence.

Originality/value. The paper underlines some opportunities for a more extensive concept of competence drawing on the capability approach of Sen and Nussbaum.

Paper type. Issues paper.

Keywords: *ECVET, Competence, Work-based learning, Capability approach.*

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1. The Notion of Competence

Competence is the human ability to implement knowledge, skills and attitudes to achieve, not only higher levels of performance, but also values and knowledge for individual development². It is – in other words – a “combination of proficiencies” (technical, theoretical and methodological skills; procedural and operational abilities).

What do we mean by “competence”? On competence, there is vast and varied pedagogical and psychological literature in many countries³. Beyond the theoretical approaches, it is important to deal with ECVET’s models to compare a conceptual framework with research in other competence domains.

What is the essence of competence? It is the individual ability to combine different proficiencies (emotional and valuable experiences) while promoting the willingness to develop “learning outcomes” as expected results and “competence”⁴. It also denotes the capability to use these learning outcomes. Also aligned with these process related terms is “qualification”, which denotes the requirements of a certain work or function

The concept of competence generally covers the combination of the following attributes⁵:

- The ability to act successfully;
- A complex context;
- The mobilization of psycho-social prerequisites (cognitive and non-cognitive);
- Results related to the requirements of a professional role or personal project.

In this view, competence is functional, performance-oriented and pragmatic, and defined in terms of external social demands that need to be mastered⁶.

² G. ALESSANDRINI & M.L. DE NATALE, *Il dibattito sulle competenze. Quale prospettiva pedagogica?*, Pensa Multimedia, Lecce-Brescia, 2015.

³ M. MULDER, *The competence construct in educational practice: A critical review of global critiques*, Paper presented at the WERA Conference, Washington (DC), April 2016.

⁴ G. ALESSANDRINI, *Manuale per l'esperto dei processi formativi (Handbook of educational processes)*, Carocci, Roma, 2016; K. ILLERIS (Ed.), *International Perspectives on Competence Development*, Routledge, London, 2009.

⁵ D.S. RYCHEN & L.H. SALGANIK, *Defining and Selecting Key Competencies*, Hogrefe & Huber, Seattle/Toronto/Bern/Göttingen, 2001; F. WEINERT, *Concept of Competence: A conceptual Clarification*, in D.S. RYCHEN & L.H. SALGANIK (Eds.), *Defining and Selecting Key Competencies*, Hogrefe & Hube, Seattle/Toronto/Bern/Göttingen, 2001.

2. Main Questions of this Paper

- Can the Qualification Framework (ECVET) support the mapping and assessment of competences in a perspective of lifelong guidance without being bureaucratic?
- To what extent does the development of training programs for adults – together with learning in a work context (Work Based Learning) – encourage individual experience of cultural or life growth of competence?
- Is it possible to implement a notion of competence with the concept of capability approach (A. Sen, M.C. Nussbaum)?
- Are there many differences and/or similar meanings?
- What is the potential benefit for educators, and for the academic debate, to compare these two concepts?

3. Qualification Frameworks and Validation of Prior Learning

In European policy development, there are two technical tools that play a key role in implementing the *policies for lifelong learning* as Sulling Olesen says⁷.

The first tool is the development of a *qualification framework*, which allows for comparison across national systems and among qualifications obtained through formal education and non-formal/informal activities⁸. The

⁶ H. SALLING OLESEN, *Some contradictions in the concept of competence as they appear in competence assessment/validation of prior learning*, Paper for Singapore Conference, December 2015.

⁷ I participated in the 9th International Conference on Researching Work and Learning (RWL9) “*Work and Learning in the era of Globalisation: Challenges for the 21st Century*” in Singapore in December 2015 and discussed with Sulling Olesen about the issue referred to in this paper. H. Salling Olesen, *Some contradictions in the concept of competence as they appear in competence assessment/validation of prior learning*, cit.

⁸ On the issue of the role of informal knowledge, there is very interesting doctoral dissertation by Claudio Pignalberi. The research project doctoral entitled “*Digital Habitat and Communities of Practice: emerging paradigms of learning and knowledge construction*” involved students and former students of the educational-training chain who were invited to reflect on the impact of the formal, informal and non-formal learning approaches in the process that has marked their college experience. The model of the Q-Sort of learning (IQA) shows the student (or former student) dimensions of learning prove complementary and converging with each other, thus it is meant as an educational proposal to train and to improve professionalism of the subjects. The type considered as “central” is informal learning, which informs us that this type of learning has primarily developed the critical side and logical reflection of the respondents’ parties, so that we can promote an internal and autonomous maturation process. The problem, in the logic of lifelong learning, is the interaction of the formal and informal types- to make sure that

second tool is the *validation of prior learning and competence assessment* that encourages the recognition of specific (individual) competences in new environments.

The PIAAC, Programme for the Assessment of Adult Population Skills, fully adopts a lifelong and life-wide learning perspective and focuses on the skills considered essential for growth, economic development and work, thus enlarging the evaluation to all competences gained during adulthood.

The *qualification framework* in Europe is sometimes seen as a bureaucratic burden to link the labour market with educational institutions. For this reason, it has been most criticized⁹. Generally, it has been seen as a bureaucratic tool for connecting the labour market with education institutions, and in Europe it has actually been used in a top-down approach aimed at creating more uniformed governance in education.

For two years, we worked in the Leonardo Project, SMEQUAL, on the competences of HR Professionals in some countries of Europe¹⁰. The project aimed to *improve the quality of training systems for SMEs* by incorporating the ECVET provisions foreseen in the Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing the ECVET system. In particular, the project provided the European operational guidelines and methods for the implementation of ECVET provisions in VET programmes for SMEs.

The project set the following concrete objectives:

- Analyse the existing experiences and good practices in designing trans-sectoral qualifications for SMEs, in units of LOs and with the attribution of ECVET points, in three partner countries (BE, IT, PL).
- Develop the “European Handbook for LO-based Qualifications for SMEs”, which would include operational methods and guidelines for defining trans-sectoral learning outcomes based on qualifications for the SMEs.

there is no separation or discontinuity between the different occasions and modes of learning.

⁹ H. SALLING OLESEN, *Certification and Validation of Competences and Prior Learning*, World Bank, Washington, 2004.

¹⁰ SmeQual Project (Project Number: 538534-LLP-1-2013-1-IT-LEONARDO-LMP). The partners of the project: Roma Tre University – Depart. Of Education (Italy), Effebi association (Italy), Scierter CID (Spain), AIDP (Italy), EUROCADRES (Belgium), CONFAPI (Italy), PAIZ Konsulting Sp.z.o.o. (Poland), The Portuguese Bank Training Institute (Portugal). Associate Partner – Cà Foscari University (Italy). In the testing phase (6th work package) the leader is Roma Tre University. Its supporters are EAPM, PAIZ, Scierter CID.

– Test the “European Handbook for LO-based Qualifications for SMEs” on a qualification prototype, for example, an HR Planning & Recruitment Expert (HR Professional) in three partner countries – Belgium, Italy, Poland.

– Define and test quality standards for the ECVET implementation (“The 10 ECVET Quality Standards”) within trans-sectoral SMEs qualifications. In order to reach these objectives, 8 work packages and a strong collaboration between the different institutions have been developed (The SMEQUAL Handbook website can be reached at <https://www.ceforc.eu>).

This work package produced the main Handbook's objective, increasing the awareness on ECVET provisions and the benefits of its implementation. During the project, we tested the applicability and efficiency of the Handbook in VET programmes for SMEs and provided a concrete example of qualifications in line with ECVET technical specifications, designed according to the Handbook and developed within the (HR Professional) project. The following figure reports a methodology example on how professional qualifications can be developed (*Figure 1*).

During the project (as a paper at the Bremen Conference)¹¹, it was possible for me and my colleagues to reflect on the following question: how we can improve our vision of competence and work on new methodologies to analyse skills and attitudes of a professional qualification without making use of a bureaucratic language?

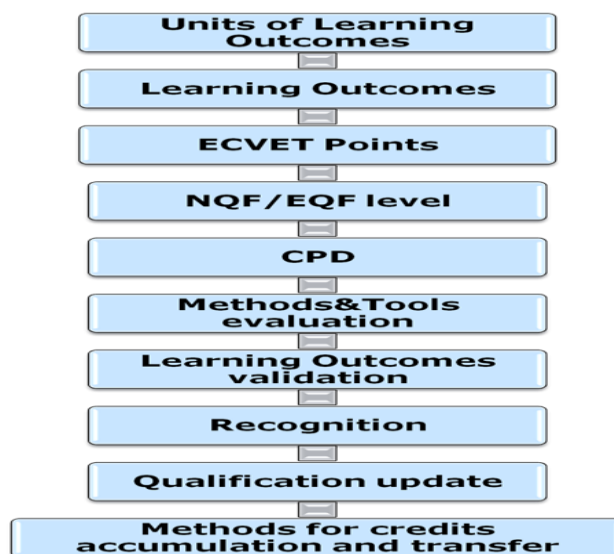
We see two main opportunities for competence recognition¹². One is work-life competence applied to the work environment and school

¹¹ International VET Conference, *Crossing Boundaries in Vocational Education and Training: Innovative Concepts for the 21st Century*, University of Bremen (ITB), Bremen, November 2015.

¹² In this field, interestingly is the doctoral dissertation of Valerio Massimo Marcone entitled “*The Formativity of Work-Based Learning*”. The issue of validation and certification of competences skills within “dual paths” training and work is ever more present in apprentices’ experiences. In fact, the quality of Work-Based Learning is central to improving the quality of education and vocational training. Innovations and good WBL practices developed in recent years are a significant route, even within traditional VET. The WBL also enhances the benefits of alternation between classroom learning and learning in the company. In Italy, we have now new opportunities of implementation of “*alternanza*” (see the new Law “Buona Scuola”) in connection with instances underlined by the European Union. The work was developed and tested with a qualitative research about educators, tutors and scholars in Taxonomy, inspired by the capability approach of Nussbaum to assess the quality of training in apprenticeship experiences.

assessment of knowledge, while the second is intellectual skills applied to the formal education institutions.

Figure 1. Methodologies for the Development of Professional Qualification



Considering the scenarios in education and the pedagogical and theoretical reflection, we believe it is important to analyse all the previously mentioned questions that represent a critical approach to competence. We also believe that it is necessary to discuss competence issues deriving from authors comprising Sulling Olesen, Weinert and Malder among others.

4. A “Critical” Approach to Competence Issues

Milana, in a recent study about the evolution of the life-long learning concept applied to main documents of the European Commission, demonstrates that «the concept of lifelong learning today is primarily associated with economic growth and the global competition of nations and geopolitical regions»¹³.

¹³ M. MILANA, *Political globalization and the shift from adult education to lifelong learning*, in *European Journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adult*, vol. 3(2), 2012, 113-117.

The Resolution on Adult Learning stresses the need for policies on this topic (2008). While personal development is mentioned as one of the goals of life-long learning, primary attention is paid on worker's employability, adaptability and vocational mobility.

The Council of European Union (2008) in Conclusion recognizes: «The key role which adult learning can play in meeting the goals of the Lisbon Strategy by fostering social cohesion, *providing citizens with the skills required to find new jobs* and helping Europe to better respond to the challenges of globalization»¹⁴.

I agree with Milana that there is a general trend in Europe to *reduce adult education to vocational and work-related education*.

«Trying to understand the rationale beyond this trend, it becomes apparent that in Europe increased political attention has been paid since the early 1980s to competence development sustained by a convergent view of learning processes as a central asset, regardless of whether the context is formal, non-formal or informal (...), this increased focus may be also explained by the diminished role of the state in securing job creation and citizen protection in relation to that of the market».

This approach is also shared by other authors¹⁵ and it is, in my opinion, a very important point of discussion. Mulder recently argued that “*Critics state that the notion of competence is useless*”, be it contextualized or not.

«Those critics often stick to the first generation of competence-based education programs which were dominated by behaviouristic functionalism. Others point at the issues encountered in the implementation of competence-based education practices and start off from more recent developments»¹⁶.

These remarks by Mulder demonstrate the notion that generalization in competence frameworks is in contrast with contextual diversity (at professional and at country level) and is a very important argument on this critical issue.

The concept of competence – for a pedagogical framework – is not only relevant to the technical knowledge, *but also to the relational, emotional and ethical level of people's education* (as the classic concept of “Bildung”). We agree with Sulling Olesen that there is a need for a *new language of competence*.

¹⁴ CEU (2008), P.C1140/11.

http://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/continuing_ed/find_a_course.asp.

¹⁵ G.J.J. BIESTA (2006), *Beyond learning: Democratic Education for a Human future*, Paradigm Publisher, Boulder, Colorado, 2006.

¹⁶ M. MULDER, *Professional Competence in Context: A Conceptual Study*, Paper presented at the AERA, Chicago (USA), April 19, 2015.

«The use of these concepts is not very clear or consequent – but together they form a new discourse about education, training and learning in everyday life. This new discourse reflects a new material dependency of capital(ism) on the concrete quality of work and workers. On the one hand this circumstance implies a total program of learning for work, which is inferred not only for education and learning but also everyday life – a new level of economic organization. On the other hand, this request for competence development in which the subjectivity of working people occupies an important role, constitutes a new arena of political struggle over the directions of learning processes and the range of subjectivities required for the participation in work and in society. Diverse as they are, the elements and interests of these policies can only be held together in a rather abstract discourse, open to quite diverse interpretations and connotations. In the practical implementation of lifelong learning policies, however, some of the hidden ambiguities and contradictions appear as technical difficulties and/or conflicts»¹⁷.

Taking a pedagogical view, the concept of competence in Europe plays a significant role as a change paradigm in education emphasizing the role of human resources. Nevertheless, we think a *further dynamic concept of competence is needed*.

Sulling Olesen suggests that an individual creates competence in processes of *active* and *situated* engagement. These may be gendered and class-based, but they are always mediated by the *individual experience*¹⁸. The issue of *situational learning* is very important in the theoretical approach of Wenger and Lave¹⁹ as well as in the Engstrom's "Theory of Activity" (see Alessandrini)²⁰.

Therefore, *we need a system allowing for an extensive, detailed mapping and recognition of competences*. The model of lifelong learning has changed across the years, so the relationship between societal requirements and the individual knowledge necessary cannot be stated in terms of a *general formula*. Thus, it should be thought of as a new model of competence that is more dynamic and sensitive to specific factors.

¹⁷ H. SALLING OLESEN, *Beyond the current political economy of competence development*, in *European Journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults*, 4, 2013, 153–170. doi:10.3384/rela.2000-7426.rela9013.

¹⁸ H. SALLING OLESEN, *Some contradictions in the concept of competence as they appear in competence assessment/validation of prior learning*, cit.

¹⁹ J. LAVE & E. WENGER, *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1990.

²⁰ G. ALESSANDRINI, *Manuale per l'esperto dei processi formativi (Handbook of educational processes)*, cit.

Evans recognises the complexity of the contextual interplay of work-based and workplace learning experiences. The intersection of the formal, informal and contextual learning, and the consideration of cultural and power relations, and micro interactions of workplace activity generate a *new theoretical perspective of innovative approach* to learning at, for and through work²¹.

Etelapelto explores the role of work identity as an object of negotiated interdependence and separation from the formal and informal. How is it possible to «implement the agentic identity construction»? The framework consists of the following concepts: the idea of self, professional knowledge and competences and work history and competence²².

Billet elaborates in his research on the role individuals can play in *mediating their learning* in workplace settings through reflections on the contribution of physical and social settings²³. The focus is on the social world's norms and practices and how individuals shape and influence perceptions of workplace capability.

5. Around the Scenario of the Challenges of Work Today: Collaborative Competence, Quality and New Relevance of Skills

Jyrki Katainen, Vice-President responsible for Jobs, Growth, Investment and Competitiveness, said recently «A competitive European economy requires innovation, be it in the area of products or services. Europe's next unicorn could stem from the *collaborative economy*. Our role is to encourage a regulatory environment that allows new business models to develop while protecting consumers and ensuring fair taxation and employment conditions»²⁴. The European Commission supports businesses and public authorities to engage the collaborative economy. These new business models can make an important contribution to jobs and growth in the European Union. Which is the best combination of

²¹ K. EVANS, *Developing the creative potential of the workforce: rethinking the part that work-based learning can play*, in H. BOUND and P. RUSHBROOK, *Towards a New Understanding of Workplace Learning*, Institute for Adult Learning, Singapore 2015.

²² A. ETELAPELTO, *The role of work identity and agency in workplace learning*, in H. BOUND and P. RUSHBROOK, *Towards a New Understanding of Workplace Learning*, Institute for Adult Learning, Singapore 2015.

²³ S. BILLET, *Positioning personal mediation as being central to workplace learning*, in H. BOUND and P. RUSHBROOK, *Towards a New Understanding of Workplace Learning*, Institute for Adult Learning, Singapore 2015.

²⁴ EUROPEAN COMMISSION, *A European agenda for the collaborative economy*, Brussels, 2 June 2016.

mindset and educational experiences useful in implementing collaborative competences?

In my opinion, another very important framework is the Agenda UNESCO Education 2030. This document will make historic progress in education as it is a commitment to bold, innovative and sustainable actions to ensure *that education truly transforms lives in the world*. Estimates from multiple sources suggest that 500 million to 900 million people will join the online ranks by 2017, while Microsoft estimates that the online population will reach 4.7 billion users by 2025.

The last Davos Report, the Fourth Industrial Revolution, urges us to think creatively about the manufacturing process, value chain, distribution and customer service processes. The future of education emphasizes the immense need to look beyond these areas to *prepare the coming workforce for the challenges ahead*.

There are different opportunities available that will shape the role which can be undertaken by higher education in the Fourth Industrial Revolution. Academic debate has emphasized universities' roles in shaping future technology by being the testbeds for innovation and educating future generations.

Which kind of education? Which kind of competence or capabilities will be generated for the future? The key words to answering these questions are “disruptive” “innovative”, but also increasingly, “inequality” (for example, about digital divide effects, and see for example Deaton, Moretti, and Stiglitz).

A new skills agenda for Europe Working together to strengthen human capital, employability and competitiveness (Strasburgo COM 2016381/2) supports «a shared commitment and works toward a *common vision about strategic importance of skills for sustaining jobs growth*»²⁵ and strengthens *three points*: the issue of *quality and relevance* of skill formation, the need for qualification that is more visible and comparable, and improvement of skill intelligence for better career choices. One of the main goals is to implement a *political awareness of the critical importance of skills in Europe*.

²⁵ EUROPEAN COMMISSION, *A new skills agenda for Europe Working together to strengthen human capital, employability and competitiveness*, Strasburgo, COM 2016381/2, 2016.

6. The *capability approach* of Sen and Nussbaum: skills or capabilities?

What is *capability approach*? The key idea is “development as freedom” (the title of one of the Sen’s most known books of 1999)²⁶ which states that economic growth can be achieved by means of democratic growth – that is, participation for every individual, not only for the elites – and developmental opportunities of one’s capabilities through educational and formative experiences²⁷.

From this point of view, there are different research questions that become important for Educational Science. Two research streams are of interest: 1) to what extent can the Capability Approach²⁸ be turned into a theory of education that can be applied in different environments and topics such as schools, teacher training, and lifelong learning; 2) what educational policies at local, national and international level grant the individual’s capabilities during the precarious transition period from school to work.

In a nutshell, there are some basic conditions in making a set of recommendations (a position paper for scholars interested in the capability approach), as studied from an educational point of view.

These conditions are:

- 1) focusing on *the anthropological issues* such as individuals’ wellbeing, freedom and development of their potential rather than on productivity and economy;
- 2) *overcoming the economic individualism* centred on instrumental rationality, and enlarging the horizon on the *person’s value and dignity*;
- 3) concentrating on *a formative welfare* concerned not only with the conditions for employability, but also with the defence and *promotion of the individual’s opportunities for development*;
- 4) widening the *idea of innovation*, not only as seen from the functionalistic and technical point of view, but also *as a social participated dimension*;
- 5) focusing on the *idea of social responsibility* as leverage for a shared and effective process of growth.

²⁶ A. SEN, *Development of freedom*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1999.

²⁷ G. ALESSANDRINI, *La pedagogia di Martha Nussbaum. Approccio alle capacità e sfide educative (The pedagogy of Martha Nussbaum. Capability approach and educational challenges)*, Franco Angeli, Milano, 2014.

²⁸ M.C. NUSSBAUM, *Not for profit. Why the Democracy Needs the Humanities*, Princeton University Press Princeton, Princeton, 2010.

7. Concluding Remarks

The idea of competence is linked to a *potentially acting* subject who is able to *mobilize* various prerequisites in a manner relevant to the situation. It should be pointed out that the *social requirements are not well-defined and known in advance*; it is more of a question of having the ability to take the appropriate action in unpredictable and relatively complex situations.

“Competence” is thus not a (new) canon of knowledge and skills, but a potentiality whose realization is conveyed through the subject’s knowledge and will. In this way, it is correct to say that *a person can be competent and can realize competencies* in specific situations.

Sulling Olesen says that «In the context of the issue of legal recognition, “competence” is supposed to serve as a “general equivalent” of *human capability*»²⁹. To do so, we believe it is important to analyse the theoretical and practical differences among the models of competence (as well as the model in the New Skills Agenda 2016) through the *capability approach* of Sen and Nussbaum. We think that this debate can implement a very new and interesting *vision of the complexity involved in the concept of competence*.

The Commission’s strategy, in front of the challenges issued by recent decades’ scenarios, requires «a notion of competence which is able to understand the latent or potential interest of learning, and link it with a level of “objective” and societal reference where legal, institutional or economic recognition can rule, an imagination of a new potential career»³⁰.

Schwab, President of Global Forum, calls for leaders and citizens to «together shape a future that works for all by *putting people first, empowering them and constantly reminding ourselves that all of these new technologies are first and foremost tools made by people for people*»³¹.

²⁹ H. SALLING OLESEN, *Some contradictions in the concept of competence as they appear in competence assessment/validation of prior learning*, cit.

³⁰ H. SALLING OLESEN, *Some contradictions in the concept of competence as they appear in competence assessment/validation of prior learning*, cit.

³¹ K. SCHWAB, *The Fourth Industrial Revolution*, World Economic Forum, January 11, 2016.

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