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Labour Perspectives on the New Politics of Skill and Competency Formation: International Reflections

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Skill/competency approaches to workplace-based policy seek to assess and train for discrete individual competencies with the goal of increasing employability and productivity. These approaches have become increasingly prominent across a range of advanced capitalist countries. A substantial critique has emerged over this same period regarding issues of instrumentality and social control, as well as the failure of skill/compentancy approaches to articulate a meaningful understanding of human learning capacities. In this article, these critical perspectives are clarified further by a review of contributions to understanding the skill/competence question emerging from sociology of work literature. Building from these critiques, this article outlines recent experiences with and perspectives on skill/competency frameworks amongst different national labour movements. Included in this outline is a more detailed, comparative analysis of Norway and Canada; here we see the lofty 'new', 'knowledge economy' rhetoric – in two countries where one might expect to see it blossom in application – brought down to earth by the realities of industrial relations, employer intransigence and intra-labour movement differences. 'Skill/competence' proves to be a floating signifier that, amongst both employers and labour, stands as a proxy for 'power/control' struggles. Degenerating in this way, from a labour perspective, the new politics of skill/competency formation is seen to have spiraled toward irrelevance in Norway and Canada; awaiting, in both countries, a re-invigoration through attention to changes in the participatory structure of the labour process itself.

Key words: work, competency, skills, employability, labour, policy, industrial relations, Canada, Norway

Introduction

> Governments, employers and trade unions increasingly face a need to prepare workers for a new and more flexible labour market, and the prospect of a working life which involves a variety of occupations and skills… a *new politics of skill formation* has emerged, facilitating and regulating the development of workers' competences and transferable skills…(Martinez Lucio, Skule, Kruse, & Trappmann, 2007, p. 323; emphasis added)

While the politics of skill/competency formation may not be as 'new' as some believe, the fact is that the new millennium has appeared to have crystalized momentum for attempts at such approaches. In this regard, it has become clear that the pressures of globalized trade, production and inter-capitalist competition, technological and demographic change (Martinez Lucio et al., 2007) have produced a willingness for experimentation.

The skills/competencies approach, as has been

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recognized, is not neutral. The discourse of skill/ competency formation belies the fact that recognition, classification, regulation and the legitimacy and resources to shape activity in ways reflecting particular material interests represent deeply political questions. Given the embeddedness of this issue in industrial relations, organized labour – while battered, bruised and in decline in most, but not all advanced capitalist countries – represents a relevant standpoint from which to investigate the skill/competency question. The goal of this article is to address the complexity and inner contradictions of this formation from the standpoint of organized labour to show how concerns over 'actual skill/competency' are marginalized in relation to traditional modes of economic struggle. As we shall see, however, labour perspectives on this issue are hardly monolithic, either within or across countries.

Below, I begin with a brief review of existing critiques of the skills/competency approach specifically. I then supplement this literature with a consideration of the skills debate from the field of sociology of work which is more generalized in nature. Across these two traditions we see the relevance of discerning interwoven orientations to 'actual skill/competency' as opposed to matters of 'power/control'. This review sets the stage for a profile of labour perspectives on skill/competency including a comparative analysis of recent initiatives in Norway and Canada. It is demonstrated that, in distinct ways that express national differences, both Norway and Canada have seen the politics of 'new' skill/competency formation overtaken by traditional forms of industrial relations struggle.

Existing Critiques of Skill/Competency Frameworks

Skill/competency approaches to workplace and economic policy have emerged based on a range of perceptions which are shared internationally. Stake-holders across virtually all advanced capitalist countries perceive a need for greater mobility of employees across economic sectors. Governments now assume that the new economy brings a need for new forms of skills and competencies linked, for example, to an emphasis on 'soft', transferable skills, the validation of non-formal and informal learning, and access to learning for workers with low formal skills. Within both North America and Europe, many countries have generated policy frameworks, e.g. see the Lisbon Council proclamations[1], which seek to use innovations in training and learning to develop dynamic knowledge-based economies. It is unquestioned in such policy frameworks that transferable skills and competencies are necessary for the development of a more competitive economy, while it is also presumed that such approaches are the best means of supporting workers in an increasingly competitive global economy (Martinez Lucio et al., 2007).

Amongst most OECD countries, state-driven policies targeting individualistic, skill/competency intervention as a form of industrial policy are nothing new (cf. Boreham, 2004).[2] Recognizing that theories of macro-economic management have consistently shaped the development of training as well as education in all advanced capitalist countries, we can nevertheless see that skill/competency frameworks have in some ways helped crystallized the centrality of education and training as economic policy (e.g., Brown, Green, & Lauder, 2001; Olsen, Codd, & O'Neill, 2004). As we shall see later on, a variety of countries including Norway and Canada have recently made sustained attempts at their own versions of this policy. And, central to virtually all such attempts are prescriptions to tighten the linkage between all forms of learning (education, training and informal learning) and organizational competitiveness.

Critical analyses of skill/competence frameworks are as well established as the policy frameworks themselves. From this perspective, researchers have addressed the inequities that tend to be reproduced in such skills/ competencies approaches (Jackson, 1991; Rainbird, 1992; Heyes & Stuart, 1994; Adkins, 1999; Mojab, 1999; Payne, 2000; Shah & Burk, 2005). Others have noted how skill/competency frameworks reflect a rejection of the wider, social goals of lifelong learning in terms of broader personal development and deepening forms of collective participation in work processes as well as society (e.g., Coffield, 2000). More generalized is the critique that lies at the centre of the question of political economic legitimacy of skill/ competency approaches. As Rikowski (e.g., 2001) points out, employers who do not recognize the nature of 'labour power', its uses, abuses as well as its relationship to learning, skills and competencies under capitalism are likely to be unable to understand, much less articulate, their training needs. In fact, as variety of researchers have noted:

'skill' and 'competency' has, by now, become the epitome of a 'floating signifier'; dangerously close to, as Lafer (2004, p. 118) puts it, 'nothing more than "whatever employers want"'[3]. Or, as Payne has so consistently explained for a decade now, skills and competencies are:

> …ubiquitous…being applied to such diverse phenomena as reading, writing, problem-solving, learning, team work, salesmanship, marketing, presentation, perseverance, motivation, enthusiasm, attitude, corporate commitment, customer-orientation, stress management… mean[ing] whatever employers and policy-makers want it to mean (Payne, 2000, p. 361).

Critics have also been particularly persistent in their challenge to skills/competency approaches in terms of conceptualizations of learning itself. As Fenwick summarizes (Fenwick, Guo, Sawchuk, Valentin, & Wheelahan, 2005),

> '[s]kill' is an illusion that floats according to the prevailing knowledge politics and observer bias identifying bits of performance spied among joint action, and marking it as some capability possessed by this or that person immersed in the communal flow (p. 2).

In fact, applications of skill/competency are in practice, if not by definition, unable to appreciate the situated or contextualized nature of performance. Such critiques offer a portal to discussions of the way the skill/competency frameworks may in fact reproduce forms of social exclusion which at the same time valorize the types of hierarchical 'knowledge politics' that Fenwick speaks of above. This is the case whether we dealing with culturally specific forms of knowledge, immigrant credentials, or more generally in terms of the traditionally upheld divisions between mental and manual labour, vocational and professionalized knowledge, and so on. Research evidence shows that hierarchical ordering of capacities are presumed and often directly embedded in skill/competency policy initiatives. And, from here it is a simple extrapolation to understand the skill/competency approach as a mechanism for producing (and then attempting to resolve) the notion of 'worker deficit'.

It is of course no mere coincidence that individualized notions of learning, skill and credentialization pre-dominate in capitalist political economy (e.g., Sawchuk, 2003a). Individuation in the learning processes – both organized and informal learning processes – ratifies the commodification process as well as the ethos of privatized market exchange. Skill/competency policy, naturally and pragmatically follows the prevailing winds in this sense.

Referenced as a skills/competency approach, what is really at stake is the locus of control of learning; a re-direction of people's energies from engagement in educational institutions, vocational training systems as well as collective bargaining processes, toward the direct and immediate mediation of learning by the needs of the firm, the sector, and capital in general. Herein lays a gap that simply cannot be ameliorated from an organizational standpoint, even in the case of critical Human Resource and Development (see Vince, 2005). It is a situation in which, as Paul Thompson (2003) has recently commented, "employers are finding it harder to keep their side of any bargain with employees" (p. 361). That is, skill/competency approaches contain a tension in which, on the surface the possibility of more engaged, meaningful, flexible and productive forms of work is offered while at its core the danger of intensified forms of exploitation, instability and vulnerability lurk. The shift to skill/competency, in short, places a vastly larger number of cards in the hands of employers who can utilize processes of recognition, designation, support and direction of learning activity in keeping with interests that are often antagonistic to those of the learner/worker.

A View from the De-Skilling / Up-Skilling Debate in the Sociology of Work

Up to this point, we have summarized literature that is widely available, both in this special issue and elsewhere. What is less often linked to the critical assessment of skill/competency approaches, however, is the tradition of skills discussion in the field of the sociology of work. I argue that this field offers additional clarity to our comprehension of the politics of skill/competency formation. A review of the skills debate in terms of the sociology of work shows that over the last three decades discussion has produced what can be called the 'up-skilling/de-skilling impasse' (Sawchuk, 2006). The roots of this impasse are found in two opposing sets of theses: the 'industrialism' and 'post-industrialism' theses on the one hand, and the Marxist labour process theory or 'capitalism' thesis and its

subsequent branches on the other.

Briefly summarized, emerging in the post-World War 2 era, the industrialism thesis projected that work was to progressively become more skilled, less physically demanding and less monotonous producing what has come to be known as the up-skilling argument (e.g., Spenner, 1979; Nonaka, & Takeuchi, 1995; Frenkel, Korczynski, Shire, & Tam, 1999). As Wood (1982) persuasively established early on, skill is not only a label used by management to divide and reduce the power of workers or the product of workers' collective resistance as Marxists suggested; it is at the same time a discourse of effective operation within a prescribed framework of capitalist organizations and economy.

In response to the industrialism/post-industrialism theses generally, came the work of Braverman (1974) which paid close attention to the organization of work (and specifically Scientific Management), seeking to recover a Marxist approach. Braverman Labour Process Theory analyzed the effects of the separation of conception and execution and argued these to be an expression of management's war with (craft and office) workers for control and through it heightened profitability. Skill and competency, in this sense, was the medium through which power, control and exploitation were enacted as well as contested. Specifically, Braverman tried to demonstrate that, on an aggregate level, the Taylorized technical division of labour – fragmenting jobs into minute actions and re-arranging activity based on management prerogative – sought to break down knowledge forms and the power that skilled workers exercised within the production process. Others since Braverman have built on the approach (e.g., Zimbalist, 1979; Burawoy, 1979; Littler, 1982; Baldry, Bain, & Taylor, 1998). Followers expanded upon Braverman's thesis, either implicitly or explicitly, through greater attention to the subjective dimensions of the labour process (such as worker consciousness, resistance and consent) and later sought to address Braverman's exclusion of gendered divisions, the need to deal with more than simply manufacturing sites, the need to develop a more detailed understanding of command/control structures as well as macro economic factors, and eventually the need to address issues of globalization and the effects of advanced technology.

Summarizing these literatures, Warhurst, Grugulis and Keep (2004, p. 5) have concluded that through these debates some basic forms of 'consensus' around skill and work have emerged. Here it was argued that researchers mutually acknowledge several key principles: i) skill includes internalized capacities resident in the individual worker; ii) skill includes job design, divisions of labour, technology and control; and iii) skill is socially constructed. This list of points of consensus in many ways parallels the principles attended to by a range of scholars writing two and three decades ago. Complicating matters, however, has been the explosion of skill types – most recently 'emotional' work/skill, 'articulation' work/skill, or 'aesthetic' work/skill: a trend that has deepened the debate over distinctions between 'personal traits' and 'learned skill' or 'competency'.

On the surface, this anti-climactic arrival at general principles defining skill that mirror so closely principles established decades ago, paired with the rampant expansion of categorization of virtually every human capacity as a skill/competency, do not suggest much of a contribution to our understanding of the new politics of skill/competency formation. However, upon deeper consideration, in fact the de-skilling/up-skillling debate has produced some important clarifications. We can see, for example, that the sheer difficulty of quantifying skill and competence has stimulated a variety of important questions: not simply the fundamental question of why we need to quantify skill/competence exactly, but also what this widely held need implicitly says about what we see as relevant and legitimate? Answers to these types of questions help to reveal the unarticulated presumptions that frame both past and current analysis of skill and competence. That is, clearly, the motive is embedded in the need for productivity, but productivity of a profitable kind; it is embedded in the need for competitive national firms, but competition under certain auspices; it is embedded in the need to engage and reward people, but people constructed as individuals vis-à-vis a labour market; and, ultimately the motivation is embedded in matters of control and social struggle.

The de-skilling/up-skilling debate has also encouraged researchers to address how it could be that the arguments for wide-spread 'up-skilling' as well as 'de-skilling' could *both* remain as persuasive as they each do. In other words, reconciling this apparent contradiction has forced deeper considerations of the meaning of skill, competence and

working knowledge itself. This consideration has begun to join the vastly superior assessments of the work processes from the field of sociology of work with the equally superior assessments of learning, skill and knowledge development processes available from fields addressing adult learning, training and education specifically.

What becomes clear from this multi-disciplinary comparison is that up-skilling must be understood in a dual sense, as including both those skills that management hopes for and legitimizes through skill/competency orientations, and the wide variety of 'skills' and 'competencies' (e.g. of disengagement, resistance, class consciousness, labour organizing, sabotage, etc.) that it does not. Against this observation, the de-skilling thesis must be understood on conceptually different plane; a process revolving around autonomy, power, control and exploitation rather than skill per se. It is a thesis, therefore, that meaningfully theorizes forms of disempowerment and appropriation, as old skills are displaced and the new ones that emerge are frequently both limited and limiting in terms of anything but exchange-value generation. The up-skilling and de-skilling debate in the sociology of work – much like the current standoff between advocates of skill/competency approaches and their critics – is therefore frequently fuelled by researchers referring to fundamentally different frames of reference and presumptions.

Labour Perspectives on Skills/Competence Frameworks

I argue that the critical orientation to skill/competency frameworks that has been developed thus far helps us to understand the series of failures that plague such initiatives to date: the failure to recognize the socially situated and collaborative nature of all skill performance, the failure to openly address the imbalances of power and thus the tendencies to reproduce inequities, the failure to recognize economic, sectoral, organizational dynamics, and finally the failure to address the conflation of 'actual skill/competency' versus relations of 'power/control'. Despite these shortcomings, what is clear is that organized labour across different national contexts has not infrequently supported skills/ competency frameworks. Building on the recent analyses in Forrester (2005) and Martinez Lucio et al. (2007), we can in fact discern four, inter-related interests that have tended to draw different labour movements into national skill/ competency framework participation.

First, there is an interest in skill/competency frameworks amongst labour movements which is oriented by a general belief that access to training enhances workers lives: narrowly in terms of the work process, but also more broadly in terms of a member's labour market value. In fact, adult education participation research (e.g., Courtney, 1992; Sawchuk, 2003b) has demonstrated that virtually any form of engagement with training or educational programs does tend to increase worker participation in the workplace and also increases participation in further education. Skills/ competency frameworks would conceivably fit into such dynamics, achieving the types of goals that many labour organizations desire in these terms.

Second, labour movements are increasingly attentive to the matter of legitimacy. As the recent review of the status of organized labour internationally by Pencavel (2005)[4] has shown, in a many advanced capitalist countries, union density is in decline.[5] These declines are most sharp in the USA, the UK and Australia but also identifiable in other countries including Japan and France. However, in countries such as Germany, Italy, Norway and Canada, union density has tended to remain relatively stable. For those national labour movements in some form of decline, there is often a concern for the broader legitimacy of unions as social and economic actors. Skill/competency frameworks in this context appear to offer an opportunity for renewed involvement in a economic policy which, in turn, offers the opportunity for increased legitimacy.

Closely related to this second point is a third one: practical recruitment potential (i.e. building membership). The labour movement in the UK is perhaps the clearest example of a national organized labour federation actively supporting a skills/competency approach with this purpose in mind. The UK's Trade Union Congress has actively supported 'employability' programs focused on skill/ competency approaches, an expression of which is the 'Union Learning Representative' program (see Forrester, 2005) which has as one of its goals to increase the relevance of unions in the lives of members as well as to support drives for increasing membership levels.

The fourth reason that organized labour has had for engaging with current skills/competency frameworks is the

most basic. It is based on the wide-spread optimism that increases in skill and competencies amongst their membership will help companies compete effectively in global markets, in turn, increasing employment security for the membership, stabilizing wage levels and so on. Virtually every national labour movement that has supported skill/competency initiatives (e.g., UK, Germany, Spain, Norway) has included this as its rationale either implicitly or explicitly.

Commenting on the broader, but closely linked 'lifelong learning' agenda, researchers (e.g. Green, 2002; Cooney, & Stuart, 2004; Payne, 2006) have noted that policy-in-practice varies significantly across countries, and that much depends on the inter-relations between the state, employers and trade unions. However, even when national labour movements are in agreement with a specific skill/competency framework, practical challenges remain. In this regard, Martinez Lucio et al. (2007), in their detailed comparative case study of Germany, Norway and Spain, summarize several examples. The authors note the challenges of inter-institutional coordination for effective implementation of skill/competency frameworks. In terms of the three countries they analyzed this meant re-orienting national and sectoral collective agreements, vocational education systems, and required the development of a functional framework of regulation at a broader political level. Particularly in countries such as Norway and Germany, forms of tripartite (state, employer, labour) bargaining were seen to be as much an impediment to new skill/competency initiatives as a support. The authors go on to note that, in addition, there was the contradiction of applying national policy to firms that operated internationally.

This brief indication of the challenges of implementation of skill/competency initiatives begins to emphasize the limitations of a generalized list of 'labour perspectives' such as the one provided above. A general list of interests, as useful as it may be, obscures the complexity where skill/competency frameworks are concerned. In particular, it obscures the differences within specific national contexts and within national labour movements. Moreover, to adequately understand the meaning of labour perspectives in relation to the adoption of and/or cooperation within national skills/competency frameworks, it is necessary to more deeply assess the meaning of these interests in relation to both issues of 'actual skill/competence' as well as matters of 'power/control'. When we take a close look at specific national cases, what we see is that much of labour's (and employer's) interest in skill/competency frameworks has little to do with learning and skill per se. Understanding how and why this is so requires us to move beyond general themes to look at the contingencies of specific national contexts.

A Comparative Analysis of Labour Responses to the New Politics of Skill/Competence Formation

To respond to the issues highlighted above, we turn in this final section to a comparative analysis of labour response to the politics of skill/competence formation in Norway and Canada specifically. From a labour movement perspective, a focus on Norway and Canada offers a great deal. Of course, while it may be of value to study labour movements in decline, it is arguably of equal or greater value to attend to the cases in which it is not. Second, while it is important not to take the comparison too far, the Canadian and Norwegian economies share a number of important similarities which shape skill/competency needs. Both countries rely heavily on natural resources including petroleum and hydroelectric power as well as mining, timber, pulp and paper; both have sizeable public sectors; while in addition both have experienced similar declines in manufacturing. Productivity growth has been similar in the two countries over the last decade (2.5% for Canada; 2.8% for Norway); and both feature comparable levels of unemployment. Both have roughly comparable trading relationships to larger economic blocs to their south (the USA and the EU). While Norway's population is obviously smaller, it has a comparable educational infrastructure: in fact, Canada and Norway lead the world in post-secondary educational attainment, and each country features among the highest rates of participation in work-based training (OECD, 2002, 2004; Livingstone, 2004). In terms of labour relations, both countries have relative stable union density.[6] At the same time however, there is an important difference that bears directly on the national experimentation with skill/competency frameworks. As we shall see below, Norwegian industrial relations are based on a more

centralized, tripartite, social partnership governance structure, whereas Canada features a de-centralized industrial relations system more similar to those seen in the USA and the UK. It is this final point that is perhaps most salient for understanding their distinct responses to skill/competency frameworks. Despite difference, however, I argue that the labour movements in both countries have struggled with a similar contradiction: a contradiction rooted in a failure to clearly distinguish between 'actual skill/ competency' development and 'power/control' dimensions endemic to the politics of skill/competency formation.

Labour and 'Competence Reform' in Norway

According to the recent case study by Payne (2006), Norway is regularly seen as an example of positive progress and engagement in terms of the skill/competency question. Their comprehensive program of 'Competence Reform' (the Realkompetanse project), however, would seem to have hit the natural limits of engagement (Teige, 2004) – what Payne (2006) refers to as the "end of a cycle of policy and academic thinking" (p. 477). From the perspective of labour, Competence Reform has proven relatively ineffective in improving either work-life balance or productivity. Norway, as mentioned, is an example of strongly regulated, centralized national social bargaining structure involving employers (represented by such groups as the Confederation of Norwegian Business and Industry), labour (i.e. the Norwegian Confederation of Trade Unions), and the state.

However, according to Skule, Stuart and Nyen (2002) the origins of the skill/competency initiative lie initially in the efforts of the Norwegian labour movement in the 1990s. Labour's chief concern at that time in addition to national competitiveness and employment, was the growing divide between high and low skilled workers and the potential negative effect on solidarity, quality of work-life balance and work participation.[7] Here, as in many instances of application we see an example of the 'floating signifier' of skill/competency: quality of work life, participation and concerns over membership unity are addressed through the amorphous skill/competency discourse. Indeed, idealized discussion of Competence Reform in Norway quickly descended to earth when specifics were discussed, and rapidly turned into a traditional negotiation over such matters as the financing of educational leave. Important in the negotiation was eligibility of different training topics with employers dismissing programs that did not directly meet the immediate needs of existing production systems, and labour expressing concerns that narrow forms of training and re-training might result in an overall de-skilling process. As Teige (2004) notes, ultimately employer groups would not be party to agreements that threatened managerial control.

Within the Norwegian labour movement itself, the skill/competency framework was accepted by those in some sectors and contested by those in others, while additional fragmentation appeared between executive and rank-and-file union members as well. In fact, according to Teige (2004), a large proportion of rank-and-file members preferred to drop the agenda of skills, training, and quality of work-life balance in favour of reversing the wage restraint agreement signed by the Confederation several years earlier. Most pointedly, as Payne (2006) notes in this quote from a former union official, "the attitude of the members tended to be one of why do we need more competence?... The Competence Reform came to be seen as just another excuse not to give us more wages" (p. 482). Rank-and-file workers appeared to remain unconvinced by the national competitiveness arguments (unlike their union executive): in many ways this represented a refusal by rank-and-file workers to confuse issues of 'actual skill/competence' with those of 'power/ control'; a matter in which they had little faith in the former's ability to deliver the latter. In turn, union executive officials lamented the lost opportunity of having Competence Reform serve as a path toward greater say over the work process and technological change, despite the evidence that employers remained intransigent about ceding any form of workplace control.

What is easily lost in much of this is a point noted earlier. Norway, like Canada, already has the most educated adult populations in the world. Short of an indictment of the entire Norwegian educational and vocational training system, it is therefore not hard to see how Competence Reform might be perceived as having more to do with issues of power and control, rather than 'actual skill/competence' needs. Indeed, in practice Competence Reform seemed to have included significant numbers of employers continuing to prefer the certainty of keeping a lower-skilled employee to the uncertainty of losing one with more advanced skills and thus broader labour market appeal (p. 485).

This contradictory conflation of skill/competence and power/control issues expressed itself in other ways as well. As a representative of the Norwegian Federation of Manufacturing Industries put it succinctly enough: "[w]hat you will see is low skill, labour intensive jobs and mass production steadily moving out of Norway to Latvia and the Baltic states. The reality is that if you want to stay in a job in this sector then you have to develop your competence" (Payne, 2006, p. 490). Here we see an example of 'skill/competence' as a signifier for wage competitiveness.

What were the actual successes of the Competence Reform program? The Competence Reform initiative resulted in significant levels of the documentation of non-formal learning, with many using this documentation to gain advanced standing in existing secondary educational programs and higher education. The initiative resulted in the delivery of some additional training, though there remained no pay for educational leave. What is striking perhaps is the degree to which the lofty rhetoric of skill/competency devolved into such conventional, long-standing education and training concerns.

The impasse reached in the Norwegian case, in fact, was shaped from the beginning by matters of control rather than competence. Indeed, this realization amongst employer and labour representatives alike has appeared to have led to shrinking interest. What may hold some promise, however, is the tentative emergence of support for turning attention toward the workplace itself. Nordic countries, and Scandinavian countries in particular, long renowned for their attention to technological change, work-life studies and the labour process itself (cf. Skule & Richborn, 2002), would appear ideally positioned to undertake this next step in the new politics of skill/competency formation. What anecdotal evidence there is suggests the possibility for gains in skill/competency as well as power-sharing and trust when changes at the level of day-to-day work processes are the focus of efforts.[8]

Labour and 'Essential Skills' in Canada

Like Norway, a skill/competency initiative has also emerged in Canada. However, unlike Norway, the process does not have roots in the labour movement beyond a basic shared concern for adult basic education (literacy and numeracy). Indeed, reflecting the absence of social partnership the initiative finds its origins in federal state efforts primarily; predictably this has led to low levels of acceptance and application.

One explanation of these low levels of acceptance is Canada's de-centralized industrial relations regime where labour negotiation is found mostly at the firm level, though with some instances of sectoral agreements through what is known as patterned bargaining and some limited attempts at social partnership agreements through Canada's sector councils. Inhibiting comprehensive experimentation further is Canada's constitutional structure which features a division of responsibility between the federal government (with responsibility for work-based training matters) and provincial government (with responsibility for educational provision including vocational education and apprenticeship certification) making any attempt at comprehensive reform unlikely.

Nevertheless, in 2004 the Human Resources and Social Development Canada (HRSDC) department of the federal government introduced the 'Essential Skills' program (2005a, 2005b). The Essential Skills program revolves around occupational profiling[9] rooted in a traditional attempt to identify and track the incidence of nine competencies: reading text; document use; numeracy; writing; oral communication; working with others; thinking skills; computer use; and, continuous learning.

What is clear, is that in terms of a labour perspective, the basic approach to skill/competency within this program is limited and limiting. The Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) has made it clear that such approaches have the potential to increase surveillance, to increase the intensity of work, training and education, and to establish accountability frameworks built on a foundation of competitiveness and profitability rather than genuine skill development (CLC, 2005, 2006). The CLC response to the Essential Skills program appears to recognize its narrow conceptualisation of skill and competency themselves: as outlined earlier in this article, often individualised, cognitive capacities are central while the collective, situated nature of competence is marginalized resulting in a 'deficit model' of worker capacities. These and many other elements, according to the CLC, form the implicit infrastructure of HRSDC's stated goals of producing a 'more productive workforce'. Thus, the labour response in Canada is – on the surface – markedly distinct from that seen in Norway. In contrast to Norway,

the CLC has taken a rejectionist stance.

Understanding the fragmented and contradictory orientation within the Canadian labour movement is difficult due to de-centralization. The CLC report, in fact, recognizes this fragmentation even while producing its recommendations. For our purposes here, this fragmentation can be understood most easily through a basic three part framework that describes the different forms of Anglo-North American trade unionism: 'business unionism', 'service unionism' and 'social unionism'.

Business unionism is an approach that fore-fronts a partnership between capital and labour in terms governed by capitalist production, circulation, distribution and consumption as pre-given and sacrosanct. It is somewhat difficult to distinguish business unionism from the range of participatory management/human resource practices currently available, but nevertheless, a business unionism perspective of the Essential Skills framework seen in Canada is largely positive, not unlike the orientation of Norwegian labour executive members. In the case of Canada, this approach has been expressed at the individual firm level. Overall, it is an orientation to the skill/competency question that aims at skill and knowledge development that best facilitates the competitive power of the firm. In Canada, examples of this are found in individual employers introducing the Essential Skills framework in individual workplaces as an expanded Human Resource program aimed at more effectively advertising, sorting and hiring, and, in small number of cases, anecdotally related, which have resulted in support for educational upgrading.[10] What is clear is that even amongst labour representatives oriented by a business unionism approach, there is no evidence of incorporation of Essential Skills orientations into collective agreements. Here the distinction between 'actual skills/competency' and 'power/control' remains unaddressed.

Service unionism is an approach that fore-fronts a relationship based on conflict between capital and labour; however, it is also an approach that orients almost exclusively to wage/benefits bargaining in the absence of a concern for participative control in the labour process. This approach seeks to maximize the wages and benefits that accrue to union members. A service unionism perspective on the Essential Skills program in Canada would not be expected to challenge who controls the assessment and recognition of the basic skill/knowledge sets. Additionally, it is doubtful that such an approach would challenge the relevancy of the skill sets themselves. To the degree that skill/competency frameworks such as the Essential Skills program have been initiated in Canada, it is through this type of negotiated model that has, as in the case of Norway above, typically led to conventional bargaining over issues such as paying for educational leave, and so on.

Finally, social unionism is an approach that is highly variegated, prone in the last two decades as well as in the inter-World War period in North America, to have been understood through a variety of additional sub-forms and strategies. It is summarized generally as fore-fronting social change by including as part of organized labour's interests, the needs of the broader working-classes under capitalism. As such, it has taken on a range of additional titles such as 'campaign unionism', 'organizing unionism', 'community unionism' and 'social capital unionism'. Here we are most likely to see an orientation to 'actual skill/competency' as individual and collective organizing capacities separate from production learning which is, in keeping with labour relations law in Canada, ceded to managerial control. That is, the 'power/control' dimension of the skill/competency question is fore-fronted; 'actual skill/competency' is taken seriously but only in the context of the needs of labour organizing and the skills necessary for the functioning of the union with little reference to production competencies. From a social unionism perspective, at the centre of a critique of the Essential Skills program is an interest to build practical capacity to transcend current labour processes, job and technological design for greater economic democracy. Examples of where, in fact, a genuinely new politics of skill/competency is emerging from a labour perspective is found amongst unions actively campaigning in the service sector such as the UNITE-HERE[11] union in the hospitality industry (Sawchuk, 2007). 'Power/control' issues are forefronted, 'skill/competency' is understood internal to union goals, and changes in labour processes including production skill/competency are viewed as an unproblematic outcome of broader changes.

Beyond these different ways that labour has taken up the skill/competence agenda in Canada, it is relevant to note that serious discussion of the Essential Skills has, for all intents and purposes, been limited to state policy personnel and, occasionally, human resource professionals. With minor exceptions, labour in Canada has largely kept its

distance beyond their (limited) participation in sector councils which benefited from an associated cash injection early in the framework's initiation (Anonymous, 2004). However, what has become clear is that employers, within and outside of sector councils, have maintained an orientation to motives not unlike those seen in Norway. As Hayes (2005) reports, employer motives remain fixated upon dealing with "the process of improving productivity and performance, and finding solutions to labour shortages" (p. 7). She goes on to forecast the emergence of an approach that "effectively avoids targeting individuals and encourages organizations to create conditions allowing for strong cultures of learning" (p. 7): a prediction that has turned out to be grossly misguided. In Canada, like in Norway, the skill/competency approach has spiraled into virtual irrelevance; stranded on the shores of issues of power, control and the distribution of resources.

Conclusions

I began this article with a review of the standard critique of skill/competency frameworks. As these scholars have noted, skill and competence as it is taken up in such frameworks is a floating signifier that obscures context, inequities and the social nature of the learning process itself. "Skill is an illusion", according to Fenwick, subject to the prevailing "knowledge politics". The upskilling/deskilling debates in the sociology of work added further clarity to the distinctions between 'actual skill/competence' and issues of 'power/control'. Thereafter I sought to add an appreciation for industrial relations negotiation from the standpoint of organized labour. It is in this context that we see the degree to which the skill/competence rhetoric is perpetually on the brink of sliding into the push and pull of traditional negotiation. In practice, skill/competence became a proxy for struggles over power and control.

In turning toward a review of organized labour perspectives specifically, I outlined four pragmatic interests in skill/competency initiatives that labour has regularly expressed. Here again we saw that these interests had relatively little to do with genuine 'up-skilling' or raising the competency levels of either workers or work processes.

The more detailed profile of Norwegian and Canadian initiatives demonstrated the ambiguity and unevenness of labour's perspective on the skill/competence question in practice. Norway with its tripartite, social partnership governance structure saw the labour movement initiate a Competence Reform program only to find the emergence of a traditional negotiation over the funding of educational leaves, accompanied by increased documentation of worker's learning and some moderate increases in educational access. Employer intransigence was matched only by rank-and-file worker rejection of Competence Reform in favour of traditional wage gains. In Canada, a rejectionist stance was maintained by the central labour federation while some small-scale engagement occurred at the individual firm and sector council levels. By far the bulk of the labour movement in Canada deemed the Essential Skills program irrelevant to their concerns, in some cases eclipsing the skills/competency approach with their own development of organizing cultures.

In both cases – in countries that one might predict fertile ground for new initiatives to take root – the spiraling irrelevance of the so-called 'new politics of skill/competence formation' has been deeply shaped by something that both employers and labour seem to have implicitly understood: in the absence of gains in their respective power and control there is little reason to invest energies into skill/competence frameworks. This confirms the critique of at least a sub-set of scholars who have maintained that political economic questions remain the fulcrum over which the politics of knowledge pivot. Indeed, it appears likely that, until the matters of 'actual skill/competence' and 'power/control' are simultaneously taken up within the labour process itself, motivation amongst either employers or labour for participation in such initiative will continue to be elusive.

Notes

[1] http://www.lisboncouncil.net.

[2] The governmental White Paper in the UK, "Twenty-First Century Skills: Realising our Potential", is an excellent example of such approaches and lays out a broad national framework, which focuses on integrating the work of educational institutions (at all levels), government bodies, training providers, and employment settings (see Forrester, 2005). Other comparisons in Payne (2006; discussed at length below) offer a review of the Norwegian alternative, equivalent in its comprehensiveness, though

distinctive in its history and future trajectory, and Martinez Lucio et al. (2007) where skills/competency policies in Germany and Spain offer additional variations on the same themes.

[3] A point, according to Tinker (2002, p. 275) that echoes earlier commentary, as we shall see in the next section, from Harry Braverman who in the 1970s recognized that, 'skill' has come to mean "waged work that is productive of surplus value".

[4] For further individual country accounts, with some international comparative data, see Kelly (1999); Waddington and Kerr (1999); Martin and Ross (1999); Waddington (2000, 2001); Peetz (1998); Hurd (2001).

[5] Union density refers to the proportion of the labour force belonging to unions. Union density should be discussed in relationship to 'union coverage' however: this refers to the proportion of workers covered by negotiated employment contracts (either locally, nationally or sectorally, depending on the country). The decline, when this measure is included, is much less sharp in several countries.

[6] 32% and 53% density respectively [for Canadian trends see Pencavel (2005); for Norwegian trends see Nergaard (2006)].

[7] In early 1990s the Confederation had signed an agreement to limit wage demands in return for overall wage and labour market stability, as well as broader social benefits.

[8] Here again many other employers remain skeptical viewing such experiments as 'an extra cost and time out of production' (see Payne, 2006, p.493).

[9] Interviews are being carried out with, to date, over 4000 workers across Canada representing over 200 occupations (http://srv108.services.gc.ca/english/general/home_e.shtml).

[10] See for example the case of Ekati diamond mine in Northwest Territory in Vu (2005) which produces 6% of the world's diamonds (represented by the Union of Northern Workers, a division of the Public Service Alliance of Canada union) who shortly after the Essential Skills initiative suffered a prolonged strike over both social equity and pay issues.

[11] United Needletrades, Industrial Textile Employees – Hotel Restaurant Employees union.

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