

HE WHAKAARO ANŌ

# The “something more” in key competencies

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This reflection was sparked by a conversation at a recent workshop to explore the key competencies. As a conversation starter I’d brought along a newspaper article entitled “Teaching mum how not to smoke” (Blundell, 2008). The story described an initiative at a local secondary school, where students caught smoking could choose whether to face the disciplinary consequences or enrol in a quit-smoking programme led by senior students of the school. I saw several interesting angles on key competencies in this story. The principal’s comments, for example, had prompted me to reflect on the role of senior management in creating opportunities for students to develop and demonstrate the competency of *participation and contribution* via leadership roles in the school. The senior student said activities selected for the programme were focused on positive benefits of not smoking, rather than on negative scare tactics. These comments hinted at interesting dimensions of *relating to others*, and I wonder if these types of somewhat intellectual dimensions are overlooked if this key competency is seen as simply being about good socialisation skills. I’ll come back to this idea at the end of the article.

In small groups, participants discussed the story with the intention that they would nominate one key competency demonstrated by each person. I must be out of practice with my facilitation skills—as they came to record their choices on the whiteboard many groups “voted” for more than one key competency for each person. But this turned out to be a good thing because it indirectly prompted the deep discussion that followed about the “something more” in key

competencies. I watched as the column of ticks under the key competency *using language, symbols, and texts* steadily grew. I was puzzled and asked if someone would explain how they were seeing this link. Responses were along the lines that the people had to talk to each other, choosing appropriate language and so on. Now this is undoubtedly so, but it does raise an interesting issue. Is this what key competencies are supposed to be about? Or is there “something more” than the things we may already do in the act of living and interacting?

Yoram Harpaz, an Israeli philosopher of education, has recently discussed this very question in the context of *thinking* as a competency (Harpaz, 2007). He differentiates between thinking skills that all of us use in the act of daily living and patterns that mould thinking along certain discipline-specific lines. He calls the former *neutral* thinking skills and lists as examples “identify, focus, classify, grade, discriminate, compare, select, generalize, summarize, ask, choose, assume, conclude, solve, decide” (p. 1848). He contrasts all these skills with what he calls *normative* thinking. By normative he means that sets of norms that have been socially created (e.g., by practitioners within a specific discipline) prescribe what counts as quality thinking of this specific type. This is an interesting idea that could help us explore the “something more” dimensions of thinking, but first I need to get a couple of reservations on the table.

The use of the term “normative” doesn’t seem especially helpful because it could cue *normalising* ideas about standardised tests, bell curves, and so on. That’s certainly not what Harpaz means but it does alert us to the need to be aware of multiple meanings that can

become attached to the words we think with—a useful thinking skill if ever there was one! Also, I'm not sure that the distinction between neutral and normative types of thinking is necessarily as definite as all that. But again, it cues an interesting idea about thinking *per se*. We do often position things in the world as binary opposites: hot/cold, bright/dull, male/female, brain/body, and so on. Just as with words themselves, we need to be aware of the limits of meaning making in this basic thinking hardware. More recently, some theorists have challenged us to replace either/or ideas with both/and thinking. How might a person be seen as both male and female? Can something (or someone) seen as bright also be seen as dull if the perspective or context changes? Keeping this both/and challenge in mind I'm going to use the terms *everyday* thinking skills and *discipline-specific* thinking skills instead of *neutral* and *normative* as I explore the implications of Harpaz's insight.

Discipline-specific patterns are not thinking patterns that people naturally use in their everyday lives—they have to learn how to use them, and when it might be appropriate to do so. The examples Harpaz lists include “breaking conventional thinking patterns, devising problems, exposing basic premises, and discovering biases (mainly in one's own thinking)” (Harpaz, 2007, p. 1848). Different discipline areas have different ways of doing this. For example, Cubists invented a form of art that morphed the rules of how the world can be represented. They did this to explore different ideas about reality, thereby breaking conventional thinking patterns. Cubism isn't likely to make much sense until you are aware of this thinking agenda. Making a distinction between hard-wired thinking abilities (our biological inheritance) and demonstrations of thinking that require mastery of a discipline-specific dimension suggests interesting challenges when reflecting on the “something more” of thinking as a key competency. How do we help students *transform* what they can already do, so that a much wider and deeper repertoire of thinking competencies comes within their reach?

### The “something more” from a 20th-century perspective

Dimensions of the thinking skills on Harpaz's neutral list are evident in the Essential Skills of the previous curriculum, especially in aspects of Information Skills and Problem Solving (Ministry of Education, 1993, pp. 18–19). Harpaz himself says that learning about and

practising these skills can make thinking more *efficient* (Harpaz, 2007, p. 1848). Such approaches are cornerstones of late 20th-century approaches to thinking skills programmes. Research suggests these types of programmes were being offered in increasing numbers of both primary and secondary schools before *The New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007) even appeared on the scene in late 2007 (Schagen & Hipkins, 2008). These programmes are certainly helpful to the extent that students expand their thinking skills, but what might be different if we consider thinking as a *competency*? Can this question cast any light on aspects of teaching that might need to change for so-called 21st-century learning?

### The “something more” from a 21st-century perspective

Twentieth-century skills are a necessary foundation and we do need practice to make our use of them more efficient. But they are not sufficient for coping in a 21st-century world. *The New Zealand Curriculum's* definition suggests a weaving of knowledge, skills, and dispositions will be needed:

More complex than skills, the competencies also draw on knowledge, attitudes and values in ways that lead to action. They are key to learning in every learning area. (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 12)

Harpaz sketches a rich metaphor for what this might look like when he advocates for strengthening thinking as “deep understanding” of a given topic:

The central metaphor of the understanding approach is a net. To understand something is to locate it in a web of concepts on the thought-about topic. The more closely woven the net, the more flexible the thinking will be. Good thinking is the ability to play with ideas and manipulate them in the net in which they are bound. This ability depends on the amount and depth of interrelations that one establishes between concepts on the density of the net. (Harpaz, 2007, p. 1861)

The following two examples might help illustrate the different look and feel of this sort of deep learning, when compared with 20th-century skill-based approaches. Learning to use the rules of formal written English is undoubtedly an important skill. In a 20th-century framing we are taught to think with these as we write, recognising when to use certain sentence

constructions accurately. In a 21st-century framing another layer of thinking is added to this basic one—one that requires us to be more aware of the role the rules play in making meaning. What purpose do such rules serve and where did they come from? What happens to meaning if we bend the rules playfully? In Harpaz's terms this could also be seen as breaking conventional thinking patterns—just as did the Cubist painters. How do others use the rules to insert subtle nuances into texts, with the intention of persuading us to a particular point of view that may not be directly stated (in Harpaz's terms “discovering bias”) and so on? In a world where open-access mass communication technologies are pervasive, this type of critical thinking is a very important “something more” than simply learning to think well as an everyday part of learning.

My second example comes from science and concerns that stalwart of the Living World strand, classification. Recall that Harpaz lists classification as a neutral (everyday) thinking skill. Children learn quite young to recognise differences such as those between spiders (eight legs, two body parts) and insects (six legs, three body parts). In a 20th-century framing this is just “what is so”. A spider *is* ... An insect *is* ... In a 21st-century framing this classification can gradually come to be seen as an evidence-based way of organising and explaining diversity in the living world, grounded in the theory of evolutionary relationships. Here classification moves beyond being an everyday thinking skill that anyone can use, to take on a framework created over time by biologists, and that is still being modified today as new types of evidence prompt a rethinking of evolutionary relationships. We could group these small animals in many everyday ways—by colour, size, and so on—or even other ways based on science ideas such as differing ecological roles. To do this is an interesting exercise in playing with the “rules” of classification, so long as students are not left without a sense of why scientists have agreed one system that they will all use, and how and why they came to choose the one they did.<sup>1</sup> Thus a discipline-specific dimension, entailing an important nature-of-science idea, adds something more to students' everyday inclination to use patterns they observe to group objects of interest.

### Teaching for something more in thinking

As the above examples illustrate, the “something more” in key competencies points to an *active* and *more explicit* process of meaning making that draws together:

- several types of knowledge—the concepts you are learning about, the discipline-specific rules and strategies that apply, and your knowledge of the context
- thinking and meta cognitive skills—thinking about thinking is important too, as is knowing when and why a particular type of thinking is appropriate to use in a new context
- dispositions—wanting to find links, being willing to step outside our habitual thinking patterns to see where they might have come from, and when and why they could be used for this knowledge, in this context
- values—for example, seeing the benefit of being open-minded, or of taking risks to play with ideas.

Making room for our students to practise thinking, and to think about it at a conscious level, is not the same as simply using habitual thinking patterns while someone else does the real thinking work for you. One simple strategy suggested in Guy Claxton's (2008) most recent book illustrates how this sort of "something more" in thinking might actually be easy to foster, if we break certain 20th-century teaching habits. He recommends noticing when we use "is" statements ("poverty is ..."). These leave no room for thinking differently. Where appropriate, consider replacing them with "could" statements ("poverty could be about ...") and exploring the new dimensions and perspectives that are opened up. No doubt you will be aware of other strategies that help make thinking itself an object of enquiry, or that could help students weave nets of deeper meaning as they make new connections between ideas or strengthen existing connections.

### What about the other key competencies?

I want to conclude by returning to the example in the introduction. Thinking, as it was defined in the original OECD key competency work (Rychen & Salganik, 2003), was seen as a "cross-cutting" competency, always in play when other key competencies are being used. Our work at the New Zealand Council for Educational Research would lead us to say all five key competencies are likely to be at work in any situation, but if we want students to

strengthen one in particular, it will need to be *foregrounded* in ways that allow students to become more aware of it, so they can reflect on their learning progress.

Take the case of the student leader of the quit-smoking programme. His comments about the types of learning experiences that have the best chance of influencing younger students to change their behaviour demonstrate a particular type of empathetic thinking, the ability to put oneself in another's shoes. This is a key aspect of *relating to others* but some people seem to find this easier to do than others. It is likely that, in this context, the idea first came from more expert educators who designed a training programme for student leaders to use. In the act of adapting their training to make the programme work, the student leaders' experiences are likely to generate powerful new insights that they can then adapt to other new contexts they might encounter. Empathy is a disposition that can be strengthened with awareness and practice. This ability to adapt competencies to use in next contexts (so-called transfer of learning) provides a powerful demonstration of learning, so there is assessment potential in this idea (Hipkins, Boyd, & Joyce, 2005). So learning to recognise the type of thinking at work when other key competencies are being used turns out to be yet another aspect of "something more".

This short article is only a starting point. I hope it opens up discussion that leads to more examples and yet more questions. If it undermines a belief that "we already do that" when traditional thinking-skills programmes are seen to equate to key competency development, then I will have succeeded with the task I set myself. Happy and playful thinking, everyone!

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### Note

- 1 If you are interested in following up on this idea, issue 115 of *The New Zealand Science Teacher* (2007) which celebrates the work of Linnaeus, inventor of the classification system, could be a good place to start.

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