

## Plus Ça Change: The Persistence of ‘Skill Talk’ in Competency Discourse

Claudia W. Ruitenberg

Volume 26, numéro 2, 2019

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1071435ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1071435ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Canadian Philosophy of Education Society

ISSN

2369-8659 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Ruitenberg, C. (2019). Plus Ça Change: The Persistence of ‘Skill Talk’ in Competency Discourse. *Philosophical Inquiry in Education*, 26(2), 124–136. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1071435ar>

Résumé de l'article

Robin Barrow has critiqued the use of the concept of “skill” for a wide range of human attributes that are not skills in the precise sense he articulated, namely: “a capacity that is discrete and can be perfected through practice and exercise.” Skill talk has persisted, though today commonly under the guise of “competency discourse.” In recent years, the British Columbia Ministry of Education has implemented a new K-12 curriculum that relies heavily on “communication competency,” “thinking competency” and “personal and social competency.” Based on Barrow’s work, I critique the tendency to refer to a wide range of human qualities as “competencies.” In addition, I argue that competency discourse commits a category mistake, especially with respect to moral qualities in the “personal and social competency” domain. After taking a closer look at the area of “personal and social competency” in BC’s new curriculum, I discuss the concept of friendship as an example of an area of significance to human life that cannot be reduced to competency. I close the paper by discussing why it matters that competency discourse commits a category mistake, and why philosophers of education should resist competency discourse.

# *Plus ça Change: The Persistence of ‘Skill Talk’ in Competency Discourse*

---

CLAUDIA W. RUITENBERG

University of British Columbia

*Robin Barrow has critiqued the use of the concept of “skill” for a wide range of human attributes that are not skills in the precise sense he articulated, namely: “a capacity that is discrete and can be perfected through practice and exercise.” Skill talk has persisted, though today commonly under the guise of “competency discourse.” In recent years, the British Columbia Ministry of Education has implemented a new K-12 curriculum that relies heavily on “communication competency,” “thinking competency” and “personal and social competency.” Based on Barrow’s work, I critique the tendency to refer to a wide range of human qualities as “competencies.” In addition, I argue that competency discourse commits a category mistake, especially with respect to moral qualities in the “personal and social competency” domain. After taking a closer look at the area of “personal and social competency” in BC’s new curriculum, I discuss the concept of friendship as an example of an area of significance to human life that cannot be reduced to competency. I close the paper by discussing why it matters that competency discourse commits a category mistake, and why philosophers of education should resist competency discourse.*

## **Introduction**

This essay springs from a concern about the persistent reference to all educational outcomes—or, perhaps, I should say all aspects of *educatedness*—as “skills” or “competencies.” I first encountered this reference in full force when I began studying medical education in 2012. I was struck by the over-use of “competency” and “skill” to refer to all desirable qualities in physicians, including in the areas of professional ethics, communication, and health advocacy (as outlined in the CanMEDS Framework of the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada). Now, we are seeing the use (and similar misuse and over-use) of competency discourse in British Columbia K-12 curriculum documents. In recent years, the BC Ministry of Education (n.d.-a) has implemented a new K-12 curriculum that relies heavily on “communication competency,” “thinking competency” and “personal and social competency.” In addition, my own employer, the University of British Columbia (2018), uses competency discourse extensively in its most recent strategic plan, writing, for instance, that “universities must support students, faculty and staff in acquiring the skills and competencies necessary for achieving success in [a] rapidly changing landscape” (p. 32). The plan echoes the BC curriculum framework’s framing of communication, collaboration, and critical thinking as competencies when it writes that “a rapidly diversifying economy, social context and job market demand a different kind of education: one with a greater focus on competencies and transferable skills, such as critical thinking, collaboration and communication” (p. 55).

Chris Gallagher (2014) provides a useful reminder of the history of competency-based education and the proliferation of competency discourse. Gallagher traces competency-based education (CBE) back to the 19<sup>th</sup>-century “acceleration movement” (p. 18) and then the wider spread of competency-based models in the United States in the 1970s (see, for example Kerr & Soltis, 1974; Noddings, 1974 for the scholarly debate about competency-based teacher education in the United States.) Gallagher cautions those who champion competency-based models today to study the problems and weaknesses of past iterations. In particular, he notes:

While the proliferation of competencies was likely a result of an attempt to be broad and thorough, the ironic effect was a narrowing of the construct being taught and assessed (often via minimum-competency testing) through a restricted focus on vocational skills (Lazarus, 1981). This tendency can be observed in CBE programs and initiatives today. (pp. 20-21).

I agree with Gallagher’s cautions, but I want to add an additional line of critique, namely of the concept of “competency” itself and its connections to the concept of “skill.” There are similarities between competency discourse today and “skill talk” (Barrow, 1987) in the past, and we stand to learn from existing cogent critiques of that skill talk.

The UK saw an earlier debate about competence-based education after the introduction of National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) in 1986 and the uptake of a competence-based model in other forms of education, including teacher education. The NVQs proposed a standardized model of vocational qualifications based on an “agreed statement of competence which should be determined or endorsed by a lead body with responsibility for defining, maintaining and improving national standards of performance in the sectors of employment where the competence is practised” (NCVQ, 1991b, p. 1, as cited in Hyland, 1993, p. 58). Terry Hyland (1993) sharply criticized the competence-based model underpinning the NVQs; his main concerns were that “competence strategies are concerned only with measurement, assessment and accreditation” and not the ways in which these competences are to be taught or learned (p. 60), and that the conceptions of knowledge implicit in competence-based models are confused, incoherent, and ambiguous (p. 60). David Bridges (1996), while agreeing with some of Hyland’s concerns, took a more positive view of competence-based models. He argued that the concept of competence, understood as the ability to do something in a particular setting, is not only compatible with but in fact enhances liberal education. He also pointed to the meritocratic benefit of competence-based models because,

in assessing someone’s suitability for a training programme, for a qualification, for a post or for a promotion, the crucial consideration should be what they demonstrate they can now do rather than whether or not they have followed a particular form of preparation or a particular route to their present position. (p. 368).

Moreover, the assessment of competence requires that “the criteria which are (or ought to be) applied in a judgement of, e.g., fitness to practise in a particular profession” are made “transparent and public” (p. 369).

In a separate publication, Hyland (1995) observed that different versions of competence are

operating alongside each other in the theory and practice of NVQ assessment, and this might account for the fact that the terms ‘competence’ (competences) and ‘competency’ (competencies) are used interchangeably without explanation. However, there are good grounds for arguing that ‘competence’ is a broad capacity more properly applied to [persons], whereas ‘competency’ refers to dispositions and is more applicable to tasks or activities. (p. 47)

The shift from competence to competency may seem slight but is quite significant: in current competency-based models, competencies are seen as the building blocks of the more encompassing concept of competence. I will argue that the very idea that a professional or other broader area of competence—for example, being a physician or being a democratic citizen—can be fully understood as a collection of competencies is itself a considerable part of the problem.

My focus in this paper will not be on the earlier critiques of competence-based education but rather on the further breakdown of competence into competencies. I am concerned with the reductive understanding of competencies as skills, which makes them subject to the earlier critiques of this concept. This reductive understanding is especially problematic, I argue, in areas involving personal and moral qualities. I take up Barrow’s critique of the concept of “skill” to critique the tendency to refer to a wide range of human attributes or qualities as “competencies.” In addition, I argue that competency discourse commits a category mistake (Ryle, 1949/2009), especially with respect to moral qualities in the “personal and social competency” domain. After taking a closer look at the area of “personal and social competency” in BC’s new curriculum, I discuss the concept of friendship as an example of an area of significance to human life that cannot be reduced to competency. I close the paper by discussing why it matters that competency discourse commits a category mistake, and why philosophers of education should resist competency discourse.

### Competence, Competency, and Skill

Barrow (1987; 1990) has critiqued the use of the concept of “skill” for a wide range of human attributes that are not skills in the precise sense he articulated, namely “a capacity that is discrete and can be perfected through practice and exercise” (1990, p. 24). Discreteness is an important aspect of the concept of skill, that is to say, the term “skill” should be used only for very specific and transferable capacities such as dribbling a ball or juggling (p. 24). There are many other human attributes that involve one or more skills but that, described as a broader attribute, exceed the concept of skill. Barrow (1987) names the human quality of “caring” as such a broader attribute and writes:

Caring is not a matter of displaying certain behaviours that can be trained and strengthened or improved through practice, as a true skill is developed ...[.] we surely have no particular interest in people who have caring skills in this sense. What we want are people who *do care* about other people, and—an important addition—who can make other people feel cared for. (p. 194, emphasis added)

In other words, in order for us to say about someone that he “cares,” it is not enough to see him going through the motions; we have to believe that he genuinely wants the best for the other person. For example, we have to believe that, depending on the circumstance, he values and is committed to

alleviating the other's suffering or helping the other to feel or do better. In a later chapter, Barrow makes these dispositional and affective aspects more explicit:

If we focus directly on the larger concepts of caring, communicating, and getting on with people, we see that they cannot be defined as skills. To be a caring individual or, as I should prefer to phrase it, to be a person who cares about others, is not simply a matter of doing anything: it involves *feeling about people in a certain kind of way* and, if it is to be of any use, it involves conveying to others an awareness that one does care. (Barrow, 1990, pp. 127-128, emphasis added)

The concept of competency, which seems to be in vogue today, is admittedly broader than the concept of skill. Interestingly, Barrow and Milburn's (1986) *Critical Dictionary of Educational Concepts* does not include an entry for "competency" or "competency-based education" exactly; it does name "competency based teaching" (p. 45) but only as a cross-reference to the concept of "microteaching," by which they mean a specific approach in pre-service or in-service teacher education that "involves providing a setting outside the regular classroom in which teachers or student teachers may meet small groups of their peers or pupils for various types of small-scale teaching sessions" (p. 150). When I refer to competency discourse as today's version of "skill talk" I have in mind a more general understanding of competency-based education that is used in a variety of K-12 schooling and professional education settings. A competency, in such a framework, refers to a demonstrated ability to do something, where the "doing" is broader than the discrete task Barrow described with the concept of skill. If dribbling a ball is a skill, playing soccer is a competency that involves dribbling a ball as well as passing a ball accurately to another player, scoring a goal, and a host of other skills.

In one of the earlier publications on the concept of competency, William Spady (1977) writes that competencies should be understood as "indicators of successful performance in life-role activities (be they producer, consumer, political citizen, driver, family member, intimate friend, recreational participant, or life-long learner)" (p. 10). I take exception to the inclusion of friendship and family relations in this list because the "goodness" in being a good driver or a good soccer player is of a different nature than the "goodness" in being a good friend or a good sister. While the former can be described as a form of competence, the latter cannot; I will return to this point at the end of the paper. Leaving this exception aside, Spady's conception of competencies is quite holistic, as successful performance in life role activities obviously depends not only on skills but also on knowledge and understanding as well as emotional and attitudinal qualities such as commitment, persistence, and care. However, Spady recognizes that, in spite of the holistic intentions of the concept, in practice—and he is referring to the practice of K-12 schooling in the US in the 1970s—competencies have frequently been reduced to "enabler capacities" such as "reading and computational skills, speaking ability, and motivation" (p. 10), leaving out "enricher capacities" such as "sensitivity, awareness and the appreciation of beauty" (p. 10). One could certainly take issue with some of the language here; I am not sure, for instance, what is gained by referring to aesthetic appreciation as an "enricher of experience in life-roles." However, for the purposes of my argument, what matters more is Spady's observation that neither enabler capacities nor enricher capacities by themselves are sufficient "indicators of successful performance in life-role activities" but that many educational policies obscure this fact: "It is the enabler rather than enricher conception of capacities that guides most statewide policy demands for the demonstration of student proficiencies, *even though neither deals explicitly with the exigencies of real life-role demands*" (p. 10). In other words, while the concept of "competency" involved preparedness for the complexity of real life-role demands in various contexts,

educational policies have typically reduced this more holistic concept to one of its building blocks, namely discrete abilities (see also Gallagher, 2014).

This reductive understanding of competency and the emphasis on abilities has been visible in the development of the competency-based education framework of Canadian medical education. Jason Frank and Deborah Danoff (2007) summarize the 2005 CanMEDS framework as consisting of key professional roles such as “Communicator” and “Health Advocate,” with each role broken down into key and enabling competencies, preceded by the introductory phrase, “Physicians are able to...”. For example, for the role of Health Advocate, the CanMEDS outline the key competencies as follows:

Physicians are able to...

1. Respond to individual patient health needs and issues as part of patient care;
2. Respond to the health needs of the communities that they serve;
3. Identify the determinants of health of the populations that they serve;
4. Promote the health of individual patients, communities and populations. (p. 645)

Now, the competencies outlined here are broader than skills as defined by Barrow, those highly specific capacities such as juggling and dribbling a ball. Each of these competencies involves a wide range of knowledge and skills. For example, a physician’s ability to identify the determinants of health of the population they serve requires knowledge of general research about the determinants of health, knowledge (or the ability to gain knowledge) of the characteristics of the population they serve, and the ability to apply the general research to the particulars of the population in question. However, the bigger problem is that being a Health Advocate, that is, fulfilling the professional role of Health Advocate in any meaningful way, requires qualities other than abilities even if those abilities are broader than skills. Just as, to repeat Barrow’s (1987) phrasing, “we ... have no particular interest in people who have caring skills .... What we want are people who *do care* about other people” (p. 197), we have no particular interest in physicians who have the *ability* to identify the social determinants of health; what we want are physicians who *do* identify the social determinants of health, who care about inequalities in access to health care, and who seek to address such inequalities.

While the development of the CanMEDS framework first saw a breakdown of the roles into a growing number of competencies, in the most recent version the number of competencies for each role has been reduced. The key competencies for the role of the Health Advocate are now described in a less fragmented manner:

PHYSICIANS ARE ABLE TO:

1. Respond to an individual patient’s health needs by advocating with the patient within and beyond the clinical environment
2. Respond to the needs of the communities or populations they serve by advocating with them for system-level change in a socially accountable manner. (Frank, Snell, & Sherbino, 2015)

While the conception of a competency as “an observable ability of a health care professional that develops through stages of expertise from novice to master clinician” (p. 8) still does not include dispositional qualities such as a commitment to greater equity in health care, the 2015 CanMEDS does seem to mark a promising turn away from the desire to break down areas of professional competence into a checklist

of artificially separate abilities. Moreover, the CanMEDS are a professional framework within which the articulation of requisite areas of competence always takes place in particular contexts of practice.

It is a different story for articulation of competencies in K-12 schooling. The focus on observable abilities in the understanding of competency is also clear in the K-12 framework of the BC Ministry of Education, but an additional problem is that they are general abilities not connected to a particular context of practice.

### Competency Discourse in the BC Curriculum

As I mentioned, the British Columbia Ministry of Education (n.d.-a) has in recent years implemented a new K-12 curriculum. The new curriculum relies heavily on what it calls “core competencies.” Confusingly, the Ministry provides different explicit definitions of the central concept of “competency.” In its *Glossary*, the Ministry writes: “Competency represents the combined skills, processes, behaviours, and habits of mind that learners use to make sense of the world” (n.d.-b). Defined thus, a competency appears to be first and foremost an interpretive, that is, sense-making, ability. Elsewhere, the Ministry (n.d.-a) writes, “the Core Competencies are sets of intellectual, personal, and social and emotional proficiencies that all students need in order to engage in deep, lifelong learning.” It goes on to identify the three “core competencies” as follows:

The communication competency encompasses the set of abilities that students use to impart and exchange information, experiences and ideas, to explore the world around them, and to understand and effectively engage in the use of digital media. ... The thinking competency encompasses the knowledge, skills and processes we associate with intellectual development. ... Personal and social competency is the set of abilities that relate to students' identity in the world, both as individuals and as members of their community and society.

It becomes clear that competencies are understood principally, if not exclusively, as “sets of abilities.” Within “personal and social competency,” three further areas are identified:

- “positive personal and cultural identity competency”
- “personal awareness and responsibility competency”
- “social responsibility competency”

I put all these in scare quotes because both the concepts of identity and responsibility are, in my view, deformed beyond recognizable shape in order to fit the mold of “competency.” The idea of “responsibility competency” is especially absurd. Just as Barrow writes that we don’t want people who have “caring skills” but rather people who *actually* care, we don’t want people who have the ability to act responsibly but rather people who *actually* act responsibly, and for whom responsibility is a moral stance or disposition that permeates how they regard and respond to others. (If I ask about a job candidate whether he is a responsible person and the letter of reference states that the candidate has good “responsibility competency,” I am not reassured.)

If we drill down into the drafts of the “competency profiles” (available from the Ministry’s website) we find detailed descriptions of the attributes of students who have achieved these competencies. What is particularly interesting about these descriptions is that they blend descriptions of *potentiality* and of

*actuality* or, as the Ministry puts it, of “I can” statements and “I do” statements. For example, in the area of “building relationships” (BC Ministry of Education, n.d.-c) we find the following “sample ‘I’ statements”:

- With some support, I can be part of a group.
- I am kind to others, can work or play co-operatively, and can build relationships with people of my choosing.
- I can identify when others need support and provide it.
- I am aware of how others may feel and take steps to help them feel included.
- I build and sustain positive relationships with diverse people, including people from different generations.

It is unclear whether this alternating of descriptions of abilities and descriptions of actual actions is deliberate and a reflection of the different valuing of various aspects in their potentiality or actuality, or whether it is a reflection of the desire to change up the language and not have the statements sound too repetitive. In the conception of competency as the *demonstrated* ability to do something, “I can do X” tends to be shorthand for “I have demonstrated that I can do X.” However, the issue remains that having a demonstrated ability does not include an inclination or commitment to use that ability. A student who has demonstrated that they can identify when others need support and that they can provide that support may, in some or even many situations, remain indifferent to the identified need for support and unmotivated to provide it.

Given the overall influence of psychology on education, and the use of psychological concepts such as emotional self-regulation in the “Personal Awareness and Responsibility” part of the framework, it is likely that the developers of the competency framework in the BC curriculum have, at least to some extent, been influenced by psychological discourse, in which “personal competency” and “social competency” seem to be uncontroversial terms.

## Friendship

I want to focus on friendship for a moment because it falls squarely within the domain of “building relationships” identified by the BC Ministry of Education and because it is an eminent example of the limits of competency discourse. To be clear: the Ministry does not use the term “friendship competency”; rather, they refer to friendship in their description of the “Social Awareness and Responsibility” *sub-competency* within the larger Personal and Social Competency. However, there is psychological research that does use the terms “friendship competency” and “friendship competence” (e.g., Allen, Porter, McFarland, Marsh, & McElhaney, 2005; Sentse, Kretschmer, de Haan, & Prinzie, 2017) and, in the Ministry’s framework, the ability to “build relationships and be a thoughtful and supportive friend” is presented as an example of the “Social Awareness and Responsibility” subcompetency (British Columbia Ministry of Education, n.d.-d). My critique is that many of the qualities that make a person a good friend cannot be meaningfully expressed in descriptions of abilities. This is not to say that there are no abilities that can be cultivated and that can contribute to a friendship; for example, the ability to listen without interrupting or to remember birthdays and anniversaries can be developed, practiced, and improved.



However, excelling in all of those abilities is not what makes someone a good friend. Imagine you asked me about one of my friends; let's call the friend "Jackie," in honour of a certain philosopher to have written about friendship. Imagine you asked me: "Is Jackie a good friend to you?" and I answered, "Jackie is a very competent friend" or "Jackie has excellent friendship competencies." I imagine that you would raise an eyebrow at this strange answer, and perhaps even be offended on Jackie's behalf. You might point out to me that the nature of goodness, the *arete*, if you will, of friendship, does not lie in competence. Asking if someone is a good friend to me means asking about qualities quite different from competence: loyalty, for instance, mutual support, trust, perhaps even love. We speak of close friends, dear friends, trusted friends, beloved friends, old friends; we do not speak of "competent friends"—in spite of the psychologists who seem to think this is a sensible term. Loyalty, trust, love, and similar qualities that we would use to describe a friendship are not competencies because they are not an ability to do something in a certain context.

Earlier, I wrote that I disagreed with Spady about the inclusion of "family member" and "intimate friend" in the list of "life role activities" for which competencies are "indicators of successful performance." We can say about someone that they are a good soccer player or, if you wish, that they have "soccer competency," in the sense that they have a demonstrated ability to perform well in the game of soccer. The idea here has a level of generality in the sense that a good soccer player is good not only on this particular field and with that particular ball, but in the game of soccer, more generally. The "goodness" of the good soccer player is thus appropriately described as "competence." By contrast, if we say about someone that they are a good friend, this means that they are a good friend *to me*, or another particular person I am referring to. The "goodness" of the good friend is not a kind of competence but a quality of the bond between two people that cannot be generalized. The American philosopher Todd May (2012)—to whose work I will return in my conclusion—captures this well when he writes, "My friend cannot be replaced by another friend, even a friend who might be an identical substitute" (p. 96). Put differently: my friend cannot be replaced by someone who is not my friend but who has all the same "personal and social competencies" as outlined by the BC Ministry of Education.

In addition to friendship, the Ministry makes references to moral qualities such as empathy, responsibility, and respect. The issue with the inclusion of these qualities within a competency framework is slightly different from the issue with friendship I have analyzed above. Bridges (1996) argues that "moral competence" is not only a coherent but also a relevant concept because "moral action, judged in even the most faintly consequentialist terms, will require some technical skill in expressing and communicating moral intentions in appropriate behaviour in a social context: it will require *moral competence*" (p. 373). However, just as Bridges argues that "the moral attitude or value may be necessary" but is not "sufficient in professional practice or indeed more broadly in interpersonal relations" (p. 373), the reverse also holds true: moral competence may be necessary but is not sufficient, as it must be complemented by moral attitudes and values. The issue is not whether the concepts of competence or competency have any relevance to the moral domain; I agree that they do, just as the ability to listen without interrupting or to remember birthdays and anniversaries is relevant to friendship. Rather, the issue is that neither friendship nor moral action can be fully captured by or as competencies or competences. Competency-based frameworks such as that of the BC Ministry of Education tend to translate all skills, forms of knowledge, personal qualities, and types of action into competencies. As a result, they end up leaving behind crucial aspects of some of these qualities and actions that are not and cannot be captured by the concept of competency.

Caring, respect, empathy, responsibility—the kinds of qualities that seem to be at stake in the “personal and social competency” domain—must always involve, as Barrow (1990) puts it, “feeling about people in a certain kind of way” and cannot be reduced to “competencies” even if they also involve certain skills and kinds of knowledge. One way of characterizing the flawed discourse that talks about human qualities that are not competencies as if they were, is to say that this discourse commits a “category mistake.”

### Ryle on Category Mistakes

Ryle (1949/2009) introduces the notion of the category-mistake in the first chapter of *The Concept of Mind*. One of the examples he provides pertains to a cricket spectator making a category-mistake about team-spirit:

A foreigner watching his first game of cricket learns what are the functions of the bowlers, the batsmen, the fielders, the umpires and the scorers. He then says ‘But there is no one left on the field to contribute the famous element of team-spirit. I see who does the bowling, the batting and the wicket-keeping; but I do not see whose role it is to exercise *esprit de corps*.’ ... [I]t would have to be explained that he was looking for the wrong type of thing. Team-spirit is not another cricketing-operation supplementary to all of the other special tasks. It is, roughly, the keenness with which each of the special tasks is performed, and performing a task keenly is not performing two tasks. Certainly exhibiting team-spirit is not the same thing as bowling or catching, but nor is it a third thing such that we can say that the bowler first bowls *and* then exhibits team-spirit or that a fielder is at a given moment *either* catching or displaying *esprit de corps*. (pp. 6-7)

The story does not involve a Martian watching cricket for the first time, a spectator who has no idea what cricket is. Rather the story involves a spectator who does have some sense of what the game of cricket is, but is confused about where to find *esprit de corps* and, more particularly, about the nature of what it is he is looking for. As Ryle puts it:

The theoretically interesting category-mistakes are those made by people who are perfectly competent to apply concepts, at least in the situations with which they are familiar, but are still liable in their abstract thinking to allocate those concepts to logical types to which they do not belong. (p. 7)

The BC Ministry of Education, in its approach to competencies, commits a category mistake by assigning moral attributes such as responsibility, kindness and respect to the same category of “competency” as the ability to “compare potential problem-solving strategies,” the ability to “identify criteria ... to analyze evidence,” and the ability to “ask open-ended questions and gather information.” Just as Ryle observes that team spirit is “not another cricketing-operation” that sits alongside all of the other operations a cricket player has to carry out (bowling, batting, and so forth), but rather a quality with which other cricket operations are performed, responsibility, kindness, and respect are not abilities that sit alongside other abilities a student seeks to acquire (writing a physics lab report, conjugating regular French verbs, and so forth); rather, they are qualities with which other abilities we value in education are put to use. Performing a task kindly, responsibly, or respectfully is not performing two tasks. Like Ryle’s cricket

spectator, the Ministry appears confused about where to find responsibility, kindness, and respect, and the nature of what it is they are looking for.

### Conclusion: Beyond Clarity

In spite of Barrow's critique of "skill talk" and others' critiques of earlier competence- and competency-based educational frameworks, an emphasis on skills has persisted under the guise of competency discourse, and Barrow's critique of the inflation of the concept of skill to encompass qualities that are not skills remains relevant. Barrow (1987) writes that "this tendency to use the word 'skill' as a general term, synonymous with ability, is to be resisted because of the likelihood of misleading implications" (p. 191) and one of the main misleading implications he identifies is that "educators talk as if, and they proceed as if, critical thinking were a skill like dribbling a ball, albeit more complex, and could be trained or developed in the same kind of way—namely, by practice in the activity itself" (p. 191).

The analysis and argument I have presented have hopefully made clear that I agree with Barrow on this, and that I believe that, unfortunately, this critique is still relevant today as we find ourselves mired in competency discourse. Skill is still used as synonymous with ability but, in addition, "competency" (the stand-in for "ability") is now used as synonymous with "human quality." However, I want to argue that Barrow does not go far enough in the reasons he presents for resisting skill talk or, today, competency discourse. The issue is not just that educators misunderstand the nature of attributes such as critical thinking, caring, responsibility, kindness, and respect, and thus how they should be taught. I believe that there are three other reasons for resisting skill talk and competency discourse.

The first is that those aspects of these attributes that do not involve skills or abilities but rather values, feelings, attitudes, and commitments, end up not being valued because all of the assessment practices are based on skills and we end up valuing what we can assess rather than assessing what we value. Gert Biesta (2009) describes this issue clearly:

More than just the question of the technical validity of our measurements - i.e., whether we are measuring what we intend to measure – the problem here lies with what I suggest to call the normative validity of our measurements. This is the question whether we are indeed measuring what we value, or whether we are just measuring what we can easily measure and thus end up valuing what we (can) measure. (p. 35)

Let us return to Spady's (1977) discussion of competency-based education. When he writes that competencies should be understood as "indicators of successful performance in life-role activities" (p. 10), the idea of competencies as *indicators* shows that they were always conceived as *assessment constructs*. In other words: the desire to assess students' attainment of attributes that indicate and predict success in life-role activities drives curriculum design. As Spady recognizes, attributes that are easier to assess—delineable bodies of knowledge and specific skills that we can group together under the term "capacities" or "abilities"—have come to play a larger role in our understanding of competency than attributes that are more difficult to assess, such as dispositions and moral qualities developed over time. The reductive understanding of competencies as abilities thus affects the normative validity of our assessments, if we value actual preparedness for the complexity of real life-role demands in various contexts. Hyland (1997) writes about competence-based vocational education frameworks: "Competence strategies are concerned

primarily with the assessment of performance, not with learning and development, and—underpinned as they are by technicist and managerialist assumptions—they cannot accommodate the ethical and epistemological bases of professional practice” (p. 492). The same holds true for competency-based frameworks for K-12 education: if these frameworks cast all abilities, dispositions, and moral qualities in the mold of “competencies,” they cannot accommodate the ethical and epistemological bases of many areas of life.

The second, and related, reason to resist competency discourse is that “abilities”—as is the case for the narrower concept of “skills”—are morally neutral. For example, the social skill or competency of striking up a conversation with a stranger can be part of the larger and more complex human qualities of kindness and hospitality, when they are paired with a genuine desire to include a new student, or a genuine commitment to making a new colleague feel welcome; however, they can also be used as flirtation techniques by a self-described pick-up artist, or worse. The aforementioned wavering between potentiality and actuality in the competency profiles in BC’s new curriculum raises questions in this regard. On one hand, “students value diversity, defend human rights, advocate for others, and act with a sense of ethics in interactions, including online” is a description of a graduate profile based on students’ actual actions. On the other hand, the “I statements” that specify this valuing of diversity include, “I *can* explain when something is unfair” and “I *can* advocate for others.” These statements are morally ambiguous because they pertain just as much to a student who can explain when something is unfair and who seeks to rectify the situation to bring about greater fairness, as they do to a student who can explain when something is unfair but who then shrugs her shoulders and says, “Too bad. It’s a dog-eat-dog world out there.” Unless it is paired with a commitment to fairness and a disposition to remedy unfairness, the ability to identify unfairness makes a very limited contribution to “social responsibility.”

With the third and final reason for objecting to competency discourse I leave what some consider to be the legitimate scope of philosophy and enter the area of social theory and critique. The reduction of all desirable human attributes to the single concept of competency is a manifestation of the tendency to reduce all human activity to a single currency that can be quantified, standardized, tabulated, and exchanged. It is a worthwhile philosophical endeavour to resist and critique competency discourse but it is also a worthwhile political endeavour to problematize the reductionist and, dare I say it, neoliberal tendency to subject all human activity to the same matrix of standardization and measurement in order to ensure their efficiency. Let me return to the concept of friendship and my critique of the idea that a student’s capacity for friendship and qualities as a friend can meaningfully be expressed in descriptions of discrete (and assessable) abilities such as “I can interact with my friends” and “with some support, I can be part of a group” (BC Ministry of Education, n.d.-b).

May (2012) has suggested that friendship and, particularly, deep friendship, can offer both an alternative mode of being and a form of resistance to neoliberal tendencies, in part because the need for open communication and trust at the heart of friendship counteracts the individualism, competition, and distrust fostered by neoliberalism. One of the most distinctive features of deep friendships, writes May, is that they assume the equality of friends:

Deep friendships are relations of equality ... not because of the general balance of giving and receiving but because in many cases that balance doesn’t even come into play. That is to say, I look at my friend as an equal, not because he or she is equal in measure to me but because equality of this type is, to a certain extent, beyond measure. (p. 128)

I bring in May's radically different perspective because it so clearly shows the inadequacy of the ways in which complex human qualities such as friendship become reduced in a framework of "personal and social competency." In the equality of friendship, what matters is not whether my friend has "friendship competency" understood as a greater or lesser ability to be part of a group, or to interact positively with me; what matters is whether there is a bond, trust, and equality beyond measure that can withstand any measurable differences that may arise or missteps either one of us may make. Just as Barrow pinpointed the profoundly human quality of caring for someone in a way that makes the other person feel cared for, seeing one's friend fundamentally as an equal is a profoundly human quality that cannot be captured by either skill talk or competency discourse. Preserving or creating room in education for such human qualities that exceed and escape the competency discourse is another reason to resist this discourse.

## Acknowledgments

An earlier version of this paper was presented at *Philosophical Issues in Education: A Symposium in Honour of Dr. Robin Barrow*, held at Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, B.C. on November 2, 2018.

## References

- Allen, J. P., Porter, M. R., McFarland, F. C., Marsh, P. & McElhane, K. B. (2005). The two faces of adolescents' success with peers: Adolescent popularity, social adaptation, and deviant behavior. *Child Development, 76*(3), 747-760.
- Barrow, R. (1987). Skill talk. *Journal of Philosophy of Education, 21*(2), 187-195.
- Barrow, R. (1990). *Understanding skills: Thinking, feeling, and caring*. London, ON: The Althouse Press.
- Barrow, R. & Milburn, G. (1986). *A critical dictionary of educational concepts*. Brighton, UK: Wheatsheaf.
- Biesta, G. (2009). Good education in an age of measurement: on the need to reconnect with the question of purpose in education. *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability, 21*(1), 33-46.
- Bridges, D. (1996). Competence-based education and training: Progress or villainy? *Journal of Philosophy of Education, 30*(3), 361-376.
- British Columbia Ministry of Education. (n.d.-a). *BC's new curriculum: Core competencies*. Retrieved from <https://curriculum.gov.bc.ca/competencies>
- British Columbia Ministry of Education. (n.d.-b). *Glossary of curriculum terms*. Retrieved from <https://curriculum.gov.bc.ca/sites/curriculum.gov.bc.ca/files/pdf/glossary.pdf>
- British Columbia Ministry of Education. (n.d.-c). *Social responsibility competency profiles draft*. Retrieved from <https://curriculum.gov.bc.ca/sites/curriculum.gov.bc.ca/files/pdf/SocialResponsibilityCompetencyProfiles.pdf>
- British Columbia Ministry of Education. (n.d.-d). *Social awareness & responsibility*. Retrieved from <https://curriculum.gov.bc.ca/competencies/personal-and-social/social-awareness-and-responsibility>
- Frank, J. R. & Danoff, D. (2007). The CanMEDS initiative: Implementing an outcomes-based framework of physician competencies. *Medical Teacher, 29*(7), 642-647.

- Frank, J. R., Snell, L., & Sherbino, J. (Eds.) (2015). *CanMEDS 2015 Physician Competency Framework*. Ottawa, ON: Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada. Retrieved from <http://www.royalcollege.ca/rcsite/documents/canmeds/canmeds-full-framework-e.pdf>
- Gallagher, C. W. (2014) Disrupting the game-changer: Remembering the history of competency-based education. *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*, 46(6), 16-23.
- Hyland, T. (1993). Competence, knowledge and education. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 27(1), 57-68.
- Hyland, T. (1995). Behaviourism and the meaning of competence. In P. Hodgkinson & M. Issitt (Eds.), *The challenge of competence: Professionalism through vocational education and training* (pp. 44-57). London, UK: Cassell.
- Hyland, T. (1997). Reconsidering competence. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 31(3), 491-503.
- Kerr, D. H. & Soltis, J. F. (1974). Locating teacher competency: An action description of teaching. *Educational Theory*, 24, 3-16.
- May, T. (2012). *Friendship in an age of economics: Resisting the forces of neoliberalism*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
- Noddings, N. (1974). Teacher competency: An extension of the Kerr-Soltis model. *Educational Theory*, 24, 284-290.
- Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada. (2018). *CanMEDS: Better standards, better physicians, better care*. Retrieved from <http://www.royalcollege.ca/rcsite/canmeds/canmeds-framework-e>
- Ryle, G. (2009). *The concept of mind*. Abingdon, UK: Routledge. (Original work published 1949)
- Sentse, M., Kretschmer, T., de Haan, A., & Prinzie, P. (2017). Conduct problem trajectories between age 4 and 17 and their association with behavioral adjustment in emerging adulthood. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 46(8), 1633-1642.
- Spady, W. G. (1977). Competency based education: A bandwagon in search of a definition. *Educational Researcher*, 6(1), 9-14.
- The University of British Columbia. (2018). *Shaping UBC's next century: Strategic plan 2018-2028*. Retrieved from [https://strategicplan.ubc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/2018\\_UBC\\_Strategic\\_Plan\\_Full-20180425.pdf](https://strategicplan.ubc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/2018_UBC_Strategic_Plan_Full-20180425.pdf)

## About the author

**Claudia Ruitenberg** is a Professor of Philosophy of Education in the Department of Educational Studies at UBC. She completed her PhD in the SFU Faculty of Education (2005). She is author of *Unlocking the World: Education in an Ethic of Hospitality* (2015), co-editor (with D. C. Phillips) of *Education, Culture and Epistemological Diversity: Mapping a Disputed Terrain* (2012), and editor of (among other titles) *Reconceptualizing Study in Educational Discourse and Practice* (Routledge, 2017). Other research interests include speech act theory, political education, translation, professional ethics, and art education.