

Comment by Timothy D. Ireland

Comment by Timothy D. Ireland

UNESCO Chair in Youth and Adult Education, Federal University of Paraiba, Brazil.
(English)

Skills and competences in a pluriversal world

When I was younger, so much younger than today, Aldous Huxley's novel *Brave New World* was almost obligatory reading. Despite being written in the 1930s, *Brave New World* continues to speak to a 21st-century world dominated by mass-entertainment, digital technology, medicine and pharmaceuticals, the arts of persuasion, and the hidden influence of elites. Somehow reading the article by Bachmann and Holdsworth on the New Skills Agenda for Europe I was reminded of Huxley's futuristic world and at the same time found myself asking 'more skills and competences, for what?' Employability and prosperity – to "strengthen human capital, employability and competitiveness"? The new Skills Agenda highlights the role of skills as a pathway to employability and prosperity but we cannot talk about employability and prosperity in a vacuum. Implicit to this perspective is a specific conception of development. The positive agenda refers to prosperity and social cohesion but there is no mention of well-being, creativity, human fulfilment, good old-fashioned happiness, social justice, decent work and human dignity. And education is framed in the similar terms – skills, competences, competitiveness, digital skills, skills for the labour market, vocational education and training, skills formation. With that I went back to read the other contributions to the debate so far.

The discussions and commentaries on the World Social Forum and the world we want have the advantage of questioning what is the world we want to live in and suggesting possible skills and competences^[1] necessary for building another possible world. However, **what challenged and provoked me were the questions posed by Cristina Maria Coimbra Vieira and Rosa Maria Torres. Cristina Vieira discusses the new agenda from the Portuguese perspective. She raises several important questions, asking whether, for example,** "The emphasis in economy seems to somehow silence the intrinsic needs and interests of workers as learning subjects, as well as their prior learning experiences" and stating that "Focusing the individual within a functionalist view - that suppose that 'equip' (sic) people with skills needed to respond to labour market changing requirements - is the best way to disclaim society responsibilities as a whole". This more critical Portuguese perspective would perhaps be supported by Spanish and Greek commentators. Whilst written from an occidental perspective it does suggest that a one-size fits all recipe is not the best way of approaching the cultural diversity so fundamental to Europe. Rosa Maria Torres from Ecuador also asks the fundamental question "Learning for what?" And replies that "There are many ways to think and deal with this question. Well-being and prosperity

mean different things to different people and cultures throughout the world". She then points to the indigenous concept of *Sumak Kawsay* (*Buen Vivir*, Good Living), as an alternative to the current western development paradigm: alternative in the sense of being radically different and non-occidental. Indeed for Artur Escobar (apud GUDYNAS, 2011), the concept of *buen vivir* does not represent an alternative development but an alternative to development based on the cosmology of the indigenous people. *Buen Vivir* is concerned with achieving a harmonious relationship between self, others and the environment. Nature is deemed to have rights in the same way as human beings have. In Dávalos' (2008) words it "incorporates nature into history (...) not as a productive factor nor as a productive force, but as an inherent part of social being". The skills and competences necessary for achieving this relationship give a new meaning to education and learning.

A second alternative paradigm which I consider worth mentioning places collective happiness and well-being as the goals of development resumed in the concept of the Index of Gross National Happiness, conceived in Bhutan. Whilst the concept of *buen vivir* is inspired by the cosmological vision and cultural values of the Andean indigenous people, the values which provide the foundation for the notion of collective happiness and well-being are profoundly rooted in the social traditions of Bhutan and in its ethical and moral cosmology developed and practiced for centuries. The GNH contributed to the creation of four strategic keys popularly known as the four pillars: (1) sustainable and equitable socioeconomic development; 2) preservation of the environment; 3) preservation and promotion of culture, and 4) promotion of good governance. Such pillars require skills and competences conducive to achieve this understanding of development.

In this brief commentary, there is no space to attempt to situate this discussion within the context of the 2030 International Development Agenda except to say that the New Skills Agenda for Europe is probably well aligned with the agenda which the SDGs propose. From a non-European perspective, I suggest that it would be important to explore concepts such as diversity, multiculturalism and intra-culturalism and pluriversality when considering the relation between skills and competences and development.

References

DAVALOS, Pablo. "Reflexiones sobre el Sumak Kawsay (El Buen Vivir) y las teorías del desarrollo". **Copyleft -Eutsi-Pagina de izquierda Antiautoritaria**, n. 6, 2008.

GUDYNAS, Eduardo. Buen vivir: Germinando alternativas al desarrollo. In: **America Latina en movimiento**, fevereiro 2011. p. 461-481.

PRIESNER, Stefan. Gross National Happiness – Bhutan's Vision of Development and its Challenges, 1999. Acesso em 27/12/2013. http://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/savifadok/320/1/GNH_Ch3_Priesner.pdf

[1] We tend to use the terms competence and competency as though they were synonyms. It is worth taking a look at the following definition indicated to me by my colleague Carlos Spezia:

<http://www.differencebetween.com/difference-between-competence-and-vs-competency/>

On the basis of this, I have adopted the term competence and competences.

These are the links to the AED 83/2016 publication in three languages:

[English](#)

[Français](#)

[Español](#)

Estos son los links para acceder a la publicación en tres idiomas:

[Inglés](#)

[Francés](#)

[Español](#)

Voici les liens vers la publication en trois langues:

[Anglais](#)

[Français](#)

[Espagnol](#)

Follow the ICAE Virtual Seminar also [here](#).

Para español favor usar [google translator](#) en los casos en que el artículo no está traducido al español

Veillez utiliser [google translator](#) pour traduire les articles qui ne sont pas en français