

# Competency-based training

An overview by *Maryellen Haines* of the Canberra Institute of Technology

Competency-based training (CBT) is not a new form of training. In fact many of us have applied aspects of competency-based training for many years in education and training. It is the new focus on the application of these methods of training across Australia in areas of the Vocational Education Training as well as in the private training sector which is making us rethink, on a large scale, about changes in training.

This brief overview does not attempt to outline the history of the Training Reform Agenda (TRA) from which the current move to CBT flowed. There is already a great deal of information available on the history of the TRA and CBT. This overview is to provide a brief glimpse of what, to many people, is a very confusing area which seems to impinge on them rather than them having a change to mould it. It would be impossible for any one person to know all that is happening at any one time in this field. There are monthly, weekly and almost daily changes in the scene and at best people can try to keep abreast of current literature and involve themselves in networks where many of the developments are debated at length.

## What is CBT?

There are many definitions of competency-based training but for the purpose of this overview the National Training Board definition is as follows:

CBT '...refers to training concerned with the attainment and demonstration of specified skills, knowledge and the application to meet industry standards...' NBT, 1992.

Of course there is a lot more to CBT than mere definition. As all professional teachers and trainers know, and what learners in quality education and training appreciate, is the richness of training that covers more than the bare bones of facts. Quality CBT should also go beyond the bones and cover the needs of the individual. Given that there is quality design, implementation and delivery, CBT can and often does offer more.

CBT does not compare one student with another but rather checks the individual student against a set of training criteria, which in turn have often been developed to reflect industry standards. This is a very important feature of CBT—the individual's ability to apply skills and knowledge to a set task in the workplace. CBT should not however be applied in a 'monkey-see, monkey-do' approach. It should embrace skills, knowledge and attitudes and have underpinning skills that develop the whole person. Ideally CBT is not fragmented learning but rather it deals with skills and knowledge in an holistic manner.

CBT does not concentrate on inputs into the learning experience, but rather on what a learner can do at the end of the training. And although CBT is certainly based on outcomes, outcomes are impossible to achieve if we do not understand and apply the processes that are required to achieve them.

Competency comes with practice. One attempt cannot ensure competency. In training programs, a participant may achieve a training competency when assessed, but the true achievement of competency can only come (in most instances) in the workplace—in a number of situations and under varying conditions. This raises the issue of transferability of skills, an issue often forgotten in the debate on CBT, but nevertheless an issue which needs far more consideration.

## What are some of the features of CBT?

There are certain features of CBT which are now nationally recognised and applied. A few of these include:

### Relationship to national standards

Competency standards bodies (CSB's) which reflect the industry and the National Training Board (NTB) work together to create both industry and enterprise standards. Standards can be achieved through either on-the-job training or off-the-job training or a combination of these. These standards provide for consistency across Australia and allow people who gain these standards through training or other methods to move more freely from job to job, state to state.

### National curriculum development

A move toward national curriculum is well under way. The Australian Committee for Training Curriculum (ACTRAC) funds such development to ensure national consistency and lack of duplication. This body works closely with industry to ensure relevant current workplace practices are reflected in the training curriculum. Learning is now developed into 'bite-sized-chunks' often referred to as modules. The flexibility of learning situations is the key.

Participants need no longer be locked into rigid structures but should have more choice and flexibility in creating training to meet their needs. National modules are produced so that training designers can create training packages and courses by using these modules and others they need to suit the industry and allow for national portability and recognition. Access and equity are part of this new development and in turn access to certification of skills both new and existing are part of CBT.

### Recognition of prior learning

Participants entering into training no longer have to do every module, they can request recognition of prior learning. This allows participants to receive recognition for their life and work experiences as well as any other training they may have received. Participants move at their own pace through the training programs. Flexible entry and exit points in courses also reflect the changing nature of course structure in CBT.

*Quality CBT should also go beyond the bones and cover the needs of the individual.*

## Training design

Self-paced learning, computer-based learning, contract learning, and action learning are all part of the dynamics of CBT. There is no one preferred model for learning or delivery in competency-based training. For example, self-paced learning does not equate with CBT: it is only one of the many methods by which a learner may choose to learn.

## Knowing outcomes upfront

In CBT participants know up-front exactly what the outcomes of their training will be. Instead of doing a workshop with a vague title, eg. *Communication One*, which means very little to anyone, the workshop would have a specific, easily-recognised title, such as *Speaking in public*. The workshop would have clearly-listed learning outcomes so that everyone knows what is to be achieved. The form of assessment can often be negotiated and the assessment criteria are clear for everyone to see: assessment is no longer a deep dark secret.

The participant will know what they have to achieve, how it will be achieved, and when it has been achieved. Not only will the participant be able to clearly identify all these outcomes but so too will employers and others for whom this information is important.

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## Where to from here?

The simple response to this questions is *Who knows!* In such an evolving area which is influenced economically, politically and even socially by every move in the training-reform field tomorrow's word on CBT could be totally changed.

An astute trainer will know that if they have...

- flexibility in thinking;
- the ability to ask and keep asking questions;
- the honesty to admit they do not understand every acronym that passes by them in the new training world;
- the courage to leave their own comfort zone; and
- the strength in the belief of quality training to ensure they take time for reflection on the issues before acting on them;

...then they will survive this current training agenda.

But wasn't that always the way we survived in the past? So what is so really different about how we handle the world of CBT? ■

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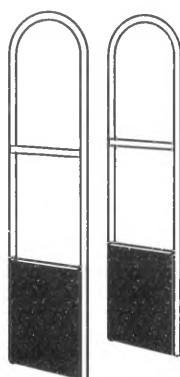
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