

Interpreting competencies

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Session Outline

- Background
- Introduction to the 2014 research on how trainers interpret units of competency
- Subsequent work and implications

‘Theory’ of the VET system

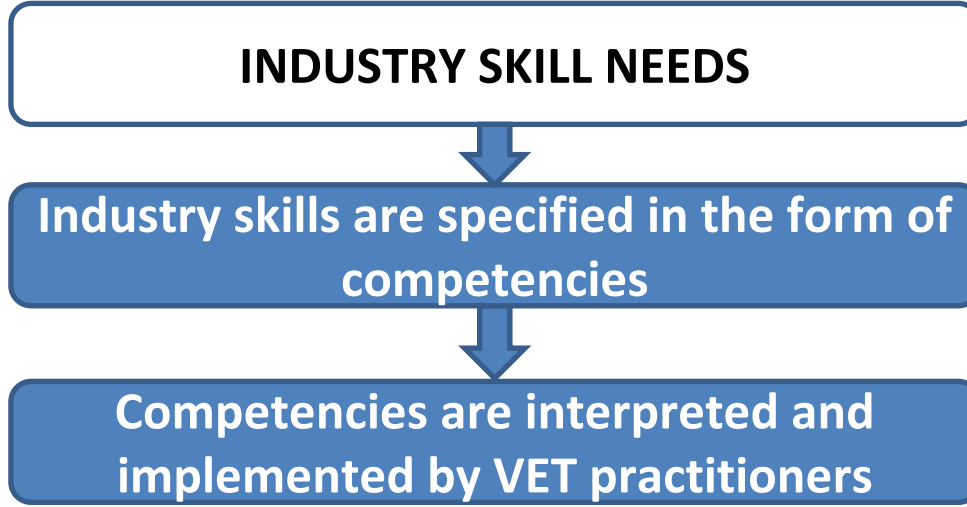
‘Theory’ of the VET system

INDUSTRY SKILL NEEDS

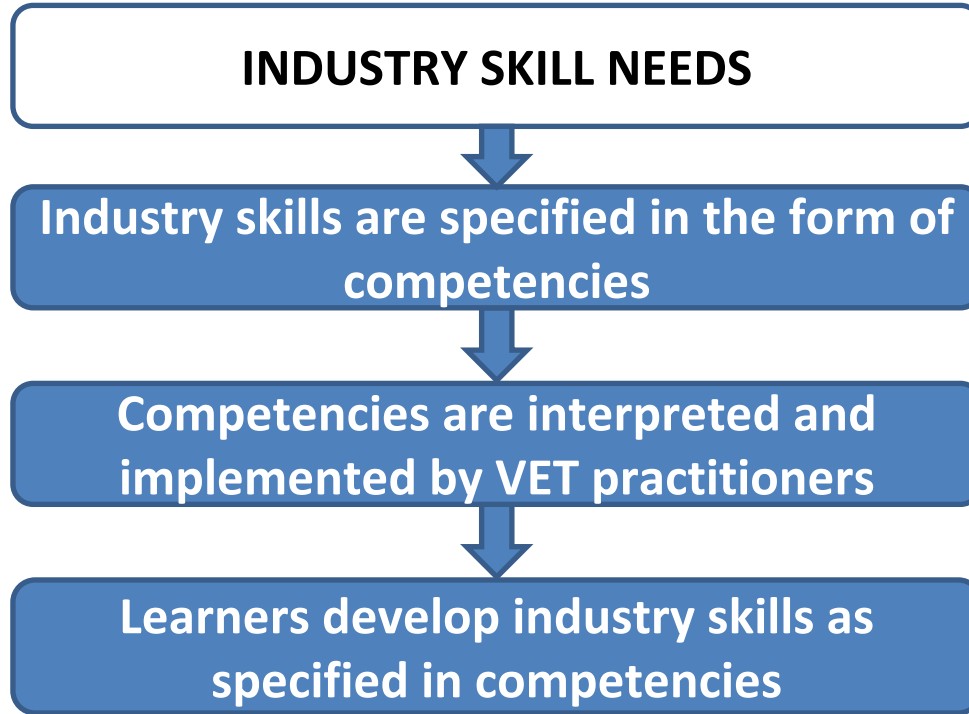


**Industry skills are specified in the form of
competencies**

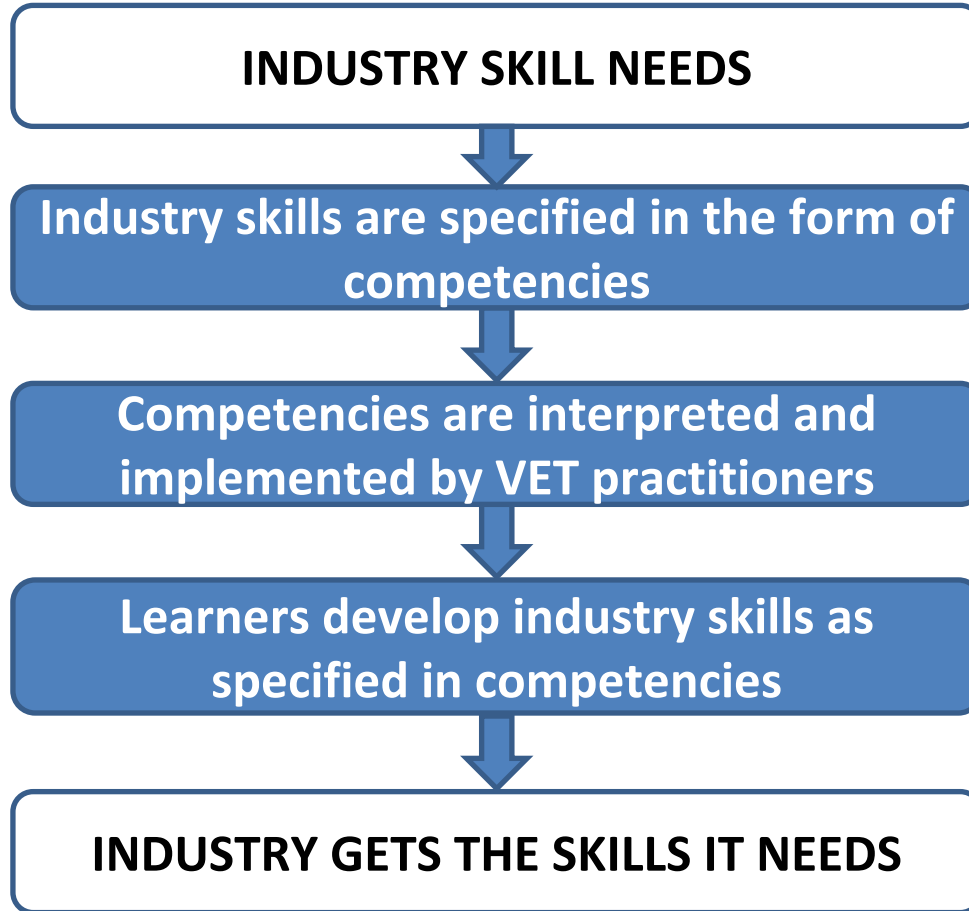
‘Theory’ of the VET system



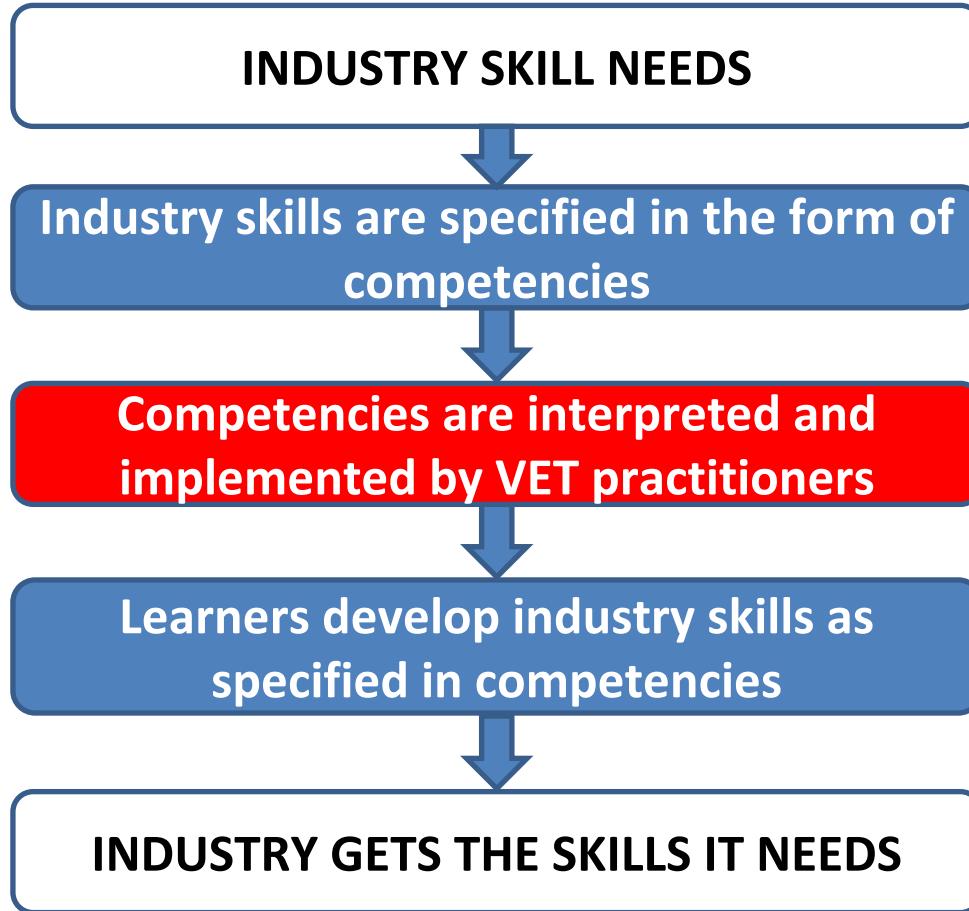
‘Theory’ of the VET system



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‘Theory’ of the VET system



TAEDES402A *Use training packages and accredited courses to meet client needs*

- Elements: e.g. **Analyse and interpret** units of competency and accredited modules
- Performance criteria: e.g. **Read, analyse and interpret all parts of the unit** or accredited module for application to client needs
- Required knowledge: e.g. **methodology relating to analysing and using competency standards** for a range of applications and purposes to meet the needs of a diverse range of VET clients
- Current unit continues to include most of these requirements (TAEDES411 *Use nationally recognised training products to meet vocational training needs*)

Background: Research

- Research on program implementation outside education and training (e.g. Beyondblue, 2009) found large discrepancies between intended and actual outcomes.
- Research on school teacher interaction with ‘teacher proof’ curriculum: found discrepancies due to misunderstanding or ‘creative insubordination’ (Schubert, 2008).
- Research on VET practitioner understanding of packages: insufficient practice with TPs, lack of confidence working with TPs (Mitchell et al, 2006, Clayton et al, 2010).

Background: Theory

- **Curriculum theory:** slippage between 'intended' and 'enacted' curriculum (Billett, 2011)
- **Theory of interpretation or 'hermeneutics':** 'autonomy' of author's products and complex nature of interpretative process (Schmidt, 2005)
- **Theory of expertise :** psychological gap between expertise and codification of expertise (Dreyfus and Dreyfus, 1988)
- **Communication theory:** discrepancy between sent and received messages due to 'noise' (Shannon & Weaver, 1949)
- **Theory of knowledge:** competencies cannot describe full range of required knowledge and skills for work (Wheelahan, 2007)

Researching the challenge (2014)

- **Goal:** to learn about how VET practitioners understand and use competencies
- **Rationale:** how effectively practitioners understand and use competencies has significant implications for the quality of VET
- **Process:** 30 practitioners were recruited with a range of industry backgrounds and levels of experience in VET. They were interviewed about their understanding and use of competencies.

The participants

- Mostly from Victoria
- 22 metropolitan, 8 regional
- 21 public, 9 private provider
- 16 Cert IV highest practitioner qualification
- 17 training packages across 8 ISCs

Learning about competencies

- Interpreting competencies prior to formal training (9)
- Formal training: Insufficient time devoted to skills of interpretation and difficulties understanding competencies remained at completion
- Around a year to feel confident
- Formal PD valuable, but limited access to it
- Assessment validation powerful informal PD

Learning about competencies

*I remember my first ever course. I was completely confused, and luckily my sane sister in law... she came along with me, because she was curious.... I just thought, 'thank God', because I remember the trainer, **I just felt like she was speaking in hieroglyphics.** I kept looking over to my sister in law saying, 'what is she talking about?' [My sister-in-law] would pass me little Post-it notes under the table, saying there's three sections of this and she's talking about the first section. 'Okay, thank you.' So it [understanding competency standards] certainly didn't happen in my first course. (Cert IV Trainer)*

Ongoing learning

- PD on 'unpacking' Training Packages valuable but rarely accessed
- Assessment validation process most valuable learning for interpretation
- Upgrading Certificate IV did not necessarily improve interpretation skills

Language of competencies

- Some descriptions: *Fluffy, ambiguous, fuzzy, vague, jargonised, convoluted, not well written, poorly written, written just appallingly*

Language of competencies

*I'm laughing because in the Advanced Diploma area, when I was working at [a small RTO with two other trainers], who were both trainers doing the same work as what I was, we'd often question this [the language of competencies] and say, 'Well, **what a load of rubbish, why don't people talk in language that a person studying gets it?**' It's almost like it's been written for an academic environment rather than the level that it's pitched at. (Management Trainer)*

Purpose of competencies

- Describe job roles
- They specify ideal levels of performance
- They specify minimum levels of performance
- Specify training and assessment activities
- Describe personal abilities
- Designed to promote consistency in VET
- Unable to answer (1)

Elements

‘Elements describe the essential outcomes.’

- Learning outcomes
- A breakdown of the competency
- Skills
- Performance criteria
- Required skills and knowledge
- Assessment requirements

Performance criteria

‘Performance criteria describe the performance needed to demonstrate achievement of the element.’

- Benchmarks/levels of performance
- Assessment requirements
- Assessment questions
- Skills
- Work tasks
- Work roles

Required skills and knowledge

- Underpin/enable performance
- Duplicate elements and performance criteria
- Prerequisites
- RPL
- Generic/soft/employability skills
- Guide training program development
- Essential vs. optional
- Unable to answer (3)

Range statement

‘provides a context for the unit of competency, describing essential operating conditions that may be present with training and assessment, depending on the work situation, needs of the candidate, accessibility of the item, and local industry and regional contexts. As applicable, the meanings of key terms used in the performance criteria will also be explained in the range statement’

- Context/environment/conditions of competency
- Reference point for training
- Refers to required skills and knowledge/elements
- Duplicates information in other components
- Vague/confusing
- Unable to answer (5)

Process of interpretation

- Holistic strategies
- Limited strategies
- Limited confirmation of interpretations
- Limited rechecking of interpretations

Views about competencies

Limited industry involvement:

- *Look, there's got to be some industry people, I reckon there's got to be industry people in there that are writing these, but sometimes I can read and think, '**Oh, that hasn't been written by an industry person.**'* (Ag Trainer)

Views about competencies

Critical:

- *I think they seem to be political documents, written to satisfy too many masters. **They don't seem to me to be written with the student or the teacher in mind.** Because I, as a conscientious and intelligent person, should be able to read through one and have it make sense. Perhaps not immediately, but on the second reading, go, 'Yeah, I get where this is going, I see what I need to do, what I need.' They're written for auditing requirements I think. (Business Trainer)*

Views about competencies

Positive/optimistic:

- Competencies have improved
- Industry Skills Councils are responsive when approached
- Optimism about streamlining initiative (new format for competencies)

Summary of findings

- Training in interpretation often limited
- Language of competencies often challenging
- Understanding of competencies often limited
- Processes of interpretation often limited
- Ambiguous views about competencies

INDUSTRY SKILL NEEDS

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graph TD; A[INDUSTRY SKILL NEEDS] --> B[Industry skills are specified in the form of competencies]; B --> C[Competencies are interpreted and implemented by VET practitioners]; C --> D[Learners develop industry skills as specified in competencies]; D --> E[INDUSTRY GETS THE SKILLS IT NEEDS];
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Industry skills are specified in the form of competencies

Competencies are interpreted and implemented by VET practitioners

Learners develop industry skills as specified in competencies

INDUSTRY GETS THE SKILLS IT NEEDS

What is hermeneutics?

- **Hermeneutics = theory of interpretation**
- Developed in the context of interest in deciphering ancient scriptures
- Developed further in Germany in the 19th Century as a methodology for deciphering classical texts
- German philosophers extended hermeneutics to a general theory of human understanding in the 19th and 20th Centuries
- A legal hermeneutics developed focused on interpreting laws
- We will consider two key hermeneutic concepts: the **autonomy of the text** and the **hermeneutic circle**

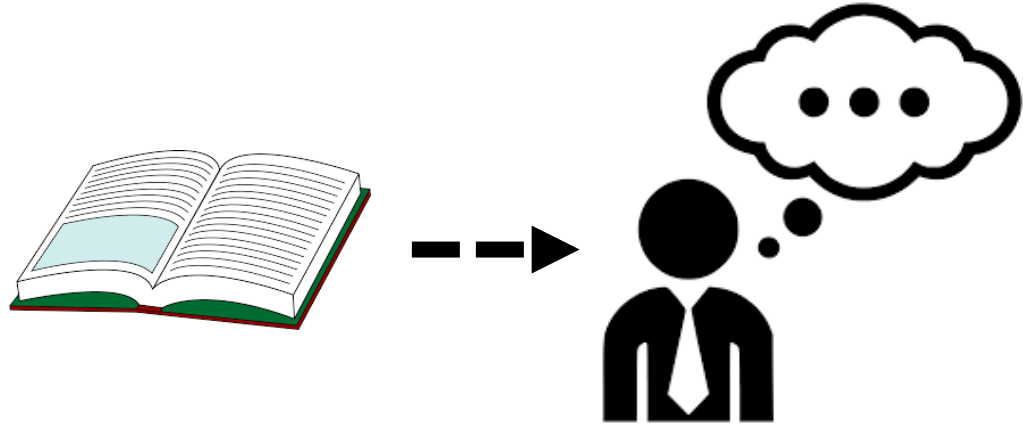
Autonomy of the text

- In a dialogue, a speaker's meaning can be confirmed by the hearer
- When a text is published, the author's intention cannot be confirmed
- When the reader's cultural and temporal context is different from that of the author, the text is more and more cut off from the author's intention
- The autonomy of the text refers to the independent 'life' that texts take on when different readers in different places and times apply their own interpretations to it

Autonomy of the text



In a conversation, the 'text' refers to a common world and interpretations can be checked and confirmed by the listener



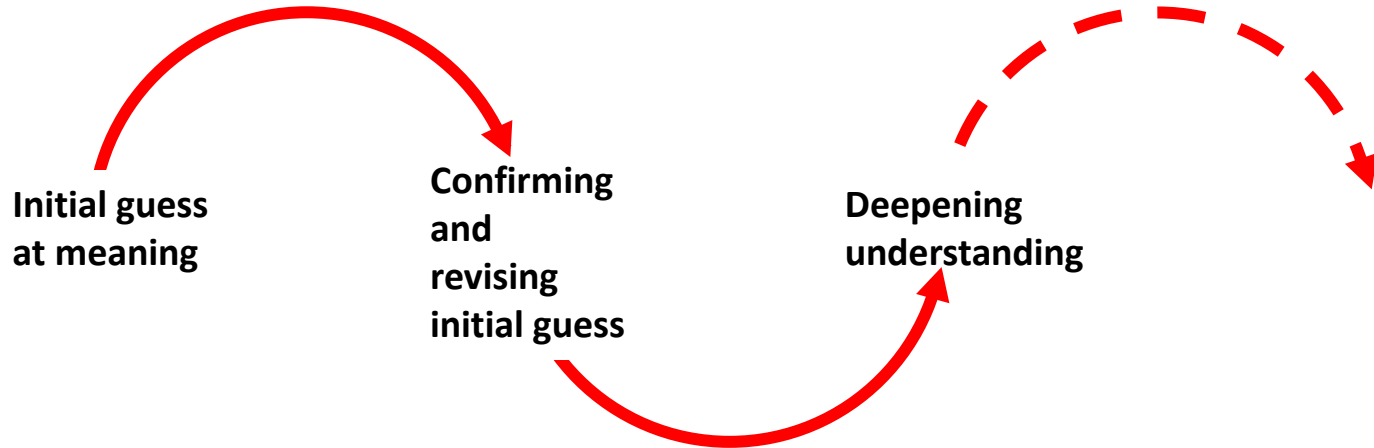
In reading, the 'text' does not necessarily refer to the world of the reader. The reader may be separated from the author in time, space, culture and background knowledge. Interpretations cannot be checked and confirmed by the reader.

Implications for competency interpretation

- The autonomy of the text suggests that we should not expect direct transmission of the competency authors' intentions into the heads of trainers
- Rather, we should expect that in different places, times and local cultures, the one competency text will generate many and diverse interpretations

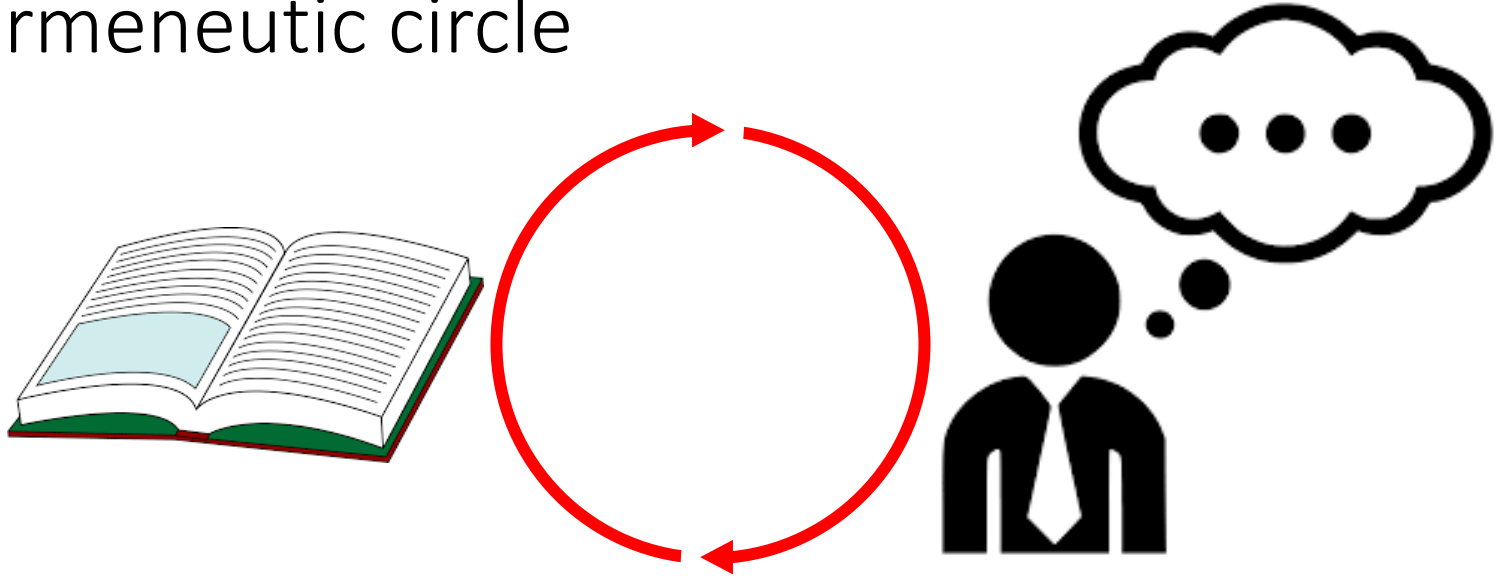
Hermeneutic circle

- The hermeneutic circle refers to the creative process of interpreting any human expression (e.g. a text, a gesture, an artwork, a practice)



- Humans bring a wealth of experience and knowledge to any encounter with a human expression, and it is applied and revised in the circular (or spiral) process of understanding

Hermeneutic circle



Instead of readers reading the whole message from a text and understanding it at once, the hermeneutic circle suggests the reader will bring their own experience and knowledge to the reading, and on that basis make an initial interpretation that is revised and revised as it develops.

References

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