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Capability and Coping in the new Millennium: A Critical Challenge for Education

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Abstract

One of the great challenges for all levels of compulsory and post-compulsory education is to help people develop the capacity to cope well within a highly turbulent environment. This challenge is evident in the face of mounting evidence that individuals, organisations and communities are, in fact, not coping at all and are developing major signs of dysfunction. My experience and research as a psychotherapist and educator suggests that we could move towards more process oriented learning strategies that will provide people with lifelong skills for managing stressful events, rapidly changing work environments and the local effects of the global community. The term heutagogy has been coined to provide a rationale for these strategies as an alternative to both pedagogical and andragogical approaches to education (Hase and Kenyon, 2000). One recent perspective that has helped develop this concept of heutagogy is that of Capability (eg Cairns & Hase, 1996 and Stephenson & Weil, 1992). Capable people are creative, know how to learn, can use competencies in novel as well as familiar circumstances, have high self-efficacy, work well with others, and have appropriate guiding values for action. It is suggested that Capable people are able to deal with the stresses of the new millennium better than others who do not possess these attributes. This paper draws on Systems Theory, Capability and the emerging concept of Heutagogy to describe why we should, and how we can, help develop Capable people in our educational, and particularly our higher education, systems.

Fads, Fancies and Personal Journeys

It is very easy to get caught up in personal, management and organisational development fads in a world in which the quick fix sits right next to the electronic calculator. Sometimes, however, it is possible to find that an idea has a long developmental pedigree that can be traced back to a fundamental concept that has substance and a deeper meaning. And occasionally that idea has a basis in reality that accords with ones own personal experience as a practitioner. This paper is about such an idea that arose here in the UK in the late 1980s and which has been called Capability.

I am a psychologist by trade and work in the areas of therapeutic and organisational psychology both as a practitioner and academic. It has been my good fortune to be able to work with people who are experiencing crisis in their lives or who have some problem of adjustment. I work with organisations for the same reasons except that with the latter the agendas sometimes seem awe inspiringly complicated. Given this focus in my work I have become interested in adaptation and it is my experience that those people, couples, families, organisations and, perhaps, communities that adapt well share a number of characteristics.

It is frequently stated that one of our major current health threats in western societies is depression and its related conditions such as anxiety, stress and substance abuse. The vast industry around the Serotonin enhancing medications such as Prozac, Zoloft, Arapax and company supports the contention that we are indeed in trouble in a mental health sense. It is interesting to revisit Huxley's 'Brave New World' in which he describes a generation of humans who take their 'Somer' pills to keep their mood even and help them be productive. This is exactly what Prozac et al do.

Our organisations are, in my view, also in crisis and there is some evidence that this may be true for our communities. It doesn't take much imagination to see the connection between what is happening in organisations and communities, and its affect on people. It seems unlikely that the causal relationship is the other way around.

I agree with commentators such as Ralston-Saul and Theobold that the real problem is systemic and it will take a change in the fundamental ways in which we understand society, particularly in relation to our emphasis on economy and the bottom line. How systemic changes might come about quickly is for discussion elsewhere but it is likely that it will be forced as the result of a massive world wide crisis, probably of an economic nature.

One vehicle (and I do not suggest that it is the only approach) for producing change, of course, is through education and, in particular, education of the young before ways of thinking and behaving have become completely habituated. It is my contention here that we need to make some fundamental, dare I say paradigm, shifts in the way in which we look at learning and the type of people our educational institutions, such as universities, churn out.

Being able to adapt to the world in which we live requires a whole new set of abilities that go beyond our obsession with competencies which, in my view, at best prepare us for the present but certainly not the future. Healthy people will be able to respond to change, to manage uncertainty and ambiguity, maintain focus and continue to engage in healthy behaviours in response to crisis. They will also work towards creating healthy environments for others to live and work in. In other words they will have a mindful respect for others. The world is not easy for the inflexible, the guardians of the status quo, those who dislike uncertainty and have an expectation that they are somehow isolated from the winds of change, and for those who are unprepared.

For example, I am still frequently amazed at the number of people I see in therapy whose main problem is that they are surprised by some change that has occurred and are having difficulty in resolving what amounts to loss as a result of this surprise, rather than the problem itself. These people seem to be totally unprepared and need to undergo new learning that helps them resolve what is a sort of grief, a loss. I am reminded of a man who was made redundant after 23 years of faithful service. He had a house in a nice place, lovely children and a wife who did not have to work. The key problem was not so much the loss of the job because he would certainly find another, it was the shock of sudden change. He became depressed, a condition founded on an inner rage related to a sense of injustice.

Its my contention here that we need to prepare people for life in a different sort of way and that universities (although what I say is just as applicable to the compulsory educational system) have a key role to play in creating what amounts to a paradigm shift. As universities we have to go beyond developing just competence and creating people who are really good at writing essays. We need to help develop people who can manage the future.

So, having gone on this personal journey lets look at what is my fancy for education and hope that it is not just another fad.

Capability

One of the most recent models to challenge traditional concepts of learning and which looks at outcomes as well as process is that of Capability (Graves, 1993; Stephenson & Weil, 1993; Stephenson, 1994) and how to enable capability to express itself in organisations (e.g. Cairns & Hase, 1996; Hase, 1998; Hase & Davis, 1999; Hase, Malloch and Cairns, 1998).). Capable people are those who: know how to learn; are creative; have a high degree of self-efficacy; have appropriate values; can apply competencies in novel as well as familiar situations; and can work well with others. Of all these components of Capability it is my view that the key is the capacity to learn. Recently Hase and Kenyon (2000) have coined the term 'heutagogy' to describe the capacity for 'self-determined' learning.

Capability and heutagogy are part of a humanistic theme that can be followed through the philosopher Heider (Emery, 1974), phenomenology (Rogers, 1951), systems thinking (Emery and Trist, 1965), double loop and organisational learning (Argyris & Schon, 1996), androgogy (Knowles, 1984), learner managed learning (Graves, 1993; Long, 1990), and action learning (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1998). This theme emphasises the responsibility for action on the 'self' and, hence, the importance of the development of the person who can purposefully act.

Competence involves the acquisition of appropriate knowledge and skills, and is clearly a vital part of managing life and work. However, over the last 10 years or so there has been an unfortunate emphasis on competencies and their measurement in

post compulsory education. Unfortunate because competence is not concerned with the future, rather it emphasises what one has been able to do in the past. Capability consists of the capacity to use competencies in novel rather than just familiar situations and involves metacognitive processes. It is the development of these processes that should be the role of higher education and has more to do with preparation for life than developing specific competencies.

Capable people will be able to deal with inevitable change and crisis. They will be open to new learning that is associated with what is happening and will call on appropriate resources to be able to cope. Most importantly they will not be overly surprised by events. Capable people will, therefore, anticipate, and they will be self-efficacious.

Most therapeutic interventions are in fact about helping people become more capable. We know that about half of the benefit of therapy (probably of any kind) is the result of the placebo effect. It is the positive effect on the part of the person to actually do something about their problem. Around about 30% of the benefit is accrued from the quality of the relationship between the person the 'therapist'. The reason for this can be distilled to the person sensing that they are important and that they can have confidence in what is happening. This is exploited by helping the person develop insight or self-understanding. About 20% of the benefit results from actual therapeutic techniques which mostly involves learning, albeit in sometimes quite sophisticated ways.

I often have the uneasy feeling when I'm working with people who are depressed, anxious or who are experiencing their distress in some other way that somehow the horse has bolted and that prevention may in fact be far better than trying to cure. This is not to say that therapy is not an uplifting experience and that suffering provides a motivation for learning. But it is expensive in terms of money, time and effort for the client and illness is a strain on current health systems.

There is also the sad realisation that I can run as many workshops as I like but real change for people is unlikely to occur in 'one off' group environments, entertaining and enlightening as they might be. The real action is to be found in our educational systems and where universities can play a very real role in helping to develop capable people. In fact most of the research and work around the concept of capability has involved how to establish learning environments that are more likely to develop capable people.

Preparation for Life

Most of us are very able learners before we go to kindergarten and/or school. Our curiosity is at an all time high and we are able to engage with our real experience in a very meaningful way. We have no trouble at all in making generalisations from specific instances and despite what philosophers such as Locke and Hume might say, we are able to make sense of the 'buzzing confusion' around us (Emery, 1974).

But our educational systems are based exactly on the opposite and Locke and Hume's position is taken to be true. They are also based on issues of power. Our compulsory and post compulsory educational systems assume that people cannot make sense of the world, that teachers know what is important to learn and when it can be learnt, that knowledge is vested in the few, that outcome is more important than process, and that competencies are the most important aspect of learning.

The humanistic tradition, however, provides a different view of people. Heider assumed that people can in fact make sense of the world and can make generalisations from the specific (Emery, 1974). People will learn from their experience. In this paradigm education takes on a new form which hands over the responsibility to the learner and de-emphasises content in favour of process. Learning becomes learner focussed rather than teacher focussed. The teacher becomes guide rather than guru.

Visualising content as secondary to process frightens many of my colleagues in higher education. This fear exists despite the obvious fact that the content is changing so rapidly that what is taught today is out of date tomorrow. Rather we need to give learners the skills to find what might be useful to them and examine concepts rather than competence.

The increasing drive to deliver education programs to all parts of the globe poses its own problems with respect to developing capable people, other than the underpinning economic motives. My observation (as a long time practitioner in the area) of distance education programs (both print based and those on the 'net') is that they focus even more on content than do face to face programs. I suggest that this is due to the fact that we have little idea yet about how people can best become learners using distance learning approaches and that anxiety increases teacher control.

The challenge then for higher education is to design curricula that not only develop competence but also develop critical features of capability such as creativity, the capacity to learn, self-efficacy, appropriate values, being able to work with others, and being able to use competencies in novel situations.

Some principles that guide educational practice towards developing capable people have already been provided by Rogers (1969) who suggests that people want to learn and have a natural inclination to do so throughout their life. Indeed he argues strongly that teacher-centred learning has been grossly over emphasised. He based his student-centred approach on five key ideas:

- We cannot teach another person directly: we can only facilitate learning;
- People learn significantly only those things that they perceive as being involved in the maintenance or enhancement of the structure of self;

- Experience which if assimilated would involve a change in the organisation of self tends to be resisted through denial or distortion of symbolisation, and the structure and organisation of self appear to become more rigid under threat;
- Experience which is perceived as inconsistent with the self can only be assimilated if the current organisation of self is relaxed and expanded to include it; and
- The educational system which most effectively promotes significant learning is one in which threat to the self, as learner, is reduced to a minimum".

A heutagogical (self-learning) approach recognises the need to be flexible in the learning where the teacher provides resources but the learner designs the actual course he or she might take by negotiating the learning. Thus learners might read around critical issues or questions and determine what is of interest and relevance to them and then negotiate further reading and assessment tasks. With respect to the latter, assessment becomes more of a learning experience rather than a means to measure attainment. Action learning, action research and work based learning models provide some interesting approaches to how we develop capable people. Interestingly some of the literature about organisational learning since the 1960s has been concerned with developing learning environments consistent with the idea of capability. It is unfortunate that it has largely been ignored.

As teachers we should concern ourselves with developing the learner's capability not just embedding discipline based skills and knowledge. We should relinquish any power we deem ourselves to have.

Conclusion

This paper suggests that universities can play a much greater role than they already do in preparing citizens for life. As a therapist it is apparent to me that we are often simply providing band aid solutions to health problems that could be avoided in the first place, at least partly, by a different educational experience. There are two challenges for higher education in my view. The first of these is to challenge the traditional educational paradigm that is teacher centred to one that is far more learner centred or heutagogical. The second is to take a far more holistic view of the learning experience that recognises a key role in the preparation of people for life, not just a specific discipline.

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