

CHAPTER TWO: FOUR THEMES IN EDUCATING FOR CAPABILITY

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Introduction

Taking responsibility and being accountable for their own learning involves students in four related groups of activities:

1. reviewing and building on previous experience, knowledge and skills;
2. preparing plans and negotiating approvals;
3. active and interactive learning;
4. the assessment of performance according to agreed learning outcomes.

If the student's programme is to have coherence, it is important that the student engages in each of the four groups of activities, irrespective of subject specialism or whether the programme is an afternoon's exercise or a complete undergraduate course. The resultant course content, learning activities and forms of assessment are then related to the students' circumstances and are justified in terms of their relevance to the wider purposes of the course as a whole. The four groups of activities, or themes, can recur in successive cycles with each assessment of performance providing a new platform on which to base further planning and negotiation. Where students consciously commit themselves to reflect on their learning from each of the themes, and their tutors see their role as helping them to do so, the quality of each successive cycle of activities is enhanced.

The brief summaries which follow are overviews of the four themes. They indicate some of the issues of practice and principle which need to be considered when contemplating the development of capability programmes and are intended to give the reader some points of reference when reading the specialist chapters in Part Two.

Theme One - Reviewing and Building on Experience

Overview of the theme

Starting where students are is almost a first principle of teaching. On conventionally taught courses, tutors' knowledge of the experience students bring with them often consists of generalisations about whole cohorts based on scanty information about previous courses (eg in schools or on earlier course components) and the performance of previous groups of students. Individual needs and aspirations may not be known and maximisation of individual benefit, therefore, may be inhibited.

A number of factors are beginning to encourage teachers to look more closely at individual student differences within their courses. Modular structures, wider access, and different courses in feeder schools and colleges mean a greater variety of student experience and expertise within the same class or lecture hall, putting pressure on conventional delivery modes of teaching. Quality assessments based on value-added concepts of educational benefit require more systematic appraisals of student starting points.

When the students themselves take responsibility for appraising their own educational starting points they take the first step in controlling their own educational development. Where appraisal of student experience is conducted with the help of others, including peers, academics and employers, students have the opportunity to test their judgments about themselves against the judgment of others, thereby helping them develop confidence in their ability to assess their relative strengths and aptitudes. A willingness to acknowledge one's weaknesses together with a well founded confidence in one's strengths are a good start for self-development and provide a relevant basis on which to build one's plans.

Clarifying where you are starting from is educationally valuable and contributes greatly to the quality of learning. Student motivation is enhanced. Self esteem is raised as students begin to appreciate the value of their own experience and expertise. Evaluation, communication and team-working skills are developed. Time devoted to this activity, particularly if conducted within students' specialist studies, is not a diversion but an aid to understanding and commitment. It helps teachers to plan effective responses and support.

Some issues of principle and practice

Are students given prior information, and a clear rationale, before being asked to appraise their own experience? This is particularly important where such schemes are introduced within more traditional educational environments.

Should student willingness and potential for taking responsibility be factors in the selection of students? Records of Achievement and Accreditation of Prior Experience and Learning techniques (APEL) will make this more feasible.

Is there sufficient space in the timetable to include appraisal activities within mainstream studies?

What techniques, materials, expertise and staff development support is available for teachers?

Are diagnostic tools available to help students arrive at objective assessments of their abilities? Do students have the opportunity to test their judgments about their expertise and to explore their potential areas of interest?

Is the process of appraising experience seen to be a learning experience in its own right?

How responsive is the programme or institution to the outcomes of appraisals? Are resources available and accessible to provide the extra support to deal with the gaps students identify? Is there sufficient flexibility in the programme for them to build on their strengths?

Theme Two - Planning, Negotiation and Approval

Overview of the theme

By itself, student self determination is not a sufficient justification for the design of their programmes. Many other factors have to be taken into account, including possible professional or employment needs, the intellectual demands of the proposed areas of study, student expertise, public confidence in the level of the qualification being sought and the resources available, including tutorial support. Students need to be able to show how these constraints can be accommodated or overcome. Students have to be accountable as well as responsible for what they plan to do. Learner responsibility and accountability invariably means negotiating approvals from other stakeholders.

The negotiation of programmes can apply to whole programmes or short-term activities, and can extend to any combination of the following: the content, the application of the content, the location, the resources used, the method of study, the mode of assessment and the criteria of assessment. Planning and negotiating approval for a programme of study or learning activity which is both personally relevant and externally valid, as explained in Chapter One, develops a deeper understanding of underlying principles, and an awareness of the programmes wider relevance. Negotiation provides practical experience of objective setting, resource planning, oral and written communication, collaboration, deciding priorities and critical self-awareness. Students have to address key issues such as content integration and the criteria and mode of assessing their end performance.

The balance of power between the various parties to the negotiation is of crucial importance. In some cases, where there are externally imposed course requirements, the scope for negotiating course content and final assessment may be very limited. In others, agreements emerge from critical dialogue between student and tutor. Students have most protection against more powerful parties when the procedures and areas for negotiation, the resource constraints and the criteria by which their proposals will be judged are clear and understood by all. If negotiation is reduced to students guessing what the tutor really wants them to do, the whole process is discredited.

Effective use is made of the opportunity to negotiate their own programmes when students receive advice, time and support for content mapping, resource exploration, programme construction and objective-setting. Staff help most when they provide a rigorous yet supportive environment, and when they appreciate that time spent on planning and negotiating is at least as valuable as 'getting on with it' and, indeed, is getting on with it. Employers help most when they allow students to explore the job implications of what they intend to study and give access to relevant learning opportunities and resources at their disposal. Institutions help most when their learning resources are made directly accessible by students and where they minimise departmental and external barriers. Everyone helps when they closely examine their assumptions about what is possible and not possible; constraints may be no more than custom and practice surviving long after their original *raison d'être* has expired.

Some issues of principle and practice

Is there clarity about a) what is negotiable, b) the procedures for the preparation and submission of plans, c) the resources available and d) the criteria for approval? Are the procedures, criteria and judgements formal or informal; are they implicit or explicit?

How can the course ensure that 'the basics' are covered? Is there a body of knowledge which is not negotiable? How is the tension between student responsibility and teacher 'knowing best' resolved?

Is help given for process issues, eg objective setting, setting out proposals etc?

Are students given time and help to explore possible course content, employment needs and their existing expertise? Are 'taster courses' available? Are students helped to consider the importance of developing personal qualities and skills?

Are students encouraged to relate their proposals to their prior experience and longer term personal, academic and professional development?

Is the process of planning and negotiation seen as a learning experience for the student? Is formal credit given for the learning derived from the planning and negotiation of a major programme of study? Are students encouraged to renegotiate aspects of their programmes in the light of progress and unintended outcomes?

How are other key stakeholders - professional bodies, employers - involved, and do they help? By what means are student negotiated programmes externally validated?

What are the implications for teachers? What kind of staff development is needed to help tutors switch from formal teaching to helping students plan and negotiate their own programmes? Does it subvert their traditional role of being 'the authority'?

Is the institution flexible in its responses to student initiative? Are cross-discipline and extra-institutional programmes possible?

Theme Three - Active and Interactive Learning

Overview of the theme

Active and interactive learning are key features of educating for capability because they give students the opportunity to a) apply and test their knowledge and skills, b) develop a range of personal skills and qualities, c) relate their studies to the world outside, d) gain experience of collaboration within a framework of specific objectives and d) take initiatives and learn from their own experiences. Passive learning, characterised by the transmission of lecture notes for re-presentation in formal assessments, may inhibit the development of capability and encourage dependence upon other people's learning. In terms of the four capability themes, active and interactive learning represent the carrying out of the programmes previously planned and negotiated by the student.

The range of possible activities is wide. It includes individually and collaboratively planned assignments, enquiries, projects, workshops, simulations, client based consultancies and work-based learning. Active learning is not synonymous with practical work, much of which can be teacher dominated; it involves the student in explicit and critical reflection on issues and problems raised by initiatives students have taken and the seeking of information and ideas to aid that reflection.

Active learning develops organisational and self-management skills. Successes boost confidence; participation and involvement raise motivation. Interactive learning develops interpersonal skills such as communication, leadership, task-sharing, the giving and receiving of criticism and the negotiation of individual contributions to common tasks. It involves students in constant explanations of their own learning and exposes them to the learning of other students. It can be both demanding and fun.

New roles are demanded of tutors, related to a) helping students to talk through what they are doing and what they have learned, b) structuring the intellectual and physical learning environment to provide rigour and support, c) providing a focus on questions and process rather than answers and content, d) giving constructive feedback on student performance against student learning goals, e) giving access to specialist resources and expertise and f) helping students to build up their awareness and understanding of their specialist fields.

Active and interactive learning do not preclude the use of lectures, formal instruction, teacher prepared information, group and individual tutorials or extensive reading. What is important is that these traditional features of higher education are supportive of and informed by learning from activities negotiated and managed by the students themselves. Lectures can be useful when they are challenging, inspirational, context setting or providing 'live' information on current issues not readily available elsewhere; they can be used in response to common problems experienced by students. Formal instruction in basic skills can fill gaps identified through student appraisals of their own experience and learning. Tutorials provide a forum for open reflection and shared learning. Permanently available teacher prepared material, like library-based materials, can provide a background level of information and conceptual support. Where lectures, formal instruction and teacher prepared materials comprise and determine the whole of the course, they are unlikely to develop student capability; where they support and respond to student initiative, they can inform student reflection and aid the development of understanding. Capability programmes are teacher supported, not teacher dependent.

Active and interactive learning raises resource availability issues. Strong motivation makes it possible for many activities to proceed without direct supervision, releasing staff time for tutorials. Other learning resources need to be readily available; institutional services need to be responsive; employers and external clients can be sources of extra support.

Some issues of principle and practice

Does active and interactive learning take place within the context of the students' specialist studies, and do its purposes include both the enhancement of the students' understanding of the field and the development of personal skills and qualities?

How easily can staff switch from their traditional teaching roles? What kind of staff development works?

How do students working on different activities monitor their own progress? How can staff monitor and facilitate the growth in student understanding and coverage of 'the knowledge base' derived from the activities?

Do employers and other outsiders get directly involved in student learning activities? Is the pool of learning material available to students greater than on a lecture based programme?

Are institutions capable of providing a sufficiently flexible response and direct access to resources? Is the information technology up to the job of giving students the information they need, when they need it?

Is time made available for critical reflection on the learning derived from the activity? Does learning from activities take precedence over participation in the activities? Is tutor feedback directed at student learning and the development of skills and qualities?

Is importance attached to the development of personal transferable skills as well as the specialist skills?

In interactive learning, is it possible to distinguish individual contributions and learning? Is tuition or guidance provided in the special skills involved in successful collaboration?

Is it possible to provide effective supervision and to monitor the learning on work-based learning?

Theme Four - Assessment

Overview of the theme

To be consistent with its aims, a capability course should assess student capability in the context of the students' specialist studies, which in turn means - according to the working definition of capability used by Higher Education for Capability - that assessment should give students opportunities to demonstrate:

- a) their grasp of their specialist studies through their ability to apply their knowledge and skills in relevant situations;
- b) their ability to explain what they have learned, and discuss its relevance to their specialist field and their personal and professional development;
- c) their ability to work effectively with others, including students and potential colleagues or clients;

- d) their ability to critically evaluate their own learning and to indicate how they might progress it further.

Successful demonstration of the above *ipso facto* also allows successful demonstration of a range of component personal skills related to interaction, oral and written communication, and evaluation, integrated with each other and with the students' specialist work. Preparing for capability assessments is itself a valuable learning experience. Demonstrating one's capability to peers, tutors, potential employers, panels and external examiners can be a more rigorous assessment than the passing of unseen written examinations on teacher provided information or the separate demonstration of isolated personal skills as promoted by the competency movement. The skills and qualities necessary to complete such assessments are particularly relevant to the world outside; the ability to apply and critically review one's specialist knowledge indicates a high level of understanding of underlying principles of the students' specialist field. In total, capability assessments are quality assessments.

Despite their obvious relevance, capability assessments leading to the award of degrees are rare; their use for monitoring assessment and in non-contributory course components is more common. Three difficulties are frequently mentioned: a) the assumed need to achieve comparability and statistical validity by giving all students the same course and the same assessment, b) the identification of individual contributions within collaborative activities, and c) the objectivity and reliability of self and peer assessments. Capability assessments, however, are about what students know and can do, judged against agreed criteria; they are not about ranked performance and comparability. If, as in the driving test, there are clear and universally applied criteria related to the general level of awards against which students can justify their proposed specialist objectives, the currency of the awards can be protected and the integrity of individual needs can be preserved. There does not seem to be a problem of principle with this approach at the Doctorate level. Multiple sources of information on student performance are available when students demonstrate the application of their knowledge and skills outside the institution, ensuring the reliability as well as the relevance of the assessment. Individually negotiated objectives and critical reviews can identify individual contributions in group assessments. The rationale offered by students for their self and peer assessments can be externally assessed; it is the students' ability to make appropriate judgments which matters.

Capability assessments describe what students have done or can do; they do not pre-determine what students must learn. They provide a wide range of useful information about the student to anyone who needs to know. They are learning experiences.

Some issues of principle and practice

Is education for capability kept on the sidelines by the use of non-capability assessments for the final award?

What alternatives to the traditional unseen written examinations are available, and with what success? Is confidence in their objectivity addressed, and if so, how?

Are the *general* requirements for degrees, for example the criteria related to the *level* of the award, clear and made available to students at the outset? Are students able to negotiate their *specific* learning goals and the *specific* criteria by which they will be assessed? Is there discussion on the validity of the students' proposals?

How can social pressures on certain sub-groups (gender and ethnic minorities) be accommodated in the assessment of individual performance in groups?

What is the experience of involving non-academics such as employers, clients and professional practitioners in the formal assessment of student performance?

What is the feasibility of assessing large numbers of possibly idiosyncratic pieces of work?

How can a wide range of learning outcomes best be recorded and made available to those who need to know? What use is made of records of achievement, logs and portfolios? Can the recording of learning outcomes be done by the student?

Are students required to justify their self and peer assessments?