Capability and its development
experiences from a work-based doctorate

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The idea of 'capability,' popularised through the Royal Society for Arts' Education for Capability project, is applicable to the growing need for professionals to move beyond discipline-specific expertise and engage with what Schön (1987) terms the "swampy lowland" of practice. Middlesex University has developed a generic doctorate designed to assist practising professionals and managers to enhance their high-level capability. Candidates joining the doctorate are required to complete a reflective Review of Previous Learning, describing their development to date and demonstrating preparedness for doctoral work. While common themes emerge of working with change and taking the lead, these Reviews point to capability as based in personally unique envelopes of abilities. They emphasise the central role of experiential learning to developing high-level capability, and the importance of opportunities and resources for personal and professional growth, events or circumstances which provide turning-points or spurs to action, and practitioners' own motivations to succeed or change.

Introduction

Broad, high-level capability, as opposed to purely discipline-based competence and expertise, is increasingly being regarded as a necessary attribute of the senior professional or manager (O'Reilly et al 1999). However, neither the nature of that capability nor the most effective ways of developing it are necessarily clear. At Middlesex University, the recent development of a generic professional doctorate employing the principles of work-based learning (Osborne et al 1998) has raised questions about both the nature of higher-level capability and the means employed to nurture it.

This paper draws on doctoral candidates' own accounts of their development as capable practitioners, and uses a phenomenological approach to gain insights into both the notion of higher-level capability and the ways in which it is developed by practitioners. Its aim is to gain a better understanding of what is involved in being and becoming capable, rather than develop normative theories of capability.

Capability

The notion of capability as discussed here owes much to the Higher Education for Capability project, which grew out of the Royal Society for Arts' Education for Capability initiative, and in particular its notion of the 'capable practitioner' (O'Reilly et al 1999). Capability in this context has a dual connotation of the ability to do coupled with an inference of being able to become (more) able. It is not restricted to being "almost synonymous with competence, but with less of a normative connotation" (Eraut 1994 p208), but also implies a capacity to develop additional competence and to move beyond competence to being able to work effectively in unpredictable and changing contexts. Stephenson (1998) describes capability as

requiring the integration of skills, knowledge, ethics and judgement, including in dealing with unfamiliar problems in unfamiliar contexts. He contrasts competence, which is primarily "about fitness for current purposes and performing effectively in the here and now," with capability which while embracing this is also forward-looking and concerned with the realisation of potential and with "imagining the future and contributing to making it happen" (ibid, p2). If competence is concerned with fitness for purpose (adequate for working within a system), capability needs to be concerned also with fitness of purpose (adequate for working on the system).

The Doctorate in Professional Studies

Middlesex University's Doctorate in Professional Studies (DProf) was started in 1998 and now has approximately 70 candidates on the main (generic) programme, as well as another 50 on two specialised pathways in psychotherapy and sustainable development. It was developed as a response to the growing demand for high level qualifications that meet the development needs of experienced professional practitioners. Many UK universities have responded to this demand and over the last decade doctorates in Education (EdD), Business Administration (DBA) and Engineering (EngD), to name but a few, have been devised as distinct alternatives to the PhD. The Middlesex University DProf differs from these in offering a generic framework in which candidates undertake research and development work within their professional field (Doncaster 2000). There has been substantial interest in this programme from practioners in the public, private and voluntary sectors, who state that the programme's appeal lies in its relevance to, and integration with, their work.

Early in the programme, candidates are required to review their professional lives to date, in order to demonstrate that they are equipped for the high level work required of the doctorate. In particular, they are asked to evaluate the range and depth of their professional knowledge and responsibilities. They are also asked to discuss the authority they have, the resources they command and the relationships they have with other stakeholders which will enable them to successfully plan, implement and conclude their doctoral project. It is this reflective 'Review of Previous Learning' that provides the source material for this paper.

The candidates

Reviews of Previous Learning were examined from 28 candidates, 8 women and 20 men, who had joined the DProf programme during 1998-99. Of these, half were working in education and training, primarily in higher education, comprising seven in management or other generalist roles, six in health or health-related faculties, and one in a business school. The other 14 candidates were employed in local or central government (five), in the church (one), in a health charity (one), and in private practice (seven). Four of the private sector candidates were involved in education, training or management consultancy, with the others comprising a lawyer, an economist and entrepreneur, and a practitioner in dispute resolution.

All candidates were established and experienced practitioners ranging in age from early 30s to nearing retirement. All had previous postgraduate or professional qualifications, including 18 with Master's degrees. Not all had first degrees, and only

half had taken a degree immediately or soon after leaving school. Two [22m, 26m] had started but subsequently abandoned PhDs.

Being capable

The Reviews provided a number of insights into how practitioners thought about being capable. Candidates' descriptions typically described capability from both an 'outer' dimension, concerned with actions, achievements and effects, and an 'inner' dimension, describing abilities, skills, dispositions and other attributes. Accounts varied in the emphasis placed on each, and a small minority of candidates concentrated almost exclusively on one or the other. Although not all distinguished explicitly between the two dimensions, in most cases there was a clear enough distinction between whether the author was discussing for instance the achievement of managing a process of change, or a bundle of skills and abilities described as 'managing change.'

Outer dimensions

Two primary themes emerged from the accounts which the candidates associated with capable action: initiating or managing change, and what might be termed 'taking the lead' (rather than leadership, which may suggest a formal connotation not reflective of all candidates' roles or approaches to leading).

Initiating or managing change was an almost universal theme running through the accounts. Almost all practitioners described activities which involved designing or setting up systems, innovating through the development of new products, systems or practices, or initiating changes in their organisations or working environments. Over half discussed managing the introduction and implementation of changes, whether initiated by themselves or by others.

Many practitioners emphasised significant achievements or getting results in 'difficult' or complex contexts, for instance, developing innovative higher education curricula including internationally "unique work" [16m], developing an integrated, multidisciplinary social services model "unprecedented in the UK on the scale envisaged" [13m], introducing a training culture in a "hierarchical bureaucracy, an environment where there was no training strategy in existence" [17m], and developing a new franchise-based business with innovative approaches to systems and training [26m]. Some focused additionally or instead on process issues, for instance "restructuring a division… creating tangible improvements while keeping people on board" [13m], or "dealing with individual concerns sensitively while (keeping) sight of the overall objective… closing gaps and managing various expectations" [6f].

In some instances the achievements themselves were quite considerable, for instance building one of the largest franchise systems in Europe [26m], growing a law firm from two partners to twelve [25m], or developing a strategic partnership across a network of organisations involved in health education [2m]. However, it appeared that the critical factor for most candidates in regarding their actions as capable was the quality of innovation and change rather than its extent.

A second major facet of capability, prominent in over half of practitioners' accounts, was taking the lead and influencing others. While a minority of candidates could be described as being in formal leadership positions where they were able to exert influence through position or resource power, many were working in professional or academic environments where less formal forms of leading were more appropriate. Practical leadership was described in one account as "getting things done by providing a focal point… and influencing others" [14m]. For several practitioners this was largely an informal activity concerned with engaging with colleagues and taking forward a project through consensus; for instance, one described setting up and co-ordinating a new course on his own initiative when a fairly junior college lecturer, and later in his career setting up and leading cross-department initiatives in a public-sector organisation [22m].

Intellectual or professional leadership also featured strongly in some accounts, and took various forms including influencing an industry through journalism and publication [3m], influencing organisational policy and change through "producing influential and considered reports" [1m], and undertaking research and publishing project findings to engage with and influence professional thinking and vocabularies [22m]. In some instances this type of leadership was responsible for taking forward professions or industries, for instance in professionalising a 'trade' occupation [3m], influencing government and public thinking [28m], bringing controversial practices into the focus of considered debate [12f], and promoting an emerging profession as an alternative to traditional approaches [11m].

Inner dimensions

All the DProf candidates included some discussion of 'inner' dimensions - qualities and skills contributing to their capability and effectiveness. There was greater variation in practitioners' discussions of inner dimensions than had been the case for the outer dimensions of capability, although several themes were common to a majority of candidates.

Abilities relating to working with people and to practical management featured most strongly in the accounts, with 21 of the 28 candidates discussing management skills of various kinds and 19 mentioning abilities relating to working with others. Management abilities ranged from self-organisation through what were described as practical management skills or an ability to get things done, to leadership ability, whether "personal influence through being a leader in the field" [21m] or "inspiring others into action in support of ideas and goals" [18f]. Political skills, and the ability to "manage (varying) agendas" [22m] featured for over a quarter of practitioners: as well as being effective in working with organisational or client politics this included what was described as "managing authority" [9m], knowing how far to take risks and embark on one's own initiatives against organisational policy or directives of senior managers.

People skills discussed in the Reviews included communication, listening, facilitation skills, tact, persuasion, and more broadly the ability to work with others. They were more often emphasised where practitioners' work required working effectively with others, and weaker or absent in the accounts of candidates who placed greater emphasis on outer achievement or to a lesser extent on intellectual leadership.

All but three candidates mentioned intellectual or thinking abilities as forming part of their capability. In terms of general abilities, the most widely mentioned were analysis or critical thinking, followed by reflection, synthesis, creativity, evaluation and intuition. Half the candidates emphasised the breadth or depth of their understanding in terms such as "seeing the big picture," having "breadth of vision," "understanding the wider context," and "understanding the wider implications" (of policies or actions) or engaging in systems thinking. Problem-solving abilities were mentioned in a third of accounts, and two practitioners also discussed the importance of framing or "setting" problems. Finally, six mentioned the importance of what they described as a research orientation, or commitment to (action) research, to inform their work.

A strongly reflective approach to practice was apparent in just under half the accounts. Practitioners talked about self-awareness and an awareness of own perspectives and assumptions, as well as variously a willingness to suspend assumptions and consider new perspectives, sensitivity and tolerance to others' perspectives and viewpoints, and openness to new or different ways of doing things. Examples of reflective practice and reflexivity were apparent in several different contexts, including staff management, psychotherapy and enterprise-building, and in relation to self-development and personal learning. For some practitioners this reflective orientation was leading to a commitment to getting beyond the surface of their fields of activity, questioning taken-for-granted assumptions and engaging with contentious issues.

Commitment to a particular type of professionalism was also apparent from many of the accounts. Just over a third of practitioners demonstrated commitment to personal growth and self-development, while a similar number discussed or demonstrated a continuing commitment to change and improvement in their organisations, work environments or professions. Others emphasised the importance of ethics and integrity in their approach to work, with some mentioning a sense of responsibility and sometimes courage to make difficult choices.

In addition to factors identified explicitly by candidates, nearly all the accounts demonstrated their authors' abilities of self-direction and self-management, as well as commitment to personal agendas and ideals. This "proper selfishness" (Handy 1997) was in most cases tempered with contextual awareness and sensitivity, leading to a sense of balance in what was being sought, so that much of what practitioners were engaged in could be regarded as containing wisdom as well as capability (cf Sternberg 1998).

A further, almost universal theme which could be discerned from the Reviews was that of flexibility in working in different contexts. Although many candidates were experts in their respective fields, there was a strong sense in many of the accounts of having moved beyond expertise-based professionalism into a more expansive capability which transcended discipline-based perspectives and included the ability to gain insights and work effectively in contexts where the practitioners lacked expertise. This kind of extended or 'Model B' professionalism (Lester 1995) was equally apparent from practitioners who had trained in specific professions (such as healthcare occupations, law or architecture) early in their career as from those who had built fields of expertise on later experience.

Becoming capable

The Reviews typically presented a progression from a position of less to more capability, though this was achieved in a range of ways. In presenting this, the accounts varied from a thematic evaluation of capabilities, for example, "I will identify three major themes that have underpinned my development and brought me to my present position of responsibility, authority and professional capability" [23m], to straightforward chronology, for example, "I have taken a detailed look back over my professional life and critically reflected on how it has equipped me to undertake the DProf" [20f]. Consequently, the Reviews varied in their focus on current use of capabilities, the development of capability over some years of professional experience, or whole-life overview.

However, all practitioners paid considerable attention to how capability had been developed within the context of their particular career path. Two aspects of professional life were also almost universally recognised as being key to becoming capable: practitioners' own motivation to succeed and the ways they related professionally to other people.

Career path

A major theme in practitioners' accounts was an increase in both breadth and depth of responsibility and influence, over the course of their working lives to date. For a third this had been effected after or through a major career change, but for the remainder, becoming capable was discussed within the context of growth within a single or related fields. All practitioners analysed this exponential development of capability, sometimes starting by describing its small beginnings, for example, "I was nineteen years old and had left college with the minimum qualifications needed to get a job in the public sector" [28m], but invariably discussing how the opportunities afforded by their work had enabled them to develop the capabilities already mentioned in previous sections.

Practitioners typically presented the development of capability in terms of taking on increasingly responsible and complex roles, though the means by which this was effected were various. A common means was making the most of opportunities in a series of jobs, leading to increasingly significant achievements in the practitioner's organisation or profession: "learn(ing) as much as I could from what was initially an unpromising opportunity was the key to my successful progression through every grade within a relatively small organisation" [16m]. Sometimes this willingness to take up new opportunities was presented as a natural progression, for example, "I was able to build step by step on the opportunities which presented themselves" [25m], sometimes the result of being "thrown in at the deep end" [2m], and sometimes as a calculated risk or "bold step" [14m]. The notion of "taking on new areas of practice and developing the knowledge and expertise necessary to make them a success" [25m] was almost universal in practitioners' discussion of their development as capable professionals.

Learning from adversity was also noted by a third of practitioners as being an important means of developing capability, whether it arose from the politics and culture of the organisation, unexpected professional reversals, the demands of

juggling work and home commitments or personal crises. The experience of lack of recognition, stress or opposition was cited as significant in increasing professional learning. For example, one practitioner described, in relation to a new product, that "this was a new concept … and I was not aware of the level of resistance. I learnt that even though the product may be an excellent one, it needs careful marketing (to the organisation)" [17m].

Specific career events, such as the leadership of a major new project or working in more than one country were also mentioned in relation to the development of new capabilities or opportunities to relate existing ones in more complex ways. For example, one candidate commented "My success was a result of my ability to combine nursing knowledge with management knowledge and apply it to work-based problems in a pragmatic way" [7f].

Motivation to succeed

Practitioners also discussed becoming capable in terms of personal influences that motivated them to succeed. Five explicitly stated their long-term interest in their particular field, for example, the development of a "special feeling" for the chosen field at the age of thirteen [21m], or that a practitioner and his chosen field had been "soul mates for almost forty years" [26m]. For many other practitioners this passion for, or commitment to, their field was apparent from the number and variety of professional challenges they undertook. Personal experiences, sometimes from childhood, were also cited by a quarter of practitioners as being important in the motivation to succeed professionally, for example, "being branded a failure at school" [4m] or the experience of a loss of identity following the ending of a first career [6f].

The determination to develop professional expertise and to become capable practitioners was also expressed in other ways. Two thirds of practitioners alluded to significant turning points, for example, "I started on a more acute journey of self-awareness, a process brought about by a significant personal crisis" [13m]. Such events effected a shift in practitioners' values or perceptions of their work, for example, in their ethical understanding, inter-cultural awareness or problem solving strategies. These amounted to significant insights which prompted changes in working practice.

The willingness to initiate self development was also an important theme in practitioners' motivation to succeed, for example, "my professional … capabilities continued to develop as I continued to choose to work … where staff development was given priority" [13m]. Several practitioners cited professional or educational courses as significant sources of professional learning, for example, "completing the Masters degree was another turning point in my life. It provided the underpinning theory and knowledge base that I lacked" [10f].

Relation to others

The importance of "critical communities" [27f], or what one practitioner called "professional socialisation" [5m], was a universal theme in practitioners' accounts of becoming capable.

The Reviews frequently presented networking as an important factor in this regard. The development of contacts was likened in one case to "throwing pebbles in a pool. Each pebble creates circular waves which criss cross with others… which can open the door to new business as clients impressed by the service recommend one to their friends and business colleagues" [25m]. Another factor, described in some form by all practitioners, was team working and collaboration. For example, "I have had to learn to work with a range of professionals… taking into account their contexts" [24f]; and "my own learning curve took a sharp rise as a result of this interchange of ideas, facts and experience - I was able to benefit immensely from being part of the select team responsible for … training for the next twenty years" [3m]. The experience of taking the lead, formally and informally, was also discussed very widely, for its effect in becoming capable, for example, "I learnt, albeit slowly, that all stakeholders need to be involved, motivated and communicated with on a regular basis if the team were to share in the processes of working together" [4m].

Another widely discussed aspect of becoming capable, particularly in the context of later professional development, was the dissemination of knowledge acquired during the course of the career. For example, "In the course of the last twenty years I have had ample opportunity to express my thoughts and share my experiences … I have been involved regularly in the process of conceiving, writing and preparing guides and manuals… I have written probably over a hundred articles … and given a hundred lectures or talks or participated in different panels of experts" [26m]. Practitioners emphasised requests to share their expertise, whether it was in the form of consultancy, lecturing or writing additional to core role, as a demonstration of the capability they had achieved. For all practitioners, this emphasis on dissemination was going to be furthered in some form in the doctoral project. Though the outcome of some projects was to be the establishing of new teams, policies or educational or training programmes, six stated in their Reviews that they intended their project to be publishable as a book or series of articles. For others, the project was likely to lead to publication in a revised form, with the aim of disseminating accrued professional knowledge to a range of audiences.

It seems clear that there were multiple influences on how practitioners' became capable, both from within their professional sphere (such as working at the interface of several fields) and from beyond it (such as juggling work and family commitments). In all accounts, practitioners approached the issue of how they had become capable from a range of angles, highlighting both its complexity and its ongoing nature.

Conclusions

The ways in which practitioners described being capable were characterised by both similarities and differences. The similarities related to the outer dimensions of change and taking the lead, and to some commonality in the inner dimensions in themes such as self-direction, self-management, and commitment to a personal agenda, as well as to a lesser extent practical management, working with people, and thinking effectively. However, at a level of detail the actual skills and abilities described or intimated in the accounts varied quite widely between individuals, even when practitioners' achievements were in a broadly similar field or were of a similar kind. Assuming the accounts are reasonably truthful, this suggests that different people may

achieve equally capable results in comparable situations through bringing to bear different combinations of skills and abilities. Several of the Reviews support this directly in candidates' self-reflection on how they have drawn on strengths and worked around limitations in order to achieve valued goals.

In terms of conceptualising capability, this suggests that it may be helpful to think of capability as an 'envelope' or complex bundle of abilities and attributes which is personal to individual practitioners, and which is exercised in equally personal ways in relevant contexts. While there are some common themes which appear useful - the 'envelope' is likely to contain abilities relevant to self-direction, initiating or managing change, and taking a leading role (in whatever form is appropriate) - the accounts do not support a normative approach to capability such as using a framework of competencies or attributes. As Brown & McCartney (1999) argue, it is far easier to recognise capability than to measure or define it, and there is a sense in which it can only be seen "in its reflection" (ibid, Lester 1999).

In practitioners' discussions of their development, three kinds of factors appeared central to the development of high-level capability: the presence of opportunities and resources for personal and professional growth, in many cases events or circumstances which provided turning-points or spurs to action, and not least practitioners' own dispositions and motivations to succeed or change. Opportunities and resources - such as the presence of mentors and communities of practice, opportunities to try out new ideas or engage with complex problems, and opportunities to express thoughts and share experiences - may be present in organisational or community environments, or may be largely created or sought out by the practitioner. Turning-points were frequently serendipitous, and although some were effectively engineered by practitioners (e.g. in joining a postgraduate course or making a career-change decision), the effects were not always predictable. While dispositions and motivations suggest more personal origins, in at least some of the accounts it is clear that significant events can lead to fairly fundamental changes in attitude which result in an expansion in capability.

Implications for programme specification

These findings have implications for the planning of courses where the development of professional capability is the core educational endeavour. First, they suggest that capability cannot be defined too closely: there is unlikely to be a formula of competencies or abilities which add up to capable practice. Instead, sufficient scope is needed to enable support for the development and expansion of a capability 'envelope' which is appropriate to the individual and his or her context. Secondly, they demonstrate the central position of experiential learning in the development of high-level capability. As Schön (op. cit.), Burgess (1986) and others have pointed out, frontloading classroom-based technical-rational knowledge is insufficient for the on-the-job requirements of professional life. In terms of opportunities and resources, events or turning-points, and dispositions and motivations, programmes can seek to engage with practitioners' experiences to date, as well as providing the kinds of resources and interactions which engage them in purposeful development towards valued goals. To deliberately set out to provide turning-points and influence motivations is unlikely to succeed, but it is realistic to provide a vehicle where the

level and depth of engagement is conducive to facilitating paradigm-shifts and changes in awareness.

In the case of the Middlesex DProf, the programme seeks to acknowledge the ongoing and experiential nature of the development of professional capability by structuring the programme around work based learning - i.e. learning through 'live' research and development work which the practitioner is carrying out in his or her working context. Consequently, the programme begins with a reflective review as discussed in this paper, and ends with the implementation of a major project within the candidate's field of activity. While much of the resource for the individual practitioner's programme comes from personal experience and from the work environment, the university provides structure and guidance (in the form of an allocated adviser and academic consultants) designed to aid critical and creative engagement with project and work-based activity. The programme also offers, through regular seminars and contact between candidates, access to a critical community and opportunity to express thoughts and share experiences (including through publication) beyond the candidate's current community of practice.

It is critical in this kind of programme that the way 'doctoralness' (or for that matter Master's or any other level) is described, particularly through any criteria or standards which are applied, is rooted in a notion of capability which relates directly into practitioners' real-world concerns and reflects the practical nature of the learning which will be undertaken. For instance, candidates for the DProf need to show that they can work within "complex, unpredictable, specialised work contexts requiring innovative study, which will involves exploring current limits of knowledge, in particular interdisciplinary approaches and understanding" (National Centre for Work Based Learning Partnerships 1999). This approach seeks on the one hand to avoid assuming that high-level work is necessarily academic, while on the other steering clear of conflating complexity with responsibility or work role.

The way capability is constructed by the practitioners who contributed to the study, and the central role of experience and practice to their becoming (more) capable, point to a need to move away from traditional designs if doctoral and other high-level programmes are to be effective in enhancing high-level practical capability. These programmes will need to assist practitioner-learners to engage with the "swampy lowland" of practice (Schön 1987), with "messes" (Ackoff 1974) and with "wicked problems" (Rittel & Webber 1984) rather than with discipline-based curricula and research topics, while maintaining clarity about how the level expected of a doctorate applies into practical contexts.

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