CHAPTER 21

Inputs and Outcomes:
The Experience of Independent Study at the North East London Polytechnic[1]

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There is an awful truthfulness about independent study. It is about yourself and there is no getting away from it. (Former student)

Introduction

In 1974, the North East London Polytechnic (NELP) gained approval from the UK body then responsible for quality control in higher education for a course that had no specified content, no prescribed reading lists, no timetables, and no formal examinations. The course proposal consisted of a rationale, a set of procedures and criteria for validating programmes of study prepared by students themselves, and arrangements for the provision of specialist supervision and basic skill support. Students had to plan and negotiate approval for their own programmes leading to the new award, thus turning traditional practice of course design and control on its head.

Although capability objectives were explicit in but few of the papers prepared while the programme was being developed, most were (perhaps intentionally) sufficiently ambiguous to be capable of being read as if the programme had such an orientation. But the programme was not only unusual in its (potential) objectives and manner of working; it also sought to attract students who would have had difficulty gaining entrance to, and persisting in, traditional university courses.

For these reasons, among others, a great deal of time was set aside to provide students with opportunities to think about themselves, how to get what they wanted from the programme, and how to justify any claim that they had done it. We will return to these procedures in a moment, but first it is desirable to say a little more about the emerging concept of capability that informed the development of the programme.
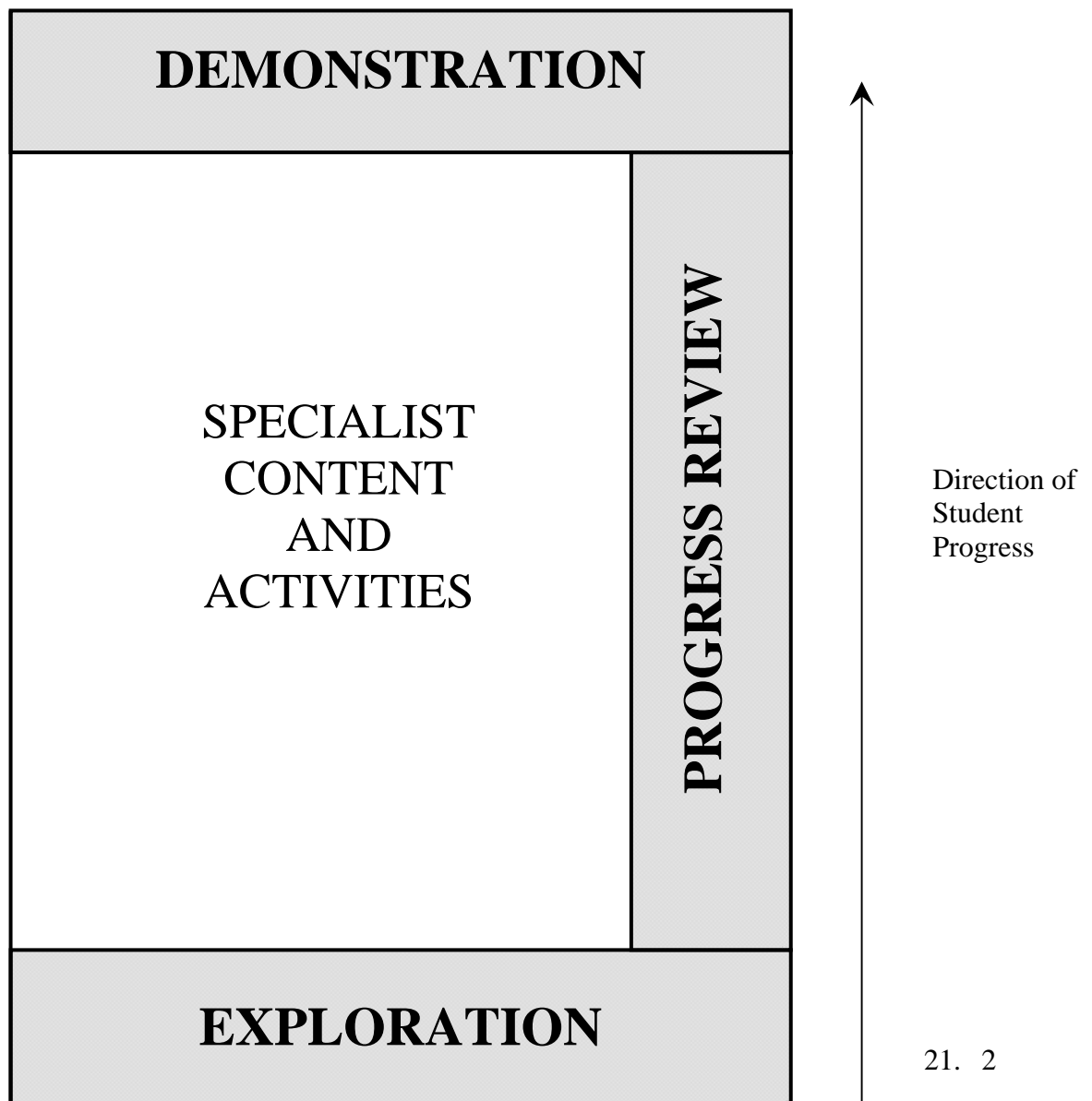
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[1] This chapter is a compilation of extracts from *Capability and Quality in Higher Education,* edited by John Stephenson and Mantz Yorke (London: Kogan Page, 1998) and John Stephenson's Professorial Lecture delivered in 1990. In the latter, he summarised the results from a major research project on the student experience of independent study. We have preserved the style of the latter, as an illustrated lecture, although it jars slightly with the tone of the earlier part of the chapter. The material from the Kogan Page book is © Kogan Page and is reproduced with their permission.

The Underlying Concept of Capability

The concept of capability which underlay the NELP programme first came to more general notice with the publication of its *Capability Manifesto* by the Royal Society for Arts in 1980. This focused on the limited value of education when it is seen solely as the pursuit of knowledge and intellectual skills for their own sake. "Individuals, industry and society as a whole benefit," the *Manifesto* asserted, "when all of us have the capacity to be effective in our personal, social and working lives." Capability was viewed an all-round human quality, observable in what Weaver (1994) described as the ability to engage appropriately and sensitively in "purposive and sensible" action, not just only in familiar and highly focused specialist contexts but also in response to new and changing circumstances.

Capability is not just about skills and knowledge. Taking effective and appropriate action within unfamiliar and changing circumstances involves ethics, judgements, the self-confidence to take risks, and a commitment to learn from the experience. A capable person has culture, in the sense of being able to "decide between goodness and wickedness or between beauty and ugliness" (Weaver, 1994).

Figure 21.1
Capability Envelope

DEMONSTRATION

SPECIALIST CONTENT AND ACTIVITIES

PROGRESS REVIEW

Direction of Student Progress

EXPLORATION

Delivering Student Capability In Higher Education

Delivering student capability in higher education has major implications for the culture, structures, procedures, practices, and management of universities and their programmes of study. The organisational arrangements required to deliver capability-oriented educational programmes have more recently (Stephenson & Yorke, 1998) been described as the "Capability Envelope" (Figure 21.1). This sets out to:

- Give students responsibility to formulate and manage their own *strategic educational development* according to their distinctive circumstances and longer-term aspirations.
- Ensure that students develop intellectual, specialist, and personal skills and qualities relevant to effective performance in life and at work.
- Meet the needs of key stakeholders such as professional bodies, custodians of academic standards, future clients (in the case of vocationally oriented programmes), and the community at large.
- Where necessary, accommodate current modes of delivery of specialist content.
- Accommodate a wide range of resources and learning opportunities and the greater availability of resources through electronic and other media in the community and at work.
- Create arrangements that can be implemented within the specialist and general resource constraints of higher education.

The Capability Envelope is a sequence of stages formally established as part of the total programme and is wrapped around the specialist content. The Envelope begins with an **Exploration Stage,** in which students are helped to plan and negotiate approval for their programmes of study; continues with a **Progress Review Stage** running through the main study phase, in which students are helped to monitor and review their progress; and ends with a **Demonstration Stage,** in which students show what they have learnt through its application to real situations relevant to their intended career.

Each of these three stages relates to the other two, giving an overall coherent structure to the learners' programme of development which is managed by the learner. The Exploration Stage builds on the students' prior experience and looks ahead beyond the completion of the programme. The Progress Review Stage monitors progress according to the plans that emerge from the Exploration Stage and facilitates changes in response to experience and evolving aspirations. What is demonstrated at the end of the programme is what was planned at the beginning or renegotiated on the way. A final critical review of the whole process provides a basis for the students' further plans. The Capability Envelope provides both a structure and a process for the autonomous management of lifelong learning, whether on campus, at work, or in life generally. People who adopt the central features of the Envelope as a habit are, we argue, independently capable.

Exploration Stage

Like explorers, autonomous learners need to construct a map of the terrain, acquire a set of tools by which to navigate, be aware of where they are starting from, and have some notion of a possible destination. The purpose of the Exploration Stage is to help students to prepare plans for the rest of their programme and to secure academic registration of those plans as leading to an approved qualification.

In order to prepare plans that meet the demanding requirements of registration,

learners need with the support of institutional staff to:

- appraise their experience and become aware of their strengths and weaknesses,
- explore their career or other long-term aspirations,
- identify the specialist expertise and personal skills and qualities they will need in order to achieve those aspirations,
- plan an appropriate programme of learning activities,
- give thought to how they will demonstrate the relevance of what they have learned to their intended career or employment, and
- become aware of the general requirements of the award for which they are working.

The above activities can be conducted in peer groups with tutor supervision supported by a programme of exploratory activities, specialist inputs, and contacts with key stakeholders. In professional courses such as medicine and civil engineering, for instance, dialogue with professional practitioners at these early stages is essential. Career advisers also have a key role to play. Once likely areas of study have been identified, projects, placements, or assignments can be used to help students become familiar with key concepts and essential components and to provide some initial exposure to the good practice that they are aiming to attain.

The interests of key stakeholders, such as professional bodies and employer groups, and the general requirements of the university for the level of the intended award, can be accommodated formally through the general criteria for the approval of student plans and the composition of the groups charged with judging the appropriateness of those plans. Non-negotiable content, such as formal legal requirements for some professional courses, can be part of the criteria for approval, provided students have the right to show where, how, and at what stage such requirements will be demonstrated within the programme as a whole.

The amount of time needed for an Exploration Stage will depend upon the scale of the programme being prepared. For whole degree programmes, it can last 10 to 12 weeks. For shorter one-year programmes, anything from two to four weeks of intensive activity may suffice.

The Exploration Stage can be a valuable learning experience in its own right for which credit can and should be given. Much of this learning relates to personal qualities that come from the experience of taking responsibility within an uncertain environment The process of planning and negotiation promotes the development of general and specialist skills and an understanding of the scope, key features, and relevance of the area of study.

Progress Review Stage

Once programmes are approved and running, students need time and opportunity to monitor their progress, review their aspirations in the light of experience, and judge the continuing relevance of their studies to those aspirations. "Learning sets" are particularly useful for these purposes; they provide students with opportunities for dialogue, intellectual challenge, personal support, and exchange of experience with peers.

The formal agenda for these sets can include:

- the preparation of learning logs or personal reviews of learning,
- the renegotiation or clarification of plans in response to experience,
- preparation of student feedback on the relevance of particular learning activities provided by the institution,
- formulation of demands that the institution provide different things,
- negotiation of access to remedial assistance,
- attention to conceptual and practical issues related to the final demonstration of

learning, and
- efforts to raise students' awareness of the emotional, intellectual, and practical aspects of taking responsibility for managing their own development.

The Capability Envelope provides time, space, and tutorial support for learning sets to meet at regular intervals throughout the students' programme. The frequency of supervised meetings can vary, but on a long programme (e.g., an undergraduate degree programme) once a month can be sufficient.

The Progress Review Stage is the main means through which students retain ownership of their programmes of study. As with the Exploration Stage, the Progress Review Stage provides opportunities for significant learning derived from both reflection on, and consolidation of, specialist material and in relation to their planned future. In recognition of this learning, students should receive credit towards their final award, thereby justifying the allocation of scarce resources to this valuable activity.

Demonstration Stage

In this stage, students are helped and given time and space to prepare a demonstration of **what they can do** as a result of the studies they have completed, allowing assessment to be based on the students' **integration and application** of component specialist skills and knowledge in the context of their intended vocational, personal or professional aspirations. The form of this demonstration of capability will be that which is most appropriate to the nature of the student's programme and can include a range of formats such as performances, exhibitions, project reports, and dissertations.

The NELP Experience of a Capability Approach

In 1984, 10 years after the NELP programme had been established and with over 1,000 students having passed through it, it seemed appropriate to ask questions about the effects the experience of independent study had had on the students themselves. t. A random selection of diplomats who were at least two years out of the Polytechnic were asked to evaluate, with the wisdom of hindsight, their experience of independent study in the context of their life histories to date. Two aspects emerged as key features of independent study: : motivation and the growth of capability.

Student Motivation

People who meet with independent study students invariably remark on their high level of motivation and their strong personal identification with their studies. Examination of their explanations of the reasons why they applied, why they persevered, and how they have benefited reveals a range of motivating factors mainly characterised by the personal benefit they most desired from their higher education. Pursuit of these personal benefits is all embracing, impinging on all aspects of students' interactions with their programmes and the polytechnic. They have the status of being the students' primary needs.

Six primary needs were distinguished:
- Respect
- Identity
- Value
- Commitment
- Qualification
- Transformation

These different needs are first identifiable in students' reasons for applying. Need for **respect** is illustrated by those who feel that their educational qualifications, jobs, or personal circumstances do not accurately present their true potential and ability to the outside world. Phil told me that he was tired of people explaining long words to him just because he was a window-cleaner. He could feel people saying "Christ, let's throw clods of earth at him" whenever they saw him with his ladder. Meryl felt patronised by the professionally qualified people for whom she worked as a secretary. Both Phil and Meryl needed the respect they felt would come from participation in higher education and having recognised educational achievement. Any higher education course would do.

Typical of those with a need for **identity** was Tim, who had spent many years doing a range of jobs but could not see how he related to any one of them. Jean did not dare to reveal or trust her real interest in poetry, and Brian wanted a chance to look around for something to which he could commit himself. They wanted the chance to "sort themselves out."

The need for **value** is felt by students who have built up some expertise largely by their own efforts. They need time to take stock or make sense of their experience and to have it recognised. Bob felt that people saying "Oh, he's self taught" did not adequately recognise his artistic ability, and Delia was looking for "some theory, to have a central focus" for her experiences as a community worker.

The need for **commitment** is felt by those who know the future they want for themselves, and they want the opportunity to make it happen, to absorb themselves in their new direction. Gary turned down a scholarship to Oxford because he could not see its relevance. He felt that Independent Studies at NELP would help him become what he wanted to become.

Qualifications are to some extent relevant to all groups, but for some, the need for a qualification dominates all other considerations. Paul applied because it was the only way he could get a qualification in computing. The School of Independent Study provided him with a back-door entrance. He had been turned down for an Higher National Diploma because he had no qualifications; he is now head of the computer department in a City of London merchant bank.

The need for **transformation** involves all aspects of students' lives. These students feel they are severely constrained by circumstances and are looking to raise the level of their whole quality of life, including their careers. Julie, at the age of 18, felt totally dominated by her parents; Doreen was constantly put down by her boyfriend and employers. Each needed to break out.

Those with needs for respect or qualification would have preferred a conventional course. At that time, one was not available. This was also true to some extent for those looking for transformation.

It is likely that these highly personal needs can be found amongst any group of students. However, the research suggested that independent study makes two things possible. It makes it possible for students to acknowledge the importance of such personal needs, and, more importantly, it enables students themselves to take actions that ensure those needs can be met through their programmes of study.

With the absence of predetermined content, independent study students find themselves, in many cases reluctantly (as we shall see), in the position of having to argue for and justify what they want to do and to do so on the basis of their own distinctive experience and longer-term ambitions. This aspect of the planning of independent study programmes puts students in touch with a life-change perspective to their education and requires them to take an active rather than a passive role in the satisfaction of their needs as part of that life-change process. As a consequence, it is possible to characterise students' experiences by the actions they take in meeting their needs.

Students may be said to belong to the following categories:
Earners of Respect
Searchers For Identity
Provers of Value
Builders of Commitment
Takers of Qualifications
Transformers

Independent study students are not able to be passive receivers. For instance, commitment has to be built, not received. Identity has to be searched for, not received. Respect has to be earned, not received. Value has to be proved, not received. Qualifications are taken, not received. Transformation has to be initiated and carried out, not received. The boldfaced words (e.g. **earners**) characterise the nature of different student interactions with their programmes and the Polytechnic. Independent study students are not just students; they are builders, provers, earners, takers, searchers, or transformers.

The importance of these different motivations is seen when comparing the experiences of different students. Compare these reactions to the experience of planning their own programmes:

First, the **builders** of commitment: Gary found it "quite exciting" to be "responsible for getting it together," and validation of his proposed programme made him feel "educationally supported" in what he wanted to do and made him feel "enormously privileged". He was building his own future and the system was helping him do it.

In stark contrast, the **takers** found the business of planning to be "a chore," and an unnecessary "waste of time". This was Moira's view: "I just wanted to get on with it but we had to play the system. I was putting things down just to get the Statement (contract) through." When her programme was validated, Moira rejoiced because "it meant the headache had stopped" and she could at last get on with her work.

Having to plan their own courses put great pressure on the **searchers** of identity. They wanted to commit themselves to something but did not know to what. This was Brian's experience:

> *It helped me clarify the path that my life had taken to that present point . . . it was a kind of catharsis, getting it out of my system . . . The process of validation was saying something about me, in that I'd clarified what it was that I wanted to do, and that felt pretty good. It was almost like a liberating experience.*

Yet a further contrast can be seen with the **earners** of respect. They needed to be seen to be succeeding in higher education, so they planned courses according to the subjects most likely to lead to their success. "Find a reasonable tutor, one who was available and who told you what to do," seemed to be their major concern at that time. Validation of their proposals was important because it meant they had passed a Part One and were still on the course. Validation of their proposal also meant that they were being taken seriously.

Similar variations can be seen in the way students interact with their tutors, judge their own progress, and prepare for their assessments. I can give only the briefest flavour.

The takers, for instance, liked it best when their tutors gave them assignments and feedback directly relevant to getting their qualification. They leave as soon as they have the qualification that will take them forward.

Earners of respect liked getting good grades for their assignments, being involved in discussion and, above all, being taken seriously by tutors and other students. Because the Diploma in Higher Education is not recognised amongst their acquaintances, they proceed to the Degree. If that is not recognised, they proceed to a Masters Degree. When they feel generally respected for their ability and worth, they begin to look for something to which

they can commit themselves.

Searchers of identity are very wary of getting too engrossed into a programme until they have tested it out as being what they really want. Formal assignments and grades do not help the searchers as much as successfully putting a possible identity to the test. Once an identity is found, progress is dramatic. Jean, the closet poet, described the most significant moment of her whole independent study experience thus:

> I put forward the proposal that I wanted to do my own poetry and he (my tutor) was very nasty and he said "give me your poetry" and that was the first time ever that I had handed it over to someone who wasn't sympathetic. It was one of the biggest risks I had ever taken.
>
> I knew he had it in him to turn round and say "This is crap." He didn't. He said "Thank goodness, you CAN write poetry.

With this confirmation, Jean progressed very rapidly and gained a degree in her own poetry. She is now publishing her work and is using poetry writing as an aid to the dying.

Builders judge their own progress in the field for which they are preparing themselves. Tutors are useful in helping them talk things through. Gary, for instance, became impatient with having to complete his programme once he realised that he had acquired the skills he needed in order to practice his new vocation.

The significance of all this is threefold:

First, students with very different needs are able to use independent study for their own purposes, and to get what they want out of it. Flexibility relates to student need as much as to content.

Second, student motivation is strong because students are able to relate their studies, and how they pursue them, to their own personal needs;

Third, awareness of the characteristics of different primary needs can help tutors and students get the most out of their interactions. The kind of feedback most useful for a taker, for instance, would not be too helpful to a searcher.

The Internal Dimension

What sense can be made of these different kinds of experience? What light do they shed on the underlying processes of independent study?

At first sight, it might appear that the differences between students can be characterised as being "intrinsic" or "extrinsic." To some extent that is right, but only up to a point. There are two different aspects:

1. the focus of reference and
2. the focus of development,

each of which has an internal and an external dimension, as illustrated in the diagram below (Figure 21.2).
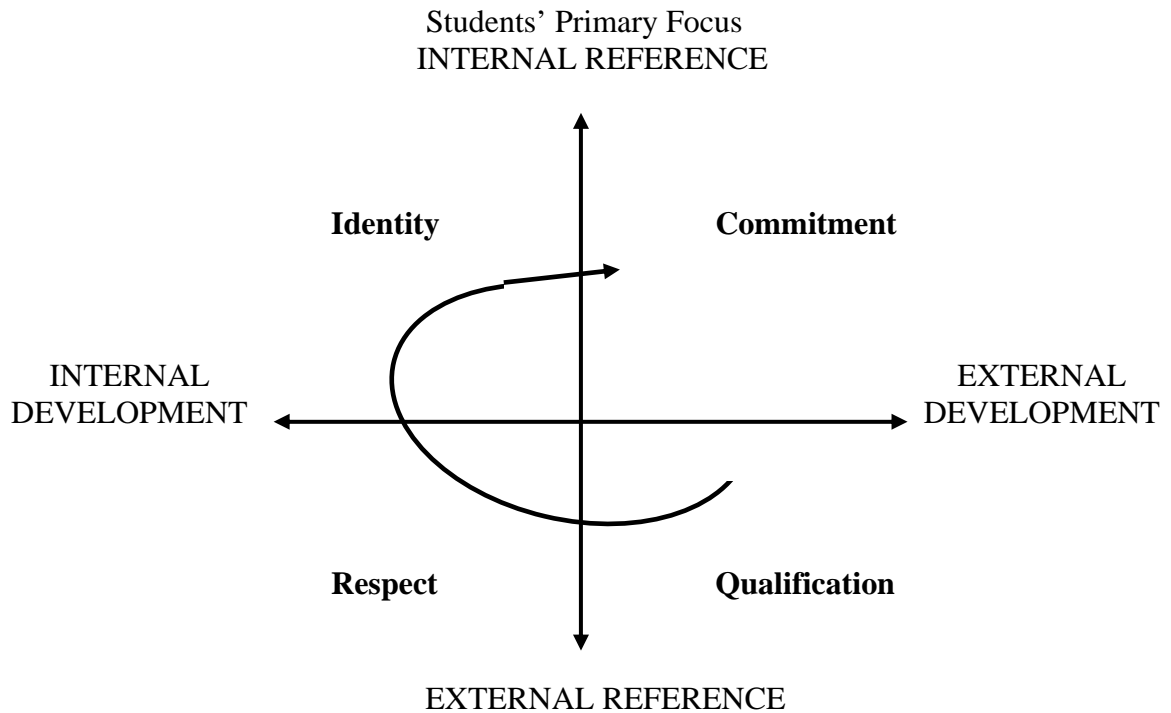
The **focus of development** refers to the general purpose of the student. An **internal focus of development**, for instance, refers to a concern about changing the self. An **external focus of development** refers to a concern to develop skills and knowledge for some outward context or application.

Figure 21.2
Students' Primary Focus Grid

INTERNAL REFERENCE

<div align="center">

INTERNAL
DEVELOPMENT ———————————————————— EXTERNAL
DEVELOPMENT

</div>

EXTERNAL REFERENCE
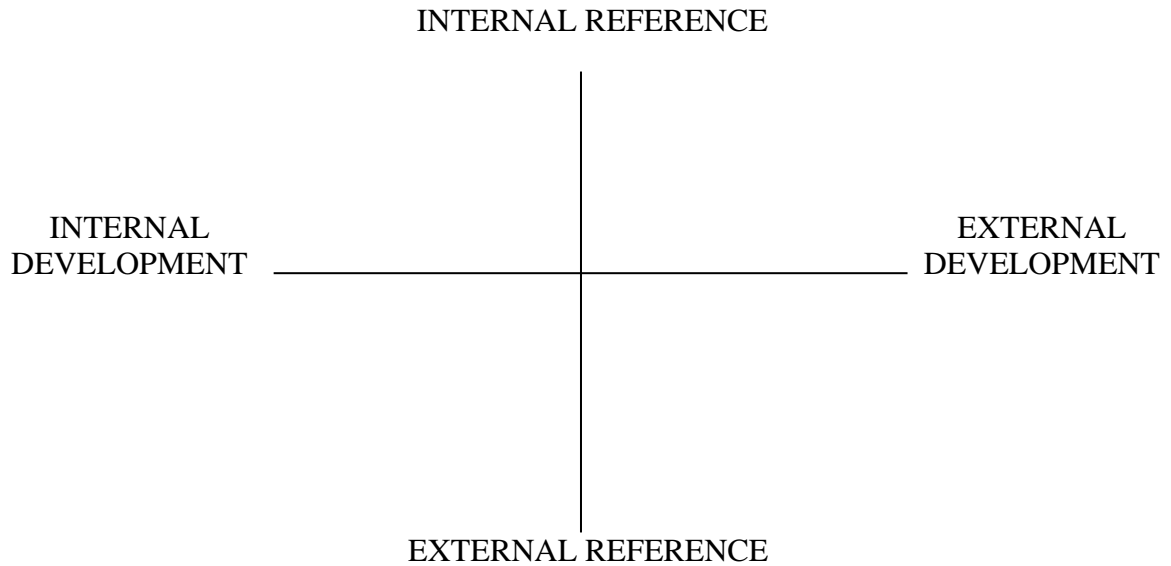
The **focus of reference** refers to a student's general inclination towards self-direction or towards the direction or opinions of others.

Figure 21.3
Motivational Types According To Students' Primary Focus

Students' Primary Focus
INTERNAL REFERENCE

Identity   **Commitment**

INTERNAL
DEVELOPMENT   EXTERNAL
                               DEVELOPMENT

Respect   **Qualification**

EXTERNAL REFERENCE

⟶ = Path of transformers   21. 9

When they are presented in a grid form, there are four basic general student orientations. It is possible to place each of the student styles within the grid (Figure 21.3).

Figure 21.3 shows, for instance, that whilst both commitment and qualification are about the external application of skills and knowledge, the essential difference between them is that commitment involves much more of an internal focus of reference than does a concern for qualifications alone.

Similarly, the concern for identity and the concern for respect are both about the internal development of the student. The qualitative differences between the experiences of the searcher and the earner are accounted for by their different focus of reference.

Concern for proving the value of your own experience involves both an external and an internal focus of development because the students concerned are so closely identified with their own expertise. The transformers move rapidly from section to section.

The qualification sector is the only sector without any internal dimension, either of reference or of development. The takers of qualifications were the students who most wanted to join a conventional course, if only they could find a conventional course to take them.

The intriguing question is whether conventional courses are able to meet needs other than the need for qualification. Do people who are strongly internally referenced keep away from education? Do they suppress their preference for self-direction or use it within the non-curriculum activities such as the student union? Do conventional courses in effect persuade people that education is not about respect, identity commitment, value, and transformation?

The student focus grid (Figure 21.2)--without the descriptive labels of respect, identity, and so forth--is a very useful tool to help students explore their own motivation. Post-graduate students in another institution were able to plot their own general disposition, and very few placed themselves in the external quarter.

It would be an interesting exercise to see how students generally in the university might rate themselves. There may be many who are internally referenced but who have learned to associate education with external reference behaviour. They must either endure it or not bother at all.

There is one further important observation to make about the internal/external dimension. As the students moved through their programmes, whether internally or externally referenced, they had no option but to take responsibility for some of their work, particularly the preparation of material for their own assessment. Students who were already internally referenced became more confident in themselves; those who were externally referenced discovered they could also be internally referenced. The transformers demonstrate this tendency most dramatically, but it applies to most of the students in the sample. The requirement that students should take responsibility gives students the experience of taking responsibility. There is a net movement towards the internally referenced.

The drift to an internal focus of reference through their independent studies programmes can be seen in the experiences of those former independent study students who move into conventionally taught courses.

Fiona (a builder of commitment), for instance, said of her teachers' certificate course that students "weren't allowed any self-expression or control"; she enlisted the help of a neighbouring university in organising a questionnaire to help her course to cater "for the needs of the students." Delia, a prover, found her university post-graduate diploma programme in psychology "atrocious"; she could learn it better herself. Doreen, a transformer, found her post-graduate professional conversion course "frustrating. . . a straitjacket . . .work that I had already done to a greater depth. I arranged my own alternative." Jim, a transformer, describes his experiences on a Certificate for Qualification in

Social Work(CQSW) course as follows:

> *It was a very structured course. I told them "There's no way I'm going to stick through lectures" and the tutor said "If you are prepared to take the risk, what we will do is we will give you an extension from lectures for a whole term. If at the end of that term all your essay marks are O.K., you do it in any way you want." I got A's and B's in all of them.*

More interesting and significant is the experience of those who were originally strongly externally referenced on joining the diploma course. Moira, as a taker, was one of those who said on entry onto the programme "I would have preferred a set course." She was pleased to have transferred to "a normal course at last" for her subsequent education. However, the culture of student control that she had previously resisted had obviously rubbed off on her because she soon discovered that "lectures. . . were not the most efficient use of our time" and that she "would have chosen a more varied reading list" than the one given to her by her tutors. She then realised that it was a matter of her "extracting the value of what I am doing, for my needs, and what I need to learn." She got a first-class honours degree. Sally, an earner, found that her fellow MA students in a major university, faced with establishing the independence necessary for the production of a dissertation, were "sort of worried because they wanted help . . . I knew what I had to do and just got on with it. . . .I know it's because of the independent study."

A further indication of the development of internal reference comes from comparing students' current self-perceptions and their self-perceptions prior to applying to the programme. Figure 21.4 shows how they feel their level of independence and how their commitment to what they are doing have changed as a result of their independent study.

In the self-perception grid, every one of the first 24 students interviewed reported feeling more independent as a result of their independent study. Some of them, mainly the transformers, report a dramatic increase in both independence and commitment. Others, mainly the earners of respect, report increases in independence but little growth in commitment.
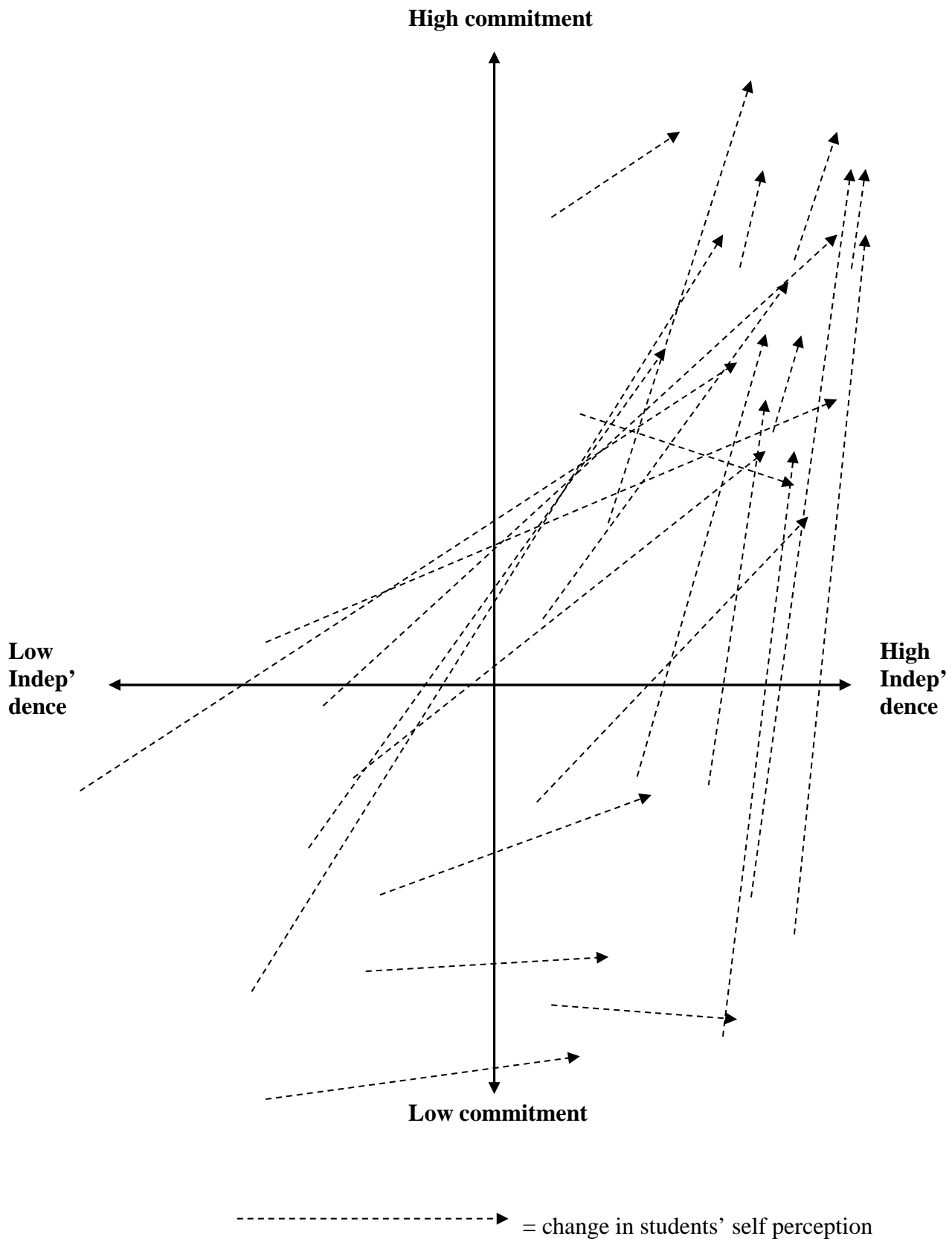
One student actually experienced a decrease in her commitment to artwork as a direct result of her independent study. Her tutor ignored her need to build her own commitment and imposed on her a programme designed to get her a qualification. Pushing her from an internal reference into the mould of the external reference reduced her commitment. Giving the externally referenced students experience of internal reference increases their independence and, in many cases, also increases their commitment.

The Development of Independent Capability

A dominant characteristic of former independent study students, hinted at in these brief cameos, is their strong belief in their own power to perform. Kenny is a director of a city company specialising in headhunting for accountants. His course was in underwater technology. He puts his success down to his insight that his job is not about accounting. It is about understanding the needs of individual people and organisations and being able to bring them together. Delia runs a refuge and rescue service for alcoholics. She has to secure funds, premises, and support from unsympathetic councils, and she has to train staff. She uses an adaptation of the Diploma in Higher Education planning activity as an effective means of getting clients to get a grip on themselves. Denny was denied entry to business studies courses so he designed his own. He now runs four separate businesses and is planning a major new investment. The Diploma in Higher Education gave him the "nerve" to give it a go. There are successful teachers and community workers, most of whom have or are securing promotion or positions of responsibility. One has recently made himself

unemployed, and the one whose experiences in art were unsatisfactory describes herself as working as a housewife. All the others are in paid or fee-earning activity.

Figure 21.4
Student Self Perceptions Pre and Post Independent Study

High commitment

Low
Indep'
dence

High
Indep'
dence

Low commitment

- - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - -▶ = change in students' self perception

Confidence in the power to take effective action seems to be a general outcome of independent study as shown by this selection of comments about their overall gain from their experience:

I don't think that anything is beyond me.

I have the confidence to do almost anything, to try almost anything.

I can cope with most things that people can throw at me now.

It's like finding a muscle you haven't used.

I know I can do it whatever it is . . . I think my personal power is now much higher.

I feel autonomous, much more confident in my own ability.

My level of confidence is based on fact, not myth. . . . Am much more in control.

I've got the confidence to actually do it as well.

I know now that when I make decisions I will actually carry them through and that I CAN carry them through.

I now know that I can really do it.

Confidence to do almost anything, to try almost anything.

A feeling of being able to get up and do something.

You can do what you want to do and not follow the sheep.

I know I can do it now.

I previously would not have had the nerve to do what I am doing.

Each of above statements represents students' own reflections on the overall value of their independent study experience. Closer analysis of students' fuller explanations of their confidence in their "power to perform" reveals three separate and interrelated components (Figure 21.5).

Figure 21.5
Three Components of Personal Power to Perform Components of Capability

Esteem

Knowledge and Skills

Values
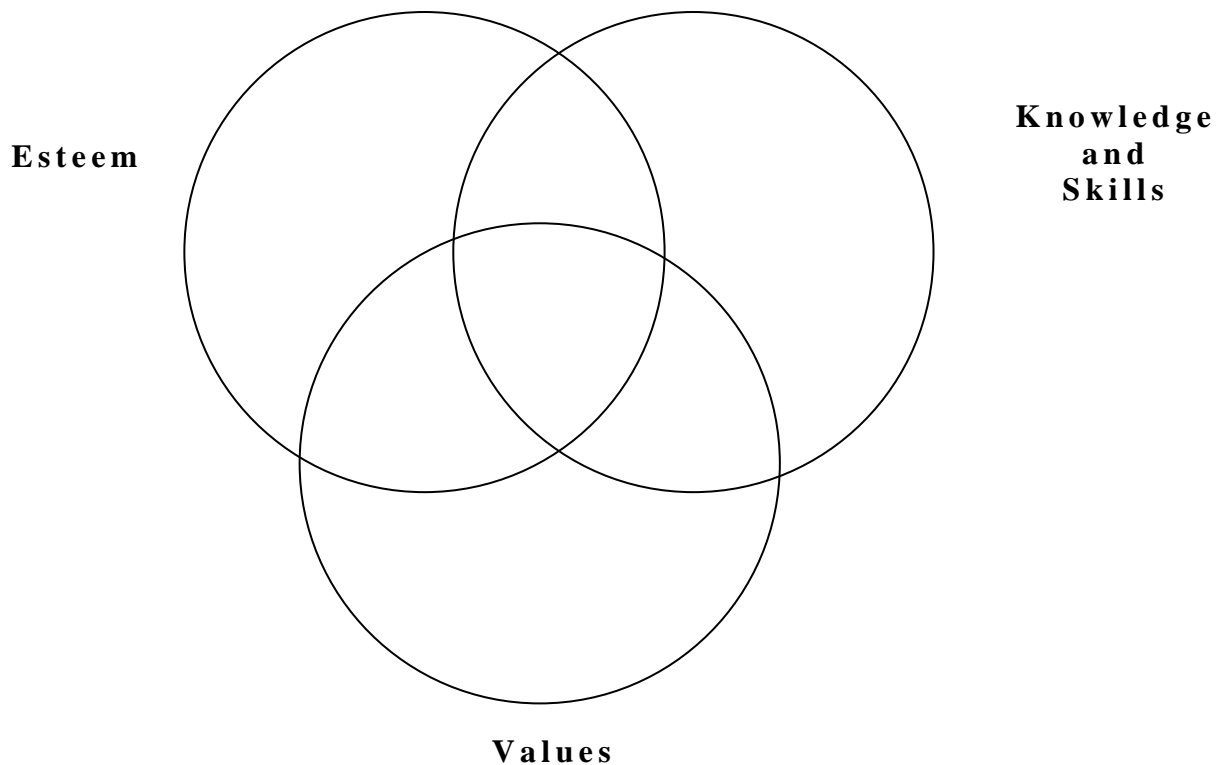
First, they have confidence in themselves as people; they have greatly enhanced **self-esteem** as illustrated by these statements by different students:

It has given me a lot more confidence to talk to people at different levels.

I'm more self-assured and confident.

I feel more able to instigate things . . . with people in authority.

Independent study gives you a certain feeling of self-worth.

I'm a lot more secure in myself . . . I have a higher opinion of myself.

It gives students formal acknowledgement of where they are.

I can now say no.

I can now look other people in the eye . . . I feel much better about myself.

(Independent study is) a means of helping people to value themselves.

I have the ability to criticise myself.

I do not feel threatened if I don't know something.

(I am) no longer feeling embarrassed about everything I did . . . Definitely self-esteem has come out of it.

Second, the students have confidence in their **judgements and values**: That is, they have confidence in their ability to make judgements, have opinions and to be decisive. Some more extracts from a range of students illustrate the point:-

I certainly express my opinions more freely.

I have a lot more confidence in my own ability and judgement.

It has allowed me to make my own decisions.

I am much clearer in what I want and what I don't want.

I am more ready to take a decision.

It built up my confidence in . . . trusting my judgement about things.

I am quite prepared to argue, whereas before I would get all timid.

I'm now much more confident to back my judgement and take things on.

As a person you feel you're independent, you're a free agent, you can decide for yourself.

I've learned how to cope with dilemmas.

I've got an opinion about world affairs.

Now I question a lot.

I have the ability to criticise myself--and I decide things for myself.

The third component of their personal power is confidence in the soundness and relevance of their **skills and knowledge**, and in their **ability to acquire new skills and knowledge when appropriate**. Here is a selection of the many statements students have made about their confidence in their ability to continue to learn through their own initiative:

It gave me the skills to acquire the information that I need at any given time for anything.

If I don't know something I know I can find it out.

(I can) decide priorities of what to learn and to pick out information.

Anything I want to know now I can teach myself.

I am more confident about finding things out for myself.

I enjoyed studying--I don't ever want to stop.

I enjoy working with others because that is one of the ways in which I learn.

All of these statements about esteem, values, skills, and knowledge have a distinct internal flavour about them. Collectively, they describe students who have an **independent capability**. They therefore chime with the earlier proposition that independent study promotes students' internal focus of reference. It seems appropriate, therefore, to speculate about what these three components might look like if they had an external focus of reference.

21. 14

Or, to put it another way, how does **independent capability** differ from **dependent capability**? Table 21.1 is one attempt to define the difference.

Table 21.1
Independent and Dependent Capability

|	Dependent Capability	Independent Capability
Knowledge and Skills	Received	Learned
	Tested by others	Self-monitored
	Relevance determined by others	Relevance negotiated by self
	Fragmented	Integrated
	Prescribed application	Adaptable and extendable
Esteem	Labels, status uniforms	Proved self-worth
	Recognised qualification	Confidence in own ability
	Failure = threat	Failure = opportunity
		Trust in intuition
Value	Priorities set by others	Can set own priorities
	Avoids judgements	Trust in own judgement

Though they may be highly skilled and knowledgeable, the **dependently capable** are likely to have acquired their expertise through instruction, training, and supervised practice, mastering known procedures or solutions that deal with predictable situations or problems. In totally new situations, where the context is unfamiliar or when entirely new problems appear, they will need re-training or strong guidance. They derive their esteem from their formal status, their certificated expertise, and the authority of those they represent. They aim to eliminate error by using tried and tested techniques; any failure is seen as a threat to their expertise. When unfamiliar situations or problems arise and judgements are needed, the dependently capable will seek guidance from superiors and will expect priorities to be set by those in authority.

At the other extreme, the **independently capable** are confident in their expertise and in their understanding of its internal interconnectedness. It has been learned, not given. Having been responsible for its acquisition, they know they can adapt or extend it when necessary. They have confidence in their own worth, both as individuals and as experts in their own right. With an inner confidence in themselves, one that is not dependent upon how others perceive them, they see error or failure as opportunity for learning, not as a threat.

They trust their intuition. When faced with unfamiliar situations, they are prepared to back their own judgements, even to take risks, in order to explore new ideas. They know they can learn from the experience.

The importance of being able to distinguish between dependent and independent capability can be shown as follows (Figure. 21.6).

Figure 21.6
Dependent and Independent Capability

Y= Dependent Capability

Z = Independent Capability
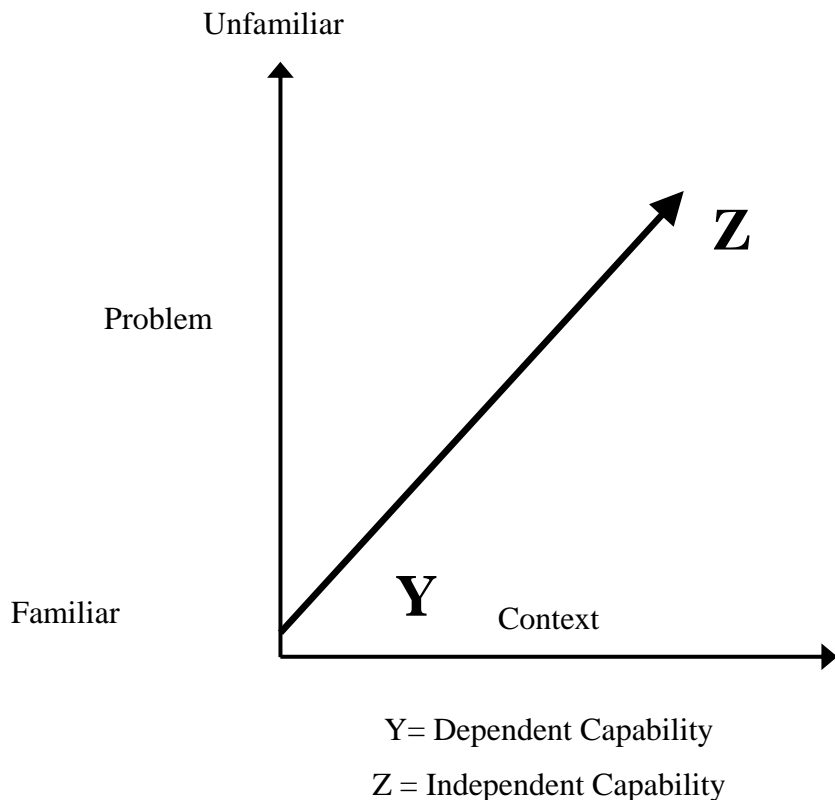
The capability required for Position Y is one that is able to use readily accessible information to service the needs of familiar situations having predictable problems. Such situations may even require a high degree of skill and considerable specialist knowledge, but once such skills and knowledge have been acquired their application is relatively straightforward.

As one moves away from the predictability ends of the problem/context axes there is a greater need for a more flexible and responsive capability, where one is able to make judgements, acquire new skills and knowledge, use the skills of others, and take calculated risks. There is a greater need for confidence in one's personal power to perform. The closer one is to Position Z, the greater the need for an independent capability.

The evidence from the students who completed their higher education by independent study suggests that their confidence in their own power to perform--that is, in their independent capability--derives directly from their experience of taking responsibility for their own development, for their own life change, for the satisfaction of deeply relevant personal needs, and for the acquisition of relevant skills and knowledge by their own efforts. They achieved all of these within the unfamiliar and demanding context of higher education.

In short, they proved they could take it on.

The students themselves explain how independent study is relevant to the development of their confidence in their power to perform:

It's the fact that you know that you did it.

I think the fact that you are actually required to input so much and rely on your own resources so much actually gives you much greater confidence about independence and ability to actually fend for yourself.

It works because you have to cope with it.

Evidence of how independent study helps with learning is shown by the freedom students feel to make and learn from mistakes and the experience it gives of being responsible for their own learning:

It gave a great space to make mistakes again, to rebuild a confidence.

The opportunity to fail--that's where learning takes place . . . it is acceptable to learn from mistakes.

(What makes it work?)--the person taking responsibility for their own learning--it places much more importance on learning than teaching. It was the first formalised kind of programme I had done where it was really valid to learn in that way.

You have to get off your backside and go and find out and it wasn't that difficult . . . You learn from it . . . You don't get supervision, you get help.

These comments on learning from mistakes present an interesting challenge. Being at ease with risking getting something wrong on the grounds that such experience is the basis of learning is an essential feature of survival in position Z. It would be interesting to discover the extent to which higher education programmes actually deny students opportunities to learn from mistakes. How many courses present their students with tightly defined content, prescriptive reading lists, carefully planned notes, and lectures directly focused on the questions known to be in the examination paper? How many work on the proposition that students must be protected at all cost from the risk of failure, and must be nurtured every step of the way? Is there more concern for lecturers' "pass-rates" than for the education of students?

The kind of experiences described in this study are not the experiences of therapy, as some critics have suggested. They are experiences of personal development through education, tested within what is normally seen to be the business of higher education, namely the pursuit of excellence. None of the students' primary needs can be met to the satisfaction of the students themselves without rigorous scrutiny of their own achievements. Respect is best earned, for instance, when the students themselves know they have achieved at least the levels achieved by other graduates, not at some compensatory level. Value, identity, and commitment are best tested against the rigours of the field itself, the reactions of clients, the recognition of acknowledged experts, or even the publication of their work. Qualifications have to be tradable on the open market. The most productive environment for independent study is one that combines mutual support with rigour and high aspiration.

Some Implications for Higher Education

Any society in which progress and change are common features requires its people to be independently capable. It should be a distinctive role of higher education to prepare people with real capacity for managing and coping with change and uncertainty. The speed of technological, economic, and social change means our jobs and circumstances change more frequently and less predictably than before. The explosion in the expansion of specialist knowledge (which is doubling every eight years by one estimate), puts a premium on giving

people confidence in their own ability to learn and shows how futile it is to try to sustain the formal-transmission-of-knowledge-model of higher education. Major employers now recognise the importance of these personal qualities of independent capability in their graduate recruitment. They also know they do not find them in the normal round of graduate recruitment. One of the world's largest business companies no longer seeks to recruit graduates of business studies programmes to its higher positions because they find them lacking in flexibility, openness, and the ability to continue learning for themselves.

At a series of seminars at the RSA organised in 1988 for chairs of leading companies, vice-chancellors and polytechnic directors, the overwhelming consensus was that the time was now right for higher education to find more ways of helping more students develop the qualities of independent capability.

Agreeing that graduates should be independently capable is one thing. Knowing how to help them develop such qualities is another. Many institutions are attempting to meet the need by "bolt-on" activities on the assumption that the skills and qualities of personal capability can be achieved as extras, using traditional teacher-student relationships. Students, it is argued by advocates of this approach, can be helped to cope with problems by being given problems to cope with--as exercises. Students can be helped to learn how to learn by being given instruction in learning methods. Values clarification can be pursued within the context of teacher-organised seminars.

The problem with this approach is that it assumes that possession of skills is in itself enough. It misses entirely the point about the development of people's confidence in their power to perform their skills in different situations. Only when the full importance of the need to foster students' internally focused power to perform is acknowledged is it appreciated that students need to have real experience of exercising such power as part of their course. Moreover, there is much educational research elsewhere that suggests that directly involving students in their mainstream courses actually enhances their level of understanding of key concepts and raises the general quality of their work.

When one adds the opportunity independent study gives for students to address their own deep personal needs, to develop their personal independence and commitment, and to acquire publicly recognised qualifications, what emerges is an impressive amount of "value added." Furthermore, 9 out of 10 of the students lacked normal entry requirements, and they represented a very wide variety of personal circumstances.

The sum effect of the experience of independent study reported by former students lends support for an otherwise fading slogan that is not normally applied to education: The medium is the message. Confidence in one's capability is developed through having to be capable on one's course.

The student experiences on which I have reported have one clear implication for the increasing numbers of teachers who wish to help students to develop their specialist expertise, their personal potential, and their capability is simply this: find as many different ways as you can to give more students more opportunities to have more responsibility for their own learning.

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