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CHAPTER 4

<u>THE NATURE OF COMPETENCE</u>

In this chapter, the nature of competence will be illuminated by analysing "initiative" as one example of a high-level competence. However, it is important for the reader to understand that it would have been possible to present an exactly parallel analysis of "problem solving ability", "the ability to communicate", or any other high-level competence.

Self Motivated

The first feature of initiative to which attention should be drawn is that it is a *self-motivated* quality. It does not make sense to record as evidence of `initiative' any behavior which someone else has told the individual concerned to carry out. The significance of this observation is that, if we wish to nurture such qualities as "initiative", "the ability to identify and solve problems" or "the ability to communicate" we will have to teach our children, pupils, or trainees to *trigger the relevant behaviors for themselves.* In other words we will not only have to foster sensitivity to the cues - often dim feelings of attraction or repulsion in various parts of the body - which tell them when such behaviors are appropriate, we will also have to create opportunities for them to experience the satisfactions which come from having undertaken such activities effectively - for it is the repeated experience of such satisfactions that will lead them to engage in these activities in the future.

Demanding and Internally Heterogeneous

Next, it should be noted that, if someone is to take a successful initiative, they will have to devote a great deal of time, thought, and effort to the activity: they will have to initiate potentially innovative action (often on the basis of hunches or feelings), "monitor" the effects of that action (again often relying on the feelings which usually precede new insights), and learn from those effects more about the nature of the problem they are trying to tackle and the effectiveness of the strategies they are using. They will have to persist over long periods of time. They will have to wake up at night in an effort to seize on flickering glimmerings of understanding on the fringe of consciousness and bring them to the center of attention so that they become fully conscious and usable. They will have to prise information out of other people's heads - often information which those concerned do not know they have or which they are unwilling to share. They will have to anticipate obstacles in the future and invent ways of circumventing them. They will have to persuade other people to help. They will have to build up their own, unique, set of *specialist* knowledge of the nature of the problem, its causes, and potential solutions. The latter will often involve building up an understanding of how the organization in which they live or work functions and identifying "leverage" points at which it can be influenced.

The same applies to competencies like the ability to identify and solve problems or communicate effectively. To identify a problem, one has to become dimly aware of feelings that tell one that something is wrong or which point toward a potential solution. (Note that these feelings form *part* of the ability to cognize). One has to persist in the face of frustration and difficulty. (Note that this, too, forms part of the ability to cognize). One has to persuade others to help. One has to initiate "experimental (often feeling-based) interactions with the environment" to test one's emerging, feeling-based, "hypotheses". And so on. All of these form part of the ability to make one's own observations. And all are difficult and demanding activities which are heavily dependent on "unconscious" processes which have time spans of their own and cannot be accessed on request.

The same applies to the ability to communicate. This involves clarifying what it is that one wants to convey and how to convey it - often without saying it. It involves experimenting with different forms of communication such as gesture, innuendo, allusion, and using images to conjure up feelings which in

turn convey ideas and understandings which have never been expressed in words, and being sensitive to one's feelings in order to monitor the reactions of one's audience.

Qualities like adventurousness require many of the competencies mentioned above plus others like sensitivity to the cues which tell one when things are getting dangerous and out of hand and that one had either better stop or get help, sensitivity to the cues which tell one how far one can let a situation go before it becomes non-recoverable, experience of recovering situations which are on the verge of getting out of hand, the kinds of sensitivity which leads one to notice things which one had not set out to look for but which represent new discoveries, and the abilities required to capitalize on new observations once they have been made.

Value-based

No-one is going to do any of these things unless they care very much indeed about the activity in the course of which they are attempting to take initiative, solve problems, communicate, or whatever.

It follows from these observations that the kinds of activity which people value are central to competence and thus to fostering and assessing its components. People cannot be expected to develop important components of competence unless they practice them in the course of undertaking activities which they care about. Likewise it does not make sense to attempt to assess such competencies except whilst those concerned are doing things they do care about. Unless they are doing things they value, people's failure to display high-level competencies simply reveals that they, personally, do not care about the task they were asked to undertake (however much they may value some external benefit which effective performance of the task might bring).

Interpenetrating Cognitive, Affective and Conative Components

Another insight to be drawn out of this analysis is that high-level competencies involve extensive use of feelings and demand determination and persistence. What have been termed their cognitive, affective, and conative components therefore interpenetrate.

Cumulative and Substitutable Components

Yet another conclusion which needs to be noted is that activities are more likely to be successful if the person concerned is able to perform *many* of the component activities mentioned above. Thus components of competence are cumulative and substitutable. It follows that high-level competencies are not internally consistent in the psychometric or factorial sense: it is the *total number* of the independent and substitutable components of competence which an individual displays in pursuit of his or her valued goals that relates to success. Models of human abilities which either emphasize internal consistency or focus only on cognitions are therefore seriously off-target.

Numerous Possibly Valued Activities and Components of Competence

One last thing we should note is that there appears to be an almost endless array of activities which people may value and competencies which may be brought to bear to undertake any one of those activities effectively. One of the things we most urgently need is, therefore, a taxonomy - like the taxonomy of chemical elements - which will enable us to organize the domain into which we have stumbled, show which values and competencies relate to which other ones, and enable us to analyse more complex qualities into their elements. A preliminary attempt to provide such a framework has been published in *Competence in Modern Society*, but a great deal of further work is needed.

Other Components of Competence

Table 4.1 presents some other qualities, or components of competence, which schools might try to foster. These competencies are not listed in any order and the list is incomplete. The list is simply included as a basis for discussion.

It is useful to examine what might be meant by "self-confidence" - and how "it" might be fostered in slightly more detail because so many people have argued that it is important for schools to foster it.

One type of confidence is confidence that one can make one's own observations, find information for oneself, and learn *without* instruction. If one is to do these things, one has to be confident that one can identify the vague feelings which tell one that one has a problem or the germ of its solution and bring them up into full consciousness. To be willing to do this one has not only to have had practice at doing it, one has also to have had sufficient experience of doing it to have learned that engaging in such frustrating and time-consuming activities tends to be worthwhile and to pay off in the end. Then one has to mull over the implications of one's observations, and initiate courses of action which will enable one to find out if one's tentative understandings are correct. One has to have learned that one does not solve one's problems *simply* by sitting and thinking about them. One has to have learned that one learns a great deal from interacting with one's environment and monitoring the effects of one's actions. This means initiating "experimental interaction with one's environment" on the basis of hunches or feelings and attending to the feelings evoked by what happens to learn more about the situation one is dealing with and the effectiveness of one's strategies. In other words, to develop confidence that one can learn on one's own, *without* instruction, one has to have had experience of successfully undertaking all the activities mentioned above in the course of doing things one cares about.

TABLE 4.1
Some Components of Competence.

- Confidence that one can engage in a number of the following types of competent behavior.
- Tendency to notice *problems* which will interfere with goal attainment.
- Tendency to notice resources which can lead to establishment of goals, or to their attainment.
- Ability to lead effectively—the ability to articulate group goals and unleash the energies of others in pursuit of them.
- Ability to follow effectively—the spontaneous tendency to study and seek to understand an overall program of activity—and one's own place in it—without having to be given detailed instructions.
- Tendency to engage in integrated thought-action-feedback strategies.
- Willingness to tolerate the anxieties which swell up in the course of achieving new and important goals.
- The tendency to bring to bear the relevant past experiences.
- Ability to integrate complex information in a subjective manner rather than to focus on one or two inadequate criteria.
- Sensitivity to one's own feelings and emotions and willingness to unleash them in the service of goal attainment.
- Tendency to make standards explicit.
- Ability to set up win-win relationships with others to achieve joint goals.

Another type of self-confidence involves confidence that one can get other people to help one. This in turn involves confidence that one can persuade other people, perhaps using gesture, innuendo, and imagery to create in others the kinds of feelings that compel action. It involves having had experience of playing a leadership role which involves clarifying group goals and convincing other people that, through joint action, they can be achieved. It involves confidence that one can express oneself adequately. It involves confidence that other people will not regard one as the sort of person to whom they should not listen. It involves the ability to be sensitive to the worries which other people have, but have not clearly articulated, let alone expressed. This in turn implies sensitivity to slight feelings on the edge of one's own consciousness. Sensitivity to others therefore depends on sensitivity to oneself. It follows that developing this type of self-confidence involves having had ample experience of engaging in these high-level cognitive, affective, and goal-directed activities. And it implies having engaged in them in an integrated manner in relation to goals which are important to one.

Yet another type of self-confidence is confidence in one's ability to contribute to a team. This involves being able to identify the type of contribution one is best able to make - something which implies having had opportunities to contribute in different ways to a group process and acquaintance with the concepts which are required to think about the nature of the contribution one has made and

compare and contrast it with the type of contribution made by others. It involves being able to persuade others to listen and to play their part and recognize one's own contribution.

<u>Implications for Education and Assessment</u>

Each of the other qualities listed in the table could also be discussed at similar length. However enough has been said to underline the following points made in our earlier discussion of initiative:

(1) It is impossible to foster the qualities identified in the previous chapters except in relation to goals that pupils care about.

(2) All of the qualities which it is important to foster are value-laden <u>motivational dispositions</u> which - even at the "lowest" level - involve beliefs about society, how it works, and one's own role in it.

(3) Because it is important to foster motivation it is necessary to both help pupils to identify their incipient motives and concerns and ensure that they have opportunities to experience the satisfactions which come from engaging in the difficult and demanding activities which are required to undertake valued activities effectively.

(4) There are so many potentially important components of competence that no pupil can be expected to develop all of them. Some pupils will have the inclination and the ability to develop one selection of them whilst others will have the inclination, the interests, and the talents that are required to develop a quite different set of qualities[4.1].

(5) Just as these qualities cannot be fostered except in relation to goals which pupils value, so neither can they be assessed except in relation to those goals. This points to the need for a two-stage measurement model in which we first find out what people care about and then ask how many - and which - high-level competencies they display whilst undertaking those tasks. A psychometric model which takes account of these observations has been published in *Competence in Modern Society: Its Identification, Development and Release* and, in summary form (but accompanied by a discussion of the destructive effects of the forms of assessment that are most widely used at the present time), in Trillium Press's companion volume: *The Tragic Illusion: Educational Testing*[4.2].

Notes

4.1. Taylor (1974, 1976, 1986, 1988), Schlichter (1986), and Hatch and Gardner (1990) have shown that, once one sets out to look for a wider range of talents in children, it is possible to identify real, idiosyncratic, gifts in virtually all children. Further, even if one resorts to variable-based assessments of only the 7 or 8 talents that each was concerned with, the correlation between most of these abilities is less than .2: i.e. 96% of the variance is *not* common variance: people who are good at one thing are *not* good at doing other things.

4.2. Raven (1984, 1991); but see also Raven (1988, 1988, 1992). Gardner (1983, 1985, 1987) has made a number of similar points about assessment but does not recognize just how many talents there are, just how important it is to create situations which tap people's values in order to lead them to develop and display their talents, or how inadequate is observed behavior as an index of the talents which people possess - and therefore the need to, in some sense, get inside their heads.