



JOHN RAVEN

CPD – What should we be developing?

LAST December I received the Society's guidelines on continuing professional development, and my first reaction was one of horror. On reflection, this was because what was being proposed seemed to conflict with almost everything that our research has revealed about the inadequacies of formal, knowledge-based education and training on the one hand, and what we know about the nature, development and assessment of competence on the other.

The central problem is that – like most discussions of 'education' – the guidelines assume that important competence deficits stem from deficiencies in technico-rational knowledge and that these can be rectified by immersion in the ocean of non-knowledge that constitutes the 'knowledge explosion'. Unfortunately, the kind of technico-rational knowledge that contributes to competence consists of idiosyncratic combinations of up-to-date specialist, and usually tacit, knowledge. It cannot usually be specified in advance but is accumulated through feeling-guided adventures into the unknown. Failure to build up such pools of knowledge stems from an absence of the motivational disposition to do so and thus cannot be rectified by external compulsion.

More fundamentally, it is clear that those who compiled the guidelines have accepted one of the cardinal errors made by most of those who draft policies for education and training. They understand the word 'learning' to refer only to learning content and fail to acknowledge the importance of other kinds of learning – such as learning to lead, to invent, to put people at ease, and to create political turbulence.

Probably the most succinct way of highlighting the problem would be to summarise the work of Donald Schön (1983, 1987, 2001). In the course of his work Schön undertook a number of remarkable studies of competence and then, in collaboration with Argyris, spent 15 years trying to change the educational process at MIT to nurture the competencies

so identified. Yet he was unable to do so because he encountered a vast hidden network of social forces. The emphasis on exam results as a measure of course quality, the fact that students had anyway been selected in academic not competency terms, the fact that lecturers' careers depended on their making as few waves as possible; these and a host of other social influences combined to ensure homeostasis in the system (for a fuller discussion see chapter 23 in Raven & Stephenson, 2001).

In the end it turns out that the competencies we most need to develop as psychologists are those required to

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understand and intervene in that network of forces – for it is these that overwhelmingly prevent us performing our role in society effectively. Yet nowhere in the guidelines is there any recognition of the importance of these competencies or how they are to be nurtured or their development recognised. Indeed, this is perhaps unsurprising, for these social forces comprise the most important determinants of behaviour – yet psychology has somehow managed largely to render them invisible (Raven, 2002).

In this article I will summarise a range of research in the hope that it will whet readers' appetites to seek out the original material – these are fascinating views of learning and competence that many readers, and those considering CPD in its pilot stage, should familiarise themselves with.

What competence is not

Let me start by outlining some misperceptions about the nature of competence, which I believe the CPD guidelines are guilty of.

Not the obverse of incompetence

Despite the fact that the competence movement is largely fuelled by the

observation and experience of incompetence, this is not the obverse of competence. The point was illustrated by Becher (2001): 'The anaesthetist (who sought to blow the whistle on an incompetent surgeon) was sacked; the surgeon was allowed to go on killing people.' The surgeon's most important defect was his failure to study the effects of his actions and take appropriate corrective action. This is a competence defect – not the likely target in any formal CPD programmes, which focus on bringing knowledge up to date. How then are people to get something done about important barriers to the effective delivery of services – in this case the delivery of safe surgery – that their organisation claims to offer?

Not individual As shown in Raven and Stephenson (2001), both competence and incompetence are group characteristics – in the surgeon example, rectifying the competence deficit would involve many different hospital staff. It follows that it may be that we need to focus on the ability to contribute in one or another of a myriad possible, but currently largely invisible, ways to these processes.

Not learnt through formal education

Those who compiled the guidelines seem to have assumed that we need more education and training of the kind with which we are familiar. But elsewhere (Raven, 1994) I have brought together a considerable amount of research which shows that formal education and training rarely enhances competence. Instead, the so-called educational system mainly performs sociological functions, like controlling access to protected occupations and legitimising huge disparities in quality of life. These, in turn, have the effect of compelling most people, against their better judgement, to participate in the unethical activities of which modern society is so largely composed – the manufacture and marketing of junk foods, junk toys, junk education and junk research.

What competence is

There are now some 700 studies of occupational competence using critical-incident methodology (Raven & Stephenson, 2001; Spencer & Spencer, 1993), where people are asked to describe actual incidents of behaviour that they regarded as effective and ineffective in a job. Competence among teachers, naval officers, medical personnel, train drivers, managers, and almost every group that has been studied, is mainly dependent on such things as initiative, the ability to work with others, and the ability to get outside the immediate environment and influence the constraints which prevent people effectively performing their jobs as more narrowly defined.

Dealing with the swamp Schön captured some of these findings by saying that occupational competence depends, above all, on 'the ability to deal with the swamp'. Thus managerial competence involves making sense of, and intervening in, the network of social and economic forces which primarily determine the success of a business. This understanding cannot be directly derived from any book or course but must be built up by individuals themselves, largely from 'experimental interactions with the environment'.

Teacher competence likewise depends on such abilities – the word 'education' derives from the Latin *educere*, meaning 'to draw out'. Good teachers spend enormous amounts of time outside their classrooms gaining control over the social forces which would otherwise prevent them doing what they need to do inside them. From the point of view of considering their possible CPD needs, it is important to note that it is not the case that they just *did not* develop these crucial competencies in the course of

formal teacher training, they *could not* have done so. Very few of their lecturers would have known much about how to nurture such talents – or even have thought it was important to initiate research in the area.

Creating a culture of enterprise The ability of organisations to innovate and survive depends primarily on people's ability to contribute to what Kanter (1985) has termed 'parallel organisation activity'. This requires everyone, from lavatory cleaner to managing director, to contribute to 'cultures of enterprise' in one way or another. Thus, one person notes defects in a product or service. Another knows how to publicise that defect. Another how to set up a network that can invent ways of doing something about it. Another how to attract funding for the necessary development work... and so forth. Such diverse, and largely invisible, abilities amount to a major component in occupational competence. Again, such qualities are generally overlooked in staff-development exercises and appraisal systems. Packaged activities promoted as means of nurturing creativity, self-confidence, and so on, only 'work' for a small subset of participants.

Competency deficits among psychologists

It follows from what was said earlier that one factor in the failure of most teachers to achieve the main goals of education stems from the lack of an appropriate theoretical framework, and set of tools, to help them to implement multiple-talent, competency-oriented educational programmes. The absence of these concepts and tools is the fault of psychologists. We have never followed up Spearman's observations to provide such a framework. Why?

I would argue that the retention of our current inappropriate paradigm is not only driven by the well-known cluster of forces that promote the hegemony of established points of view in science (Kuhn, 1970), but also, as Shiva (1998) has noted, by the fact that the network of forces driving towards the adoption of single-factor models of 'ability' is somehow linked to the sociological need for a single and unarguable criterion of merit to allocate position and status. By so doing, social divisions are legitimised which drive everyone to participate in the unethical activities that constitute most work in modern society.

If we are to foster the Kuhnian revolution in assessment – the need for which has been noted by so many for so long – it is crucial for us to seek to understand and intervene in the omnipresent social forces that overwhelmingly determine our behaviour. In other words, our competence as psychologists must mainly depend on what we contribute to collective activity, and, in particular, what we do through our professional institutions to influence the context in which we work. But what would this involve?

Promoting the growth of competence

The key concept here is that of a developmental environment. Such environments have common features across homes, workplaces and schools (Raven & Stephenson, 2001). Effective parents, teachers and managers study their children's, students' or subordinates' interests and incipient patterns of competence and create situations in which those concerned are able to exercise and develop competencies like initiative, creativity and the ability to understand and influence their organisations and society in the course of carrying out activities (ranging from putting people at ease to creating political turbulence) that they themselves care about. They also expose those concerned to appropriate role models, in person or in literature. These role models are unusual in that they portray the normally private patterns of thinking and feeling which contribute to effective behaviour. They demonstrate how to set out into the unknown, reflect upon what one finds, and take corrective action when necessary.

If psychologists are to promote the more widespread creation of developmental environments in workplaces, whether for themselves or for others, they will need to engage with the social forces that are

currently driving down both the quality of life in general and the developmental potential of workplaces in particular. Although few psychologists currently view such activity as falling within their domain of professional responsibility, it is in fact central to their competence as psychologists. They cannot do their jobs as more narrowly defined without engaging in it. It follows that, if it is to be of much value, CPD will need to focus primarily on creating situations in which people – whether psychologists or members of other professions – can evolve more appropriate beliefs about society, how it works, and their role in it.

A more appropriate appraisal and development system

To the best of my knowledge, the only ‘appraisal’ system that has been developed to help identify and nurture the kinds of contributions mentioned above was that designed and piloted by Adams and Burgess (1989).

In brief, what it did was ask teachers to keep private records of the occasions on which they felt they had contributed something they were particularly pleased about to pupils, or to the schools or society in which they worked. After some time they were asked if they would mind discussing these records with a friend of their own choice. In due course the network grew. What then happened was that everyone came to realise that their colleagues were serious-minded and had contributed in very diverse ways to the system. All were necessary and valuable. There was no one thing that constituted ‘teacher competence’ let alone ‘excellent teaching’. All these talents could be developed and used.

The painstakingly developed procedures were nevertheless rapidly consigned to oblivion by those who believed in

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In the film *They Live* special glasses reveal alien messages underlying the surface appearance. Should CPD challenge a similarly hidden network of social forces?

centralised specification of teacher competence – and whose livelihoods just happened to depend on running courses to teach the ‘prior knowledge base’ on which teacher competence could be claimed to depend. Of course, this is but one manifestation of the hidden social forces that overwhelmingly determine behaviour,

‘It is time to revolutionise our ways of thinking about, and assessing, individual differences’

the acknowledgement of which demands a Newtonian shift in the way psychologists think about the determination of behaviour.

Continuing development of psychology?

It would seem to follow from the material summarised here that the attempt to direct the continuing professional development needs of psychologists into anything resembling conventional courses or journal

readings is likely to result in increasing professional incompetence, concealed behind a façade of Orwellian diplomas proclaiming the contrary. The need is, above all, to seek to understand and engage with the wider social forces that determine our behaviour. It is to re-orient our psychological explanations. It is to revolutionise our ways of thinking about, and assessing, individual differences. It is to think through the question of how we can contribute to individual and societal well-being... and that means largely abandoning our attempts to colonise such things as counselling in schools and society (McKnight, 1995, for a discussion), and to focus instead on societal reform to enhance quality of life and the survival of the species.

If the members of the Society are to be forced to report annually on anything, it should be on how they have contributed to the continuing development of psychology – their CDP rather than CPD activities. Whereas there is very little to be gained from having our fellows record courses taken and books read, there is a great deal to be gained from having them reflect on where their branch of psychology needs to get to, what they have done in the past year to help it get there, and how they are going to contribute more effectively to that movement in the future.

■ *John Raven is an independent consultant based at 30 Great King Street, Edinburgh.*

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