

Raven, J., & Stephenson, J. (Eds.). (2001). *Competence in the Learning Society*. New York: Peter Lang, pp.69-71.

CHAPTER 6

Commentary: The Pernicious Effects of Incompetence on Society, Education, and Assessment

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VERSION DATE: 13 September 2000

The two papers in this Part of our book are of the greatest importance for at least the following reasons:

1. Although issues relating to *incompetence* were raised by a number of speakers at the Higher Education for Capability conferences that gave rise to this book, these papers are the only markers of this concern here.
2. *Incompetence* is indeed of the greatest importance. For example, Hogan (1990) has shown that the base rate for gross incompetence among American managers is about 50%: They destroy the competence of their subordinates, undermine their colleagues, and drive their organisations into the ground. Hope (1984), Day and Klein (1987), and Raven and Dolphin (1978) have published similar findings for public servants. Raven (1995) reviewed a much wider range of evidence demonstrating not only the inability of public servants to manage public provision in the long-term public interest but also their complicity in socially destructive acts. These studies, taken together with those of Becher and Illott, raise the question of whether it is possible to draw a firm distinction between professional competence and the ethics ("incompetence" as judged from looking at the effects of behaviour on the wider organisation or society) of their behaviour. Indeed, one of Weaver's (1994) reasons for preferring the term "capability" to "competence" when promoting *Education for Capability* was precisely to underline the importance of these wider aspects of competence.
3. The observation and fear of *incompetence* is one of the most powerful motives contributing to the feeling (a) that all prospective entrants to all occupational groups should have certificates demonstrating that they are familiar with all knowledge which may one day be relevant to them, and (b) that, throughout their lives thereafter, they should enrol in courses to update that knowledge. The full report from which Illott's chapter here is extracted documents this process. It reveals the way in which a concern with incompetence stemming from failure to exercise high-level competencies (i.e., sins of omission) gets translated into the prescription of low-level competencies to be mastered and demonstrated (usually in the course of training programmes). It would therefore seem to behove us to carefully examine the foundation and logic of this process.
4. Both papers forcefully raise the question of how incompetence is to be assessed and how such information is to be given teeth so that it will lead to appropriate action.
5. They raise the question of whether most *incompetence* stems from deficiencies in technical-rational competence or from an inability to, as Schön puts it, "deal with the swamp". They therefore raise questions about the focus of any competency-oriented educational programmes which may be required.

6. They raise the question of whether the obvious problems are to be overcome by focusing on continuously updating the technical-rational competence of those concerned or by making more appropriate arrangements to ensure that those concerned are encouraged to develop, and move into positions in which they can utilise, high-level competencies at work and by making more appropriate arrangements to oversee their work. If the latter is the case, the implication is that we need to pay more attention to the nature of the organisational arrangements required to lead people to develop and display high-level competencies, and thus to the competencies which are required by those who are to clarify, introduce, and run, more appropriate societal management arrangements. Adams and Burgess (1989), in a carefully researched radical publication that is generally assimilated back to the conventional,¹ are among the very few who have developed ways of surfacing and promoting practical discussion of such high level competencies and the organisational arrangements required if they are to be nurtured, recognised, and utilised.
7. The papers might have dwelt on aspects of incompetence that only become apparent if one considers the wider social (moral) consequences of action and sins of *omission*--such as the failure of teachers to band together to change the nature of educational assessment because of its effects. (As Raven, 1991, has shown, these effects include depriving most pupils of opportunities to develop and gain recognition for their talents, legitimising the consignment of many highly capable people to an occupational scrapheap, depriving society of many hugely important talents, and promoting into senior management positions in society a disproportionate number of those least able and willing to make acute observations about the workings of society and those least willing and able to act on their convictions in the long-term public interest.)
8. If it is true, as implied by 7, that the level of both competence and ethics that people can be said to display is determined by the extent to which they engage effectively with the wider social forces that otherwise push them toward incompetent and unethical behaviour, what are the perceptions and competencies which are required to understand, and intervene in, these social forces?

If *incompetence* arises mainly from failure to deal adequately with Schön's "swamp"--i.e., from failure to deal with all the non-narrowly technical issues which plague one in the course of one's daily work--then serious questions must be asked about the focus of professional education. Perhaps more importantly, staff appraisal becomes problematic. Supposing, for a moment, that the most serious sources of incompetence among teachers might have to do with their failure to create opportunities for *most* of their pupils to develop, and get recognition for, their talents and depriving society of the talents it most importantly needs, what would be the implications? One implication would certainly be that society needs to establish policy research and development institutes that would raise and explore such questions and, in due course, develop the understandings and tools required if teachers are to run more broadly-based programmes. But whose responsibility is it to bring such developments into being? Do not teachers, given the professional responsibilities that society has entrusted to them, have a particular ethical responsibility, requiring very high levels of competence or capability, to raise and publicise such questions? In that case, what new expectations is it appropriate for society to have of the competence and behaviour of teachers? How are we to hold them accountable for performing these responsibilities? What organisational arrangements are required to enable them to carry out these tasks? How are we to ensure that they fulfil these and other responsibilities? Whose job is it to clarify these things? What organisational arrangements and competencies are required to do that?

These papers therefore indirectly call into question the whole way in which we think of incompetence, how incompetence is to be handled (certainly not mainly through initial technical training), whose responsibility it is to handle it (and thus what constitutes incompetence in *those* personnel--be they managers or citizens), what competencies are required to evolve the societal learning and management arrangements that are required to handle it, and what competencies are going to be required of those who man these new arrangements.

These issues are central to this book.

Note

1. Sales of Adams and Burgess's (1989) book were discontinued precisely because it was perceived as "yet another staff appraisal system". In fact, its basic message (essentially that it is vital to identify, develop, and utilise the superstar qualities of *everyone* in the organisation) was both radical and at loggerheads with the single-factor models of ability and hierarchy that dominate Western thought. We greatly regret being unable to include a chapter summarising this work here.

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