Learning for a Complex World

A lifewide concept of learning, education and personal development

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Chapter 4

Developing capability through lifewide education

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Synopsis

Capability is the power or ability to do something or to perform a certain role. It is an important concept in education and human development. Our capability represents 'the *real opportunity* that we have to accomplish what we value' (Sen 1992). Students value their own development as it improves their chances for a fulfilled and productive life. We talk a lot about student-centred learning that encourages independence, self-motivation and self-management, but if we respected learners as the designers and architects of their own life experiences, which includes by choice a higher education, we would have more chance of realising this goal. This Chapter considers capability from a number of perspectives and argues that a more complete education values, supports and recognises students' efforts to develop their own capability through the freedom and opportunities they have across all the spaces and places in their lives.

Why is capability so important?

Chapter 1 drew attention to a key building block in the lifewide learning idea; namely, that our lives are composed of multiple streams of situations that require us to evaluate options and make decisions about what to do or what not to do. Chapter 3 developed a holistic model for the patterns of thinking and actions that enable us to deal with or create situations - based on the idea of self-regulation (Zimmerman, 2000). Attention was drawn to Stephen Covey's explanation of what happens in the decision making space where we make choices.

Between stimulus and response there is a space. In the space lies our freedom and power to choose our response. In those choices lie our growth and our happiness.

(Covey 2004:4).

In this space where we have the freedom (or restricted freedom) to choose what to do, we make decisions that are based on what we and others value, what we know and don't know, what we believe is right or wrong, what we think we can or can't do and how we feel about the different options available to us. But in order to turn our thoughts and feelings into effective action we need both the will and capability to act. This chapter focuses on the idea of developing capability through a lifewide concept of education.

Capability is the power or ability to do something or to perform a certain role. It is an important concept in education and human development; it refers to (Sen 1992:40) 'the various combinations of functionings (beings and doings) that [a] person can achieve'. It also reflects a 'person's freedom to lead one type of life or another ... to choose from possible livings' (ibid. 40). Our capability represents 'the *real opportunity* that we have to accomplish what we value' (ibid. 31). Sen draws attention to the inter-relationship between the *functionings and beings* that enable people to accomplish something and the *opportunity* they have (available to them) for utilising these functionings to achieve something that they and/or others value. The difference between a capability and functioning is the same as an opportunity to achieve something and the actual fulfilment of that thing. The notion of capability is 'essentially one of freedom – the range of options a person has in deciding what kind of life to lead' (Dreze and Sen 1995:11). These authors emphasise the importance of choosing a life one has reason to value, where choices have been determined through considered thought and reflected upon.

Walker (2006), inspired by Sen's seminal work, presented a strong case for a capability approach in order to encourage fresh thinking and reflect ethically upon the purposes and values of higher education in relation to student development, agency and learning, public values and democratic life, and the pedagogies that support these things. Walker develops a coherent, value-based philosophy that is consistent with lifewide education, which provides a context within which learners can choose to reveal, in a thoughtful, reflective and appreciative way, the kind of life they choose to lead or would like to lead. The approach to lifewide education we are advocating aims to provide learners with a supportive, empowering and enabling framework to draw

deeper meanings and fulfilment from their lives, gaining recognition for capabilities they develop and demonstrate through participation in the experiences they create for themselves.

Lifewide education also holds the possibility of engaging individuals more systematically and more deeply with the way in which they secure and sustain a good quality of life for themselves (Alkire 2008) and for others, and for maintaining a sense of personal well-being in a world of continuous, rapid and sometimes disruptive change[1]. Allied to this it affords opportunities for a strength-based approach, rather than the more usual deficit oriented approach, to capability development. Linley (2008:29) defines a strength as 'a pre-existing capacity for a particular way of behaving, thinking, or feeling that is authentic and energising to the user, and enables optimal functioning, development and performance'. O'Connell summarises the key features of a strength-based approach thus.

> A strength-based approach is a positive psychology perspective that emphasises the capabilities and strengths of the individual. It starts with and accentuates the positive. Strengths-based approaches are developmental and process-oriented. They identify and reveal internal strengths and resources (resiliencies) that exist within an individual, family, or group as they occur in specific problems and contexts (Egeland *et al.*:1993)...The strength-based approach 'honour[s] the innate wisdom of the human spirit, the inherent capacity for transformation of even the most humbled and abuse' (Saleeby 1997). The basic premise of this approach is 'that people possess inherent strengths or assets that hold the key to their ability to cope with stress and trauma. Instead of diagnosing deficits and prescribing treatment to address them, strength-based therapists help clients identify and build on their capacities' (Barton 2005). Every individual, group, family, and community has strengths. To detect them, the social work practitioner must be genuinely interested in and respectful of their client's stories, narratives, and accounts, as well as the interpretive angles they take on their own experiences (Saleeby 1997).
> (O'Connell 2006:2)

O'Connell was writing in the context of social work practice but a strength-based approach can be used in any relational developmental situation (like coaching, mentoring, careers guidance and the learning partnerships advocated in Chapters 11-13). Evidence that a strength-based approach has positive effects on dispositions and beliefs that relate to capability is provided

by Govindji and Linley (2007). A study of 214 university students showed that people who used their strengths more reported higher levels of subjective well-being (i.e., happiness) and psychological well-being (i.e., fulfilment). They also found that people who used their strengths more reported higher levels of self-esteem and self-efficacy, which is a scientific conception of confidence – the belief that they were capable of achieving the things they wanted to achieve. Lifewide education recognises that while acknowledging and acting on weaknesses, it is valuable to personal development, the strength-based approach encourages people to discover what they are good at and invest time and energy in developing their talents through the experiences that they believe will nurture these talents. Maret Staron explores the strength-based idea further in Chapter 8.

Perspectives on capability

The concern for capability advocated in this book is not new. In 1979, the Royal Society of Arts published an 'Education for Capability Manifesto'. The campaign it supported ultimately led to a capability approach to higher education being advocated in the 1990s as part of a Government-funded Enterprise in Higher Education programme (EHE). The 'capability movement' was motivated by the desire to better equip learners for the challenges they would face in a modern world. The same values and motivation that underlie our advocacy for lifewide education. Participants in this movement believed that by developing students' capability they would have more functionings, opportunities and freedoms to choose how to lead a productive and fulfilled life and this would ultimately benefit society and the economy.

Stephenson, one of the leaders of the UK capability movement, described capability as:

> an integration of knowledge, skills, personal qualities and understanding used appropriately and effectively – not just in familiar and highly focused specialist contexts but in response to new and changing circumstances. Capability can be observed when we see people with justified confidence in their ability to:
> - Take effective and appropriate action
> - Explain what they are about
> - Live and work effectively with others
> - Continue to learn from their experiences as individuals and in association with others, in a diverse and changing society
> (Stephenson 1998:2)

He also emphasised the integrated and action-oriented nature of capability, its relationship to confidence and knowledge, skills, and values, and the making and execution of judgements about what is right and wrong.

> Each of these four 'abilities' is an integration of many component skills and qualities, and each ability relates to the others. For instance, people's ability to take appropriate action is related to specialist expertise which in turn is enhanced by learning derived from experiences of earlier actions. Explaining what one is about involves much more than the possession of superficial oral and written communication skills; it requires self-awareness and confidence in one's specialist knowledge and skills and how they relate to the circumstances in hand. The emphasis on 'confidence' draws attention to the distinction between the possession and the use of skills and qualities. To be 'justified', such confidence needs to be based on real experience of their successful use............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.
>
> (Stephenson 1998:3)

More recently, Cairns and Stephenson (2009:16) argue that capability is a holistic concept which encompasses both current competence and future development through the application of potential, bringing their concept of capability closer to Sen's (1992) integrated notion of functionings and opportunity. In their opinion the concept of capability is applicable across individuals and organisations and it includes:

- the capacity to operate in both familiar and unfamiliar situations
- the utilisation of creativity/innovation
- being mindful about change and open to opportunities/uncertainties
- being confident about one's abilities
- being able to engage with social values relevant to actions
- engaging with learning as a self-directed process
- operating to formulate and solve problems.

Cairns and Stephenson (2009:17) identify three elements to capability:

- *ability* – to carry out observable behaviours to a level of acceptable performance and potential skills and attributes that can be realised with effort and opportunity

- *self*-efficacy – defined as the confidence of the individual, acts as a motivational force and with success a confidence builder supporting further risk taking, persistence and capable behaviour
- *values* – the way individuals' actions are guided by a personal set of values and their ability to articulate any values issues associated with that action.

According to Cairns and Stephenson (2009:18) capable implementation of actions requires:

- *Mindfulness – awareness and openness to change.* Mindful people are conscious of their thinking and working out of solutions and progress
- *Self-management.* All learners need to be self-managing and responsible for their own learning and development.
- *Effective problem formulation and problem solving.*

The educational philosophy that underpins this book builds on these understandings. They are the things that enable us to act within the self-regulatory model proposed in Chapter 3. Here I would like to emphasise four aspects of capability. The first is *imagination.* Capable people are able to comprehend a situation, to think with sufficient complexity to deal with it and to imagine what might be. How we nurture rather than stifle imagination, as well as critical thinking, is an important question for higher education and the lifewide education concept provides an opportunity for nurturing and celebrating the imaginations of our students (Chapters 9-13 provide abundant evidence of this).

The second characteristic of capable people is that they have the *will* to succeed. Without the will to try, even if you don't succeed, nothing is possible. You have to be willing to involve yourself in a situation in order to influence it. Belief in ourselves and our own capacity and ability to effect a change or make a difference is an integral part of our willingness to try. How we nurture will in an educational world that forever seeks compliance with the will of teachers is another difficult challenge for higher education and lifewide education offers more scope for students to make use of and demonstrate their wilfulness in a variety of contexts and situations.

Knowing that you are able to do something in order to deal with a situation also feeds into our preparedness to try. The third dimension of capability is *ability*. We have to develop practical skill and knowledge of how and when to use the

skill in an appropriate manner to turn ideas into effective action: action that will one way or another have an impact. Skill is not a checklist of things we can do but an *integrated set of functionings* that are adjusted in response to the ongoing monitoring or 'sensing' of our effects as the results of our actions emerge. Here we return to the conundrum of what knowledge and skills do we choose to help students' develop for a rapidly changing world? Perhaps the overarching capability is the ability to develop and utilise new knowledge and skill when it is needed and to combine and adapt existing knowledge and skills in order to improvise in new and unfamiliar situations.

The fourth component of capability is *self-awareness* the ability to recognise and evaluate the effects we are having and adjust what we are doing if necessary. Our ability to sense and observe situations and make sense of what is happening feeds into our self-regulatory action-oriented mechanism to help us refine our actions and intentions. Our preparedness and ability to reflect on a situation enables us to learn from our experience so that we can have more immediate effect and more impact in the future. Reflection is the key sense and meaning making process in our life and it ultimately feeds into what we value and our sense of satisfaction and fulfilment. The challenge for higher education is to develop this habit in ways that are meaningful and relevant to students' lives and lifewide education provides a rich context that is full of opportunity, achievement, uncertainty, mistakes and failures that are so necessary to stimulate this metacognitive process.

The successful application of capability in different situations produces effects or impacts and awareness of these nourishes our *confidence* and sustains our willingness to try to achieve things that we or others value. But in order to turn ideas and feelings into action we need *opportunity* – we have to be provided with opportunity and we have to recognise and make good use of it when we see it, or be able to create our own opportunities. So linked to opportunity is *freedom* – without the freedom to choose and the freedom to create opportunities, our ability to achieve will be limited by the decisions of others. If we have the freedom (autonomy) what is possible is only limited by our imagination, willingness and capability.

Contexts for developing and utilising capability
Stephenson (1998:4) made the distinction between dependent and independent capability, using the idea that the situations we encounter may be categorised according to whether they are within a familiar or unfamiliar

context and whether the problem (challenge or opportunity) is familiar or unfamiliar (Figure 4.1).

Much of our life is spent in familiar situations where we don't have to pay much attention to what we are doing and we can reproduce the response and routine practices that we have done many times before (position W, Figure 4.1). Stephenson considered this space to be one in which we practised dependent capability and he related this to traditional teaching approaches adopted in higher education.

Figure 4.1 Relationship between capability, context and the nature of problems, challenges and opportunities (adapted from Stephenson 1998:5). Letters refer to scenarios described below[1]

Unfamiliar problems, challenges and opportunities
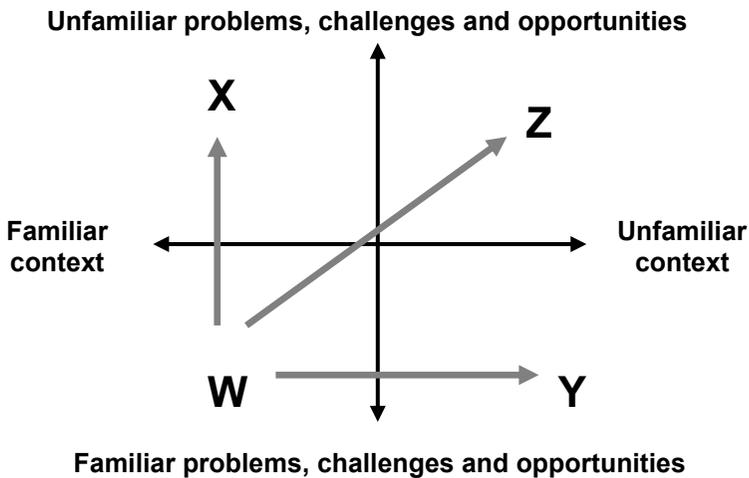
Position W can apply to the work-place, the home, community activities or artistic pursuits. Good performance in position W may require technical skills and knowledge of the highest order, or at the simplest level. We give students information about the context; the more complex the context, the more information we give them. We give them information about the kinds of problems they will meet, and details of the solutions which have been found to be effective. We might even give them practice in the implementation of the solutions and evaluation of their effectiveness. We seek to develop student capability in position W by passing on other people's experience, knowledge and solutions … the resultant capability is essentially a dependent capability.

In any aspect of our life we can suddenly be confronted with a problem, challenge or opportunity that we have not encountered before in a context with which we are familiar (position X, Figure 4.1), or we may find ourselves in a new context dealing with problems that we have encountered before (position Y, Figure 4.1). Such situations require us to develop new contextual understandings and invent and try out new practices and ways of behaving. We have to have the will, capability and confidence to learn and adapt to the new situations. Stephenson viewed performance in these environments as involving a degree of independent capability.

Life also has a habit of putting us in situations, or we put ourselves into situations, in which both the contexts and challenges are unfamiliar (position Z, Figure 4.1). In such situations the resources and support we depend on in more familiar settings may not be available to us and we have to rely on our own resources and create new sources of support. We have to develop new contextual understanding and create, adapt and implement ideas, formulate and invent solutions and develop new practices rather than replicate things that we have done before. Stephenson viewed performance in this environment as an expression of independent capability.

> In position Z, we have less familiarity with the context and we have not previously experienced the problems with which we are faced. The slavish application of solutions perfected for familiar problems may have disastrous effects in position Z. To a large extent we are on our own, either individually or collectively [and] we have to take much more responsibility for our own learning. By definition, we must inform ourselves about the unfamiliar context and not simply remind ourselves of what we were taught or trained to do. By definition, we must formulate the problems we have to deal with, not remind ourselves of problems previously learned. We must devise solutions and ways of applying them without the certainty of knowing the outcome, as a way of learning more about both the context and the problem. ... We need confidence in ourselves, and in our judgements, if we are to take actions in uncertainty and to see initial failure as a basis of learning how to do better. When taking action in position Z, intuition, judgement and courage become important; there is no certainty of consequences based on previous experience.
>
> (Stephenson 1998:5)

This conceptual framework provided by Stephenson (ibid.) provides a useful tool for thinking about the situations in which we involve ourselves on our lifelong - lifewide journey. The added value that lifewide education brings to this way of thinking is that at any point in time we may be involved in one, several or all of the environments portrayed in Figure 4.1 in our different life spaces. It must also be apparent that lifewide education provides learners with the opportunity to learn through venturing into spaces and places where both the contexts and the challenges are unfamiliar (position Z in Figure 4.3) and this is crucial to the development of capability that learners need to become the authors of their own lives (Baxter Magolda 2004a) a theme that is developed in Chapter 5.

We can use this framework to encourage students to think about the sorts of situations they are using to develop themselves and invite them to reflect on whether they are restricting themselves to contexts and challenges that are familiar and comfortable, or whether they are involving themselves in unfamiliar problems and contexts that will require them to develop resourcefulness and new forms of independent capability. Chapters 10 and 13 discuss the latter types of situation in more detail.

The challenge of complexity

The human condition is to try to understand situations in order to make good decisions about how to act (or not to act). Some situations are easy to comprehend: they are familiar and we have dealt with them or something like them before and we are confident that we know what to do. Others are more difficult to understand and some are impossible to understand until we have engaged in them. The Cynefin framework (Figure 4.2) developed by Snowden (Snowden 2000; Snowden and Boone 2007) and described by Callaghan (2009) helps us appreciate the nature and level of complexity in different types of situation. The framework was originally developed to aid understanding of situations and how to deal with them in organisations, but the concept can also be used to evaluate personal situations. There are four domains within the framework.

In the *simple* domain things have a simple cause and effect – you do X and you are very likely to get Y. The environment is familiar and understood. You will probably have had many similar experiences that can be directly related to the situation. You know that 'what you do' is likely to have a particular result. And if you do the same thing in a similar situation the same result will happen. At the other extreme is the *chaotic* domain where there is no perceivable

relationship between cause and effect. If this situation happens in your life, you feel totally out of control and overwhelmed. In these situations your natural response is to act, sense what happens and then act again until you get yourself into a more understandable and comfortable situation. Between these two extremes there are two other types of situation.

Figure 4.2 The Cynefin tool[3] to facilitate thinking about situations of differing complexity (Snowden 2000, Callaghan 2009)

COMPLEX Cause and effect only make sense in retrospect. Situations are not predictable and are unlikely to be repeatable but principles learnt can be used again**.**	**COMPLICATED** Cause and effect may be widely separated but with effort a relationship can be made. Situation is analysable and knowable.
CHAOTIC No cause and effect relationships. Situation is not perceivable.	**SIMPLE** Cause leads to a predictable effect. Relationships are repeatable. Situation is known

Complicated situations are not single events but involve a stream of interconnected situations (many of which may be simple) linked to achieving a goal (like solving a difficult problem or bringing about a significant innovation or corporate performance). They can be difficult to understand: there are cause-and-effect relationships but you have to put some effort into working out the relationships by gathering information about the situation and analysing it to see the patterns and look for possible explanations of what is happening. Engaging in these sorts of challenges is the way you become more expert in achieving difficult things and a lot of professional work is like this.

Complex situations are the most difficult to understand. They are not single events but involve multiple streams of variably connected situations linked to achieving a significant change in the pattern of beliefs and behaviours (culture) in a society or organisation. In such situations the cause-and-effect relationships are so intertwined that things only make sense in hindsight and

sometimes well after the events have taken place. In the complex space, it's all about the inter-connectivity of people and their evolving behaviours and patterns of participation that are being encouraged or nurtured through the actions of key agents. The results of action will be unique to the particular situation and cannot be directly repeated. In these situations relationships are not straightforward and things are unpredictable in detail. People involved may not know the cause of the change that they have been involved in or ascribe the source of change to something that is quite removed from the trigger for change. The sort of factors being dealt with in the complex space are things like culture, trust and leadership, and the way you make progress in understanding what is happening is to sense the patterns of change and respond accordingly.

In developing capability for dealing effectively with situations we are developing the ability to comprehend and appraise situations, and perform appropriately and effectively in situations of different levels of complexity. We do this intuitively throughout our lives because that is what life is about. Formal education can equip us with knowledge, understanding and ways of thinking that can assist us in particular contexts but it is limited in so far as it cannot offer us the experiences of actually dealing with situations as they arise in the world outside the classroom. That is why programmes that integrate learning in work and institutional environments have so much more potential to develop capability for dealing with situations where knowledge and capability are grown and applied in situations that are not controlled. A lifewide concept of education simply extends this opportunity into other aspects of students' lives.

Capability and self-regulation

Chapter 3 argued that lifewide education needs to be underpinned by a holistic model of learning embedded in the self-regulating[4] practices of individuals. This framework for observing, sensing and evaluating situations, making decisions and plans for action, implementing action and adjusting actions in response to feedback and then reflecting on actions and their effects, defines the fundamental set of capabilities we need to accomplish anything of significance. This process of self-regulation is remarkably similar to what Eraut (2009:6) defines as the basic epistemology of practice in professional work situations, namely:

- *Assessing situations* (sometimes briefly, sometimes involving a long process of *investigation and enquiry*) and continuing to monitor the situation

- *Deciding what, if any, action to take*, both immediately and over a longer period (either on one's own or as a leader or member of a team); [In complex situations this stage also includes *Designing (planning) the action*]
- *Pursuing an agreed course of action*, performing professional actions – evaluating the effects of actions and the environment and adapting as and when necessary
- *Metacognitive monitoring of oneself*, people needing attention and the general progress of the case, problem, project or situation; and sometimes also learning through reflection on the experience.

The capability to do something is defined and judged in terms of the appropriateness of what is being done, how well it is being done and the effects of what has been done. Eraut focused on the capability exhibited by professionals in fulfilling their work role. He defined capability in terms of 'what individual persons bring to situations that enables them to think, interact and perform' (Eraut 1997; 1998), and 'everything that a person (or group or organisation) can think or do' (Eraut 2009:6). In his research into how professionals learn through work, he identified over 50 aspects of professional activity which he called learning trajectories. At any point in time professionals are either developing or regressing within a particular trajectory depending on the experiences they are gaining through their work which enabled them to develop and use their capability. This highlights the important fact that the capability to do anything is a dynamic phenomenon that grows and wanes according to the opportunities available for practice and further development. The added value of a lifewide education is that there are more opportunities for the development and application of capability across all of a students' life spaces than there are within an academic programme.

The final perspective on capability offered in the chapter comes from the work of Richard Greene (2004[4]) who describes '32 capabilities of highly effective people in any field' and distils these down to eight general capabilities.

Highly effective people have eight general capabilities. The first four such capabilities are ways of using liberty they make for constructing, establishing, and founding enduring changes in lives and the world. They have ways, when encountering difference and otherness, of keeping what is new, difficult, and unknown or challenging from being absorbed and assimilated to their existing models and preferences. They have ways of preserving the otherness of what they encounter.

Second, they have ways of unearthing the most buried, subtle, intimate, and vital forces and things inside themselves and examining them for possible use or improvement. Third, they have ways of bringing order to their own selves and to the selves of those in groups around them. Fourth, they have ways of turning insights, ideas, experiences, and the like into impacts on society, actual changes in how things are arranged and done. The second four general effectiveness capabilities are ways of protecting novelty from erosion by large, traditional, already established powers of the world. Fifth, they have ways of doing things with style and verve rather than doing them perfunctorily. Sixth, they have ways of upping the performance of all dimensions of their selves, work, and lives, not just some or a few. Seventh, they have ways of influencing people, in many channels, modes, and means. Eighth, and last, they have ways of operating with new commonsenses, they borrow or invent, that make their automatic reactions up-to-date and future-looking.

(Greene 2004:5)

Greene's detailed research-based account of the capabilities of high-performing people who are effective in their field, provides a comprehensive, explicit and inspiring vision for human development. But this research focuses on exceptional people, the high achievers in their field, and it might be argued that the capability constructs developed for exceptional people cannot be applied to individuals with more modest achievements. However, Greene's powerful way of framing capability – '*they have ways*' – points to the repertoire of strategies, skills, ways of thinking and behaving that people possess in order to achieve the things that they value in life. I believe that similar capabilities to those described by Greene can be recognised in the lives of some of the students who have been involved in piloting the Lifewide Learning Award (for example the student narrative in Chapter 1).

Our goal is draw attention to the possibility that a lifewide concept of education offers more potential for enabling people to develop, use and demonstrate the sorts of complex capability Greene portrays than more traditional forms of curriculum. It offers the possibility of being able to recognise the emergence of such complex capabilities through the ways and means in which students choose to live their lives.

The will to be capable

Our will and values determine the choices we make about the sort of person we want to be and the sort of life we want to lead. 'Will is the most important concept in education. Without the will nothing is possible' (Barnett 2005: 15). We cannot achieve anything of significance. We cannot strive to be creative or make decisions about a situation we find ourselves in, we cannot act in ways that are ethical and appropriate to the situation and we cannot learn how to deal with the situation without the will to do so. Ultimately, it is our will to develop capability in and for a particular set of situations that determines what we can and can't do.

Greene's (2004) analysis and synthesis of the capabilities of highly effective people reveals the complex nature of what capable people are able to do. They do these things not just because they are able to but because they want to, inspired by the value and meaning that they derive from what they are doing and from the feedback they receive from the results of their efforts.

A fundamental question for higher education curriculum designers is *what forms of experience nurture the spirit and self-belief that will enable learners to become who they want to become and enable them to develop the capability that will enable them to cope and keep on coping with the considerable challenges they will experience in their future personal and professional lives?* The central proposition of this book is that a lifewide concept of education offers more opportunity for achieving this worthwhile goal than an academic, discipline-based programme alone.

Endnotes

1 For example, the global recession of 2010–11.

2 Stephenson's original diagram only described two fields which he labelled X and Y. These have been relabelled W and Z on ,y diagram so that two other fields can be described

3 visit http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cynefin. Shawn Callaghan provides an excellent introduction by in the form of a YouTube podcast.

4 In the UK, the terms 'self-management' or 'managing self' are often used to denote the executive capability required to think about, plan, organise and execute actions strategically. Self-regulation is a well-researched phenomenon that engages more fundamentally with the learner's psychological processes underlying intentional actions and behaviours.