Capacity development for emancipatory social change.

Reimaging university learning and teaching for critical development practitioners.

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Abstract

In the paper, we propose a theoretical framework that tries to characterize and understand capacity development processes oriented to the promotion of a critical development practice. It is what we call capacity development for emancipatory social change, an approach that faces the tensions between reformist and critical views of development management.

From this framework, we explore a postgraduate university programme in development management, with two aims: first, to carry out an inquiry of the programme as a capacity development process in the training of critical development practitioners; second, to discuss the suitability of the framework for understanding similar capacity development processes.

Keywords: capacity development, development management, critical practice, university education.

1. Exploring capacity development for a critical development practice

Managerialism in development management (DM) has been characterized by the promotion of holistic idealizations, blind faith in scientific and rational knowledge based on linear, cause-and-effect logic, and acting exclusively on effectiveness and impact criteria (Mowles *et al.*, 2008; Mowles, 2010; Quarles *et al.*, 2003; Mosse, 2005). Development issues and problems are all reduced to aseptic technical and managerial ones (Wallace *et al.*, 2007), handled by experts. From this perspective, which is dominant in the aid system, capacity development processes must be able to provide technical instruments which enable experts to offer solutions, through policies and practices, in order to attain those results which most effectively contribute to development aims (Clarke and Oswald, 2010).

Among those who share this perspective, however, there are many whom we might call 'reformists', 'who accept the managerialist proposition, but with a reformist addenda' (Mowles, 2010:150). They do so 'either by emphasising the progressive nature of those who would become development managers, or by offering participative and "bottom up" modalities as a way of mitigating managerialism's worst effects' (Mowles, 2010:150). Thomas (1996; 2007), considered a paradigm of this trend, maintains that DM should above all promote the values of development and the interests of the powerless. Nevertheless, Thomas 'assumed that the new pro-poor end could be achieved using the existing mainstream means' (McCourt and Gulrajani, 2010: 83). These 'reformist' visions of DM have been accompanied by a new debate on ways of understanding and promoting capacity development (Clarke and Oswald, 2010), which does not necessarily abandon the usual tools but puts values and ideas about the social changes we pursue at the heart of the question.

Another group of authors 'shares the pro-poor orientation but believes that it will inevitably be distorted by the very means to promote it' (McCourt and Gulrajani, 2010: 83). DM is inescapably managerialist and it inevitably reinforces power relations, as 'managers' interests are aligned with an underlying political and economic interest which is contrary to the interests of poor people' (Fine and Jomo, 2006, in McCourt and Gulrajani, 2010: 83). For scholars who share this perspective, inspired by Foucault (1980 and 2002), capacity development is understood as 'a discourse concealing an agenda of power', with it being

nothing more than 'a political technology of neoliberal governance' (Clarke and Oswald, 2010:3).

From our perspective, we sympathize with these critiques and share their general thrust. We agree with Mowles (2010), however, that it is difficult to move beyond some of the concepts that are taken for granted within the mainstream of DM, and that these concepts can leave room for political contestation and critical engagement.

We also concur with Gulrajani (2010) that a non-managerialist practice of development is possible. The usual mainstream tools and concepts can be employed, alongside others, as one strives to put values at the heart of practice and to take into consideration the complex and political nature of development processes, embedded in power relations. As such, we propose what we will call a 'critical development practice', coherent with the final objective of social justice and directed at what Clarke and Oswald (2010) call 'emancipatory social change'. This position is challenging, requiring a compromise between a reformist perspective of DM and a critical stance, and is subject to permanent tension.

This perspective on development practice must be based on a different manner of understanding and promoting capacity development processes. Following Clarke and Oswald (2010), it is what can be called 'capacity development for emancipatory social change', which would become 'a form of social mobilization, with profound moral, ethical, social and political overtones' (Morgan, 1999: 18). Reflecting on capacity development from this perspective can also become a means to explore the tensions between reformist and critical perspectives on DM.

From this standpoint, we will draw on the thoughts of different authors who have reflected on the idea of 'capacities for change' (*IDS Bulletin*, 41 [3]), in order to discuss possible answers to the following questions (Clarke and Oswald, 2010): What capacities are most needed for a critical development practice that can contribute to emancipatory social change? How are the processes of capacity development to take place from this perspective? How can these processes be promoted and supported?

This discussion will serve to construct a framework with which to analyse and direct capacity development processes, in order to understand how and to what extent they can contribute to a 'critical development practice'.

From this framework and questions, we will explore a particular capacity development process, a postgraduate programme in development management, the *Máster en Políticas y Procesos de Desarrollo* (MPPD, Master in Development Policies and Processes), offered by the Universidad Politécnica de Valencia (UPV), in Spain.

This exploration has two aims: first, to carry out an inquiry of the MPPD as a capacity development process in the training of students as critical development practitioners; second, to discuss the suitability of the framework for understanding similar capacity development processes, facing the tensions between critical and reformist views of development management.

The selection of this particular case of study is justified by two main reasons. First, it is a relevant case to go into the practical and theoretical tensions between development

management perspectives we pointed before: the Master moves in an academic, social and policy context full of constraints and conflicting demands, and it is also shaped by conflicting visions and approaches.

Second, our framework can bring new elements to understand and reflect on learning process in postgraduate development programmes that try "to meet new demands and challenges in rapidly changing and increasingly complex arenas" (Johnson and Thomas, 2007: 39), as it goes beyond traditional approaches to higher education, and takes its insights from reflections about capacity development processes in other contexts (as NGOs or social movements).

2. Theoretical framework: capacity development for emancipatory social change

According to our framework, certain 'results' or capacities for critical development practice emerge during capacity development process for emancipatory social change. Building on the contributions of different researchers, we have identified these 'results' as *navigating complexity*, *understanding and engaging with power* and the *capacity for permanent learning and adaptation.*

The process which produces these results is endogenous, continuous and permanent, occurring in individuals and groups due to certain 'drivers', which, as we shall see, are the *development of values and visions of social change*, the *development of relations* and the experience of *comprehensive learning processes*.

Finally, this endogenous process can be promoted and supported exogenously through a variety of different methods, such as critical reflection and experiential learning methods.

Figure 1. Process of capacity development for emancipatory social change.
Source: Self-elaboration .
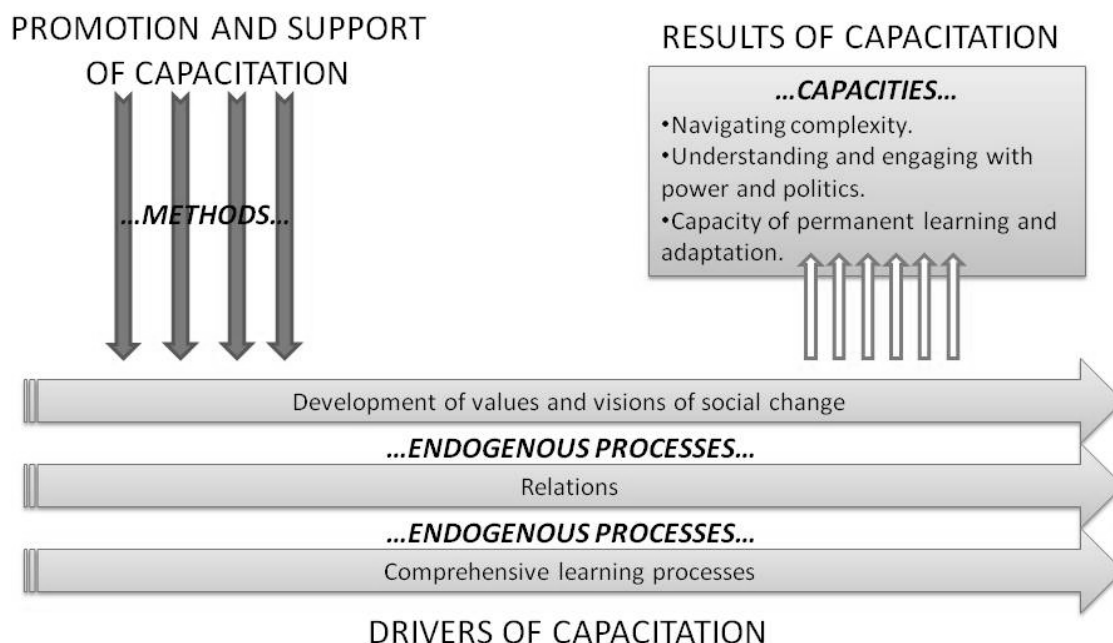
Turning to the 'results' first, it is our view that, for a critical development practice, individuals and organizations must recognize and understand the implications of working with processes which are always unpredictable, emergent and turbulent. This means 'being able to operate within the inherent complexity and unpredictability of social systems' (Woodhill, 2010: 53), and being able to 'better grapple with complexity – not to be able to master it, but to be able to act thoughtfully and purposefully within it' (Ortiz Aragon, 2010:39). This entails 'a changing of cultural assumptions about how the world works and what we should do about it' (Ortiz Aragon, 2010: 41), which, according to Woodhill (2010: 55) 'is as much about attitudes and mindsets as it is to do with any practical tools'.

It is also our view that the processes of social change are not neutral; they are of a political nature and to be a part of them entails discovering, questioning and, sometimes, confronting authority and power. Therefore, there is a need for 'the ability to understand power relations and situate oneself within them, but also to then strategise about how to engage with those power relations, either to challenge them or use them to one's advantage' (Pettit, 2010 in Clarke and Oswald, 2010:6), including the dynamics of the exercise of power that the aid system itself generates (Harvey and Langdon, 2010). The multiple ways – visible, hidden, and invisible (Gaventa, 2005) – in which power manifests itself must be considered, including 'personal and professional dynamics of power' (Pettit, 2010: 27), and how power 'affects' us and how it 'transects' us (Harvey and Langdon, 2010: 81). This understanding of power is crucial in order to engage politically with the processes of change around us (Woodhill, 2010).

Crucial to any critical development practice is the *capacity for permanent learning and adaptation*. This can be an individual capacity or the capacity of a group (Senge, 2006), including the capacity to recognize the value and potential of collaborative learning, as well as promoting and facilitating this (Woodhill, 2010). Such learning can occur in unpredictable and informal ways (Harvey and Langdon, 2010), and it is always embedded in the conditions of the particular individual or group.

As regards the 'drivers' of the endogenous process of capacity development, it is our view that, first, the capacities for a critical development practice emerge alongside the permanent generation of *values and visions of social change*. These enable us to navigate, engage, manage, and learn throughout the course of the processes of change. These allow us to generate 'our social world by applying socially derived categories of judgement' (Ortiz Aragon, 2010:42), thereby providing our activities with meaning (Pipit and Baser, 2010: 61). These values and ideas, along with expectations, intentions and visions are uncovered during action and reflection (Mowles *et al.*, 2008), simultaneously bringing into question one's own assumptions and beliefs (Ortiz Aragon, 2010; Woodhill, 2010). This process occurs at an individual level and also at a group level, as the relations and interactions within it and with the external world are continually recreated (Ortiz Aragon, 2010).

Second, it is our view that the capacity development process also emerges out of *relations*. This is a dynamic and contextual process, with different levels of aggregation, in different formal and informal spaces (e.g. organizations, families, society, etc.), and always embedded in particular contexts, where political, social, economic and cultural factors are at work (Margaret, 2010). The processes occurring within groups are also subject to complex power dynamics, in which conflicts arise, as well as permanent negotiation dynamics (Harvey and

Langdon, 2010). The different settings may facilitate or inhibit the capacitation processes (Margaret, 2010).

We have said that the process of capacity development for emancipatory social change is a *learning process*. This should be understood in a comprehensive sense, related to the interiorization of new concepts, to the development of new analytical capacities and the creation of new meanings, to experiential learning based on one's own experiences and motivations, to reflection and self-criticism, the questioning of one's own values, assumptions, orthodoxies and existing norms, which are at the foundation of social inequality (Pettit, 2006, 2010). It is a creative process with intellectual and emotional components, including the understanding of oneself (Woodhill, 2010).

Finally, according to our model, this endogenous process can be promoted and supported through very diverse pedagogical methods and approaches. Various authors have provided specific examples (Pearson, 2010; Pettit, 2010; Ortiz Aragon, 2010; Jackson, 2010; Soal, 2010; Fisher, 2010), ranging from learning through personal experience to 'creative' methods which appeal to the emotions and the use of the body. In general, the processes of capacity development considered in these examples occur in contexts which are very different from those of university teaching, although they can be relevant for approaching higher education methods and learning processes, by introducing new elements and reflections beyond traditional approaches to university education. In this study we focus on the specific methods employed in the MPPD, analysing how they may contribute to the process of capacity development for emancipatory social change.

3. The MPPD and its context

The MPPD is run by the Department of Engineering Projects at the UPV. This is a decidedly technical environment, impregnated with a rational and instrumental vision of the capacities which university students should acquire. As in the rest of Europe, the Spanish university system is also immersed in a process characterized by academic managerialism (Amaral *et al,* 2003).

The aid sector in Valencia, as in most Spanish regions, is characterized by largely weak and bureaucratized development organizations with little social support, little culture of self-criticism and reflection and very disconnected from academia (Unceta, 2004). However, we find some notable exceptions of politically engaged, critical and self-critical organizations.

Valencian regional aid policies[1] and bureaucracies promote almost exclusively logical models of development planning and management. The strategies defined by policy makers are, in practice, erratic and volatile, and there is an increasing public scepticism of the aid system[2].

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[1] Spanish aid system is characterized by the weight and importance of regional governments in bilateral aid. Each *comunidad autónoma* (autonomous region) has its own aid development policies and programmes.

[2] Moreover, policy makers have recently been affected by scandals concerning alleged irregularities. Summaries of the scandals which affect the aid system in Valencia can be read in quality newspapers such as *El País.* The latest news to appear on grant award irregularities was published as this article was being written:

In 2006, two participatory workshops took place in order to design the curriculum and teaching methodology for the MPPD. Most of the development organizations invited and some university staff demanded technical-instrumental training in 'useful' tools for raising public funds and manage projects, while some organizations and most of the university staff involved were more worried about introducing alternative and critical perspectives. The approach that emerged tried to be sensitive to these tensions: mainstream DM approaches and tools (such as logical models) were incorporated into the curriculum, along with other models of a more progressive slant (participative approaches, or those dealing with power or rights), associated with more reformist perspectives. The overall critical vision would also be present throughout the curriculum. The first MPPD intake was in 2007, and it has been taught for four years.

The structure of the programme aims to facilitate the participation of active professionals, combining distance-learning with intensive classroom sessions or workshops at UPV lasting two and a half days. The course starts with a period of training consisting of 36 ECTS[3] over two semesters, in which the economic, social and political forces that shape development processes are studied. Development approaches and the aid system are also studied, together with instruments and methodologies for DM. A phase of practical application follows, in the form of an internship in a development institution (16 ECTS, for at least four months). This experience is the basis for a research study, synthesized in the form of the Master's final dissertation (5 ECTS).

4. Methodology

The methodology employed for this study consisted of undertaking semi-structured interviews of thirteen students who have completed the MPPD training process. Of these, three had finished three months before; four, nine months before; and six, fourteen months before.

A questionnaire to reveal students perceptions was drawn up for these interviews, which covered all of the elements identified within the framework. The information obtained was complemented with an analysis of the students' dissertations, as well as the internship reports.

With this material, we asked ourselves the following questions regarding our framework: Which 'results' (or capacities) for a critical development practice had been developed by the students through the MPPD? How the endogenous process took place? What pedagogical methods and approaches of the MPPD promoted and supported the process?

We were aware of the main methodological limitations: the small sample size, the lack of cross-checking with information from other key players who formed part of the students' capacity development process (particularly from the organizations where they worked) and the limitations of individual interviews to reconstruct collective experiences. Nevertheless, it is

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http://www.elpais.com/articulo/Comunidad/Valenciana/Blasco/da/millon/euros/entidades/investiga/fiscal/elpepu espval/20110415elpval_2/Tes [accessed on 14 April, 2011].

[3] European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) is the standard unit for comparing the study attainment of students of higher education across the European Union and other collaborating European countries. 1 ECTS is equivalent to 25-30 hours of learning (autonomous work, classroom attendance, etc.)

our view that these limitations do not invalidate this study, as it is a decidedly exploratory, and it also inquires in the scope of the limitations, and in the potentials for further research. This work must be understood as the first part of a still ongoing process of research.

5. Evidences and discussion

The first idea that the results from the interviews suggest regarding the theoretical framework concerns the difficulty in clearly differentiating between the categories of 'results', 'drivers' and 'methods to support and promote' in the capacity development process, as well as how to situate the elements in the different categories (for example, 'understanding and engaging with power' is a 'result' but may be also a 'driver' of the process). Moreover, the relations among the categories are also more complex than what the framework supposes. However, the framework was relevant for clarification, for establishing the main relations between categories and elements and for constructing a comprehensive and relevant view of the capacity development process of the students.

The second general reflection regards attribution, as the answers of many of the interviewees confirmed that it is not possible to attribute the changes in the individual and groups exclusively to the MPPD. Therefore, we took the evidence to mean that the MPPD process played a key role in the development of capacities.

5.1. The 'results' of capacitation: the capacities for a critical development practice

In light of the opinions of our interviewees, we can say that the capacity that most clearly emerged in the students from the MPPD process is the second of those results identified in the proposed model: *understanding and engaging with power*. The first result, *navigating complexity*, and the third*, capacity for learning and adaptation*, appear less clearly.

The students perceive that they have achieved a certain level of intellectual interiorization of power and that they have the tools to manage this: *Power, certainly, because you get tools with which to analyse power and that makes all the difference, it's like a prism which helps you see more clearly.* Interviewee 3 *(E3)*

Several students felt that they have developed the ability to perceive and manage power dynamics in particular contexts with the MPPD process. For example, speaking about his current action as an activist, one interviewee stated:

> *It's no longer about 'let's pressure to get this done', but there are these people with these interests, with these inertias, we have these cards we can play, this legitimacy, this power, let's see what we can do with these tools, how far we can go, what alliances we can make. (E1)*

The interviewees also spoke of the perception and management of own power. For example:

> *It's not easy because they are shy, they have no voice (...) But I wasn't asking difficult questions, I was just asking about when she got up, her normal routine (…).That's when I remembered [teacher from the MPPD] because the woman wasn't answering me, so I crouched a little, so that we were at the same height and then she did answer me. (E2)*

The result of 'navigating' complexity is much less clearly appreciable, even if the idea is present in the interviews. Understanding of the concept is generally vague:

> *Regarding how change happens, of course, in a very complex way you have to keep looking at this, this and this and when you've got it all, all of sudden, something else appears which changes everything. (E7)*

> *At [local African NGO], as you have to manage the agenda of the people there, your own agenda, the dynamics, then what you're dealing with is very complex and you have to know the right time to go to a particular place, when to dig your heels in and say I need such and such a thing and when to understand how things flow. (E1)*

Regarding the result of the *capacity for permanent learning and adaptation*, the interviews did not reveal much evidence in relation to the elements of the theoretical framework. For example, with regard to promoting learning processes, only one of the interviewees mentions such a thing happening in his case:

> *One of the things you learn on the Master's course is that you have to devote a lot of thought to things, and so promoting those forums [for reflection and learning] within organizations has been something which, for example, I've tried to bring about and the Master's course enabled me to do that, I had that set of tools to facilitate those forums. (E4)*

The other comments only mention (albeit frequently) superficial elements, such as 'raising awareness' amongst family and friends, being more open-minded to new things (*I feel completely open towards anything that may happen or occur in the future* (E6)), or now being better at searching for information (*now I know where to go, where to look* (E7)).

5.2. The 'drivers' of capacitation*: the endogenous processes*

Answers were given which justify the statement that during the MPPD period the students were immersed in capacity development processes through the three drivers which we identified: the *development of values and ideas on change*, *relations*, and *comprehensive learning processes,* although to different degrees.

Regarding the *values and ideas on change*, the most frequently expressed opinion is that, over the course of the MPPD period, a critical vision of the current approach to development co-operation emerges, generating "disillusionment" and visions of aid as not useful or even a new form of colonialism.

Apart from this, some interviews have given hints of the emergence of new values and ideas in the students, directing the actions they take in their daily work (related or unrelated to the practice of development) or as social activists:

> *For example, at [a social action NGO], because of the Master's course, along with many other things, we started to work on the issue of political impact and raising social awareness.* (E4)

Some students came up with new elements to reflect upon, even if these ideas were not clearly defined. For example, one student explicitly said:

I've got more ideas, but (…) I'm not sure if change should be top-down, from the political sphere, from the policies emerging from aid issues, or if change should come from the activism of the general population, from their raised awareness… (E2)

With regard to *relations* as a driver of the process, we recorded numerous opinions highlighting their importance within student group, both at formal and informal forums:

Yes, I think that it was partly at the end of the classes when the people would get together and everything came out. (E9)

These relations within the group are very positively viewed as facilitators of learning, although several remarks were made about dynamics which could inhibit it. For example:

Those who have more experience speak from a stronger position, with more conviction… and I thought about that sometimes… I [had to] sieve through that information because maybe I am letting myself be influenced. (E2)

Often mentioned was the importance of other collective spaces where parallel processes occurred, especially in social organizations that the students participated in. For example:

One part was the Master's course, there was one with [social action NGO], and there was another that was being here with the group [of MPPD students] (...) so there are lots of group structures that overlap and then, in the end, what is mine is mine, but it has partly been built here. (E1)

All these spaces (including family environment and circles of friends) were seen as facilitators of the learning process which does not necessarily mean that the students were able to apply their capacities within them.

Finally, concerning *comprehensive learning processes,* many comments were made which led us to believe that many elements of the framework were present.

Some of the comments relate to more intellectual processes, such as the interiorization of concepts or the questioning of assumptions. Another recurring element was self-reflection, visualized as a widespread feature of the MPPD process.

Experiential aspects of learning were also frequently mentioned, especially with regard to the internship phase. For example:

The internship was a bit like 'bullfighting' […] I've had decent training, but not as much as others, and so, you know, dealing with people, the 'bulls', I realized things and learnt a lot in a personal sense. (E6)

Less frequent mention was made of the purely emotional aspects of the process. Terms mentioned by more than one interviewee were 'exhaustion', 'disillusionment' with the current aid system and the new 'motivation' for a different kind of action to effect change, generally more 'political'. Several interviewees spoke of shedding 'fears':

> *When I finished [the period at the UPV] I didn't feel ready at all, but I did the internship (...) and after I felt that while I was there, I confronted all my fears and insecurities. (E10)*

5.3. *Promotion and support of the process of capacity development: the methods*

Numerous methods of the MPPD were mentioned by the students, although it is difficult to say to what extent they promoted and supported the process of capacity development. We see justification, however, for stating that the different phases of the MPPD (training at the UPV, internship and dissertation) have been important in the promotion of capacitation.

Regarding the training period at the UPV, methods repeatedly referred to were the reading and analysis of texts (as a way of promoting the generation of students' own ideas), criticism, self-reflection and debate. The variety of opinions, along with the diversity of profiles, careers and disciplinary backgrounds of the students, drew much approval, as it promoted learning through relations and gave rise to new ideas.

The participatory methods trialled during some practical sessions were also mentioned on several occasions. For example:

> *The more participatory technical ideas, and how people learn together and can see the different issues in a way which is easy to understand, that really has been a way, which maybe I did know and like, but you can see that there are lot more tools as well.* (E1)

These methods were frequently mentioned as the key to the learning occurring later, during the internship, facilitating experiential learning in the process of immersion and participation in specific development processes.

As regards the drafting of the dissertation, positive mention was made of its nature as an element of analytical 'closure' of the MPPD process. The difficulty of this task was also remarked upon several times, however, along with the emotional effort required.

The actual way in which the course is structured (autonomous individual and group work followed by intensive classroom and workshop sessions lasting two and a half days) seems to have been an important method for the generation of informal learning environments (breaks and meals after classes, meetings for the autonomous group work, etc.).

Finally, it is worth noting that little reference was made to some of the methods put forward by the authors cited earlier: for example, those methods called 'creative' by Pettit (2010) (role-plays, poetry, theatre…), which are aimed at the emotions. These were used only occasionally in the MPPD and the interviewees made no mention of them. Another example is the use of the student's own experience (Pettit, 2010; Pearson, 2010; Jackson, 2010): several students made positive mention of the fact that the teaching staff presented issues for discussion through the prism of their own experience, but they make little reference to the teaching staff motivating the discussion via the students' own experience and expectations.

6. Concluding remarks

The proposed framework has allowed us to explore the MPPD from a more suitable standpoint in order to consider capacity development for another possible practice of development, which we have called 'critical'. On the one hand, this model is more comprehensive, not focusing just on 'results', but also on the endogenous process of capacity development and the methods to promote and support it; on the other, it also concentrates on aspects which may be important in order to navigate the tensions between a reformist perspective and a critical perspective of DM.

The issues we have focused on (elements of results, drivers and methods) are distributed unequally in the MPPD, sometimes in ambiguous and obscure ways. Yet the framework and the discussion have enabled us to get new insights to reflect both on the MPPD and on the framework itself. Regarding the MPPD, in relation to the 'results', we detected limitations to the emergence of the capacities for *navigating complexity* and for *learning and adapting*. The MPPD has the challenge to ensure that the students interiorize the importance of these aspects and that they have the skills to deal with them.

Regarding the endogenous processes, there is still a lot of potential for developing ideas and visions on change as a driver of the capacity development process. More weight and thought should also be given to the strong relational learning which appears to emerge from the MPPD's informal forums, as well as in the parallel environments that the students inhabit, particularly the organizational ones.

Methods which can promote the processes mentioned should be considered: intellectual interiorization of new ideas, conscious generation of one's own ideas, etc. Other, more 'creative' methods, could receive greater consideration, and more use could be made of the students' own experience. The relationships and complex synergies between the analytical, critical, experiential and emotional methods of learning could be explored and promoted.

As regards the theoretical and methodological framework itself, the results/vectors/methods model seems to us to be relevant. Some of its elements, however, could be reconsidered (by combining those which we identify or by adding new aspects), as well as the relations between categories, which are more complex than what the model proposes. More information and evidence would be needed for this aim, which should be partly obtained through the continuation of the study in the near future, addressing the methodological limitations noted. The questionnaire itself for the interviews should also be modified during this process.

It is our view that the problems and ambiguities of the model largely derive from the fact that its theoretical 'inputs' principally originate from reflections of the authors noted on processes in other contexts (like NGOs and social movements), very different from a university context. Nevertheless, this has offered us a different and more wide-ranging perspective of the capacity development processes, leading to a re-assessment of many forgotten aspects of formal education and university teaching, particularly in DM postgraduate programs. This new insights introduce relevant elements and questions that capacity development processes, as well as future development practitioners, have to consider when moving in the tensions between reformist and critical perspectives on DM.

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