

Domain: **Management**

Exploring leadership, governance and management development in quality assurance systems

What Quality Assurance misses: redressing the imbalance between ‘reification’ and ‘participation’ (0279)

Wareing¹Shan, ¹*University of the Arts London, London, United Kingdom*

This paper is concerned with how Quality Assurance could be more valid and more relevant, through fuller engagement of students and teaching and support staff. It uses Wenger’s model of ‘Communities of practice’ to analyse current QA processes which it argues are heavily reliant on ‘reification’ at the expense of ‘participation’, thus ensuring that the systems miss many significant aspects of how the quality of the student learning experience is assured, and leading to QA appearing irrelevant to many staff and students. Wenger’s model and the theory of ‘co-creation’ are used to suggest ways in which ‘participation’ could be increased in QA to make it more effective.

Wenger (1998) identifies two interdependent concepts in his exploration of communities of practice: ‘participation’ and ‘reification’.

Reification is the process by which shared meanings are crystallised and made permanent, for example in text, photographs, or symbolic objects such as statues or badges. Once reified or ‘fixed’, meanings can be cross referenced and communicated over elapsed time and geographical distance. Quality assurance relies very heavily on reified meanings, being largely dependent on formal text produced under specific circumstances (such as reports by approved external examiners commenting on highly formulaic processes, approved minutes from meetings where the membership and terms of reference are documented independently, and accounts written in a specific discourse and following an agreed structure.)

‘Participation’ is the immediate and ephemeral communication that characterises day to day social exchanges where communities construct many of their shared meanings. Meaning communicated through participation tends to be immediate, tacit and transient. It is built of conversations, jokes, body language, and habits. It is ‘what everyone knows’ but which may be recorded nowhere. Students’ experience of higher education, and the experience of staff too, partly consists of undocumented but shared meanings which are significant but do not necessarily appear in the reified records. This can result in disconnections in the process and outcomes of quality assurance compared to other data (for example, the National Student Survey).

It has been my experience of internal and external quality assurance processes is that QA often misses what ‘everyone knows’. As Lewis Elton has written “Why did the entire edifice of inspection fail to identify what every student knows – that some teaching is brilliant, some is adequate, and some is distressingly awful and a waste of everyone’s time?”

My university recently conducted a research project into variation in student retention rates between courses. An unintended outcome was what we learnt about how course directors viewed internal quality assurance processes. Staff reported that in contrast to the enjoyable, informative and supportive process of taking part in the research, they found QA dull and a waste of time. Meetings were boring ('that's why they call them Bored meetings'), that the paper work is 'just feeding the system', that the processes feel threatening and high risk. The overall sense was that QA systems have little relevance or connection with Course Directors' actual work of teaching and managing the resources which construct students' experiences.

Despite external QAA Audit now including a student submission I argue that it is the relative absence of student and staff participation throughout QA which allows QA to disconnect extensively from key factors in students' actual experience. Wenger describes participation as 'living in the world; membership; acting; interacting; mutuality'. A current model increasingly appearing as a process for institutional change management which echoes Wenger's ideas is 'Co-creation' (see for example, Oblinger and Lombardi 2008, Collis 2005). Co-creation in industry has meant involving the client throughout the design and production process. In higher education, it is not a well established concept outside elearning curriculum development, but it could mean bringing students particularly, but also staff from across the university, into processes which might otherwise have been handled by specialists or managers, perhaps with token consultation of other groups.

Co-creation would be a way to improve the validity and relevance of QA. I suggest the key attributes for participation and co-creation are:

- 1) Reduce the risk to participants of genuine engagement. The quality enhancement system in Scotland recognised that a major threat to the effectiveness of QA was game playing and risk avoidance, and changed the system to provide fewer 'perverse incentives' for cheating (or gaming, if we are being euphemistic).
- 2) To explore aspects of the educational process which need teasing out and interpreting in a way which isn't possible in many HE contexts and processes, for example when committees consider formal reports. This would involve the acquisition and analysis of qualitative data cross-referenced to quantitative data to understand cause and effect of educational processes and interventions better. This could also be called listening carefully to what students and staff are really telling us.
- 3) To ensure the widest possible inclusion, and that all voices are heard, allowing participants to define what they think is important.

The kinds of change we might see as a result include an uncovering of hidden consequences, for example, variation in consequences for late submission and whether this has a differential impact on different demographic groups of students. We might gain a better understanding of the significance of the relatively high numbers of students reporting nationally and annually in the National Student Survey that the criteria on which they are assessed are not clear to them in advance, and that feedback does not help them improve their work in future. We might discover

whether validation and annual monitoring forms enable staff to capture and communicate what they perceive to be the essence of their course and the educational experience they want to provide, and if not, how could the process be changed to lessen the gap. It might tell us who reads programme specifications and what purpose they serve, and how they could be made readable to a wider or more significant audience.

I suggest that by incorporating ideas of participation and co-creation, Quality Assurance would become more effective and the quality of higher education would improve as a result.

Text of paper: 994 words

References

- Collis, B. (2005) 'Elearning and the Transformation of Education for a Knowledge Economy' in *The Network Society: from knowledge to policy* edited by Manuel Castells and Gustavo Cardoso, Washington: Center for Transatlantic Relations pp251-223
- Elton, L. (2004) 'Continuing Professional Development in Higher Education: Trust and Accountability', *Higher Education Digest* **49**, Digest Supplement, pp. 5 – 7.
- Oblinger, D. and Lombardi, M. (2008) 'Common knowledge: openness in Higher Education' in *Opening Up Education: the collective advancement of education through Open Technology, Open Content and Open Knowledge*, edited by Toru Iiyoshi and M.S Vijay Kumar, Massachusetts: MIT Press, p389-400
- Seymour, D. (1992) *On Q: Causing Quality in Higher Education*, New Jersey: Macmillan
- Wenger, Etienne (1998) *Communities of Practice* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.