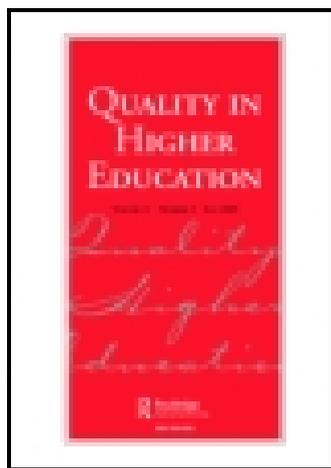


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Quality in Work-based Studies not Lost, Merely Undiscovered

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ABSTRACT *The argument made in this paper is that good quality is subsumed into the practices of skilful participants and that institutions should act upon their consciences. This is particularly important in the complex blending of the workplace and the academy, where codified quality may disrupt learning rather than support a flourishing environment for all stakeholders. Following Heidegger's notion of referential totalities it is proposed that what should be sought is concealment of quality and for its discovery only in times of genuine concern. Ultimately this means trusting the expertise of those involved, not the precepts to control activities.*

Keywords: workplace learning; Heidegger; quality; conscience

Introduction

This paper starts with a wish to provide a quality of student experience that facilitates students' mastery of the skills they, employers and educationalists desire. An essential part of confirming the quality potentially afforded by the world of learning is clarity of definition. The paper argues that central measurement and control of quality is neither effective nor necessary. As Harvey (2005) reveals in his history and critique of quality evaluation in higher education, the moves towards standards, benchmarking, codes of practices and qualification frameworks may have distanced us from, rather than returning us to 'an integrated process of mutual trust that priorities improvement in learning' (Harvey, 2005, p. 274). According to Harvey, current quality assurance processes point to a future for learning which is 'not a real engagement with learning but the advent of more complex evaluation procedures: in that setting it is unlikely that the quality in student experience will improve' (Harvey, 2005, p. 274). This rush for transparency has meant that the prize, the 'what-for' of quality, has been lost to its own image. By becoming all too visible, English quality assurance has not promoted quality so much as promoted itself, under the rubric of accountability. Moreover, such a self-satisfying, controlling and totalising approach has proven problematic for innovations marking the emergence of higher education in the workplace. Unlike Harvey, the paper does not suggest that bureaucratic quality systems of the UK and Europe hide a worsening academic base but rather that higher education institutions ought to absorb quality

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assurance into the background of our higher education practices and let quality learning shine forth.

This paper argues that good quality is subsumed into the practices of skilful participants and that institutions act upon their conscience. This is particularly important in the complex blending of the workplace and the academy, where codified quality may disrupt learning rather than support a flourishing environment for all stakeholders. The proposal is that what should be sought is concealment of quality and for its discovery only in times of genuine concern. Ultimately this means trusting the expertise of those involved, not the precepts to control activities. This approach has something in common with what Massy and Wilger based on international research, have defined as 'education quality work'. This is, as they explain, 'the activities of faculty, academic leaders, and oversight bodies that are aimed at *improving and assuring quality*' (Massy & Wilger, 1999, p. 48, original emphasis). This approach requires, according to its authors, a:

...high degree of collegiality and professionalism, and also the balancing of priorities for teaching and research. Such excellence requires that professors work together rather than as individuals and that they devote substantial time to, for example, explicating educational goals, enhancing teaching and learning processes. (Massy & Wilger, 1999, p. 50)

Although this approach puts the control of what are the quality issues, and how they are to be addressed, in the hands of the academics it is set within the oversight, control and surveillance régime based on procedure that, although better than the precepts and hegemony of some quality systems, still falls short of the trust based on mastery and accountability advocated in this paper.

Quality and work-based learning

The development of work-based learning (WBL) programmes requires close cooperation between the parties who agree to the learning outcomes leading to the academic award. In a recent survey of 70 institutional audits by the QAA (2007) they found that more than two-thirds mention programmes with placement elements. Clearly a stakeholder relationship exists, meaning relations have both moral and procedural bases upon which a system of controls can be placed to give assurance of the awards' quality. This is an educational institution responsibility (QAA, 2007, p. 7) but the very idea of combining learning derived from formal education with that from the workplace is problematic. Tasker and Peckham (1994), Barnett (2000) and West (2006) claim that academic and industrial values are incommensurate and that it is only with mutual respect that collaboration can be fruitful. According to Evans *et al.* (2006, p. 6) 'the workplace is a site in which antagonistic relationships are expressed' and for Reeve and Gallacher (2005, p. 223) despite government encouragement to 'view partnership as central to the successful development of WBL in universities, much of the literature also reflects significant problems in trying to implement this approach'. Moreover, Kinman and Kinman (2000, p. 15) found that:

Busy managers are adept at filtering out what they see as unnecessary information to get at the 'bones' of a message. Unfortunately this trained focus on the essential tends to prevent participants from taking notice of the peripheral details

that often lead to new connections and the stimulation of abstract thought and critical thinking...

A view that many may emphasise as the fundamental purpose of university education.

However, the point is not the tension but its effect. The tension prevents the notion of quality being absorbed into the practices of work-based higher education and may create a rupture that makes it perceptible when it should be part of our everydayness. Indeed, the insistence on the term 'precept', taken to mean a commandment, instruction, or order intended as an authoritative rule of action, in the QAA's workplace code acts to ensure that quality is rule-bound. This is the sort of behaviour that, according to Dreyfus (2001), is naive and not the action of someone who has mastery or practical wisdom whose status is usually identified by their ability to transcend rule following. This does not assume or advocate that quality should be without any guiding documentation but that it is used for the purposes of developing quality educational work evidence which is evidenced and agreed for learning that occurs in the workplace.

It is against this background that responsibility for quality management in higher education has historically fallen on a decentralised system of accrediting agencies, which monitor quality largely through external quality approaches (Welsh & Dey, 2002). Governments tend to address quality management issues through monitoring activities (Green, 1994) such as accreditation, audits, assessment and external examination (Harvey, 2002). The objectives are institutional and programme compliance, with a series of regulations and standards, the achievement of stated institutional goals and conformity to given specifications. Yet, these external quality approaches are not uncontested. Gibbs and Iacovidou (2004) for example, refer to this approach as 'pedagogy of the confined', where quality is an externally measurable form of control, not good education. Harvey (2002, p. 5) also critiques external quality monitoring as 'bureaucratic... incapable of asking the right questions... leads to directing scarce resources from the improvement of learning, the experience for students and the development of research and scholarship'.

Williams (the then head of the UK QAA) showed awareness of the issues, if not the solutions, when he proposed at a recent UVAC conference that work-based learning 'frees higher education from the concept of physical borders and methods of delivery are without limit and the landscape is rich in opportunity' (Williams, 2006, p. 191). However, he continued, 'these factors pose various challenges for effective quality assurance'. He echoed the issues made more forcefully in the QAA Code of Practice relating to work-based and placement learning (QAA, 2007), which highlight concerns over the responsibilities of partners, the communication roles and the management of students, employers and universities. Specifically, the aspect of awarding credit for work-based learning is noted by Nixon *et al.* (2006). They claim that practitioners delivering work-based learning find 'anomalies exist in the functioning of institutionally or regionally driven credit-based systems. For instance, the maximum amount of credit a student can achieve through APEL [accreditation of prior experiential learning] varies by institution and as such a rather arbitrary system seems to have emerged' (Nixon *et al.*, 2006, p. 51). This challenge is particularly well covered by Brennan (2005) and Connor (2005). Contrary to transparency, the chosen discourse of each institution, both academic and commercial, on rules and precepts are hidden. The task to be faced is to hide quality assurance in learning. This is not to deny the need for investigation and enquiry into practice in order to know and understand but to resist using instruments designed out of context to measure against predetermined, standing evaluation criteria (van Rensburg, 2008).

Quality in our everydayness from a Heideggerian^[1] perspective

For Heidegger the notion of quality production, whether that be silver chalices, cabinets or works of art, is in the relatedness of the creator to the work. It is not about external standards that, while relevant, may tend to impose rather than liberate quality. He illustrates this when he discusses the relationship of a cabinet maker to his creative medium; wood. He argues that a cabinet maker worthy of the name transcends the use of wood as a mere component in the production process and relates to it as part of his identity as cabinet maker and argues 'the craft will never be anything but empty busywork' (Heidegger, 1977, p. 15). It is in this ancient sense that *work-based learning* should be considered. Such learning is always in flux, always engaging in new problems, always learning; it is the modern craftsman identifying with her or his production, which is quite distinct from modern academically-grounded workers dis-interested in their work. Importantly it also needs teacher, mentor, masters to transcend their own goals to free the student to 'let learn' (Heidegger, 1977, p. 15) and, it is in this sense, experiential vocational learning.

Moreover, when working at the level of mastery of our practices we are usually unaware of the activities and the environment in which we undertake them we just get on and do them. This for Heidegger is a 'referential totality' within which we move and make sense of ourselves and others. In it we become aware when things do not work or happen as we expect, or we are not able to do what is required; we do not have the competency or have the capability to act. At that point, what becomes conspicuous is that which failed. Quality is thus hidden in what we do; we do not notice what is being used by something for the sake of doing something else. We use things (entities or procedures) in this sense as equipment and this equipment is what helps us make sense of our world of action; it forms a referential totality. For example, the keyboard for writing this paper is often conspicuous, even obstructive, especially to the unskilled typist whose efforts are that of the novice but in the hands of a skilled secretary the keys are incidental to the words appearing for the sake of communication to be produced.

Quality in things acting in-order-to achieve what is intended is un-noticed, for neither are the tools used in-order-to achieve the goal noticed. Heidegger calls such tools and processes 'ready-to-hand' in that we can use them, or learn to use them, in a referential whole through which we can reveal ourselves. As skilful practitioners we become absorbed in the purpose for which we use this equipment; not in the item of equipment. If the equipment breaks or is not available, we look upon it in a different way, a way that acknowledges its thing-ness rather than its usefulness; this is called 'present-at-hand' and, should the tool be available for use but is inappropriate, for example too heavy for the task, then the equipment is 'unready-to-hand'.

The point is that quality ought to be treated as a referential totality within which processes and procedures act so they can be readily absorbed in the practices performed for the sake of the organisation's ultimate goals. Such a referential totality does not have quality as an entity present-at-hand, measurable but not involved. In building a learning environment spanning work and the academy, quality needs to disappear; to be hidden until something goes wrong. That is not to say that the procedures and process ought not, from time to time, be made visible. They can be inspected, investigated and evaluated, not as precepts but as examples of practice. Improvements will be made to them to enable their disappearance again into our everyday practice as workers, researchers or students. Of course, this concerns the quality of the learning environment, not the often-separate quality assurance function of the workplace and the academy which may be identified through ISO9000 or

Sigma 6. Moreover, Heidegger also recognises that some encounters are of the type, unready-to-hand; that is we don't know what to do with them or they cause us to question what we would ordinarily just get on with. This may be applicable to new academics joining a community of scholars or to the introduction of new modes of teaching or of educational distribution. For instance, when addressing the questions of how does distance education enhance student learning? There are many issues that may be new to the institutions and their partnerships that require understanding and the development of expert practices. At the early stage of competence written documentation may enhance quality but when the project is mastered as evidence in quality practices they can be absorbed in the joint activities of the partnership.

This Heideggerian approach will strike a chord with the pragmatists. It argues for a form of inconspicuous quality assurance revealed in the final outcome of the production process. For business, this is the organisation's sustainability and for the university it might be the students flourishing and then securing employment. Whatever it is, given the clarity required earlier, its success is in its inconspicuousness.

This goal is hindered by the somewhat prescriptive direction about responsibility for quality in work-based learning. The QAA's Code of Conduct seems to envision this as being the role of the academic institution but, the precepts in Section 9 of the Code are more readily applied to work placements than work-based learning on a workplace 'site' (QAA, 2007, p. 13). Indeed, the evidence shows little regard for precepts that render the university responsible for aspects of workplace provision. The code manages to make quality all too visible and so reduce its contribution to the practices it purports to foster. Disclosed through practice, quality is a communal idea that draws its definition and its support from stakeholders transacting in the world where the deeds are practiced. In this sense, the responsibility for the quality of the practices cannot be the sole responsibility of one party; one cannot control or monitor practice by rendering quality visible. It is a surely a stakeholder responsibility.

Quality undisclosed

In 'Building Dwelling Thinking', Heidegger claims that 'to dwell, to be set at peace, means to remain at peace within the free sphere that cares-for each thing in its own nature. The fundamental character of dwelling is this caring-for' (Heidegger, 1975, p. 149). 'To dwell' is to be at peace within one's abode and to care for all things within it; it is being-at-home within one's dwelling place, abiding as the ground of all that we care-for, all that is important to us, manifesting in and as the manner humans being fulfilled in being-itself (Heidegger, 2000). Furthermore, Heidegger claims 'the fundamental character of dwelling is this caring-for' (1975, p. 149). This dwelling suggests an acculturation of rituals and practices that are central to learning in practice.

For instance, it follows, that a discourse of skills is much less problematic in the intent towards the development of the person than the current use of the term in the sense of prescribed learning outcomes and competency-based communities (Smith, 2005). Indeed the prescription of outcomes of teaching to student learning seems to be counter-intuitive if the aim of education is personal autonomy and practical wisdom. Surely, education is the blending in the educated person of learned being and creative becoming. It may be discussed as skills acquisition provided these skills be rich in the relationship to the development of the identity of the person as a social actor in ways that foster the disposition outlined by White (1996) and Gibbs and Anglides (2004).

These dispositions are not exclusive of any form of structured education; they draw no real or virtual line in cyber space or elsewhere in separating vocational and academic. The insight of Dewey's (1966, p. 318) that vocational education is about becoming a contributor to society and warns of the perils for society of an overtly instrumental vocational educational system can become an 'instrument in accomplishing the feudal dogma of social predestination'. This tension between finding a home in society through an occupation in which one can be contented (Bonnett, 2003), not one forced onto the student as a pre-determined function of their social standing. In other words the acquisition of skills should be considered both a political and moral endeavour as well as a process of achieving competence. It is encouraged through opportunities to learn that are existentially enriched and students make decisions not just on the tools of their endeavour but how they want to use them to influence their societal role.

There is evidence in the UK system that vocational education does indeed try to do that. For instance in a recent study by Colley *et al.* (2003) concerning vocational education in further education colleges, they illustrate the social constructivism of vocational education through the lens of 'vocational *habitus*'. Although the focus of their article was not the notion of morality, the case studies they offered clearly indicated that the learning opportunities within the communities of practice that the student engaged in when working other than at college did contribute to their becoming members of their communities in ways beyond skills.

The workplace with its structure, culture, atmosphere or climate and prescribed way of conducting business is a dwelling place in the Heideggerian sense. Indeed it is evident from the literature that 'workplace culture is multifaceted and asserts a major influence on individuals and groups behaviour' (Wilson *et al.*, 2005, p. 928). A world where any artificial divide between ethics and the being of an ethical agent is removed and where learning takes place in both explicit and tacit skills and in the transcendence and immanence of Being. In this sense the workplace can be where one can authentically reveal oneself through one's work in ways that encourage caring and participation through responsibility and the realisation of potential. Such a workplace is conducive to a culture that defines what the community of practice means within the world at large. It is developed through the engagement of workers with workers who are often subjected to, rather than liberated from, the management that directs their endeavour. It is the manner of the actual practice of a novice or experienced worker that they reveal themselves to be work mates who care about or look after each other. This is most obviously seen in dangerous occupations but is also in the potentially less physical dangerous but psychologically threatening service and caring industries.

The risk of the reification of skills is that they do not lead to their wisdom use. This progression beyond skills might be one aspect in the difference between occupation and vocation. To restore the value of vocation to occupations, vocational education ought to take place in the workplace but a workplace that is designed to offer a community at peace with itself. Such a combination will enable students to transform to practitioners within the context of being engaged in the actual issues of society and learning the conditions that will support or disrupt the dwelling place they find. This may only be plausible to the degree that the workplace matches the notion of democracy advocated here. However, pragmatically, the failure of society to embrace notions of democracy, dignity and care reflect a society that itself is shallow in these dispositions. The argument for the development of such wise workplaces seems self evident given the significant role they play in the identify formation of those engaged in actions within them.

In everyday working environments anything that is produced has a quality. It is judged by others and ourselves by our practices. The becoming of an expert is through certain practices and this is a notion of quality that has real purchase in the 'work' of work-related studies. In this sense, those who can are hired, promoted or, at the very least, not fired; although perhaps exploited! Their quality is seen in their fitness for purpose; their skills in coping; their expertise. It is not weighted by how many quality guidelines they follow; it is not expressly contractual or authoritarian but judged by practices of the everyday world.

This point is crucial for, without a broad rather than simply instrumental approach to quality assurance, the development of the trans-disciplinary and practical knowledge at the core of work-based learning will be constrained by an academically subject-based and rigidly self-interested view of knowledge creation. Even Boud and Symes (2000) warn that universities need to be cautious with their work-based learning provision for such arrangements may debase the educational process. Such a conservative approach may impede further democratisation of education through the embrace of learning in the workplace. The quality assurance policymakers ought not to seek comparisons with what holds for propositional knowledge but to give parity of esteem to practical knowledge. They need to recognise that learning realised through the workplace can lead to greater openness and fairness but needs trust and promises, not inspection and contracts.

A conscience?

This may be facilitated by the learning outcomes and assessment regimes adopted by higher education as a way of revealing achievement beyond contexts defined by discipline. Work-based learning requires an appreciation of 'forms of understanding that are sensitive to context, time, change, events, beliefs and desires and power' (Tsoukas, 2005, p. 4). Thus, while subject benchmarks are inevitably concerned with generalisation from constituted bodies of subject knowledge, 'canon' and learning, much of work-based learning is concerned with the complexity and depth of understanding of specific contexts (Garrick & Rhodes, 2000). Furthermore, the implementation of learning outcomes enable the widening and deepening of knowledge to be assessed critically and in its full complexity, rather than in the often artificial structures of disciplines. As Garnett states:

The high level of customisation, not only to meet the needs of individual students but also their organizations, is prized within the discourse of modernism which pervades quality assurance in higher education... In this respect work-based learning and quality assurance in higher education can be seen as part of the same modernising discourse. (Garnett, 2000)

These shifts are more than changes in discourse and include the way the workplace is perceived as a learning environment and act within it. Williams (2006) does not want corners cut but for us to produce something worthwhile. He claims that the QAA acts as 'an academic conscience (hence the use of the word precept?) for the higher education community in system-wide quality and standards matters' (Williams, 2006, p. 194). There is much here to interpret but perhaps the most interesting is his use of the notion of conscience. Williams, in all probability, is using the term in the sense that a call of conscience is a response to some particular violation of what is right. Conscience tells us that we are guilty on a specific occasion such as the 'cutting of corners' (most likely of the QAA precepts,) referred to above. Although guilt is a strong word to use, it does awaken

us to the strength of the claim. Heidegger has a temporal way to deal with this issue which is borrowed here. He structures guilt on the basis of indebtedness; our past, which cannot be changed and our responsibility to the future. As people or as institutions, we are guilty if we assume that neither exists and act only in the present. In essence, my responsibility is to make choices that preclude other possibilities. As Polt (2003, p. 89) suggests, it would be 'inauthentic to pretend either that he has no other options, or that he can afford the luxury of not choosing at all'. Facing up authentically to the needs of work-based learning requires actions that are owned and will create anxieties for institutions determined to hide their past under the cloak of work-based learning. What is needed is a fresh look at work-based learning and its relationships, not an approach in which one party, either the university or the industry, suggests merging its values into its own. Whilst both parties try to do this, and the QAA's precepts make this manifest, the sector will continue to feel guilty for not making the right choices. Whether this is meant as the 'conscience' of higher education, is debatable. However, if it were, the QAA needs to do more to encourage institutions to recognise their past relationship with work-based learning and resolutely to assume their responsibilities for work-based learning by either engaging or retreating. Moreover, as Naidoo and Jamieson (2005) suggest, rather than using valuable resources attempting to move up the ranking tables based around QAA indicators, universities might be better off investing in their missions.

The desire of disappearance

There are continuing debates in both the worlds of work and education on *what* higher education is and *how* it should be evaluated. Nixon *et al.* (2006, p. 51) claim that quality assurance procedures and codes of practice 'will need to better reflect the breadth of approaches to flexible learning being adopted by HEIs [higher education institutions] so as not to stifle innovation in the future'. What the argument intends is to create an understanding of the quality of practice, that is, quality has to become absorbed within those practices. Quality in the learning-place allows novices to become experts and experts to aspire to be practically wise. It is unsustainable to create such a space by setting out precepts designed to protect the self-interested goals of awarding credentials or harnessing cheaply-trained labour. A learning environment needs all stakeholder to identify the new situation and either embrace it or reject it, not to accept then graft on quality assurance processes in an attempt to hide the unacceptable. Honesty must precede trust and only when there is a genuine desire for an enriched learning environment, demonstrated by requiring essential change in both academy and workplace. Given this, then 'care' about quality assurance for the learning experience will be absorbed in genuine workplace learning practices.

Note

- [1] For the purpose of this paper it is not necessary to detail the appearance of these concepts in Heidegger's work, although they can all be found in his (1962) book, *Being and Time*.

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