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Quality and equality in lifelong learning: intersections and collisions

Louise Morley

Lifelong learning has become a dominant policy in education today. By disaggregating education from age there are agendas for opportunity, continuous development and change. Individuals and professional communities are in a permanent state of becoming. A policy challenge is how to ensure the maintenance of quality and standards in the midst of enhanced participation. This chapter will examine some of the arguments for and against concepts of quality as they are applied to higher education in particular, and to lifelong learning in general. It will trace the genesis of quality from its origins in the commercial world and raise questions about whether quality technologies from industry are appropriate to the complex social and intellectual processes of the academy. It will also interrogate the discourse in relation to equity issues and identify whether quality and equality are oppositional or complementary discourses in the framework of lifelong learning.

The genesis of the discourse

Quality became an issue with the advent of industrialization, relating to elimination of waste (time, materials, money) and safety requirements. Quality now relates to 'fitness for purpose' and measurement of outcomes in relation to product specifications, 'zero defect', effectiveness in achieving institutional goals and success in meeting customers' stated or implied needs (Green, 1995). Quality gained currency in Japanese industry in the 1940s and 1950s and was applied specifically to the public services in the USA and UK in the 1980s.

Japan appeared to make a significant economic recovery after the Second World War. The West attempted to decode Japanese economic success. Japanese work practices were imported into different sectors of British

manufacturing production, starting with the car manufacturing industry. Some of the key aspects of the Japanese economic miracle were thought to be long-term planning, designing quality into products, and employee attitudes and relationships. However, there were also questions raised about whether some social and cultural characteristics were more conducive to productivity. According to Imai (1986), the key to the overall success of Japanese business and industry lies first in the philosophical concept of *kaizen*, which, he argues, provides the best means by which all aspects of Japanese production and management can be understood. *Kaizen*, literally translated, means continuous improvement '*involving everyone, including both managers and workers*' (Imai, 1986: 3). It is a generic term that penetrates all aspects of Japanese life. Imai (1986: 3) states that '*the kaizen philosophy assumes that our way of life – be it our working life, our social life, or our home life – deserves to be constantly improved*'. This ethos is reflected in the ideology of lifelong learning. The notion of continuous professional development, and the decoupling of education from chronological age, means that there is never an end point. This is strongly associated with neo-Fordist employment regimes and the politics of flexibility (Jessop *et al*, 1991).

In a period of rapid technological and social change, the world has become a riskier place (Beck, 1992). Skill requirements are constantly in flux. Power (1997) argues that quality assurance is about seeking comfort and certainties. In today's risk society, the ineffective public institution is seen to be as risky to the public as an engine falling off an aeroplane. Quality was originally associated with quality control and was part of Fordist production processes. It consisted of the detection and elimination of components or final products that were not up to standard. It was invariably undertaken by an inspector/controller, rather than by the workers themselves. In education, this translated into external inspections consisting purely of observations and judgements. The emphasis gradually moved away from control and towards quality assurance. Quality was designed into the process, with the aim of preventing faults from occurring in the first place. Systems were put into place throughout the production process. The goal was for 'zero defects' and the meeting of product specification. In education, this is often represented as the quest for excellence (DfEE, 1997). Institutions are not just evaluated on students' performance, but also on the provision that is made for getting them to that point.

Quality assurance rapidly developed into Total Quality Management (TQM). This involves the creation of a quality culture. Staff are expected to understand, internalize and live the message. The structure of the organization allows and facilitates this process. There is a commitment to continuous improvement, reminiscent of Japanese production processes. The concepts of TQM derived from the industrial model made famous by Deming and Juran during the 1950s and 1960s in the USA and centralized in the Japanese production model.

In 1991 the Further Education Unit (FEU) published what was to become a highly influential document in the framing of the quality debate in British education. *Quality Matters* (FEU, 1991: 2) positioned the concept of quality in education within the framework of manufacturing industry's definition of '*fitness for purpose*', which, it argued, is '*arrived at through conformance to specification*'. The FEU highlighted distinctions between the concepts of 'quality control' (TQC), 'quality assurance', 'quality systems' and 'continuous quality improvement'. Japanese and US work practices form an integral part of the process of TQM, which places emphasis on '*the search for opportunities for improvement rather than maintaining current performance*' (FEU, 1991: 2). In education, TQM transferred to the adoption of adequate measures '*to improve the quality of teaching and learning, to increase participation, and to improve attainment*' (FEU, 1991: 3). Central to the concept of TQM is the need to change working practices and to generate a climate of 'not being satisfied' within the organization. Learning organizations are required constantly to evaluate, research, analyse and measure needs, results and effectiveness and to feed these back as part of the process of continuous improvement (FEU, 1991).

Similar to the notion of original sin in Christianity, the construction of the individual and the organization as being in deficit and in need of continuous improvement can be a powerful regulatory device. The mindset of never being satisfied can create an urgency and compliance that shifts attention away from values and ideologies and towards technologies and competencies. Hence, vast amounts of energy are invested in enhancing effectiveness, quality, learning and productivity rather than questioning whose interests are being served. Indeed, the end point in the continuous improvement process is unclear. Strathern (1997: 307) argues that this lack of closure brings with it a 'morality of attainment':

> 'Improvement' is wonderfully open-ended, for it at once describes effort and results. And it invites one to make both ever more effective – a process from which the tests themselves are not immune; measuring the improvement leads to improving the measures.

However, continuous improvement can also represent opportunity and personal development. It challenges 'routinization' and staleness in the workplace. The opportunity/exploitation dilemma is a powerful part of lifelong learning. Ball (1999: 197) identifies how Labour's education policies can be understood and analysed as a '*synthesis between market and social democratic values*'.

The discourses of quality and of lifelong learning both contain a mixture of democratic and economic imperatives. Sallis (1996) argues that there are four imperatives embedded in the quality discourse: moral, professional, competitive and accountability. The multi-layering of imperatives, alongside the command economy, where funding is linked to external assessments, means that quality is difficult to contest and resist. For many,

lifelong learning is not an option, but linked to continuing professional status and indeed, employment (Eraut, Morley and Cole, 1998).

The political economy of education

A key question is why quality was inserted into education at a particular political moment. The economy was in crisis in the 1970s and 1980s. In Britain, the economic crisis revolved around stagnant markets, low levels of productivity in the manufacturing sector, high levels of unemployment, lack of investment in the development of new products and, related to these, Britain's inability to compete successfully in an increasingly globalized economy. These difficulties within the economy contributed to a general reduction in the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). The most marked transformation in the economy during the 1980s was the shift from the manufacturing to the service sector (Massey and Allen, 1992).

The changes that were now taking place in the labour market impacted also on skills training needs, including business management and other job-specific skills requiring specialist short-term training, some of which were predominantly information based. According to research undertaken by the Institute of Employment in the UK, by the year 2000, 70 per cent of all jobs in Europe will require people with A levels and above (Day, 1997). The belief that Britain needs to overhaul its educational system in order to be more globally competitive has been a central theme in New Labour's first two White Papers (DfEE, 1997, 1998). It was also a dominant theme in the Dearing Review (NCIHE, 1997). Human capital theory is a major policy influence now. The increasing subordination of education to economic considerations means that there is now a well-established knowledge economy.

Values, as well as technologies and drive systems from the cultural world of business and commerce, have been imported into education, bringing with them new meanings, priorities and truths (Morley and Rassool 1999). For many, interpretative academic freedom in education was causally linked to low standards, and there needed to be an insertion of certainties and benchmarks. Indeed, by the time that the Conservative Government came to power in 1979:

> Education had come to epitomise much that was seen to be wrong with burgeoning state power. It was construed as expensive, not self-evidently adequately productive, insufficiently accountable, monopolistic, producer-dominated, a bastion of an entrenched professional elite, resistant to consumer demand and, at worst, self-generating and self-serving.
>
> (Fergusson, 1994: 93)

In relation to higher and further education, expansion also created a type of chaos in need of regulation. After the 1992 FHE Act, the number of universities in Britain increased from 46 to 112. There was a rise in the number of students from 900,000 to 1,800,000 (from 15 to 33 per cent). There are no nationally defined higher education qualifications, and considerable product variety across the system. Quality had previously been assured via the system of peer review and external examiners. Studies appeared demonstrating the precariousness of peer review (Silver, 1993). As Evans (1999: 147) indicates, *'peer review is clearly not an exact science'*. Furthermore, the notion of 'peer' excludes considerations of exclusion and discriminatory practices. It is often based on gendered networks and comradeship.

The insertion of the quality discourse into higher education is an example of the changing relations between universities and the state. In one sense, it represents a challenge to the medieval achievement of separating the idea of intellectual authority from political authority (Finch, 1997). For some, this is perceived as an intrusion into academic freedom (Peters, 1992). For others, it is a long-overdue attempt to make dominant organizations of knowledge production more accountable and transparent in their procedures (Luke, 1997). It is debatable whether the questions being asked about quality and standards within a mass system have promoted equity issues. Rather, the emphasis has been on value for money, public accountability, and the identification of standards, ie the requirement for reference points, benchmarks against which performance is measured (Elton, 1998).

Two basic models of quality apply to higher education: inspectorial – an external agency is sent in to make judgements (quality control), and self-regulation – shared purposes, tacit values and understandings, peer review. Quality applies to the level of academic discipline, the award bearing institution and professional and statutory bodies. Brown (1998) argues that the most critical aspect of the new quality framework is the relationship between external and internal assessments. For example, providers of academic subjects now compile a self-assessment document that reflects the areas open to external assessment. The external inspection has a four-point scale for six areas: curriculum design, content and organization; teaching, learning and assessment; student progression and achievement; student support and guidance; learning resources; and quality assurance and enhancement. Customer care has been an important feature of quality assurance in higher education, with the introduction of handbooks, guidelines, codes of practice, student opinion surveys, a students' charter and staff development. The customer, however, often remains a universal subject, without gender, social class or ethnicity.

The regulation and management of quality in higher education has been a fairly fragmented affair. In 1990, the Committee for Vice-Chancellors and Principals (CVCP) set up an Academic Audit Unit (which lasted for two years). In 1992, the Higher Education Quality Council was established. In 1997, after the Dearing Report, the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) was

set up. Teaching, as well as research, has been highlighted as a signifier of excellence and productivity. Research quality is regulated via the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) Research Assessment Exercise (every four to five years). Teaching quality is regulated via the QAA. Academic Reviewers are appointed to visit institutions for their Subject Reviews. The system of auditing teaching has moved from Quality Control to Quality Assurance, ie the emphasis is now on how quality is embedded in systems, structures and mechanisms. The Institute of Learning and Teaching opened in 1999. This provides professional development for university teachers. Membership is not yet mandatory (not a licence to practice), but is sometimes built into lecturers' probationary period. It is developing a national accreditation scheme, a portfolio of Continuous Professional Development (CPD) programmes and a register of members.

The audit culture

Quality combines culture management (the creation of purposes and meanings) with performance management (measuring what really matters). Performance is now an organizational responsibility. Underpinning these interventions are issues of trust, democracy and risk. As Power (1997: 103) suggests, 'The performance culture of rewards and penalties is a refusal to trust'. Ironically, we are invited to place total trust in the auditors, many of whom are drawn from the profession on trial in the first place. The meaning of quality in public services relates to performance auditing. It also applies to the values of the entitlement culture, encoded in documents such as student charters. Audit and the ensuing certification and grading mean that private in-house matters are now open to public scrutiny. This is often referred to as the 'evaluative state'. There has been a shift from process-based local forms of self-evaluation to standardized measures of output.

Generally, in the public services, the performance ethos has created an 'audit explosion', with a proliferation of evaluative procedures (Power, 1994, 1997; Strathern, 1997). Audit is based on a conflation of measures with targets. There is a modernist, rationalist belief that the complexities of the social world can be measured and recorded with the appropriate instruments and technologies. Specific performance indicators are selected to illustrate effectiveness and individuals and organizations are graded in relation to these signifiers. The results then provide a reified reading, which becomes a truth. These readings become the baseline data for the point of entry into the mechanisms for continuous improvement.

Schools, colleges and universities, like other public-service institutions over the past two decades, have been subject to 'human accounting'. The introduction of markets and managers has been a generic transformational device designed to restructure and reorient public-service provision. The common elements have involved site-based management, the language of

improvement and budgetary devolution. Funding regimes have become structuring mechanisms. Decision-making, priorities and service provision are determined by financial considerations. There are also financial consequences to quality audits, with resources allocated and withdrawn according to performance. Power (1994: 36–7) notes:

> What is audited is whether there is a system which embodies standards and the standards of performance themselves are shaped by the need to be auditable... audit becomes a formal 'loop' by which the system observes itself.

There is an implied relationship between accountability and improvement. The auditing gaze is both internal and external, as educational institutions are subjected to inspection. There is also a strong element of self-scrutiny. This self-regulation is an example of how power can be capillary, rather than monolithic. A capillary notion of power suggests that power operates everywhere in everyday transactions. It is totalizing in so far as it is rehearsed in inter- and intra-personal relations, as well as in structures (Morley, 1999).

One way in which macro-policies translate into micro-practices is in the identification of performance indicators. These represent an encoding of values, priorities and prejudices. It is questionable what the appropriate performance indicators are for lifelong learning. For example, are performance indicators such as completion rates appropriate to the concept of lifelong learning? Does this represent a type of closure in a process that is meant to be open-ended? Another consideration is whether completion rates are deconstructed with attention paid to equity issues. For example, as long ago as 1983, Berg and Ferber discovered that women students tend to be more successful in completing postgraduate degrees where the proportion of female academics on the staff is relatively higher. Furthermore, success criteria in lifelong learning are not always immediately apparent in the short term, or in the reified academic environment, but are only visible when applied in the workplace or the community often many years after completion. Performance indicators can be fragmented and left unrelated to one another. They can also be highly contradictory. For example, institutions with very high Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) scores, such as Oxbridge, have some of the lowest participation rates of working-class students (McCrum, 1998). Performance indicators can also date rapidly, as organizations and individuals can just work to those measures and nothing else. As Strathern (1997: 308) indicates:

> When a measure becomes a target, it ceases to be a good measure.

Quality as a regulatory device

I wish to argue that quality is not a neutral notion. Quality is a subjective category of description and its meaning derives from its point of articulation. There are questions about who defines quality, and indeed, whose interests it represents. Furthermore, multi-dimensional concepts, such as quality, are often reduced to binaries, such as effective/failing organizations. There are important questions about what type of support is appropriate for failing institutions, or whether, indeed, failure is merely a social construction – a totem to assuage the fears of consumers and to demonstrate state power over standards (Carvel, 1999).

Quality is often socially decontextualized, with an emphasis on organizational scores rather than social structures. It can also be fairly reductive, as there are complex areas of the public services that are difficult to measure, quantify and capture, ie processes, the affective domain, attitudes and values. The gaps and silences in taxonomies of effectiveness are often where equity issues constellate (Morley and Rassool, 1999). Ball (1997: 327) believes that quality is 'a "relay device" effectively linking government "mentalities" and policies, with everyday organizational realities'. The emphasis on continuous improvement suggests a permanent deficit model. Tacit professional practices are bureaucratized and a panoptical culture is promoted (Foucault, 1979a, 1979b). The quality discourse is an effective way of ensuring the compliance and docility of employees by establishing a set of goals and objectives that are not always negotiable.

There is a tacit notion of what constitutes excellence. Behind judgements of quality are power relations and values. Quality increases bureaucratization and takes practitioners away from the interface with clients. In quality-assurance procedures, organizations have to represent their identities discursively and in a confessional manner. Quality audits encourage 'performativity' (Lyotard, 1984), as organizations tend to give aspirational accounts of themselves within certain prescribed parameters.

A further criticism of quality in relation to lifelong learning is that quality is being promoted at a time when public funding is decreasing. For example, public funding per student in higher education has fallen by more than 40 per cent since 1976. The student–staff ratios have moved from 9.3:1 in the old universities and 8.4:1 in the former polytechnics to an overall figure of 16.5:1 (Watson and Bowden, 1999). There is also an increasing 'casualization' of labour and decreasing employment conditions in higher education. However, the quality discourse attempts to demonstrate how standards can rise even when investments and employment rights decrease, thus demonstrating the profligacy of pre-managerial regimes. The euphemism 'efficiency gains' for the cuts in higher education asserts that cuts in unit costs have not lowered the quality of the education provided by British universities (Trow, 1998). Whereas the Government has pledged to support the extra 500,000 students generated by lifelong learning initiatives, this funding is not necessarily for the institutions (Court, 1998). Hence quality may be being audited in conditions of funding and employment that could be eroding it. Quality could well be seen as a massive displacement activity, distracting attention away from under-resourcing and focusing on naming and shaming of individual organizations (Carvel, 1999).

In defence of quality

An argument in favour of quality is that it condenses complex professional processes into easily identifiable information for consumers. The use of league tables, grades for teaching quality and RAE scores can be indicators to assist choice-making processes. Similarly, benchmarking is often seen as a type of classification and framing exercise in the midst of the potential chaos of expansion of lifelong learning. This can be seen as elite organizations being forced to become more user-friendly, particularly to those users who lack the cultural capital and social advantages often required for educational decision-making. The reconstruction of students as consumers and clients changes power relationships between the purchasers and the providers of the educational product. Quality audits could be said to privilege users' voices by measuring customer satisfaction via the use of evaluation instruments and consumer surveys.

In terms of equity, greater transparency of procedures can sometimes make discriminatory and exclusionary practices more visible. One view is that quality audits can be used by women as a mechanism for what Yeatman (1990) calls 'equity-oriented change management' (Luke, 1997: 437). The 'panoptic' gaze of audit can bring marginalized groups into the light. The emphasis on continuing professional development and on accountability can challenge expert power and routinization. There is the potential for organizational reflexivity, as preparation for quality audits can provide some discursive space for reflecting on practices, assumptions, and procedures. Quality audits can sometimes transform and update organizations. If one takes a Foucauldian analysis of power, quality can be both oppressive and creative. Quality is a complex and contradictory affair.

Quality and equality

The quality discourse has achieved authority in higher education when the equality discourse did not. To say that there has been an implementation gap between policies and practices might be an understatement. The Dearing Report noted that only one-third of higher education institutions with equal opportunities policies had plans directed towards their achievement (Watson and Taylor, 1998). Ironically, New Right educational reform (continued by New Labour) was able to effect more significant changes in the quantity and composition of the student body in higher education than

two decades of equality legislation. Critics of the quality discourse often express a sense of loss of academic freedom. However, Luke (1997: 436) asks whether the 'Golden Age of Academic Autonomy Prior to Managerialism' was, in fact, *'an epoch of access, equity and enfranchisement for women and people of colour?'*

However, there could be an equity paradox (Morley, 1997) in so far as the transition from an elite to a mass system has produced considerable concerns about the quality of the higher education product. The policy framework of lifelong learning is accompanied by a moral panic over standards (the 'dumbing' down/more means worse debate), and inflation of certification. To some, quality assurance is compatible with equity concerns. The scrutiny of organizations is seen as a refreshing challenge to elitism and to disciplinary authority (Luke, 1997). Quality audits are also perceived as transformational devices, allowing questions to be posed about whether equity provisions are measures of excellence, for example, arrangements for students with special needs.

The standardization implied in quality assurance could also suggest normalization. It is questionable whether the diversity implied in lifelong learning is reflected in audits. There are dangers of homogenizing teachers and learners and creating a universal subject and organizational isomorphism. Currently, very diverse organizations are placed on the same continuum for research excellence, for example. This automatically disadvantages those organizations with diverse populations, as Wagner (1989: 36) points out:

> It is those who restrict access by accepting only students with the highest traditional qualifications which receive status, privilege, honours and resources.

The technology of quality assurance is perceived as a reductive input/output model. It is seen as a process of impression management and 'performativity', with performance indicators socially and politically constructed. The technology masks the ideology and value base of what is considered excellent at this particular political and historical moment (Ball, 1997).

As part of the modernization programme, the Government has invested large sums of money in quality assurance, with an aim to collect evidence and evaluate educational provisions. There is an implied relationship between accountability and improvement. Accountability has been linked to public information. The rhetoric of improvement is related both to organizational development and to individual learners in the context of lifelong learning. However, in spite of this vast machinery, there is little evidence to suggest that the quality of student or staff experiences has been enhanced, or that the role that lifelong learning plays in social reproduction has been interrupted.

It is doubtful whether the evidence collected via quality audits reflects wider social transformations and shifting student demographics. Many of these concerns have crystallized around the issue of value added, ie ensuring

that people exit with better characteristics than they possessed at the point of input (Brennan *et al*, 1997). However, issues of diversity and equity are only superficially addressed. Multifaceted qualitative processes such as pedagogical relations and barriers to participation are reduced to quantitative indicators (Morley, 2000). Vexed political questions relating to power and knowledge are condensed into concerns about course documentation, waiting time for essay feedback and so on. It is dubious whether audit detects complex micro-processes of power in organizations (Morley, 1999). Meanwhile, the rhetoric of lifelong learning and continuous improvement are sending powerful messages to students and staff, informing them of their lack and deficit, in an attempt to make them more 'governmentable'. Quality has become a regime of truth in the academy, reinforced by performance tables and financial consequences. Concerns about the authenticity of the exercise abound. Yet auditors and those who are audited perform a type of comedy of manners. We speak the discourse and the discourse speaks us.

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7

Bringing knowledge back in: towards a curriculum for lifelong learning

Michael Young

Introduction

The promotion of lifelong learning lies at the heart of the present Government's policies for post-compulsory education and training and was first expressed in the Green Paper *The Learning Age* (DfEE, 1998). However, what lifelong learning means, what types of learning should be emphasized and what it will be important for people to learn are far from clear. This vagueness about the meaning of lifelong learning means that the Green Paper seems to be pointing in two directions at once. It stresses that becoming a lifelong learner is an individual responsibility while, at the same time, recognizing that lifelong learning is too important to be left to individuals on their own and requires the intervention of government.

The focus on the responsibility of individuals for their own learning is not entirely new. It has been a recurring theme of policies for the 14–18 age group such as 'active learning', 'individual action planning' and 'records of achievement'. Furthermore, the emphasis on the individual also reflects elements of the Government's 'Third Way' approach that aims to improve services and provision without significant increases in expenditure. What is new in educational policy is the shift to promoting learning throughout people's lives and, in particular, in contexts other than those associated with formal education. It is this shift that reflects what might be called a new type of 'collectivism' in government policy. While recognizing that the market is far from being an adequate distributor of learning opportunities, the Government seeks forms of intervention that involve minimum extra public spending. These tensions are reflected in the Prime Minister's view, quoted in the Green Paper, that 'education is the best economic policy that we have' (DfEE, 1998: 9). This is an indirect way of admitting that the Government is leaving a major aspect of the context in which individuals take up learning opportunities – the investment decisions of individual companies –