

## **Deconstructing quality culture**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The paper examines the idea of quality culture and goes beyond taken-for-granted notions to examine underlying ideologies. Drawing on previous explorations of quality culture and of the epistemology of quality, this paper attempts to raise fundamental questions about existing 'models' and preconceptions about the value of quality cultures.

### **Introduction**

Quality assurance is ubiquitous but developments of internal quality processes within institutions are still far from well developed in many cases. National and institutional systems for evaluation, assessment, accreditation and audit are now a routine in the majority of European countries. Available evidence rather suggests that while systems, procedures and rules are being laid down, there is still a lack of staff and student active involvement in these processes.

The notion of quality culture has emerged as indicative of the way that an organisation (or sub-unit) has taken to developing the quality of what they do. Or at least that is the assumption underpinning references to institutional quality culture. However, in practice, quality culture has drifted towards meaning how a unit adapts to quality assurance. There is increasingly a taken-for-granted view that quality culture is about the development of, and compliance with, processes of internal quality assurance.

This paper explores the idea of quality culture and asks if it is really helpful in improving the link between quality work and the fundamental processes of teaching and learning.

### **Background**

This analysis of quality culture is an evolving exploration. At the 2007 EAIR Forum in Innsbruck Bjorn Stensaker and Lee Harvey explored the issue of quality culture (Harvey and Stensaker, 2008). They suggested, following Williams (1983) that culture is a complex concept. They explored the numerous definitions of culture and how its meaning changed over time, not least from an élite notion of 'high culture' through to a more democratic view of multiple cultures and subcultures. They suggested that, at core, culture is shared, learned and symbolic. In short, culture is a way of life.

When applied to organisations, Harvey and Stensaker noted the view that culture is perceived as either something an organisation has (a potentially identifiable and manipulative factor) or something that an organisation is (an integrated product of social interaction and organisational life that is impossible to differentiate from other factors) (Alvesson & Berg, 1992). What is tending to happen with the notion of quality culture is a drift towards seeing it as something that an organisation has, an additional element related to assurance processes, rather than an embodiment of the essential being of an organisation.

Harvey and Stensaker (2008) attempted do three things:

- clarify the notion of culture and showed how it relates to the complexity of the concept of quality;
- identify a number of caveats that inform the construction of a concept of quality culture;
- dismiss the idea that there is a monolithic (and somehow beneficial) quality culture (to which organisations might aspire) and instead suggested, by way of illustration of the variability of quality culture, a simple two-dimensional dichotomisation by which to analyse quality culture.

The dichotomisation was based on whether individual behaviour is group-controlled on one dimension and whether individual behaviour is prescribed by external rules and regulations on the other. This generates four 'ideal-type' quality cultures (in the Weberian sense), which, for higher education settings, are elaborated below (Figure 1). It is important to remember that this is a schema to aid reflection and that these are indicative types not idealisations in the common-sense meaning of the term. According to Weber (1904), an ideal type is purely fictional in nature, it is a methodological 'utopia [that] cannot be found empirically anywhere in reality'. Further, the two dimensions in the suggested analytic framework are just two of a number of potential dimensions and they have been dichotomised for simplicity; rather more complex elaborations could have been constructed.

**Figure 1: Ideal-type quality cultures**

		<i>Degree of group control</i>	
		Strong	Weak
<i>Intensity of external rules</i>	Strong	<i>Responsive</i> quality culture: led by external demands, opportunistic, combining accountability and improvement, but perhaps also sometimes a lack of ownership and control	<i>Reactive</i> quality culture: reward or sanction led, task-oriented, doubts about the potential of improvement, compliance, reluctant ("beast to be fed")
	Weak	<i>Regenerative</i> quality culture: internally oriented with strong belief in staff and existing procedures, widespread, experimental, although not always adaptive to external demands and developments	<i>Reproductive</i> quality culture: wanting to minimize the impact of external factors, focusing on sub-units, lack of transparency throughout the institution, emphasise the expertise of the individual

Adapted from Harvey and Stensaker, 2008

The four resulting types represent different modes of operating. None are 'correct' or desirable in general, albeit some approaches may be preferable in a specific context. In which case, practitioners should reflect on their own 'culture' and critically reflect on its appropriateness and efficacy.

At both the ENQA seminar in The Hague (Harvey, 2009c) and the INQAAHE Conference in Abu Dhabi (Harvey, 2009b), participants were asked to examine which of the Weberian 'ideal types' they thought most represented their working situation. This revealed a spread of approaches, indicating that quality culture is far from homogeneous.

The ENQA workshop paper noted:

Quality culture is the latest buzzword and the concept is already beginning to lose its meaning.... [Quality culture] reflects the way in which a group of people (organisation through to operational unit) address the issue of quality in their lived, every day, existence. There is no right or wrong, good or bad quality culture, although a 'real' quality culture is 'invisible'; in as much as it is an integral part of everyday practice rather than a rule-bound add-on. (Harvey, 2009c)

A key emphasis at the ENQA workshop (Harvey 2009c) and in a paper presented at the INQAAHE Conference (Harvey, 2009a) was that a quality culture is independent of any formal specification of internal quality assurance procedures.

Quality culture is poorly understood and often implicitly construed as embodying a system of internal quality monitoring. However, a set of bureaucratic procedures is not the same as a quality culture. Most internal processes do not exhibit the characteristics of a lived culture, rather they reflect the rules and expectations of an 'audit culture'. They are fundamentally distrustful and constrained by an externally imposed or oriented framework of thinking.

Furthermore, cultures are unique and there is no easy solution waiting to be picked off the shelf.

Thus quality culture is not a set of procedures much less one that can be imported from a different context or imposed on an organisation. There is no simple checklist of actions to create a quality culture. However, it is legitimate to ask if there is a way to encourage quality culture? In essence, the answer is to require self-reflection on the part of the practitioners, something akin to developing a self-critical and reflective community of practitioners. (Harvey, 2009c, pp. 2-3)

### **Epistemology of quality**

There is relatively little analysis of the epistemology of quality, particularly in the realm of higher education. Curvale (CCC) recently argued that the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (ESG) (ENQA, 2005) convey principles as well as method, including an 'embryonic epistemology of quality assurance'. Such an epistemology sees quality assurance as guided by the notion of fitness for purpose, such that 'quality assurance in higher education is a rational activity that has to constantly demonstrate that it meets the expectations of all those who are concerned with the development of higher education'.

Arguments elsewhere raise issues about the appropriateness and validity of fitness for purpose approaches to quality but, significantly, Curvale's epistemological analysis, because of the context of the ESG, relates to quality assurance rather than quality *per se*.

In an earlier INQAAHE Forum, Toronto (2007), an attempt was made to examine the epistemology of quality (Harvey, 2007). Although unrefined, this examination argued that quality as a concept is increasingly difficult to disentangle from the assurance of quality, which it called quality in use. It suggested that quality in use is underpinned

by the philosophy of pragmatism. Alternatives to quality in use are divided along an idealist-materialist fault line. A synthesis of conceptual work on quality reveals several dimensions of the quality conceptualisation and implementation process. The complex interrelationship of quality concept, quality assurance and implementation reaffirmed the need to disentangle quality theorising from operational matters. However, it is important not to create a superstratum of theorising that fails to engage the practicalities of learning and teaching.

There are different ways of classifying epistemological perspectives in the social sciences and no way has universal agreement. Drawing on well-established analyses of the theory of the nature of knowledge, the following tri-partite framework was used: positivism, phenomenology and critical-dialectical understanding. Further, the paper restated the analysis of definitions of quality (Harvey and Green, 1993, updated as Harvey, 2006) (Table 1) and the relationship between quality and standards in higher education and means of assurance (Table 2).

**Table 1: Definitions of quality and standards.**

<i>Quality</i>	<i>Definition</i>
Exceptional	A traditional concept linked to the idea of 'excellence', usually operationalised as exceptionally high standards of academic achievement. Quality is achieved if the standards are surpassed.
Perfection or consistency	Focuses on process and sets specifications that it aims to meet. Quality in this sense is summed up by the interrelated ideas of zero defects and getting things right first time.
Fitness for purpose	Judges quality in terms of the extent to which a product or service meets its stated purpose. The purpose may be customer-defined to meet requirements or (in education) institution-defined to reflect institutional mission (or course objectives). <i>NB: There are some who suggest that 'fitness of purpose' is a definition of quality but it is a specification of parameters of fitness and not itself a definition of the quality concept.</i>
Value for money	Assesses quality in terms of return on investment or expenditure. At the heart of the value-for-money approach in education is the notion of accountability. Public services, including education, are expected to be accountable to the funders. Increasingly, students are also considering their own investment in higher education in value-for-money terms.
Transformation	Sees quality as a process of change, which in higher education adds value to students through their learning experience. Education is not a service for a customer but an ongoing process of transformation of the participant. This leads to two notions of transformative quality in education: enhancing the consumer and empowering the consumer.
<i>Standards</i>	
Academic standards	The demonstrated ability to meet specified level of academic attainment. For pedagogy, the ability of students to be able to do those things designated as appropriate at a given level of education. Usually, the measured competence of an individual in attaining specified (or implied) course aims and objectives, operationalised via performance on assessed pieces of work. For research, the ability to undertake effective scholarship or produce new knowledge, which is assessed via peer recognition.
Standards of competence	Demonstration that a specified level of ability on a range of competencies has been achieved. Competencies may include general transferable skills required by employers; academic ('higher level') skills implicit or explicit in the attainment of degree status or in a post-graduation academic apprenticeship; particular abilities congruent with induction into a profession.
Service standards	Are measures devised to assess identified elements of the service provided against specified benchmarks? Elements assessed include activities of service providers and facilities within which the service takes place. Benchmarks specified in 'contracts' such as student charters tend to be quantified and restricted to measurable items. <i>Post hoc</i> measurement of customer opinions (satisfaction) is used as indicators of service provision. Thus, service standards in higher education parallel consumer standards.
Organisational standards	Attainment of formal recognition of systems to ensure effective management of organisational processes and clear dissemination of organisational practices.

Source: adapted from Harvey, 1995 © Lee Harvey, 2007

**Table 2: Relationship between quality and standards in higher education and means of assurance** (items in parentheses are indirect assurance mechanisms)

	<i>Standards</i>	<i>Academic standards</i>	<i>Standards of competence</i>	<i>Service standards</i>	<i>Organisational standards</i>
<i>Quality</i>					
Exceptional		Emphasis on summative assessment of knowledge and, implicitly, some 'higher-level' skills. Implicit normative gold standard. Comparative evaluation of research output. Elitism: the presupposition of a need to maintain pockets of high quality and standards in a mass education system.	Linked to professional competence; emphasis mainly on traditional demarcation between knowledge and (professional) skills.	Input-driven assumptions of resource-linked service/facilities. Good facilities, well-qualified staff, etc. 'guarantee' service standards. Reluctance to expose professional (teaching) competence to scrutiny.	Clear role hierarchy reflecting academic status and experience. Often a heavy emphasis on 'traditional values'. Strong emphasis on autonomy and academic freedom. Aversion to transparency.
		Assured by: Standards monitoring Research assessment Teacher assessment (Accreditation)	Assured by: Standards monitoring Professional accreditation	Assured by: Accreditation (Performance indicators)	Assured by: Institutional Accreditation (Audit of quality processes)
Perfection or consistency		A target level of academic standard is consistently achieved (year on year).	Expectation of a minimum prescribed level of professional competence. Problem in assessing for 'zero defects'.	Primarily relates to reliable and consistent student grading and to administrative processes, such as accuracy and reliability of record keeping, timetables, coursework arrangements.	Right first time. Document procedures, regulations and good practice. Obtain ISO9000 certification.
		Assured by: (Standards monitoring)	Assured by: Standards monitoring (Accreditation)	Assured by: Participant/user feedback (Audit) (Assessment)	Assured by: External QM certification (Accreditation)
Fitness for purpose (Fitness of purpose)		Theoretically, standards should relate to the defined objectives that relate to the purpose of the course (or institution). Summative assessment should be criteria referenced, although as purposes often include a comparative element (e.g., in mission statement) these are mediated by norm-referenced criteria.	Explicit specification of skills and abilities related to objectives. Evidence required to at least identify threshold standards. Professional competence primarily assessed in terms of threshold minimums against professional body requirements for practice. This is similar to excellence approaches to checking minimum standards.	The purpose involves the provision of a service. Thus, process is assessed via (minimum) standards for the purpose — usually teaching competence, the link between teaching and research, student support (academic and non-academic), other facilities. Purpose is, for students, often judged against expectations.	Ensure appropriate mechanisms in place to assess whether practices and procedures fit the stated mission-based purposes.
		Assured by: Assessment (Accreditation)	Assured by: Standards monitoring (Accreditation Subject assessment)	Assured by: Customer charters/ surveys (Accountability audit) (Assessment) (Accreditation)	Assured by: Institutional accountability audit
Value for money		Maintenance or improvement of academic outcomes (graduate standards and research output) for the same (or declining) unit of resource. I.e., greater efficiency. Concern that efficiency gains work in the opposite direction to quality improvement. Provide students with an academic experience (qualification, training, personal development) to warrant the investment.	Maintain or improve the output of generally 'employable' graduates for the same unit of resource. Similarly, ensure a continual or increasing supply of recruits to post-graduation professional bodies. Provide students with an educational experience that increases competence, in relation to career advancement, which ensures a return on investment.	Customer satisfaction analyses (student, employers, funding bodies) to assess process and outcomes. Students and other stakeholders are seen as 'paying customers'. Customer charters specify minimum levels of service (and facilities) that students (parents, employers) can expect.	Relies heavily on periodic or <i>ad hoc</i> reviews of whether organisational structure is effective and efficient, often informed by management information (especially basic output statistics).
		Assured by: Performance indicators Graduate feedback (Accreditation)	Assured by: Performance indicators Graduate feedback (Accreditation)	Assured by: Customer surveys and charters (Performance indicators)	Assured by: (Institutional accountability audit) (Performance indicators)
Transformation		Assessment of students' acquisition of transformative knowledge and skills (analysis, critique, synthesis, innovation) against explicit objectives. Focus on adding value rather than gold standards. As transformation includes empowerment, formative as well as summative assessment is required. Transformative research standards are assessed on their <i>impact</i> in relation to objectives.	Provide students with enhanced skills and abilities that empower them to continue learning and to engage effectively with the complexities of the 'outside' world. Assessment of students in terms of the acquisition of transformative skills (analysis, critique, synthesis, innovation) and the transformative impact they have post-graduation.	Emphasis on specification and assessment of standards of service and facilities that enable the process of student learning <i>and</i> the acquisition of transformative abilities.	Emphasis on organisational structure that encourages dialogue, team working and, ultimately, empowerment of the learner. Delegated responsibility for quality and standards. Innovation, responsiveness and 'trust' are prominent.
		Assured by: Value added performance indicators. (External examination) (Accreditation)	Assured by: Value added. Professional accreditation	Assured by: Participant feedback (Accreditation) (Assessment)	Assured by: Improvement audit

Source: Adapted from Harvey (1995), a version in Harvey, (2006) © Lee Harvey, 2007

The paper then examined the interrelationship between different purposes of quality assurance, approaches to quality assurance within each element of the quality and standards grid. It took a few examples from the myriad of potential interrelationships and examined their epistemological basis. This pseudo-inductive approach revealed a variety of clashing epistemological underpinnings. For example, accountability for public money is fundamentally a positivist cause and effect analysis, while compliance with quality assurance agency requirements involves a phenomenological process of constructing meanings. Whereas an approach that empowers learners as part of the improvement of teaching and learning is fundamentally critical-dialectical, lacking simple, self-evident or taken-for-granted and easily assimilated criteria for judging how students are empowered as critical reflective learners.

The paper thus revealed the fundamental underlying differences in quality issues.

Quality and quality assurance are not homogeneous and, for example, a fitness-for-purpose approach is not adequate, nor even appropriate, for evaluating many quality issues. What an epistemological analysis does, as hinted at by the examples, is to draw attention to the way that we construct quality as knowledge. It differentiates reductionist causal explanations from interpretation of meanings of actors from socio-historically specific deconstructed and reconstructed alternative understandings.

The paper raised questions about impact analysis of quality assurance if a predominantly positivist model is used to explore impact on constructed meanings or dialectical understandings. In short, there is a problem in addressing quality culture if the underlying epistemology is positivist. Further, as the paper indicated, there is work to be done to relate the epistemological analysis to learning theory. An approach that attempts to explore the intrinsic nature of quality in higher education cannot divorce itself from learning, which is at the heart of the higher education enterprise.

### **Quality culture and epistemology**

As the forgoing has suggested there are epistemological issues around the notion of quality and quality assurance that inform notions of quality culture. Where quality culture is seen as a way of life, as opposed to a set of procedures, then there are issues of meaning construction (phenomenological) or the deconstruction of understanding (critical dialectical). These have resonances in the caveats of culture identified in Harvey and Stensaker (2008, p. 434).

An analysis of the notion of culture, combined with a review of more recent developments concerning quality in higher education raises important issues and relationships for the idea of a quality culture. First, in developing this notion, one needs to be aware of the critique of culture as a homogeneous, evolving elitist concept. Second, culture still retains a sense that it is about creative endeavours of a particular artistic form. Third, counter to a view of separate cultural producers and consumers, is the dialectical synthesis of the 'producer' and the 'reader', which is important in thinking about the way quality cultures are developed. Fourth, culture, in its democratic form, is about a learned way of life, a context for knowledge production. Fifth, culture is symbolic as much as it is material. Sixth, culture and ideology are related, which tends to be overlooked in analyses of 'quality culture'. Seventh, there

is, arguably, a dialectical relationship between culture and economy, not a deterministic one. Eighth, culture may be construed as transcending the human actors or as possessed uniquely by people. Ninth, subcultures can be sites of resistance; a documented effect of the quality movement in higher education (Newton, 2000).

This complexity is not resolved by positivistic performance indicators or procedural codes, which ignore the subtleties of understanding or construction of meaning that render externally imposed, audit-like requirements irrelevant or at best marginal but extrinsic to the development of a lived quality culture. However, as this paper will go on to suggest, perhaps the construct of quality culture is, itself, as transitory and delusional as the idea that quality can be safeguarded (let alone achieved) through quality assurance. First, though, a review of transformative learning.

### **Transformative learning**

At the EAIR Forum last year in Copenhagen the notion of transformative learning was explored (Harvey, 2008a) and was further elaborated in a paper in Abu Dhabi (Harvey, 2009a). These explorations attempted to link transformative learning to quality. Transformative learning is one of many different learning theories (many of which are in fact models or hypotheses or methods (Appendix 1). Arguably, there are three overarching approaches to learning theory: behaviourism, cognitivism, constructivism, although others also suggest humanism as a 'paradigm'. In practice, these broad approaches are not as clear-cut as they may seem and the many variants and sub-theories do not fall neatly under the three umbrellas. Even more problematic, the three or four broad approaches don't marry up neatly with epistemological positions. It is beyond this paper to attempt to construct a meaningful set of connections between different learning theories and suffice it to say that transformational theory is a form of radical constructivism, informed by a critical dialectical epistemology. There are two main approaches to transformational learning theory, derived entirely independently.

In the early 1990s, following the analysis of quality as a concept and rooted in an analysis of the critical social research methodological heritage (Harvey, 1990), the idea of learning as a transformative process was developed and culminated in the publication of *Transforming Higher Education* (Harvey and Knight, 1996). Transformative learning starts from the premise that the student is a participant in an educative process. Students are not products, customers, consumers, service users or clients. Education is not a service *for* a customer (much less a product to be consumed) but an ongoing process of transformation *of* the participant.

Transformative learning is rather more than the notion of student-centred pedagogy. Harvey and Knight (1996) drew together threads from their respective earlier work in setting out an explanation of transformative learning. They maintained that transformative learning is based around the notion of qualitative change, which also links to the notion of quality as a transformative process (rather than a stable state to be judged against predefined standards or desires or mission statements).

They argued that transformation is about a fundamental change of *form*. Ice is transformed into water and eventually steam if it experiences an increase in temperature. While the increase in temperature can be measured, the transformation involves a qualitative change. Ice has different qualities from those of

steam or water. It is made up of the same molecules but reacts very differently with its environment. Furthermore, transformation is not restricted to apparent or physical transformation but also includes cognitive transcendence (as in the work of Aristotle, Kant, Hegel and Marx as well as in the more essentialist transcendental philosophies, ranging from Husserlian phenomenology through Buddhism and Janism).

The approach suggests that there are two elements of transformative quality in education, enhancing the participant and empowering the participant. A quality education is one that effects changes in the participants and, thereby, enhances them. However, *enhancement* is not itself transformative and the second element of transformative quality is *empowerment*. Empowering students involves giving power to participants to influence their own transformation. It involves students taking ownership of the learning process. Furthermore, the transformation process itself provides the opportunity for self-empowerment, through increased confidence and self-awareness.

In essence, empowerment is about developing students' critical ability, that is, their ability to think and act in a way that transcends taken-for-granted preconceptions, prejudices and frames of reference. Developing critical thinking involves getting students to question the established orthodoxy and learn to justify their opinions. Students are encouraged to think about knowledge as a process in which *they* are engaged, not some 'thing' they tentatively approach and selectively appropriate. A critical ability enables students to self-assess, to be able to decide what is good quality work and to be confident when they have achieved it. In short, an approach that encourages critical ability treats students as *intellectual performers* rather than as compliant audience. Developing a critical ability involves encouraging students to challenge preconceptions, their own, their peers and their teachers. It is about the process of coming to understand. This form of empowerment is at the heart of the dialectical process of critical transformation.

Critical transformative learning involves deconstructing taken for granted and ideological edifices and reconstructing alternative understandings. However, critical transformation is continuous and having reconstructed an alternative conceptualisation this, itself, becomes the subject of further critical transformative learning. So, transformation is not just about adding to a student's stock of knowledge or set of skills and abilities. At its core, transformation, in an educational sense, refers to the evolution of the way students approach the acquisition of knowledge and skills and relate them to a wider context.

The idea of transformative learning has also been developed by Mezirow (2000), taking a cue from critical theory's analysis of consciousness. (The following account draws heavily on Harvey (2009a)). Mezirow developed the concept of 'perspective transformation', which is about becoming critically aware that assumptions about the world constrain the way the world is perceived and understood. Perspective transformation is about challenging taken-for-granted, developing new understandings and acting upon these new understandings. Astin (1985) had developed much the same kind of analysis, albeit from somewhat different roots. Mezirow's approach (also referred to as transformational learning by him and sometimes as transformative learning by others commenting on his approach) is compatible with a constructivist view. He argues that meaning structures may change as an individual adds to or integrates ideas within an existing scheme; such a transformation of meaning occurs routinely through learning. However, perspective

transformation leading to transformative learning, where a fundamental reconceptualisation takes place, occurs much less frequently. Mezirow suggested that transformative learning usually results from a disorienting dilemma, triggered by a life crisis or major life transition, although it may also result from an accumulation of meaning transformations (Mezirow, 1995, p. 50). On the other hand, Mezirow suggests that transformative learning may also be mindlessly assimilative. Harvey and Knight's critical attitude is not a mindless, habitual process.

This focus on paradigm-shift like changes is where Mezirow differs from the concept of transformative learning developed by Harvey and Knight (1996). For them, transformative learning is about enabling a continuous dialectical process of engaging: of a critical attitude versus assimilation and momentous periodic change. The momentous occasion in the Harvey and Knight approach is the initial grasping of the critical dialectical approach, thereafter, transformative learning is continuous through ongoing critique. This is similar to O'Sullivan's (2003) view of transformative learning, which asserts that transformative learning involves experiencing:

a deep, structural shift in the basic premises of thought, feelings, and actions. It is a shift of consciousness that dramatically and irreversibly alters our way of being in the world. Such a shift involves our understanding of ourselves and our self-locations; our relationships with other humans and with the natural world; our understanding of relations of power in interlocking structures of class, race and gender; our body awareneses, our visions of alternative approaches to living; and our sense of possibilities for social justice and peace and personal joy.

If the deep structural shift is the shift to a critical attitude it more or less matches the Harvey and Knight approach. If, however, and the definition is ambiguous, the structural shift is recurring and occasional, then it is closer to the Mezirow-style paradigm shift.

Another difference between Harvey and Knight and Mezirow, is the emphasis on deconstruction and rationalism in Mezirow and deconstruction and reconstruction of alternative understanding in Harvey and Knight. Mezirow's meaning schemes are based upon experiences that can be deconstructed and acted upon in a rational way. Mezirow (1995) suggests this happens through a series of phases that begin with the disorienting dilemma. Other phases include self-examination, critical assessment of assumptions, recognition that others have shared similar transformations, exploration of new roles or actions, development of a plan for action, acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing the plan, tryout of the plan, development of competence and self-confidence in new roles, and reintegration into life on the basis of new perspectives. In this he takes on elements of Schultz's non-transcendental phenomenological project. Thus, transformative learning occurs when individuals change their frames of reference by critically reflecting on their assumptions and beliefs and consciously making and implementing plans that bring about new ways of defining their worlds. This starts to converge back towards the critical dialectical perspective developed by Harvey and Knight (1996).

Mezirow thus places emphasis on transformative paradigm-shift-like moments, whereas Harvey and Knight's notion of transformative learning places more emphasis on ongoing dialectical deconstruction and reconstruction. Mezirow also linked transformative learning to deconstruction but is relatively silent about the nature of reconstructive processes. He is rather more concerned with rationalisation, taking his cue from Habermas. He proposed that:

A key proposition of transformative learning theory recognizes the validity of

Habermas's (1984) fundamental distinction between instrumental and communicative learning. Instrumental learning is about controlling and manipulating the environment, with emphasis on improving prediction and performance. Instrumental learning centrally involves assessing truth claims—that something is as it is purported to be. Communicative learning refers to understanding what someone means when they communicate with you.... The process of understanding [communication] involves assessing claims to rightness, sincerity, authenticity, and appropriateness rather than assessing a truth claim. The process of critical-dialectical discourse centrally involves assessing the beliefs of others to arrive at a tentative best judgment.

Thus, for Mezirow, the distinction between instrumental and communicative learning is fundamental. He proposes that hypothetical-deductive logic and empirical methods are more often appropriate for instrumental learning, while for communicative learning, the developmental logic involves analogic-abductive inference and qualitative research methods are often more appropriate. He states that abductive reasoning is reasoning from concrete instances to an abstract conceptualization, which is the reverse of Marx's dialectical analysis from abstract to concrete, with its necessary shuttling back and forth between past and present, incident and structure, instance and theory. Harvey and Knight's transformative learning is coincident with a broader approach to critical social research than critical theory; one that draws on Marx's analysis of dialectical deconstruction and reconstruction.

### **Conclusion: Transformative learning and quality culture**

This paper is an attempt to provide a clearer understanding of quality, culture and the epistemological basis of both. This enhanced understanding is intended to provide the basis for developing a more appropriate approach to developing internal quality procedures; more focused on improvement.

What this analysis raises is the need to think of quality culture not as a set of procedures but as context in which efforts are linked to the development of transformative learning. However, a more cynical reading might suggest that quality culture is an ephemeral construct that serves to mystify rather than render transparent quality development. One might argue that quality culture has no meaning if the construct is 'a way of living', is truly embedded then it is just part of the culture of an organisation, or rather more generally and abstractly, academic culture. In short, prefacing culture with 'quality' detracts from the real issue of developing a critical reflective academic culture that will generate quality outcomes and, instead, puts an emphasis on codified procedures that conceal or detract from quality enhancement.

So where does the forgoing take us? One line of argument is as follows.

- Quality assurance is intended to ensure a high quality higher education system.
- There has been little direct evidence that quality assurance has improved much, especially not the process of learning.
- There is considerable scepticism about quality assurance to the extent that it is sometimes projected as a process designed to obscure what has really happened to higher education,
- Quality assurance is obsessed with codified processes and is underpinned by an ontological belief in the untrustworthiness of those being quality assured.

- Quality assurance doesn't get to the heart of the matter: student learning or cutting edge research.
- Quality assurance is preoccupied with operationalisation of quality without examining the epistemological nature of quality: primarily it disregards the transformative essence of quality.
- Quality assurance uncritically adopts a fitness-for-purpose approach, which, at root, is a poor and inadequate operationalisation of the concept of quality.
- (In research analysis it adopts another approach, viz. excellence of outputs, although its methodologies are inadequate, but not as inadequate as those composing ranking tables (Harvey, 2008b))
- Further, quality assurance is epistemologically naïve, at best adopting (uncritically) a pragmatist approach.
- Consequently, epistemologically, quality assurance is asking the wrong questions.
- Quality assurance fails to engage with learning, and its positivistic pseudo-pragmatism is at variance with the epistemological basis of most modern learning theory: particularly constructivism and the more radical transformative learning approaches.
- Quality culture is a concept in vogue but it is a poorly understood or examined concept.
- Quality culture is not a panacea.
- There is no 'correct' quality culture: culture is a lived experience not a set of procedures.
- In a sense, quality culture is a red herring while quality assurance continues to ask the wrong questions.
- On the other hand, a lived quality culture can remain impervious to quality assurance processes, while continuing to pay lip service to them.
- Quality cultures evaporate under closer scrutiny: there are academic cultures that, to a greater or lesser extent, enable transformative learning.
- (Similarly, there are academic cultures that do (or do not) enable and encourage transformative research (as opposed to rehashing and repackaging already established research).)
- In practice, a so-called quality culture is one that embraces and takes-for-granted the procedural requirements of quality assurance. It should, therefore, be called a quality assurance culture (or an audit culture, as indeed it already is).
- A 'real' quality culture is epistemologically distinct, internally motivated, guided by transformation and independent of external assurance protocols. In short, we're back at a dynamic, critical, self-reflective academic culture: 'quality culture' evaporates.
- Quality assurance is also superfluous: in higher education it has spent 20 years chasing the elusive undefined butterfly of quality.
- Fitness for purpose is not a definition it is an excuse for focusing on assurance not quality: but an excuse that is less and less believable.
- Higher education has had two decades of the quality assurance game: a game with, increasingly, a single rule book (ESG), that itself, ironically, is not fit for purpose (Stensaker *et al.*, at the EAIR Forum)
- Now it is the turn of the quality culture game.
- However, alongside it, higher education is being forced to play ranking games.
- They are conspiring to create a front that inhibits the examination of what and how students are learning.
- Transformative learning has been going on for a long time, as have many other approaches to enhancements and innovations in learning and teaching.

- They have developed independently from quality assurance; and in some cases despite quality assurance. Quality assurance does not exactly encourage risk taking.
- There was some short-lived hope that an improvement oriented approach to quality (as in some Scandinavian countries in the past and in Scotland currently) might shift to asking, epistemologically, the right questions: viz. about transformation.
- But political interference, the demand for simplistic indicators, the close-mindedness embodied in the implementation of the ESG (if not in its original intention), conspire against a coming together of quality assurance and learning.
- So let's go for learning and redeploy the resources to better enable learning and encourage critical, self-reflective teaching.

## References

*Apologies for many self-references but this is a work in progress and some of this has been addressed in more detail in previous papers.*

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## **Appendix 1: Some Learning 'Theories'.**

- ACT\* (J. Anderson)
- Action learning
- Activity Theory (Vygotsky, Leont'ev, Luria, Engstrom)
- Actor-Network Theory (Latour, Callon)
- ADDIE Model of Instructional Design
- Adult learning (Andragogy) (M. Knowles)
- Adult Learning Theory (P. Cross)
- Affordance Theory (Gibson)
- Algo-Heuristic Theory (L. Landa)
- Anchored Instruction (J. Bransford & the CTGV)
- Andragogy (M. Knowles)
- Aptitude-Treatment Interaction (L. Cronbach & R. Snow)
- ARCS Model of Motivational Design (Keller)

Assimilation Theory (Ausubel)  
Attribution Theory (F. Heider; B. Weiner)  
Behaviourism (J.B. Watson)  
Brain-based Learning (I Hart)  
Case-Based Learning (C Nygaard)  
Cognitive Apprenticeship (Collins et al.)  
Cognitive Constructivism (Gagne; Birggs; Bruner)  
Cognitive Dissonance Theory (L. Festinger)  
Cognitive Flexibility Theory (R. Spiro)  
Cognitive Load Theory (J. Sweller)  
Cognitive-Gestalt approaches  
Cognitive Psychology  
Cognitivism  
Collaborative Learning  
Communities of Practice (Lave and Wenger)  
Component Display Theory (M.D. Merrill)  
Conditioning Theory (I. Pavlov)  
Conditions of Learning (R. Gagne)  
Connectionism /Connectivism (E. Thorndike)  
Constructivist Theory (J. Bruner)  
Contiguity Theory (E. Guthrie)  
Control Theory (W. Glasser)  
Conversation Theory (G. Pask)  
Co-operative Learning  
Criterion Referenced Instruction (R. Mager)  
Discovery Learning (Bruner)  
Distributed Cognition (Hutchins)  
Double Loop Learning (C. Argyris)  
Drive Reduction Theory (C. Hull)  
Dual Coding Theory (A. Paivio)  
Elaboration Theory (C. Reigeluth)  
Engagement Theory (G. Kearsley & B. Shneiderman)  
Experiential Learning (C. Rogers; Kolb)  
Facilitation theory  
Flexible Learning  
Functional Context Theory (T. Sticht)  
Genetic Epistemology (J. Piaget)  
Gestalt Psychology (Tolman)  
Gestalt Theory (M. Wertheimer)  
Goal Based Scenarios  
GOMS (S. Card, T. Moran & A. Newell)  
GPS (A. Newell & H. Simon)  
Holistic learning theory  
Identity Status Theory (Marcia)  
Information Pickup Theory (J.J. Gibson)  
Information Processing Theory (G.A. Miller)  
Lateral Thinking (E. DeBono)  
Learning Styles (B. McCarthy)  
Levels of Processing ( Craik & Lockhart)  
Mathematical Learning Theory (R.C. Atkinson)  
Mathematical Problem Solving (A. Schoenfeld)  
Mental Models (Johnson; Laird)  
Minimalism (J. M. Carroll)

Model Centered Instruction and Design Layering (A. Gibbons)  
Modes of Learning (D. Rumelhart & D. Norman)  
Multiple Intelligences (H. Gardner)  
Neuroscience-based theory (G Edelman)  
Observational learning  
Operant Conditioning (B.F. Skinner)  
Originality (I. Maltzman)  
Phenomenonography (F. Marton & N. Entwistle)  
Problem-Based Learning  
Reinforcement theory (Skinner)  
Repair Theory (K. VanLehn)  
Right Brain/Left Brain Thinking (  
Schema Theory  
Script Theory (R. Schank)  
Self-Theories: Entity and Incremental Theory (Dweck)  
Sensory stimulation theory  
Sign Theory (E. Tolman)  
Situated Learning (J. Lave)  
Soar (A. Newell et al.)  
Social Development/Social Cognition (L. Vygotsky)  
Social Judgement Theory (K. Krebs)  
Social Learning Theory (A. Bandura)  
Stage Theory of Cognitive Development/Developmental Theory (J. Piaget)  
Stages of Development (Erikson)  
Stimulus Sampling Theory (W. Estes)  
Structural Learning Theory (J. Scandura)  
Structure of Intellect (J. Guilford)  
Subsumption Theory (D. Ausubel)  
Symbol Systems (G. Salomon)  
Transformative Learning (L. Harvey and P.K. Knight)  
Transformational Learning (Mezirow)  
Triarchic Theory (R. Sternberg)

List adapted from <http://tip.psychology.org/theories.html>, <http://www.learning-theories.com/>,  
[http://www.brookes.ac.uk/services/ocsd/2\\_learnth/theories.html](http://www.brookes.ac.uk/services/ocsd/2_learnth/theories.html),  
<http://www.funderstanding.com/content/about-learning>;  
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