



Institutional audits as reflexive praxis

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Approach

- Quality and quality assurance as a contested concept
- Balancing a dual mandate, and some...
- An eclectic theoretical approach
- A Socratic approach: asking questions



Quality and Quality Assurance as a contested concept

- Who makes the decision what quality is?
- Based on what criteria or standards?
- In what context?
- For what purpose?
- What is contextually relevant and transformative quality?

(Aluko, Letseka, & Pitsoe, 2016; Fresen & Boyd, 2005; Hauptman Komotar, 2020; Zawada, 2019)



Audit Culture vs quality culture

- Audit culture as a “condition....shaped by the use of modern techniques and principles of financial audit, but in contexts far removed from the world of financial accountancy...the techniques and values of accountancy have become a central organizing principles in the governance and management of human conduct – and the new kinds of relationships, habits and practices that this is creating.” (Shore, 2008:278)
- Concerns about quality, risk and a crisis of trust in the higher education prevalent
- Audit culture conflates accountability with accountancy and may be viewed as an elaborate policing mechanism based on minimum compliance
- Such an audit culture, however, can lead to ‘concealing behaviour’, where instead of accountability, data is deliberately concealed to make institutions look as if there is ‘good quality’ and compliance (Bamber & Anderson, 2012).
- Audit culture also runs the risk of alienating everyday academics because they feel that it devalues their everyday practices.
- If quality assurance is seen as a top-down practice where mindless conformity is expected, there will be conflict between quality assurance efforts and academics

(Bamber & Anderson, 2012).



Quality Culture

- Theatre metaphor (Zawada, 2019)
- The props on the stage (e.g. policies, documents, rules and performance agreements) – **the design of the IQA system**
- Audience and beneficiaries (the public and the students)
- Enactment: daily, infused across the institution, what actually happens, irrespective of the players, triangulated with the student experience and the student voice – **the implementation, M&E and impact**
- Moving from externally driven processes (the regulator) to internally driven processes (the individual and community)



Balancing a dual mandate, and some...

- Legislative mandate (HE Act and NQF Act)
- Accountability (protecting students and the public purse)
- An institutional audit should be seen as a point in a journey (or a critical review of the theatre performance), to pause and give evidence of an existing quality culture
- A developmental approach (continuous improvement and enhancement)
- The scholarship of Teaching and Learning and of Quality Assurance (QA): learning organisations
- The new mandate of the CHE on transformation (cf. also COL 2021)



Guiding questions (*Manual*, 2021: 35)

Guiding questions such as the following may be used:

- a. What are the goals the institution / department / programme / module / we / I intend(s) to achieve?
- b. How are we working to achieve these goals?
- c. What plans, procedures and resources are in place to achieve these goals?
- d. How do we know when those goals have been achieved?
- e. What do we do when we are not achieving what we set out to achieve?**
(Patchy implementation; pockets of shining excellence vs dim corners)



The scholarship of Teaching and Learning

The scholarship of teaching and learning has the following characteristics:

- It is public
 - It is open to critical review
 - It is provided in a form others can build on
 - It asks questions around issues of student learning
 - It is discipline-specific
 - It is based on Continuous Professional Development (CPD)
 - It demands innovation and activism
- How do we extend this scholarship to QA, e.g. in terms of discourse and understanding?



Reflexivity: defined

- Broad term with a rich history (Pitsoe and Maila, 2011)
- Applying one's experience to oneself, while reflecting upon it, examining it ***critically***, and exploring it ***analytically*** (to enhance critical and analytical thinking about your practice)
- An attitude of attending ***systematically*** to the context of knowledge construction
- Reflective practice is to understand, question and investigate your own practices, and to ***take these seriously***



Reflexivity: defined

- Bordieu claims that a social science is inherently laden with *bias*
- Social scientists should turn their 'objectifying' gaze upon themselves and become aware of the *hidden assumptions* in their practice
- As academics and professionals, in T&L and in QA, you are all busy with EDUCATION as a social science



Reflexivity: defined

- “Reflexivity is making aspects of the self strange: focusing close attention upon one’s own actions, thoughts, feelings, values, identity, **and their effect** upon others, situations, and professional and social structures” (Bolton & Dederfeld, 2008).
- Reflexivity is more than looking at your own personal experiences, but rather “is located in ...political and social structures”; it is not confession “that passes responsibility to others” (Bolton & Dederfeld, 2008).
- The notion of reflexive research and reflexive practice in research, teaching and student support has been acknowledged as being one way to improve praxis of teaching (Nyoni, 2016; Pitsoe, 2016).
- Reflective practice can only work in a learning organisation (Bolton & Dederfeld, 2008). And a learning organisation must be a reflexive institution.



Reflexivity: defined

- “Institutional reflexivity” is based on sets of organisational rules and practices that include strong incentives for organisational **actors** to put institutional routines into question, criticise established procedures, enable new ideas to thrive and this to overcome barriers hindering progress and innovation” (Kuhlman & Bogumuil, 2018)
- Institutional reflexivity is necessary for organisational learning to take place, to ensure that organisations are viable and sustainable in the long run
- **External factors such as institutional audits are an external impetus that can support the processes of an internal reflexive mode**
- **Institutional audits as an OPPORTUNITY for reflection and improvement**



Reflexivity: defined

- ***Epistemic reflexivity*** focuses on our belief systems, and aims and challenges our meta-theoretical assumptions

In terms of ***decoloniality***, it requires us to reflect on and disrupt existing *ways of knowing*.

- ***Methodological reflexivity*** is concerned with the monitoring of the impact of our behaviour

In terms of ***decoloniality***, it requires us to reflect on and disrupt existing *ways of being* and *ways of power*.



At the personal level: *Ways of being*

- Challenges us to ***take ownership*** of shortcomings, misunderstandings, oversights and mistakes
- Reclaim (y)our lives; self-awareness
- Often discussed in terms of research, and refers to the relationship between the researcher and the object of his / her research, but can be applied to T&L, CE, academic citizenship and quality assurance, i.e. all that we do in our professional lives



Reflexivity as community: *Ways of being*

- Do not only reflect on our theories, but also on our practices and ***our lived African experience***
- Our experience is situated in time and place, and is ***contextualised (locality and historicity)***
- *What is our context in HE in SA in 2021?*
- *What is your lived experience as an academic in HE or as a QA professional?*
- *How do students experience your teaching and your institution?*



At the institutional level: *Ways of power*

- Uncertainties, disruptions and confusion in concrete life situations and in complex processes are crucial areas of learning – take an institutional audit as example
- Reject the conventional conceptualisation of organisations as a ‘rational’ static entity
- Encourage a conceptualisation of organisations as complex, dynamic and constantly and actively transforming, **and your role in that!**



- Understanding that this ***transformation*** takes place by human beings growing and advancing
- Acknowledging human behaviour in organisations as fluid, complex and contradictory
- Should promote ***collective learning, un-learning and re-learning*** and ***collective responsibility***



What reflexivity should not be

- Reflexivity should not become individualistic and narcissistic, but should be ***collective*** and ***objective*** (Maton, 2003)
- Reflexivity is not skepticism , but ***nonskepticist*** enquiry (Macbeth, 2001)
- Reflexivity is not negative and destructive, but should be positive, transformative and constructive (***care, collegiality and community***)
- Reflexivity is not, ‘**not** being accountable’



The Socratic approach: Questions to ask ourselves

In Teaching and Learning:

1. What values and biases do we bring to our T&L?
2. What decisions do we make about T&L?
3. What conditions for T&L do we create?
4. Do we meet the students where they are?
5. Do we provoke our students from their comfort zone to allow transformative encounters?
6. Do we transcend arrogance in our teaching practice?
7. Are we reproducing an irrelevant colonial curriculum?
8. How do we elevate these questions to the departmental, faculty and institutional level?



Our role in the institutional audits

1. What is the role and function of an institutional audit?
2. What is **our** role and function in an institutional audit, from where we are?
3. What are the values and biases we bring to this institutional audit?
4. What activities are part of this institutional audit and what is our part in them?
5. Do we know/understand/agree/practice the policies and procedures that inform the activities of the institutional audit?
6. Did we contribute meaningfully to this collective activity?
7. Did we learn anything from this collective activity (about myself, about my discipline, about the topic of the meeting, about the Other, about my participation in positive or toxic power?)



Conclusion

Reflexive praxis is

a deliberate and systematic critical analysis of my personal, our communal and our institutional knowledge base (points of departure, values, beliefs, biases), as well as our daily practice in all spheres of academic life (T&L, research, CE and academic citizenship and quality assurance)

With the ***purpose*** of

constructing new knowledge about ourselves and others, and of ***transforming*** and improving our ways of knowing and doing and our ways of being by creating new alternatives.



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