



## Restoring Academic Quality

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For decades the university has tried to figure out its connection with the local community and beyond. (Gitlin, 1996) Many see the university located on the “ivory tower” suggesting a large disconnect between the knowledge priorities of the university and those who reside “on the ground”. This gap between the heights of the tower and the ground reflects the university’s attachment to knowledge that is conceptual, discipline specific and largely inaccessible for the “common folk” while the people that live and work on the ground (the local community) typically endorse a more practical, holistic and accessible form of knowledge. One need not look further than the foundation of academic life, the Ph.D., to see the universities knowledge priorities.

But as Bob Dylan (Gray, 2006) suggested so many years ago the times are truly changing. These changes, however, are likely to be swallowed up by a whole range of other traditions and institutional structures that obscure quality judgments and discussions as the language of numbers and assumed objective values found within language inform individual, group and institution identities and their meaning within the larger societal context. (Eisner, 1994). Put directly, quality judgments are transformed to neutral, objective determinations through traditions and structures rooted in the priorities of normal science. (Adorno, 2005). As Adorno states:

To yield to the object (*for example the person being assessed for tenure*) means to do justice to

the object's qualitative moments. Scientific objectification, (*what is referred to in this chapter as normal science*) in line with the quantifying tendency of all science since Descartes, tends to eliminate qualities and to transform them into measurable definitions. Increasingly, rationality itself is equated more *mathematico* with the faculty of quantification (Adorno, 1973, p.43).

This is not to suggest that issues of quality are not inferred in academic policies, practices and relationships. Rather, the hidden nature of quality judgments, obscured by the need to be objective, allows these qualities to become reified and remain unchanged (Bewes, 2002). As such, they stand as a barrier to progressive change that is dissatisfied with the current institutional and cultural construction of dominance (Charlesbois, 2011). The university, for example, can fight within its corridors as much as it wants about issues such as qualitative and quantitative research, but in the end this is much to do about nothing if the traditions and structures of this institution abandons articulation of the qualities desired and reflection and critique on those qualities. Furthermore, this sort of communication and critique on quality needs to begin with the value of individuals, groups and the institutional itself. Put in a facile manner, the

communication and critique concerning quality needs to shine brightly on those who work and study within academic institutions and the institutional structures and traditions that shape this sort of discourse. (Sillars & Gronback, 2000)

To see and critically consider this sort of discourse it is important to look back at a few established traditions (supported by structures) within the university. One such tradition concerns the quality of knowledge produced within the university, usually referred to as research. Research is seen with little or no discussion or consideration to be superior to the knowledge produced on the ground—experiential knowledge. Because research has high status, as deemed by the dominant culture (both within and outside the institution), just the act of doing research confers authority and movement toward the status of expert (Gitlin, 1996) reference) for those engaged in this form of knowledge production. And doing more of this research is also a sign of doing better—being a high quality researcher. Note a common line echoed in the halls of academia, “I had a great year --three articles and two books came out”. The traditions and structures that

support the assumptions about research knowledge and that more research is better (a form of quality) limit and often eliminate the need to discuss and reflect on the scope and nature of desired forms of knowledge production (Hejinian, 2000).

It is not only researchers who speak words of silence about quality but also the university itself. The university's engagement with rankings is a case in point. While coming under heavy criticism as of late (Rauhvargers, 2011), these ranking are typically based in part on numbers of articles produced (more is better), the money attached to research grants (more is better) and dollars brought into the institution through numbers of students and tuition (more is better). Again, because the quality of these activities is assumed, discussions and judgments about what the university wants its identity to be, its relations with other institutions and its ambitions to help make a better more educated society are hidden if not completely abandoned at the level of practice.

The traditions and structures found in universities that limit discussions and judgments of quality are not only focused on research but

also teaching. Teaching is often seen as having far less importance than research. It is, however, a required part of the job that has to meet some standards of quality if one is to move up in rank and to gain tenure. The structure and tradition for judging teaching quality is often a student evaluation that has a number of predetermined questions placed on a Likert scale (i.e., a set of numbers that suggest most to least in answer to a question). As is true of research, these numbers obscure discussions of quality and while the comments on the evaluation form could lead to a discussion of quality, they typically don't count for promotion, tenure or merit pay because they don't provide an "objective" way to compare faculty.

Normal science (Kuhn, 1962), with its reputation for providing objective accounts, legitimates the traditions and structures that limit discussion and reflection on quality at the individual, group and institutional level for both research and teaching. The lack of discussion and reflection on quality reinforce the status quo without a whisper of dissent or significant challenge. For the status quo and the silent view

of quality embedded within continues to shape and direct all levels of university life including the institutional identity itself. Creating a new degree, for example, with an expansive more democratic view of quality, without discussions and reflections on quality is likely to encounter constant pushback with the taken for granted structures and traditions that have an interest in its demise (Gitlin, 2005).

While qualities are messy, subjective and uncertain, especially as compared to quantities, they are a life force and the last barrier to authoritarian rule (Benjamin, 1968). They are the directional force at the very core of our relationships' and decision—making. And yet, as we have pushed ever further into the “age of science”, the academy seems to have given in to the seductive powers and authority of normal science with its claims of objectivity and its ties to expertise, authority and what is seen as legitimate.

To consider the devolution of quality communication and critique and its replacement with quantification and code words, this essay, following Dewey's pragmatics (Dancy, 2004), turns toward experience. Experience, according

to Dewey, requires action and reflection (Boydston, 1972). It is the reflection that creates meaning for the event and turns these events into experiences. The experience, in turn, creates the possibility for revision of the meaning of the event. Illuminating the spiral of action, reflection, meaning making & revision is pushed to the forefront of this essay (Carr & Kemmis, 1986).

Specifically, this essay will look at three events, faculty recruitment, faculty productivity assessments and the evaluation of professors teaching by students. With these reflective experiences articulated and reflected upon, this chapter moves to the controversial claim that bringing to the fore discussions of quality requires a full embrace of technology and its ability to generate “big data” (Smolan & Erwit, 2011).

### **Recruitment**

When my Ph.D. was almost completed, it was time to look forward and try to get a job. Being naïve, to say the least, I looked through the Chronicle of Higher Education to search for a possible job. My search led me to several possibilities that I checked out with my dissertation director. When I reluctantly showed

him one particular job, he said to me “Andrew at this point any interview is a good one”. My mentor was absolutely right. I had only one presentation at AERA and no other published articles. Further, it wasn’t like my conceptual framework, critical theory was number one on everyone’s depth chart. And so, I ended up taking the interview.

The interview started on a positive note, but quickly turned in an uncomfortable direction. In response to my presentation on teachers’ work, questions started to emerge about my use of concepts such as such as deskilling and resistance. Clearly, my orientation did not appeal to the majority of the audience at my presentation. When I returned home it wasn’t long before the phone rang and I was offered the job!!! Why? I’m unsure to this day but here are some strong possibilities. I had after the presentation agreed to the salary offered. Another faculty member decided without much notice he wasn’t coming back. And the institution I received my Ph.D. from was ranked 1<sup>st</sup> in the country. If these are even close to the reasons for the decision then numbers and necessity was used instead of any

quality I may have added by coming. Instead of any discussion on quality what is now clear is that I was cheap, they had to fill two opening and the institution granting my Ph.D. was ranked 1<sup>st</sup> in the country (Altbach, 2006). But the actual qualities were never discussed but rather hidden. But there was one exception to this focus on numbers: a question at my presentation about deskilling and reskilling. Isn’t that a case of quality discussion? Actually, I doubt it.

What the next few years that I spent at this institution indicated was that the question posed about teachers skills emerged from a notion of *fit*. Fit meant how well does the new candidate fit within the current structure. There is no need to expose oneself as being against or for anything—but rather to appear as an impartial observer that is looking toward a reasoned and reasonable basis for their decision—in this case fit. In taking this reasoned position the foundation for authentic relationships were truncated. I didn’t know how faculty felt and accepted the job based on a fictional account of the faculty—they wanted me as opposed to needed me. On the other hand, these fictions could not be maintained in everyday

practice and it wasn't long before more authentic actions occurred. Without a foundation for discussion on quality and value added, the authentic actions never had a name or a basis for their projection. All discussion was reduced to personality and quality became the victim as the constructed status quo ruled the day.

### **Faculty Productivity Reports**

My experience with faculty productivity reports (what we call faculty activity reports (FAR)) is that they are made up of an on-line list of categories and sub-categories that comprise the major areas of being a faculty: research, teaching and service. When a faculty member has evidence of productivity for a certain sub-category within the larger category they upload that data. This information is then given to a faculty committee that makes recommendations to the appropriate administrator. A letter is then sent to the faculty suggesting the nature of the assessment. The faculty then has the right to discuss this with the administrator and suggest changes. Once agreed upon, the letter is signed and sent forward.

Recently, I transferred to a new department and was filling out the form for the

first time. I did the best I could to fill out the form accurately but before the form went to the faculty committee, the administrator had me clarify one notation on the form. He raised a question about an article I was including in my FAR that was peer refereed but was published in a conference proceeding not in a journal per se. In my area of specialty, this is a very common practice, but in my new department it is not considered appropriate. Of course, the administrator viewed this as my attempt to inflate my productivity and I viewed it as a problem of imposing a narrow standard on the ways I had legitimately notated the FAR in the past.

As I reflect on this issue I believe neither scenario provides a compelling view of the experience. What happened was that neither the new department nor myself had indicated in any previous discussions what we consider quality research. We had not considered, for example, if peer review increases quality and if so in what ways? Neither of us (the administrator and myself) had questioned the rubric used to decide which articles should count and which others should not. And neither of us had looked carefully

at the article and considered its quality on some articulated and coherent basis. Put simply, we both allowed numbers and categories to count for quality and only argued on what was the correct number not what ought to be a quality article. As opposed to making a case, we let the numbers make the case and therefore had a conflict that couldn't be resolved. Our silent voices spoke not a word in terms of moving the discussion of quality forward.

However, it is not only the numbers that is the problem but rather it is the fact that categories are developed historically and applied to the present/future. Because they are developed years before the assessment is made by definition these categories are out of date. Research dollars, for example, are now vastly more important than 10 years ago in most academic institutions. Most rubrics made 3-5 years ago may miss the boat in terms of importance. But even if you remade the rubric and FAR every year the problem is the same—a priori categories and sub categories assume that looking backward is more important than looking forward to what you desire in terms of quality. History, on the other hand, is assumed

to be consistent—what happened in the past will be repeated in the future. Both of these assumptions, coming out of normal science's need for objectivity, are assumed to be necessary to have an objective view. While categories may seem objective on the surface, they are actually about preserving the dominant view—the dominant way things were constructed not what they ought to be. The status quo is the winner and an opportunity to see the status quo in relation to a larger set of qualities is lost.

### **Student Evaluation**

Student evaluation of professors is largely standardized across contexts. It involves a form with a series of questions about the readings assigned, the overall satisfaction of the student about the professor, the type of impact the course had on learning, and any number of specific queries about effectiveness and fairness. Each question is placed on a Likert scale that allows responses from a very positive rating to a very negative rating with several other choices in between. At the end of the form is a space for comments.

The use of this type of evaluation is based on the assumption that they provide conclusive data to sort professors for merit pay from best to worst. One professor, for example may receive a 4.3 out of 5 and another a 4.1. Because the professor with the 4.3 is rated higher she is now in a position to receive more merit pay. This may be the way the institution wants things to operate but the “cost” is that there is no discussion of how the numbers are tied to quality—a quality that is neither understood nor critiqued. Further, because there is not a need to have even a brief discussion about quality, including what it means to be educated—the professor leaves with little or no information about their teaching. All the professor can do if they receive a high rating is try to mimic what occurred in the past. And this mimetic process is the foundation for supporting the status quo. And when students do write comments that could speak to quality, these comments, in my experience, are usually discounted. Why you ask?? They are discounted on the grounds that comments don’t allow professors to be compared because they are not standardized. For example, I often put the

comments of students in my FAR report and never in all my years has an administrator commented on this aspect of student assessment, only the numbers. Teaching is not informed by the evaluation and in this sense teaching also becomes reified and supports the current construction of good teaching. Like art for art sake, professor evaluation only serves the purpose of creating an artificial hierarchy that makes seemingly objective decisions—the ambition of normal science. The winner is the status quo as little or nothing changes in terms of teaching.

### **The Ought**

Taken as a whole this portrayal to academic traditions and structures is limiting is that dominance in whatever form it may be trending is maintained and an opportunity to make informed moral, ethical and political judgments and actions to push individuals, communities and the institution itself forward are ambushed and truncated. This does not mean that changes will not or do not occur. Rather, they are changes that in one way or another fit the current construction of the status quo such that the more things change the more they remain the same. And when

changes are forced on the academy through economic pressures, these reflect the priorities of so called free markets not the desires of informed groups and communities interested in having a more just institution.

This bleak picture of academic life, is neither inevitable nor certain. Breaking the hold of normal science on these traditions and structures means finding ways to communicate and speak to issues of quality that don't impose objective criteria or infer quality ends thereby obscuring the need to discuss quality (e.g., fit). Numbers and language that conceals quality will not do to avoid reproduction of dominance and the status quo—but big data can provide the antidote to this alchemist concoction.

In the simplest terms big data, is the collection of mass amounts of data on an individual that when taken together can speak more holistically about issues of quality. For example, one might suggest that a quality article is paid attention to, allows the reader to learn something and in some instances broadens or changes her perspective. The way traditions and structures in academic life are currently set-up this

sort of data is seen as impractical because it is too time consuming and too subjective. But this assumes that numbers and certain language are never subjective and as discussed they are and in fact are specifically ideological in that they often if not always support a constructed status quo. And if all data is at least partially subjective then a space is opened up to discuss its subjectivity including issues of quality. And with multiple data points instead of one—as opposed to the point of view of only the producer of research—the data is more holistic and therefore represents the complexity of the situation more completely. The beauty of this sort of data, is that a case is being made on quality, so if the data is to be discounted a case must be made. For example, after presenting data on one's research in terms of where they were published and how many articles were published, data was also presented from the point of view of reader—views, viewer ratings on how much is learned and perspective change—a discussion is required to consider how these multiple data points reflect quality. Let's say that the person producing the multiple data points suggests that even though the articles were not

peer reviewed or were not in a top journal, they reflect quality based on views—many readers paid attention. Furthermore, let's suggest that the person looking at the data says "views" are a popularity contest, so your issue of quality fails on this criteria. At that point, the person being assessed might ask about learning and perspective change. And the assessor might respond by saying this data is also subjective. And even if all the data is rejected for one reason or another that rejection still has started a discussion on quality because the rejection infers the need to why current data is more objective and better. And clearly instances can be found where very weak articles were published in a top journal and therefore we need something more than a causal relation between journal type and quality. Not only is this something more suggestive of a holistic experience, it is also easy to collect with the use of technology.

But big data does more than facilitate a discussion of quality on recruitment and productivity, it also can inform teaching in much the same way. Let me provide an example. Let's say that the professor being assessed uses the

standard evaluation form and compliments that with data collected through the use of technology in the classroom. Let's say this technology captures the number of learning communities students created and what emerged from those communities in terms of projects papers, the number of documents students read and commented upon, in terms of notes and quotes and the number of study groups they attended and what came out of those study groups. The professor could now make a case from multiple data points about teaching. The numbers for example on the traditional evaluation form might be at the mean and so largely discounted as not reflecting quality teaching but then the person being assessed might suggest well that is true but look at how much my students learned look at their work and papers look at their commitment to learning outside of the class requirements look at their production. Again, even in a "worst case" scenario, the rejection of data points as quality provides an opening to discuss quality which at the least makes quality a part of public discourse. This discourse, in turn, can provide the foundation for change where it is seen as desirable. And note

that in this last example numbers were used—but because they do not come from a dominant tradition they infer the need for a quality discussion. As is true of so many issues of this sort, quality only reflects a just view if it consistently changes and does not become a new dominance that requires no reflection or active reconsideration (Gitlin, 1996).

In closing what I am suggesting is a need to rethink many traditions and structures found in academic life if the potential for progressive change is to become a reality. One way to move in this direction is through technology that allows actors to make a case, a case that is not already captured in the current traditions and structures. This “out of the box” move will always spur debate and that debate allows the taken for granted to be unearthed (Reitz, 2000). And once public, the foundation is set to move beyond the boundaries of normal science and the traditions and structures that have made academic institutions into conserving institutions that reflect the status quo (Lincoln, 1995).

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