Higher education quality assurance in South Africa widens democracy or not? Response to Anneke Venter’s article: Student involvement and empowerment in quality assurance in distance education in South Africa

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Abstract

In this response I argue that the notion of quality is embedded in the tension between powerful patterns of inherited epistemic and symbolic understanding and the dynamic of the creative, imaginative moments of understanding and design. This would take the idea of co-producer/creator of knowledge beyond the boundaries of (re)packaging commodities for the knowledge market as it would also be located in the disciplinary patterns of knowledge domains.

The abovementioned article argues for quality education expressed as building students’ voices not only as co-developers of quality distance education, but as ‘...co-creator(s) and co-owner(s) of the core knowledge creation business of the institution’ (Venter 2006, 917). Within a context of globalisation and digitalisation, both with a myriad of strands, this for me constitutes a powerful and highly ambitious claim for quality education or quality learning. It is also within the context of quality assurance, according to Venter (2006), something that distance learning institutions should be held accountable for. It is, however, an idea that I think should exceed the boundaries of distance learning and be part of what all learning programmes be held accountable for.

Before exploring some of the implications of this idea I would like to explore what underpins my view of quality. The notion of co-producer or -creator of knowledge for me would accommodate the idea of quality, not only as ‘fit for purpose’ but as good that is both static and dynamic. This distinction originates from Pirsig’s (1991) argument about the duality of quality cultural goods. He argues (1991, 117) that static good ‘...has its own pattern derived from fixed laws and the traditions and values that underlie them’ and dynamic good that ‘...is outside of any culture, that cannot be contained by any system of precepts, but has to be continually rediscovered as a culture evolves’. Quality then would reveal itself not only in dynamic patterns, for that alone would result in chaos; but also in static quality patterns that provides a necessary stabilizing force. ‘Although Dynamic Quality, the Quality of freedom creates this world we live, these patterns of static quality, the quality of order, preserve our world’ (Pirsig 1991, 124). One could then argue that the notion of quality is embedded in the tension between powerful patterns of inherited epistemic and symbolic understanding and the
dynamic of the creative, imaginative moments of understanding and design. It could also be argued that the static order of one level forms the precondition for the establishment of a ‘higher’ level (Cook 2006). This would take the idea of co-producer/creator of knowledge beyond the boundaries of (re)packaging commodities for the knowledge market with limited shelf value as it would also be locate in the disciplinary patterns of knowledge domains.

One could then enquire as to whether ‘student involvement’ accommodates both patterns of static quality and open up space for dynamic quality. Whether it provides for quality ‘literacy’ both as understood by Venter (2006) as the ‘proper understanding’ and the mastering of standardised symbolisations and techniques as well as the critical and creative production thereof. This is, however, a question that cannot be considered without locating it in the contemporary context of dynamic knowledge and choice or what we face in ‘... an enlarged world (that) has become crystallized through the processes of globalization and digitalization’ (Featherstone and Venn 2006, 1). Thinking about becoming a co-producer or -creator of knowledge implies considering the shifting boundaries of both static and dynamic patterns of knowledge and the challenges this poses for democratization.

Venter’s argument, however, is loosely constructed around an assemblage of conceptually contested notions of which the most prominent would be student involvement, empowerment, quality assurance, distance (higher) education (learning), and ‘contextualised to South Africa’. These notions are assembled in a taken for granted manner that assumes agreement of understanding and meaning that must be contested. It constitutes a fragmented combination of fashionable notions (e.g. “quality empowerment” (p. 914)) that reads more like a wish list for ‘action’ (such as the ‘list of criteria’ compiled from what she calls an ‘ubiquitous trend’) without conceptual consideration or clarification. Neither is the article based on systematic empirical enquiry. It reads like the ‘mimicry’ of positions espoused by an arbitrary selection of authors. It does not acknowledge the historical context and the challenges it pose, especially to ‘distant learners’ mainly dependent on ‘paper and pen’ interaction with the learning institution.

I would like therefore firstly to take issue with the absence of serious theoretical engagement in the article. Contrary to plans-of-action, however ill-conceived, theory in South African education spaces and research like this is often derided as the ‘ivory tower’ concern of university professors. Theory is, however, in practice and practice in theory (Gunter 2004). For me Paulo Freire’s argument, that practice without theory is concomitant to slavery, whilst practice without theory or critical reflection is esoteric, still holds true. ‘Engagement and objective distance, understanding reality as object, understanding the significance of men’s action upon objective reality, creative communication about the object by means of language, plurality of responses to a single challenge – these varied dimensions testify to the existence of critical reflection in men’s relationships with the world’ (Freire 1975, 454). I furthermore want to strongly argue with Ball (2006, 1),
introducing a symposium on education research and the necessity of theory, that: ‘. . . social theory, rather than being an indulgence or irrelevance to research, plays a key role in forming and reforming key research questions, invigorating the interpretation of research, and ensuring reflexivity in relation to research practice and the social production of research’. Making a case for the urgent necessity of theory he points to ‘. . . its crucial role in epistemological decision-making; in ensuring the conceptual robustness of conceptual categories; and in providing a method for reflexivity – that is, for understanding the social conditions of the production of knowledge’. He also ‘. . . suggested the importance of the violence that theory does, as a reflexive tool within research practice, its role in challenging conservative orthodoxies and closure, parsimony, and simplicity – that is the role of theory in retaining some sense of the obduracy and complexity of the social’ (Ball 2006, 9).

Against this background I would in this response like to problematise some of the challenges that the tension between static and dynamic quality would pose. I would like to wonder about ‘student involvement’ not as representatives in programme development and decision-making but as ‘co-producers or co-creators of knowledge’ in a particular South African context as part of the global and digitalised world. If we assume globalisation to be prismatic as on the one hand it pulls towards greater similarity whilst simultaneously opening out into different localities and on the other hand digitalisation as representing the capacity of storing and retrieving vast amounts of information and or knowledge, it raises issues of the ‘structure of the world’ that relates to curricular questions within particular learning programmes.

Would mastering the selected patterns of powerful thinking of existing disciplinary knowledge (education requires maps and classifications) have to be reflected in students’ assignments (to link it to a distance learning space) and/or examinations? How would the need for mastering powerful historical patterns of understanding be reconciled with the idea of co-creator of knowledge? Arguing for a static notion of quality Bishop and Phillips’ (2006) argument would pertain as knowledge for them ‘. . . would be nothing without the arrangements, classifications and kinds of assemblage that make it possible, prepare for its emergence, produce it maintain it and critique it’ (2006, 186). The importance of mastering patterns of signification is further emphasized by Turner’s (2006) argument that ‘Like the related notions of cultivation and culture, an academic discipline requires regulatory practices, and a rhetoric of competence, if a specific mentality is to be sustained over time among a community of scholars’ (Turner 2006, 183).

Or contrary to the above would dynamic quality learning programmes become visible in providing for dynamic learning whereby students would learn according to ‘the latest learning theories’ and primarily have to do research and construct their own knowledge? Creative research would entail the need to learn to handle and navigate the enlarged archive of academic material (the potential global archive, or inter-active drawing on the world’s digitalized libraries and archives
(Featherstone and Venn 2006, 15). It would also have to engage with the challenges of local and/or indigenous knowledge(s) and what would constitute new in relations to particular cultural patterns.

What if the knowledge unit of production for the academic and co-producing student ceases to be an object (the book, or article) and more an unstable field, festooned in links and accompanied by its own set of para-sites and commentaries, then the alleged linearity of writing and the alleged integrity of the author, the authority of the author, could potentially diminish in significance (Featherstone and Venn 2006, 16). Could one also argue for the possibility of an inherited pattern of progression that would provide scaffolding towards enabling students to become co-producers of knowledge?

What if the preconditions of knowledge cannot easily be made the object of knowledge? Is it a matter of making evident the structures of knowledge itself, which emerge in ways that provide definitive proof of the imperfectability of knowledge? (Bishop and Phillips 2006, 187) The conditions of knowledge production are much more capricious and shifting than what is often assumed. Encyclopaedias once seen as classified inventories of ‘all’ knowledge and democratically available are increasingly contested both as to the voices (experts) that constructed the classificatory framework and the content in/excluded. Rather than representing knowledge according to clear classificatory systems it is seen as rhizomatic.

Against the background of what Venter calls ‘mass empowerment’ how do we open up a space for learner involvement that could become knowledge productive beyond the ticking off of the ‘wish list’ of what constitutes quality assurance? In a digitalized globally connected world it is becoming increasingly difficult to set clear boundaries on the difference between learning spaces other than the material and geographic togetherness of students and learners on a regular basis.

It is furthermore crucial to enquire as to whose interests are being served. In South Africa large numbers of ‘our students’ do not have access to the digitalized world. To what extent would this once again constitute a barrier to their full participation in gaining access to the power of disciplinary patterns of understanding and the kaleidoscopic explosion of knowledge?

The last question that I would like to pose with regard to quality education as a context that provides for co-knowledge production would be about assessment. Knowledge production, or in some cases merely information production, has exploded and the evaluation of what constitutes valuable knowledge has become seriously contested. One could contend for ‘peer-evaluation’ emulating the practice of academic journals but this would raise two related issues, namely the scale of education provision on the one hand and expertise on the other. Considering the scale of learning opportunities provided, one would have to wonder about the availability of the necessary expertise, or static patterns of quality, to evaluate the claim of what constitutes ‘knowledge’.
REFERENCES


