

Notes on Quality (in Particular, With Reference to Education)¹

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I undertook the task of preparing these introductory remarks on quality in education with excitement, for the topic seemed to me to be both important and interesting. What a shock was in store! Much of the material I came across on quality was inane, superficial, inconsistent and irrelevant. (And to paraphrase a remark by Woody Allen, often on the same occasion.) I should note that I am not being xenophobic here, for I include in the ranks of the inane and irrelevant the work of a number of philosophers of education.

For example, here are a couple of accounts of quality that came up immediately when I consulted the experts on the topic, via a source located about two miles from my home: Google!

“Good quality means a predictable degree of uniformity and dependability with a quality standard”; it is an old trick, of course, to define a troublesome term by including that very same term in the definition. After doing so, one can take the rest of the day off, having pushed the boundaries of scholarship to their limits. Another account that was appealing was, “[Q]uality is the degree to which performance meets expectations.” Like all of you, I have had a few weak doctoral students who wrote even weaker dissertations, but it is liberating to know that because these students performed up to my low expectations of them, they had done quality work.

I became more hopeful when I came across several sources that cited the dictionary definition, according to which quality means “degree of excellence.” Unfortunately these sources seemed dissatisfied with this (correct) account, wistfully pointing out that this made quality “relative in nature,” although some also treated this point about relativism as a revolutionary but disturbing insight.

The reluctant observation that quality is relative in nature is puzzling, because one does not need to be a great philosophical intellect (in fact, any intellect at all) to realize that *of course* it is! A dish of French cooking is judged to be of high quality (to have excellence) on the basis of its possession of certain characteristics; these are quite different from the characteristics that make my paper on constructivism a quality piece of philosophical writing (although, of course, both the French dish and my beautifully-argued paper whet the appetite for more).

This insight about the relativity of quality leads to a crisis, one that the literature barely recognizes (if it recognizes at all): The issue, of course, is where do the criteria for judging excellence in a domain come from? From whence do the criteria for judging French cooking come? What criteria determine the excellence of a piece of philosophical writing, and who decides upon them?

Actually, here I am not being fair, for the literature does describe (and in some cases recommends) a technique for resolving this crisis—it can be given the technical label *hocus-pocus*. Instead of backing off and doing the hard work of reflecting about what constitutes excellence in a domain, the technique is to select

¹ These informal remarks were originally delivered as the introduction to a symposium on quality, at the biennial meeting of the International Academy of Education in Marbach, Germany, in the summer of 2013.

something that is measurable, and with the magic of quantitative analysis, all worries are dissipated—for the possession of a high degree of this measurable feature *becomes* the definition, or part of the definition, of quality. A school that produces more graduates than its rivals has higher quality (because this is measurable); an education system that produces more readers of the magazine *The New York Review of Books* (and less of Murdoch-owned newspapers) is of higher quality than one that... you get the idea! One source I located put the determination of quality this way: “[T]he ultimate test ... lies with the consumer. The customer’s needs must be translated into measurable characteristics in a product or service. Once the specifics are developed ways to measure and monitor the characteristics need to be found.”

There is a point here that I have been struggling very hard not to mention, but unfortunately I have just lost the struggle. Some of the hocus-pocus is very sophisticated, and is really high-end magic—and it emanates from some of our economist friends (or former friends!) and colleagues. The magic words that they use are expressions like “measuring economic inputs and outputs,” “cost benefit analyses,” “rates of return of investment in education,” and the like. The result of the economists’ quantitative magic is that education is turned into a commodity, which simplifies a little the determination of quality—although it needs to be pointed out that economists do not speak with a unified voice about what constitutes quality with respect to this commodity; because they can measure a variety of aspects of what they call “education,” there are a variety of things that constitute quality.

Lacking the ability to come up with high-end magic themselves, philosophers of education (with the exception of the author of this paper) detest the magic words (and the quantitative techniques they invoke), and also have disdain for the economists who use them. (More on this in a moment.)

In most if not all cases the crisis of the relativism of quality can be avoided by recognizing that the criteria of excellence are contained in, or are derivable from, the definition of the activity or process or entity itself. Once one knows the definition of a “French Drop,” or of a “Fox Trot,”² one is in possession of the criteria with which to judge excellence in their performance. This is only a small step forward, however, because in many instances, relativity or value judgments are built into the definition, making the crisis inescapable. For example, an erotic drawing may be partially defined as a drawing that produces some degree of sexual arousal in a viewer, but what arouses an Eskimo (such things as rubbing noses) is likely to be different from what arouses an Australian or—Lord help us—what arouses a Canadian. Thus the precise features possessed by a piece of high-quality erotic art are probably impossible to determine in absolute terms, for there necessarily is relativism here.

And, believe it or not, here is where philosophers of education enter the narrative. Their strategy for resolving the issue of quality seems to place them on the side of the angels, for philosophers insist that before we can get clear about *high-quality* education, we must first get clear about the concept of *education*. Unfortunately the philosophical track record is not promising here, as no agreement has evidently been reached on this matter since it was first raised in the days of Ancient Greece some two and a half thousand years ago. Still, the philosophers insist, nothing else can be decided until we reach agreement on a clarification of the concept of education. (And it must be admitted here that the logic seems to be compelling—we cannot determine what constitutes a high-quality French drop until we know what a French drop *is*; and similarly we cannot decide upon what constitute a quality education until...)

In effect the philosophical argument develops in two stages, the first of which in my judgment is non-problematic, especially when developed in the following way (which, to be candid, is not the way it is usually developed in the literature). First, then, education needs to be distinguished from schooling. The establishment of schools, and of what types, is a matter of social policy, and those individuals who have the

² The “French drop” is a move in sleight-of-hand used by conjurers to make a coin disappear; the foxtrot is a ballroom dance. But these are hardly definitions, as there are many sleight-of-hand moves and many dances.

requisite social/political authority can make decisions (as part of general social policy) about what the content of this schooling is to be. It might be decided that this content will be entirely instrumental, having nothing at all to do with education (perhaps schooling in Ancient Sparta was like this, or schooling in Nazi Germany). Some proportion (it is a matter of dispute how large a proportion) of contemporary schooling in the USA is instrumental—driver’s education, provision of school lunches, coaching in competitive sports, the knowledge and skills that are included in—or excluded from—the curriculum in certain subjects. (It is worth making the point here that the teaching methods used are an important aspect of schooling, and these also might be selected for instrumental purposes as well as the actual curriculum content.)

A schooling that is instrumental in this way is, by definition, an instrument aimed at achieving a purpose (or purposes), and as such its effectiveness as an instrument (its quality as this instrument) can be assessed by quantitative or other means. Thus our economist and other empirical-researcher colleagues are on firm philosophical ground when, in their efforts to determine quality, they ask if some instrumental aspect of schooling, or some number of years of exposure to this schooling, is an effective means of increasing international commercial competitiveness or some other trait that is regarded as socially important.

I stress that they are on firm ground so long as they speak of *schooling*; it is when they treat the terms “schooling” and “education” as synonyms that the philosophical trouble begins. For not everything, and perhaps very little, that occurs in the process of schooling constitutes education – though it is possible of course that in some schools and colleges there is a great deal that is educational. However, it should be clear that to make headway here we need to clarify the concept of education!

So far my remarks seem to be making philosophers of education into the heroes of my story; so why did I make nasty remarks about them earlier? It is because (in my view) they go off track in the second stage of their argument. Despite the complexities here, I will make only two points. First, the prospect of putting educational research on hold (as opposed to research into instrumentally-oriented schooling) until philosophers reach agreement about the concept of education (or on the Continent, the concept of *Bildung*) is not particularly attractive, for over the millennia a number of rival conceptions have been put forward: The aim of education is the fostering of individual autonomy, or the fostering of rationality, or to equip individuals with the ability to seek a personally fulfilling life, or to equip the individual to live a life in accord with principles laid down by the Divine, or it is to allow individuals to keep growing throughout their lifetime, or to instill a wide cognitive perspective... Using as a guide past progress on sorting through these conceptions of education, we may have to wait until the next millennium before we can start to do genuine educational research.

My second point can be stated in the form of a question: “Is this really the case? Does everything need to be put on hold until agreement about the concept is reached?” I must admit that I have been personally criticized by philosophers who have used a form of this argument—my writing on educational research is deficient, it has sometimes been said, because I do not start out by defending a conception of “education.” “Phillips defends research,” the criticisms go, “but he has not shown that this is *educational* research.”

It seems to me this line of argument displays a lack of common sense. Whatever analysis of the concept of education eventually is settled upon, *it will have no credibility* if developing children’s literacy and numeracy are not included as part of education; if a degree of scientific literacy is not included; if familiarity with some of the great works of literature and the arts are not included; and if there is no attention to fostering the student’s rational and critical capacities. So, while philosophers sit and ponder the larger issues, the rest of us can go about our urgent business of increasing the effectiveness—increasing the quality—of literacy instruction, of science and math education, and the rest, confident that we are indeed pursuing educational research. However, it is important that, while doing our research, we bear in mind that the purpose in exposing children to schooling is not solely instrumental, not solely to foster national

development, but that it also has (in part) a broader educational purpose—whatever, precisely, this may turn out to be.

About the Author

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