

Assessing Quality in Educational Action Research and Learning Studies.

John Elliott, University of East Anglia, UK

Quality as Experienced v Quality as Measured.

- Two views of quality that are often seen as standing in tension with each other (Stake and Schwandt, 2006).
- The former implies the *discernment of quality* as a form of *practically embodied knowledge*, which is both cognitive and emotional and takes the form ‘experience-near understandings’. Under these conditions *quality* is represented through narratives of personal experience(see Elliott 2007 p.230).
- The latter approach to evaluation involves a *distancing-from-experience*. Discernments of quality involve explicit comparison of the object the object in question with a set of standards for it. Stake and Schwandt pp.404-418) point out that the meaning of quality, is structured by a set of constructs that are derived from the community of discourse to which the evaluator belongs rather than to the actions and language of the evaluand.

Externally mediated action research

Vignette 1: The problem of information handling in classrooms, in the context of the Humanities Curriculum Project (see Stenhouse 1970).

What made it good action research?

- 1. Focuses on a problem that is of practical concern to the teachers involved.*
- 2. Involved a gathering of data from the different points of view of the teacher, an observer, and students (triangulation).*
- 3. Enabled teachers to call their existing stock of professional knowledge (tacit theories) into question, and to test it against evidence gathered in their practical situation.*
- 4. Extended teachers' understanding of their situation in a way that opened new possibilities for action.*

Experimental Teaching

Vignette 2. Gendered Constraints on Freedom of Discussion (see Elliott 1974).

What made it good action research?

5. It is a deliberative and self-reflexive process in which the teacher calls into question both her teaching strategies (means) and the aims (ends) to which they are directed, and then modifies each by reflecting on the other.

6. It is a rigorous conversational process in which the teacher opens up her practice to the rational scrutiny of students and peers, 'in-voices' their views of the action situation, and in the process demonstrates a disposition to subordinate her own prejudices to the search for an overlapping and un-coerced consensus.



Experimental Teaching (cont).

What made it good action research?

7. It is a process in which the teacher displays:

Integrity in the pursuit of her educational aims and values;

Curiosity about other people's interpretations of the action situation;

Objectivity and honesty about her own motives and reasons for action;

Open-mindedness towards the views of others and respect for their freedom of thought and action.

8. It enlarges the teacher's sphere of personal agency in the practical situation through the realisation of her educational aims in a sustainable form.

9. It enables a teacher to generate a description of the complexities of the case in sufficient detail to be of universal significance to other teachers.

Collaborative action research across networked professional learning communities

Vignette 3. Inquiry/Discovery Teaching (see Elliott, J 1976/77).


Good collaborative action research should:

10. Exemplify a democratic process in which teachers submit their actions and reasons for actions to the rational scrutiny of their professional peers, and demonstrate a willingness to modify their actions in the light of an emerging consensus about their educational significance.

11. Foster the development of experimental teaching across the learning network in a sustainable form.

12. Enable teachers to discern common features across a range and variety of teaching situations that are practically relevant for educational action.

13. Enable teachers to collectively construct knowledge about how to realize their educational aims and values in particular concrete situations.



Collaborative action research across networked professional learning communities (cont).

Vignette 3. Inquiry/Discovery Teaching (1972-74)

Good collaborative action research should:

14. Enable teachers to develop shared understandings of their educational aims and values by deliberating together on the actions they take to give them practical expression in their teaching.

15. Make a significant contribution to the development of a tradition of understandings - a theory - about how to bring about worthwhile educational change across contexts of teaching and learning, and thereby extend the knowledge-base of the teaching profession.

16. Enable teachers to systematically present a body of shared understandings and insights in a publicly accessible form for other teachers to test in their contexts of practice.



Quality as measured at masters-degree level: an example of a standards template.

MAIN CATEGORIES.

Classification;

Learning outcomes and scholarship;

Presentation;

Methodology;

Argument and Understanding;

Criticality and Analysis;

Use of Sources and Evidence.

LEVELS.

Distinction : 100-70 % (Upper, Middle, Lower Range); High Merit (69-65%) and Merit (64-60%); Pass (59-55%) and Pass (54-50%).




Theory-informed Lesson Study: can it be cast in the form of action research?

Can the experience of facilitating and conducting theory-informed Lesson Study provide quality criteria for practice-based research projects at Masters-Level that are more clearly matched to traditional standards of academic Scholarship?

Does not theory-informed Learning Study imply a greater distancing from professional practice than the action-research approach to teachers' professional development?

What is distinctive about using the theory of variation (see Marton & Booth, 1997) to inform Lesson Study; in terms of its relationship to educational practice?



Quality as Experienced in Learning Studies.

Good Learning Studies:

- A) Adopt a phenomenographic perspective inasmuch as they focus on depicting students' ways of experiencing the object of learning and in “revealing and describing the variation therein” (Marton and Booth 1997 :111);
- B) Are explicitly aimed at *deepening understanding* of the object of learning. They reveal an educational interest “in the variation and change in capabilities for experiencing---particular phenomena in the world in certain ways” (Marton and Booth p:111).
- C) Place capabilities for experiencing phenomena in certain ways as objects of understanding in a pedagogically significant hierarchical order. From the point of view adopted some “can be seen as more advanced, more complex, or more powerful than other capabilities” (Marton and Booth:111).
- D) Demonstrate that differences between students' capabilities for experiencing the object of learning are educationally critical, and that changes between them constitute the most important aspects of learning (see Marton and Booth 1997:111), and effecting such changes the most important pedagogical task for teachers.


Quality as Experienced in Learning Studies (cont).

Good Learning Studies:

E) Depict teachers' attempts to realize in action pedagogical principles, implied by variation theory, which specify necessary conditions of learning:

- 1) Directing students' *attention* to critical aspects and features of the object of learning;
- 2) Enabling students to discern critical features of the object of learning by getting them to experience *contrasting* views of the object along a similar dimension of variation (aspects);
- 3) Enabling students to discern the critical features and aspects of an object of learning *simultaneously*;
- 4) Enabling students to deepen their understanding of a phenomenon by progressively differentiating its critical features (values) from the whole, and thereby opening up the major dimensions of variation that constitute it as an object of learning;
- 5) Enabling students, as their understanding of an object of learning unfolds, to make generalizations by attending to what remains invariant in the background of variable appearances e.g. to define what makes a geometric figure a triangle in terms of three sides and 180 degrees as the sum of all angles (see Lo & Marton 2012 p.11).

F) Depict an experimental approach to developing teaching strategies for handling curriculum content in the light of variation theory, and thereby improving both practice and the theory itself. e.g. testing the finding that from the standpoint of variation theory *contrast* should precede *generalization*, by experimenting with a different interpretation of the theory; namely, presenting contrast after generalization (see Ko Po Yuk 2014 pp.285-287).



Quality as Experienced in Learning Studies (cont)

Good Learning Studies:

G. Depict a dynamic relationship between the Intended, enacted, and lived object of learning, that is well-grounded in:

- a) data from staff and expert planning meetings:
- b) observational data used in post-lesson reviews of research lessons about patterns of classroom interaction between students, and between teacher and students in relation to the content of the research lessons;
- c) questionnaire and interview data about the students' lived experience of the lesson content and about their lived experience as learners in classrooms generally.


Quality as Experienced in Learning Studies (cont)

Good Learning Studies:

H. Extend the theory of variation used to assess the impact of the study to cover the professional learning of teachers as well as student learning about the object of learning e.g. Lo and Pong (2005) discriminated three dimensions of variation in assessing the impact of their first LS project on the teachers involved; namely,

- a) V1. Variation in students' experience and understanding of content;
- b) V2. Variation in teachers' approaches to handling the object of learning as evidenced in planning meetings and discussions e.g. in their discernment of its critical features;
- c) V3. Variation as a guiding principle of pedagogical design, i.e. the use teachers make of patterns of variation in enabling teachers to discern critical features of the object of learning.

Use extended variation theory to reflect on and explore changes along all the above dimensions of variation in a way that depicts the learning of students and teachers as a process that constitutes the 'object of learning', and thereby challenges the received wisdom about the use of variation theory as a pedagogical design framework " -first to describe the object of learning in its own right and then describe what the learner learns about it (Marton and Booth 1997 p.161)."



Quality as Experienced in Learning Studies (cont)

Good Learning Studies:


I) Treat the educational aim of ‘developing an understanding of the object of learning’ as inexhaustible with no fixed end-point.

J) Identify educationally significant differences in the way both students and their teachers experience the object of learning (V1 & V2).

K) Identify problems in realizing the principles of discussion in the classroom and teachers’ planning and review meetings.

L) Assess the impact of discussion in classrooms and in planning and reviewing ‘research lessons’ on changing conceptions of the object of learning amongst participating students and teachers.

M) Identify the links between students and teachers different ways of seeing the object of learning, and persistent controversial value issues that surround the discernment of critical aspects and features of the object amongst experts.



Quality as Experienced in Learning Studies (cont.)

Good Learning Studies:

N) Demonstrate what makes the selection and pedagogical handling of an object of learning *educationally worthwhile* by providing evidence of its impact on the learner's capability to make sense of their 'life world'. This is an important dimension of 'deep' as opposed to surface understanding.

O) Systematically generate and articulate 'findings', in the form of general hypotheses about a) the critical features of an object of learning, and b) the effective use of patterns of variation (V3), which can be tested by teachers in their classrooms (see Kullberg 2012, and Runesson & Gustafsson 2012, and Elliott 2012).

Are the quality criteria for Lesson and Learning Studies well-matched?

The characterization of good learning studies outlined in criteria A to O above appear to be very well matched to the criteria stated for good action research and vice versa. They may be regarded as mutually illuminating. e.g. LS/H resonates with AR/2 and in themselves accommodate many of the other criteria listed for each category of research. Also, both sets of criteria match significant features of the 'process model' of curriculum development in contrast to the 'objectives model' (see Stenhouse 1975:84-97).

Some have argued that action research is an *atheoretical* process. This appears to invalidate the claim that Learning Study, informed by variation theory, constitutes a form of action research, at least of the kind depicted by Stenhouse. Yet Stenhouse (1975:157) argued that teachers needed a "common vocabulary of concepts and a syntax of theory" in order to communicate with each other in a context of collaborative action research. He did, however, argue that such a theory needed to have practical significance for teachers, who were less interested in generalizing beyond their experience of their own particular classrooms. The theory of variation, given its phenomenographic grounding, serves such a function.



Phenomenographical inquiry and theory construction (see Marton and Booth, 1997:110-136).

An interest in understanding phenomena as others experience them in and across particular contexts of action and “in revealing and describing the variation therein” and not as the researcher experiences them from a more distanced academic/abstract standpoint. This represents an educational interest in which other people’s different ways of experiencing phenomena are viewed as ‘educationally critical differences’.

Variation theory can therefore be contrasted with more abstract learning theories, such as ‘constructivism, that embody a dualistic picture of the mind on the presumption that: “all psychological explanation must be framed in terms of internal mental representation, and processes (or rules) by which these representations are manipulated and transformed” (Marton and Booth:163).

Variation theory implies less mind-body dualism than some other learning theories, and therefore less distancing from teachers’ experience of the practical context of their work.



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