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**The Actors' Lenses:
On understanding prevailing conditions for introducing quality assurance
measures in an institution**

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Abstract

This paper discusses challenges that can confront higher education institutions when quality assurance measures such as student evaluation of teaching are introduced. It is based on a research study of how student evaluation of individual instrumental tuition is perceived, experienced and practiced by instrumental teachers and their students at a Norwegian music academy. The study takes institutional theory as its point of departure. This theory focuses on how norms, values, routines, and perceptions develop in an institution and result in a collective "logic of appropriateness": taken-for-granted expectations as to how members of the institution "should" behave. The results indicate that there exists such a "logic of appropriateness" in the case institution, and that it represents several challenges to student evaluation of teaching. The results underline the importance of understanding the prevailing "logic of appropriateness" when introducing quality assurance measures such as student evaluation of teaching in higher education institutions.

Introduction

Asking the students to evaluate teaching is an increasingly common way of obtaining information for quality assurance in higher education. In this paper I will present results from a case study of a music academy, which illustrates that implementing such quality assurance measures does not always work according to plan, and I will argue that other types of higher education institutions might have something to learn from this study for as well.

The background for the study was the fact that student evaluation of teaching was made mandatory by Norwegian higher education authorities in 1994. Being a member of the

academic staff at the Norwegian Academy of Music, I became involved in implementing this new procedure in the institution.¹

It soon became obvious that there were some problems concerning student evaluation, especially in relation to the individual instrumental tuition, which in many ways can be understood as belonging to an apprenticeship tradition. Typical characteristics in this respect are the strong and independent position of the instrumental teachers within the institution, and their strong professional authority in relation to their students. The fact that they in many cases also serve as mentors for their students will also contribute to shaping this as a master-apprentice relationship (see Burwell 2005; Gaunt 2006; Hays et al. 2000; Kingsbury 1988; Nerland 2003; Nettle 1995; Nielsen 1998; Presland 2005). These are characteristics which, in different ways, could possibly influence student evaluation of teaching negatively.

For most music students individual instrumental tuition is considered the most important subject in their studies (Nerland 2003; Nielsen 1998; Plasket 1992). Therefore, if student evaluation of teaching in this particular subject does not contribute to quality, or even has detrimental effects, there is reason for concern. In this situation, there was an obvious need to know more in order to understand and remedy the problem. A literature review revealed that there is very little research on student evaluation of individual tuition/-supervision in general and instrumental tuition in particular, which could shed light on this problem.

Research questions and methodology

On this background I decided to conduct an exploratory study to investigate the problems encountered. My main research question was how instrumental teachers and their students perceive, experience and practice student evaluation of individual instrumental tuition. I conducted semi-structured research interviews with 9 experienced teachers and with a total of 9 students studying with 3 of these teachers. For a more detailed discussion of the research study and its methodology, see Hanken (2007).

Theoretical background

Since the research study was based on the initial assumption that there are certain characteristics of instrumental tuition which might influence how student evaluation is

¹ The Norwegian Academy of Music has 475 students, and is offering programmes on bachelor-, master-, and doctorate level.

perceived, experienced and practiced, organizational theory seemed relevant for theoretical support. The focus in this study was on cultural characteristics connected to instrumental tuition, such as norms, values, traditions and conceptions which operate within the institution, and how these might influence student evaluation. For this purpose, so called (neo-) institutional theory was considered as potentially fruitful, since it illuminates how cultural characteristics of an organization provide their own forces and motives to processes such as, in this case, introducing student evaluation of teaching (see Brunsson 1989; DiMaggio & Powell 1991; March & Olsen 1984, 1989; Meyer & Rowan 1977/1991, 1992; Olsen 1992; Peters 1999).

Institutional theory can be understood as a reaction to a dominating conception of organizations as being unambiguous and rational, where the members' behaviour is understood as controlled by formalized structures, objectives, rules, sanctions etc. Institutional theory, in contrast, emphasises the importance of subjective, interpretative processes when members are expected to implement changes. The members are influenced by values, norms, and ways of thinking and acting which permeates the organization and influence how they will interpret the demands, and consequently, how they will choose to act. A rationalistic understanding of organizations builds on a "logic of consequences"; the members' actions are governed by rational deliberations as to what consequences their actions will have. Institutional theory builds on a different logic, a "logic of appropriateness", where the members do what they consider *appropriate* in relation to their role within the organization. This in turn is influenced by values, norms, routines, unwritten rules and traditions within the organizations which create taken-for-granted expectations towards the behaviour and actions of the individual member. Through identification and socialization these traits will emerge as "natural" and "the right thing to do"; they will create "...the lenses through which actors view the world and the very categories of structure, action, and thought" (Di Maggio & Powell 1991:13).

If behaviour in an organization is governed by a "logic of appropriateness" rather than by formalized, rational structure, the question of organizational change becomes much more complicated. When values, identity and perceptions of reality are embedded in the organization, change can easily be met by resistance. Institutional theory is therefore in many ways a theory about why an organization does *not* change, or change as intended. This research study is about an intended change – implementing student evaluation – which did not work according to plan. Institutional theory will here focus on the teachers' and students'

”lenses” when confronted with these demands for change, and how they actively interpret these demands in light of the prevailing ”logic of appropriateness” in their institution.

Results

Judging from the results there are certain institutionally embedded values, norms, traditions and conceptions concerning roles and relationships in instrumental tuition, which represent challenges when student evaluation is to find its position and function within this particular educational context. I will here discuss three such challenges.

First challenge: The need for trust and authority

The education of musicians is often described as learning by apprenticeship (Burwell 2005; Gaunt 2006; Nerland 2003; Nielsen 1998). The instrumental teachers are, or have been, professional musicians, and this is what gives them strong professional authority and legitimacy in the eyes of the students. The teacher “manifests” the profession and it is through him/her the student gains access to the professional practice (Nerland 2003), and to study with a renowned musician/teacher also gives status in itself to the student (Kingsbury 1988; Roberts 1991). Therefore, if learning by apprenticeship is to be effective, the student must trust his/her teacher and accept his/her authority as a professional (Gaunt 2006; Nerland 2003; Nielsen 1999). The results from this study strongly support this conclusion, but it also reveals how difficult it can be to combine this trust with student evaluation of teaching. One of the teachers expressed her concerns in this way:

It is not natural for the Master to ask for an evaluation, because the Master is, per definition, a Master. [...] Student evaluation is not perceived as natural within the master-apprentice tradition, it just isn't; you only destroy yourself.

This teacher feels as if she undermines her own authority by asking the student to evaluate her teaching. Also students can find it difficult to combine an appraising and dispassionate attitude with having a strong professional trust in their teacher. This dilemma was illustrated by one of the students:

In my opinion, to put up too much resistance against the teacher or the type of system he has just doesn't work, especially in the type of teaching tradition that we have. I think you have to decide to go along with him entirely, or otherwise you have to find yourself another teacher.

This illustrates how students make a deliberate choice of trusting their teacher. The importance of this unconditional trust is underlined by Polanyi in his book *Personal*

knowledge (1958:53), where he writes "You follow your master because you trust his manner of doing things even when you cannot analyse and account in detail for its effectiveness." The authority is not suppressive; the students *choose* to submit themselves, and the authority can rather be understood as a productive and essential learning resource in this type of teaching (Nerland 2003).

Here it is the very *premise* underlying student evaluation – that students should assume a dispassionate and appraising attitude – which can be in conflict with the students', and sometimes also the teachers', "logic of appropriateness". In other words, it is not the teacher's formal authority or role as a Master per se which stands in the way, but rather fundamental and constitutive traits in instrumental tuition which makes it difficult for student evaluation to fit the logic of what is "right" and "natural" in the teacher-student relationship.

Second challenge: close and vulnerable relationships

In the research literature on instrumental teaching, the importance of an unstrained relationship between teacher and student is underlined in order for teaching and learning to succeed (Gaunt 2006; Nielsen 1998; Presland 2005). In many cases the relationship will extend beyond a teacher-student relationship, because the teacher also becomes a mentor who helps and supports in both personal and career matters (Hays et al. 2000; Presland 2005). It was also confirmed in the present study that the relationships often become very close and extensive. As an example one of the student described her relationship to her teacher as "almost a parent-child relationship".

Based on this, one can presume that the relationship between instrumental teacher and student easily becomes vulnerable, and that both parties have something to lose if the relationship becomes embittered. The question is if this will also influence student evaluation, bearing in mind that such evaluations in reality are non-anonymous in this teaching context. This presumption was confirmed by both students and teachers; they underlined that the need for an unstrained relationship will influence the students' willingness to conduct any evaluations, and also their honesty and frankness in case they do decide to evaluate. A statement from one of the teachers illustrates this:

In a way you have to attach more importance to any hint of objection that crops up, and then decide whether this is only a considerate way of saying that this is hopeless, because they don't dare to express themselves more strongly.

The students confirmed that their anxiousness for hurting or irritating the teacher made it more difficult to voice any criticism in this subject than in class teaching. It seems as if one-

to-one teaching brings about an expectation to be considerate, which causes the students to be careful as to what they say and how they express themselves to their teacher. That one-to-one teaching represents a special challenge in this respect is also underlined by Tiberius & Flak (1999). They claim that it is more difficult to give expression to tensions, conflicts and disappointment in one-to-one teaching than in classroom teaching and that such feeling therefore often will be masked by overt civility.

It is a general research finding that teacher involvement and a positive relationship between teacher and student will influence both learning outcomes and the total development of the student positively (Endo & Harpel 1982; Lublin & Barrand 1987; Pascarella 1980; Tiberius & Bilson 1991). The importance of a positive and unstrained relationship is, in other words, not unique to instrumental teaching. However, there might be some characteristics of this particular subject which makes having a positive relationship particularly vital. The following quote from an interview with one of the teacher is an illustration of this point:

With regard to having a close relationship – a lot of people say that the teacher-student relationship should not become too personal, but I find that difficult to regulate. We talk a lot about real *feelings* during the lessons, not just 4th finger on F sharp [...] We talk about what this music expresses. It might sound sentimental, but you have to open up your whole register of feelings, and then you cannot just sit there and keep a distance to the student. [...] you cannot be close in your teaching without becoming close as a human being.

In a subject where personal expression is *part of the subject*, both students and teachers need to feel that there is a positive and unstrained atmosphere for the teaching to be effective, because conflicts and negative feelings can have strong negative effects on the actual teaching and learning. The awareness of this fact seems to create strong expectations of civil and considerate behaviour towards each other. In this context, expressing critical views on teaching can clearly be understood as “inappropriate”.

Third challenge: Modes of communication

The most common procedure for student evaluation of teaching is using anonymous, standardized questionnaires. This was also the chosen procedure in the case institution; the teachers were expected to hand out a questionnaire to the students towards the end of the academic year, and the students were expected to deliver them back in the teachers' mailboxes. Of the 9 teachers interviewed, 7 said that they did not hand out any questionnaire. The reason they gave was mainly that they do not get them back from the students anyway. Results indicate that the *content* of the questionnaire was not the problem; both teachers and

students interviewed perceived the questions as relevant. The problem was rather that the *mode* of communication that a written questionnaire implies was perceived as an alien way of communicating, and as somewhat redundant. Both students and teacher underline that there usually is an ongoing dialogue between instrumental teachers and their students on different aspects of teaching and learning. On this background a written mode of communication is perceived as “strange”, to quote on of the students:

It would be a bit strange to hand over a questionnaire to your instrumental teacher. It works better in theoretical subjects. There is so much personal contact all the way, and having to write down your comments on a piece of paper...

Reactions like this could be one explanation for the fact that many students do not turn in the questionnaire to their teacher.

The *anonymity* of the questionnaire is also perceived as a problem by both teachers and students. Guidelines and handbooks for student evaluation usually recommend that such evaluations should be conducted anonymously. This is based on research indicating that students give somewhat more positive evaluations when they are not anonymous (Blunt 1991; Feldman 1979; Fries & McNinch 2003), which will influence the validity negatively. In individual instrumental tuition it seems as if it is very difficult to protect the students' anonymity. Both students and teachers agreed that the teachers know their students so well that they can reveal their identity through the way the students answer, particularly if they are invited to write comments in their own words. The students are well aware of the fact that they can be identified, so they will not evaluate differently in an anonymous questionnaire than they would in open evaluations. The anonymity actually becomes a problem in itself in two ways in this context: *Firstly* an anonymous evaluation is perceived as rather pointless in a subject where the main purpose of student evaluation is understood as helping teachers adapt their teaching to the needs and goals of the individual student. Anonymous evaluations therefore frustrate the teachers, because they prevent them from discussing and clarifying the students' evaluations. They also frustrate the students, because they have no way of knowing if they have been heard and understood. *Secondly*, the whole exercise is perceived as an “act”, where both parties know that the other part knows, but where the anonymity prevents a discussion in the open. Teachers and students feel uncomfortable in this situation; especially since there is a prevailing expectation that the relationship between an instrumental teacher and his/her students should be so open and trusting that the students can raise any problems face to face with their teacher.

A procedure for student evaluation which is anonymous and in writing therefore seems to be in conflict with certain norms and values in instrumental tuition which regulate the understanding of how the communication and the relationship between teacher and student “should” be. In a subject which to a large extent is based on mutual trust, where teaching in many ways takes the shape of a continuous dialogue (Nerland 2003), it is considered “unnatural” and “inappropriate” that the student once a year should give anonymous evaluations in writing to his/her own teacher.

Conclusion

The results from this case study indicate that there are certain taken-for-granted expectations as to what is considered appropriate behaviour and relationships in individual instrumental tuition, expectations which can have strong negative effects on student evaluation. These expectations appear to be culturally embedded in this institution, and provide their own forces and motives to student evaluation, as predicted by institutional theory.

The question remains: are the results from this case study relevant for other higher education institutions? I would argue that they might be generalized to three different contexts. *First* to the many other music education institutions² which provide instrumental tuition within an apprenticeship tradition. Judging from the response this research study has received, the results seem to be highly relevant for understanding the challenges such institutions are facing when introducing student evaluation of teaching. *Secondly* to other forms of individual tuition, especially in the arts, but also to different forms of supervision. I would argue that similar challenges to the three described above, might be encountered, for example in supervision of doctoral students, when asking these students to give evaluations. *Thirdly*, I would also suggest that the study might have some relevance for higher education institutions in general by drawing attention to the importance of understanding the prevailing “logic of appropriateness” in an institution when implementing changes in procedures. In my view, institutional theory provides a fruitful perspective which can help us discover, understand, and therefore also counteract the barriers one can encounter when implementing quality assurance measures.

² The European Association for Conservatoires and Music Academies (AEC) have more than 250 member institutions.

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Questions for discussion:

1. In this paper it is suggested that it is important to understand the prevailing “logic of appropriateness” in an institution when implementing quality assurance measures, in order to counteract possible barriers. Do you agree that such taken-for-granted

expectations as to what is appropriate can play a role in quality assurance processes within an institution?

2. If you agree; how can this challenge best be handled?