

Creativity and Diversity: Challenges for quality assurance beyond 2010

'Zen, Motorcycle Maintenance, and the Metaphysics of Quality'

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Abstract

This paper examines the nature of the relationship between the creative, diversity-friendly and the predictability, standardisation-driven aspects of quality assurance when looked at through the lens of Robert Pirsig's 'Metaphysics of Quality'.

In 2007, in an edition of the journal Quality Assurance in Education there was an interesting article by Laurie Lomas of Kings College London entitled: "Zen, motorcycle maintenance and quality in higher education" (a paraphrase of the title of Robert Pirsig's seminal 1970's book on the 'Metaphysics of Quality' – "Zen and the Art of Motor Cycle Maintenance"), in which Lomas draws a distinction between the holistic 'Zen' 'transformative' (i.e. creative, diversity-friendly approach to quality favoured by academics), and the 'mechanistic' 'narrow' 'motorcycle maintenance' approach to quality typically (predictably) adopted by external quality assurance agencies.

These propositions are then examined, by exploring Pirsig's 'Metaphysics of Quality'. This section includes consideration of various propositions about the nature of quality, from the creative and innovative, to the view of quality assurance as a maintenance manual for ensuring predictability and standardisation.

The paper concludes by endorsing approaches to quality which strike a harmonious blend or balance between the creativity/diversity-friendly, and predictability/standardisation aspects.

"And what is good Phaedrus, and what is not good, need we ask anyone to tell us these things?"

(Socrates – from The Phaedrus Dialogue, Plato in which the case is put that making judgments about quality invariably involves having to balance arguments that are based on external authority, against those that are based on internal autonomy. Robert Pirsig, author of the book 'Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance', uses this quote to open his 'Inquiry into Values'.)

Zen, motorcycle maintenance and quality in higher education

In 2007, in an edition of the journal Quality Assurance in Education there was an article by Laurie Lomas of Kings College London entitled: "Zen, motorcycle maintenance and quality in higher education". In that article, Lomas stated:

"In his seminal book Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance [ZMM] Robert Pirsig (1976) gives the analogy of motorcycle riding as a more discursive, subjective perception of quality and motorcycle maintenance as a mechanistic, objectivist approach. Quality can embrace a blend of both a broad approach which is founded on the student's interpretation of it and the narrower definition of fitness for purpose (Franklin, 1992)." (Lomas, Quality Assurance in Education, Vol 15 No 4 (2007), p402)

In the context of higher education, Lomas distinguishes between ‘transformative’ quality enhancement, which he characterises as being “more discursive and subjective than other forms of quality initiative and more closely related to a Zen philosophy than the rigidity of motorcycle maintenance”, and “fitness for purpose” quality assurance which he characterises as “related to the strictures of a motorcycle maintenance manual rather than the autonomy of a Zen philosophy.” (Lomas, 2007, p403)

That is to say, something that you personally value has a certain ‘transformative Zen quality’ about it, while poor old fitness-for-purpose quality assurance (typical of external QA) is about as dull as reading a technical instructions manual!

Lomas’s conclusions are somewhat paradoxical: On the one hand, he found that the majority of his respondents ‘perceived’ quality to be largely related to fitness-for-purpose (i.e. predictability and standardization typical of external forms of QA), rather than being ‘transformative’ (an adjectival form of the verb ‘transform’ i.e. ‘to alter’ or ‘to change’, ostensibly in the quality paradigm, ‘to improve’, that is, to make into something of a qualitatively higher order), something which in education is conducive to creativity and diversity); On the other hand, Lomas observed that the more subjective ‘aspirations’ of the academic respondents that he interviewed in his 2007 study “are associated far more to a (‘transcendental’ i.e. ‘superior’) Zen philosophy than to the strictures of motorcycle maintenance” (Lomas, 2007, p412, the interpolation ‘transcendental’ in brackets is mine). Ostensibly, the difference between his respondents’ ‘perceptions’ and their ‘aspirations’ explains the stated reluctance of many of the academics that Lomas interviewed to willingly involve themselves in external Quality Assurance Agency quality initiatives?

But why is there this dissonance between creative ideas about quality (i.e. approaches that are ‘diversity-friendly’), and the notion that quality assurance is primarily a ‘mechanistic’, predictability/standardisation process?

This paper will now examine this question by exploring the ‘Metaphysics of Quality’.

The Metaphysics of Quality

This is a term coined by Robert Pirsig to expound his ideas about the concept of ‘Quality’ first expressed in ZMM:

“Quality...you know what it is, yet you don’t know what it is. But that’s self-contradictory. But some things are better than others, that is they have more quality, but when you try to say what quality is, apart from the things that have it, it all goes poof!...Obviously some things are better than others...but what’s the “betterness”?...What the hell is Quality? What is it?” (ZMM, p184)

This question led Pirsig to later develop a set of ideas (drawn from both Eastern religion and Western philosophy) about the concept of ‘Quality’ (for which Pirsig uses an upper case Q), and which he called ‘the Metaphysics of Quality’ (MOQ). ‘Quality’, or ‘value’ as described by Pirsig, cannot be defined because it empirically precedes any intellectual constructions. It is the ‘knife’ or ‘cutting-edge’ of experience, known to us all, for example, as when we are asked to distinguish between good and bad writing (or a painting etc), and out comes the old adage: ‘I don’t know anything about art, but I (intuitively) know what I like!’

For Pirsig, Quality is the fundamental creative force in the universe stimulating everything, from atoms to combine to make molecules, to what causes animals to evolve and incorporate ever greater levels of Quality. According to the MOQ, everything (including mind, ideas and matter) is a product and a result of Quality! Quality therefore is not just diversity-friendly, it creates diversity!

This means that Quality lies in the dynamic ‘now’ moment that we sense anything during the instantaneous present; with a short delay we then give this impression a ‘static form’ by describing it as an emotion, a thing, a word, etc. These ‘static forms’, if they have enough good or bad quality associations, are given names and ideas about them are interchanged with other people, building the base of knowledge for a culture. Quality then according to Pirsig is fundamentally a continuing dialogue between our personal (internally-referenced, subjective, and creative) values and beliefs, and a publicly-accepted (i.e. objective, externally verifiable, predictable) construction of reality. (“And what is good Phaedrus, and what is not good, need we ask anyone to tell us these things?”)

Thus contrast the exhilarating experience of riding a fast, powerful motorcycle on a demanding circuit or road as a moment of ‘dynamic Quality’, as against having to study a motorcycle manual in order to learn how to clean a spark plug, change the oil, or adjust the timing chain - ‘the dead hand’ of the ‘static forms’ of Quality, tedious, but essential if you want the machine to operate as it was intended (fitness-for-purpose).

To quote Pirsig on motorcycle maintenance manuals:

“These were spectator manuals. It was built into the format of them. Implicit in every line is the idea that “Here is the machine, isolated in time and in space from everything else in the universe. It has no relationship to you, you have no relationship to it, other than to turn certain switches, maintain voltage levels, check error conditions....” And so on. That’s it. The mechanics in their attitude towards the machine were really taking no different attitude from the manual’s towards the machine....And it occurred to me that there is no manual that deals with the real business of motorcycle maintenance, the most important aspect of all. Caring about what you are doing is considered either unimportant or taken for granted.” (Pirsig, ZMM, p35, the text underlined is my emphasis)

Here Pirsig is admonishing the application of overly-mechanistic approaches, because they lack human value (creativity & diversity). Such mechanistic approaches stand in stark contrast to the notion of ‘mastery’ or to that of an artisan (from the Greek ‘Arete’, i.e. virtue, or excellence) where the mastery of technique is virtually indistinguishable from the person commanding it.

It must therefore be very tempting for an ‘autonomous’ academic commentator to contrast the mercurial ‘in real-time’ experience of having a creative and innovative class go well in their favorite discipline, against the mind-numbing boredom of having to then laboriously follow, step-by-step, the assessment, recording, moderation, and reporting processes, according to the procedures as laid out in the university’s official ‘Quality Maintenance Manual’ after the event.

But according to Pirsig, what this sort of ‘dichotomous’ thinking does is create an unhelpful quality hierarchy, where some things or ideas are valued as being creative (and therefore intrinsically being of high-quality) and others predictably not, and that we therefore seek to be involved in ‘the pursuit of excellence’ rather than the drudgery of ‘mechanistic’ (predictable), maintenance-type activities. But Pirsig argues forcefully that if you apply the MOQ to even a routine situation or in solving an everyday problem, it is possible to get the same creative ‘Zen high’ from doing quite mundane tasks as well as the ‘dynamic quality moment’ allows (that is, by applying the boring old ‘mechanistic’ fitness-for-purpose principle, and doing exactly what the situation actually requires, not in ‘creatively’ doing or saying ‘whatever you like’, or by trying to impress others). In the MOQ, being excellent in what we do, and being ‘fit-for-purpose’ mean essentially the same thing.

Thus, according to Pirsig, the internal (creative/diversity) and external (predictable/standardising) dimensions of quality, rather than being at opposite poles, fuse into a more holistic concept of ‘Quality’. This view stands in stark contrast to the Lomas characterisation of fitness-for-purpose as being ‘mechanistic’ and ‘narrow’.

The Australian Universities Agency (AUQA) favours a holistic fitness-for-purpose definition of quality over all others:

“The final definition, ‘quality equals fitness-for-purpose’ is one of the most commonly used in HE, and rightly so, because it subsumes all the rest. It will be noticed that the list of definitions of quality is not even internally consistent. Some are verbs some are nouns and some are adjectives. Taking quality as fitness-for-purpose means deciding on the desired emphasis whether it be threshold, excellence, transformation or value for money, and then ‘quality’ is ‘achieving this’.” (Woodhouse, 2009, the underlining is mine to emphasise the creative/diversity-friendly aspects of this definition.)

In ZMM, Pirsig further illustrates the holistic subjective/internal/creative and objective/external/predictable dimensions of the MOQ through the use of motorcycle as metaphor:

“The motorcycle is a system. A real system...(but) the true system, the real system, is our present construction of systematic thought itself, rationality itself...That’s all the motorcycle is, a system of concepts worked out in steel. There is no part in it, no shape in it, that is not out of somebody’s mind...the motorcycle is primarily a mental phenomenon.” (Pirsig, ZMM, p102)

And:

“The real cycle you’re working on is a cycle called yourself. The machine that (predictably) appears to be “out there” (i.e. external) and the person that appears to be “in here” (i.e. internally created) are not two separate things. They grow towards Quality or fall away from Quality together.” (Pirsig, ZMM, p325, the interpolations in brackets are also mine.)

Yes, Pirsig’s argument is based on the creative use of metaphor, but what is he really getting at here?

The inter-active relationship between the observer and the observed is an understood phenomenon in quantum mechanics (e.g. as in ‘Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle’ whereby the very act of observation minutely changes existing conditions), as it is in studies involving human behavior (e.g. as in ‘the Hawthorne Effect’ whereby people will (in the short term at least) be more productive when they are appreciated or when being watched by an external observer).

It is also very similar to the central concept of economist George Soros’ economic philosophy called ‘the theory of reflexivity’. The theory of reflexivity is explained in Soros’ book *The Crises of Global Capitalism*. In summary the theory is that: "...financial markets cannot possibly discount the future correctly because they do not merely discount the future; they help to shape it. In certain circumstances, financial markets can affect the so-called fundamentals which they are supposed to reflect." (Soros, 1998, the underlining for emphasis is again mine)

So, according to Soros a future financial market is created by the economic outcomes that predecessor markets produced! That is, the process shapes the outcome, which in turn affects the way the process operates, which in turn...and so on.

So too when an external quality assurance body observes the internal operations of an organisation that they are reviewing / auditing, in ‘the dynamic now’, there is a coherent ‘reflexive’ inter-relationship between subject and object, between the observer and the observed, whether it be to make a commendation for the achievement of high-quality outcomes, or a recommendation to improve a process, so that improved quality outcomes can be achieved, there must be a *coherent nexus* between the process and the outcomes being

produced by it. The lines of enquiry in an audit are to see if the links between process and outcomes are demonstrable. It is a blend of creative analysis and predictability.

And so to conclude on the MOQ with a final quote from Pirsig:

“What the “Metaphysics of Quality” does is take this separate category, “Quality”, and show how it contains within itself both subjects and objects. The Metaphysics of Quality would show how things become enormously more coherent--fabulously more coherent--when you start with an assumption that Quality is the primary empirical reality of the world.....” (Pirsig, Lila: An Inquiry into Morals, 1991, underlined is my emphasis)

“Quality is the primary empirical reality of the world” – reflect on the implications of that statement for your work in higher education and for your life in general.

Resolving Pirsig’s Quality dichotomy

As educators, and as quality practitioners, we need to maintain a harmonious balance between the internally-referenced ‘creative/dynamic/diversity-friendly’ and the externally-referenced ‘static/predictable/standardising’ aspects of quality – and to focus on both developing (and maintaining) high-quality processes and outcomes (such as in the attainment of high academic standards). In fact, Laurie Lomas came pretty close to capturing this balance quite early in his 2007 paper:

“There are problems inherent in positing a dualism of (creativity and diversity-friendly) quality enhancement and (predictable and therefore ‘tedious’) quality assurance, as this would constitute over-simplification and over-generalisation. Quality initiatives are likely to involve elements of enhancement and assurance....It is an appropriate blend of these elements that is sought.” (Lomas, 2007, the words in brackets and the underlined emphasis are mine.)

Thank you Laurie – well put. As Pirsig pointed out in ZMM, the classic subject/object Quality dichotomy is in reality a false one, because it excludes the effect of the coherent interaction between the observer and the observed, the subjective and the objective, that is, between the creative, internal and the predictable, external dimensions of what Pirsig nominally calls Quality, but what we more often use as an adjective (e.g. as in a ‘high-quality’ university/course/teacher/student).

These ideas suggest to this writer that in order to really experience and enjoy the ‘Zen’ exhilaration of riding a motorcycle, it is also necessary to understand and properly maintain your machine - to achieve an appropriate balance or blend between creativity and predictability! When the two dimension of what Pirsig calls ‘Quality’ become so fused because of their coherent interaction that they can no longer be easily distinguished from each other, then that really brings it all together – that is a true ‘Zen’ quality moment!

Exactly the same basic MOQ principles apply in educational quality circles (or cycles!) as they do in motorcycling: Understand and care properly for the thing that makes it possible, and you will enjoy getting to your destination! This applies equally to the teaching/learning relationship between teachers and students, as it does to the coherent interaction between a motorcyclist and their motorcycle.

This view is very close to the axiom held by Ronald Barnett (Barnett, 1992) that in relation to the higher education quality agenda, it is really the character and quality of the continuing interactions of higher education’s members that are at issue rather than the arrival of the higher education system at any pre-determined (i.e. predictable) endpoint – quality is also a product of the creativity and diversity of the

interlocutors. The solution does not lie in us totally embracing chaos theory, or in tacitly accepting the inevitability of a totally predictable universe, but in achieving a harmonious blend.

-MOQ-

To conclude this session, here are some questions for discussion:

1. In your experience (whether that is as an academic or as a quality practitioner) is the approach to quality assurance in your institution/system/country/region friendly towards ‘creativity and diversity’ or is it driven by ‘predictability and standardisation’ requirements?
2. What do you see as being the most ‘creative and diversity-friendly’ aspects in your situation, and what the most ‘predictability and standardisation-driven’ aspects?
3. Do you think it possible to achieve a harmonious blend or balance between these various aspects in your situation? What would be the evidence that a harmonious blend or balance has been achieved?

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NB. If readers are interested in picking up more information about Pirsig’s *Metaphysics of Quality*, you could start by visiting the following URL:

<http://www.moq.org/>