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## But is it Transformative? Quality Assurance as Co-learning in Graduate Education

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BUT IS IT TRANSFORMATIVE?

But is it Transformative? Quality Assurance as Co-learning in Graduate Education

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### Abstract

This research explores *quality* in two online graduate courses by examining data sets gathered separately from the same cohort of students. Data include an institutional survey and student work outputs such as assignments and learning logs. Quality in higher education is critically important, but the means to establish it has reportedly been somewhat illusive in academia (Anderson, G., 2006). There are tensions evident in processes such as program review because it encourages faculty to reflect on their practice but is generally not course-specific. Program reviews also rely on external experts to match the evidence to standards. Barrow (1999) employs the term “dramaturgical compliance” to describe quality assurance reviews, implying that program review can be staged.

Understanding these tensions, the authors instead use data collected *within* the institution: student work and a program-specific survey. The literature reviewed on quality assurance and online learning leads to a theoretical framework based on elements of online courses associated with quality such as: *social presence*, *cognitive presence*, and *teaching presence* (Garrison, Anderson T., and Archer, 2001) and community building in online programs (Archer, 2001). This framework is used also to analyze the data from student work outputs such as assignments and learning logs. The identification of transformative elements was aided by Mezirow’s (1990) criteria. Next, findings from a survey administered by the institution are compared to the findings from the qualitative data analysis. This study finds evidence that quality assurance is enriched by professors and the institution collaborating to seek different types of feedback.

*Keywords:* higher education, quality assurance, student perspectives, theoretical framework, online learning, comparison, transformative

But is it Transformative? Quality assurance as co-learning in Graduate Education

*We propose that the academy's educational mission is a formative one. Higher education contributes most to society and is most faithful to its own deepest purposes when it seeks to use its considerable intellectual and cultural resources to prepare students for lives of significance and responsibility. (Sullivan & Rosin, 2008, p. xv)*

### **Introduction**

This research study is a comparative analysis between the outputs of student learning which were generated within two graduate courses and a survey which was generated through the institution. In comparing the authors intend to build their own understandings of quality indicators in online graduate courses. Building, maintaining, and measuring quality in higher education are not new ideas, but agreement on the means to establish quality assurance has been somewhat illusive in academia (Anderson, G., 2006). In the most recent decades there have been significant changes in society, many of them prompted by advances in technology and access to information. Changes in the pace and volume of knowledge, the introduction of technology in higher learning, and the globalization of higher learning have challenged departments of higher education to continually re-define their disciplinary traditions (Walker, Golde, Jones, Bueshel & Hutchings, 2009).

Increasingly, as higher education responds to these new ways of learning with technology and changing adult learner demographics, there is a call for institutions of higher education to connect the worlds of theory and practice for learners, and increase the relevance and application of academic learning (Sullivan & Rosin, 2008; Walker et al., 2009). In the Canadian context,

there are ongoing debates in academia regarding how best to move higher education from a “teacher-centered, content-oriented curriculum to a student-centered process-oriented one” (Hoddinott & Wuetherick, 2006, p. 3). A significant question arises: “Are there more responsive ways to measure quality in higher education that take into account these increasing calls for relevance, appropriate and meaningful use of digital technologies, and a focus on adult learning?”

It is critically important in all professions to establish quality assurance. In the higher education academy, both teaching and research are key areas of performance, although there is considerable debate regarding which of these two areas define a professor’s role or how these two activities align to promote quality learning in the Canadian context (See for example, Adams, 2009). This point of conflict, which has been termed the *teaching-research nexus* is explored by Hoddinott and Wuetherick (2006) who argue that awareness needs to be raised about this intersection but it should occur within the context of understanding how people learn. They state:

Current knowledge about the nature of student learning should frame the discussion about how to improve teaching and learning in a research-based university environment...A substantial literature explores the factors that promote deep learning. They include: good teaching, openness to students, freedom in learning, clear goals and standards, vocational relevance, social climate, workload, and formal teaching. (Hoddinott & Wuetherick, 2006, p.3)

While quality assurance measures are designed to provide opportunities for faculty to reflect on their practice and identify areas of strength and growth, there are tensions evident in many quality assurance processes (Adams, 2009; Anderson, G., 2006; Barrow, 1999). Faculty

engagement and improvement are not necessarily outputs of traditionally-organized and mandated studies within external reviews. For example, Van Kemenade and Hardjono (2010) argue that a required self-study should not be part of a compulsory external review because when it is within an internal quality review, it can be “a powerful instrument for improvement” (p. 257). In addition, the process of program review is generally not course-specific. The review process frequently relies on an external body that seeks evidence that the program is meeting established standards. The faculty may not perceive that this process benefits them (Anderson, G., 2006) and this may be reflected in their level of engagement in the process. Barrow (1999) in describing how a faculty might approach a program review as a form of stage play carefully presented for a designated audience, states that “[T]his culture of dramaturgical compliance is perhaps an almost inevitable consequence of the systems approach and the manner of its development” (Barrow, 1999, p. 33).

With these tensions surrounding quality assurance in mind, a literature search was undertaken to determine how quality learning is defined in adult learning courses offered online. The findings from the review of the literature are presented next, organized under principles of quality learning in online courses, current understandings of critical reflective practice, and theory that identifies new learning or changes in perspective to indicate transformative learning. These three areas form the basis of the theoretical framework which organizes this research study.

### **Theoretical Framework: Quality, Reflection, and Transformation**

#### **Quality in Online Courses**

The particular course under investigation in this study focused on critical reflection and it was offered online through a synchronous video-conferencing mode. Within the institution, a survey specific to the course was sent to the students. This survey was organized around and

informed by Garrison, Anderson, T. and Archer's (2001) elements of the online educational experience. This same framework was also used for the qualitative review of student work from the course. Garrison et al. (2001) define a worthwhile online educational experience as one which is within a community of inquiry and has three "essential elements: cognitive presence, social presence and teaching presence" (p.88). They define *cognitive presence* as the extent to which the learners can construct meaning. Garrison et al. consider that this is a "vital element" in critical thinking. Indicators of cognitive presence could include a questioning response or a "sense of puzzlement" (p. 89) which is triggered by an event. Other indicators might be the exchange of information, connecting ideas, and applying new ideas. Garrison et al. link the second element, *social presence*, to cognitive presence, articulating that social presence is a support for the cognitive presence. They define *social presence* as the degree to which the students "project themselves as 'real people'" (p. 89) to other students in the class. The third element *teaching presence* has two functions associated with it: the design of the course and the learning activities, and the actual facilitation of this teaching. See Figure 1 (below).

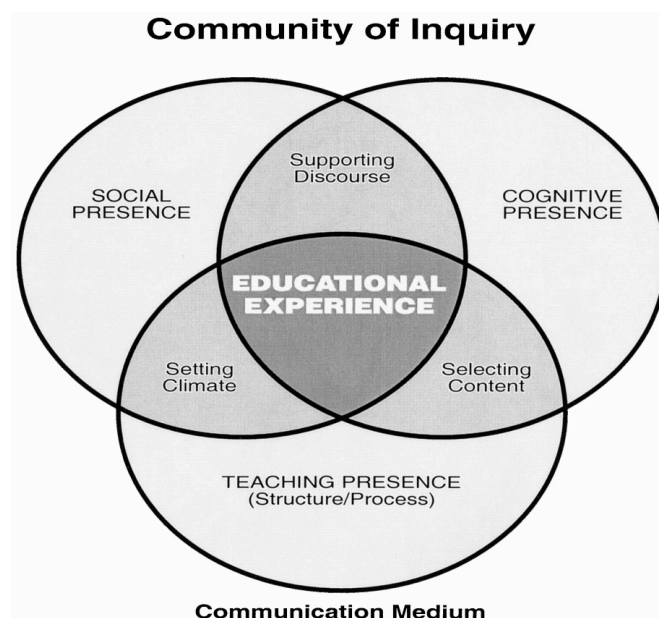


Figure 1. Elements of an online educational experience. Garrison et al., 2001.

Garrison and colleagues (2001) note that facilitation of learning is often shared in higher education between the teachers and the students, but the role of the teaching presence is to support and build on the social presence and the cognitive presence. In their findings, they report that online courses have “considerable potential” (p. 103) for providing a medium for critical reflection and building community (Garrison et al., 2001). Because critical reflection has been identified as an important learning outcome of graduate education, this aspect is reviewed next.

### **Critical Reflection**

Defining *critical reflection* has been approached from many different angles, leaving it not precisely defined and often contested, but allowing for multiple considerations of what the definition entails. According to Thompson and Pascal (2012), earlier versions of reflective practice (See for example, Schön, 1983) were somewhat technical-rationality or practical in their orientation. Thompson et al., instead, propose that critically reflective practice should become more socially-informed because it is “more a matter of art or craft than science” (p. 313). They argue that the theory-practice dialectic is a significant element because reflection is a form of validation for the efforts that are put into practice. They also see that critical reflective practice which they term “reflection-for-action” is an important element which is designed to challenge taken-for-granted assumptions and hegemonic thinking. Further to this, Kotzee (2012) attests that there is a criticism of reflection and learning wherein “reflective practice is too individualistic in its conception of learning and that it leaves out the social dimension” (p. 5). Thompson et al. summarize criticisms of earlier work on reflection by recommending that reflection can focus on the group rather than the individual, that it can pay more attention to the socio-emotional dimension, and that it should include examination of the workings of power discourses in education (Thompson et al., 2012).



Larrivee (2008) has investigated definitions of reflective practice and identifies three levels at which it is operationalized. At the initial level, it is focused on functions and treats teaching activities in isolation. At the more advanced level, reflection considers the theory and rationale for practices. At its highest level, reflection helps teachers examine the social, ethical and political implications of their teaching (Larrivee, 2008). The deepest level of reflection or the third level aligns closely with Mezirow's (1990) argument that, "Critical reflection involves a critique of the presuppositions on which our beliefs have been built" (p. 1). In summary, then, critical reflection has been identified in the literature as a deeper form of looking back on theory and practice. Critical reflection has an open and exploratory stance toward social and political elements which may be present, and it involves elements of both the re-thinking of previous assumptions and acting on them in some form.

### **Transformative learning**

Mezirow (1990) argues that we make meaning throughout our lifetime, and for the most part participate in meaning-making in uncritical ways in childhood. As we mature, we add new meanings that either mesh with our previous conceptions or challenge them. This type of higher-order learning where we re-think previous assumptions is a form of critical reflection. It is a thoughtful kind of action and it is sometimes difficult to challenge values which are close to the center of our being (Mezirow, 1990). Cranton (2010) reminds us that transformative learning is a process which should contain both awareness and a noticeable change or action element. She explains:

Transformative learning occurs when a person, group, or larger social unit encounters a perspective that is at odds with the prevailing perspective. The discrepant perspective can be ignored or it can lead to an examination of previously-held beliefs, values, and

assumptions. When the latter is the case, the potential for transformative learning exists, though it is not called transformative until there is a deep shift in perspective and noticeable changes in actions as a result of the shift. (p. 2)

In summary then, it can be argued that quality learning in an online course should consider the elements of teaching presence, social presence and cognitive presence within a community of learners. For growth and change to occur, however, the literature would point us in the direction of seeking evidence of deeper learning that would be characterized through critical, reflective practice and some indication that the learner would be acting on a change as a result of this deeper learning. Potentially, there are additional dimensions to quality learning in online education that may not have been considered earlier – critical reflection and transformative learning.

### **Research Methodology**

This research employs both quantitative and qualitative elements, using contrasting data types which were available to the instructors as they reflected on the quality of their courses. The first data set are numerical scores on quality indicators generated by the institution. The second data set includes the learning logs of the students in the course, their written summaries of their learning gained from the courses and their reflections about their learning through online forums and blogs. Permission was sought through the university to work with the student data. For the qualitative data analysis, student outputs of the courses were examined carefully based on the review of the literature to seek indications of what they considered to be quality elements of an online course. Based on our review of the literature, we also sought out examples of critical reflection, and transformative learning. Each instructor worked individually with her course data to make determinations regarding student learning, and then the instructors organized the

findings from the qualitative data into their respective categories to report the data. In the section that follows, the quantitative data are reported first, followed by the qualitative data. While both data sets provide helpful information, their comparison also provides a helpful perspective.

### **Findings**

In this section, we report the findings from the comparisons of the information provided by both types of quality indicators for a graduate program. First, we present the types of information provided through the institutional quality assurance data. The precise report which was generated for the instructor can be seen in Appendix A. Secondly, we provide some of the indicators of quality which were determined through a qualitative data analysis of students' learning logs. In the discussion section, we interrogate the findings using our own version of critical reflective practice.

#### **Findings from Student Reports Initiated Outside the Course**

Institutional measures of quality were assessed based on an anonymous course evaluation administered by the program's director. The ratings included both a numerical rating and a section for anecdotal comments. Students were asked to provide numerical ratings out of 5 in each of the subcategories outlined above. These values were then averaged again to provide a total score out of 5 for each of the four broad categories, and then returned to the instructor. In addition, students were able to make qualitative comments about the course in each of the four broad categories (Course Structure, Teacher Presence, Cognitive Presence and Social Presence).

The sections in the evaluation included four broad categories with up to 9 subcategories in each, for a total of 30 sub-categories as follows:

**Course structure.** (a) outline was clear and helpful (b) learning outcomes were clearly communicated (c) materials (e.g., lessons, resources, assignment) were easily accessible from a central location (d) topics and units were well sequenced within the course (e) learning materials were directly related to the learning outcomes (f) workload was reasonable (g) methods of assessment/evaluation contributed to achieving the course learning outcomes (h) made an important contribution to my program of study.

**Teacher presence.** (a) conducted classes in a well-organized manner (b) organized activities that were aligned with the course learning outcomes (c) provided clear instructions on how to participate in course learning activities when appropriate (d) meaningfully incorporated technology to support the learning outcomes of the course (e) helped to keep students engaged and participating in productive dialogue (f) responded to student requests or questions promptly (g) provide constructive and timely feedback that helped me understand my strengths and challenges (h) was available for outside-class consultation (i) treated students with courtesy and respect.

**Cognitive presence.** (a) course activities piqued my curiosity (b) problems posed increased my interest in the course (c) I felt motivated to explore new problems/content (d) I was able to work on issues/problems that were personally meaningful (e) I was able to keep up with the material covered in this course (f) discussions were valuable in helping me appreciate alternative perspectives (g) I was cognitively engaged in this course.

**Social presence.** (a) made meaningful connections with one or more of my peers (b) felt a strong sense of belonging in this course (c) felt comfortable communicating with my peers (d) was comfortable having challenging discussions with my peers while still maintaining a sense of trust (e) felt that there was an atmosphere of respect when interacting with my peers (f) felt that class discussions helped me develop a sense of collaboration.

### **Findings from Student Reports Initiated Within the Course**

Experiencing new pedagogies for the first time as an adult student: the first finding from our review of the students' assignments and learning logs was that we should not assume that students who are adults in graduate programs have experienced more recent innovations in pedagogy. Their narratives reminded us that many of the pedagogies such as the flipped classroom model (Mazur, 2009) were not in practice when they attended elementary and secondary schooling. One student said that, partway into the course, she came to the realization that she had not "lived this type of learning before." So these newer pedagogies such as problem-based learning and student-centered learning can represent significant changes for adult students. When this is added to the transition to learning online, our findings suggest that the students are undergoing big changes in *how* they are learning as well as *what* they are learning. These changes extend to new forms of online collaboration in which the students are engaging. When they conference online with peers, or co-create through Google documents, some of the students indicate that they are experiencing these forms of co-creation of knowledge for the first time. Students also commented that, once they had experienced these kinds of learning, they were not ready to go back to previous models of pedagogy. One student explained that she had attended a professional development session at her school board, and quickly lost her focus

because it was simply the transmission of information. It was additionally disconcerting because the topic of the professional development session was technology.

**Personalized learning.** The students identified that, when the learning was personal, they were more engaged in the learning process and they learned more. In the words of one student, “Personalized learning events ‘stick’ better with me.” Speaking during class and relating learning to personal experience is also a new form of learning for some students. As students become more comfortable speaking online, they indicated that discussion helped them to retain new concepts and information. One student summed this up nicely stating, “To me an ideal learning environment for adults is one where students are provided with choice and flexibility and can pursue topics that have real world meaning to them.”

Another student reminded us in a powerful way that adult students are shaped by many forces in their lives. She used words and images to show that her life-long learning had taken place within a cross-cultural milieu that continuously both encouraged her to learn and discouraged her from learning so that she would meet socially-established cultural and gender roles. She states:

As an adult learner, for now, completing this degree is my number one goal. I do not plan on continuing education, in terms of pursuing more degrees in the future.

However, I do plan on focusing on my career and the education that is provided within my current profession. I also plan on satisfying my family, and I guess part of myself, by getting married in the future and having children of my own. I just hope that the cultural differences are not reflected as much to my children for them to not follow their dreams and just fall into the cultural norms. This isn't to say that the Guyanese culture is negative and is anti-woman. It is a beautiful culture that is loud, accepting,

and full of fun. But it is one that you have to go against certain norms to follow your dreams.

Another significant finding was that students value the opportunities to present their personal learning stories in individual ways. For example, one student who was an artist was able to draw his learning and use this as a medium to show his growth in *learning about learning* to the class.



Figure 2. Image drawn by student entitled “Unique”

**The online course as a form of silent pedagogy.** Students said that they were also learning outside of class and compare it to their learning in graduate school. One student compared his journey from health into disability when he acquired a chronic disease and had to learn *how to learn* in order to reclaim his life and health. Similar stories of learning through health and disability were shared. It was clear in our data that graduate students lead complex lives, and they are up to the challenge of comparing how they are learning in life to how they are experiencing learning in a graduate program. When encouraged to reflect on their learning, they make surprisingly strong connections between in-school and out-of-school learning. This could not happen if there were jarring disconnects between the course offerings and how they experience learning. One student explains this way:

Anderson's read kept me engaged all throughout as the material was interesting and the writing style was easy to follow. I felt connected to the content and as I was reading through. I could see his words and concepts in application in this course. Many of the elements discussed, such as the four attributes of learning (learner, knowledge, assessment and community - centered), I saw present in our assignments and the way class runs as well as in the program as a whole.

**Technology – can't live with it or without it.** The students' saw technology as a tool to make their learning easier but also has a disruptive influence on their learning. One of the advantages of technology is that it takes away the need for learning to occur at a set time and place. Students report that it is disconcerting when the internet goes down and classes are missed. One student told how she was eagerly looking forward to class when this happened. We can feel the stress as she relates her story of trying to tether her laptop to her phone, and her resignation as she admits she will have to wait to view the recording of the class. She comments that the incident made her “miss the old days of pen and paper.” In summary, the findings from inside the class (though we cited only a few representative ones of the many) indicate that our adult students value a very personalized form of learning that helps them integrate their prior experiences in very individual ways. They value learning personally and professionally to the extent that they reflect on models of pedagogy in the program in order to analyze out-of-school learning experiences. The findings also point to the importance of story and remind us that *story* may not happen in class sizes that preclude this level of personalization.



### **Discussion**

Quality online learning depends on four attributes: focusing on the learner, on knowledge, on assessment, and a collaborative community (Garrison et al., 2001). The institutional measurements of course quality used these four categories to measure the graduate student experience. It is important, however, to acknowledge that institutional measures of quality are influenced by other elements of student satisfaction. Different types of data speak differently to different instructors. The qualitative data from this study provide different information. Within the qualitative narratives, students' personhoods and contributions speak volumes, and they provided evidence that learning in a graduate program transformed their views of learning. More importantly, we were able to see that their learning in the graduate program helped them to grow as individual learners and peer learners. Reviewing these data, which we found to be a profoundly useful exercise, there is not so much a rift between the students' perceptions of a quality graduate course and the institution's measurement, but perhaps a bridge. With the advantage of viewing both sides of the data, we pull together a more complete image of the graduate student experience through their eyes and told in their own ways.

### **Conclusion**

The findings of this study provide evidence that quality assurance in multiple forms provides value for course instructors. Different types of feedback yield different kinds of information. Mezirow reminds us, however that, "By far the most significant learning experiences in adulthood involve critical self-reflection - reassessing our own orientation to perceiving knowing, believing, feeling, and acting" (p. 13). Our findings suggest that quantitative data may be more useful when seeking to improve the quality of instruction, but

instructors also need to listen to student narratives in order to gain the kind of personally-significant data to improve student learning.

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