Back From the Brink: reclaiming ‘quality’ in the pursuit of a transformative education agenda

Quality Learning Research Priority Area
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1 This paper may be cited, but please note that due to difficulties with endnote 6 the endnote references are not yet complete. The endnote bibliography is available from lrowan@deakin.edu.au.
Introduction

The Faculty of Education at Deakin University is host to an institutionally supported Research Priority Area known as Quality Learning (the QLRPA)\(^2\). Throughout 2002 and 2003, the QLRPA has worked to (re)define the concept of Quality as it relates to various education and learning contexts. The overarching goal of the QL RPA has been to move beyond the limits of mainstream ‘quality’ discourses (particularly those based on processes of quality assurance) in a way that nevertheless allows for judgements about the ‘value’, ‘purpose’ or ‘usefulness’ of various educational activities to be made.\(^3\).

This paper outlines the key principles underpinning the QL RPA and identifies the key ways in which it departs from mainstream Quality Assurance (QA) agendas, and other educational ‘reform’ initiatives. This introduction is followed by four main sections: in the first we identify the characteristics commonly ascribed to the concept of ‘quality’ in contemporary Australian universities. In the second we outline a contemporary context that makes the concept of ‘quality’ worth pursuing in educational contexts more generally. In the third we identify three dimensions of the quality learning reform platform and in the fourth and final section we identify future directions of the QLRPA\(^5\).

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This paper is underpinned by a fundamental belief that dominant understandings of education—and their associated curriculum, pedagogical and assessment processes—do not meet the needs of all (or even most) learners, where these needs are conceptualised outside traditional measures of quality and attainment. As such, the kinds of questions raised, and the theoretical resources put forward, are intended to facilitate the critique and the transformation of existing educational environments.

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Part One: ‘Your call may be monitored for quality and coaching purposes…’

The Contemporary Australia Quality Context

In contemporary Australian life—particularly that part of life conducted over the telephone—it is almost impossible to get through a day without encountering some assurance that one is about to experience a ‘quality’ product. These assertions are particularly common in the electronic interfaces that guard access to the ‘services’\(^6\) offered by insurance companies, government agencies,

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\(^2\) Deakin University supports a number of research priority areas. These are centrally funded, cross institutional research foci designed to contribute to the advancement of Deakin’s international research profile.

\(^3\) This working paper begins the process of publicly stating Deakin University’s work in the area of Quality Learning. As such it is a starting point—not an end point—and is intended to open up further debate. The ideas expressed in the paper have benefited from feedback from all of the QL members.

\(^4\) At various times throughout this paper I refer to university contexts, school contexts, adult learning contexts and home or informal learning environments. While I do not refer to all contexts in relation to every point, it is our hope that the characteristics of the quality learning framework which we seek to articulate will be applicable in each of them. Some of the earlier discussion is focused on universities as this is where many current associations between quality assurance and quality education are being made.

\(^5\) At some times in this paper I refer to myself, and at others to ‘we’. This reflects the necessarily collaborative nature of the thinking that has gone on around these ideas, as well as the participation of members of the QL RPA in key planning and discussion activities. ‘Responsibility’ for the ideas expressed in the paper, however, must rest with me, so the slippage between I/we is primarily a self conscious and deliberate attempt to communicate shared ideas whilst also acknowledging that my own interpretations are my own responsibility. Many of the points discussed in this paper can be explored in more detail in the work of QL members. For a full list of members and related publication see:

\(^6\) I use the term loosely
telecommunications providers airlines and the like. Before callers are able to speak to a consultant at these establishments—indeed, before one is even placed in the queue that might, eventually, lead to a consultant—they are quietly assured that their call (should it ever be answered) may be monitored to ensure the ‘quality’ of the service provided.

These telephonic reminders that we live in the era of ‘quality control’ are paralleled not only by the prominence of the term ‘quality’ within advertising campaigns, corporate slogans, and vision statements, but also by the existence of extremely complex and highly visible quality control or quality assurance mechanisms within most public—and private—sector enterprises. From childcare centres to coffee shops; supermarkets to service stations: businesses with little else in common display similarly prominent folders labelled ‘quality assurance manual’ or ‘quality assurance guidelines’ on similarly labelled bookshelves. As Green notes:

> businesses are increasingly seeking more objective ways of demonstrating their superior quality relative to their competitors. This phenomenon explains the growing popularity of quality management systems such as BS 5750 or total quality management (TQM). Interest in such systems is beginning to percolate from the manufacturing sector to public service organizations in fields like health and education. [Green, 1994 #9: 7]

Educational sites, including universities and schools, are no exception. The Australian federal government has ‘promoted’ and mandated the use of particular quality assurance mechanisms within higher education since 1992, and the recent establishment of The Australian University Quality Agency combined with ever decreasing funding support has helped to propel universities into the world of private enterprise, where they compete with increasing vigour for a share of whatever financial resources are to be found in the open marketplace. The economic and political pressures driving this development are referred to quite explicitly by the Australian Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs in its introduction to the published collection of Quality Assurance and Improvement Plans for Australian Universities for the 2001-2003 Triennium:

> Australia's national policy environment encourages universities to seek greater commercial opportunities and align themselves more closely with industry needs. Efforts by the higher education sector to attract business investment rely to a considerable extent on available evidence attesting to the quality of their service and the skill level of their graduates. Formal, transparent and credible systems of quality assurance will help guarantee a successful future for Australian universities in this environment [DETYA, 2001 #16]

Schooling systems have been similarly challenged in recent years to demonstrate the quality of their products and procedures [Cuttance, 1996 #46: 296ff]. School review and school improvement processes and associated reporting mechanisms—not to mention initiatives such as ‘quality teaching’ programs, also reflect the rise of the ‘quality’ discourse in educational settings. But while capital-Q-Quality has certainly attained a new profile and has, by extension, an impact upon the way concepts such as teaching and learning are understood, it remains—at least in educational contexts—a disputatious term. As Harvey notes, the term quality:

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7 I remember one such day—following a move inter-state and all the necessary phone calls to insurance agencies, telephone companies, gas and electricity suppliers etc etc—where I was fairly sure I would end up as the feature story on A Current Affair (crazy queenslander hurls phone, desk and chair out of window—and it wasn't even her window...:) if one more unfailingly chipper computer generated voice told me that my call was going to be monitored for training/coaching/quality purposes and then put me hold....

8 “There is no substitute for quality”: Arnotts Biscuits; “KFC is proud of its guaranteed high quality product”

9 The strategic plan or vision statement of the Victorian tourism department begins with the statement that “Victoria has quality product and services in strategic locations that match consumer demand and maximise yield”.

10 Interesting here is the presentation of QA as the government’s generous solution to a contemporary problem facing universities. What is not said, however, is that DETYA and the federal government created this problem in the first place. By offering to universities a solution to their problem, the origins of and the policies underpinning government policies are, to some extent, obscured or, for some, made irrelevant.
means different things to different people, indeed the same person may adopt different conceptualisations at different moments...There are a variety of ‘stakeholders’ in higher education, including students, employers, teaching and non-teaching staff, government and its funding agencies, accreditors, validators, auditors, and assessors...Each have a different perspective on quality. This is not a different perspective on the same thing, but different perspectives on different things with the same label [Harvey, 1993 #4:10\cite{Sarah Guri-Rozenblit]}

In this context, any commitment to engaging with the concept of quality in relation to education needs to work simultaneously to define both what it does and what it does not refer to. These distinctions are made particularly important in educational contexts where ‘Quality’ clearly enjoys high institutional status whilst being simultaneously regarded with suspicion by many non-management staff. The next section of the paper works to identify some of the dominant ways in which the term is used and some of the more common criticisms levelled at these meanings.

**Dominant definitions of quality**

Quality assurance is a child of the corporate world\footnote{It is not my intention in this paper to suggest that everything associated with ‘business’ endeavours is antithetical to education. Indeed, I have found some aspects of ‘business’ to be extremely helpful in my thinking. What I am suggesting, however, is that an unproblematic adoption of resources from one context into another can have unintended consequences.} and there are four or five dominant meanings commonly ascribed to the term\footnote{It is important to note that while quality as a concept is embedded in a relatively unproblematic fashion within a huge amount of educational literature, when it is the explicit topic of discussion authors turn consistently to the kinds of definitions associated with ‘quality assurance’. It is for this reason that I have referred to these common definitions here.}. First, quality is often taken to mean conformity to standards and absence of defect. In this “quality as perfection” (Reid, 2003: 3) framework, the quality of a product:

> is measured in terms of its conformance to the specification. Quality control in this context relates to testing the product or service to see whether it meets the standards set and rejecting those that do not conform. [Green, 1994 #9: 13]

Green goes on to make the point that under the ‘conformance to standards’ or ‘compliance’ definition it is perfectly possible to have a poor quality Rolls Royce and a high quality mini [Green, 1994 #9: 14]. It is also possible, one assumes, to have a high quality missile system. Educational manifestations of this approach see close attention paid to the development of educational ‘standards’ and, often, rigorous assessment or evaluation processes. Alternatively, attention can be drawn to the characteristics of ‘quality’ pedagogy which might, for example, “engage”, “challenge” learners while keeping learning “situated” and “practical” [Oliver, 2003 #42: 2]

In a second but related definition, quality is seen to reside in the ‘fitness for purpose’ of a particular product or service:

> Exponents of this approach argue that quality has no meaning except in relation to the purpose of the product or service. Quality is judged in terms of the extent to which a product or service meets its stated purpose(s). [Green, 1994 #9: 15]

The quality of a can opener, then, is determined by its ability to open cans. In educational contexts, the quality of processes or products relate to the extent to which they facilitate a particular goal. So a ‘fit for purpose’ web site may provide ‘students’ with easy access to lecture notes, or discussion forums or other resources and be deemed of good quality because technical access was the purpose the designer had in mind.

More recently, the concept of quality has expanded to refer to degrees of customer satisfaction or the ability meet customer needs. In this context attention is paid not only to conformance to standards, but also the extent to which these standards satisfy a customer. In universities, this kind of approach has seen the rise of ‘system wide’ student evaluations that ask a certain number of
questions on a certain number of topics and are then used to determine the quality of both the course, and often, the teaching team.

Fourth, declarations of quality still regularly refer to the elite or exclusive nature of a particular experience or product: the educational 'superiority' regularly claimed by institutions such as Harvard and Oxford symbolise the educational manifestation of this perspective which is discussed by Reid (following Harvey and Green, 1993) as the 'quality as exceptional' approach [Reid, 2003 #23: 5]. The implication is that an education from any such 'elite' institution will automatically be of better quality than that experienced at a less 'exclusive' place.

And finally, it is worth noting that many of the preceding understandings of quality are often coupled with an emphasis on quality as 'value for money'. This approach supports the oft-stated belief that 'you get what you pay for' and emphasises the ability of a consumer to decide what they really want, and what they are prepared to spend. So one gets an elite educational experience if one is willing to pay for it: thus our choices are tied to our perception of the 'value' of a particular set of offerings, considered alongside our own understandings of the purpose we want the product to serve [14]. We have quality when we have a return on our investment [Sinclair, 2003 #25: 3].

There is nothing automatically problematic about any of these definitions, if they are seen as definitions that focus attention on some particular aspects of a process or procedure: value for money is a criteria many people hold dear. Similarly, it is important for products to actually 'do' that which it is they purport to do. But while it is clearly important to acknowledge that some educational procedures and products have been vastly improved through the use of QA kinds of processes [15], there are many criticisms to be levelled at unproblematic uses of dominant QA definitions. The idea of conformance to standards, for example, does not necessarily have to demonstrate how or why or by whom the standards were set. As Green notes:

> the disadvantage with this model is that it tells us nothing about the criteria used to set the standards and, unless the standards are in line with our understanding of what is significant, we may not agree that something is a quality product or service, even if it conforms to the standards that have been set for it (the British Rail standard for a train being on time – arriving within 15 minutes of the scheduled arrival time- is an example here) [Green, 1994 #9: 14]

The potential absurdity of this kind of approach to QA is communicated well by Richard Buetow, corporate quality director at Motorola who notes that:

> With ISO 9000 you can still have terrible processes and products. You can certify a manufacturer that makes life jackets from concrete, as long as those jackets are made according to the documented procedures and the company provides the next of kin with instructions on how to complain about defects. [quoted in] [Peters, 1994 #24: 192] [16]

An important point here is that it is possible to make claims about the demonstrated quality of a particular process or product with absolutely no reference whatsoever to the social or political consequences of the product. There is nothing within dominant QA frameworks to 'assure' the identification of unintended and/or undesirable outcomes. It is unclear, for example, how Arnott's declaration of its 'quality' status relates to the members of the Australian workforce affected by the sale of the company to a foreign owner.

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13 Commonly cited dictionary definitions of quality often emphasis a degree of excellence or superiority in kind (eg the Penguin dictionary [ cited in] [Sinclair, 2003 #25: 1]

14 Harvey & Green (1993) make mention to a definition of "quality as transformative" where transformation is associated with the ability of a consumer to pick and choose what they want from a wide selection.

15 I could be wrong, but these kinds of QA definitions seem to be referred to with particular frequency in discussions about the characteristics of 'quality' online learning resources and other forms of 'distance' education.

16 ISO 9000 is the name for a common 'quality assurance' protocol; a framework for documenting and evaluating conformance to standards.
Fitness for purpose is a similarly contentious framework. Within this model, quality products are those that do what they claim to do. The quality of a guillotine, is judged by its ability to, er, behead things. The extent to which decapitation is seen as a worthwhile social activity is not brought into discussion. Rizvi makes the point that within unproblematic uses of this definition, it is possible for the emphasis within any ‘quality’ judgement to be placed on the fitness of an item/process, rather than its purpose.

While it is perhaps possible to determine whether or not products such as telephones or can openers are adequate to their task, the assessment is not so straightforward when applied to education. Green makes this point in relation to higher education, but the general questions can be addressed also to other fields:

The problem with this definition of quality in higher education is that it is difficult to be clear what the purposes of higher education should be. ... different stakeholders in higher education may have different views about this issue. Who should define the purposes of higher education? Should it be the government, the students, the employers of students, the mangers of institutions or the academic professionals?...How would....conflicts be resolved in judging the quality of an institution? Who would determine the priorities? [Green, 1994 #9: 15]

Similar questions can be asked of the processes associated with one common variation of the fitness for purpose model: a model that sees quality related to effectiveness of processes in achieving institutional goals. Once again, there is little attention given to the means by which an institution determines these goals or sets its priorities. It doesn’t take much work to imagine that different stakeholders in the higher education environment may see the goals of the university in quite different ways.

Another variation of fitness for purpose ties ‘quality’ to the satisfaction of customers’ stated or implied needs. [Green, 1994 #9: 16]. Once again, the difficulties with transferring this definition in to education are clear. Who actually is the customer? The students? The government? The employers? And rather more contentiously, it is possible to suggest that in education, customers do not always know best:

satisfying students’ needs is not the same as satisfying their wants....Defining quality as meeting customers’ needs does not necessarily imply that the customer is always best placed to determine what quality is or whether it is present. [Green, 1994 #9: 17]

This kind of critique is consistent with an educational philosophy that relates education specifically to the challenges of making the strange familiar and the familiar strange. From that starting point it is almost impossible to argue that the ‘client’ will automatically ‘know’ what they ‘need’. A further difficulty lies in the fact that fiction of the ‘happy customer’ almost always denies the heterogeneity of a consumer base, and regularly elides those who it does not address.

Even this brief review of dominant quality discourses makes it quite clear that they are fundamentally tied to economic agendas.

17 I have used this expression for many years in my own teaching but couldn't originally recall its origin. Thanks to Noel Gough I now know that the term can be traced back to "German poet Novalis (1772-1801, aka Friedrich von Hardenberg), who declared that the essence of romanticism was 'to make the familiar strange, and the strange familiar.'" (Gough, 2003). Thanks also to Mary Rice who pointed out a similarity between this expression and the words of G. K. Chesterton (1874-1936):"The function of the imagination is not to make strange things settled, so much as to make settled things strange."

18 For many years I taught first year students in regional university a course designed to draw attention to the way Australian society routinely deals with cultural and social difference. I can't recall any of them coming up to me at the start of the semester and saying "right, what I really want is for this course to make me call into question some of my most cherished beliefs; and it would be good if at least on one occasion you could make me feel really angry and, if possible, a little bit depressed. And then at the end I’d like to feel that I have a much more detailed understanding of my own belief system, and a greater sense of ownership of the associated values." They would be far more likely to say "OK, show me the direct connection between what you propose to teach and curriculum in schools". But in years of feedback they have consistently argued that the course—although not what they 'expected'—did provide them with 'quality' learning experiences.
This, of course, does not preclude the possibility that processes to have emerged out of QA agendas can improve education. Adherence to one or more of these frameworks—or the development of new frameworks based upon general ‘quality’ principles, certain can result in high ‘quality’ educational experiences. However there are several important questions that need to be asked before ‘quality’ can be assured:

- Is the purpose that a particular process is deemed ‘fit’ for, connected to the contemporary world? And does it have demonstrable educational and social benefits?
- Are the ‘standards’ that are met directly connected to the educational needs of all students?
- Does analysis of these needs reflect detailed understandings of the changed and changing nature of contemporary life?
- Are the ‘defects’ that are absent the ones most likely—in their absence—to remove barriers to educational participation and achievement?
- Is the market share one obtains tied to desirable social goals? (it is possible, after all to corner the market in the sale of ecstasy, or diet tablets, or tickets to jelly wrestling competitions but the extent to which others benefit from these processes are less clear)
- Are those customers who are identified as ‘happy’ in the best position to comment on those who are either not happy, or not (able to be) customers? How much thought is given to those who do not appear in the target market?
- What conception of ‘customer’ underpins this kind of logic?
- Are the criteria used to determine ‘happiness’ or satisfaction measuring the ‘right’ or ‘meaningful’ things?

and overall:

- What happens to the person or people whose needs aren’t address within any ‘quality’ process and its resultant ‘quality’ product, particularly if the processes have recently been ‘improved’?

Most manifestations of the QA models outlined above are based on an assumption that their product has merely to meet the standards of their company in satisfying the demands of their particular, homogenous clientele for a product that achieves their particular goals. For this reason it is doubtful that the makers of Mercedes Benz lie awake at night worrying about the rather ‘elite’ nature of their clientele: and it is similarly doubtful that the person who purchases this kind of vehicle experiences sustainable angst at the thought that others may not be able to. In this instance, both the company and consumer can take heart in the idea that there are, after all: other products on the market that will suit these other people’s needs.

A key question for educational contexts though, is what happens at the end of this chain? What happens to the children enrolled in the ‘lowest common denominator’ school, who still find themselves alienated from the educational practices that ostensibly hold the key to their future? What happens to the adult learner, who finds no trace of their own experiences in a tertiary course, and whose particular needs and desires are not attended to by the standardised approach to learning? What happens to those learning outcomes or objectives that are not easy to translate into outcomes jargon? Or conversely, what happens to the learner in the ‘elite’ school, whose inclusion rests upon their conformity?

These and related questions lead to the crucial distinction between traditional QA definitions, and the approach to quality that underpins this paper. The emphasis regularly placed on fitness for purpose, absence of defect, customer satisfaction and so on has the potential to ignore the fundamental relationship between education and social and cultural benefit. Even more specifically,
traditional QA measures do not necessarily result in any analysis of who benefits from the processes and who does not.\footnote{This is not to say that concern for particular groups or individuals cannot feature in a QA procedures manual: at least one Australian University specifically identifies access and equity as a marker of quality education. And some authors have argued that QA has the potential to greatly benefit groups such as women in universities, for it can require a university to set and then account for their progress towards, ‘equity’ targets. It is also important to note that not all quality assurance processes or manuals are intrinsically undesirable. However, the extent to which concepts such as equity, fairness, or morality are reflected in dominant understandings of QA is entirely dependent upon the ‘good nature’ or the organisation: there is nothing in the processes or procedures themselves that predispose a company to attend to any social concern.}

This is the fundamental point at which Deakin University’s Quality Learning Research Priority parts company with some of the more traditional approaches to ‘quality’. We have no problem accepting that education—like any process with such a significant impact on so many people—should be able to articulate clear aims and objectives, and to demonstrate, throughout each process, the progress made towards those ends and ‘quality’ of the overall process. What I would suggest, however, is the need for both a more diverse understanding of what these goals might be and whom they are meant to benefit—and a more sophisticated approach to considering how the quality of process, experience, environments and achievements might be measured with particular attention to both the context within which education is now positioned, and the ‘customers’ it is intended to serve.

Underpinning both these needs is a fundamental alignment with the kind of work regularly associated with social justice or equity agendas. This is not to say that issues of ‘good teaching’ or ‘quality pedagogy’ are secondary to issues of equity. It is, rather, to do away with the distinctions that are drawn so artificially and so regularly between ‘equity’ initiatives (which are often seen to benefit the ‘minority’) and ‘mainstream’ education (that caters to the ‘majority’). The QL agenda rests on the fundamental interconnectedness of the two. Our primary goal in the remainder of this paper, is to begin to sketch out what an alternative quality framework might involve. Before going any further, however, there is one key question that needs to be addressed: why pursue the term quality—with all its contemporary baggage—when other terms would do? We address this issue in the following section.

**Part Two: Who needs it anyway? Why quality still matters in education**

**The other quality context**

Many academics with a stronger commitment to equity than to economics and a greater concern for people than for policies have increasingly felt themselves alienated within an institutional environment that seems to invest more time in documenting increasingly rigid procedures than in looking at the point of the procedure in the first place. In this context it is tempting indeed to reject absolutely all that has become associated with ‘quality’. This temptation is perhaps compounded by the common recognition that ‘quality’ removed from a QA context is a very slippery term. As Persig notes in the oft-cited classic, *Zen and the art of motorcycle maintenance*: "when you try to say what quality is, apart from the things that have it, it all goes poof! There’s nothing to talk about" [Persig cited in\Evans, 2003: np].

There are, however, several contexts that underpin our commitment to ensuring that the concept of ‘quality’ does not tumble out of reach, into dominant, economic discourse.

First: key indicators produced by a range of organizations throughout Australia and internationally continue to demonstrate the fact that some individuals and groups are consistently more likely to
experience ‘positive’ educational outcomes than others. Groups most at risk are those that depart from the ‘mythical norm’ of western culture: specifically, those who are not white, male, middle class, physically able, financially secure, Christian, heterosexual [Lorde, 1990 #43]. Others at risk are those whose learning styles of personalities do not match up to the dominant educational philosophy of a particular learning environment or educator.

Second: there is clear evidence to suggest a direct relationship between educational attainment and an individual’s subsequent ‘quality of life’. The education a person experiences, does have an impact upon their life outside of or beyond school, TAFE, university and so on.

Third: the contemporary environment has generated enormous amounts of ‘educational innovation’ and ‘reform’. Some of this is designed to respond to student ‘needs’. Some is designed to respond to new contexts of technology or new forms of media. Research conducted by QLRPA members, however, suggests that much which is routinely labelled as ‘innovative’ is ultimately economically inefficient, pedagogically unsound, insensitive to issues of student diversity, and regularly unsustainable. As such, many ‘innovations’ use up valuable resources for little or no educational or social benefit.

Fourth: it is increasingly recognised that any attempt to improve educational initiatives needs to be cognisant of the particular characteristics of contemporary Australian life. I have indicated above a commitment to ensuring that ‘quality’ education has a ‘positive’ impact on the lives of those it involves. Any attempt to assess such an impact requires a willingness to denaturalise some of the taken for granted assumptions about the nature of the learner in the contemporary world. In this process, close attention needs to be given to the impact that factors such as new literacies, computer and information technologies, the changing nature of families and work as well as increasing social diversity have on individuals’ sense of themselves as learners and on their engagement with various educational contexts and processes. New identities, new relationships, new knowledges all require attention.

It is this fourth contextual point that provides the most challenges for attempts to rethink quality. Moving beyond the limitations of discourses based on QA frameworks requires an ability to think simultaneously about the real problems facing education—the ongoing marginalisation of some groups and individuals, the consistently uneven nature of outcomes—and the challenges of responding to these problems whilst paying sufficient and meaningful attention to the changed and changing nature of contemporary worlds. This is further complicated by even the most basic recognition that this ‘changing’ world, is evolving in many different directions, across many different planes.

It is worth considering in more detail the multiple and fundamental nature of the change that is central to contemporary life.

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20 Data collected by organisations such as the OECD, UNESCO, UNICEF, The Smith Family and various state and federal governments forms the basis of many educational policy speeches

21 The specific indicators used to determine ‘quality of life’ vary considerably and Cummins has cited approximately 100 instruments designed to measure some dimension of ‘quality of life’ [cited in Cummins, 1997 #22: 6]. Common ‘quality of life scales’, attempt to measure experiences in relation to Material well-being, health, productivity, intimacy, safety, place in community, and emotional well-being [Cummins, 1997 #22: 7].

22 The obvious exceptions here are projects based on explicit equity or social justice agendas, many of which have had a tremendous impact upon the educational experiences of some students. There are, however, many innovations that make reference to the ‘equity’ benefits of the reform, but are unable to substantiate the claims they make.
New contexts for learners

Attempts to describe ‘the’ key characteristics of contemporary life—life in an era of globalisation—regularly refer to five or six kinds of phenomenon: new and emergent resources, practices and relationships associated with information technologies; communication technologies; media activities; finances; and the flow and exchange of people and ideas. Arjun Appadurai captures a general sense of the nature of these changes when he refers to developments across five ‘scapes’: media scape; technoscape; ethnoscape; finanscape; and the ideoscape.

The changes that have already been seen and which continue to be mapped within and across each of the scapes (for they are each fundamentally interconnected) are seen not only in the rise and rise of technologically mediated practices—what Shiv Visvanathn describes as an “explosion of innovation chains” [ , 2001 #47], and radically different financial and economic arrangements, but also in significant changes to understandings of ‘nation state’ and the way individuals and communities conceptualise themselves/their identities/their subjectivities.

It has become common for particular kinds of contemporary research to emphasise the ways in which individuals negotiate a sense of them selves (their subjectivity) at the intersection of multiple and competing discourses. A middle class, English speaking, heterosexual, white woman working in a medical research facility in the centre of Sydney negotiates in her day-to-day lives, multiple understandings of what it means to be a woman, a worker, a researcher, an Australian, a wife, a mother and so on. Some of these understandings are in competition with each other—as dominant discourses of the family tend to reify the mother with endless time for the child, while corporate discourses continue to devalue (if not actually demonise) the ‘not-totally-committed worker’. This woman may take up some aspects of these discourses and reject some others. In this process she negotiates a sense of self that is both multiple and fluid—open to change from day to day, context to context. This negotiation is made more complex in the context of globalisation. This complexity is tied to two related issues: first, the nature and number of discourses negotiated has changed dramatically. It is now possible to receive messages in an extraordinary variety of forms. It is also possible to feel connected to/with the experiences of people who may be quite distant from oneself geographically, but quite closely connected experientially. There are, in other words, new forms of community opened up by information and communication technologies. This is connected to the development of trans-national communities, with the members bound together by shared sense of culture or religion or political concerns, regardless of their distributed locations.

The second complicating factor concerns the increasingly insistent ways in which these complex social formations are re-presented back to ‘the community’ in simplistic and narrow terms. For at precisely the same historical period when concepts of difference, heterogeneity and multiplicity are prominent in critical discourse, mainstream media, political and popular culture texts are just as likely to insist upon the desirability of sameness, homogeneity and consistency.

Let me give a simple example: Australia has worked for twenty odd years to present itself to an international market place as a land of cultural diversity and tolerance. In recent times, this same diverse and tolerant society has embraced particular cultural fictions that work to vilify and demonise particular groups of people. Indigenous Australians, homosexual Australians and, most recently, migrants and refugees have been portrayed in ways that position ‘them’ in opposition to ‘us’. This positioning has worked to suggest that the real, fair-minded Australian who works hard for a living and waits their turn patiently in queues (and in life) should be rightfully intolerant of those who seek to circumvent the aussie commitment to a ‘fair go’ by taking handouts, looking for charity, leading unnatural or flamboyant lifestyles, or trying to enter the country through anything other than ‘official’ means.

In this process, both new and old technologies and media processes are manipulated by governance technologies to try and preserve the fiction of a worthy ‘us’ protecting our country from

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23 She may decide, for instance, that placing her children in a child-care facility will not automatically turn them into socially mal-adjusted psychopaths (or is this an oxymoron? Can one be a well-adjusted psychopath??) with a penchant for torturing small animals and stuffed toys, but she may still attempt to minimise the risk by lessening time away from the sanctity of the home: perhaps by working part-time or late in the evening and early in the morning when the children will not know of her ‘neglect’.

the problematic of ‘them’. The politics of this process are captured well by Appadurai when he reminds us that “minority groups” (and outsiders) “do not come preformed. They are produced in the specific circumstances of every nation and every nationalism” [, 2001 #48: 5]. He goes on:

They are often the carriers of the unwanted memories of the acts of violence that produced existing states, of forced conscription or of violent extrusion as new states were formed. And, in addition, as weak claimants on state entitlements or drains on the resources of highly contested national resources, they are also reminders of the failures of various state projects (socialist, developmentalist and capitalist). They are marks of failure and coercion. They are embarrassments to any state-sponsored image of national purity and state fairness. They are thus scape goats in the classical sense. [Appadurai, 2001 #48: 6]

From this point of view it is hardly surprising that Australia—like many other countries—has periodically demonised refugees, ‘illegal immigrants’, and those imprisoned in ‘detention centres’. This is one of the most extreme examples of producing an ‘other’ to ensure the stability of the centre, in fundamentally troubled and troubling times. As Appadurai notes: “minorities are the major site for displacing the anxieties of many states abut their own minority or marginality (real or imagined) in a world of a few mega states, of unruly economic flows and compromised sovereignties” [, 2001 #48: 6].

While ‘non-citizens’ are particular vulnerable, similar processes have happened in relation to other subject positions. Working women have come under new and increasingly creative attacks in recent years with ‘scientific studies’ now arguing that everything from schizophrenia through to autism can be traced back to what women do (or do not do) with their children and themselves. The point here is that one of the most powerful consequences of globalisation is a rise in explanatory devices designed to reduce what has become an increasingly complex and thus barely knowable ‘reality’ back into manageable pieces with neat and simple explanations and responses already scripted.

Attempts to ‘explain’ and ‘understand’ globalisation processes has seen much written about the fundamental changes to understandings of and practices concerning finance, information, technology, social relations and so on. These gestures to the ‘new’, the ‘strange’ the ‘unfamiliar’, however, are routinely coupled with attempts to explain the seemingly inexplicable. For example, attempts to ‘explain’ the nature of contemporary ‘youth’ have led to mapping of apparent distinctions between Generations and an increasingly colourful labelling of age cohorts—Generation X, Generation Y, Baby Boomers, Echo Boomers, Baby Busters, Nintendo Generation, Screenagers, Thumb people and so on. Each label comes with a set of defining characteristics, and a claim to be representing the ‘nature’ or the new group.

Clearly, the lure of explanation is strong:

“the possibility of explanation carries the presupposition of an explainable (even if not fully) universe and an explaining (even if imperfectly) subject. These presuppositions assure our being. Explaining, we exclude the possibility of the radically heterogeneous.”

But attempts to ‘know’ or ‘define’ absolutely any dimension of contemporary culture walks the fine line between increasing one’s understanding or awareness of current shifts in dominant cultural practices on the one hand, and representing—on the other hand—particular responses to those practices as though these responses were the natural ones.

Here is the crucial point: the uncertainties produced by globalisation has led to many attempts to declare what it is that is ‘really’ important in contemporary life. This has seen the emergence of responses to ‘contemporary life’ that priorities some contexts over others, and some skills over others. In educational contexts, this results in certain kinds of curricula, certain assessment practices, certain benchmarking and performance indicator data, and particular ‘quality’ control mechanisms being presented—at this historical juncture—as the ‘best’, the ‘necessary’ and the ‘new basics’.
But what if these initiatives are attempts to domesticate an untamable environment? What if the skills they celebrate are the wrong ones? What if they students they serve are a small, privileged group??

These are the kinds of questions raised by critical analysis of dominant educational practices, and an associated concern for the ways in which education systems continue to produce categories of students who succeed and who fail.

It is not sufficient to identify isolated practices within globalisation and design a domesticated (or ‘schooled’) curriculum to respond to those practices. Teaching a group of students how to put their projects about ancient Egypt into powerpoint software does not constitute an ‘authentic’ or defensible response to global conditions. Similarly, introducing multi-cultural days once a year, where students can dress up in ‘traditional dress’ and eat ‘authentic’ meals combining doner kebabs and Turkish delight or tacos and chocolate do not constitute sophisticated responses to global diversity. Nor does providing students with options to access some information on line constitute a meaningful response to global information. But these are precisely the kinds of responses that occur in contemporary Australian schools. Complex issues associated with new technologies (and their relationship to new cultures, new identities and new technologies) are watered down into paint-by-numbers approaches to learning in ‘new times’. These approaches lay claim to responding to contemporary life, but invariably resort back to old practices in new forms. As such, they work to (re)produce ‘globalisation’ in known and knowable terms and leave us quite ill-equipped to deal with phenomenon in their ‘real’ as opposed to their ‘represented’ form.

To risk a universalising statement, then, it is possible to argue that there are two overarching phenomenon to emerge out of the global condition: first, the constancy of change—technological, ideological, political, social—and second, the constancy of attempts to reduce changed products back to some pre-existing, knowable form. The obvious problem here, as Lankshear notes, is that:

the world isn’t ”safe” any more because taking risks has become the rule, not the exception.’

if you can't innovate effectively (which means innovating about how to make a life for yourself and your own) you're dead meat cos the painting by numbers linear life course is dead in the water. (Lankshear, 2003: pers. comm.)

The point I am attempting to make here, is that contemporary education needs to respond not only to the manifestations of globalisation that relate to changing technologies, finance systems, employment patterns, media systems, communication process and political structures, but also to changes in identity formations, sense of community and the flow of ideas. This involves recognition not only of political and technical changes, but emotional and social changes as well.

Responding to ‘new times’, is not, therefore, a simple matter of trying to incorporate one or two new technologies into a classroom, or working to ensure that university students have an understanding of issues associated with indigenous cultures. Rather, then challenge is one of re-thinking in quite a fundamental way the relationship between these new times, the new kinds of knowledges they require and support (knowledges about the context, the learner), and what it might now mean to offer ‘quality’ education.

There are many ways in which responses to this context can the theorised and actualised, and in the next section of this paper we will outline one simple approach for attempting to ascertain which

24 Consider the changes that have taken place in the automobile industry in the last 150 years. Any brief history of automobiles identifies key years in which Disc brakes, ABS, driveshafts, fuel injected engines, powersteering, fenders, not to mention airconditioning, airbags, radios, seatbelts and windscreen wipers have been added in to cars. It is a veritable history of technological advancement. But in 2003 women and men are still routinely positioned in differential relationships to automobile discourses and practices. This is signified not only by the ongoing representation of women as objects to be draped across car hoods or to spray champagne over the victors in formulae one races. Even in more mundane and suburban environments the terms ‘woman’, ‘car’ and ‘knowledge’ are not routinely connected.
dimensions of contemporary contexts are responded to in the pursuit of educational quality. Our emphasis in that section will be on ensuring that it is the learner (in all their newness, diversity and multiplicity) and their communities (families, carers, friends and so on) who are central to the evaluation process.

Traditional frameworks for assessing the ‘quality’ of an innovation seem to position us well to respond to some dimensions of this ‘newness’ and educators in all sectors are now—and will continue to be—challenged to demonstrate the ‘quality’ of their practices both within, and beyond standard ‘quality assurance’ mechanisms. In the short term at least, there is no getting away from the need to demonstrate the ‘quality’ of one’s practices against criteria set by/for others. However, it is entirely possible that these criteria will not include analysis of who benefits from a particular educational initiative, nor attend to who is excluded, forgotten or ignored, nor justify the choice made about what counts are important ‘knowledge’ in the contemporary environment.

What is necessary, therefore, is the use of a framework for thinking about ‘quality learning’ that takes, as its primary focus, the need for educational practices to respond to all of the contexts outlined above in the design of educational innovations that are relevant, effective and able to have a demonstrably positive impact on learners’ lives. Once the limitations of dominant performativity based definitions are identified new frameworks for thinking about both the fitness and the purpose of educational endeavours emerge: a quality learning environment, text or context, could be defined as one that works to move beyond the simplistic, tokenistic or stereotyped response to ‘new times’ to provide access to the kinds of skills and experiences, knowledges and understandings, that maximise an individual’s ability to contribute actively, productively, safely and creatively to the world both as it currently appears to be, and as it may become.

Within the Quality Learning RPA, then, emphasis is placed upon the importance of a framework that is able to talk simultaneously about educational contexts, educational needs, educational products, educational outcomes and educational quality in ways that are not easily reduced to back to simple consideration of processes or procedures. We need, in short, a framework for conceptualising, implementing and evaluating ‘quality’ learning environments and experiences that begins with rigorous analysis of the context within which education now occurs; and which is fundamentally concerned with the consequences of any educational agenda for all.

This framework must, of necessity, be able to address head on any claims about the quality of any initiative that are based on criteria other than this. As a second focus, the framework needs to be able to conceptualise the transformation of certain existing practices in the production of ‘real’ quality learning environments.

This returns us to the question asked at the start of this section: who needs quality anyway? The answer here is that while educators face increasingly complex questions in an era of global change, for many educators the ‘bottom line’ remains the same: who does education work for? Developing a vocabulary to ask this simple question in complex times leads almost inexorably back to the term ‘quality’. Despite its most recent appropriations, quality has popular resonances, and is still a useful term for talking about the value, worth, fitness and purpose of any educational endeavour. Once the dominant discourses and associated performativity criteria are denaturalised, it is possible to once again talk of quality experiences through reference to a much broader range of criteria:

Clearly there are other educational initiatives throughout Australia and overseas that work to address at least some of these issues. Perhaps the most commonly cited project in Australia at the moment is the 2010/New Basics initiative in Queensland which makes reference to the need to improve educational retention and issues of educational inclusion.
• What assumptions about ‘the world’ underpin a particular educational environment/text context/curriculum?
• What understandings of technology and culture dominate?
• What understanding of the relationship between technology, culture, education and pedagogy can be seen?
• And who benefits from these understandings?

This last question is central, but tied, also, to a recognition that ‘benefit’ and ‘positive’ or ‘quality’ learning outcomes depend both upon the quality of the content and the quality of the experience. There are many ways in which both of these factors can be evaluated. But any educational activity seeking the label ‘Quality’ learning practice, must be critiqued in order to determine the extent to which it respond to new social/cultural/political/financial/technological/informational figurations in creative and positive ways. This process is accompanied by an analysis of the consequences of a particular educational phenomenon—be it a book, a classroom organization, a curriculum document or any other text—and followed by a commitment to work to improve those texts and contexts which have negative consequences.

We proceed in the following section, then, from the basic belief that the term ‘Quality’ can and needs to be reclaimed from some of the more narrow discourses associated with managerialism, corporatism and rationalism, and from the kinds of performativity criteria that are so commonly produced as indicators of quality. As Chambers notes "no discourse can ‘dictate’ its meanings absolutely...discourse always has the potential, realized by reading, to mean other than it says” [Chambers #27: 235]. Moving beyond the limitations of QA discourses, however, requires two things: first a clear exploration of its origins and limitations and an associated denaturalising of its ‘logic’ and air of inevitability. As Ferguson notes:

in our society, dominant discourse tries never to speak its own name. Its authority is based on absence. The absence is not just that of the various groups classified as “other”, although members of these groups are routinely denied power. It is also the lack of any overt acknowledgement of the specificity of the dominant culture, which is simply assumed to be the all-encompassing norm [Ferguson, 1990 #38: 11]

Second, it requires the articulation of an alternative framework. In the following section we outline one such alternative. It is not the only alternative. And it may not work for every person in every context. However, provided it is read in conjunction with the preceeding sections and their emphasis on the complexity of contemporary life—and provided also that it is not taken as either a simple formulae to guarantee ‘quality’ education or as an end to debates about quality in education—it can provide a way of thinking about the extent to which any educational text or context can be seen as a quality product.

Part Three: towards quality education: a transformative agenda

In contrast to the idea of quality as ‘evidenced conformance’ that underpins the dominant definitions reviewed in section one, and cognisant of the contextual challenges identified in section two, this paper puts forward the argument that attempts to work towards quality education—when theorised outside of institutionalised norms—has three key dimensions:

• First, the critique of dominant (and emergent) educational practices and discourses (including the standards and criteria that are regularly used to assess quality) with particular attention given to the knowledges and people included by or represented within these practices, and the relationship of this knowledge to contemporary theorising around technology/culture/pedagogy
Second, the identification of the consequences of dominant educational practices (and their associated assumptions about the world and attendant ‘evaluation’ criteria) for particular individuals and groups, and

Third, a commitment to the fundamental transformation of those practices that have negative consequences (and the preservation of those that already sustain cultures of equity and justice)

These three dimensions—focusing on critique, consequences and transformation—are underpinned by a fundamental understanding that—regardless of any other criteria that are added into the equation—‘quality learning’ environments, experiences and opportunities must have a demonstrably positive impact upon those they involve. This means that attention is not only on process and procedure but also on intention and outcome. This, in turn, recognises the importance of responding to a changed and changing world characterised by new and emergent identities, technologies and pedagogies. The emphasis here shifts immediately from a focus on teaching to a focus on learning. These distinctions help to draw the proverbial line in the sand that distinguishes a quality learning environment in the QL RPA model, from the kinds of quality education that may be ‘proven’ by other definitions.

The key challenges here, then, are to identify the kinds of resources that are most useful for mapping the existing environment, for theorising the process of critique and transformation and for measuring both ‘negative consequences’ and ‘positive impact’ for learners.

The key terms introduced here—critique, consequence and transformation—are similar to the term ‘quality’ in that they stand for many things to many people. While we recognise the difficulty of pinning down the terms to absolute definitions, there are some associations between critique, consequence, transformation and the question of quality that we wish to draw attention to here.

One final introductory point: processes of critique, the identification of consequences and the work of transformation all involve particular techniques and strategies: how does one ‘critique’; how does one measure ‘consequences; how do we work towards transformation? And how do we know when we’ve achieved it? In this section of the paper our aim is to outline general issues associated with each term, and to signal some of the kinds of specific strategies that can be used. A more detailed mapping of the strategies associated with each phase, however, will need to occur in future papers.

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26 As indicated earlier, the specific means by which one measures ‘positive impact’ is difficult to be precise about, but can relate, among other things, to emotional, social and economic factors.  
27 This is not to suggest, of course, that there is no relationship between teaching and learning; what we are trying to emphasise is that it is possible to use criteria to determine quality teaching that does not actually attend to the quality of the learners experience. I can think of several instances where I have felt that I taught what might be regarded as a good quality lesson, which did not achieve the kinds of outcomes I was after for the students. I can also think of instances where I abandoned my carefully constructed lesson plan and ended up with much great student engagement, debate and ‘learning’.  
28 Recognising the impact of these quality learning initiatives entails, in turn, recognition that learners are a fundamentally diverse group, characterised by difference between groups, within groups, and within individuals themselves.  
29 Charlotte Roberts [cited in Senge, 1999 #20: 117] describes these kinds of terms as “blinking words”: “words phrases or tones with a wide range of possibility definitions, meanings, and connotations” that flash in neon-light or ‘red alert’ fashion in the minds of an audience who immediately say to themselves “what does she mean by that word…”. Interestingly Roberts gives an example of 9 “blinking” words commonly used in business discourse: “Quality, Empowerment. Learning. Training. Vision-driven. Transformation. Capacity-building. Twenty-first Century Leadership. And Coaching” [cited in Senge, 1999 #20: 117]. If we try hard we might be able to get a couple more of these into our framework??
Critique

As an opening point it is important to acknowledge that we use critique in a much broader sense than is common in ‘quality’ analyses. That is to say, we do not ‘critique’ the quality of any program by checking on the extent to which it meets its stated objectives. Rather we align ourselves with a much more politically oriented approach to critique, of the kind that has dominated much philosophical thought for the past century. This critique has increasingly been focused not only on the examination of political and economic power, but also on the production and maintenance of social and cultural inequities. Close attention has been focused on the diverse ways in which particular cultural practices produce, reproduce and naturalise specific and restrictive understandings of what it means to ‘be’ a certain type of person, and the associated processes through which adherence to these recognised types are rewarded and or policed.

Many of the associated resources are valuable to the QL RPA because they work, in the words of Kellner [, 2001 #17: 3-4] to “center attention on phenomena and their connections to the broader society and a wide range of institutions, discourses, and practices”30. As we have argued above, this involves close attention to the phenomena of globalisation and the way these phenomena shape and are shaped by each other.

Working towards the critique of existing educational practice, then, begins with an analysis of any of a full range of educational texts and contexts—with their associated assumptions, practices and procedures—to identify the beliefs and perspectives that produce and are produced through them, and to identify the relationship between these practices and understandings of global contexts and various markers of difference and forms of identity.

To cite Kellner one last time, we also believe that there is a distinction between an eclectic, ‘anything goes’ approach to the theorising of education, and the deliberate transgression of boundaries between disciplines and traditions that could usefully be brought together. Writing of the challenges facing media and cultural studies he notes that:

“Against pluralism and eclecticism, we believe that it is important to challenge the established academic division of labor and to develop a transdisciplinary approach that contests both the bifurcation of the field of media and cultural studies and the society that produces it. A transdisciplinary media and cultural studies will thus overcome the boundaries of academic disciplines and will combine political economy, social theory and research, and cultural criticism in its project which aims at critique of domination and social transformation. “Such a transformative venture must also engage the new cultural, political and social forms of the present era”. [Kellner, 2001 #17: 28]

Critique, therefore, involves consideration not only of ‘formal’ educational texts—such as curriculum materials, textbooks, assessment processes, pedagogical practices, discipline policies and so on—but also the full range of ‘everyday’ texts that range from teacher talk, student talk, posters, newsletters, notes to care-givers and so on. It is therefore focused very broadly to allow consideration of how meanings—and their consequences—are produced, circulated, naturalised, contested and transformed in various discursive practices.

Feminist theorists, postcolonial and indigenous scholars, have provided some of the most useful perspectives on this process and have given a language to speak about the way particular discourses—and the texts they produce—produce and are produced by day-to-day practice. While clearly these are diverse theoretical categories—characterised almost as much by their differences

30 I am also persuaded by Kellner’s argument that “constantly expanding one’s theoretical perspectives and horizons helps to illuminate multiple dimensions of our cultural environment, providing richer and more complex understandings of our sociocultural life. [Kellner, 2001 #17: 3-4]. It is for this reason that we bring together a range of resources, some of which may have only a passing acquaintance with each other.
as by shared political interests—in making reference to their work here we acknowledge that the provision of ‘quality’ education is necessarily premised on a willingness to examine precisely what is at stake in the educational process. This involves considering not only how particular goals or objectives might best be achieved, but also identifying whose interests are served by these objectives: why were they set? Who will they benefit? Who will they exclude?; to identify who is included and who is excluded; who is valued who is devalued; who is represented as natural and normal; who is produced as ‘other’; who is not represented at all?. In this way critique is focused not only on what is included or is addressed but also the absent, the silent and the ignored. In the words of Michele de Certeau:

Finally, beyond the question of methods and contents, beyond what it says, the measure of a work is what it keeps silent. And we must say that the scientific studies—and undoubtedly the works they highlight—include vast and strange expanses of silence. These blank spots outline a geography of the forgotten. [de Certeau, 1986 #33: 131]

Identifying who is or is not represented within, catered for, acknowledged or valued by particular discourses, curriculum materials, assessment processes, classroom organisation, professional development, salary scales and so on requires much more than a ‘check list’ analysis to determine who/what/where is referred to. A list of the things we remember does not necessarily help us identify that which we forgot. Instead, focus must be brought to bear on the consequences of how particular individuals or groups are or are not dealt with in these and related contexts.

This leads to the second key concept: the exploration of consequences.

Consequences

To talk of the consequences of particular educational practices is to draw attention to broad kinds of ‘outcomes’. First there are the traditional markers of educational achievement: passing grades, progression into advanced classes, completion of years, rankings, performance on standardised tests, entrance into further education of employment. Schools will often celebrate the percentage of their students who receive the top tertiary entrance score for their state. Universities speak proudly about the high percentage of their graduates who have offers of employment within three months of the completion of their degree.

Analysis of student results have identified in recent years that some groups of students are consistently more ‘at risk’ of failure—or ‘under achievement’—or ‘disinterest’ than others. Girls remain less likely than boys to pursue study in information technology. Boys remain less likely than girls to pursue educational pathways in education, nursing, or the arts. These categories, of course, are open to scrutiny. Much has been written about the ways in which various markers of difference—gender, race, socio-economic status, sexuality, geographical location, disability and so on—combine to increase the chances of educational marginalisation. Research into literacy achievement, for instance, recognises indigenous and working class kids as a high-risk category. This kind of category based analysis that focuses on issues of subject selection and subject results provides important data to indicate ways in which education may be failing to meet the educational needs of particular groups of students.

There are other kinds of outcomes that are sometimes less easy to identify. An increasing body of literature has identified students in schools who feel themselves to be alienated or disenfranchised within learning environments. Some feel themselves to be directly threatened by a hostile school environment; others experience more subtle feelings of disquiet. Attempts have been made to map experience in diverse contexts—including educational environments—to suicide rates, eating disorders, smoking and drug abuse, domestic violence, unemployment levels, crime, depression and many other variables.

In addition to this, critical readings of educational environments have increasingly identified the fact that even schools that may score highly on traditional measures of quality such as student achievement or student satisfaction scales may well be endorsing or naturalising particular world views that can be seen—from our perspective—as problematic. And to further complicate matters, it is possible for students to score highly on traditional measures of success whilst being simultaneously marginalised by an educational experience. For example, a child can be taught to
Critique, consequences and quality learning

The approach to critique that underpins the QL RPA, then, draws upon a range of analytical techniques and a variety of data sources in order to answer two fundamental questions:

- What understanding of ‘the learner’ and ‘learning’ underpins a particular text, context or practice?  
- What consequences does this have for all involved in the learning community?

Answering these overarching questions is facilitated by the use of some simple sub-questions:

- Who/what is included/represented or excluded/not represented?
- Who/what is valued or devalued? How do we know?
  What kinds of participants ‘do best’? What kinds of rewards are available in this context: who has access to those rewards? What kinds of ‘punishments’ exist in

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31 It is clearly important to recognise that inclusion by itself is not necessarily a signifier of a ‘quality’ experience. It is necessary to be alert to processes of negative inclusion (where an individual or group may be brought into a situation only to be devalued or limited in some way); stereotyping, and tokenism. These factors make it important for consideration of inclusion/exclusion to be tied directly to consideration of who is valued/devalued.

32 It is important to keep our attention focused on the learners in a particular context, but it is also important to recognise that educational texts or contexts can impact just as powerfully on teachers, family, care givers, and community members.

33 As indicated earlier, a certain amount of caution needs to apply with regards to the use of the terms inclusion/included. It is easy for these terms to be seen as signifiers of a particular approach to inclusivity which sees inclusion as a positive in its own right, and which generally fails to address all the issues associated with the way people/ideas are represented. However, provided questions of inclusion are always coupled with analysis of what happens within an environment or text, it is a useful term.

34 It is quite common for schools to assume that the primary participants in a child’s schooling are parents. It is very difficult for step-parents to be seen as legitimate contributors to school activities. Another example of a particular kind of learner being assumed comes from university time tables which can often schedule classes at times that make it very difficult for those with family commitments to attend.

35 In one environment where I have worked curriculum design for an entire semester was based upon the assumption that the boys would learn more effectively if they were taken into single sex groups and given an opportunity to focus exclusively on texts related to sport. There was no negotiation of this topic with the boys. Their interest was taken as a given.

36 In another context, one student was sent to the principal’s office for disciplining because he refused to produce three handwritten copies of an assignment before making use of word processing software; he argued that handwritten texts were irrelevant; the teacher sent him to the office…. In educational settings common ‘rewards’ relate not only to good grades and positive feedback, but also things like actual attention; during one reform project I worked on the students in the class commented on how surprised they were that when they asked a question someone actually heard it as a question and not just as noise.
Who does this most commonly affect? Who has access to the resources or materials most valued in that context? Who has the most freedom?

- Who/what is represented as natural/normal and, by extension, who/what is represented as aberrant, deviant, unnatural or ‘other’?
  - What assumptions are made about participants in a particular text or context?
  - What assumptions are made about their interests, experiences, backgrounds, knowledge base, hopes, fears and desires?
  - Which learners are attended to in the day-to-day work of the learning environment and which learners are ‘added on’ at various times?
  - What kinds of stories about ‘valuable’ knowledge, or behaviour are told?
  - Which groups are left out? What experiences are forgotten?

- How are these views communicated?
  - What is included in the curriculum or other key documents? Who decides?
  - What resources are learners offered? How/when are they communicated with?
  - What texts surround or are part of the learning environment?
  - What assessment strategies are used? Why?

- In what ways do learners benefit from their experiences?

Most of these questions can be addressed not only to ‘in class’ or specific educational activities, but also to some of the broader contexts for education—such as discourses around learning, gender, childhood and so on. The sub-questions, therefore, at indicative only, and would be in some ways different if the object of analysis was, for example, a government policy, or a set of historical documents. The common element, however, is a desire to reveal the politics that underpin any discourse, text or context, and to show the impact of those politics on diverse groups and individuals.

Different people will make use of different analytical and research techniques in attempting to address these questions. It is vital to recognise, however, that addressing these questions does not require the use of a complex vocabulary, nor familiarity with any particular kind of theory. What is required, however, is a willingness to look again at processes and procedures that may have attained the status of ‘normal’ or ‘natural’ by simple virtue of repetition. Working with these questions requires a willingness to interrogate simple answers or knee jerk responses (‘we cater for everyone’; ‘everyone is included’; ‘all students can learn well here if they choose to’; ‘in the end it’s up the students’) and to ask the harder question “how do we know?? And who says so??”

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38 One of the most common experiences of disenfranchised students is that they are recognised almost exclusively as ‘trouble makers’: I remember walking with one teenage boy from a classroom to an office area that he was helping me to locate. We passed a teacher who looked at me, and the boy, and said “I see you’re in trouble again.” Even in the process of helping me out, this kid was inscribed as bad.

39 I went to a school characterised by enormous cultural and economic diversity where the lessons for the year 6 and 7 students for the first semester were all to be organised around the NZ defence of the America’s Cup.

40 I was invited to a prestigious boarding school to talk about the fact that some of the girls in the school (which had been co-educational for some ten years, after 70 odd years of being male only) didn’t feel like they were valued enough. The PD session took place in a most impressive school hall—reminiscent of a church—that had a war memorial at one end, and pictures of successful sporting teams—cricket, rugby, tennis etc etc—covering 3/4 of all available wall space. There was one picture of a girls netball team hanging in the far back corner. The teachers expressed outrage when I suggested that this may be one environment that required a second look.

41 Some educational contexts work to ‘add in’ particular groups such as children with disabilities, or kids from non-english speaking backgrounds through special themed activities, or ‘special interest’ days; some other kids don't have to wait for a special occasion to see their own culture represented positively in the curriculum they are exposed to; some of them can take it for granted that their history, their language, their past times will be routinely referred to by their teacher.

42 Some schools still send home notes that say ‘dear parents’, others have newsletters that invite the dads to come along to a working bee. Some university texts still include sexist language, and assignments addressing the experiences of ‘mankind’ are not uncommon.
The overall goal of this approach is well captured by Gayatri Spivak who writes of her own commitment to techniques which facilitate the work of "constantly and persistently looking into how truths are produced" (cited at http://www.emory.edu/ENGLISH/Bahri/Glossary.html 9 June 2003).

Taken seriously, the process of critique outlined above will lead inevitably to an identification of the way in which a particular combination of texts and contexts assume, or produce, a particular kind of learner. And they will almost always identify groups or individuals currently enjoying less that ideal learning experiences. This leads to the third dimension of the quality learning agenda: a commitment to intervention and transformation.

**Transformation and quality learning interventions**

Like quality, transformation is a word with many diverse meanings. While it is commonly associated with process of reform or metamorphosis, it can also be used to describe acts of camouflage and disguise. It addition to this, the term has magical overtones in its links to processes of transfiguration, transmogrification and transubstantiation. Magicians, alchemists and avatars are some of the identities commonly linked to transformative practice. These diverse uses of 'transformation' as a term encourage us to introduce this section with some important clarifications.

First, there is nothing magical about transformation as conceptualised in QL: it is, rather, a lot of hard work.

Second, transformation is fundamentally about change but clearly we would not suggest that all change is positive. The QL agenda is conscious of the risks associated with change for the sake of change, change that further disenfranchises already marginal groups and change that returns to previous moments of marginalisation.

Third, not all change is possible: this is a point that we will examine in more detail later but here it is sufficient to note that any transformative agenda must be underpinned by 'realistic' or 'imaginable' outcomes.

Fourth, there is a fundamental difference between the kind of constant, irresistible change that is fundamental to contemporary life and human identity, and the change that is deliberately orchestrated to achieve specific goals. It is possible to argue that everything is always changing and that identities—subjectivities—are in a constant state of becoming, rather than being. But it is also possible to identify specific attempts to effect change, or to bring about transformation. It is these effects that Quality learning is most concerned with.

Finally, not all change is change. This last point is particularly important to us. A great deal of time, effort and physical and emotional resources are regularly committed to the introduction of 'new' programs; 'change' agendas; 'better' practice. In some instances these changes have a demonstrably positive impact on the work and lives of those involved.

In many other cases the fundamental nature of the product or process or service under review remains unaltered. Bringing computers into schools, for example, may constitute a dramatic change to the way classrooms or libraries look. They may even change the way that teachers or students spend their time. They do not necessarily improve with any consistency the learning outcomes of the majority of students. Nor do they necessarily improve the learning outcomes of

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43 It is perfectly possible to argue that someone has taught a high quality lesson, or written a high quality resource, or produced a high quality picture book by drawing upon widely endorsed criteria for assessing such things. We do not dispute that many off these products are, in these terms, good quality. What we are interested in pursuing within QL however, is the combination of these processes with an awareness of the diverse needs of a diverse population and the concomitant importance of transforming their educational experiences.

44 History is full of instances of conscious transformative agendas. Some 'good'; others bad. Mohandas Ghandi’s use of non-violent resistance was a transformative act. The suffragettes diverse moves to obtain the vote were transformative acts. Rosa Parker’s refusal to give up her seat on a bus was a transformative act. One man’s choice to be a stay-at-home dad is a transformative act.
those students who are ‘at risk’ in a particular environment. This is disturbing not only because of the cost in terms of the time and energy invested, but also because it can make it difficult to generate ‘real’ change. Jean Baudrillard’s comments on the nature of scandal and reform are useful here. Baudrillard makes the point “the denunciation of scandal always pays homage to the law” [Baudrillard, 1983 #29: 27]. In the process of identifying the need to ‘assure the quality of schooling’, attention can be brought to the failures of the existing system, and the solutions offered can easily be embraced regardless of the extent to which they change the fundamental content, politics and outcomes of the system. Scandal, in other words, can create the illusion of purification.

[Baudrillard, 1983 #29: 27]

Similar observations are made by Roland Barthes, who describes the kinds of processes by which societies are ‘vaccinated’ against or rendered immune to a sensitivity to social or cultural ‘wrongs’:

To instil into the Established Order the complacent portrayal of its drawbacks has nowadays become a paradoxical but incontrovertible means of exalting it. Here is the pattern of the new-style demonstration: take the established value which you want to restore or develop, and first lavishly display its pettiness, the injustices which it produces, the vexations to which it gives rise, and plunge it into its natural imperfection; then, at the last moment, save it in spite of itself, or rather by the heavy curse of its blemishes. [Barthes, 1983/2001 #19: 121]

Take the army; show without disguise its chiefs as martinets, its discipline as narrow-minded and unfair, and into this stupid tyranny immerse an average human being, fallible but likeable, the archetype of the spectator. And then, at the last moment, turn over the magical hat, and pull out of it the image of an army, flags flying, triumphant, bewitching, to which, like Sganarelle’s wife, one cannot but be faithful although beaten [Barthes, 1983/2001 #19: 121]

The kind of transformation that Barthes and Baudrillard warn of here is that of the fundamentally deceptive kind: change in form but not in substance; change in process but not in outcomes. Resistance to this all-too-common form of change is dependent upon an ability to keep what it is that is to be transformed—and why such work is necessary—at the forefront of one’s mind. This is why there is such a fundamental link between any transformative agenda, and the on-going critique of processes in order to highlight their consequences.

To make an obvious point, though, transformation is very hard work and this alone is one of the main reasons why undoubtedly well intentioned reform projects so regularly reproduce that with which they began. This point is raised by John Merrow in his comments on the ‘quality’ of American public education and the barriers to change. He argues that there are three kinds of schools: “bad, good enough, and excellent…”Good enough” schools are those in Merrow’s framework:

that most people settle for: schools everyone wants to believe are okay—even though, deep down, they know better….not enough people are willing to make change, and so they play it safe and settle for less…the status quo survives because it works for just enough kids and parents, and because it’s easier to go along with what’s familiar. Change is hard work, and changing schools may be the hardest work of all [Merrow, 2001 #21: 4]

45 Maurice Blanchot’s concept of disaster is similarly useful. “He argues that ‘the disaster ruins everything, all the while leaving everything intact’” (Blanchot 1986: 1).

46 Barthes writes: “One can trace in advertising a narrative pattern which clearly shows the working of this new vaccine. It is found in the publicity for Astra margarine. The episode always begins with a cry of indignation against margarine: ‘a mousse? Made with margarine? Unthinkable!’ ” “Margarine? Your uncle will be furious!” and then one’s eyes are opened, one’s conscience becomes more pliable, and margarine is a delicious food, tasty, digestible, economical, useful in all circumstances. The moral at the end is well known: “Here you are, rid of a prejudice which cost you dearly!” it is in the same way that the Established Order relieves you of your progressive prejudices….what does it matter, after all, if margarine is just fat, when it goes further than butter, and costs less? What does it matter, after all, if Order is a little brutal or a little blind, when it allows us to live cheaply? Here we are, in our turn, rid of a prejudice which cost us dearly, too dearly, which cost us too much in scruples, in revolt, in fights and in solitude.” [Barthes, 1983/2001 #18: 122]
The QL RPA rejects absolutely the idea that good enough is good enough in schools or any other educational context. This is the approach to educational reform that has seen millions of dollars spent on educational reform that nevertheless results in the alienation of many individuals and groups on a day to day basis.

But although change is neither quick, nor easy, nor always sustainable, the quality learning agenda is based on a commitment to the design, implementation and evaluation of transformative practices that attempt to intervene in those dimensions of educational and social life that currently produce undesirable consequences for those involved.

Transformation, in this sense, is about drawing attention to that which exists, highlighting the silences in mainstream practices, and introducing into circulation—into consciousness and possibility—alternatives to the ‘original’. Thus transformation begins with critique, but moves necessarily into the development of strategies designed to denaturalise that which is taken for granted, and to introduce and legitimate alternative educational performances.

This interconnection is captured well by Elizabeth Grosz who writes:

Strategy involves recognizing the situation and alignments of power within and against which it operates. It needs to know its adversary intimately in order to strike at its most vulnerable points. It must also seek certain (provisional) goals and future possibilities with which it may replace prevailing norms and ideals, demonstrating that they are not the only possibilities. They can be superseded. [, 1990 #34: 59-60]

Consistent with the general approach introduced above, the resources we have found most useful in conceptualising transformation\(^{47}\) are those generally recognised as anti-essentialist in their approach to social and cultural practice. They reflect the kind of paradigm shift that has occurred through the late twentieth century that has been “characterised by the movement from the universal to the particular, from Truth to truths” [Hekman, 1999 #39: 23]. Anti-essentialist resources, therefore, recognise the constructed nature of social and cultural practices and accept, as a result, that all that appears as natural, desirable, dominant could be otherwise. Anti-essentialist frameworks are based upon a recognition that many of the categories used as explanations—for example the use of the category ‘masculinity’ to explain some boys’ restlessness in schools or the use of ‘femininity’ to explain some girls’ reluctance to pursue study in information technology—are themselves things that need to be explained [Latour, 1996 #28]. Post-structural feminist research, for instance, is generally committed to the denaturalisation of patterns and processes associated with the cultural constructions ‘man’ and ‘woman’ and all of their attendant consequences\(^{48}\). Post-colonial literature is associated with the interrogation of processes that produce indigenous cultures as automatically ‘other’ to white, western norms\(^{49}\). In these ways they both work against seemingly natural frameworks for understanding and responding to race and gender.

\(^{47}\) It is important to acknowledge that transformation—or change—is a fact of every day life; and that identities and subjectivities are in a constant state of flux, or becoming. In this sense, transformation is not something that one initiates, it is something that just is. However, while this is an important contextual point, it is also possible to argue that within this context, people do set in train particular processes or activities that do have an impact on other people. A deliberate, conscious and politically aware attempt to effect change—to work to transformation—is a fundamental dimension of the QL agenda.

\(^{48}\) There are examples too numerous to mention. Elizabeth Grosz, Donna Haraway, Moira Gatens, Susan Hekman are all proponents of post-structural analysis.

\(^{49}\) Since the writings of theorists such as Edward Said and Homi Bhabha, post-colonialist literature has proliferated. Gayatri Spivak is an example of a theorist who combines feminist and post-colonial theory.
These same resources also highlight the connection between anti-essentialism and transformative agendas, because within essentialist frameworks only a limited amount of change will ever be possible. Anti-essentialist resources, then, recognise that no matter how ‘natural’ particular processes may appear, they can be open to change. Importantly, they also acknowledge that no matter how one goes about introducing change, the change ‘process’ and the ‘result’ itself with be different from what one imagines, because those involved are not passive recipients of benevolently bestowed transformation: each intervention produces a new context which must, in turn, be analysed in order to determine the extent to which it deals with difference.

So while it is not possible to provide a road map that is guaranteed to lead to positively transformed environments, it is possible from this basis to identify some key aspects of a transformative process.

First: Educational transformation depends on circulating diverse understanding of ‘learners’

The traditional concept of the good learner, for instance, has changed substantially over the years. Once upon a time the ‘good learner’ was almost universally considered to be middle class, Christian and male. Now there are broader identities associated with the term, but there are still many limitations associated with it. Moving beyond these historical limitations—and moving beyond the existing limitations—depends upon people identifying the limits, and showing alternatives. This process is described by Rosi Braidotti as one of introducing new subjectivities, of ‘figurations’. She argues:

Figurations are not pretty metaphors: They are politically informed maps, which play a crucial role at this point in the cartography of feminist corporeal materialism in that they aim at redesigning female subjectivity...In this respect, the more figurations that are disclosed in this phase of feminist practice, the better. [Braidotti, 1994b #31: 181]

In relation to educational experiences, new figurations of learners, link the idea of a ‘good’ or ‘successful’ or ‘happy’ learner, to the identities of those often marginalised by these discourses. So projects may work to connect individual boys to literacy achievement; or to make links between indigenous students and mathematics; or to demonstrate ways in which students can combine areas that are often kept apart—such as science and English—in ‘meaningful’ assessment activities.

Second: New images of learners and learning cannot be willed into existence

Importantly, Braidotti also acknowledges that new figurations cannot be called into existence independent of the processes of denaturalising existing subject positions. In Braidotti’s [, 1994(a) #30: 169] terms, “the new is created by revisiting and burning up the old”.

Like the gradual peeling off of old skins...it is the metabolic consumption of the old that can engender the new. Difference is not the effect of willpower, but the result of many, of endless repetitions [Braidotti, 1994(a) #30: 182]

This point is important to keep at the forefront of any intervention, or reform project: many projects ‘fail’ or run out of steam because the participants place too much faith in the power of good will, good intentions and good ideas. Getting new ideas, new practices, new understandings into circulation requires a willingness to engage over and over again with that which exists, and to identify, over and over again, the reasons why transformation is important.

Third: transformation depends on repetition

There is, therefore, a fundamental relationship between transformation and repetition. Braidotti’s emphasis upon repetition resonates with the writings of theorists such as Trinh Minh-ha who notes that displacement of mainstream practices comes from repetition:

By questioning over and over again what is taken for granted as self-evident, by reminding oneself and the others of the unchangeability of change itself. Disturbing thereby ones own thinking habits, dissipating what has become familiar and clichéd, and participating in the
changing of received values—the transformation (without master) of other selves through one’s self. [, 1990 #32: 332]

There are further connections between Braidotti’s ‘nomadic feminism’ and the work of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari who also conceptualise change in a way that is useful for the QL agenda. Deleuze and Guattari distinguish between frames of references which they define as arboreal and rhizomatic. Arboreal structures, for Deleuze and Guattari, reflect the vertical/hierarchical patterns of trees and can be understood as rigid, fixed, and clearly differentiated from other structures. Arboral (or molar) structures reflect centralised binary divisions, and are predicated on well rehearsed ‘truths’: the existence of God; the rights of ‘man’ and so on. Traditional understandings of masculinity (and femininity) are arboreal. Mainstream ideologies about education are also arboreal.

While arboreal structures seek to limit what it is that can occur within any particular framework, rhizomes work against this limitation. The function of the rhizome is to traverse arboreal structures and to interrupt oppositions and divisions. Deleuze and Guattari describe it like this: “Unlike trees or their roots, the rhizome connects any point to any other point, and its traits are not necessarily linked to the traits of the same nature” [, 1987 #35: 21]. By connecting any point—images of indigenous children for instance—to any other point—images of ‘successful’ students for example—the rhizome resists the order that is imposed by working on one stratum alone [Deleuze, 1987 #35: 503] ‘Non-traditional’ or ‘unexpected’ ways of performing ‘the good student’ or Aboriginality, therefore, are rhizomatic.

In analysing social systems, and educational structures, it is possible to identify processes associated with the production of arboreal structures—that is, those tied to the production of a majority politics within which certain values are coded as natural and normal and against which ‘other’ interests are produced as subordinate. In contrast to these there are molecular structures—those that work to disrupt the appearance of unity and seek, instead, to demonstrate change, difference and fluidity. The tension between the arboreal and the rhizomatic—the process of transformation—is played out in a process of deterritorialization and reterritorialization. Critiques of dominant practice; alternative responses to dominant discourses; multiple enactments of the subject position ‘the good student’: all of these are ‘lines of flight’ that cut across coded pathways in a process of deterritorialization. By making connections across multiple strata, lines of flight produce assemblages—figurations that are new, different and, most importantly, continually changing.

But lines of flight, of course, do not automatically win out. While they enact a deterritorialization, the molar structures they serve to disrupt work to capture and re-code a molecular flight back within a fixed position through a process of reterritorialization. Marcus Doel makes the point well when he writes: “[the] momentary escape of absolute deterritorialization—once it is detected by the molar apparatus—will come to be clamped down upon with the full force of the Law and confined within a new identity” [Doel, 1995 #36: 237].

Fourth: transformative projects require constant attention

We will make reference to one further theoretical resource in acknowledging the on-going work required to bring any challenge to dominant practice into stable, durable existence. A framework for the study of innovation that identifies the processes through which innovations are introduced, modified, stabilised through negotiations between various actors in a network, the sociology of translation (or actor-network theory as it is often described) draws close attention (among many other things) to the on-going work required to make any innovation—any educational performance—durable. In addition to recognising that the stabilisation of any innovation depends both upon making the innovation the solution to someone else’s problem, and disentangling network members for their other existing, competing networks, ANT highlights the fact that the maintenance of a network is of crucial importance. A network becomes ‘stronger’ and more ‘durable’ the more actors that are attached to it who behave in the desired way. In other words, creating a durable network is a complex process of enrolling various actors, encouraging them to perform certain roles and to remain “true to these roles”, resisting, by extension, attempts to enrol
them in other, competing networks [Simpson, 2000 #40:]. In Latour’s terms, this is a process that involves the on-going construction of a network’s reality:

...anything can become more or less real, depending on the continuous chains of translation. It's essential to continue to generate interest, to seduce, to translate interests. You can't ever stop becoming more real. [Latour, 1996 #28: 85]

In at least some of its incarnations, ANT is generally reluctant to comment on the ‘quality’ of particular innovations: within the QL framework, however, we would clearly argue that some performances are better or more desirable than others. These are those that increase, rather than decrease, opportunities for individuals to be valued within a learning context and to experience the kinds of social benefits regularly valued in Australia. We also acknowledge that making these performances the more durable ones—the ones with which the most actors will ‘play along’ with minimal ‘policing’—is a process demanding time, energy and more than a little money. The QL commitment to transformation, therefore, is based upon an awareness that new performances of ‘learning’ and ‘learners’, sustained commitment over time and processes of repetition are key components in any transformative agenda.

Taken together, the points outlined above draw attention to the complex nature of transformation and the fundamental interconnection between ongoing critique (and associated examination of consequences) and the design, implementation, modification, and circulation of transformative agendas. This leads us to the final summary of the Quality Learning agenda.

**Part Four: summary and future directions**

**The key stages**

There are, then, three interconnected dimensions of quality learning projects:

- first, a process of critique, where we identify all that is included or excluded; valued or devalued; celebrated or demonised in an educational context
- second, a process of highlighting consequences where we reflect not only on who wins or loses against traditional markers of success but also on less tangible, less quantifiable measures of ‘quality’ of life
- third, a process of transformation, where we identify an issue or group requiring attention and work to change the relationship between this group or this context and ‘learning’

Working through each of these stages requires not only a commitment to ‘looking again’ at things that may well seem natural, but also a willingness to identify and acknowledge the fundamentally heterogeneous nature of the population. Asking the questions above is a meaningless activity if one does not have the ability, the vocabulary or the inclination to identify the existence of multiplicity and difference in any population. This difference, moreover, exists not only between groups of people—such as differences between the way indigenous Australians and ‘white’ Australians are consistently regarded; but also in differences within particular groups (not all disabled people are the same; not all migrants are the same) and differences within individuals themselves (not every man acts in the same way every day: individuals are sites of multiplicity and contradiction).

It is perhaps helpful to emphasise here the important point that processes of critique, and a commitment to the identification of consequences, will inevitably result in transformative ventures which themselves must be subjected to critique and the analysis of their consequences. So the

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50 This term may seem at odds with an approach to learning that emphasises equity and diversity; but it signals, perhaps, the idea that departing from culturally endorsed educational performances requires, at the very least, a constant disciplining of one’s self....
framework here is not focused on a linear how-to-do-it approach to ‘reform’ but is, rather, a mindset that facilitates focused but on-going efforts to improve educational outcomes—to lead to qualitatively superior learning.

Critique is tied to a mapping of consequences of what is and work towards transformation; this is followed by critique of what became and identification of its consequences, and further work towards transformation. There is no end point. The emphasis is on becoming: not being, not completing, but becoming. This model also allows for individuals to enter the process at any point, and it helps to move away from the temptation to represent the quality learning principles outlined above as linear, progressive steps: while I have described them as stages, they are not necessarily ordered chronologically and people move to and from each stage at various times. Given this fluidity it is no coincidence that the model above—the figure eight—resembles so closely the infinity symbol.

However, the on-going nature of the reform project does not mean that individual moves towards transformation are not important. Indeed, they are absolutely central.

Not all transformative practice will be of the ‘earth shattering’ variety. Nor will every project attend equally to every difference. But in a genuine transformative agenda, micro moves are as important as macro projects. If one teacher is able to help one student disentangle him or herself from just one belief that narrows their perspective on themselves, then that is a quality learning moment. What is most important is that these moments are repeated over and over again, so that the power of traditional frameworks is fundamentally disrupted, and new ways of learning become legitimated and normalised. This is the fundamental basis of transformative projects: the ceaseless recognition of difference; the constant response to diversity; the ongoing quest for new strategies, new techniques, new understandings that will support the fundamental redefinition of what it means to teach, what it means to learn, and the relationship of quality to this process.

Let me give a few (necessarily brief) examples. Traditional storybooks tend to exclude—among other things—images of people with disabilities. In this context, a text that not only includes a child with a disability, but also represents that child in ways that don’t revolve around the disability (ie the disability is not the sole focus of the story) can be a transformative text. Similarly, if an assessment item asks for a biography to be written about an Australian author, and lists, as examples, Henry Lawson, Banjo Paterson, Patrick White, John Marsden or ‘an author of your own

Within an ‘ideal’ quality learning environment, all of the differences within a population would be recognised and catered for. For most this is not a realistic agenda, and the work associated with ‘undoing’ traditional exclusions and silencing takes place in a gradual, even sequenced fashion. There is a fine line here. While we would not advocate the kind of one-off, tokenistic efforts to respond, for instance, to the experiences of refugee children in Australian schools, we also recognise that not every text in every classroom can include images of difference from all possible paradigms.
choice’, then there are clear absences here. A transformative version of the same assignment might also refer students to indigenous authors, or women writers. If a lecturer offers students considerable and genuine choice in the format of their assessment—and provides them with resources to support their decision making—then that person is acting in a transformative way. Or if a teacher directs positive attention towards a student who usually only occupies ‘centre stage’ when they are in trouble, and if they are able to make a connection between that student, and the notion of educational achievement, then that is a transformative moment.

These examples are intended to illustrate the fact that transformation—and the quality learning it underpins—can begin in small, every day moments, and it is facilitated by an awareness of and access to a diverse range of research and reflection materials.

This leads us to the need to map in detail the kinds of resources and strategies—the pedagogies, the knowledges, the skills, the technologies—that will ultimately underpin transformation.

**Some future steps: resource mapping and development**

Successful work in all of these stages is dependent upon access to the kinds of theories and resources—the conceptual and practical skills—that can make the difference between a good intention and a real intervention. The process of mapping these particular resources—and the interventions they facilitate and support—is the primary task of the next position paper.

Specifically, we will be focusing on identifying sets of quality learning resources that relate to all three phases.

**Phase one—the process of critique—requires:**
- resources/frameworks for critically analysing existing texts or contexts (and for locating those within broader contexts such as those associated with new technologies, new identities, new pedagogies)

**Phase two—the mapping of consequences—requires:**
- resources for measuring the ‘quality’ of formal/official and informal educational outcomes

**Phase three—the design and implementation of a transformative project—requires:**
- pedagogies and processes that can introduce concepts of transformation to those in a particular intervention (and make explicit the value of any transformative agenda)
- pedagogies and processes that can inform alternatives to existing practices
- resources for re-designing curriculum, assessment and professional development in various contexts and across/beyond various ‘disciplines’
- techniques for sustaining these alternatives

Given the differences among those who are concerned with the outcomes of educational discourses practices (in all their many forms) some researchers will inevitably focus their efforts on only one or two of these phases: on the analysis of discourses of early childhood, for example, and an associated identification of the consequences of some of the normative definitions of development. Others will work across all three phases. The one limitation, however, is that phase three can not, in quality learning terms, proceed within due attention to phase one and two: for ‘quality’ transformation is based fundamentally upon careful critique of what exists, and the identification of what can (and indeed should) be usefully, morally, ethically transformed.

**Final points**

The Quality Learning RPA has just begun to articulate the kinds of moves and processes that seem best suited to facilitate the transformation of traditional learning environments—with their patterns
of exclusion and routine silences—into places where all individuals have the greatest possible chance to benefit from all the dimensions—overt and covert—of their educational time. The strategies that are to be used may well vary from site to site, from discipline to discipline and there is much work to be done in identifying these differences. There is similar work required to identify the moves most likely to bring people on-board for this transformative journey. All of this needs to take place in relation to diverse contexts, and with regard to diverse learners for their can be no one-size fits all formulae for the creation of a quality learning environment. And we must remain mindful of the fact that even the best intentioned transformative process can itself have unexpected, unforseen and ‘negative consequences.

Attempting to outline a process for making judgements about the ‘quality’ of various learning environments, then, is a difficult process: one that requires considerable care, a great deal of self reflection and a willingness to work over time. The next step, it seems, is to make explicit connections between the work already done, the work currently in progress, and this reclamation of ‘quality’ for new, transformative agendas.

This requires close attention to the key contexts shaping existing practice: contemporary technologies; increasing cultural diversity; new literacies; youth cultures; government policies; dominant frameworks of pedagogy, curriculum and assessment; debates about the nature of knowledge in the 21st century. We need a quality learning protocol that focuses on each of these issues and more.  

The basis of this work is a belief that transformation of existing environments into inclusive, beneficial ‘quality earning environments is not just a possibility, but also an imperative. Helene Cixous provides a final guiding comment:

The future must no longer be determined by the past. I do not deny that the effects of the past are still with us. But I refuse to strengthen them by repeating them, to confer upon them an immovability the equivalent of destiny [1990 #37: 245]

52 Work is currently underway to investigate the extent to which the figure 8 associated with critique, consequences, and transformation, can be usefully combined with another combination of coordinates—one that emphasises new identities, new technologies and new pedagogies. So we have:

\[\text{New Identities} \quad \text{Critique} \quad \text{New Pedagogies & Consequences} \quad \text{Transformation} \quad \text{New Technologies}\]